



# Sweet Caroline

**Author:** *Mary Alice Alexander*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** When Caroline Bingley first arrives in Meryton with her brothers household, she dismisses the local society as entirely beneath her notice—until she realizes Mr. Darcys growing fascination with Elizabeth Bennet poses a threat to her own carefully laid plans. Determined to prevent any possibility of a match, Caroline orchestrates her brothers departure from Hertfordshire to sever his attachment to Jane Bennet, believing this will remove the entire Bennet family from their circle and bring her one step closer to becoming the future Mrs. Darcy.

Armed with her imported French perfumes, carefully rehearsed curtsies, and the ingenious assistance of her ladys maid Adèle, Caroline launches a calculated campaign to secure the most eligible gentleman in London. But as her schemes meet with increasingly frigid responses from Mr. Darcy and quiet resistance from his household, Caroline begins to question whether her machinations serve anyones happiness—including her own. When her most extreme manipulations fail to capture her prey, she must decide if being mistress of Pemberley is worth the cost to those she claims to hold dear, especially herself.

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:01 am*

Where it began....

The dusty stairs to the Meryton assembly rooms left a trail of dirt on my train. Surely, that was merely the first sign of the degradation this environment would provide.

I had commissioned my gown from Madame Beauregard after lingering on her waiting list for an age. The glistening coral silk and gauze overlay stood out in London. Here in this God-forsaken provincial dunghill, it was arresting. Not one woman, I cannot use the term lady for these wretched specimens, wore a gown less than three years out of fashion. The colours, the styles, were pitiable in their simplicity. Only Louisa and I wore anything au courant. And, if I am frank, Louisa's attire was becoming absolutely dowdy since her marriage.

I stood at the edge of the assembly room, observing the provincial masses with thinly veiled disdain. Our party had barely crossed the threshold when I sensed the shift in the atmosphere—all eyes turned to us, drinking in every detail of our appearance and demeanour.

Darcy commanded the greatest attention. I felt a flutter in my chest as I gazed upon his noble countenance. Within moments, whispers of his ten thousand a year spread through the room like a spreading flame up a curtain. I smirked, knowing full well the effect such news would have on these fortune-hunting country folk.

As the evening progressed, I watched with growing amusement as the locals' initial admiration for Mr Darcy turned sour. His reserved nature and discerning taste were clearly beyond their comprehension. These simple people mistook his refinement for pride, his discretion for disdain. How little they understood true quality! I overheard

snatches of conversation about our party.

“That is Mr Darcy. They say he has ten thousand a year!”

“He is handsome enough, to be sure, but how he looked at us? As if we were beneath him! He was stood beside Mrs Long for an entire set and never uttered a word.”

I smirked. Turning to Mr Darcy, I said, “It seems you have made an impression, sir. Though I daresay they do not quite know what to make of you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I care not for their expectations, Miss Bingley.”

Charles approached us, flushed from dancing. I asked, “Enjoying yourself, brother?”

“Immensely!” he beamed. “Such charming people. I say.”

“You have danced every dance, Charles. Might you not show some discretion?”

“I am happy to dance, Caroline. Why Miss Jane Bennet is the prettiest, sweetest girl here. I was obliged to dance with her sisters and friends.”

“You do not fool me, Charles. I was well able to see that Mrs Bennet corner you into asking each of her ridiculous daughters for a set.”

Charles demurred, insisting he was happy to dance with them all, but I had eyes. Mrs Bennet had latched onto my brother as their saviour. It was all I could do to keep him from asking that Jane Bennet for a third set.

To his credit, Mr Darcy limited his dancing to Louisa and me. He spent much of the evening standing silently at the edge of the room, much to the chagrin of the local ladies. I pretended not to notice the jealous glances when I partnered him. I smiled

with elegant restraint, pleased that at least one man present recognised true worth.

It appeared that Mr Darcy had the good sense to avoid dancing with the unremarkable Bennet daughters. That dreadful Mrs Bennet's unrefined voice loudly complained; "Did you see how Mr Darcy snubbed my poor Lizzy? The proudest, most disagreeable man! I hope he never comes here again!" Mr Darcy would no doubt be delighted to comply with her wish.

The carriage ride home was filled with lively discussion of the evening's events. Charles, predictably, had nothing but praise for the local population. Mr Darcy and I, however, shared a silent understanding. We had endured this rustic gathering, but it had only served to highlight the vast gulf between our refined circles and this quaint country society.

Charles was ebullient. "What a delightful evening! I have never met with pleasanter people or prettier girls in my life!"

I exchanged a glance with Mr Darcy before responding, "Charles, dear, surely you jest? While the evening was... tolerable, I hardly think it compares to our London gatherings. You are far too easily pleased. Mr Darcy, do you not agree that the society here is rather beneath our usual circles?"

Darcy nodded slightly. Or perhaps he merely turned his head. He made no reply.

As Netherfield came into view, I allowed myself a small sigh of relief. One provincial assembly had been endured, but how much more would we have to endure in this backwater?

Charles, in his guileless ignorance, accepted an invitation to what is termed a 'supper party' at the home of our only local person of distinction—though I use that term with considerable irony. A knighthood for addressing the King about cheese. Really,

what is society coming to? Sir William Lucas. If I heard the tale of his speech and the later designation as “Sir” once, I heard it a thousand times. A former shopkeeper, Sir William, stretched the idea of knighthood until it threatened to snap. He considered himself to be the social leader of Meryton, as though that were a distinction of merit. It promised to be another evening wasted in the dismal company of the Meryton denizens.

“Sir William Lucas,” I murmured to Louisa behind my fan, “has mentioned his knighthood only three times this evening. Perhaps he is feeling unwell.”

“Caroline,” Louisa sighed, but I noted she kept her own fan carefully positioned.

“The noise, Louisa! The wild behaviour of those chits! I am beside myself.” And to think we might have been at Lady Hampton’s musical evening in town.

Louisa shook her head. “They are children, Caroline. They are perhaps a little loud, but I recall some excessive enthusiasm in your actions not many years ago.”

I stared at her in horror. “Have you gone native already, Louisa? Next, you’ll be praising their gowns.” That would be impossible — I have seen better fabric adorning tea shop windows.

Mr Hurst had already abandoned us to the card-room, having consumed enough punch to fell a cavalry officer. Louisa had been irritable and difficult since we came to Netherfield. Had her marriage made her complacent?

A Mrs Purvis approached us and began speaking of some matter of no interest to me. Louisa engaged with her as though she were a leading light of society. Bored with their talk of muslin—was Louisa now to wear peasant garb?—I sauntered away. Darcy was stood against the hearth, a distant expression on his face, looking magnificent and properly disapproving. Perfect. At least someone else recognised the

absurdity of our situation.

“I can guess the subject of your reverie.” I said as I approached Mr Darcy with a coquettish smile.

“I should imagine not.”

“You are considering how insupportable it would be to pass many evenings in this manner—in such society; and, indeed, I am quite of your opinion. I was never more annoyed! The insipidity, and yet the noise—the nothingness, and yet the self-importance, of all these people! What would I give to hear your strictures on them!” Darcy could be stodgy, but his estate and his wealth, his connections and his fine person, all would meet my wishes agreeably. With the position of Mrs Darcy, I would be a leader of the ton. I was certain he was as disgusted with the evening as was I.

“Your conjecture is totally wrong, I assure you. My mind was more agreeably engaged. I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow.”

I was startled. Had I at last broken through to capture him? Who else could he possibly be thinking of in this hell hole. I immediately fixed my eyes on his face. Surely he means... he must mean...

“Pray tell me, what lady had the credit of inspiring such reflections?” Mine own, perhaps?

Mr Darcy replied, with great intrepidity, —

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

My stomach dropped. He could not be serious. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet!” said I.

Surely I misheard. The second Bennet girl? I scrambled for a response that would sufficiently express both my horror and call his sanity into question. “I am all astonishment. How long has she been such a favourite? and pray when am I to wish you joy?” He. Could. Not. Be. Serious.

“That is exactly the question which I expected you to ask. A lady’s imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony, in a moment. I knew you would be wishing me joy.” Ouch. He was standing firm on his opinion. Worse still, he rather denigrated my intelligence. I would have to redouble my efforts.

“Nay, if you are so serious about it, I shall consider the matter as absolutely settled. You will have a charming mother-in-law, indeed, and of course, she will be always at Pemberley with you.” Indeed, no man would wish to be saddled with Mrs Bennet as a mother-in-law. She was relentlessly mercenary and never ceased speaking. Her machinations in attempting to throw her girls ‘into the path of rich men’ were obvious and despicable. I swear she was teaching those young ones to simper and flatter like grasping fortune hunters.

He listened to me with perfect indifference. Desperate to reach him, I entertained myself in this manner. His composure convinced me that all was safe, so I took a breath, and my wit flowed along.

“Surely you will have the younger Misses Bennet to your London home. They will make fine examples for Miss Georgiana.” I thought I detected a slight wince. Had I hit a sore spot?

“Of course, Miss Mary Bennet would be a fine musical accompaniment to your sister. Perhaps dear Georgiana would enjoy adopting a pedantic style of playing more suited to dirges than to dances.” Nothing.

After some minutes of receiving no satisfaction from Mr Darcy, I retreated to Louisa,

my mind whirling. “Do you know, Louisa, what Mr Darcy just said? I cannot comprehend him.”

“What now, Caroline? Your fixation on that man is unseemly.”

“Louisa, how can you say that? Mr Darcy praised Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s eyes! Her eyes, Louisa! A country nobody who has not the least notion of proper comportment! Such unrestrained laughter in company, such decided opinions - one would hardly know she had received any education at all. To see Mr Darcy attend to such embarrassing exhibitions of high spirits when he might converse with those who understand the elegant forms of society!”

“Lower your voice, Caroline. Company is quite close here.”

“If it were not so ridiculous, I would say he is infatuated with the trollop,” I held my fan, shielding my lips lest some peasant overhear.

Louisa glared at me as if I were the one making outrageous remarks.

Company was indeed excessively close in what was grandiosely called “Lucas Lodge.” Indeed, the proportions were those of some woodland hovel suited to use as a hunting lodge. All manner of creatures were crammed in. The local tradesman’s wife pressed against one’s sleeve on the left, while the solicitor’s daughter invaded one’s person on the right. Such promiscuous mixing of society! And in such confined quarters! How could anyone of refined sensibilities endure such an assemblage?

One of those wild younger Bennet girls was yammering to another, demanding that she play ‘dancing music’ so that they could make up a set in the miniscule confines of the ‘drawing room.’ Insipidity and noise were only the half of it.

What had possessed my fool of a brother, Charles, to take the lease of a property in

this backwater, Meryton, without so much as consulting me, I could not fathom. We were advantageously situated in London. A townhouse nearly in Mayfair and the society of the best people, with thanks to Charles's friendship with Fitzwilliam Darcy. The same Mr Darcy who was now salivating after some chit with wild hair and a gown so far out of fashion, it was nearly in fashion again.

This setback would not ruin my plans. As horrendous as the God-forsaken Netherfield estate Charles had taken was, the benefit was the presence of Mr Darcy. We had been acquainted now for three years, perhaps? The summer before, I had had the inordinate pleasure of spending a sojourn in Derbyshire at that gentleman's fine estate, Pemberley. I believe I must date my devotion to the man from my first seeing his beautiful house at Pemberley. For a certainty, he is a great tall fellow, handsome and always perfectly turned out. What he lacks in sociability is more than made up for by his truly superior connections and wealth. He is perfect for me, and his visit to Netherfield is the ideal setting for me to show him I am perfect for him. I will run a perfect household, order meals to impress even his refined palate, and perform as the ideal hostess. Eliza Bennet would not thwart my design. I have not spent three years cultivating his good opinion to lose him to a girl who probably thinks Almack's is a type of soup.

It was not enough that Charles had ensconced us in this wilderness, lacking any decent society. No, my pudding headed brother must needs have another of his usual infatuations with the prettiest, well, relatively speaking prettiest, girl in the village. Miss Jane Bennet. She was precisely Charles's type. Blonde, blue eyed, willowy, she was ever smiling her mindless smile and was utterly without rank, connection or, as far as I had yet determined, dowry. Charles mooned over her constantly, danced with her at the slightest provocation, and gave all the signs of a deep infatuation. The prospect of my brother being ensnared by such a nobody, let alone one with a determined fortune hunting matchmaking mother, was insufferable. I had to act. I would detach Charles from this insipid creature and entrance Mr Darcy with my elegance and charm.

I shall simply have to redouble my efforts. After all, what gentleman of sense would choose a country nobody who could not distinguish a barouche from a landau over the perfect mistress for Pemberley? Though I must admit, the way he looked when speaking of her eyes... No. Impossible. It cannot be.

???

In the drawing room of Netherfield, I found myself sighing at the tedious obligation of receiving the Bennet ladies. “Louisa,” I whispered to my sister, “prepare yourself. The Bennet invasion is upon us.”

Louisa gave me a reproachful look. “Caroline. They are our neighbours. They were hospitable when we called and we shall be hospitable to them.”

“I am the very soul of hospitality.” Though why I must be hospitable to people who probably think a polonaise is something one eats for breakfast, I can not fathom.

The Bennets were announced, and I affixed my most practised smile. “Mrs Bennet, Miss Bennet, Miss Eliza, how lovely to see you again.” About as lovely as a tooth extraction. I smothered my smirk as Miss Eliza made a barely perceptible grimace at my sobriquet.

Jane Bennet’s curtsy was admittedly graceful. “Thank you for having us, Miss Bingley. It is a pleasure to be here.”

I had to admit, Jane’s manners were impeccable. As we exchanged pleasantries, I found myself warming to her slightly. “Miss Bennet, you must tell me about the local walks. I have heard they are quite charming.” There. Let no one say I cannot make polite conversation.

Jane’s face brightened. “Oh, they are! There is a particularly lovely path through the

woods near Oakham Mount. Perhaps we could walk there together sometime?"

I hesitated, then nodded. "That would be... agreeable." Inwardly, I shuddered. I would never willingly submit myself to anything involving the word "Mount." I preferred more civilised environs. A nice ten-minute stroll through a manicured garden was more to my taste. Climbing a mountain? Unthinkable.

As the visit progressed, I observed Charles's perpetual puppy-like attention to Jane with growing alarm. When Mrs Bennet began another of her interminable stories, I leaned closer to Louisa.

"Do you see how Charles looks at her? It is becoming rather obvious."

Louisa shook her head slightly. "You are imagining things, Caroline. Charles is being polite. You might try it."

I covered my snort with a quick touch to my nose with a handkerchief. "I hope I am not falling ill!" I said, inspired that such might cause our visitors to depart.

???

Later, after the Bennets had left, Charles approached us, beaming like a moon-struck calf. "Was that not a pleasant visit? Miss Bennet is such a gentle creature."

I glanced at Louisa before responding. "She seems amiable enough, I suppose. Though one can hardly say the same for her family."

Charles frowned. "Come now, Caroline. They are perfectly pleasant people."

I sighed dramatically. "Oh, Charles. Can you not see how vulgar Mrs Bennet is? And those younger sisters! Absolutely wild."

Louisa intervened. “Mrs Bennet can be... enthusiastic, as are her younger daughters, however the elder Misses Bennet are perfectly lovely young ladies.”

Charles nodded appreciatively at Louisa. “Thank you, Louisa. I agree completely. Miss Bennet, especially, is a true gentlewoman.”

I patted Charles’s arm condescendingly. “Of course, dear brother. We shall be civil to Miss Bennet for your sake. But do be careful. We would not want any... misunderstandings to arise.”

As Charles walked away, looking perturbed, I turned to Louisa. “We must keep a close eye on this situation. Jane Bennet may be sweet, but she is entirely unsuitable as a match for Charles.”

Louisa shook her head firmly. “Miss Bennet is a respectable, young gentlewoman. If Charles develops an attachment to her, we should support him.”

I stared at Louisa, aghast. “Surely you cannot be serious. Think of her family, her connections!”

Louisa placed a calming hand on my arm. “We are not even a generation from trade, Caroline. Jane Bennet outranks us, despite apparently lacking a fortune. I am simply saying we should not interfere. Charles is capable of making his own decisions. Our role is to support him, not to manipulate his choices.”

As I gazed out the window, watching the Bennet carriage disappear down the drive, I found myself unsettled by Louisa’s words. I could not shake a sense of dread that our peaceful stay at Netherfield was about to become far more complicated.

I could not allow this matter to play out without acting. I needed to prepare. Whatever Jane Bennet’s sweet appeal, she was not what my brother ought to aspire to. It was

imperative that I find an opportunity to question Miss Jane Bennet and warn her off my brother.

A perfect opportunity to take the measure of Miss Bennet without her overbearing mother and intolerable sister beside her arose when Charles and the other gentlemen accepted an invitation to dine in the village with the commander of the regiment stationed there. I could extract the details of her connections, her father's estate and what dowry she brought, whilst exposing her to the superior, genteel manners I am renowned for. Louisa agreed that I should invite Jane Bennet to dine.

"We ought to get to know the girl, since Charles seems quite intrigued by her," she said. The chance to have an hour or two without Charles and Mr Darcy at the dinner table was ideal.

I composed what I considered a masterpiece of manipulation:

"My dear friend,

If you are not so compassionate as to dine to-day with Louisa and me, we shall be in danger of hating each other for the rest of our lives; for a whole day's tête-à-tête between two women can never end without a quarrel. Come as soon as you can on the receipt of this. My brother and the gentlemen are to dine with the officers.

Yours ever,

Caroline Bingley"

Perfect. No mother, no impertinent sister, just dear Jane alone with her inquisitors.

Jane, the picture of politeness, agreed to my plan. The next afternoon, the three gentlemen had departed under threatening skies, whilst I made no mention of my

expected guest. That it was about to blow a gale was inconvenient, but surely of no great concern. I paced the paltry drawing room, anticipating the pleasure of interrogating the unsuspecting dear. Then I stood at the window, utterly aghast at the sight before me. Miss Jane Bennet was trotting up our drive on horseback!

I had expected her to arrive in that rickety old carriage the Bennets usually rattle about in, but no. Even with dark clouds looming overhead, threatening to burst at any moment, she rode five or however many miles on this decrepit piece of horseflesh. And ride she did, wrapped in the most atrocious garment I have ever laid eyes on.

Of course, the heavens had opened as she rode. The rain drenched her to the bone. By the time she dismounted, her hair hung in rattails, and her dress clung to her in the most indecent manner. I could practically see through to her stays!

“Louisa!” I called from the window. “You will never believe... she has come on horseback! In this weather!” On what appears to be a creature too enfeebled for the knackers.

“Surely not in this rain?”

“Oh, but she has. And in what appears to be her great grandmother’s cast off riding habit.”

As Miss Bennet sloshed her way to our door, I savoured the sight of her bedraggled form. Surely, this would extinguish Charles’ inexplicable fascination. I straightened my own immaculate gown, ready to greet our sodden guest with all the false civility I could muster.

Louisa scurried off on some pretence, leaving me to curtsy to Miss Bennet as if she were royalty. Let her see how a true lady comports herself.

Miss Bennet stammered apologies for her unseemly state, hesitating to soil our ugly silk upholstery. She stood there, dripping and shivering like a half-drowned kitten. Mrs Nickless materialised with towels. A maid appeared unbidden with tea, and Louisa returned to fawn over our guest as if she were a long-lost sister.

“Miss Bennet, you poor dear! Come, let’s set you to rights,” Louisa cooed, whisking her away.

I endured ten interminable minutes of solitude before they returned. Miss Bennet looked marginally less sodden, though her hair remained a fright. I insisted on fresh tea. Miss Bennet accepted a cup, holding it close to her face as if it was the first decent cup she had ever experienced.

“My dear Miss Bennet, how delightful of you to brave the elements to visit us,” I began with a gracious smile. She had the decency to respond.

“Thank you for the invitation,” she replied through chattering teeth.

I pressed on, determined to unearth every sordid detail of her family connections. “Do tell us about your relations. Have you many aunts or uncles? Grandparents, perhaps?”

“My aunt Mrs Phillips is married to the local solicitor...”

Excellent. A country lawyer. This grows better and better.

“And my uncle in London...”

“Oh? Where in London?”

“He lives in... Cheapside.”

I nearly clapped my hands in delight.

My persistence had borne fruit. An uncle in trade, living in Cheapside, no less! I could have cried out with joy at each mortifying admission.! It was all too perfect. She was compelled to reveal all her sordid connections whilst engaging in what appeared to be a simple teatime visit.

I had almost extracted the precise income of Longbourn when Louisa interrupted with tedious prattle about tenants and charitable sewing. Later, she dared to call my inquiries ‘crass,’ but I assured her the information was vital. After all, we must ascertain whether Miss Bennet is the fortune hunter I suspect her to be.

“You were rather hard on the poor girl,” Louisa observed in that superior older sister tone I detested.

“Hard? I was the soul of politeness.” Whilst extracting every damning detail about her connections. Really, I deserve a commendation.

???

As the day progressed, matters only deteriorated. I had calculated that we could whisk Miss Bennet out well before Charles returned from his dinner with the officers. But I failed to account for the legendary delicate constitution of the eldest Miss Bennet. Honestly, these country girls and their mysterious ailments! How terribly... convenient.

“Caroline,” Louisa murmured behind her soup spoon, “does Miss Bennet look rather pale to you?”

I barely glanced up from my own tepid soup—Cook really must learn that lukewarm consommé is an insult to civilisation itself. “My dear sister, everyone appears pale in

this ghastly candlelight.”

But even I could not ignore the way that lady swayed in her seat. Her usually serene countenance was creased with a grimace. Her lower jaw began to tremble, and her eyes took on a glassy appearance. Her usually serene countenance—the very one that had so bewitched my brother—had taken on a most alarming shade of grey.

“Miss Bennet,” Louisa crooned, “I fear you are unwell! Did you take a chill?”

Jane Bennet nodded with a stricken expression. Her lower lip trembled in a way that would have seemed affected had I not known her to be unfortunately genuine in all things. “I fear I am indeed unwell,” she whispered, as if admitting to some grave social faux pas. Which, in my opinion, she absolutely was. Falling ill at dinner? How desperately middle class.

Louisa glared at me as if there was something I should do. I watched in disbelief as our carefully orchestrated dinner devolved into utter chaos. My brilliant plan to dispatch Miss Bennet before Charles’s return crumbled faster than Cook’s notoriously dry scones.

We had scarcely finished the soup - a tepid affair that did little to warm our still-damp guest - when Miss Jane Bennet had begun to sway like a reed in the wind. For a moment, I entertained the delicious notion that she was in her cups, but alas! The silly girl had declined even the mildest cordial.

Louisa, ever the dramatist, leapt to her feet as if the chair had suddenly caught fire. Then she said, shaking her head. “Gracious!” I half expected her to press the back of her hand to her forehead and declare, “The vapours!” Instead, she merely summoned Peters, our footman, with a wave that would have made Sarah Siddons herself envious. “We must get you to bed at once!”

“Oh no,” Jane protested weakly, “I could not possibly impose—”

“Nonsense!” Louisa declared, already dispatching Peters to fetch Mrs Nicolet. “We simply cannot allow you to return home in such a state.”

Cannot allow her to return home? I nearly choked on my wine. This was precisely the sort of thing I had been trying to prevent. One might as well hand Charles a marriage licence and have done with it.

“Sister,” I attempted to interject, “surely Miss Bennet would be more comfortable in her own—”

“Caroline!” Louisa shot me a look that could have curdled all the cream in Hertfordshire. “Do be useful and send for the apothecary.”

“Miss Bennet!” she continued. “We must get you to bed at once!”

“Is the entirely necess—” I began, but Louisa had already swept from the room in a flutter of silk and misplaced maternal instinct, assisting Miss Bennet to her feet and with the housekeeper, escorting Jane Bennet up the stairs apparently to deposit her in a guest chamber!

I found myself abandoned at the table, surrounded by half-empty soup dishes and my own growing irritation. The nerve! I consoled myself by instructing the footman to refill my glass - repeatedly. If I was to be left alone, I might as well enjoy the good wine Charles had laid in.

When Louisa finally deigned to return, she was all aflutter about sending for the apothecary.

“Caroline,” she whispered, as if imparting state secrets, “Miss Bennet is terribly ill.

The poor thing is burning up! She must have caught a cold. Caroline, have you not done anything? Did you not send a footman to the apothecary? - or order some hot tea for our guest?" Louisa looked at me as though I were suddenly the drudge assigned to the care of the sickroom. Then she issued her coup de grace. "We simply must keep her here tonight."

"Must we?" I drawled, signalling for another glass. "How extraordinarily convenient."

"Whatever do you mean by that tone?"

"Oh, nothing at all, dearest sister. I merely find it remarkable how frequently young ladies of uncertain fortune manage to fall ill in houses containing eligible gentlemen of substantial means."

"Caroline Bingley!" Louisa's scandalised gasp was almost worth the entire evening. "You cannot possibly suggest—"

"I suggest nothing," I replied smoothly. "I merely observe. And what I observe is that our dear Miss Bennet has managed to secure herself a night under our roof mere hours before Charles's return."

"You are impossible," Louisa declared, sweeping from the room once again, no doubt to order hot bricks and extra blankets like some common nurse. I heard her speaking with the Butler in the hall.

Ill indeed! I was not born yesterday; unlike some people I could mention. This was clearly a ruse, a calculated device to extend Miss Bennet's stay and further entangle my brother in her web of country charm and tattered petticoats.

Again, I was left to sit alone at table, while Louisa was off on whatever frolic. I did

direct the footman to refill my glass and serve the next course while I waited.

Louisa returned eventually, with some tale about calling the apothecary. I was not so gullible as my sister. Miss Bennet had seen a chance to remain at Netherfield and took advantage of it.

As Louisa fretted over bed linens and hot bricks, I enjoyed my dinner and plotted. If Miss Bennet thought she could outwit Caroline Bingley, she was in for a rude awakening. Though I dreaded to admit it, Charles would be absolutely insufferable when he returned—all puppyish concern and eager solicitude. No doubt he'd want to taste her gruel or some such nonsense. The whole thing was enough to give one a headache. Or perhaps that was the Bordeaux.

I could already envision his fawning excitement, his eager inquiries after her health, his insistence on personally overseeing her care. Oh, what a vexing development! This evening had transformed from a minor annoyance into a full-blown catastrophe. I would need to redouble my efforts to keep Charles from falling further under the spell of the bewitching Miss Bennet.

As I drained the last of my wine, I consoled myself with one comforting thought: at least no rain-soaked, bedraggled Miss Elizabeth was here to complete this mockery of a family reunion. Small mercies, indeed.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:01 am*

The next morning, secure in the knowledge that Charles would not cross the threshold of Miss Bennet's sick room, I attempted to break my fast.

I had barely lifted my first cup of perfectly brewed tea to my lips when chaos incarnate burst through our breakfast parlour door in the form of Elizabeth Bennet. Dear reader, I tell you with complete sincerity that she looked as though she had challenged every hedgerow in Hertfordshire to mortal combat—and lost.

I stopped, frozen in horror, as Miss Elizabeth Bennet traipsed into our breakfast parlour. Her face was flushed an alarming shade of red, her bonnet visibly in disrepair, and her petticoat... good heavens, her petticoat! It bore more mud than fabric at this point. Or what little mud not already affixed to her boots. Three miles! On foot! In this weather! It was beyond comprehension. I half expected to see a flock of sheep trailing behind her.

“Miss Elizabeth!” I nearly dropped my cup, which would have been a tragedy as it was my favourite Wedgwood. “What an... unexpected pleasure.” The word ‘pleasure’ had never been stretched so thin.

“Good morning, Miss Bingley.” She had the audacity to beam at us all, as if appearing at a gentleman's house at dawn looking like something the gamekeeper's dog had dragged in was perfectly acceptable behaviour. “I hope I'm not intruding?”

“Not at all,” I lied through gritted teeth. “Though I confess, we were not expecting visitors quite so... early. Or quite so...”

“Muddy?” she supplied helpfully. she actually twirled—twirled! — giving us all an

excellent view of her ruined stockings and petticoats. The hem of her dress appeared to have absorbed half the county's topsoil. "I walked from Longbourn." Surely she had waded through a knee-deep creek of muck to render her hems so filthy. The chit had the audacity to smile, as if her bedraggled state was something to be proud of.

"Walked?" I echoed faintly. "In this weather? My dear Miss Elizabeth, were all the horses in Hertfordshire suddenly struck lame?"

"The exercise was most invigorating!" She seemed positively gleeful about her state of dishevelment. "I have come to inquire after my sister," she announced, as if that explained everything.

Charles, ever the fool, jumped to her defence. "Caroline! Miss Elizabeth has shown great devotion in coming to check on her sister. It's admirable, really."

"Oh yes, brother dear. Terribly admirable. I'm sure Miss Elizabeth's innovative approach to morning calls will be the talk of the county." I added sotto voce for Mr Darcy's amusement, "Along with her unique approach to morning attire." I took a fortifying sip of tea.

"Caroline," Louisa hissed behind her napkin, "do attempt to be civil."

"I am being perfectly civil," I whispered back. "I have not even mentioned that she appears to have brought half of Longbourn's gardens with her on her hem."

Mr Darcy, usually so composed, bore the queerest expression, as if caught between admiration and confusion. He was staring at our mud-spattered visitor with an expression I had never seen before—something between horror and fascination, like a man watching a shipwreck in progress.

"Miss Elizabeth," he managed, his voice oddly strained, "your dedication to your

sister is... commendable.”

I nearly inhaled my tea. “Oh yes, Mr Darcy. Commendable indeed.” Had the man completely lost his senses? Though I suppose there’s no accounting for taste when it comes to... rustic charm. I, of course, had to express agreement with him, but had he lost his mind?

As Miss Elizabeth was whisked away, leaving a trail of muddy footprints that would give Mrs Nickson apoplexy — to infect poor Jane with her peculiar brand of madness, I turned to my siblings. “Well! How thoughtful of Miss Elizabeth to bring us a piece of her ancestral estate. Perhaps we should have the servants preserve it as a souvenir?”

Louisa glared at me. “Caroline, please. She is our guest.”

“A guest?” I scoffed. “More like an invading army of mud and impropriety.” Charles and Louisa both huffed at that. Mr Darcy bore his usual inscrutable expression, but I hoped that he merely was silent to avoid disagreeing with his host.

The day proceeded to deteriorate with remarkable efficiency. The apothecary arrived—a dried-up little man who looked as though he had learnt his trade during the Crusades—and pronounced Miss Jane Bennet too ill to be moved. Charles fretted about like a mother hen, and Mrs Nickle pestered me endlessly about broths and tinctures, as if I had suddenly been appointed head nurse of this impromptu infirmary.

By three o’clock, I was certain our ordeal was nearly over. While we were stuck with Miss Bennet, per the orders of the apothecary, she was out of sight in a guest room. I made what I thought was a masterful attempt to salvage the situation. I ordered the carriage prepared and pressed it on Miss Elizabeth with grace and elegance.

“Miss Elizabeth,” I said, with what I considered saint-like patience, “pray allow us to

send you home in the carriage. We would not want you to... exert yourself unnecessarily.”

But before she could accept this perfectly reasonable offer, Jane’s weak voice floated up from her bed: “Oh, Lizzy, you will not leave me, will you? I depend upon you so...”

Charles heard Miss Jane Bennet speak of her reliance on “dear Lizzy” and had such concern at parting the sisters and just like that, my brilliant strategy crumbled. Social propriety demanded that I extend an invitation for Miss Elizabeth to stay, which she accepted with thoroughly suspicious gratitude. Likely she merely wished to impose on our superior kitchens for some decent meals to fatten up her scrawny frame.

“How delightful,” I said, my smile so fixed it threatened to crack my face. “Now we can enjoy Miss Elizabeth’s unique... perspectives for even longer. Though perhaps we should send for some additional cleaning staff?”

“Caroline,” Charles frowned, “do try to be kind.”

I waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, I am perfectly kind, Charles. In fact, I am considering taking up Miss Elizabeth’s novel approach to exercise myself. What do you say, Louisa? Shall we go wrestle with some shrubbery before dinner?”

Louisa looked horrified. “Caroline!”

I sighed dramatically. “No? Well, I suppose we cannot all aspire to such heights of... rustic charm.”

“Caroline!” Louisa cornered me with her most formidable older-sister expression. “You do yourself no favours with such remarks. Would you like to be known as the sharp-tongued spinster of the neighbourhood?”

“Better a sharp tongue than mud-caked stockings,” I muttered, but she seized my arm with surprising force.

“There is no need to be rude, Caroline. You need not give rein to your least charitable thoughts. Do you wish to be viewed as a shrew?”

A shrew! Louisa had truly lost her sense after her marriage. She no longer understood the pressure I felt to make a positive impression on the only eligible man within a hundred miles. I shook off her hand and took up a position to provide the best view of my figure directed towards Mr Darcy.

Louisa approached me and hissed “Sister dear. Your attempts to impress Mr Darcy will come to nothing if you persist in showing your worst nature.”

I turned away, adjusting my pose to best display my figure—which, I might add, was decidedly un-mud-spattered. “I merely wish to maintain some standards of decorum in this house. Is that so terrible?”

As a footman was dispatched to fetch Miss Elizabeth’s things—hopefully including some clean stockings—I consoled myself by planning extensive renovations to our morning room. Clearly, we needed more mirrors. Mr Darcy could not possibly have seen Miss Elizabeth’s bedraggled state from all angles, or he would surely have been properly horrified.

Heaven help us all. The Bennet invasion was officially underway, and I appeared to be the only one with sense enough to mount a defence.

One would think, after the dramatic displays of the previous evening, that the morning might offer some respite. One would be devastatingly incorrect.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet joined us for dinner, looking only marginally less dishevelled

than she had earlier—though that is rather like saying a hurricane is marginally more pleasant than a tsunami. The mud had been cleaned from her hem, but her hair retained that wild quality that spoke of complete indifference to proper grooming. Or perhaps she merely had not yet learnt that civilised society possessed such innovations as combs.

Charles, predictably, launched straight into his concerned-host performance. “And how is dear Miss Bennet faring?” He leaned forward so eagerly I feared he might fall face-first into his soup. I suppressed a sigh of exasperation.

“I am afraid she is no better,” she said with all the gravity of a third-act tragedy.

“Oh, how dreadful!” I exclaimed, my voice dripping with feigned sympathy. “A bad cold is so shocking, is it not, Louisa?”

“Indeed,” Louisa agreed. “I absolutely detest being ill.” I fear Louisa missed the mark and took my words seriously.

“Who does not, dear?” I muttered into my wine glass. Though I had to admit, if illness brought eligible gentlemen rushing to one’s bedside, perhaps the Bennets were onto something.

We repeated our concerns a few more times for good measure before I promptly forgot about the matter entirely. After all, there were far more pressing issues at hand - such as ensuring Mr Darcy did not spend too much time gazing at Miss Elizabeth’s “fine eyes.”

The moment Miss Elizabeth excused herself to check on her sister—probably to ensure Jane maintained the perfect level of theatrical invalidity—I turned to our dining companions with barely contained glee.

“Well! Shall we discuss our dear guest’s... unique approach to morning calls?”

“Caroline,” Louisa warned, wielding her dinner knife with uncomfortable precision.

“Indeed, it must be quite worrying for Miss Elizabeth. I do hope Jane recovers soon.”

I pressed on, determined to make my point. “That petticoat! Six inches deep in mud! I have not seen such a determined assault on cleanliness since the pig escaped into the parlour at Lady Metcalf’s last summer.”

Charles set down his fork with exaggerated calm and predictably, agreed with my sister. “Your picture may be very exact, Caroline,” said he, “but this was all lost upon me. I thought Miss Elizabeth Bennet looked remarkably well when she came into the room this morning. Her dirty petticoat quite escaped my notice.”

“Of course, dear brother,” I patted his hand as one might comfort a particularly dim child. “You were too busy composing sonnets to her sister’s sneezes.”

Turning to Mr Darcy—who had been suspiciously quiet—I lowered my voice to a confidential murmur.

“You observed it, Mr Darcy, I am sure, and I am inclined to think that you would not wish to see your sister make such an exhibition.”

“Certainly not,” he replied, though his eyes held an alarming twinkle. Not to be deterred, I took that as encouragement.

“To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum.”

“Caroline,” Louisa interjected firmly, “this is most unbecoming. We ought to be gracious hosts, not gossips.”

I felt a flush of irritation at my sister’s attack. “I am merely pointing out the impropriety of her actions.”

“It shows affection for her sister,” Charles said, backing up Louisa. Finding no support with my siblings, I turned to a certain sympathiser with my view.

“I am afraid, Mr Darcy,” I added, undeterred, in a half whisper, “that this adventure has rather affected your admiration of her fine eyes.”

“Not at all,” he replied with alarming promptness. “They were brightened by the exercise.”

A short pause followed this speech. I had no witty retort prepared for him taking the side of the trollop. Might he be sincere in his admiration? Impossible. He must be joking. But Mr Darcy was not a man known for frivolity. Mr Darcy’s sense of humour, while it existed, rarely extended to matters of propriety. Good heavens, had the man been enchanted?

Refusing to be deterred, I pressed on. “Well, regardless of her eyes—though I am sure they are very fine when not obscured by hedge clippings—with such a family and such connections, I fear poor Jane’s prospects are rather limited. Did you know their uncle is an attorney in Meryton?”

With no one taking up the topic, I continued, “and another is in trade and lives near Cheapside!”

Charles, predictably, came to their defence. “If they had uncles enough to fill all Cheapside, it would not make them any less agreeable.”

“But it would certainly lessen their chances of marrying well,” Mr Darcy observed, finally giving me something to work with. I seized upon this morsel of sense like a drowning woman clutching at a life raft. I gave it my hearty assent and indulged in further mirth for some time at the expense of our dear friend’s vulgar relations. My energy soon flagged with no assistance from the others in our party.

At Louisa’s insistence, we two ladies went up to see Jane for ourselves. She was clearly ill, her face ashen, her hair lank and unkempt, and a handkerchief constantly at her nose. I prepared to remove myself for fear of contagion, but Louisa restrained me, insisting on asking a litany of questions about Jane Bennet’s health.

When we finally departed, Elizabeth would not quit her at all. Late in the evening, when she had the comfort of seeing her sister asleep, she came downstairs herself. She was immediately invited to join us in a game of loo, but declined saying her sister might require her. Probably worried about betting away her quarterly allowance in a single hand. Mr Hurst looked at her with astonishment, as he never refrains from betting as he enjoys taking our money while he lives off of Charles’s generosity.

As the evening wore on, I found myself increasingly irritated by Miss Elizabeth’s continued presence in our home. When she declined again to join our card game, preferring a book instead, I sharpened my sword.

“Miss Eliza Bennet despises cards,” I announced to the room. “She is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else.”

“I deserve neither such praise nor such censure,” she replied, with infuriating composure. “I am not a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things.”

“Like tramping through mud, no doubt,” I muttered under my breath. The sharp pain in my ankle suggested Louisa’s aim with a well-placed kick had improved since our schoolroom days. I consoled myself by plotting to have the morning room

redecorated in shades that would make Miss Elizabeth's complexion look particularly sallow. If we must endure this invasion, I would at least ensure the battlefield was tilted in my favour.

Miss Eliza Bennet pretended to read some dusty tome of Mr Darcy's. More vexing still was the way Mr Darcy's eyes kept straying in her direction like compass needles drawn to magnetic north. Clearly, I would need to develop a sudden passionate interest in whatever medieval manuscripts he favoured. Eager to reclaim his attention, "I am astonished," I announced to the room at large, "that my father left so small a collection of books. What a delightful library you have at Pemberley, Mr Darcy!"

"It ought to be good," he replied, his gaze still magnetised by Elizabeth's profile. "It has been the work of many generations."

"And you have added so much to it yourself," I persisted, wondering if I should fetch a book and wave it about like a flag. "You are always buying books."

His response was frustratingly vague. "I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these."

Was this a hint? Should I begin expanding Netherfield's modest collection? I made a mental note to order several hundred incomprehensible volumes at the earliest opportunity. But perhaps I ought to divert attention from the library to the building itself. Netherfield was a privy next to Darcy's estate.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

“Charles,” I pivoted smoothly, “when you build your house, I wish it may be half as delightful as Pemberley.”

“With all my heart!” Charles replied with all the restraint of a child at Astley’s circus, “I shall buy Pemberley itself if Darcy will sell it.”

“I am speaking of possibilities, Charles,” I said through gritted teeth, my patience wearing thin.

“Upon my word, Caroline,” he laughed, “I should think it more possible to get Pemberley by purchase than by imitation.”

Desperate to find a more productive conversation, I was inspired to touch on the topic which had managed to extract a slight smile from my quarry in the past. I inquired of Mr Darcy, “Is Miss Darcy much grown since the spring? Will she be as tall as I am?”

“I believe she will,” he replied, his eyes flickering yet again to Eliza. “She is now about Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s height, or rather taller.”

I nearly dropped my paper dry scone. Was he deliberately attempting to vex me? Was there no topic which would not draw him back to that vixen? Next he’d be comparing his sister’s accomplishments to Elizabeth’s mud-walking.

“How I long to see her again!” I effused, determined to reclaim control. “I never met with anybody who delighted me so much. Such a countenance, such manners, and so extremely accomplished for her age! Her performance on the pianoforte is exquisite.”

Charles, demonstrating his usual gift for missing the point entirely, chimed in: “It is amazing to me how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished as they all are.”

“All young ladies accomplished! My dear Charles, what do you mean?” I cried. The poor, boy. My brother would be dazzled by anyone with blonde hair, blue eyes and a shapely figure, regardless of whether she could even write her name.

“Yes, all of them, I think.” He beamed like a proud father in his nursery. “They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses. I scarcely know anyone who cannot do all this; and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very accomplished.”

I sunk back in my chair. Charles was hopeless. Did I dissuade him of this foolishness, or simply give up on him? I straightened my back again, conscious of the impact of slouching on my bosom.

“Oh yes, brother dear,” I muttered sotto voce . “And I suppose breathing in and out counts as an accomplishment these days?”

Darcy, finally stirring from his Elizabeth-induced trance, attempted to inject some sense into the proceedings. “Your list of common accomplishments has too much truth. The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it no otherwise than by netting a purse or covering a screen. I cannot boast of knowing more than half-a-dozen truly accomplished women in my entire acquaintance.”

“Nor I, I am sure,” I agreed. At last Mr Darcy was defending me!

“Then,” Miss Elizabeth piped up, “you must comprehend a great deal in your idea of an accomplished woman.” She had only joined the conversation to redirect Darcy’s attention to herself. I would correct that.

“Yes; I do comprehend a great deal in it.” Serious as ever, Darcy spoke plainly.

I absolutely beamed. Mr Darcy had at last spoken of his admiration for me. I stood head and shoulders above any of the country misses in this backwater. Both literally and in accomplishments. I saw my opportunity to put Miss Eliza in her place. “Oh, certainly,” I cried as his faithful assistant, “no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with,” I glanced at Mr Darcy, anticipating his admiring gaze. He continued to look surreptitiously at Miss Eliza. I pressed on. “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word.” Dare I suggest that I rendered a perfect description of myself? I hoped I was not too subtle for Mr Darcy. It was, if I do say so myself, a masterful self-portrait. Subtle as a brick through a window, perhaps, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

Mr Darcy said nothing.

Nothing for it, I would go in for the kill.

“Besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.” He could not but see how well suited I am to him. But no. I was ignored and the provincial chit wished to speak again.

Elizabeth, apparently determined to be thoroughly provoking, merely laughed. “I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any.”

I gasped. The audacity! The impertinence! The... the way Darcy was actually smirking at her comment! How dare she insult me so! My accomplishments, my elegance, how could she deny my superiority! While I fumed, Darcy smirked!

“Are you so severe upon your own sex as to doubt the possibility of all this?” said he—he, always so stoic, nearly broke into a grin at this country bumpkin challenging him! She dared to disagree with him, the grandson of an earl, the scion of an ancient lineage. He surely would put her in her place...

But she went on! “I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united.” HOW DARE SHE!

I was compelled to cry out against the injustice of her implied doubt, and protested that I knew many women in London who answered this description. But Mr Hurst called me to order, with bitter complaints of my inattention to the stupid game. As I turned away, to fume in silence, Mr Darcy, to my dismay, went on.

“All this she must possess,” he had to add; “and to all she must yet add something more substantial in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.” What the devil was this? I had not yet taken up his foolish book. Extensive reading? Now I had to actually read his dusty tomes rather than just admire them from afar? What next—should I take up astronomy? Learn Greek? Write philosophical treatises?

I caught his meaningful look at Elizabeth and nearly cursed with indignation.

When Elizabeth finally quitted the room, I could contain myself no longer. “Eliza Bennet is one of those young ladies who seeks to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own,” I sneered.

“Caroline!” Louisa exclaimed. “That is quite unkind. Miss Elizabeth has been nothing but pleasant.”

Mr Darcy’s response was even more galling. “There is meanness in all the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable.”

I fell into a sullen silence, contemplating his words. At least he had remarked on how cunning Miss Eliza was, with her pretension to reading and her teasing flirts. She strove to captivate him, for a certainty. Yet she did not flatter him. She did not even agree with the man when she might easily show herself as an agreeable lady. I could not fathom what Mr Darcy meant by engaging with her when she employed such tricks.

Here I was, accomplishing myself to death, while Elizabeth Bennet tramped about the countryside collecting mud and contradicting everyone, and somehow she was the one drawing his attention.

Later, Elizabeth returned with news of her sister's worsening condition. I saw another opportunity. Her report of Miss Bennet's condition was a melodramatic tour de force. Her fever, her this, her that. I would play along and call her bluff.

"We must send for a physician from town," I insisted. "No country doctor could possibly be of use."

But Miss Eliza would only accept a visit from the apothecary. It was settled that Mr Jones should be sent for early in the morning, if Miss Bennet were not decidedly better. Charles was quite uncomfortable, and I declared that I was miserable. I was, however, the cause was the presence of the Bennet sisters, not the condition of their health.

Charles fretted and fussed over the Bennets, giving poor Mrs Nicklet all sorts of orders for Miss Bennet's comfort.

"Come, Louisa," I said with forced brightness, "let us soothe our misery with a duet." Perhaps if we play loudly enough, we can drown out the sound of my dreams shattering.

Louisa gave me a reproachful look, but joined me, nonetheless

As we played, I watched Mr Darcy with growing despair. Something had to be done about these Bennet sisters, and soon. Though at this rate, I would probably have better luck trying to teach the pigeons in the garden to play whist.

Upon the third day of what I had taken to calling the Bennet invasion—though Louisa insists I ought not— as I sat in the breakfast parlour, attempting to enjoy my morning repast, the door burst open to admit none other than Mrs Bennet and her two youngest daughters. I was struck quite motionless, toast suspended midair at the incursion. “Good heavens,” I whispered to Louisa, “the entire Bennet clan has descended upon us.”

“Caroline,” Louisa admonished, “do attempt to be civil.”

The matron and her gawking offspring trooped up to the sickroom, returning post haste to work on Charles.

I plastered on my most gracious smile as Mrs Bennet approached.

My sweet, biddable brother spoke to them. Had Mrs Bennet had not found Miss Bennet worse than she expected?

“Indeed, I have, sir,” was her answer. “She is a great deal too ill to be moved. Mr Jones says we must not think of moving her. We must trespass a little longer on your kindness,” she said. Her smirk - which I found most telling - did not go unnoticed.

“Removed!” cried Charles. “It must not be thought of. My sister, I am sure, will not hear of her removal.” I perceived the steely glint in my brother’s eye—he can be remarkably stubborn when it suits him—and knew I had no choice but to force myself to be hospitable.

“You may depend upon it, madam,” said I. I must play the gracious hostess, however much it pained me, “Miss Bennet shall receive every possible attention while she remains with us.”

Mrs Bennet was profuse in her acknowledgements and gratitude, She then expanded upon her attack with praise of the dreadful estate we were stuck in. “I do not know a place in the country that is equal to Netherfield. You will not think of quitting it in a hurry, I hope, though you have but a short lease.” Not, sadly, short enough.

“Whatever I do is done in a hurry,” replied Charles, with rare insight, “and therefore if I should resolve to quit Netherfield, I should probably be off in five minutes. At present, however, I consider myself as quite fixed here.” Charles apparently thought his flightiness ought to be praised.

“That is exactly what I should have supposed of you,” said Miss Eliza. I could not determine whether she was now attempting to flirt with Charles or insult him.

“You begin to comprehend me, do you?” Whatever her scheme, Charles took the bait.

“Oh, yes—I understand you perfectly.” Miss Eliza smiled that shrewish smile which she appeared to use to good effect.

“I wish I might take this for a compliment; but to be so easily seen through, I am afraid, is pitiful.” Why Charles, you are less dense than I feared.

“That is as it happens. It does not necessarily follow that a deep, intricate character is more or less estimable than such a one as yours.” At this further flattery by Miss Eliza, Charles grinned. Fortunately, Mrs Bennet for once took charge.

“Lizzy,” cried her mother, “remember where you are, and do not run on in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home.” Her remarks deterred neither Charles

nor her wild daughter, but I was astounded to learn that anyone had ever endeavoured to check the chit.

Charles was not deterred. “I did not know before,” said he immediately, “that you were a studier of character. It must be an amusing study.”

“Yes; but intricate characters are the most amusing. They have at least that advantage.” I feared Miss Eliza was playing chess whilst my brother was not quite mastering draughts.

Darcy apparently caught on to the game. “The country,” he said, “can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighbourhood, you move in a very confined and unvarying society.” I watched in dismay as Elizabeth and Mr Darcy engaged in what could only be described as verbal sparring, their eyes locked in a way that made my stomach revolt. Her manner of discourse bore no similarity to proper flirtation, yet I observed—much to my dismay—that Mr Darcy appeared thoroughly enchanted by this extraordinary exchange.

“But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them forever.” Miss Eliza was quick. I had to acknowledge that. I could not say for certain what she was about, but she somehow had both gentlemen in her thrall. I thought, but did not say, ‘ Indeed, Miss Eliza, one might say the same of young ladies who discover a sudden talent for witty discourse when particular gentlemen are in attendance.’

I swear Louisa read my mind. She again kicked me under the table. “Caroline, be kind,” she whispered. What? I had not even made a peep.

The conversation descended into further chaos. Mrs Bennet began extolling the virtues of country life and boasting about her acquaintances. She utterly missed the mark, “Yes, indeed,” said she, apparently offended by Darcy’s manner of mentioning

a country neighbourhood. “I assure you there is quite as much of that going on in the country as in town.” I was intrigued. Exactly what manner of “that” was Mrs Bennet referring to? What could possibly happen in this flea-bitten environs which might be remotely amusing?

Darcy, after looking at her for a moment, turned silently away. I was certain he resisted the urge to provide Mrs Bennet with a spectacular set down. Or perhaps he was bored. Mrs Bennet, who fancied she had gained a complete victory over him, continued her triumph—

“I cannot see that London has any great advantage over the country, for my part, except the shops and public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter, is not it, Mr Bingley?” One thing I must say for that lady, she knew her audience. Charles would no more disagree with her than climb up to dust the dingy chandelier.

“When I am in the country,” he replied, “I never wish to leave it; and when I am in town, it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can be equally happy in either.”

“Ay, that is because you have the right disposition.” Mrs Bennet beamed at Charles, her new favourite. “But that gentleman,” she continued, looking daggers at Darcy, “seemed to think the country was nothing at all.”

“Indeed, mamma, you are mistaken.” Miss Eliza was blushing for her mother. “You quite mistook Mr Darcy. He only meant that there was not such a variety of people to be met with in the country as in town, which you must acknowledge to be true.”

“Certainly, my dear, nobody said there were but as to not meeting with many people in this neighbourhood, I believe there are few neighbourhoods larger. I know we dine with four-and-twenty families.”

I directed my eye towards Mr Darcy with a very expressive smile. He maintained his stoic countenance, despite the ample provocation.

Miss Eliza, desperate to change the topic, asked mother her if Charlotte Lucas had been at Longbourn since her coming away.

“Yes, she called yesterday with her father. What an agreeable man Sir William is, Mr Bingley—is not he? so much the man of fashion! so genteel and so easy! He has always something to say to everybody. That is my idea of good breeding; and those persons who fancy themselves very important and never open their mouths quite mistake the matter.” Mrs Bennet’s unsubtle jab at Mr Darcy missed its mark by a furlong. That gentleman was looking away as if wool gathering. The conversation went on.

“Did Charlotte dine with you?”

“No, she would go home. I fancy she was wanted about the mince-pies. For my part, Mr Bingley, I always keep servants that can do their own work; my daughters are brought up differently. But everybody is to judge for themselves, and the Lucases are a very good sort of girls, I assure you. It is a pity they are not handsome! Not that I think Charlotte so very plain; but then she is our particular friend.”

“She seems a very pleasant young woman,” Charles could never stand a conflict, no matter how mild or irrelevant.

“Oh dear, yes; but you must own she is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so and envied me Jane’s beauty. I do not like to boast of my own child; but to be sure, Jane—one does not often see anybody better looking. It is what everybody says. I do not trust my own partiality. When she was only fifteen, there was a gentleman at my brother Gardiner’s in town so much in love with her, that my sister-in-law was sure he would make her an offer before we came away. But, however, he did not. Perhaps

he thought her too young. However, he wrote some verses on her, and very pretty they were.” Lord save us, we were now to be treated to Mrs Bennet attempting to render Jane more palatable on the basis of some ‘gentleman’ attempting to win her when she was a child. I squeezed my eyes closed to relieve the urge to gape at her.

“And so ended his affection,” said Miss Eliza, her tone impatient. It was oddly satisfying to see that one suffer. Her mother’s effusions embarrassed her, as they would any decent person. She attempted to divert attention from her mother with further blather. “There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!” This nonsense roused Darcy from his stupor.

“I have been used to consider poetry as the food of love,” said Darcy, his voice soft in a way I had never heard before.

I gripped my teacup so tightly I feared it might shatter. Indeed, he had not been wool-gathering, but merely waiting to reengage with his favoured sparring partner.

“Of a fine, stout, healthy love, it may. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.” Miss Eliza’s fine eyes sparkled as she gazed at Darcy. I felt a pang in my back teeth and attempted to cease clenching them with quite so much force.

Darcy only smiled. It was not a smile of disdain, nor one of polite indifference. It was a sort of smile I had not before seen on Mr Darcy and it puzzled me exceedingly.

I was not in the least troubled, however, to observe Miss Eliza appear to tremble lest her mother should be exposing herself again.

Mrs Bennet began repeating her thanks for Charles’s kindness to Jane, with an

apology for troubling him also with Lizzy. He turned his eyes on me with such a glare as forced me to be civil also and say what the occasion required. I expertly performed my part, indeed, with much graciousness, and, heaven be praised, Mrs Bennet was satisfied, and soon afterwards ordered her carriage.

Upon this signal, the youngest of her daughters put herself forward. The two girls had been rudely whispering to each other during the whole visit; and the result of it was that the youngest should tax my brother with having promised on his first coming into the country to give a ball at Netherfield.

It was the taller of the two little baggages. The overly endowed, flirtatious one. The Lord only knew what possessed her mother to bring her into public at an early age. She had high animal spirits, and a sort of natural self-consequence, which the attentions of anything in trousers had increased into an appalling self-assurance. She was very equal, therefore, to address my hapless brother on the subject of the ball, and abruptly reminded him of his ‘promise’ saying “it would be the most shameful thing in the world if he did not keep it.”

His answer to this sudden attack was delightful to her mother’s ear and a painful shock to mine. He could not be serious.

“I am perfectly ready, I assure you, to keep my engagement; and, when your sister is recovered, you shall, if you please, name the very day of the ball. But you would not wish to be dancing while she is ill?” His capitulation was as swift as a debutante’s first waltz.

Preening, Miss youngest and least civilised Bennet declared herself satisfied. “Oh yes—it would be much better to wait till Jane was well; and by that time, most likely, Captain Carter would be at Meryton again. And when you have given your ball,” she added, “I shall insist on their giving one as well. I shall tell Colonel Forster it will be quite a shame if he does not.”

“Oh, how delightful,” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “Nothing would please me more than to open our home to every officer and country miss within ten miles.”

I fear only Louisa heard my contribution. “Caroline!” Louisa hissed. “You forget yourself!”

As the Bennet battalion finally took their leave—praise Providence—Miss Elizabeth fled upstairs in well-deserved humiliation. I rather enjoyed watching her mortification, I must confess. I turned to Mr Darcy, determined to salvage the morning. “Well, Mr Darcy, what did you think of our visitors? Surely the charming company of those ladies surpasses the delights of a certain pair of ‘fine eyes,’”

To my utter dismay—though I maintained perfect composure—he merely smiled. “I found the experience most... illuminating.”

I collapsed onto the sofa, wielding my fan like a weapon against vapours. Illuminating indeed. Like a house ablaze on Guy Fawkes Night.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

A nother day of the Bennet occupation dawned. After Louisa forced me to spend several excruciating hours playing nurse to our “invalid” who continued to recover at a glacial pace, I found myself in the drawing room, watching Mr Darcy write to his sister. I positioned myself strategically near him—close enough that he might catch the expensive French perfume I had applied liberally, but not so near as to appear desperate.

Miss Elizabeth sat nearby with her needlework, no doubt plotting how to turn even this peaceful scene to her advantage. For a certainty, she eavesdropped shamelessly.

“How delighted Miss Darcy will be to receive such a letter!” I exclaimed, leaning closer to admire his penmanship.

Mr Darcy made no reply. He may have sighed. Undeterred, I made another effort.

“You write uncommonly fast.” I wished he would write more quickly and turn his attention to me.

“You are mistaken. I write rather slowly,” he responded, not looking up. What, I wondered, would it take to garner a second of his attention? I began to wonder if I should simply set my dress on fire to get his attention. Surely more flattery could not go wrong. I would find something to engage him.

“How many letters you must have occasion to write in the course of a year!” I gushed, as if correspondence was the most fascinating topic in creation. “Letters of business, too! How odious I should think them!” My admiration of his industriousness was a bit forced, but I was grasping for an angle that would entice

him. Would the man not even look at me? I was running out of compliments.

“It is fortunate, then, that they fall to my lot instead of to yours.” Indeed. I could think of nothing more tedious. I longed to extract a soupçon of attention so I tittered at his wit, though I sensed Miss Eliza’s eyes upon us. She raised a single brow in what I was learning to recognise as her ‘arch’ expression. The woman had more facial expressions than a travelling theatre troupe. Surreptitiously, I experimented with lifting one brow. My facial muscles seemed unwilling to cooperate. Was this the missing accomplishment I needed to develop?

“Pray tell your sister that I long to see her.” I touched his arm lightly, my fingers barely grazing the superfine wool of his coat.

“I have already told her so once, by your desire.” His gaze fixed on my hand as if it were some exotic species of insect that had landed on his sleeve.

After a moment, I perceived that he would like me to relocate my hand.

“Caroline,” Louisa whispered, “do not pester Mr Darcy so.”

I ignored her, moving slightly closer—and conveniently out of my sister’s reach. “I am afraid you do not like your pen. Let me mend it for you. I mend pens remarkably well.” And I am clearly running out of conversational gambits .

“Thank you—but I always mend my own.” Mr Darcy did not even raise his eyes to me as he spoke. What would it take to interest him?

I executed a strategic retreat across the room, making sure to display my elegant walk to its best advantage. Upon turning back, I found that rather than admire my form, he was entirely absorbed in his writing. The man might as well have been carved from marble.

“How can you contrive to write so even?” I threw out. He did have the most masculine, precise handwriting. Quite attractive if you like that sort of thing.

Silence. I was beginning to wonder if he’d gone temporarily deaf. But wait, was that a titter? I whipped around to glare at Miss Eliza, but her expression revealed nothing.

Making one final assault on the fortress of Mr Darcy’s attention, I called forth my most potent piece of artillery—excessive praise of his beloved sister. He was devoted to that mousy little sister of his. A few kind words about her could not go astray.

“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, and I think it infinitely superior to Miss Grantley’s.”

Darcy actually stopped writing. For a moment, he seemed to be praying for patience. “Will you give me leave to defer your raptures till I write again? At present I have not room to do them justice.”

Was his jaw clenching? And was Miss Eliza smothering a giggle? If she found something amusing, I could do no less. I forced out a gay laugh of my own, though internally I was contemplating murder. “Oh, it is of no consequence. I shall see her in January. But do you always write such charming long letters to her, Mr Darcy?”

“They are generally long; but whether always charming, it is not for me to determine.” The muscle in his cheek twitched like he was biting back something decidedly not charming

“It is a rule with me, that a person who can write a long letter with ease cannot write ill.” He would not escape my admiration so easily as that. I was not going to be deterred by mere facial tics.

Charles, bless his perpetually inconvenient heart, chose this moment to join in. “That will not do for a compliment to Darcy, Caroline, because he does not write with ease. He studies too much for words of four syllables. Do not you, Darcy?”

“My style of writing is very different from yours,” Mr Darcy replied coolly. He did, however, grace Charles with a glance as he spoke.

“Oh!” I seized the chance to mock Charles, hoping to spark some fraternal camaraderie. “Charles writes in the most careless way imaginable. He leaves out half his words and blots the rest.”

To my absolute horror, this sparked a lengthy debate between Darcy and Elizabeth about the merits of humility and haste in correspondence. I watched in mounting despair as Darcy actually set down his pen, sat back and turned in her direction. His eyes sparkled with interest at her impertinent observations.

Their discussion of friendship and persuasion was utterly tedious, yet Mr Darcy seemed inexplicably captivated. My ire rose as I watched them toss the conversational ball between them as if in a game of royal tennis. Nothing I had said earned more than a polite dismissal. The man was inured to my flattery but appeared to lap up the impertinent badinage Miss Eliza served. I fumed. Gradually, I moved across the carpet to position myself between the two contestants, in hopes of interrupting their little skirmish.

“Caroline,” Louisa murmured, as she came to my side and attempted to bring me to the window, “you look quite flushed. Perhaps some air would do you good?”

“I am perfectly well,” I snapped, though in truth I felt rather faint as Mr Darcy and Miss Eliza carried on their verbal sparring. I felt rather like I was watching a carriage accident progress by degrees.

Charles, ever insensible to the mood, joined in, jesting about Mr Darcy's stature. Mr Darcy merely smiled, though I fancied I detected a hint of discomfort. Miss Eliza, the impertinent creature, appeared to be suppressing a laugh.

"I declare I do not know a more awful object than Darcy on particular occasions," Charles continued, "and in particular places; at his own house especially, and of a Sunday evening, when he has nothing to do."

"I see your design, Bingley," Mr Darcy said, addressing Charles. "You dislike an argument and want to silence this." Charles laughed in a sheepish manner, and, to my relief, that concluded the conversation. Mr Darcy returned to his cursed letter. Determined to capture his attention, I suggested some music.

"Mr Darcy, would you care for some entertainment? Perhaps Miss Eliza would favour us with a performance?"

"Oh no," Miss Eliza demurred, "I believe Miss Bingley's talents far exceed my own."

I schooled my expression, though my brows may have risen of their own accord. Only in tandem, however. The single brown lift was not within my capacity. I bit back a number of delectable retorts. My mind spun with possibilities-

'Indeed, they do. I am capable of playing without slurring the notes and skipping the difficult parts.'

'How kind of you to notice my superiority in at least one area.'

'Talents? I was not aware you had any.'

I amused myself with these as, with an expression of extreme modesty, I took my place at the pianoforte. As I played, I glared over the top of the instrument. Mr

Darcy's gaze continued to be fixed upon Miss Eliza. The sight nearly caused me to miss several notes. I stopped in the middle of an ill-chosen Italian love song, hoping to shift the mood. I would not provide musical accompaniment to that witch's seduction! Instead, like a fool, I varied the charm with a lively Scotch air; and soon afterwards Mr Darcy drew near Miss Eliza.

"Do you not feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?"

I nearly slipped into a funeral march. The man was actually asking her to dance while I provided the musical accompaniment to my own humiliation!

Eliza smiled but made no answer. The man asked her to dance, and she ignored him! What manner of flirtation was this? I surely did not wish her success, but, in fact, he repeated the question with some surprise at her silence.

"Oh," said she, "I heard you before; but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. You wanted me, I know, to say 'Yes,' that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; but I always delight in overthrowing those kinds of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have, therefore, 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."

"Indeed, I do not dare."

I am certain I missed an entire measure with that. Why in the name of everything holy did he NOT despise her? Surely her words would affront him, but instead provoked remarkable gallantry. What was it in her manner which made the man keep going back for more? Heretofore, he never gave any woman a second glance. And this countrified, impertinent miss had him eating out of her hand. Thank goodness for the inferiority of her connections, else he should be in some danger.

They did not, heavens be praised, dance. But I concluded my performance abruptly in fear that such a thing could be reconsidered. I was trembling with disgust and wrapped myself well in a shawl while I thought through the events. I was not capable of conversation for some time.

How was it possible that Miss Elizabeth Bennet—plain, unaccomplished, and with all the refinement of a farmyard cat—had managed to capture Darcy’s attention when I, with my superior everything, could barely get him to look at me, while he stared across many a room at her. None of this made any sense.

The next day, I made a further attempt. Nothing I had attempted had provoked Darcy into disliking her. Even talking of their supposed marriage and planning his happiness in such an alliance fell flat. As we were walking in the shrubbery, I endeavoured to point out the inferiority of her connections to no avail.

“I hope,” I said, “you will give your mother-in-law a few hints, when this desirable event takes place, as to the advantage of holding her tongue; and if you can compass it, to cure the younger girls of running after the officers. And, if I may mention so delicate a subject, endeavour to check that little something, bordering on conceit and impertinence, which your lady possesses.”

“Have you anything else to propose for my domestic felicity?” The man actually looked amused.

“Oh yes,” I pressed on, determined to have the last word. “Do let the portraits of your uncle and aunt Philips 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.”

Finding him still unmoved by my wit, I deployed my final weapon. “As for your Elizabeth’s picture, you must not attempt to have it taken, for what painter could do

justice to those beautiful eyes?”

I nearly choked on the words; certain such obvious flattery would reveal the absurdity of his fascination. Instead, the traitorous man actually considered it seriously.

“It would not be easy, indeed, to catch their expression,” he mused. “But their colour and shape, and the eyelashes, so remarkably fine, might be copied.”

I contemplated throwing myself into the nearest ornamental pond. Clearly, we were all living in some sort of other world in which mud-spattered impertinence trumped breeding and accomplishments. I felt my face grow hot with indignation. Before I could formulate a suitably cutting response, we were interrupted by the arrival of my sister and the very object of our discussion, Miss Eliza herself.

Panic seized me as I realised they might have overheard our conversation. I scrambled to cover my confusion, saying, “I did not know that you intended to walk.”

Louisa, bless her misguided heart, seemed more concerned with their sudden appearance than the potential eavesdropping. “You used us abominably ill,” she scolded, “running away without telling us that you were coming out.” Of course I had not told them. I wanted the man to myself !

Louisa took Mr Darcy’s other arm, leaving Miss Eliza to walk alone. Did my sister not realise she was giving that woman the perfect opportunity to appear noble and self-sacrificing? As if on cue, Mr Darcy noticed the impropriety of the situation.

“This walk is not wide enough for our party,” said he, ever the gentleman. “We had better go into the avenue.”

I held my breath, certain that Miss Eliza would use this moment to insinuate herself further into Mr Darcy’s good graces. To my surprise, she did quite the opposite.

“No, no; stay where you are,” she said with a laugh that set my teeth on edge. “You are charmingly grouped and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth. Good-bye.”

With that, she ran off, leaving us standing there like fools. I fumed. The picturesque indeed. I was certain there was an insult buried in that phrase; though I could not quite think what it was.

The Bennet sisters had to leave Netherfield before it was too late. Though judging by the way Darcy’s eyes followed Elizabeth’s retreating figure, I feared it already was.

After dinner that evening, when we ladies withdrew, Miss Eliza fussed over her sister like a mother hen with her only chick, escorting her to the drawing room as if Jane might dissolve upon exposure to the evening air. I welcomed them with such excessive warmth that I nearly strained something.

Inspired by their imminent departure, I am sure I had never been so agreeable to them as I was during the hour which passed before the gentlemen appeared. I regaled them with tales of London society, describing balls and soirées with such exquisite detail that surely they ought to recognise their own provincial limitations.

“Of course,” I added with delicate emphasis, “one must have the proper connections to attend such affairs.” I might as well have acted it out in the manner of a charade, without providing a single clue. They smiled politely but were unmoved.

When the gentlemen at last entered, my eyes were instantly turned towards Darcy, but he bypassed me as if I were merely decorative furniture, making straight for Jane with his congratulations on her recovery. Even Mr Hurst, who generally acknowledges nothing unless it is wrapped in pastry, managed a slight bow and said he was “very glad.”

Charles, meanwhile, transformed into some sort of overwrought nurse. “Miss Bennet, are you quite warm enough? Jenkins! Another log on the fire! Thompson! Fetch the largest screen—no, the other one. Miss Bennet, pray move away from that treacherous draft!”

He was showing such unseemly, marked attention to a nobody.

“Charles,” I hissed, “do you intend to burn down Netherfield for Miss Bennet’s comfort?”

He ignored me completely, the lovesick fool, continuing to hover over Jane like an anxious butterfly. Miss Elizabeth, pretending to focus on her needlework, watched it all with poorly concealed triumph while I contemplated the shocking prospect of being permanently yoked to these two insipid creatures. If only Charles could attach himself to someone of actual consequence—or better yet, to Georgiana Darcy, giving me the perfect excuse to become a permanent fixture at Pemberley.

But no, Charles doted upon the ever-smiling Jane Bennet as if she were Helen of Troy and he Menelaus attempting to wrest her from Paris.

Later, as we settled for the evening, I made every effort to engage Mr Darcy in conversation, but he seemed determined to bury his nose in a book. In desperation, I selected the second volume of his book and attempted to read the tedious thing, all while stealing glances at him. I might as well have been reading ancient Greek for all I comprehended. I peppered him with questions, but could not win him, however, to any conversation; he merely answered the questions tersely and read on.

“How pleasant it is to spend an evening thus!” I exclaimed, unable to bear the silence any longer. “I declare, after all, there is no enjoyment like reading!”

Mr Darcy responded by turning a page with devastating indifference.

“When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library.” Though perhaps with slightly more fashionable titles than “Treatise on Agricultural Developments in Northumbria.”

Silence reigned once more. In a fit of pique, I turned to Charles. “By the bye, are you truly serious about hosting a ball at Netherfield? I fear some among us,” I glanced meaningfully at Mr Darcy, “might find it more punishment than pleasure.”

Charles, the blundering oaf, merely laughed. “If Darcy wishes to retire early, he may. The ball is quite decided.”

Finding Darcy still absorbed in his book, I made a strategic decision. My elegant figure and graceful carriage had captured many a gentleman’s eye in London. Could I not capture Mr Darcy’s? If I could not capture his attention alone, perhaps I could use Elizabeth as a foil. Surely my stylish figure would appear to even greater advantage next to her reed-thin form.

“Miss Eliza Bennet, let me persuade you to follow my example, and take a turn about the room.” I called out sweetly, “will you not join me in a turn about the room? It is most refreshing after sitting so long in one attitude.”

To my astonishment, she agreed. Even more shocking, Mr Darcy looked up from his book. I nearly stumbled in my triumph.

“Will you not join us, Mr Darcy?” I inquired, batting my eyelashes. His eyes slid to mine for a half second before immediately fixing again on the ill dressed, inelegant miss beside me.

His response was typically cryptic, something about two motives for walking together. I feigned confusion, hoping he would elaborate, but Miss Eliza had the gall to suggest we disappoint him by not inquiring further as to his motives.

I was incapable of disappointing Mr Darcy in anything, and persevered, therefore, in requiring an explanation of his two motives.

“I have not the smallest objection to explaining them,” said he, as soon as she allowed him to speak. “You either choose this method of passing the evening because you are in each other’s confidence, and have secret affairs to discuss, or because you are conscious that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking: if the first, I should be completely in your way; and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire.”

“Oh, shocking!” I cried. In each other’s confidence? Not in a thousand years. “I never heard anything so abominable. How shall we punish him for such a speech?”

Miss Eliza had the temerity to suggest that we “Tease him—laugh at him. Intimate as you are, you must know how it is to be done.”

Indeed, I had not the least idea how to tease such a man. It would never have occurred to me to do anything so scandalous. What was this wild girl about?

What followed was possibly the most excruciating conversation of my life, as Elizabeth and Mr Darcy engaged in what could only be described as verbal fencing, while I stood by like a particularly useless referee. They sparred about pride, prejudice, and the nature of character defects, while I contemplated whether it was possible to expire from sheer frustration.

“Your examination of Mr Darcy is over, I presume,” I said after what had seemed hours. “And pray what is the result?”

“I am perfectly convinced by it that Mr Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise.”

“No,” said Darcy, “I have made no such pretension. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper I dare not vouch for. It is, I believe, too little yielding; certainly, too little for the convenience of the world. I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offences against myself. My feelings are not puffed about with every attempt to move them. My temper would perhaps be called resentful. My good opinion once lost is lost for ever.”

“That is a failing, indeed!” She persisted in plaguing the man. “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.”

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

“And your defect is a propensity to hate everybody.”

“And yours,” he replied, with a smile, a smile unlike any I had ever seen upon his handsome visage before, “is wilfully to misunderstand them.”

I could not comprehend what was happening before me. Mr. Darcy, actually smiling at that impertinent country nobody after she accused him of hating everyone! I have spent years perfecting every accomplishment that would suit Pemberley’s mistress, yet he seems enchanted by this....I know not what she is. His eyes follow her about the room, as if she were some fascinating puzzle. He teases her about “wilfully misunderstanding” everyone, when she understands nothing about proper society. It simply cannot be serious. It cannot!

“Do let us have a little music,” I finally announced, my voice several octaves higher than intended. “Louisa, you will not mind my waking Mr Hurst?”

As I attacked the pianoforte with more vigour than accuracy, I made a solemn vow.

These Bennet sisters would not triumph. Not while Caroline Bingley drew breath. Though at this rate, I might need to consider more dramatic measures—perhaps a convenient carriage accident? Or would that be too obvious?

I caught my wrathful reflection in the mirror above the pianoforte and forced myself to smile serenely. After all, a lady never shows her distress—even when watching her carefully constructed world crumble note by terrible note.

To think, I mused darkly as I massacred Mozart, I once thought country life would be merely boring.

???

Heaven be praised! The moment I had been praying for finally arrived. Miss Bennet requested her mother send a carriage. My jubilation lasted approximately thirty seconds before that scheming matron replied that she would not do so for several more days. Of course not. Why make things simple when one could prolong the agony?

Thankfully, Miss Bennet then appealed to Charles for his carriage, proving she had at least a modicum of sense beneath all those serene smiles.

“Louisa,” I whispered, a triumphant smile playing upon my lips, “it appears we may soon be rid of our... charming visitors.”

“Caroline,” Louisa admonished, “do attempt to display some semblance of regret at their leaving.”

I immediately arranged my features into an expression of profound distress that would befit any tragic actress. “Oh, but surely you cannot think of leaving us so soon!” I warbled, my voice dripping with enough artificial sweetness to cause the loss

of several teeth. “Why, Jane is scarcely recovered! What if you should catch your death on the journey?”

The look of determination on Miss Eliza’s face nearly caused me to lose my composure. She was as desperate to escape as I was to see her go—possibly the only thing we had ever agreed upon. I could not blame her, for I wished nothing more fervently than to see the back of her.

“Charles,” I called out, unable to resist the urge to further my triumph, “do tell Miss Bennet that she simply must not travel in her delicate condition.”

My brother, predictably, seized the chance to play the gallant host. “Indeed, Miss Bennet,” he said, gazing at Jane with all the subtlety of a lovesick puppy, “I fear for your health should you depart too hastily.”

Mr Darcy stood by the hearth looking as if he would rather be anywhere else—possibly including an evening of conversation with his aunt Lady Catherine. His studied avoidance of Elizabeth’s gaze only served to highlight how attentive he had been before. The man had all the restraint of a summer tempest.

“Mr Darcy,” I simpered, determined to draw him into conversation, “do you not agree that our guests should remain a while longer?”

He mumbled something noncommittal, suddenly fascinated by whatever pastoral scene was visible through the window. Sheep, presumably. Or possibly escape routes. I seethed inwardly at his obvious preoccupation.

It was decided that the two interlopers would remain in our midst until after services the following morning. I reproached myself for following Louisa’s order to pretend I wished them to stay.

I did take some comfort in noting that Darcy scarcely spoke ten words to Elizabeth all that Saturday, adhering to his book as if it contained the wisdom of Solomon. My heart soared with relief. I could only assume that ample exposure to her ill-mannered bickering and scanty charms had at last disgusted him.

As Sunday dawned and the longed-for hour of departure approached, I found myself in the peculiar position of almost wishing to prolong the Bennet sisters' stay, if only to prevent Charles from moping about the house like a lovestruck fool.

"Miss Eliza," I said, forcing myself to shake her hand and wondering if impertinence was contagious, "do know that you shall always be welcome at Netherfield." The lie nearly caused me physical pain.

"How kind you are, Miss Bingley," she replied, her eyes twinkling with barely suppressed mirth. "I shall treasure the memory of your hospitality." I felt a blush rise at her clever riposte. How did she manage to make perfect politeness sound so much like a reproach?

As I watched them rejoin their ill-bred family in their own decrepit carriage, I let out a sigh of relief. "Well," I declared, turning to Louisa, "Dare I hope we have seen the last of the Bennet sisters for quite some time."

Louisa merely shook her head, a knowing smile upon her face. "I would not celebrate too soon, Caroline. I fear our brother is quite taken with Miss Bennet."

I sniffed dismissively. "Nonsense. It is merely a passing fancy. He shall forget her as soon as the next pretty face catches his eye."

But even as I spoke, I caught sight of Mr Darcy's expression as he watched Elizabeth's departure. He looked like a man who had just discovered something both wonderful and terrible, and was not quite sure which frightened him more.

I retreated to my room to nurse a sudden headache. Clearly, this battle was far from over. Perhaps it was time to consider more drastic measures. I wondered idly if one could arrange for an entire family to be accidentally relocated to the colonies.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

My elation at the eviction of the two interlopers was short-lived thanks to my brother's hasty decision to hold a ball. A ball! In this backwater! My days were filled with constant struggles to create an elegant entertainment in a provincial town.

"Charles," I called out sweetly, "pray tell me, how do you propose we create a decent ball when we are a day's journey from London?"

My dear brother, bless his simple heart, merely smiled. "I am certain you shall manage splendidly, Caroline."

I sniffed. "Oh yes, splendidly," I muttered. "And I suppose you imagine we shall source our supplies from the illustrious shops of this pitiful outpost?"

The horror dawning on Charles's face as he reviewed the bills for our impending lavish entertainment almost made the whole ordeal worthwhile. Almost.

"Good heavens, Caroline!" he spluttered, his eyes threatening to escape their sockets. "Are these figures correct?"

I smiled with angelic patience. "But of course, dear brother. Did you imagine quality appears by magic?"

As I rattled off the list of necessities - linens, flowers, wines, foodstuffs, even the very musicians - all to be hauled from London, I watched Charles's complexion achieve fascinating new shades of pale.

"Surely we do not need quite so many candles—"

“Oh no,” I interrupted, warming to my theme. “We certainly have no need for proper lighting. Let us give everyone tallow candles and watch the local gentry drip grease all over themselves. How atmospheric.”

My exhaustive labours in preparing for this ball did provide one small mercy - I was spared the requirement of making calls or attending entertainments in the village. Small favours indeed.

Thanks to my maid, Adèle Durand, whose French accent was far more authentic than my enthusiasm for country life, I remained admirably well-informed of the goings-on in our delightful neighbourhood. The girl had a rather keen ability to gather gossip.

“Mademoiselle Caroline,” she simpered one evening, lowering her voice, “I ‘ave ‘eard ze most intriguing news!”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do enlighten me, Adèle. Has someone finally invented a way to make Meryton tolerable?”

She giggled, a most unbecoming sound. “Non, Mademoiselle. But zere are two new gentlemen in town, one connected to ze Bennet family!”

My interest was piqued. “Do go on, Adèle. I find myself in desperate need of amusement.”

The tale she spun was positively delicious. The first gentleman—and I use that term loosely—was apparently the heir to Longbourn, some sort of clergyman. The laundry maid at Netherfield also served Longbourn on occasion and was full of talk about the man, whose dingy linens had sparked her outrage. He was, by her report, tall and spindly but rather round about the middle. He came to the estate by donkey cart and took residence for some weeks' visit. His intention to select his bride from among the Bennet throng was music to my ears. Surely any man would immediately be drawn to

the admittedly beautiful Jane Bennet. Charles would be spared!

“Adèle,” I declared, “your news has afforded me no small pleasure. Please, take these silk stockings. I find I have no use for them in this dull hamlet.”

But it was the second arrival that truly captured my attention. I found myself, quite by accident of course, standing in a particular spot in the corridor outside the billiard room, where some peculiarity of the building made the gentlemen’s conversation quite audible. I overheard the most fascinating exchange between Charles and Mr Darcy about a certain Mr Wickham.

Darcy dropped his voice more than once, and the sound of billiard balls as they played interfered with some words. But I heard enough to be intrigued.

“What unsettled you in town, Darcy?” Charles asked. “You fled while I was speaking with the Misses Bennet as if the Devil himself were in pursuit.”

Darcy’s response was somewhere between a grunt and a growl.

“Was it the soldiers? Or that peculiar fellow they called cousin?”

“Cousin? Which was a cousin?”

“The one who kept bowing, dressed like a parson.”

“He is a cousin to the Bennets?”

“So he was introduced. Did he provoke you somehow?”

“No. I barely took note of him. It was the new militia man. Wickham.”

Lengthy silence. Billiard balls clacking. The distinct sound of liquid being poured suggested that this conversation required the aid of spirits.

“He is the son of my former steward,” Darcy finally ground out, sounding about as cheerful as a man attending his own funeral. “He grew up on the estate. He is as licentious a debauchee as you could imagine.”

“Ah, I recall the name now. Thought he could get paid for a clerical living and then claim the living as well. Hardly seems he sought his ordination if he is now marching in the militia.”

“I can only hope the French find their way to this part of England and put a sword through the dastard.”

“My word,” I murmured to myself, “a licentious debauchee set loose among the young ladies of the village? How perfectly dreadful. I simply must inform everyone I know, purely out of concern for their welfare, of course. Or, on second thought, perhaps I should keep the matter to myself.” This little sojourn in the countryside might prove entertaining after all .

???

My citron silk gown drew many an eye. It was so satisfying to see the envy reflected in the gazes of the dowdy local matrons for my turban with dyed to match ostrich feathers which rose nearly twenty inches. It was the sort of ensemble that would have attracted notice in London, let alone in this provincial locale where the height of style apparently involves putting ribbons on one’s bonnet. I cannot say, however, that it made up for being forced to receive the throng of barely washed, poorly dressed locals who promenaded into Netherfield gawking as if they had never seen a proper house before.

After the tedious reception, I opened the ball with Charles. Perhaps it was proper, but I was sorely disappointed that Mr Darcy had not taken the opportunity to request the honour. He declined to dance the first as was his wont. Surely, our intimate friendship warranted an exception. I caught my reflection in one of the pier glasses I had insisted on having installed at ruinous expense and quickly adjusted my expression from “quietly seething” to “radiantly content.” One must maintain standards, after all.

Dancing with my brother was far from exhilarating. However I was relieved of my ennui by the opportunity to watch Miss Eliza with her cousin, the visiting parson. He had clearly solicited her hand prior to the evening. The resignation on Elizabeth’s face matched that of Marie Antoinette approaching the guillotine. What followed was less a dance than an extended exercise in foot-stomping and apology-making.

This Mr Collins had been introduced to me in the receiving line. He distinguished himself by his ridiculously low and repeated bowing, and the endless stream of drivel emanating from his mouth. Miss Eliza and her sisters each did their best to behave as though the strange fellow was not actually of their party, but he latched on to Miss Eliza as they entered the ballroom as though she were his personal property. Might this signal some intention? While my wish was for him to secure Jane Bennet to spare Charles, the idea of Miss Eliza shackled to such a specimen had a certain appeal.

The man had not the slightest acquaintance with the patterns of the dance, or the manners of a gentleman. Miss Eliza’s glossy silk slippers were marred with his footprints before the first turn. I bit my cheek to restrain my mirth. The moment the torture ended she trotted to that plain spinster, Miss Lucas, where they whispered together violently.

My joy at Miss Eliza’s misfortune was tempered exceedingly when next she was approached by Mr Darcy—yes, the same Mr Darcy who could not be bothered to dance the first with me. I could not credit my eyes when I saw him lead her to the floor for the next set. Fine eyes indeed!

What I could see of them during the dance led me to conclude that neither was best pleased with their partner. What objection that chit could possibly have to being partnered with the most eligible man in the room I could not imagine. Mr Darcy looked positively thunderous as I overheard Miss Eliza mention the name “Wickham.” If she was championing Darcy’s enemy to him in the course of my ball, she was even more deluded than I had thought.

After the set ended, I made myself agreeable to Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty, knowing they would divulge confidences faster than an overturned wine glass. What I learnt was shocking indeed.

Miss Lydia declared this Wickham, or as she so charmingly named him “Wicky,” to be the ‘handsomest man’ she had ever met, with elegant manners and a winning smile. “Oh Lord, yes!” Lydia squealed, demonstrating the discretion of a fishwife. “Lizzy has been absolutely monopolising Wickham at every gathering. Though I do not see why—I am much prettier!”

“And where is the gallant Mr Wickham tonight?” I inquired, affecting my sweetest tone.

“Gone to town on business,” Lydia pouted. “Though he promised me three dances! Three! It’s positively barbaric of him to disappear.”

Armed with this intelligence, I intercepted Eliza with my sweetest smile—the one that usually precedes a most delightful destruction of reputation.

The impertinent Miss Eliza’s face momentarily showed a flash of dismay, but then returned to her usual expression of being entirely too pleased with herself. I resolved to wipe that self-satisfied expression from her face.

“Miss Eliza,” I began, my voice dripping with false civility, “I hear you are quite

delighted with George Wickham.” I paused, savouring the moment. “Let me recommend you, however, as a friend,” I simpered, though we both knew friendship was the furthest thing from my mind, “not to give implicit confidence to all his assertions. The young man forgot to tell you, among his other communications, that he was the son of old Wickham, the late Mr. Darcy’s steward.”

The look of indifference on her face was not gratifying. I pressed on, hoping to further diminish her pretensions.

“I do not know the particulars, but I know very well that Mr Darcy is not in the least to blame; that he cannot bear to hear George Wickham mentioned; and that though my brother thought he could not well avoid including him in his invitation to the officers, he was excessively glad to find that he had taken himself out of the way. His coming into the country at all is a most insolent thing, indeed, and I wonder how he could presume to do it. I pity you, Miss Eliza, for this discovery of your favourite’s guilt; but really, considering his descent, one could not expect much better.”

To my utter vexation, Miss Eliza seemed more amused than chastened. “His guilt and his descent appear, by your account, to be the same,” said Elizabeth, angrily; “for I have heard you accuse him of nothing worse than of being the son of Mr Darcy’s steward, and of that, I can assure you, he informed me himself.”

My face grew hot with indignation. How dare she dismiss my warnings so cavalierly? “I beg your pardon,” I managed to say, turning away with what I hoped was a cutting sneer. “Excuse my interference; it was kindly meant.”

As I stalked away, I could have sworn I heard her mutter, “Insolent girl!” under her breath. The nerve! To think that she, a nobody from nowhere, would dare to insult me!

I retreated to a corner of the ballroom, seething. My attempt to discredit Wickham in

Miss Eliza's eyes had failed miserably. Worse still, I feared I had only succeeded in raising her opinion of the scoundrel. On further reflection, perhaps this turn of events was better than my plan. Nothing would turn Darcy from Miss Eliza more quickly than her infatuation with his enemy. My criticism of Wickham had caused Miss Eliza to fix herself more determinedly in her partiality, perverse creature that she was. I smiled with satisfaction.

As I sipped my wine, I watched Miss Eliza join her sister Jane, who met her with a smile of such sweet complacency, a glow of such happy expression, as sufficiently marked how well she was satisfied with the occurrences of the evening. Of course, my brother had taken her to the floor twice already, and that fatuous Sir William was crowing about it as if the banns were being read.

Disaster.

By the time the last of our "esteemed guests" began their departure, my patience had worn thinner than the soles of Miss Elizabeth's dancing slippers after her encounter with Mr Collins. The Bennet clan, led by their indefatigable matriarch, seemed determined to extend their interminable presence well past the point when all civilised persons had mercifully departed.

"Louisa," I hissed, watching Mrs Bennet arrange herself more comfortably in our best chair, "I fear we shall be entertaining the Bennets until Michaelmas. Perhaps we should simply deed them the house and be done with it?"

My sister merely yawned. "I am excessively fatigued, Caroline. These country dances are positively wearying."

I nodded in fervent agreement. "Indeed. I feel as though I have been trampled by a herd of particularly uncoordinated cattle."

Louisa made no reply, merely shook her head and turned away from me.

I steadfastly repulsed every attempt at conversation from Mrs Bennet, hoping my silence might penetrate even her remarkably thick skull. Alas, my pointed silence had no effect whatsoever on Mr Collins, who continued to expound upon our entertainment with all the brevity of a sermon from an Archbishop.

“Mr Bingley,” he simpered, “I must compliment you on the exceptional nature of this gathering. Such refinement! Such sophistication! Why, one might almost imagine oneself in London. It nearly rivals the entertainments of Lady Catherine de Bourgh!”

I briefly contemplated whether shoving him bodily from the house would constitute a breach of etiquette. Surely any reasonable magistrate would consider it justifiable?

“Mr Collins,” I finally interjected, my voice sweeter than an entire sugar merchant’s warehouse, “while we are deeply gratified by your effusive praise, I fear you may exhaust your supply of adjectives before you reach Longbourn. Perhaps it would be prudent to save some for the journey? I’m certain Lady Catherine would not wish you to strain yourself.”

The fool merely blinked at me, uncomprehending, before launching into another tedious monologue on the sumptuousness of our refreshments.

My eyes darted about the room, seeking diversion. The scene resembled nothing so much as the aftermath of a particularly lengthy siege. Mr Darcy stood like a statue, his face suggesting he was mentally composing his will. Mr Bennet smirked from his corner, clearly enjoying everyone else’s discomfort. And Charles... oh, Charles. There he stood with Jane Bennet, lost in conversation, utterly oblivious to the fact that all proper society was descending into chaos around him.

Even Lydia Bennet, usually as unstoppable as a bolting curricule, had been reduced to

occasional grunts of “Lord, how tired I am!” punctuated by yawns wide enough to swallow a footman whole.

When the Bennets finally rose to leave, my relief was short-lived, as Mrs Bennet immediately launched into a tirade of invitations.

“Oh, Mr Bingley,” she cooed, her voice grating on my every nerve, “you simply must come to Longbourn for a family dinner. No need for formality! Why, we will welcome you at any time! We shall be delighted to have you!”

I watched in horror as Charles, the traitor, agreed with alacrity. “It would be my pleasure, Mrs Bennet. I shall call upon you directly after my return from London.”

As the Bennets finally, mercifully, quit the house, I turned to Charles, my eyes narrowing. “Brother dear,” I said, my voice as sweet as I could make it in my exhaustion, “perhaps we might discuss the wisdom of accepting impromptu dinner invitations from every family in the county?”

Charles, oblivious to my ire, merely smiled. “Come now, Caroline. The Bennets are delightful company.”

I bit back my scathing retort, reminding myself that fratricide, while tempting, was generally frowned upon in polite society.

As the Bennet carriage finally, blessedly, rolled away, I turned to Louisa with a look of abject despair. “Sister dear, I fear we are doomed. Charles shall be irrevocably bound to Jane Bennet before the year is out, and we shall be forced to endure Mrs Bennet’s company for all eternity.”

Louisa patted my arm sympathetically. “Come, Caroline. Let us retire. There is plenty of time to consider Charles’s future.”

Instead, I retreated to my chambers, determined to find a way to extricate us from this rural nightmare before we found ourselves irrevocably entangled with the Bennet family. Safely ensconced in my chambers, I rang for Adèle, desperate for a sympathetic ear.

"Mon Dieu, Mademoiselle," she exclaimed, her French accent strong in her excitement as she helped me out of my gown. "Quel soir! I 'ave never seen such a spectacle!"

"Oh, Adèle," I collapsed into my chair, "it was an absolute disaster. Charles might as well have proposed to Jane Bennet on the spot, given how he gazed upon her with such obvious admiration all evening. That woman smiled at him so much I fear her face might become fixed in that expression."

"Eef I may be so bold, Mademoiselle," Adèle suggested, her eyes glinting with calculation as she brushed out my hair, "perhaps it is time to consider ze return to Londres?"

I sat up straighter, suddenly alert. "Go on."

"Well, Mademoiselle, I 'ave observed Miss Bennet carefully. She smiles ze same way at everyone—at your brother, at ze officers, even at old Monsieur Lucas. And when your brother is not looking..." She paused meaningfully.

"Yes?" I turned to face her, intrigued.

"She shows no particular preference for 'im. No stealing glances when 'e looks away, no special smiles saved only for 'im. Not like ze young ladies in love I 'ave known."

"Adèle," I said slowly, "are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

“Only zat perhaps Monsieur Charles should be made aware zat ‘is affections might not be... equally returned? And surely ze season in London is about to begin. It would be a shame for ‘im to miss it, tied to ze countryside by a lady who sees ‘im as nothing more special zan any other gentleman.”

“Adèle, you brilliant creature!” I sat up straighter. “If we could convince Charles that Jane’s affections are merely generally pleasing rather than particularly attached...”

“And surely Mademoiselle knows many charming young ladies in London who would be most eager to show your brother what real ardour looks like?”

“You know,” I mused, reaching for my writing desk, “I believe it’s time I wrote to dear Georgiana Darcy. The London air would do her good, do not you think? And where Miss Darcy goes, her brother is sure to follow...”

“And where Monsieur Darcy goes...”

“Charles will follow!” I finished triumphantly. “Adèle, you’re absolutely invaluable. Though I must know—how did you become so observant of matters of the heart?”

She smiled mysteriously as she turned down my bed. “Let us say zat in my previous position, ze lady of ze house was not nearly so clever as you, Mademoiselle. She never thought to ask what ze servants might notice about ‘er daughter’s suitors.”

“You know, Adèle,” I mused as I climbed into bed, “I believe this little sojourn in the countryside is making me exceedingly artful.”

“Non, Mademoiselle,” she smirked, drawing the curtains. “You were always devious. Ze countryside merely gives you more opportunities to practice.”

As I prepared for sleep, my mind whirled with possibilities. A hasty departure to

London, subtle hints about Jane's indifference, the promise of more suitable matches in town... Yes, this could work perfectly.

"Adèle," I called out as she reached the door, "remind me to give you those silk ribbons I bought in London. You've more than earned them."

"Merci, Mademoiselle. Though might I suggest—ze next time you wish to observe Miss Bennet's true feelings, watch 'er when she thinks no one is looking. Ze servants see everything, you know."

Her knowing smile as she closed the door behind her reminded me why I'd hired her in the first place. Sometimes the best intelligence comes from those everyone else forgets to notice.

Tomorrow, I would begin planning our escape from this rural purgatory. But tonight, I would sleep soundly, knowing that the battle was not lost—it was merely moving to more favourable terrain.

I heard Charles's thunderous departure at first light, the door slamming with all the subtlety of a cannon blast. My brother never could master the art of quiet exits. "For heaven's sake, Charles," I muttered into my pillow, "Must you announce your departure to all of Hertfordshire? "

Despite my utter exhaustion, I dragged myself from bed. There was far too much to accomplish to lounge about like some provincial miss.

I had no intention of remaining at Netherfield. Under no circumstance would I permit my foolish brother to entangle himself further with the nobodies of Meryton. He would easily be swayed to believe Jane Bennet a mere fortune hunter, provided he was no longer in her vicinity. His infatuation was palpable and likely to progress with further exposure. Miss Bennet was a beauty, for a certainty. But she lacked any

another qualification to match with Charles Bingley.

I needed to order the closure of the house, the dismissal of the servants, the packing of my things. Most urgently, I must write a pithy letter to Jane Bennet making it unquestionably clear that she had failed in her quest to catch my fool of a brother.

As Adèle scurried about, I settled at my *escritoire*, mind already composing the most essential correspondence of the morning. That simpering Jane Bennet must be dealt with, and quickly.

“Let me see,” I murmured, dipping my quill with perhaps more force than strictly necessary. “How does one politely tell a fortune hunter she’s failed spectacularly?”

“ My dear Miss Bennet ,” I began with a flourish. No one viewing my correspondence could doubt my accomplishments. At least as far as penmanship. Those pesky rules of grammar quite escaped me.

A knock at the door interrupted my composition. “Miss Bingley?” It was Mrs Nickleby, the housekeeper. “The servants are asking about their wages—”

“Oh, for—” I caught myself before uttering something unladylike. “Pay them through the month and dismiss them all. We are closing Netherfield immediately.”

“But miss, the kitchen has already started preparing—”

“Then they can eat it themselves! We shall dine in Grosvenor Street tonight.” I turned back to my letter, muttering, “Where civilised people actually know which fork to use.”

Returning to my correspondence, I carefully crafted the perfect blend of condescension and false friendship. First, I set out the facts:

“ This morning, we have resolved to follow my brother to town directly. We mean to dine today in Grosvenor Street, where Mr Hurst has a house ,” I wrote, then paused to appreciate my handiwork. 'Oh, that sounds properly sophisticated. Let her chew on that while she's eating mutton in Meryton.'

“ I do not pretend to regret anything I shall leave in Hertfordshire except your society, my dearest friend; but we will hope, at some future period, to enjoy many returns of that delightful intercourse we have known, and meanwhile may lessen the pain of separation by a very frequent and most unreserved correspondence. I depend on you for that .” I suppose I might miss watching Elizabeth Bennet traipse through mud. Such refined entertainment is hard to come by in town.

Surely that would suffice to give the impression the abrupt removal from Netherfield back to civilisation was a simple matter of returning to more verdant pastures, as it were. It would be polite to suggest a correspondence, perhaps even to suggest that we might visit should she by some miracle appear in London. No, promised letters would suffice. Let Miss Jane Bennet fill a thousand sheets, she will wait a very long time for me to put my quill to paper for the likes of her. Now, on to the more pressing concerns.

“ When my brother departed yesterday ”... no, too simple. “Upon my brother's precipitous departure ”... oh Lord, no, she probably does not know what precipitous means. Ah, here we are—

“When my brother left us yesterday, he imagined that the business which took him to London might be concluded in three or four days ,” I paused to laugh. 'Three or four days indeed. He shall stay in town until he forgets the exact shade of Jane Bennet's eyes if I have anything to say about it.'

“ But as we are certain it cannot be so, and at the same time convinced that when Charles gets to town, he will be in no hurry to leave it again, we have determined on

following him thither, that he may not be obliged to spend his vacant hours in a comfortless hotel. Many of my acquaintance are already there for the winter: I wish I could hear that you, my dearest friend, had any intention of making one in the crowd, but of that I despair. I sincerely hope your Christmas in Hertfordshire may abound in the gaieties which that season generally brings, and that your beaux will be so numerous as to prevent your feeling the loss of the three of whom we shall deprive you. ”

Yes. Numerous beaux- none of whom is my brother.

The masterpiece of my correspondence would be the casual mention of Georgiana Darcy. I felt profound satisfaction as I wrote that section, imagining Jane Bennet’s face as she read it.

“ ‘Mr Darcy is impatient to see his sister, ’” I read, adding with a smirk, 'And I am impatient to see her brother, but we need not mention that part.'

I continued writing: “ I really do not think Georgiana Darcy has her equal for beauty, elegance, and accomplishments... ”

“Unlike some people we know,” I added to the empty room, “who can only claim one out of three. Beauty without fortune is like a garden without a wall—entirely too accessible to the public.”

“ And the affection she inspires in Louisa and myself is heightened into something still more interesting from the hope we dare to entertain of her being hereafter our sister. I do not know whether I ever before mentioned to you my feelings on this subject, but I will not leave the country without confiding them, and I trust you will not esteem them unreasonable. My brother admires her greatly already; he will have frequent opportunity now of seeing her on the most intimate footing; her relations all wish the connection as much as his own; and a sister’s partiality is not misleading me,

I think, when I call Charles most capable of engaging any woman's heart. With all these circumstances to favour an attachment, and nothing to prevent it, am I wrong, my dearest Jane, in indulging the hope of an event which will secure the happiness of so many ?”

I was determined to match Charles with Georgiana, if I could not find him a title or another well-connected heiress more of an age. Darcy's sister would be ideal for him if not. She was the daughter of a gentleman, had a lovely fortune, and, to my mind, was as malleable as honey. She would suit me perfectly. And Charles would do well with such a retiring lady. In truth, it would chiefly secure my own happiness, elevating my rank, and when there has been one inter-marriage, I surely will have less trouble in achieving a second. With her brother.

Finally, I sealed the letter with a flourish, admiring how the wax caught the light. There. That should thoroughly extinguish any expectations of a Bingley-Bennet alliance. Now, to more important matters—like convincing Mr Darcy of my suitability as his life companion.

I summoned a footman. “Have this delivered to Longbourn immediately. And Morton? Make sure the messenger bears an appropriately grave countenance. We would not want Miss Bennet thinking this is good news.”

As I watched the letter being carried away, I felt rather pleased with myself. 'Well done, Caroline,' I congratulated myself. 'Now, which dress shall I wear to greatest advantage when paying a call on Georgiana? Something that says 'loving sister-in-law material,' perhaps?'

After all, what was the point of arranging one's brother's affairs if one could not secure one's own in the process?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

Darcy sat at the breakfast table exactly as I had hoped, looking irritatingly handsome as he methodically buttered his toast. His eyebrow arched at my early appearance—usually I preferred to emerge fashionably late—but I smoothly mentioned my pressing duties regarding the household closure. His expression flickered with mild surprise, but he remained characteristically mute.

Time to begin my campaign.

“You must be aware, Mr Darcy,” I ventured, delicately selecting a piece of toast, “that my brother has been inordinately attentive to Miss Jane Bennet.”

He responded with an expression that could only be described as that of a man who would rather face Napoleon’s army than this conversation. Still, he continued consuming his meal with measured, precise bites that made me want to grab a fork and demand he speak.

“I am sure,” I pressed on, “you cannot see such a match as one Charles ought to pursue.”

Darcy chewed. And chewed. And chewed some more. I began to wonder if he’d somehow acquired a particularly tough piece of toast.

I was almost certain Mr Darcy found the entire Bennet clan appalling, as did I, but Jane herself had been so inoffensive as to be nearly invisible. If Darcy did not have a firm opinion, I would make certain mine swayed him.

Finally, with all the enthusiasm of a man approaching the gallows, he spoke. “I heard

Sir William Lucas speculate on a betrothal last evening.”

He paused to take a fortifying sip of coffee. “I was concerned that it appeared to the populace that Bingley’s attentions were marked. He may have given rise to an expectation.” He parsed his words with care, not opining on the match itself, but on the impression Charles had made.

“Indeed!” I seized upon this chance like a cat on a mouse. “And pray, did you have the supreme misfortune of hearing Mrs Bennet’s proclamations on the subject? The woman was positively vulgar in her celebrations of Jane’s ‘conquest.’” I affected Mrs Bennet’s shrill tones: ““Such a fine match for my Jane! Ten thousand a year!”” I felt safe in degrading the matron, as she and Darcy had never agreed on anything. He had made that comment about her lack of wit, as well. How I enjoyed reviewing it in my mind. “She a beauty. I should as soon call her mother a wit.” Disparaging the meagre attractions of Miss Eliza and her mother was music to my ear.

Darcy merely grunted, though it was a very elegant grunt. The man could make clearing his throat sound like a pronouncement from the King.

I pressed on.

“I am certain that Mrs Bennet would do anything in her power to have Jane secure Charles, whether she likes him or not. She saw his fortune and directed her daughter to make herself agreeable. That business with the horse ride in the rain,” I continued, buttering my toast with perhaps more vigour than strictly necessary. “Utterly transparent manipulation. I would not be surprised if Mrs Bennet had been out there with a watering can, ensuring her daughter caught a proper cold.”

Another grunt. Getting conversation from this man was like trying to squeeze water from a stone. An uncommonly handsome stone, but still.

Darcy quirked a brow. I despaired of our marriage if he would ever be so taciturn. It was a raging battle to pull a syllable from him. He was far too much a gentleman to refuse to answer a lady's questions, however, so I would put it to him.

"Mr Darcy," I leaned forward slightly, lowering my voice to a confidential tone, "I cannot say I ever saw any evidence of actual affection from Jane Bennet for Charles. Do you not think it was only at her mother's insistence that she accepted his attention?"

Darcy appeared to be solving complex mathematical equations in his head, such was his contemplative expression. I could have aged ten years waiting for his response. He was an intelligent man but given to long pauses as he evaluated his answers. At last, words emitted from the gentleman.

"Indeed, I noticed Bingley's preference for Miss Bennet. It was quite marked." An answer, of sorts, but not to my question.

Oh, for heaven's sake! "Exactly!" I tried again. "But Mr Darcy, I am convinced that Miss Bennet does not return his affections with equal fervour. I observed her closely, and while she was pleasant and engaging as always—" Like a well-trained lap dog, I thought but did not say "—I detected no particular regard for Charles."

The silence stretched so long I considered ascertaining whether he still drew breath. Finally, he spoke: "Your observations align with my own, Miss Bingley. I found Miss Bennet's manner to be... lacking in a certain warmth one might expect." Hurrah! Victory! I nearly upset my tea in excitement.

"Oh, I knew you would see it, Mr Darcy! You are always so perceptive." I preened slightly. "Did you not find her countenance oddly serene for a woman supposedly in love?"

He took another bite of toast. Chewed. Swallowed. Took a sip of coffee. I began counting the flowers on the wallpaper to maintain my sanity. I could have cut and chewed an entire rasher of bacon while he contemplated. Not that I would be so unladylike in his presence. I nibbled as was appropriate for a refined person such as myself.

“I did find Miss Bennet’s demeanour to be composed,” he finally offered. “After Sir William’s remarks, I made a point to observe Miss Bennet’s interactions with your brother.”

At last! I had wrung speech from the sphinx!

“And? What did you conclude, Mr Darcy?” He looked away, thinking, or at least avoiding answering for another interminable moment.

He studied his coffee cup as if it held the secrets of the universe. “While your brother’s attentions undoubtedly pleased Miss Bennet, I saw no evidence of any deeper sentiment on her part. Her look and manners were open and cheerful, but with no symptom of peculiar regard. She is universally kind.”

“Exactly my thoughts!”

Well, aside from the kind part. I rather thought her calculating, but far be it from me to contradict the man when he was being so wonderfully cooperative. Now I was on the route to enlisting his help.

“Oh, Mr Darcy, we must warn Charles. He values your opinion so highly. If you were to tell him that Miss Bennet’s affections are not engaged, he might be spared a great deal of pain.”

Silence. Chewing. Coffee. I began composing my own epitaph: ‘Here lies Caroline

Bingley, died of anticipation waiting for Fitzwilliam Darcy to speak.’

“I will consider the prudence of speaking to Bingley on this matter.”

Consider? CONSIDER? I wanted to shake him. This was not a time for consideration! No, no, no, he must step in immediately upon our arrival in London. This is not a time to consider!

“Oh, you must, Mr Darcy! Who else can save Charles from making a terrible mistake? You know how hasty he can be in matters of the heart.”

Darcy appeared to weigh this assertion with gravity. He exhaled sharply, then said, “You are not wrong. Bingley does tend to fall in and out of love with alarming frequency. However, this attachment seems more serious than his previous infatuations.”

If you say so. I believe he could easily be disengaged, but only if Darcy worked on him.

“All the more reason he needs your guidance, Mr Darcy. A word from you could prevent a most unfortunate alliance.” And preserve my chances of becoming Mrs Darcy, though I kept that thought firmly to myself.

A serious expression. Several minutes of contemplation. I was ready to shred my serviette in frustration.

“While I am loath to interfere in such personal matters, I believe in this instance it may be necessary for Bingley’s own good.”

Thank heaven! I knew I could bring him to my way of thinking. I could have kissed him. I still might, given the opportunity.

“Oh, thank you, Mr Darcy! I knew I could rely on your good judgement. When will you speak to him?”

Darcy looked about himself. He appeared to be readying to depart the breakfast room. I prepared to thrust myself across the threshold to prevent his leaving until he promised to speak with Charles.

“I shall seek an opportune moment to discuss the matter with him privately. Rest assured, Miss Bingley, I will approach the subject with all due delicacy.”

No need of that. Strike him on the head if you wish. Delicacy be hanged! He must see reason!

“I am most grateful, Mr Darcy. You are truly a friend to our family. Charles may not thank you immediately, but I am certain he will come to see the wisdom of your counsel in time.”

“Let us hope so, Miss Bingley. Now, if you will excuse me, I believe I must order my trunks packed if you plan to close the house today.” He rose and bowed.

“Of course, Mr Darcy. Thank you again for your intervention. The happiness of my dear brother depends upon it!” I trilled to his departing back. An uncommonly well-formed ...view if I were to be honest.

I was exhausted. But victory was mine. If Darcy said Jane Bennet’s affections were not engaged, and I followed up regularly with reinforcement, Charles would soon forget his little fling.

But I had no time to dwell on such pleasant observations. Louisa and her husband still needed managing, though that proved simpler than expected. Louisa agreed warily to remove to London, and Hurst would do whatever preserved his comfort and access to

good wine. He had planned to ride with Charles anyway, and like any practiced sponger, would remain wherever the best meals were served.

Louisa, for all her faults, had chosen a compliant man, albeit one with very little else to recommend him.

The morning was ending when we climbed into the Darcy carriage for our journey to London. Thank goodness Darcy had not objected to our departure; else I had not figured out how we would travel since Charles took the carriage. Hurst, that parsimonious dandy, never kept a carriage of his own, preferring to depend on the generosity of others' horseflesh.

I ensured that the subject most concerning to me was not forgotten, dropping little remarks into Darcy's ear as we travelled, ensuring he was reminded of his promise about Charles. "The Bennets' connections are so very low... And that mother! Did you hear her at the assembly? Utterly uncouth..."

After about an hour of my helpful observations, Louisa's foot connected sharply with my ankle.

"Enough!" she hissed, tilting her head meaningfully toward Darcy.

I followed her gaze to find him fiddling with his signet ring, his face set in a grimace of scarcely concealed suppressed displeasure. Well, perhaps Louisa had a point, though I should never admit it.

Besides, Darcy was a man of his word. He would surely speak with my brother that day. He could merely mention the fact that Jane Bennet was indifferent to Charles. Between his intervention and the inconvenience of reopening Netherfield, Charles would be free of the Bennet women's mercenary snares by teatime.

I settled back into my seat, already planning my first London dinner party. One without any country beauties in attendance.

Charles was not, in fact, languishing in some dreary hotel as I had written to Jane Bennet. That little fiction was merely to underscore the vast gulf between her provincial existence and our life of refinement. When we arrived at our townhouse near Mayfair, we found him ensconced in the study, looking decidedly unhappy to see us.

“What the devil are you doing here?” was his rude greeting.

Louisa suddenly became terribly interested in arranging her shawl, leaving me to handle our brother’s ill-humour.

“Charles, darling,” I began in my most soothing tone—the one I typically reserved for elderly aunts and fractious horses, “we really saw no point in remaining at Netherfield. There is simply nothing to do in that dreary place, now we have suffered through all their provincial entertainments. I refuse to languish in the hinterlands when London has so much more to offer.” Charles did not appear to be soothed.

Charles’s face began to take on an alarming shade of red. Rather like those horrid window draperies Mrs Bennet seemed so proud of.

“I have undertaken obligations regarding the estate!” He spluttered, waving a handful of papers about. “I merely needed two days to resolve a matter here with my solicitor, but you could not wait a day before abandoning the place! I fully intended to stay in the country for the festive season!”

“Charles, my dear, Mr Darcy quite agreed with me that we would be better to return to London. He despaired of seeing Georgiana, and with one less in our party, what was there to do?” Then I added, with just the right note of pathos, “I do need to be

seen in real society if I am ever to wed!” I was rather pleased with how neatly I had woven thoughts of Darcy with my matrimonial aspirations. Subtlety is an art, after all.

“Darcy said he was going to shoot today while I was off to attend to business. Now he has decided to remove to London? Caroline, I do not think this is entirely....” Charles was flustered and about to accuse me of something, but stopped himself in time.

“There is nothing for me in Hertfordshire, Charles. And nothing for you.” I fixed him with a serious stare, intended to communicate that my opinion was immovable.

Charles heaved a sigh worthy of a tragic hero and slumped back in his chair, fiddling with his pen like a schoolboy. I did not care for his pensive expression—thinking never led to anything good where Charles was concerned.

“I shall find Mrs Henshaw and get everything settled here,” I offered brightly. “Did she order dinner?”

“What? No, Hurst and I were to dine at my club. No need to disturb the entire household for one meal. You will have to manage without me.” Why was his tone so testy? I was only concerned for his future.

“Shall I arrange a little dinner party this week?” I pressed on, determined to redirect his thoughts. “Perhaps Mr Darcy and Georgiana could join us for an intimate party? Or I could see whether Miss Hazelton or Miss Merryweather is in town?” Surely ladies of their calibre would make him forget all about that insipid Jane Bennet.

“Do as you like. I will be at my club.” Charles grimaced, stood, and bellowed for his coat and hat.

I began to fear this might be more difficult than I had imagined.

As he stormed out, I turned to Louisa. "What ever is the matter with Charles?" I asked.

My sister looked up. Her eyes were narrowed and her mouth a grim line of distaste.

"I do not know, Caroline, perhaps he is not happy about being treated as if he is a school boy? Or having his plans altered without his being consulted? It could be a number of things. I hope for your sake that time shall soften his judgement. We will be departing as soon as Mr Hurst has made arrangements for transportation. Charles has taken the carriage thanks to your causing his precipitous departure."

"You ought to have had Mr Darcy bring you home, Louisa. Whyever did you stop here?" Louisa really needed to think things through .

"I stopped here because you insisted we meet with Charles at once. Now, he has left, we are stranded here and I am certain there is nothing to eat. Really Caroline. You cannot direct Mr Darcy. He is a man grown and not particularly responsive to your attempts at managing him. He wished to see his sister." Louisa had taken her 'older sister' tone which did nothing to endear her to me.

"Very well, I will see whether Cook can contrive a meal for us, if you intend to remain." I would see to it that Mr Bradley took the least valuable bottle from the cellar. No use wasting good wine of the likes of her in a state of agitation.

Mrs Henshaw's face grew quite red as I requested a meal, a hackney or carriage for the Hursts after dinner, or perhaps rooms fitted up for them for the night. The housekeeper was never insolent, impertinent or impudent. No, she maintained a perfectly polite manner. Somehow, still, I was quite well aware that she did so only to maintain her position. She knew her place, even if her curtsy was rather shorter than

strictly proper. I was the lady of the house, after all, even if every servant from the Cook to the scullery maid seemed to have developed sudden deafness whenever I rang.

I watched Mrs Henshaw's retreating form and sighed. Persuading Charles to abandon his regard for Jane Bennet might prove more challenging than I had anticipated. Perhaps I should arrange for Georgiana to play the pianoforte for him—that always put him in a better mood. And if Mr Darcy happened to be in attendance... well, two birds with one stone, as they say in less refined circles.

I know not how Adèle managed it, but for her, my brother's valet was pliable as the overcooked asparagus Cook inflicted on us last evening. I averted my gaze as she slipped out from the dressing room where Faxon ruled over my brother's wardrobe. Her dishevelled coiffure and flushed cheeks spoke volumes about her activities. Some things a lady prefers not to contemplate.

Thus far, Charles had not given any indication that Darcy had spoken to him about Jane Bennet. We had been three days in London. Charles made no movement toward preparing to return to Netherfield, which gave me hope. I would be fretting all night as I awaited a report from Darcy.

“Really, Adèle,” I murmured as she attempted to straighten her hair in the mirror as she stood behind me at my dressing table.

“Mais non, Mademoiselle. Ze information I ‘ave gained is worth ze... dérangement of my ‘air.”

I pursed my lips.

“Mademoiselle, Faxon ‘as prepared Monsieur Bingley for ze evening out. ‘E and Monsieur Darcy go to ze party at ze ‘ome of Monsieur Bentley. Eet is a party for ze

gentlemen only.”

“Faxon volunteered this information out of the goodness of his heart?” I certainly hoped my servants were not so wanting in discretion.

Adèle’s answering smile spoke of arts not taught at Madame Dubois’s Academy for Young Ladies. “Non, but ze ‘eart was not what made ‘im so... obliging.”

“Adèle!” I tried to look scandalised but could not quite manage it. Competent servants were a rare commodity and excellent spies even rarer.

My evening of cards and supper with Louisa, Hurst and Miss Talley and Miss Richards was dull, quite frankly. The lack of gentlemen- Hurst being one only in name as far as I saw- made us all boring. I did get a snatch of gossip regarding Mr Hartwell and his pursuit of Miss Marple, but it was hardly worth the long, tedious evening. Even Mrs Henshaw seemed to be punishing us, sending up lukewarm tea and stale biscuits. When I rang for fresh refreshments, the footman arrived at a pace that suggested he’d stopped to grow the tea leaves himself.

“Jenkins,” I said with deadly sweetness, “do remind Mrs Henshaw that while my brother may be dining out, I still expect proper service.”

“Yes, miss,” Jenkins replied with a bow so shallow it barely qualified as a nod. “Though with the master away, she’s sent most of the kitchen staff to bed.”

“Has she indeed?” I arched an eyebrow. “How... economical of her. Please inform her that in the future, I expect a full complement of staff until I retire for the evening.”

Jenkins managed another microscopic bow before withdrawing at exactly the same snail-like pace. I made a mental note to speak with Charles about the declining standards among our servants.

Charles returned quite late. I attempted to wait up to interrogate him, but I collapsed with ennui by midnight. The next morning, Adèle brought my chocolate with triumph written all over her face.

“Mademoiselle,” she announced, setting down the chocolate with a flourish, “Faxon says Monsieur Bingley returned after trois heures, and ‘e was...” she paused delicately, “comment dit-on... dans ses vignes?”

I did retain some of the French I had studied. “Really, Adèle,” I sniffed, “My brother was ‘in his vines?’”

She saw my confusion and added with a knowing smile, “Ah, we say zis in France when a gentleman ‘as been... ‘ow you English say... visiting wiz ze wine cup too long. Ze peasants, zey say a man lost in ‘is vineyard ‘as found too much of its fruits?”

Now I understood. “It is hardly proper to gossip about the master’s condition.”

“Ze truth cannot be gossip, n’est-ce pas?” she pointed out.

I could not argue with her logic. Instead, I eyed my morning clothes with critical concern.

“The blue morning dress today, I think. And have Jenkins bring round the carriage after breakfast.” “Pardonnez-moi, Mademoiselle, but ze blue dress, eet is still with ze laundry maid. Ze poor girl, she is quite overwhelmed wiz all ze linens from ze guest rooms.”

I narrowed my eyes. The servants had again hindered me. “The grey will do then. Though do remind me to inform Mrs Henshaw that I expect the household to run efficiently whether my brother is in residence or not.”

The sole regret I held at leaving that horrible habitation in Meryton was that I no longer had unfettered access to Darcy. There, I need only survey the rooms he preferred- the library, the billiard room and from time to time the grounds, and I would surely find him. Now, I needed to make a greater effort. When he failed to call yet again, I intended to take a liberty in my acquaintance with Miss Georgiana Darcy and pay a call. The child was not out, and surely was not ready for such a thing with her mute, retiring ways, so she did not pay calls. Technically, she did not have an “at home,” so I would have to fabricate some pretext for calling. She certainly would not refuse me. If I timed my call carefully, Darcy would be at home. I would find a pretext to go to his study for our long overdue conference.

Since Charles showed no signs of life by calling hours, I had no choice but to attempt my stratagem to enter Darcy House on my own. When I am mistress of that elegant establishment—and I will be—that insufferable Mr Blank will be the first to go, followed swiftly by any servant who shows the slightest hint of loyalty to him. His rudeness in suggesting I merely leave a card as Miss Darcy “did not receive” was outrageous. He well knew I was on intimate terms with the Darcys.

“Good morning, Mr Blank,” I announced with my most gracious smile. “I have come to call on Miss Darcy.”

The butler’s expression suggested I had proposed hosting a public hanging in the drawing room. “Miss Darcy does not receive, Miss Bingley. Perhaps you would care to leave your card?”

“Oh, but surely she will see me? We are practically sisters already.” Did he suppress a shudder?

“I regret that Miss Darcy’s companion, Mrs Annesley, is most particular about maintaining routine.”

I had nearly run out of ways to wheedle the insufferable creature when Adèle sidled up and whispered in my ear.

“Zhe nécessaire.”

Brilliant stroke.

I fixed Mr Blank with my most imperious stare. “Surely you will allow me to come in for a moment to... attend to a matter of some personal necessity? I cannot possibly return to my carriage for the journey home without a brief stop to... retire.” I let the implications hang heavily in the air.

The butler’s face underwent a fascinating series of transformations as he weighed his options. Finally, with all the enthusiasm of a man heading to the gallows, he opened the door while calling, “Martha! Attend Miss Bingley to the retiring room.” He was not fooled, neither was he prepared to shove me down the stairs into the street. With a foreboding expression and exaggerated movements, he slowly opened the door.

It was my terrible luck these days. The housekeeper herself, Mrs I forget her name—but she too will be seeking a new position—had the gall to look me up and down as if I were a tradesman’s delivery mistakenly brought to the front door.

“This way, if you please, Miss Bingley,” she said with a courtesy that could not quite mask her disapproval. “We would not want you to be... uncomfortable.”

She marched me with military precision to the retiring room off the entry hall, rather than the more advantageously located one upstairs near the drawing room. I noticed she stationed herself firmly by the door afterward, like a sentry guarding a prisoner.

Entering Darcy House filled me with a sense of serenity. Here was a truly stately home, perfectly situated and providing every amenity one could wish for, even if the

décor was woefully outdated. It was all I could do to stop myself contemplating the replacement of the tired wallcoverings with something more... Egyptian, perhaps? And surely that ancient footman by the stairs could be replaced with someone who did not look quite so... judgemental. Having given the excuse, I had no choice but to feign the need to use the facilities.

Adèle used her time wisely as she awaited me in the grand foyer. As I emerged after lingering as long as propriety allowed in the little retiring room, I saw Adèle's grin. She had somehow managed to charm one of the younger footmen into letting her secure a position further into the foyer and was now situated with a full view of the adjoining chambers. She canted her head toward the far side of the hall, where, to my utter joy, my future caro sposo was just visible in his study.

I had the extraordinary good fortune to find Mr Darcy alone in his study—though judging by the way he stiffened at my entrance, one might have thought I was a tax collector rather than his dearest friend's sister.

I crossed the hall to his study rather more quickly than my usual elegant glide, my face a mask of feigned concern. He stood at my entrance, surprise quickly giving way to wariness.

"Miss Bingley," he said, executing a bow that somehow managed to be both perfectly proper and utterly unwelcoming. "I was unaware we were expecting the pleasure of your company today."

"Oh, Mr Darcy," I spoke with artful delicacy, "I have come to call on dear Georgiana. Is she at home?" I executed the most flirtatious curtsy I had contrived during many hours of rehearsal in my pier glass.

He regarded me with all the warmth of a February morning in Scotland. His eyes narrowed slightly. "I regret that my sister does not receive callers at present. Perhaps

you might have sent word ahead of your visit?"

Blast. Necessity demanded I continue. I glided closer, as closely as decency might allow, or perhaps a smidgen closer, arranging my skirts just so, leaning forward to envelop him in my scent, and waved away his implied rebuke. "Never mind that now. I simply must inquire about Charles. Have you spoken with him regarding that... situation in Hertfordshire?" I emphasised the word as though referring to a particularly nasty outbreak of pox.

Darcy's brow furrowed slightly. "I have indeed exchanged words with Bingley."

"And? Was he in good spirits? I worry the country air might have addled his wits somewhat. All that... sheep-gazing." I shuddered delicately.

"Bingley appeared to be in his usual temperament," Darcy replied, his tone maddeningly neutral.

"I rather thought he might be wandering about in lovelorn melancholy. You know how Charles is—he would fall in love with a hedgerow if it wore a bonnet and smiled at him twice."

Darcy's jaw clenched. "Your brother's personal affairs are not mine to discuss, Miss Bingley. They are private. Much like my study should be."

Ouch. "Of course not," I said, waving a hand dismissively. "I merely worry for him. Charles can be such a feather-brain at times, so easily swayed by a pretty face and a simpering smile. I had hoped that a wiser head might have counselled him on the folly of certain attachments."

"I assure you, Miss Bingley, that your brother is quite capable of managing his own affairs," Darcy said, his tone growing cooler still.

“Oh, naturally, naturally,” I interrupted, edging closer. My neckline happened to gape most advantageously as I leaned forward. “I merely thought, as his dearest friend and a man of superior judgement, you might have helped him see reason about certain... unfortunate attachments. After all, we cannot have him forming an imprudent alliance in such an ill-advised infatuation.”

Darcy closed his book with such vehemence as to cause me to start. “Miss Bingley,” he said, in tones that could have frozen the Thames, “while I appreciate your... profound concern for your brother’s welfare, I must insist that any conversations between Bingley and me remain private. Now, if you will excuse me, I have urgent correspondence requiring my attention. As previously mentioned, Georgiana is not receiving visitors. In the future, might I suggest sending word before calling? To avoid any... misunderstandings.”

His meaning was unmistakable. Flushing with embarrassment and thwarted ambition, I gathered what remained of my dignity.

“Of course, Mr Darcy. I apologise for the intrusion. Please give my regards to Georgiana.”

As I withdrew from the room with all proper dignity, I was sensible of his gaze following me—though evidently my strategy to secure his regard required adjustment. His was not the admiring look I hoped for, but rather one of marked displeasure. I retreated, but I did not surrender. I was already contemplating my next endeavour.

“Perhaps next time, Mademoiselle,” Adèle whispered as we descended the steps “we might try ze servants’ entrance.”

I pretended not to hear her. A lady would never stoop to such measures.

Though necessity has been known to overcome the strictest propriety .

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

Louisa and I were thoroughly engaged in dissecting Lady Holland's latest scandal—apparently, her new turbans were mere French imitations, if you can imagine—when our butler announced the arrival of Miss Jane Bennet and her aunt, Mrs Gardiner. The groan very nearly escaped my lips before I caught it.

“Miss Bennet and Mrs Gardiner,” I simpered, rising with all the enthusiasm of a gouty gentleman forced to dance at Assembly. “What an... unexpected pleasure.”

Jane's face retained its perpetually serene expression—really, it was quite vexing how the girl maintained such composure. One might think she had been born in a better sphere of life. “Miss Bingley, Mrs Hurst, how lovely to see you both. I hope you received my note letting you know I am in London?”

Louisa, bless her, jumped in. “Of course, Miss Bennet. Though I am afraid you have caught us at an inopportune moment. We were about to go out.”

Mrs Gardiner—wearing a dress that was distractingly elegant for a tradesman's wife—spoke up. “Oh, we shall not keep you long. We merely wished to pay our respects and perhaps arrange a more suitable time to visit.”

I seized upon this escape route like a desperate debutante spotting the last eligible bachelor at Almack's. “Yes, quite right. We shall be sure to send word when we are next available. London is so dreadfully busy, you know. One can scarcely find time to breathe between social obligations.”

Jane, ever hopeful, asked, “And how is your brother, Miss Bingley? Is he in Town as well?”

I waved a hand dismissively. “Charles? Oh, he is well enough, I suppose. Terribly busy with Mr Darcy and his sister. They are practically inseparable these days.”

A flicker of disappointment crossed Jane’s face. “I see. And will Mr Bingley be returning to Netherfield soon?”

“Netherfield?” I laughed with all the warmth of a January frost. “Oh, I think not. Charles is talking of giving up the lease entirely. London society suits him so much better, as a man of his position should prefer.”

Mrs Gardiner’s eyes narrowed slightly, but Jane’s smile remained fixed as firmly as my own. “I am sure Mr Bingley knows his own mind best.”

“Indeed,” I said, springing up as though my chair had suddenly caught fire. “Well, it has been delightful catching up, but we really must be going. You understand, of course.”

As we ushered them out, I felt a twinge of guilt at Jane’s crestfallen expression. But it was necessary, I reminded myself. Charles would thank me for this someday.

“Caroline, we ought at least to have offered them tea! You ran them out like they were pedlars!” Louisa shook her head in dismay.

“Are they not pedlars of a sort? I know not what goods Mrs Gardiner’s husband hawks, but she is a tradesman’s wife through and through. As for Jane Bennet, she is determinedly peddling her looks and smiles. I will not have my brother purchasing that particular merchandise.”

Louisa sighed with all the dramatic flair of a Drury Lane actress. “I fear for you when Charles learns of this rudeness.”

“How, dear sister, would that occur? Surely you will not be going to him with the information.” I fixed a hard stare at my sister. She would tattle on me at her peril.

Weeks passed, during which I mislaid Jane’s letters with the skill of a society matron avoiding her creditors. Finally, after nearly a month, Louisa insisted we could delay no longer without appearing outrageously rude.

“Remember, Louisa,” I instructed as our carriage pulled up to the Gardiners’ unfashionable direction—Cheapside, if you can imagine—our wheels splashing through February’s endless puddles. The damp air carried the unmistakable mingled scents of the merchant quarter: tea, spices, and the Thames. “We are to be brief. Ten minutes, no more. Any longer and we risk catching whatever malady causes people to go into trade.”

We swept into the Gardiners’ surprisingly elegant drawing room, which was, irritatingly, furnished with better taste than half the ton’s drawing rooms. That could not be a real Aubusson carpet? Gilt-framed mirrors and terribly elegant furnishings—they must be facsimiles. Jane greeted us with undiminished warmth.

“Miss Bingley, Mrs Hurst, how kind of you to call,” Miss Bennet said, her smile genuine.

I summoned my most practised society simper—the one reserved for particularly tedious social obligations. “Miss Bennet, Mrs Gardiner, how lovely to see you again. I do apologise for the delay in returning your call. London has been a positive whirl.”

Louisa nodded in agreement. “Indeed, one can scarcely find a moment to oneself.” The looks she cast my way rather belied her words, but if I cannot withstand my sister’s ire, I am nothing.

After a minimum of the requisite pleasantries, Jane opened her mouth, undoubtedly to

inquire after Charles, but I cut her off faster than a modiste's scissors through last season's muslins.

"I fear we cannot stay," I said. I sprang up with unbecoming haste. "We have an engagement with the Darcy family. You remember our speaking of Miss Darcy, of course? Such an accomplished young lady. Charles is quite taken with her, I must say." The lie rolled off my tongue smooth as Lyon silk.

A flash of pain crossed Jane's face like summer lightning. "I am... I am glad to hear Mr Bingley is well. Please give him my regards."

Not if I were the last messenger in London, my dear.

"Of course," I lied smoothly. "Well, we really must be going. It has been delightful, Miss Bennet, Mrs Gardiner. I wish you good health!"

As we departed, leaving Jane looking as deflated as the cook's soufflé, I felt triumph marred only slightly by an annoying prick of conscience. Louisa had lingered in the hall, speaking all manner of good wishes to the two ladies. As she joined me, she was fairly trembling with disapproval.

"Caroline. That was unaccountably rude. You might as well have given her the cut direct."

Would that I could .

"What could we possibly have to say to such lowly people? We returned the call, as manners require. Now, we need not be at home to them again. Charles will be the better for it."

"Mark my words, sister. Should Charles learn of this, he will be exceedingly

displeased. Not simply because it is Miss Bennet. Because you injure his reputation in the world when you display such ill-mannered actions. Our society has rules—calls are returned; calls last fifteen minutes; one accepts refreshments when offered. Rushing in and out of the house as though you fear a pestilence paints us as lacking in social graces. Should you behave so again, I will not comply.”

Had I not known Louisa was increasing, albeit she had not yet felt the quickening, I would have suggested she was indisposed from her courses. I refrained from responding, instead I was distracted by the enormous, very prosperous-looking warehouse across from the Gardiner abode—a four-storey brick edifice with grand Portland stone columns framing its entrance and a series of handsome arched windows. The loading bays were crafted of solid oak, and if I was not mistaken, the crest on the carriage waiting outside its impressive double doors was that of Lady Sefton.

???

I was reclining in the drawing room with all the studied carelessness of a cat pretending not to watch a mousehole, idly flipping through fashion plates while keeping one ear tuned for approaching carriages. I heard the distinctive sound of Mr Darcy’s well-sprung equipage—perhaps I happened to glance out the window at that precise moment, but really, who could mistake the sound of such superior horseflesh?—I hastily arranged myself into a tableau of elegant repose that had only taken three hours to perfect in front of my mirror that morning.

As Mr Darcy entered, I favoured him with my most dazzling smile—the one that had once caused poor Mr Grantley to walk into a potted plant at Lady Jersey’s ball. “Mr Darcy, what an utterly delightful surprise! I am afraid Charles is out at present.”

He frowned slightly. “I see. I had hoped to speak with him on a matter of business.”

“Oh, but surely you can spare a few moments for me,” I simpered, patting the seat beside me with all the subtlety of a matchmaking mama. “I have some rather interesting news that I simply must share with you.”

Mr Darcy’s expression remained as readable as an ancient Greek tablet, but he inclined his head marginally.

“Very well, Miss Bingley. What is this news?” His tone suggested he would rather hear the local banns being read.

I leaned forward conspiratorially, ensuring my figure was displayed to full effect. “It concerns Miss Jane Bennet. Did you know she is in Town?”

His eyebrows rose by approximately half a hair’s breadth. “Indeed? I was not aware.”

“Oh yes,” I continued, my voice sweet and demure. “She called upon me some weeks ago. I have since returned the call, of course, as propriety demands.” Much like propriety demands one acknowledge a tradesman’s bow—briefly and with minimal encouragement.

Mr Darcy’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. “I see. And does Bingley know of this?”

I waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, heavens no. My simkin of a brother must remain blissfully unaware. And I must insist, Mr Darcy, that you do not breathe a word of this to him.”

“Miss Bingley,” he began, his tone cautious, “I do not believe it is wise to keep such information from your brother. Nor is it my custom to disguise.”

I fixed him with a steely gaze. “Mr Darcy, I must have your word that you will not

disclose this to Charles. Promise me you shall not tell him.”

He hesitated, clearly uncomfortable. “Miss Bingley, I cannot in good conscience—”

“Promise me,” I insisted, my voice taking on a sharp edge. “Surely a man of your honour would not go back on his word once given?”

Mr Darcy’s expression hardened. “Very well, Miss Bingley. I give you my word that I shall not volunteer this information to your brother. However, should he ask me directly, I will not lie.”

I smiled, satisfied. “That is all I ask, Mr Darcy. We cannot have Charles falling back into the clutches of that family. He has been playing the complete gudgeon over Miss Bennet, and it simply will not do.”

“I believe your brother is capable of managing his own affairs,” Mr Darcy replied coolly.

I laughed lightly. “Oh, Mr Darcy, you know as well as I do that Charles can be a veritable nodcock when it comes to matters of the heart. We are simply looking out for his best interests.”

Mr Darcy’s expression remained stern. “Is that all, Miss Bingley? I believe I shall take my leave now.”

As he turned to go, I called after him, “Remember your promise, Mr Darcy. Not a word to Charles about Miss Bennet’s presence in Town. We cannot have him acting the mooncalf over her again.”

He paused at the door, his back to me. “Good day, Miss Bingley,” he said stiffly, before striding out.

I sank back onto the sofa, feeling both triumphant and uneasy. Mr Darcy's promise would hold, I was certain, but I could not shake the feeling that I had somehow overplayed my hand. I certainly could not displease the greater prize of Mr Darcy himself to ensure Charles escaped that fortune hunter. It was for Charles's own good.

If my machinations happened to keep me in close proximity to Mr Darcy, well, that was merely a fortunate coincidence. Rather like my neckline's tendency to spontaneously lower itself whenever he was nearby.

The oppressive heat of a London summer day had driven us all indoors, and I found myself idly picking out stitches in my embroidery. My thoughts were rather more occupied with certain tall, proud gentlemen than with mere needlework. The door creaked open, admitting Charles and Mr Darcy, the latter looking particularly sour.

"Come, Darcy," Charles was chattering away like an optimistic sparrow, "you really must shake off this dark humour. What happened during your travels to leave you so cast down? You look as though you have been forced to dance with every wallflower at Almack's."

Mr Darcy merely grunted in response, his eyes downcast. I seized the opportunity to insert myself into the conversation.

"Mr Darcy," I simpered, "how distressing to see you so glum. Perhaps the prospect of our upcoming visit to Pemberley might cheer you? I, for one, am counting the days." And the hours. And the minutes. I may have had a small accounting hidden in my reticule.

Darcy's eyes flicked to mine, a brief spark of... something... passing through them before the shutters fell once more. "Indeed, Miss Bingley. The invitation stands, of course." My, that was less than an enthusiastic endorsement.

I set my book aside with practised grace, rising to approach the gentlemen like Venus emerging from the waves—if Venus had been wearing the latest fashion from Paris and had spent two hours arranging her hair. “You are too kind, Mr Darcy. I do hope nothing has occurred to dampen your spirits about the visit?”

“Not at all,” he replied, though his tone lacked conviction. “If you’ll excuse me, I have promised Georgiana an outing.”

As he strode from the room, I turned to Charles with a practised look of concern. “Oh, Charles, what can have happened to leave Mr Darcy in such a taking? He is exceedingly gloomy.”

Charles shrugged, his usual good humour undimmed. “I am sure it’s nothing, Caroline. Darcy is never best pleased when he has been at his aunt’s estate.”

I nodded sagely, though my thoughts were already racing ahead.

“Well, we must do our utmost to lift his spirits during our stay at Pemberley. I shall make it my personal mission to see him smile again.”

Charles wandered off in search of refreshment. I allowed myself a small, triumphant smile. Mr Darcy’s current disposition was but a minor setback. I could not imagine how anything could truly disturb a man of his stature—surely it was a minor matter he would resolve promptly.

Upon Louisa’s arrival, her complexion bearing a slight greenish tint, poor dear, I brought up the curious change in Mr Darcy’s demeanour. After his absence for several weeks, upon his return, he seemed positively lugubrious. Then, he had always been taciturn, but this was something altogether different.

“Louisa,” I murmured to my sister, watching her struggle with some miniature

garment for an infant, “have you noticed how terribly out of sorts Mr Darcy has been since his return?”

Louisa glanced up briefly from her endless construction of baby clothes. “Indeed, he does seem rather subdued. Perhaps he encountered some difficulty in his business affairs.”

I waved my fan dismissively. “Oh, it matters not. What concerns me is his invitation for us to stay at Pemberley this summer. We must ensure that nothing interferes with those plans.”

“Of course,” Louisa agreed placidly. “Though I doubt Mr Darcy would rescind such an invitation.”

I leaned forward, lowering my voice conspiratorially. “This is my opportunity, Louisa. With several weeks at Pemberley, I shall have ample time to demonstrate to Mr Darcy what an excellent mistress I would make for his estate.”

Louisa raised an eyebrow. “And how do you propose to do that, Caroline?”

“By any means necessary,” I declared. “I shall be the very model of grace and sophistication. I shall charm his sister, impress his housekeeper, and prove myself indispensable to Mr Darcy himself.”

“You seem most determined,” Louisa observed.

“Indeed, I am,” I replied, straightening my spine. “I have not spent years cultivating this acquaintance to falter now. Mr Darcy may be acting melancholy, but I shall rouse him from it. By the end of our stay, he shall see that I am the only sensible choice for a wife.”

Louisa sighed with the weight of one who has heard this particular speech rather too often. “Well, I wish you success, sister. Though I caution you. Mr Darcy is not one to be pushed.”

I waved away her concerns like an extra single gentleman at a dinner party. “Fear not, Louisa. I shall be the very soul of subtlety. Mr Darcy will find himself thoroughly conquered before he realizes the campaign has begun.”

As I sat back, a satisfied smile playing on my lips, I began to plan my victory in earnest. Pemberley would be mine, and with it, the estimable Mr Darcy. And his ample purse. His current mood was but a minor obstacle, one I would overcome with all the charm and wit at my disposal. Let him play the curmudgeon now; soon enough, he would see reason. And I, Caroline Bingley, would emerge triumphant as the new mistress of Pemberley. After all, what could possibly go wrong?

???

Our carriage rolled through the picturesque Derbyshire countryside, like a particularly well-sprung ship navigating waves of sheep and picturesque hills. I examined the girl seated across from me, Miss Georgiana Darcy. The shy, impressionable girl was the perfect source of intelligence about her enigmatic brother, if I could only coax her out of her shell.

I leaned forward with an expression of maternal concern I had spent weeks perfecting. “My dear Georgiana,” I began, “how delightful to have this time together before we arrive at Pemberley. I do hope you will consider me a confidante during our stay.” And a sister-in-law shortly thereafter, God willing.

Georgiana smiled timidly. “That is very kind of you, Miss Bingley.”

I waved away her formality like an unwanted suitor. “Oh, please, call me Caroline.

Now, tell me, how has your brother been faring? He seemed rather out of sorts when last we met in Town.”

“Fitzwilliam?” Georgiana’s brow furrowed slightly. “He has been... preoccupied of late. Though I confess I know not why.”

I pounced on this morsel of information. “Preoccupied, you say? How intriguing. Has he spoken of any... particular interests that might have captured his attention?”

Georgiana shifted uncomfortably. “I... I should not...”

“Oh, come now,” I pressed, patting her hand with all the encouragement of a matchmaking mama, “I only ask out of concern for your brother’s welfare. You know how dear he is to me.” About ten thousand pounds a year dear, to be precise.

The girl’s cheeks flushed pinker than my newest ball gown. “Well, he has been spending a great deal of time in his study, poring over letters. And he’s taken a renewed interest in improving the estate.”

“How... fascinating,” I replied, trying to mask my disappointment like a gentleman concealing his gambling debts. “And has your brother expressed any intention of... seeking a mistress for Pemberley?” Apart from myself, naturally.

Georgiana’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. “Oh! I... that is not something my brother would discuss with me, Miss Bingley.”

Realising I had pushed too far, I quickly changed tack. “Of course not, my dear. I never meant to pry. Let us discuss your musical studies. What new piano forte music will you delight us with this month? You play so divinely.”

As Georgiana mumbled a description of her latest acquisitions, I leaned back, my

mind whirring. Mr Darcy's preoccupation remained a mystery, but I was determined to unravel it. Perhaps his renewed interest in the estate was a sign that he was indeed considering marriage. I would need to redouble my efforts to show him that I, Caroline Bingley, was the only suitable choice for mistress of Pemberley. And this was my chance to show him my best.

The carriage rolled on towards our destination. I began to plot my strategy. Georgiana Darcy had proved a less useful source of intelligence than I had hoped, but no matter. I would find other ways to glean the information I needed. I occupied myself more agreeably by conjuring the jewels I might acquire as mistress of the Darcy purse, er estate.

At last, we arrived at the magnificent grounds of Pemberley. As soon as Georgiana perked up in recognition of her home lands, I began a careful inventory of my appearance. It was essential that I appear the picture of elegance and poise, to impress the staff and, of course, Darcy. I averted my face as I surreptitiously applied Pear's Almond Bloom to my travel weary face—guaranteed to give one the complexion of an angel, or so the advertisement claimed. Next, a touch of Bloom of Roses in carmine to suggest a becoming flush. Finally, my secret weapon—a personally concocted lip salve mixing Rigge's Liquid Bloom in vermillion with rose balm to enhance my lips. I slipped the silver cachou box into my reticule and extracted my pocket mirror. The light in the carriage was poor, but I caught a reassuring glimpse of my perfected complexion.

The sight of Pemberley itself nearly stopped my heart—though sadly not from the romantic sensibilities one might hope for in a future mistress. Rather, my first thought was calculating how many new drapes I'd need to order. The current ones were hideously understated.

I was thoroughly put out to be handed down by a mere footman—surely an honoured guest and future mistress deserved the attention of either the master or at least the

butler. But Darcy was entirely occupied with greeting his sister, displaying an unseemly amount of familial affection. Note to self: that would need to be corrected once I took charge. A slight nod would suffice for all future greetings.

I swept into Pemberley's grand entrance surely looking as though I had just emerged from Madame Devy's salon in Paris. Charles and Louisa trailed behind me, gawking at the surroundings like farmers at their first glimpse of St. Paul's. As we approached Mrs Reynolds, the housekeeper— mental note: start compiling a list of servants to replacement—I overheard mention of visitors to the estate.

Rounding the corner with all the grace I could muster—which was considerable, having practiced this particular entrance for weeks—I stopped dead in my tracks. There stood Mr Darcy, looking more animated than I'd seen him since... well, ever. Perhaps his return to his palatial estate had cheered him. It certainly cheered me.

"Mr Darcy!" I exclaimed, "We had no idea you allowed visitors to your estate! Your housekeeper must surely manage them, without your needing to be involved." A pointed hint for the future, when I would be directing such things.

Darcy turned. As he took in my appearance an expression of surprise crossed his face, which he quickly controlled. He was cool as he regarded me. "Miss Bingley. Yes, I arrived early to attend to some business with my steward, and encountered Miss Bennet and her relations visiting. They will join us tomorrow." There was no acknowledgement of my assistance. My entrance fell flat.

"I see," I replied, in shock. What the devil might she be doing here! How had this chit of a girl managed to appear at Pemberley before us? And why did Mr Darcy look so... pleased? I struggled to maintain my composure. "Miss Eliza Bennet! What an... unexpected pleasure."

Charles, bless his cork-headed heart, chose that moment to join us. "I say, Darcy!

Miss Elizabeth! What a delightful surprise! Does she travel with her...er family as well?" Charles spoke to Mr Darcy, but when he turned to glance at me his brows rose as if he was surprised by my appearance. I smiled serenely and permitted the servant to relieve me of my cloak.

Really, what was everyone staring at?

As Charles prattled on, I observed Mr Darcy closely. The transformation in Mr Darcy was positively alarming. The man was practically glowing—like a freshly trimmed lamp. His eyes kept darting about with something approaching glee, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth—and none of it directed at me, despite my carefully crafted appearance. His eyes glided past me, barely arresting, not at all taking in my fashionable compliments to his home.

This would not do at all. I had not come all this way to Pemberley to have my plans thwarted by some country nobody. As the conversation continued around me, I began to plot. Somehow, I would need to remind Mr Darcy of Miss Elizabeth's unsuitability. Perhaps a few well-placed comments about her family's vulgarity...

"Miss Bingley?" Mr Darcy's voice cut through my thoughts. Why did he appear so amused? "Mrs Reynolds will show you to your rooms."

The housekeeper murmured a greeting. She blinked rapidly as she regarded me, impressed to have a quality lady gracing the estate.

I adopted my most charming smile, the one that had once caused poor Mr Grantley to collide with the gilt pier glass. "Of course, Mr Darcy. How kind of you. I do hope we'll have ample opportunity to... catch up during our stay."

As we ascended the grand staircase, I cast one last glance over my much desired future home. I could imagine the transformation I planned, with the traditional entry

remade with a Chinoiserie interior and rich colours. The dull, pale blue room did nothing to display the riches of the Darcy estate. The modest country house look was reminiscent of Henry Holland. It would be far more impressive with red floral imagery and imitated bamboo lacquer finishes on the walls, à la Prince Regent.

Once in my room, I removed my cloak and sat at the dressing table. Adèle approached to help me freshen and gasped.

“Ma’mselle! Your face!”

The pier glass revealed the horrible truth. Instead of the elegant future mistress of Pemberley, I resembled nothing so much as a circus performer between acts. The Almond Bloom had turned my complexion a ghastly shade of paste, my cheeks were two perfect circles of alarming carmine, and my lips... well, the less said about that vermilion disaster, the better. I had entered Pemberley not the elegant mistress to be, but as a painted lady worthy of a stage production.

Adèle was silent as she attacked my face with her special concoction, juice of house-leek, mixed with an equal quantity of sweet milk. It took several minutes of odiferous scrubbing of my stained cheeks to return my face to a normal appearance.

Had anyone noticed? I tried to convince myself that the entry hall’s lighting had hidden my painted lady impression, but then remembered posing deliberately under the transom window’s stream of light. That explained Mr Darcy’s expression of barely suppressed glee. I struggled to hang on to the conviction that his joy at my arrival had inspired such delight. Each glance at the ruddy streaks across my skin called that into question. It was not pleasure at seeing Elizabeth Bennet in the neighbourhood—he’d been trying not to laugh at my toilette mishap.

It was essential that I move on. I ceased my redecorating schemes and focused on the next challenge. Elizabeth Bennet may have complicated my plans, but this was

merely a skirmish. The battle for Pemberley—and Mr Darcy—was far from over.

The following morning, I sat in the opulent drawing room of Pemberley, sipping tea from a delicate Wedgwood cup and trying to forget yesterday's humiliation, when Georgiana burst in, practically bouncing with excitement. I raised an eyebrow, curiosity overcoming my usual indifference towards the shy girl.

“Miss Darcy, you seem rather animated. Has something of interest occurred?” I inquired, setting my cup down with a soft clink.

Georgiana nodded eagerly, her golden curls bouncing. “Oh, Miss Bingley, you will never guess! Fitzwilliam and I went to Lambton this morning to call on Miss Elizabeth Bennet!”

I nearly choked on the last sip of my tea, the fine blend suddenly tasting bitter in my mouth. This morning? It was barely noon, and I had already missed their foray into the village to rusticate with that.... “Miss Elizabeth Bennet? In Lambton?” I managed to wheeze. “Whatever for?” Apart from stalking eligible gentlemen.

“She is touring the country with her aunt and uncle,” Georgiana explained, settling onto the chaise longue opposite me. Her excitement made her oblivious to my dismay. “Fitzwilliam was so pleased to see her. He insisted we visit. I have never known him to be so... eager.”

I forced a smile that felt like it might crack my face. “How... thoughtful of him. And how did Miss Eliza receive you?” Please let her have been caught in her nightgown, or better yet, consorting with a soldier.

“She was most gracious,” Georgiana replied, her eyes shining with admiration. “So kind and attentive. Fitzwilliam seemed quite transformed in her presence. I had been so concerned about his poor spirits, but he smiled more in that one visit than I’ve seen

in months!”

I gripped the armrest of my chair, my knuckles whitening. “Indeed? How... fascinating.”

Before I could interrogate her further, Charles burst in like a bull in a milliner’s shop. “Caroline! You will never believe who I have seen in Lambton!”

“Let me guess,” I drawled, my voice dryer than last year’s biscuits. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

Charles’s face fell slightly, reminding me of a disappointed puppy. “Oh, Georgiana’s told you already. Is it not marvellous? And Darcy was so eager to introduce me to her aunt and uncle. They seem like capital people.”

I bristled at this, sitting up straighter. “Really, Charles. I’m sure Mr Darcy was merely being polite. We must not read too much into his actions. After all, it would be unconscionably rude to ignore an acquaintance, no matter how... insignificant.”

The news only grew worse. “Oh, I do not think you have the right of it,” Charles replied, his grin returning as he flopped into a nearby chair, oblivious to my barb. “He was positively beaming when Miss Elizabeth agreed to dine with us tomorrow. You remember how lively she is, do you not, Caroline? Such sparkling wit!”

“Dine with us?” I exclaimed, unable to hide my horror. My teacup clattered against its saucer as I set it down with more force than intended. “Surely you jest, Charles. Mr Darcy would never invite such... such provincial persons to dine at Pemberley.” Dinner with that chit and her tradesman relations! This would not do at all. Somehow, I had to remind Mr Darcy of Miss Elizabeth’s complete unsuitability.

But my addle-pated brother merely laughed, the sound grating on my already frayed

nerves. “No jest, Caroline. Darcy insisted. In fact, he’s instructed Mrs Reynolds to prepare a veritable feast. You shall see for yourself tomorrow how well they get on. I have not seen Darcy so happy in ages!”

As Charles wandered off, still chuckling to himself, I sank back into my chair, my mind reeling. The expensive upholstery suddenly felt suffocating. This was a disaster of unprecedented magnitude. All my carefully laid plans were crumbling around me like a poorly constructed house of cards. How had that impertinent country miss managed to bewitch both Darcy and my brother? And in such a short time!

I stood abruptly, the sudden movement startling poor Georgiana, who had been prattling on about Miss Elizabeth’s kindness. “If you would excuse me,” I said, my voice tight, “I believe I need to lie down. The journey has quite fatigued me.”

As I swept from the room, my skirts rustling dramatically, my mind raced faster than my feet. I needed a new strategy, and quickly. Tomorrow’s dinner would be crucial. Somehow, I had to remind Mr Darcy of Miss Elizabeth’s unsuitability. Her low connections, her vulgar relations, her complete lack of fortune or standing in society - surely these facts would outweigh whatever fleeting charm she possessed.

The future mistress of Pemberley could not be some nobody from Hertfordshire.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

“How very ill Eliza Bennet looks this morning,” I declared. “I never in my life saw anyone so much altered as she is since the winter. She is grown so brown and coarse!”

Louisa frowned. “Caroline, I do not think that is quite fair. Miss Elizabeth looked well enough to me.”

I waved away her objection like an unwanted suitor. “Nonsense, Louisa. You must have noticed how tanned she has become. It is most unbecoming. One might mistake her for a farmer’s daughter.” Given her connections, that was not far off the mark.

“I thought Miss Elizabeth looked lovely,” Georgiana said softly.

I fixed her with my best governess stare, the one I had been practising for when I would become mistress of Pemberley. “My dear Georgiana, you are too kind. Surely you must have noticed her utter lack of fashion and grace. Why, her walking dress was at least two seasons out of date!”

Louisa cleared her throat as if preparing for a particularly lengthy sermon. “Caroline, perhaps we should speak of more pleasant topics. The weather has been delightful, has it not?”

Ignoring her, I continued, “For my own part, I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her face is too thin; her complexion has no brilliancy; and her features are not at all handsome.”

“Caroline!” Louisa exclaimed. “That is quite enough. You are being terribly unkind.”

I rounded on her like a general spotting weakness in enemy lines. “Am I? I am merely stating facts, Louisa. Her nose wants character—there is nothing marked in its lines. Her teeth are tolerable, but not out of the common way; and as for her eyes, which have sometimes been called so ‘fine,’ I never could perceive anything extraordinary in them. Save, perhaps, their ability to bewitch otherwise sensible gentlemen.”

Georgiana shifted in her seat like a schoolgirl caught passing notes. No matter—she needed to learn proper standards if I were to guide her through her coming out. After all, as her future sister-in-law, it would be my duty to ensure she did not fall prey to fortune hunters and other undesirables.

“They have a sharp, shrewish look,” I continued, warming to my theme, “which I do not like at all; and in her air altogether, there is a self-sufficiency without fashion, which is intolerable.”

I glared at her with fury. “I am merely expressing my opinion, Louisa. Do you not remember how amazed we all were to find that she was a reputed beauty in Hertfordshire?”

“Pray excuse me,” Georgiana murmured, fleeing the room. Her face had gone quite pale, poor thing. Clearly, she needed more exposure to proper critical thinking.

Louisa shook her head. “I remember no such thing. Caroline, you are letting your jealousy cloud your judgement.”

“Jealousy?” I sputtered, nearly choking on the word. “What nonsense! I have no reason to be jealous of Eliza Bennet. Why should I envy a girl who dresses as though she has been ploughing fields?”

“Do you not?” Louisa asked pointedly. “Then why are you so determined to find fault

with her?”

Before I could deliver a scathing retort, Mr Darcy entered the room. I immediately transformed my expression into one of sweet concern, like a guardian angel hovering over my charge.

“Mr Darcy,” I simpered, “we were discussing Miss Eliza Bennet. Do you not agree that she looks quite altered since the winter? The country air has been most... unkind to her complexion.”

Darcy’s expression remained impassive. “I perceived no alteration beyond her being rather tanned, which is no miraculous consequence of travelling in the summer.”

Louisa shot me a warning glance that chilled the air, but I persisted with one last piece of criticism. “But surely you must admit that she has lost whatever charm she once possessed? I particularly recollect your saying one night, after they had been dining at Netherfield, ‘She a beauty! I should as soon call her mother a wit.’”

Darcy’s jaw tightened, an amazing feat given that his expression had appeared carved from marble. “Yes,” he replied, his tone cooler than a December morning, “but that was only when I first knew her. For it is many months since I have considered her as one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance.”

With that, he strode from the room, his gait firm and his shoulders stiff. I was left gaping in his wake.

Louisa fixed her eyes on me. With a look that mingled pity and exasperation, she said softly, “Caroline, you have gone too far. Can you not see that your words only serve to lower yourself in Mr Darcy’s estimation?”

I turned away, unable to bear the truth of her words. “I do not know what you mean,

Louisa. I was merely making conversation.”

“No, Caroline,” Louisa replied firmly. “You were attempting to disparage a woman whom Mr Darcy clearly admires. It is unbecoming and, frankly, rather desperate.”

I whirled to face her, my silk rustling. “Desperate? How dare you!”

Louisa held up a hand. “Sister, please. For your own sake, I beg you to let this go. Your pursuit of Mr Darcy is more than obvious to everyone, and it is not having the effect you desire. Rather, the opposite.”

I felt my cheeks burn with humiliation. “I do not know what you are talking about,” I said stiffly.

Louisa sighed. “Very well, Caroline. But I implore you to consider your actions more carefully. You are only hurting yourself. Need I remind you of the matter of Sir Nigel Winston?”

I gasped at Louisa's cruelty, rose and fled to my chambers, summoning Adèle with a sharp pull of the bell that greatly strained the rope.

“Adèle,” I snapped as she entered, “fetch my rose water. I find myself quite overcome with the heat.” And the humiliation, though I would never admit it.

“Oui, Ma'mselle,” she murmured, but I caught the slight hesitation in her step. “Though per'aps Ma'mselle would prefer ze lavender water? I 'ear it is Mees Elizabeth's favourite—ze 'ousekeeper was telling me 'ow she commented most favourably on ze scent in ze guest chambers. ”

I fixed her with a glare that should have turned her to ice. “And pray tell, what else has the housekeeper been saying about Miss Eliza Bennet?”

Adèle busied herself with my toilette items, her face a mask of careful neutrality. “Oh, zat she is très gentille—very kind—to all ze servants. Madame Reynolds says she 'as never seen ze master so pleased with a visitor. Unlike some who... ” She caught herself, but the damage was done.

“Unlike some who what?” I demanded, my voice rising.

“Nothing, Ma'mselle. Though per'aps if you were to speak to Monsieur Thomas with less... 'ow you say, severity about ze coal scuttle incident? And to Marie about ze tea tray? And to Cook about ze partridge? And— ”

“That will be all, Adèle,” I said through clenched teeth.

As she departed, I caught my reflection in the pier glass. The woman staring back at me looked rather like someone who had discovered all their best winter gowns had been eaten by moths—and that everyone else had noticed first.

I sank onto a nearby chair, my mind reeling. Could Louisa be right? Had I truly made such a fool of myself? No, I decided. It was not possible. Eliza Bennet was nothing, a mere country nobody. Mr Darcy would see reason eventually. He had to.

And yet...

Louisa had been rather unfeeling reminding me of Sir Nigel Winston. Surely, it was unnecessary and unkind. I had been a child, well, a young lady of fifteen, but that is practically infancy when one considers matters of the heart.

Mrs Tyler's Boarding School for Young Ladies was where Papa had spent a small fortune—thirty guineas per annum! to transform his merchant's daughters into ladies of quality. The prospectus had promised everything a young lady might need to catch a titled husband: “The English and French Languages, History, Chronology,

Mythology, and every kind of Needle Work .” For an extra guinea each, one could add “ Music, Dancing, Writing, Arithmetic, and Geography, with the Use of the Globes .” Papa, bless his generous merchant heart, had insisted we take every possible extra.

“My girls,” he had declared, counting out the guineas, “shall be as accomplished as any lady of the ton. More so, if possible!” The situation was healthy; and being so contiguous to the metropolis that my father, who resided in London, and preferred having his children near him, he declared this seminary proved ideal.

Louisa and I entered together, as my mother would not have us separated, despite Louisa being three years my senior. Louisa was then eighteen and more retiring than she now seems. Mrs Tyler’s establishment occupied a commodious house with extensive gardens and walks, where twelve carefully selected young ladies were meant to bloom into social butterflies.

We mingled with the other pupils every day—during instruction, at meals and when we were called upon to practise the skills of a lady of a household. Of the young ladies we lived with, several were from mercantile households. We all were being educated with the hope that we would move up in society through marriage. Two were of a higher sphere—Miss Clarissa Winston and Miss Althea Hightower. Miss Hightower was well named, as she would not for a second allow anyone to stand as her equal. She insisted the distinction of rank be preserved, as she was the grandniece of an earl. Miss Winston, whose father had been a baronet, was the only member of our group Miss Hightower willingly associated with. Nonetheless, Miss Winston was kind and put on no airs due to her superior birth.

During one of our holidays from school, Miss Winston kindly invited Louisa and me to visit her home. I had not considered her a close acquaintance, but was delighted to accept.

The Winston home, Misslewood, was a day's journey from school. The Winston family coach conveyed us to Kent, and I fell in love twice during that visit—first with Misslewood, though comparing it to Pemberley now is like comparing a cottage to a palace—and then with Sir Nigel Winston himself, Miss Winston's eldest brother. In retrospect, he was rather middling in every possible way: middling height, middling looks, middling conversation. But to my fifteen-year-old eyes, he might as well have been Adonis incarnate.

I smoothed my finest gown—pale blue silk that I was convinced made me look at least eighteen—and had spent hours arranging my hair to achieve that perfect “artlessly elegant” look.

Sir Nigel stood near the fireplace, his profile illuminated by the flickering flames. My heart fluttered in my chest.

“Miss Bingley,” he said, inclining his head as I approached. “I trust you are finding your stay agreeable?”

“Indeed, Sir Nigel,” I replied, endeavouring to maintain my composure at this marked attention. “Your hospitality is most gracious.”

As we took our seats at the table, I found myself fortuitously placed beside the young baronet. I reached for my glass, trusting he would not perceive the slight tremor in my hand.

“Sir Nigel,” I ventured, “I could not help but admire the fine collection of books in your library. Are you a great reader?”

Sir Nigel's eyes met mine, and for a moment, I fancied I detected interest. “I do enjoy a good volume now and then, Miss Bingley. Have you found anything to your taste?”

I seized upon the opening. “Oh yes, I was particularly drawn to a collection of Shakespeare’s sonnets. His words are so... moving.” Shakespeare was always a safe choice. No one would denigrate that taste.

“Do you have a favourite?” he had asked, his tone suggesting he already knew the answer.

“I... find them all so beautiful, Sir. How could one possibly choose?” I had, in fact, read precisely one sonnet, understood none of it, and promptly abandoned the enterprise.

His expression had suggested he would rather converse with his soup. “I see. Well, Miss Bingley, I am pleased you have found some diversion in our modest library.”

He turned then to address the lady on his other side, leaving me to contemplate my folly. I was not discouraged, however, since my dowry of twenty thousand was far superior to any but my sister’s among the party.

In the drawing room after dinner, I manoeuvred to sit beside Sir Nigel on a small settee.

“Sir,” I ventured, leaning closer than I ought, “I am most eager to hear of your adventures. Did you perhaps visit the Continent?”

Sir Nigel shifted, putting a respectable distance between us. “I did not, Miss Bingley. My travels were confined to our fair shores.”

“Oh! Then you must have seen the Lake District. I have heard it is tremendously romantic.”

At this, Sir Nigel’s brow furrowed. “I visited on matters of business, Miss Bingley.

There was little time for romantic notions.”

My cheeks blazed with such violence I feared they might catch fire. How could I have been so unutterably stupid? Oh! I wished the Turkish carpet might open and swallow me whole.

"I... that is... I spoke out of turn," I stammered, my fingers twisting my silk skirts quite beyond redemption. "Pray excuse my presumption, sir."

Later, speaking with Louisa, I reflected on each particular of the evening. How could I capture the attention of a man like Sir Nigel? Louisa suggested I comport myself with greater dignity for the remainder of my visit. Perhaps, she suggested, Sir Nigel sought a lady of more mature years. I countered that Many girls found husbands at an early age and wed at perhaps sixteen. Or so I had heard. Louisa fixed me with such a look I begrudgingly admitted that, given that I was not yet out, he might be reluctant. But a small, stubborn part of me still clung to the hope that I might yet find a way to distinguish myself in his eyes.

I was thoroughly disabused of this notion when I experienced the proverb Miss Tyler always remarked upon. "Listeners never hear any good of themselves."

I had determined that Sir Nigel was a perennial early riser, and thus insisted that our maid awaken me at dawn. I completed my toilette with care, and proceeded to the breakfast room with high hopes.

I could not believe my ears! I had only meant to join them for an early breakfast when I overheard the most dreadful conversation between Sir Nigel and Lady Winston. Hidden behind the door in the hallway, I found myself an unwilling audience to their cruel words.

"Nigel," Lady Winston's voice dripped with disdain, "you simply must put a stop to

that Bingley girl's unseemly behaviour. It is becoming quite embarrassing."

Surely they did not mean me? What had Louisa done?

Sir Nigel's deep chuckle sent a shudder down my spine. "Mother, you need not worry. I have no interest in entertaining the fancies of a child. Miss Bingley is but fifteen—a mere babe playing at being grown." Oh dear. Louisa was not fifteen.

"Nevertheless," Lady Winston continued, "her attempts at flirtation are gauche. Did you see how she simpered and batted her eyelashes at you during dinner? It was positively vulgar." Miss Hightower always batted her eyelashes and she captured the attention of many a gentleman. And what did "simper" mean? I must consult my Johnson's Dictionary to learn the meaning of the word.

"Come now, Mother. She is harmless, if a trifle annoying. She will grow out of this foolishness in time."

"One can only hope. Really, Nigel, I expected better from the girls from Miss Tyler's. What are they teaching when this upstart girl from trade sets her cap at a man twice her age—scandalous! You need not humour her," the lady said.

"I do not intend to do so. I speak with her at my peril. She is relentless and has not the judgement of a schoolroom miss. I politely attempted to discourage her attentions, but I have ensured my safety. Spencer slept in my dressing room last night lest she forget herself and enter unbidden."

I could bear no more. Tears filling my eyes, I fled from my place of concealment. How could I have been so blind? So foolish? Sir Nigel saw me as nothing more than a silly child, and I had made myself the object of ridicule.

I vowed never to make such a display of myself again! Though given my recent

behaviour with Mr Darcy, some lessons take longer to learn than others.

Adèle, seeing my distress at the memory, attempted to console me: "At least Monsieur Darcy is not twice your age, Ma'mselle. And you no longer ..'ow do you say...simper quite so obviously."

I tossed a cushion at her.

It was a most peculiar morning indeed. I had descended for breakfast at what I considered an entirely reasonable hour—not yet eleven o'clock—when I encountered Adèle in the corridor, who informed me that Mr Darcy had already departed. Upon entering the breakfast parlour, I discovered it quite deserted save for Mr Hurst, who appeared to have taken permanent residence behind his newspaper. The rustling of pages was punctuated only by the occasional clink of his coffee cup.

"Has Louisa made her appearance this morning?" I enquired, affecting an air of dignified concern.

Mr Hurst barely lowered his newspaper—the ill-mannered oaf—to drawl, "Louisa was quite indisposed early this morning. She is now out with Miss Darcy walking in the rose garden." He did not bother to look at me as he responded, insolent fool.

I signalled to the footman—a lamentably untrained fellow—to assemble my plate. The incompetent creature managed to botch even this simple task, failing to provide adequate preserves and selecting a very paltry slice of cake.

"I say," I addressed the footman with measured displeasure, "one generally expects the morning cake to be visible to the naked eye. Shall I require a magnifying glass to locate it?"

The poor fool merely blinked at me like a startled owl. No matter, I would consume

my meal quickly and find my sister and Miss Darcy. Perhaps she would be able to relate where her brother had gone.

I had slept ill, ruminating as I was over Louisa's cruel words and the long buried memory of that holiday at Misslewood. I had most certainly remedied any tendency toward "simpering"—such a vulgar accusation. I did not “smile in an affected and silly way.” I was determined to reserve my dignified smiles for gentlemen of consequence.

Like Mr Darcy, my thoughts helpfully supplied.

The very gentleman whose inexplicable fascination with that Bennet creature continued to vex me. The chit did not smile so much as guffaw like a marketplace fishwife! She had no compunction about bursting into unladylike laughter in company. Was this not far less appealing than an occasional smile of little sincerity? I could not fathom her success given how far her behavior diverged from everything I had learned at Miss Tyler's Select Seminary for Young Ladies at considerable expense, I might add.

As I sipped my chocolate I determined that when I became mistress, I should instruct the cook as to the proper preparation of hot chocolate. I was accustomed to there being at least a half a drachm of cardamom-seeds incorporated into my beverage. Pemberley's cook used none, but rather added a quantity of vanelos. “Ghastly,” I murmured.

"Did you speak, Miss Bingley?" Mr Hurst inquired from behind his paper fortress.

"I was merely observing," I replied with glacial politeness, "that when I become mistress of a great estate, I shall ensure the cook is replaced. This... concoction appears to contain nothing but vanelos." I pronounced the word as if it were a particularly disagreeable disease.

"Mmph," contributed Mr Hurst, vanishing once more behind his newspaper. How had my dear sister attached herself to such a monosyllabic specimen? Did she not converse with him during their courtship?

My thoughts drifted to various courtships I had observed, particularly Louisa's peculiar liaison with the very gentleman currently ignoring me. Their courtship had been businesslike, with Mr Hurst pursuing Louisa with all the finesse of a runaway carriage.

Almost from their first meeting, Mr Hurst followed Louisa like a well trained dog. Louisa had not been required to put a great deal of effort into the endeavour. Mr Hurst's pursuit was open and direct. There was something to be said for receiving the determined attention of a gentleman, but somehow it fell flat. There was no thrill of the chase, no sense of achievement. But Louisa had managed what I had not yet done. Not that I would wish to sink to accepting the attentions of such a man, but Louisa had married and married into the gentry. I wanted a great deal more for myself, yet, I had to be honest, I had made little headway.

Louisa had spent some time considering whether she could be happy with Hurst, and became convinced that her chance of happiness with him was as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state. I could learn little from Louisa's courtship, as, honestly, it was far more conducted on Mr Hurst's side than on Louisa's. I recalled teasing her about his ardor.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

“Mr Hurst nearly knocked over poor Mr Lawrence in his haste to secure your hand for the first set.”

Louisa laughed, the sound both amused and mortified. “Oh, do not remind me! Though I must say, his enthusiasm, while perhaps lacking in grace, does have a certain... charm to it.”

“Charm?” I arched an eyebrow. “Is that what we’re calling it now? The man announces his intentions with the subtlety of a town crier.”

“Not everyone needs to conduct their affairs with your level of sophistication, Caroline.” Louisa picked up her embroidery, though her eyes remained unfocused. “There is something rather refreshing about knowing exactly where one stands.”

I watched her carefully. “And where do you stand, sister?”

She was quiet for a moment, her needle moving in small, precise stitches. “I believe... I believe I could be content with him. He is not what one might call brilliant, but he is kind, and his situation is comfortable.”

“Comfortable!” I exclaimed. “Really, Louisa, is that all you aspire to?”

“What would you have me aspire to?” She set down her work again, meeting my gaze directly. “We cannot all wait for a duke to come sweeping in on a white horse, Caroline. Some of us must be practical.”

The next day brought Mr Hurst himself, looking rather like an eager hound as he

bounded into our drawing room. I observed with some amusement how he barely remembered to bow to me before turning his attention to Louisa.

“Miss Bingley,” he said, his round face flushed with either exertion or anticipation, “I wondered if you might care to take a turn about the garden? The gardener tells me the roses are particularly fine this year.”

“The gardener tells you?” I murmured, too quietly for him to hear. “Since when does Mr Hurst consult with gardeners about roses?”

But Louisa was already rising, a soft smile playing about her lips. “That would be lovely, Mr Hurst. Though perhaps Caroline would care to join us?”

“Oh, no,” I demurred, lifting my book meaningfully. “I find myself quite engrossed in Miss Edgeworth's latest moral tale. I am sure one of the maids will suffice as a chaperon.”

Louisa shot me a knowing look as she accepted Mr Hurst's arm. I watched them through the window as they made their way down the garden path, his steps carefully measured to match her shorter stride, his head bent attentively as she spoke about something that made her gesture animatedly with her free hand.

I sighed, setting aside the book I had not actually been reading. While I could not see settling as she did, perhaps Louisa had a point, after all. There was something to be said for a man who knew his own mind and was not afraid to show it. Though I would never admit it aloud, I envied her a little – not for Mr Hurst himself, heaven forbid, but for the simplicity of it all. No games, no sophisticated maneuvers, just honest affection offered and, eventually, accepted.

Their courtship proceeded with all the predictability of a well-rehearsed country dance. Mr Hurst called three times a week, brought flowers twice, and spoke

enthusiastically about his cook's legendary dishes at least twice per visit. Louisa listened, smiled, and gradually stopped looking to me for rescue when he launched into his favorite topics.

When he finally made his offer, it was again in the garden—direct and to the point, just like everything else about him.

“Well?” I demanded when Louisa emerged, her eyes bright.

“He says his cook makes the finest white soup in all of England,” she replied with a small laugh. “And... I believe I shall enjoy testing that claim for myself.”

I embraced her then. I was still certain she was a fool, and that I would fare far better, seeking a grand match when, to Louisa, contentment might be the greater prize. Not that I would ever lower my own standards, of course. But watching Louisa's quiet joy in the weeks that followed, I had to consider that there might be more than one path to happiness in the marriage state.

Though I maintained Mr Hurst might have made his offer without reference to the soup.

My ambitions had been entirely focused on Mr Darcy for the last three years. Since he befriended Charles, no other gentleman had been worthy of my interest. Prior to that, I had considered and attempted to attract a handful of gentlemen, but none had taken.

My contemplation was disturbed by the appearance of my brother, who brought with him the smell of horse. Charles burst into the breakfast room with his usual excessive energy, presenting himself with all the dignity of a gentleman who had been forcibly reacquainted with his horse's negative opinion of jumping hedges.

"Caroline!" he exclaimed cheerfully, "What a splendid morning! Though I dare say you have missed all the best of it. I passed Darcy on the road to Lambton, looking remarkably purposeful for so early an hour."

"Purposeful?" I enquired, affecting disinterest.

"Oh yes," Charles continued blithely, "and wearing his finest coat, which seems rather excessive for a simple morning ride. Though I suppose one never knows whom one might encounter in the neighbourhood."

I turned this intelligence over in my mind, noting with some disquiet that Lambton lay in precisely the direction where certain persons of our acquaintance were known to be staying. The chocolate, I decided, had become entirely unpalatable.

The following morning began with the sort of disturbance that sets one's nerves quite on edge. I had scarcely finished my toilette when Adèle appeared at my chamber door, practically trembling with suppressed intelligence.

"Mademoiselle," she whispered, glancing furtively down the corridor, "Ze most extraordinary zing 'as occurred. Monsieur Darcy 'as departed again, not one heure 'ence, taking only 'is valet and travelling case!"

I paused in the act of adjusting my morning attire. "Departed? He said nothing of this last evening!"

"Oui, Mademoiselle. 'E wished to leave for Londres most urgently, zey say. Faxon—zat is, Monsieur Darcy's man—was to order ze fastest 'orses from ze stable. And zere is more.. "

"Well? Out with it, girl! Do not keep me in suspense."

“A note arrived from ze inn at Lambton. Ze Gardiners send zeir deepest regrets, but zey cannot attend dinner tonight as planned. Zey ‘ave been called most urgently to Londres ”

This was beyond irregular. Mr Darcy had seemed rather preoccupied upon his return yesterday, though I had attributed it to the tedium of whatever business had called him to Lambton. But to depart again so soon, and with such haste...

“And their niece?” I enquired, striving for nonchalance. “I suppose Miss Eliza Bennet accompanies them?”

“Mais naturellement, Mademoiselle. Zey departed within ze heure of sending ze note, or so says ze messenger.”

I swept from my chambers with purposeful dignity, my mind already cataloguing these suspicious circumstances. First, Mr Darcy’s oddly abbreviated visit to Lambton, then his distracted manner at supper last evening, and now this precipitous departure—coinciding precisely with that of Miss Eliza and her relations? One could hardly ignore such a synchronous sequence of events.

I found Miss Darcy in the music room, bent over her pianoforte with unusual concentration. Too much concentration, one might say, for someone merely practicing scales.

“My dear Georgiana,” I called, sailing into the room. “I was most distressed to hear of your brother’s sudden departure, particularly when we only arrived a few days ago! I trust no ill news prompted such haste?”

Georgiana’s fingers stumbled over the notes. “Oh! Good morning, Miss Bingley. I... that is to say... my brother had urgent business in town.”

“Indeed? How vexing for him to be called away so unexpectedly, especially after such a brief stay in Pemberley. I noticed he seemed rather preoccupied at supper last evening.”

“Did he?” Her voice rose slightly. “I am sure I did not notice anything unusual.”

“And such a shame about the Gardiners being unable to join us for dinner,” I continued, watching her reflection in the pianoforte’s polished surface. “I had rather looked forward to hearing more about their travels through Derbyshire.”

Another stumble in the scales. “Yes, it is... unfortunate. Mrs Gardiner wrote that they had received news requiring their immediate return to London.”

How fascinating, I thought, that both parties should be called to London with such urgency, after your brother’s return from Lambton. Where, one assumes, he encountered them.

I spent the next hour making what I considered to be a most thorough investigation of the household, though to disappointingly little effect. The housekeeper was suddenly quite deaf to any indirect enquiries about Mr Darcy’s movements the previous day. The butler had developed an unprecedented passion for monosyllabic responses. Even Adèle’s usual network of intelligence seemed to have failed entirely.

“Louisa,” I declared, cornering my sister in the conservatory, “you cannot tell me you see nothing suspicious in this sudden exodus. Mr Darcy returns from Lambton in obvious distress, barely speaks at supper, and then flees to London at dawn?”

My sister continued arranging flowers with maddening serenity. “I am sure I do not know what you mean, Caroline. Mr Darcy is quite at liberty to attend to his business as he sees fit.”

“And I suppose you find nothing remarkable in Miss Eliza’s equally precipitous departure? When they were explicitly expected for dinner?”

“The Gardiners are tradespeople,” Louisa replied, snipping a stem with perhaps unnecessary vigour. “No doubt some matter of business required their attention.”

“Both parties departing for London within hours of each other, directly after Mr Darcy’s return from Lambton where, I might add, he likely encountered them? And you see no connection?”

“I see,” said Louisa, turning to face me at last, “that you are in danger of appearing rather more interested in Mr Darcy’s movements than is strictly proper.”

I drew myself up with injured dignity. “I merely express natural concern for our host’s well-being, particularly given his peculiar behaviour at supper last evening.”

“Then you may express it more quietly. Really, Caroline, you are becoming quite shrill.”

I was saved from having to respond to this slander by the arrival of Charles, who bounded into the conservatory with his usual excess of energy.

“There you are!” he exclaimed. “I have been searching for you in all directions. I find myself thinking—we really must remove to Scarborough directly. It would be most improper to impose upon Miss Darcy’s hospitality indefinitely while her brother is from home, what?”

“Scarborough?” I very nearly screeched, then collected myself. “My dear Charles, surely you cannot mean to abandon Miss Darcy in her hour of need?”

“Abandon? Good heavens, no! Quite the opposite. Girl ought to have some peace and

quiet, not have to worry about entertaining guests. Mrs Annesley agrees completely.”

“But surely—”

“Already sent word ahead to Aunt Matilda,” Charles continued cheerfully. “We shall leave first thing tomorrow.”

I looked to Louisa for support, but found her suddenly fascinated by a rather mediocre arrangement of some tedious form of flora.

“I suppose,” I said with all the grace I could muster, “if you think it best.”

That evening at dinner, I watched Miss Darcy pick at her food with an air of preoccupation that I found highly suggestive. Something was afoot—something significant enough to send Mr Darcy hastening to London at dawn, something connecting him to that pretentious country nobody, Miss Eliza Bennet.

And I, Caroline Bingley, was being hustled off to Scarborough like an inconvenient houseguest, denied even the satisfaction of discovering what might be afoot.

“More wine, Miss Bingley?” enquired Mr Hurst, who had apparently noticed nothing amiss about the entire day.

“No,” I replied shortly. “I thank you. I find I have quite lost my taste for it.”

For now, I added silently, watching Miss Darcy’s downcast expression. But I shall discover what has occurred, if I must interview every servant in London to do so.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

I stood at the window of my aunt's drawing room in Scarborough, watching raindrops trace dreary patterns down the glass. A gust of wind rattled the windowpane, carrying with it the briny scent of the sea mixed with coal smoke from the nearby chimneys. The weather matched my mood perfectly – dark and utterly miserable. I pressed my fingertips against the cold glass, feeling the subtle vibration of each raindrop's impact.

"My dear Caroline," came Aunt Margaret's shrill voice from behind me, accompanied by the rustle of silk skirts. "Do come away from that dreary window. Mrs Whipple has informed me that her nephew, Mr. Edmund Brown, is to visit next week. A most eligible young man, I assure you – two thousand a year at least!"

I caught my own grimacing reflection in the window. "How fascinating," I murmured, not bothering to turn around.

"Really, child," my aunt continued, settling herself into her preferred chair with a creak of whalebone stays, "you might show a little more enthusiasm. These three weeks you have been with us, and I have yet to see you display proper interest in any of the gentlemen I have mentioned. Why, yesterday at tea, Mrs. Pembroke was telling me—"

"That her second cousin's wife's brother is seeking a wife?" I interrupted, my voice sharp as a pin. "Or perhaps it was her third cousin's husband's nephew?" I finally turned from the window, fixing my aunt with what I hoped was a withering stare. "I confess, after three weeks of such riveting discourse, the relationships have begun to blur together."

"Well!" Aunt Margaret's face flushed an unbecoming shade of purple. "I never! Such ingratitude, when we have only your best interests at heart. Why, if you had shown half this much spirit at Pemberley—"

At the mention of Pemberley, I felt my fingers curl against my skirts. The endless parade of local gossip and matrimonial schemes I had endured these past weeks only served to remind me of what I had left behind – the elegant halls of Pemberley, where I had spent innumerable hours attempting to catch Mr Darcy's eye. I now sorely regretted my many speeches to Aunt Margaret about my anticipated betrothal to Mr Darcy. Despite my every carefully calculated gesture, my most accomplished piano performances, and my subtle compliments about his magnificent library, he had remained frustratingly indifferent to my charms. And now he had departed suddenly for London – on the very same day as Miss Elizabeth Bennet, of all people. The coincidence gnawed at my thoughts, refusing to let me rest.

The very thought made my spirits chafe. That a gentleman of Mr. Darcy's consequence should be so bewitched by a young woman who seemed to pride herself on flouting every convention of polite society! It was an affront to the natural order of things. I lifted my chin, watching my reflection grow prouder in the rain-dappled window. I, at least, knew my true worth. If Mr. Darcy chose to blind himself to it, then perhaps he was not quite the prize I had imagined him to be.

Yet even as the thought formed, I felt its hollowness.

"I believe I shall take some air in the garden," I announced, though the rain still drummed steadily against the windows.

"In this weather? You will catch your death! Besides, Miss Hartley is expected for tea, and she particularly wished to tell you about her brother-in-law's—"

"I fear I shall have to disappoint Miss Hartley," I said, already striding toward the

door. "I find myself suddenly afflicted with a megrim."

My aunt's indignant spluttering followed me into the hallway, where I nearly collided with a maid carrying fresh linens. The girl cried out and pressed herself against the wall, eyes downcast, as I swept past. I had endured quite enough of Scarborough and its inhabitants, regardless of their income or connections. It was time take direction of my own affairs.

My thoughts kept returning to the abrupt way Mr. Darcy had departed for London. The morning post had brought something worse than any news - no news at all. My careful inquiries to my London acquaintances had yielded nothing but polite deflections. Even my own brother Charles, usually so forthcoming, had written only the briefest note: "All is well, dear sister. Remain in Scarborough as planned."

As if I were some child to be managed! I paced the length of the gallery, my skirts rustling against the carpet. Through the interior window, I caught sight of my aunt in the foyer below, deep in conversation with that insufferable Mrs Pembroke. No doubt plotting yet another introduction to yet another dull country squire.

"I am Caroline Bingley," I whispered to myself, coming to an abrupt halt. "I do not wait to be told what is happening in my own circle, or to be given permission to depart this tedious situation."

"Adèle!" I called sharply to my lady's maid. "Pack our things. We are leaving."

Adèle appeared in the doorway, her expression cautious. "But Mademoiselle, your brother expects you to remain 'ere until—"

"My brother," I said with newfound resolution, "has forgotten that I am quite capable of managing my own affairs. I refuse to spend another moment listening to Aunt Margaret's endless simpers about the local squire's son. We leave within the hour."

Within two hours, I had arranged for a hired carriage and driver, leaving behind a tersely worded note for my relations. The vehicle itself was a shock to my sensibilities - a shabby conveyance that bore little resemblance to my brother's well-sprung carriages. The leather seats were cracked, releasing a stale, musty air whenever I shifted my weight, and the windows rattled alarmingly with every bump in the road.

"Mademoiselle," Adèle ventured, her French accent more pronounced in her anxiety after a particularly violent jolt had sent my reticule tumbling to the floor, "Per'aps we should 'ave waited for ze bettair weathair?" She gestured to the ceiling, where an ominous drip had begun to form.

"Nonsense," I snapped, though I drew my feet away from the growing puddle beneath the window. "A little rain never hurt anyone." Even as I spoke, a spray of muddy water splashed through the ill-fitted window frame, speckling my yellow silk traveling dress with some revolting substance.

The driver seemed determined to hit every rut in the road. Each impact sent shudders through the carriage's ancient frame, and my stomach lurched in most unladylike ways. The familiar comfort of my morning chocolate, hastily consumed before departure, now seemed a grievous error.

"I do not suppose," I said through clenched teeth, "that you have any of those peppermint lozenges?"

"Non, Mademoiselle. You did not allow zhe time to pack such zings."

I pressed my lips together, fighting both nausea and the urge to snap at my maid. The countryside rolled by indistinctly through the grey morning, punctuated by the rhythmic squeak of poorly-oiled springs. A distinctive farmyard smell wafted through the carriage, making my stomach roil afresh.

"What is that appalling odour?"

"We are passing zhe dairy farm, Mademoiselle."

"A dairy farm," I repeated faintly. I had always rather enjoyed cream in my tea, but had never considered its origins quite so... viscerally.

The carriage struck another bone-rattling bump, and my carefully arranged coiffure began to collapse, sending hairpins descending down my neck. Outside, the driver shouted something incomprehensible at his horses, accompanied by a crack of the whip that made me start.

"Adèle," I said, trying to maintain my dignity as my hair continued its rebellion, "Did you think to bring any—"

"Extra pins, Mademoiselle? Non. Nor spare 'andkerchiefs, nor your evening tonique, nor—"

"Yes, thank you, Adèle, I take your point." I closed my eyes, willing my stomach to settle. When I opened them again, I found myself staring at a suspicious stain on the ceiling that I could have sworn was spreading. At this rate, I would arrive in London looking quite unrecognizable as a lady of quality—if we managed to arrive at all.

This, I reflected as another jolt sent my hat askew, was not quite the dramatic departure I had envisioned.

The first inn we approached - The King's Arms - had such a respectable facade that I felt my spirits lift. Surely here we would find suitable accommodation. I swept through the door with my usual authority, Adèle trailing behind.

"We require your finest room," I announced to the proprietor, a portly man whose

smile faltered as he looked past me to the doorway.

"We, madam?"

"Indeed. Myself and my lady's maid."

He peered around me again. "No... gentleman in your party?"

"I am Miss Caroline Bingley of—"

"Begging your pardon, miss, but we can not accommodate unaccompanied ladies. We have a reputation to uphold, you understand."

"I beg your pardon?" I drew myself up to my full height. "Do you have any idea who my brother is? Who my connections are?"

"Very sorry, miss. Perhaps try The Crown in Millbury? They might be more... accommodating."

The Crown in Millbury was not, in fact, more accommodating. The proprietress there, a thin woman with suspicious eyes, did not even let me finish my introduction.

"No gentleman? Then no rooms. We run a respectable establishment."

By the third inn - The Rose & Crown - the sun was sinking and a chill wind had picked up. My hair, already loosened by the carriage ride, had begun to escape its pins entirely. My yellow dress bore suspicious spots from the leaking carriage, and my kid leather slippers were splashed with mud.

"Please," I said, hating the note of desperation that had crept into my voice. "We have traveled all day. I can pay handsomely—"

"No doubt you can, miss," the innkeeper said, not unkindly. "But rules are rules. Would not be proper, would it?"

"Mademoiselle," Adèle murmured as we made our weary way back to the carriage, "per'aps we should return to—"

"We most certainly shall not!" But I heard the lack of conviction in my own voice.

The shadows lengthened. We passed two more inns without stopping - one looked so common that I could not even bring myself to inquire, and the other had such a boisterous common room visible through the windows that even Adèle shuddered.

It was nearly dark when we finally found The White Horse Inn. The whitewash was grey with age, the horse on the sign so faded it might have been any sort of beast. A tabby cat watched us disdainfully from a windowsill, and the smell of boiled cabbage wafted from somewhere within.

I stood in the rutted courtyard, feeling my shoulders fall. "Surely not here," I whispered.

"Zhe choice, Mademoiselle," Adèle said with uncharacteristic firmness, "is zis or zhe carriage."

The innkeeper's wife was a broad-faced woman whose apron had seen better days. She looked me up and down with shrewd eyes.

"Unchaperoned, are you? Well, would not be my first choice to put you up, but night is falling and there is talk of footpads on the road." She named a price that made me wince and consider whether footpads would be more economical. "Take it or leave it, miss. And payment in advance."

The room, when we reached it, was small enough that I could touch both walls with my arms outstretched. The furnishings were worn, the draft whistled through ill-fitting windows, and something that might have been a mouse scurried into a corner. But it had a copper bath, which the innkeeper's wife promised would be filled with hot water.

"Not what you are used to, I would warrant," the woman said, noting my expression. "But it is clean enough, and the locks are good." She paused. "You will be wanting to use those locks, miss. Not everyone here is as particular about reputation as those other inns."

I felt the blood drain from my face. Into what circumstance had I placed myself?

"At least I may refresh myself," I said to Adèle, trying to maintain my dignity as I slipped into the steaming bath behind the dressing screen. I sent Adèle to fetch more towels, and for a few moments, I allowed myself to relax in the warm water, eyes closed.

The sounds from the outer room barely registered at first – just the quiet creaking of floorboards. But then came the distinct sound of a door closing. I sat up, water sloshing around me.

"Adèle?"

No response.

"Adèle! Come at once!"

When my maid finally emerged from behind the screen, she wrapped me in a borrowed robe. The scene before us made my blood run cold. Every piece of clothing I owned – my traveling dress, my spare gowns, my pelisse, everything – had

vanished. But worst of all, my reticule containing all my coin was gone.

The innkeeper was unsympathetic to my plight. "Begging your pardon, miss, but if you cannot pay, you will be leaving come morning."

"Zhe gown is perhaps a little short, Mademoiselle," Adèle observed as I tugged at the worn muslin hem that exposed my ankles. Her spare black work dress hung awkwardly on my taller frame, the bodice uncomfortably loose.

"It will have to do," I said through clenched teeth.

A burst of laughter from below gave me a start. Through the floorboards wafted the aroma of mutton stew - the sort of common fare I would have dismissed the cook for presenting at my own dinner table. Yet now the rich smell of meat and vegetables, however coarsely prepared, caused my stomach to growl with mortifying insistence. I found myself imagining the taste of the gravy soaked into a crust of bread, an image that would have revolted me mere days ago.

"You there, girl!" A sharp voice made me turn automatically. A woman in a modish but well-worn pelisse stood in the hallway, gesturing imperiously. From her dress and manner, she might have been a merchant's wife, or perhaps a moderately successful farmer's daughter. "We need more coal in the private parlor."

"I am not—" I began, drawing myself up with what remained of my dignity.

"Oh, I see. One of those, are you? Too fine to fetch coal, I suppose." The woman's eyes narrowed as she took in my ill-fitting dress. "These new girls, putting on such airs. Mrs. Barnes!" She raised her voice. "Your new maid needs instruction in her duties. Standing about idle when there is work to be done!"

From below stairs came the innkeeper's harried voice: "Girl! Get down here and help

with the washing up!"

I fled back up the stairs, my face burning. To be dismissed not as an impoverished gentlewoman, but as an incompetent servant by a woman I would once have considered beneath my notice - there was a particular sting in that.

As evening fell, the smells from below grew more tantalizing. I crept down the back stairs, intending to inquire about dinner, only to find myself pressed against the wall as serving maids hurried past with platters of modest fare. Through the half-open parlor door, I glimpsed traveling salesmen and local farmers' families dining at rough wooden tables, their pewter tankards catching the dim candlelight, their voices growing louder with each round of ale.

My own stomach twisted. The innkeeper's wife had made it clear - no payment, no food. The last of our money had gone to the room.

"Here." A girl with red, chapped hands appeared beside me, making me jump. "Cook says you are to have these." She thrust forward a plate bearing bread and cheese.

"I... thank you, but I cannot pay—"

"Never mind about payment. I am Sally from the scullery." She nodded at my borrowed dress. "Seen plenty like you before. Fine ladies in reduced circumstances. Though usually they have more sense than to travel alone."

I opened my mouth to deliver a stinging retort about impertinent servants, but my stomach growled again. The bread, though coarse, was fresh.

"Thank you," I managed instead.

That night, lying on the uneven pallet with Adèle's spare shawl pulled tight around

my shoulders, I listened to the sounds of revelry below. The fire had long since died, and drafts whistled through the window frame. Something skittered in the corner - I told myself it was just the old boards settling.

A particularly loud burst of laughter floated up, followed by the clink of glasses. Were they drinking negus now? Or perhaps port? I had always loved the way port was served in crystal decanters at Pemberley, the way the firelight caught the rich red liquid...

My teeth chattered. In the other bed, Adèle snored softly. She seemed remarkably untroubled by our circumstances, as though sleeping in a freezing room with mice was a perfectly ordinary occurrence.

Another scrabbling sound. I pulled the thin blanket over my head, no longer caring about the state of my hair. What did it matter? My borrowed garments proclaimed my circumstances as clearly as any herald - I was no longer Miss Caroline Bingley of anywhere at all.

In the grey hours of morning, Sally was already at her tasks. Her arms plunged again and again into murky water, scrubbing at stubborn stains. She hauled buckets up creaking stairs without pause, and seemed to appear in three places at once - stoking dying fires, sweeping dirt into corners, emptying chamber pots.

"Is it not excessively fatiguing?" I found myself asking, watching her attack a particularly resistant mark upon the floor.

"No more than usual, miss." She shifted her weight to better apply the brush, without looking up.

I tried to smooth the borrowed gown at my waist, conscious of its patched weave against my fingers.

The church bells struck eight, each toll seeming to echo my predicament. In an hour, perhaps less, we would be turned out. The driver had made it quite clear the previous evening - no payment, no journey. Where might a lady walk alone? I had never troubled myself to learn distances between towns, having always traveled in well-sprung carriages with fresh horses at every stop. Now such knowledge seemed rather crucial.

My contemplation of these unhappy circumstances was interrupted by heavy footsteps in the corridor. The innkeeper appeared in the doorway, but she was not alone. Behind him stood my brother Charles, his usually cheerful face creased with worry.

"Caroline! What were you thinking, running off alone? I have been searching everywhere!"

I stood there in Adèle's ill-fitting dress, my hair uncombed, my feet cold in borrowed stockings, and for once in my life, I found myself entirely without words. How could I explain to my perpetually good-natured brother that I had fled Scarborough in a fit of wounded pride, only to find myself reduced to accepting kindness from a scullery maid?

The smells of breakfast wafted up from below – eggs and bacon and fresh bread that I would not taste. I observed my reflection in the spotted looking glass: a young lady in a borrowed maid's dress, her hair quite undone, who bore little resemblance to the Miss Bingley of Grosvenor Street. The neat ordering of my former life – the carriages always ready at precisely the right moment, the fires lit before dawn, the dinner appearing as if by magic – seemed now like a dream from which I had been rather rudely awakened.

"Charles," I began, but the words I had rehearsed through the long night - explanations, justifications, grievances - seemed to have fled along with my dignity.

My brother stood before me in his immaculate coat and gleaming Hessians, every inch the gentleman, while I... well. The contrast between us had never been quite so marked. How peculiar that the world should continue in its ordinary way - fires being lit, tea trays arranged, boots polished - while I stood thus transformed.

When had I last thanked a servant? When had I last noticed their existence at all?

These thoughts, so foreign to my nature, quite undid me. Tears filled my eyes. I dropped my gaze to my borrowed shoes, unable to meet my brother's concerned eye.

But Charles, dear Charles, simply wrapped his coat around my shoulders. "Come, sister. I will take you home."

As we descended the stairs, I paused by the scullery. Sally looked up from her work, her hands red from the washing.

"I shall not forget your kindness," I said softly.

She just nodded, already turning back to her tasks. She had no time for prolonged farewells – there was work to be done, as there always had been, as there always would be. And for the first time in my life, I truly saw it.

But it was Charles who reached for his purse and drew out a guinea, pressing it into Sally's hand with his characteristic generosity. For once, I did not think him excessive in his liberality.

"Thank you, Charles," I said softly - words I had perhaps not spoken since childhood.

He glanced at me curiously but said nothing as he handed me into the carriage.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

At last, I thought, settling into the morning room of our London residence, one might breathe properly again. The air in Scarborough had been altogether too healthful for my constitution—to say nothing of the mortifying ordeal at that wretched excuse for an inn. Even now, I cannot bear to think of those endless hours confined to a chamber scarcely fit for servants, bereft of both funds and suitable attire after some light-fingered thief made off with my belongings. That a scullery maid—a scullery maid!—should have been my sole source of sustenance until Charles's arrival... Well. The entire adventure had utterly unsettled my nerves. I found myself jumping at the slightest sound, and my appreciation for cook's efforts had increased dramatically, having learned through bitter experience what passes for cuisine in provincial establishments—if you have the coin to pay for it.

“The morning papers, Miss,” murmured Phillips, presenting them with an elegant flourish that nearly—but not quite—made up for his otherwise pedestrian manner.

I accepted them with a languid gesture, preparing myself for the usual tedium of society announcements. The Season had not yet begun in earnest, though one had hopes that—

My fingers arrested their movement across the page.

“Good heavens,” I breathed, sitting forward with rather more animation than I generally permitted myself to display.

There, tucked between an announcement of Lady Metcalfe's musical evening and a tediously lengthy account of sheep prices, sat the most extraordinary intelligence:

MARRIAGE. At the parish church of St Clement's, London, Mr George Wickham, formerly of His Majesty's —th Regiment of Foot, to Miss Lydia Bennet, youngest daughter of Mr Thomas Bennet of Longbourn, Hertfordshire.

"Louisa!" I called out, barely restraining myself from the vulgarity of shouting. "Louisa, you simply must attend me at once!"

My sister appeared in the doorway, looking mildly alarmed. "Really, Caroline, what has occurred? You sound quite overcome."

"Do read this," I commanded, thrusting the paper toward her. "And pray tell me I am not misconstruing matters."

Louisa adjusted her spectacles—which she persisted in calling her "reading glasses" as though that somehow rendered them more elegant—and peered at the indicated passage.

"Well!" she exclaimed after a moment. "That is... rather sudden, is it not?"

"Sudden?" I very nearly laughed. "My dear sister, it is beyond sudden. It is positively precipitous. And if you recall what Mr Darcy related about that gentleman's... proclivities..."

"Caroline," Louisa warned, glancing meaningfully at Phillips, who was taking an inordinate amount of time arranging the tea things.

"Oh, very well. Phillips, you may leave us. And do inform Mrs Morton that I shall take my chocolate in here this morning."

No sooner had the door closed behind him than I turned to Louisa with barely contained glee. "Now, you cannot tell me this marriage has not been hastily arranged

to prevent some scandal. The youngest Miss Bennet cannot be above sixteen years old, and Mr Wickham's reputation..."

"It does seem rather... irregular," Louisa admitted, sinking into the chair opposite mine.

"Irregular?" I savoured the word as though it were the finest chocolate. "My dear sister, this has all the hallmarks of what one might delicately term a 'marriage under necessity.' Though given Mr Wickham's history of accumulating debts, perhaps 'creditor's noose' would be more apt."

"Caroline!"

"Oh, come now, Louisa. You cannot have forgotten the tales we heard of his behaviour in Meryton. And now to marry the youngest Bennet girl, barely out, with no fortune to speak of? There must be some compelling reason for such a match."

"It is not our place to speculate," Louisa murmured, though I noticed she made no move to leave the room.

"And what of Mr Darcy?" I mused, tapping the newspaper thoughtfully. "How mortifying this must be for him, after his marked attention to Miss Eliza. To have his former steward's son marry into that family under such circumstances... Why, he shall hardly be able to acknowledge the connection now."

"You seem rather pleased at the prospect."

"I am merely concerned for our dear friend's reputation," I replied virtuously. "One cannot be too careful about one's connections in society. And really, to have one's sister married to such a man, and in such circumstances... Well, I dare say even Miss Eliza's fine eyes shall lose some of their lustre in his estimation now. Not to mention

the risk to our reputations should Charles continue his interest in Miss Jane Bennet.”

“You show a disturbing facility for intrigue, Caroline.” She did, I noted, furrow her brow most unattractively.

“I am being quite realistic, dear sister. Mark my words, we shall hear no more of Mr Darcy’s fascinating attraction to country misses with poor connections. Indeed, I should not be surprised if he removes himself from that entire circle of acquaintance. As we ought as well.”

The door opened to admit Charles, who appeared excessively cheerful for so early an hour.

“I say,” he announced, helping himself to a piece of toast from my perfectly arranged breakfast tray, “have you heard the news? Wickham has married one of the Bennet girls!”

“We are aware,” I replied dryly. “Though I confess myself surprised that you concern yourself with such matters.”

“Well, naturally I take an interest! I mean to call on Darcy directly and offer my congratulations on the happy event.”

I nearly dropped my chocolate. “You cannot be serious.”

“Whyever not? I mean, given his involvement in arranging the whole thing—”

“What?”

Charles blinked at me owlishly. “Oh! Perhaps I ought not to have... that is to say... I believe I hear my horse being brought round. Must dash!”

“Charles Bingley, you shall not leave this room until you have explained yourself thoroughly!”

But my brother, displaying heretofore-unknown talents for swift movement, had already vanished.

I turned to Louisa, who was suddenly very interested in adjusting her spectacles. “Did you hear that? Mr Darcy arranged the marriage? But why would he... unless...”

A horrible suspicion began to dawn.

“Oh, good heavens,” I breathed. “He is still in love with her.”

“With whom?” Louisa enquired innocently.

“Do not play the simpleton, Louisa. It does not become you. This can mean only one thing: Mr Darcy has involved himself in the Bennet family’s affairs for the sake of Miss Eliza. He has rescued her sister from scandal, thereby placing Miss Eliza under an obligation to him. How... how chivalrous of him.”

I slumped back in my chair, all pleasure in the morning’s intelligence quite dissipated.

“More chocolate?” Louisa offered, with what I considered to be wholly inappropriate amusement.

“No,” I replied shortly. “I find myself quite without an appetite.”

“Adèle,” I called, pausing before my mirror, “do come and attend to my hair. I find I am quite unable to think properly with these curls arranged so... provincially.”

My maid appeared with gratifying promptitude, her clever fingers already reaching for the tortoiseshell combs. “Mademoiselle appears troubled zis morning.”

“Troubled? Nonsense. I am merely contemplating a rather interesting piece of intelligence.” I adjusted my shawl with perfect nonchalance. “It appears Miss Lydia Bennet has married Mr Wickham. Rather hastily, one might say.”

Adèle’s hands paused briefly in their work. “Ah. And zis deesturbs Mademoiselle because...?”

“I am not disturbed! I am merely... puzzled. You see, my brother let slip that Mr Darcy had some hand in arranging the match. Now, why should a gentleman of Mr Darcy’s consequence involve himself in such a vulgar affair?”

“Per’aps,” Adèle suggested, deftly rearranging an errant curl, “Monsieur Darcy ‘as ‘is reasons.”

“Oh, I am quite certain he does. And I suspect those reasons have rather fine eyes and an impertinent manner.”

“Ma’mselle refers to Mees Elizabeth Bennet?” Adèle’s tone was entirely too knowing for a lady’s maid.

“Who else? Though what he sees in her, I cannot fathom. A gentleman of his refinement, his intelligence, his breeding—to be captivated by a country miss who tramples through muddy fields and laughs without restraint!”

“Ah, but Mademoiselle,” Adèle murmured, securing another curl, “is it not precisely such qualities zat might appeal to a man of substance? Ze ability to zink deeply, to laugh freely, to value what is genuine over what is merely fashionable...”

I turned sharply, causing her to drop a hairpin. “Really, Adèle! You sound as though you approve.”

“I speak only what I see, Mademoiselle. And what I ‘ave seen in Mees Elizabeth is a young lady of quick intelligence and sincere feeling. Such qualities are rare in any société.”

“Sincere feeling! Is that what one calls it when a young lady argues with every opinion a gentleman expresses?”

“Better, per'aps, zan agreeing with opinions one does not share?” The words were spoken so softly I might almost have imagined them.

“I believe you are becoming impertinent, Adèle.”

“A zousand pardons, Mademoiselle. Shall I arrange zese curls in ze Greek style you admired in La Belle Assemblée ?”

I waved her away. “No, no. I find I am suffering from a headache. You may leave me.”

Alone in my chamber, I found my thoughts turning traitorously to certain observations I had rather wished to ignore. The way Mr Darcy’s expression had softened when Miss Elizabeth spoke, even in disagreement. How his usual reserve had melted when she had teased him about his letter-writing. The manner in which he had attended to her every word during their discussions of books and music, while my own carefully prepared observations about the superiority of town life had fallen quite flat.

I rose and paced to the window, watching a pair of fashionable ladies carefully picking their way across the street, their delicate shoes unsullied by the slightest

speck of dirt.

When, I wondered, had I last walked anywhere with such careless joy as Miss Elizabeth displayed?

The thought was immediately banished as unworthy. And yet...

I recalled a conversation overheard at Pemberley, Miss Elizabeth explaining to Miss Darcy about her rambles through the woods near Longbourn. “There is such pleasure in watching the seasons change,” she had said, her eyes alight with genuine enthusiasm. “Each day brings some new discovery—a nest of eggs, a late-blooming flower, a particularly fine view one had never noticed before.”

I had dismissed such raptures as affected rusticity. But Mr Darcy’s face as he listened—that had been genuine appreciation, had it not? Not for the subject matter itself, perhaps, but for the authentic delight with which it was expressed.

“Lord preserve me,” I murmured, sinking into my chair. “I believe I am beginning to understand.”

What man of sense would not prefer honest excitement over practised elegance? Natural wit over carefully rehearsed observations? Real feeling over perfect manners?

And there lies the heart of it, does it not? While I had spent years perfecting the precise angle of my head when listening to music, Elizabeth Bennet actually listened. While I had memorized clever observations about popular novels, she had formed her own opinions and defended them with spirit. While I had learned to move through a room with calculated grace, she moved with the natural animation of someone who actually had somewhere to go.

I thought of my own carefully crafted compliments about Pemberley’s grounds,

delivered with perfect posture from the safety of the terrace. Then I recalled Miss Elizabeth, her cheeks flushed from walking, speaking with genuine passion about a particular vista she had discovered. No wonder he looked at her that way. She showed him the familiar through new eyes, while I merely showed him his own reflection.

The truth of it stung: Mr Darcy had enough wealth and consequence to fill a dozen drawing rooms. What he lacked—what Elizabeth Bennet offered in such abundance—was someone who cared nothing for his position and everything for his character, his inner self. Someone whose opinions were her own, whose laughter was genuine, whose very imperfections spoke to an authenticity I had long since polished away from myself.

How exhausting it must be, I realized with growing dismay, for Mr Darcy to constantly guard against fortune hunters and flatterers. To wonder if every smile, every compliment, every carefully staged moment of appreciation is genuine or merely another attempt to secure his favor. No wonder he looked at Elizabeth as though she were a rain shower in a drought—she offered him the one thing his wealth and position made nearly impossible to find: simple, sincere, honesty.

I glanced at my reflection in the looking glass. . The India muslin of my gown rustled softly as I leaned closer, seeing for the first time how very... practised I appeared. Every gesture calculated, every expression schooled - even the fashionable arch of my brow seemed artificial now. Perhaps it is time to remember who Caroline Bingley was before she learned to navigate the ton, before she spent hours practicing the perfect subtle incline of the head before this very mirror. If such a person still exists beneath all these layers of decorum and French cologne. I hardly recognised the uncertain expression I saw there, so at odds with my precisely painted lips and elaborately dressed hair. Was it possible that all my careful study of proper behaviour, all my diligent attention to the forms of elegant society - the perfectly modulated laugh, the exact degree of curtsy appropriate to each rank - had somehow failed utterly in its purpose?

“Non,” Adèle’s voice drifted through the door as she spoke to another servant. “Mademoiselle ‘as a ‘eadache. She is not to be disturbed.”

I almost laughed. A headache indeed—such as one gets from having one’s entire worldview shifted ever so slightly from its proper alignment.

Perhaps, a treacherous voice in my mind whispered, one might profit from a turn in the garden. Without regard for one’s shoes.

“Absolutely not,” I said aloud, straightening my spine. “I am Caroline Bingley, and I do not traipse about risking mud for anyone’s good opinion.”

But even as I spoke, I found myself wondering whether there might not be some middle ground between affecting raptures over every daisy and maintaining an unceasing pursuit of perfection of manner. Whether, perhaps, I had been on an entirely mistaken course all along.

“Adèle!” I called out suddenly.

She appeared at once. “Oui, Mademoiselle?”

“I believe I shall take a turn in the garden after all. And you need not trouble yourself about protecting my hem from the dew.”

Adèle’s expression remained entirely proper, but I rather fancied I saw a glimmer of approval in her eyes.

“Très bien, Mademoiselle. Shall I fetch your sturdy ‘alf-boots?”

“Good heavens, no. Let us not descend into complete savagery at once. My normal shoes shall do perfectly well.” I paused at the door. “Though perhaps... perhaps

tomorrow we might see about the boots.”

There is, perhaps, a greater elegance in nature than in art—one which all my practised refinement has quite overlooked. What begins in artifice may end in authenticity.

Monday, the Seventh of September, 1812

I must write this down, though it pains me to acknowledge it even in private. I find I can no longer ignore the evidence. I have been reconsidering my approach but have not yet been fully convinced that change was needed. Tonight was mortifying enough to force me to face the fact that my methods do not work

There I stood, in my coral gown ordered specifically to complement the blue drawing-room at Lady Portsmouth's, positioned precisely where the chandelier would catch the gold thread in the embroidery. My hair was dressed to perfection, despite nearly scorching my neck when I insisted Adèle attempt to create a loose curl to hang down my back. The ostrich feathers, which stood half a yard above my head were the exact shade of my gown. Everything was calculated to perfection, as always. And yet—

Mr Brown walked straight past me to join that hoydenish Miss Maxter, who was practically bouncing in her seat whilst telling some nonsensical story about a pig in a parlour. A pig! In mixed company! And instead of the social censure such behaviour deserved, she received genuine laughter—even from Mr Brown himself.

I could almost hear Elizabeth Bennet's voice in my head: "Perhaps, Miss Bingley, they laugh because they are genuinely amused rather than socially obligated."

I recalled every excruciating occasion when I agreed with Mr Darcy's literary opinions. How many times did I abandon my own thoughts before they were even

fully formed? "Oh yes, Mr Darcy, Byron's latest work is quite shocking." "Indeed, Mr Darcy, I find Cowper's pastoral scenes so... uplifting." Always watching his face, modulating my response to match his expression.

Whilst Elizabeth Bennet simply spoke her mind and won his approval.

I am not a fool. I have succeeded in many ways - my manners are impeccable, my fingers moving with practiced grace over the pianoforte's ivory keys, my watercolors displaying all the delicate skill that twelve years of instruction could impart. My accomplishments numerous, my attire always exactly right, from the precise arrangement of my Kashmir shawl to the latest Parisian trim on my evening gowns. But I am still unmarried, still watching others succeed where I have failed. And tonight, watching Miss Maxter's natural animation draw everyone to her like moths to a flame - her unschooled laugh ringing through the assembly rooms, her cheeks flushed with genuine pleasure rather than carefully applied carmine, her every movement spontaneous rather than studied - I was forced to consider a horrifying thought: all my careful cultivation of the perfect manner, every hour spent practicing the elegant arch of my wrist as I take tea, every carefully memorized bon mot, has been worse than useless.

So, I did it. I actually disagreed with someone - with Mr Radford, no less. My hands are still shaking as I write this.

He was praising that dreadful new production of 'Twelfth Night,' and instead of nodding and simulating perfect agreement as I have trained myself to do, I said: "Actually, I found it rather heavy-handed."

The words felt foreign on my tongue. I nearly swallowed them back, nearly laughed and pretended it was a joke. But then the strangest thing happened - he asked my opinion. He wanted to know more.

And somehow, I found I had more to say. Real thoughts, not merely carefully curated responses. I heard myself critiquing the actor playing Malvolio, explaining how his broad comedy undermined the poignancy of the character's humiliation. Where did those thoughts come from? Have they always been there, hidden beneath layers of calculation?

Even stranger - when Miss Maxter joined our discussion, I forgot to be jealous. I actually wanted to hear her perspective on the play. Is this what it feels like to have a genuine conversation? To actually care about the answers when one asks questions?

I find myself thinking of Elizabeth Bennet again, but differently now. Not with resentment, but with curiosity. How does she do it? How does one learn to be genuine?

Perhaps... perhaps one practises, as one practises the pianoforte or French. I've spent years practising artifice - surely sincerity can be learned just as carefully?

A plan is forming in my mind. I shall approach this methodically:

- i. Observe those who succeed at being "natural" - not to copy them exactly, but to understand their methods
- ii. Practise voicing real opinions in safe situations first
- iii. Study subjects that actually interest me, not only those that make for acceptable conversation
- iv. Allow myself to react genuinely to things, in small ways at first
- v. Keep a journal of what works and what does not

It feels strange to be studying how to be natural and unstudied. But one must start somewhere, must one not? And if I have learned anything from watching Elizabeth Bennet's success, it is that I must have been pursuing the wrong course. Her success and my, I must admit, utter failure, proves it.

Tomorrow I shall visit Hatchard's. Not for the latest fashionable novel everyone is discussing, but for something I actually wish to read.

—?—

Tuesday, the Eighth of September, 1812

At the card-party at Mrs Powers's home this evening, Mr Radford sought me out at supper specifically to discuss the theatre further. He maneuvered quite deliberately past Mrs Ashton's peacock feather fan and Mrs. Harding's elaborate turban to reach my corner by the gilt-edged mirror. He said he looks forward to hearing my thoughts on the new comedy next week.

The strange warmth in my breast—I believe it might be genuine pleasure. How singular.

I wonder what else I might discover about myself, if I dare to look?

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

The autumn air in Lady Milton's conservatory had become stifling, though perhaps it was merely my own discomfort at being surrounded by endless prattle about Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I had placed myself behind a particularly robust fern, ostensibly to admire its fronds, but truly to avoid yet another conversation about her alleged charms. As if I needed to hear more about her particular brand of...vivacity.

"...and when poor Mrs Langford's daughter took ill, you would hardly credit it," Lady Milton's voice drifted over the greenery, "but Miss Elizabeth herself called upon them. In those awful rooms above the milliner's shop, no less!"

"How very like my niece's friend," came the Countess of Matlock's measured response. "Though I confess, I am not surprised. She has always been remarkably gracious to those in reduced circumstances. It is precisely why I have mentioned her favourably to my nephew, despite certain—objections."

I nearly laughed aloud. Gracious? Elizabeth Bennet? A country miss who traipses through muddy fields? I had personally witnessed her nearly trip over her own feet at the Meryton assembly, and her dancing, while energetic, hardly qualified as—

But something in the Countess's tone gave me pause. She had not emphasised the word as one might when discussing deportment or physical grace. And Lady Matlock's opinion carries considerably more weight than... well, than mine, if I must be honest with myself.

I drifted closer, the fern's leaves providing sufficient concealment for my eavesdropping.

“Indeed,” Lady Milton continued, “I found her quite different to what certain people had led me to expect. Such genuine warmth in her manner, and so very attentive in her treatment of my rather diffident niece. The girl has not stopped talking about Miss Elizabeth’s kindness in engaging her in conversation about poetry, of all things!” And was that barb aimed in my direction? Surely not - she cannot know I am here.

“Miss Elizabeth has a particular talent for making the neglected feel valued,” the Countess replied. “A quality I find far more meaningful than the mere superficial accomplishments of ...certain people.” Oh! Oh dear.

I felt my cheeks grow warm, knowing full well I was among those “certain people” who had painted a rather different picture of Elizabeth Bennet. Though in my defence, I had been chiefly concerned with her abysmal curtsy. Which now seems... rather beside the point.

Excusing myself shortly after, I retreated to my chambers, my thoughts in an uncomfortable tangle. I retrieved Johnson’s Dictionary, though I knew perfectly well what I would find:

GRACIOUS, adj. [gracieux, French]

1. Merciful; benevolent.
2. Favourable; kind.
3. Acceptable; favoured.
4. Virtuous; good.
5. Excellent. Obsolete.

How telling that I immediately assumed a judgement of her physical deportment, when they spoke of her character. The words seemed to mock me from the page. Benevolent. Kind. Virtuous. Everything I had dismissed as beneath my notice, yet here was Elizabeth Bennet, without title or fortune, exemplifying qualities I had never bothered to cultivate.

I closed the dictionary with trembling fingers. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that my own definition of superiority requires...revision. Before it costs me more than dignity alone.

—

Thursday, the Tenth of September, 1812

Disaster. Utter disaster. I attempted to join a discussion about Shakespeare's sonnets at Lady Melbourne's, thinking myself well-prepared after my recent reading. But the moment Mr Wilcox turned his attention to me, I found myself falling back into old habits—that awful simper, that practised head tilt. Worse, I could hear myself trying to imitate Elizabeth Bennet's wit and failing miserably. "Indeed, sir, I find Sonnet 116 rather... imperfect itself. Does it not shake your constancy?" The silence that followed! I sounded exactly like what I am—someone trying too hard to be clever. Even Miss Maxter winced in sympathy. I must remember: the goal is not to become Elizabeth Bennet. The goal is to become a more genuine Caroline Bingley. Though at present, I am not entirely sure who that might be.

—

Thursday, the Seventeenth of September, 1812

A small victory today.

I was walking in the park, my parasol tilted just so against the autumn sunshine, when I genuinely admired Lady Worcester's new bonnet, its azure ribbons fluttering in the morning breeze.

Instead of using the compliment as currency, my usual strategy of flattering those whose favour I seek with carefully memorized phrases from *La Belle Assemblée* I simply said what I thought: "What a lovely shade of blue, my lady.

It reminds me of the forget-me-nots in my brother's garden." The words felt strange upon my tongue, unpolished and spontaneous.

She seemed startled, then pleased, the fine Mechlin lace of her collar trembling slightly as she laughed.

We had a very pleasant conversation about gardens, of all things, as we strolled past the carefully manicured hedges of the promenade.

I found myself mentioning my secret preference for wildflowers over hothouse blooms—something I would never have admitted in the perfumed confines of a drawing room—and she confided that she lets part of her estate grow wild specifically for butterflies.

Her gloved hand touched my arm in genuine fellowship, not the studied gestures of social ceremony.

No calculation.

No advantage gained.

Mere...

discourse.

The gravel crunched beneath our feet as we walked, and I noticed, for the first time in an age, the simple pleasure of morning air untainted by strategic thinking.

How singular.

---

Thursday, the First of October, 1812

I catch myself sometimes, still playing the old games. Tonight at the Morrises' Ball, I deliberately positioned myself near the card-room, knowing Mr Harrison would have to pass by. But then—and this is the strange part—when he stopped to talk, I forgot to pose. I was too engaged in watching his reaction to my thoughts about Byron's latest work (which I genuinely find overwrought, no matter what Mr Darcy thinks). He made a discussion of horticulture fascinating. Can one be calculating and genuine at the same time? Is there perhaps a middle ground between Elizabeth's natural manner and my carefully constructed one?

---

Friday, the Second of October, 1812

I have been thinking about last night. Perhaps there is nothing inherently wrong with choosing advantageous positions in a ballroom—positioning oneself where the candlelight falls most becomingly through the crystal chandeliers, or wearing flattering colours. The problem was that I never went beyond that—I treated discourse itself as merely another form of positioning.

I felt so alive when I spoke with Mr Harrison. I had not paid him much mind

before—he is merely a younger son with a modest estate. But his conversation... his conversation made me think. Made me wish to think. He spoke of his gardens not as mere ornaments but as experiments, challenges, triumphs and failures, his enthusiasm causing him to gesture with his quizzing glass in a most unstudied manner. When he described the difficulties of cultivating a particularly delicate variety of rose, the Autumn Damask, celebrated as the 'Four Seasons Rose of Paestum,' whose perfume filled the conservatory at his estate, I found myself offering genuine suggestions rather than mere pleasantries. For the first time, I was not calculating the effect of my words or monitoring the precise angle of my fan. I was simply engaged in the pleasure of real discourse. How strange that in forgetting to be strategic, I should find myself truly charming.

---

Saturday, the Ninth of October, 1812

An illuminating evening, the light of a hundred beeswax candles reflecting off the gilt-framed mirrors. I overheard someone refer to me as "greatly improved" while I was adjusting my Kashmir shawl near the Pembroke table. I felt simultaneously pleased and offended. Improved from what? Then I remembered myself six months ago, endlessly agreeing with everyone of consequence, my only goal to secure an advantageous match, my voice as practiced and hollow as the tinkling of the musical boxes. I still wish to marry well—I see no shame in that. But I find I now have other wishes too. I want to be listened to, not merely heard. I want to have genuine discourse, not mere exchanges of pleasantries that sound as rehearsed as a pianoforte exercise. I want... Good heavens. I want to be interested in people. How absolutely shocking.

---

Monday, the Eleventh of October, 1812

I had tea with Mrs Garth today—her best Wedgwood china with the blue-and-white pattern, and those delightfully unfashionable seed cakes she insists upon serving. Yes, really. I can hardly believe it myself. But she has such interesting perspectives on everything, and she does not simper or play games. I find myself admiring that more and more. As she poured the Earl Grey, she said something that struck me: "You seem more at ease with yourself lately, Miss Bingley." Am I? I am certainly less comfortable in my social mask. It feels tighter these days, more constraining. Like a gown I have outgrown, with old whalebone stays pinching with every breath.

---

Tuesday, the Twelfth of October, 1812

Where it began, I cannot begin to know—though I suspect it has something to do with that mortifying business of watching Mr Darcy's face soften every time Elizabeth Bennet opened her mouth to disagree with him, her dark eyes sparkling more brilliantly than the diamonds at my throat. (Really, the man might have saved us all a great deal of trouble by explaining his preference for argumentative females years ago.) Tonight, after the Rutherfords' dinner-party, I watched Miss Maxter charm the entire dining-room and finally understood something: her great secret is that she has no secrets. She simply is who she is. But that does not mean she is artless—I have begun to notice the skill with which she guides conversations, includes wallflowers, smooths over awkward moments. The subtle sweep of her gown through the gathering shows as much design as any battle plan. There is an art to appearing artless, it seems. But it must grow from something real.

---

Tuesday, the Ninth of November, 1812

Mr Harrison asked me today why I have changed. The Caroline of six months ago

would have demurred, simpered, hidden behind her painted fan, denied any change at all. Instead, I found myself saying, "Because I was tired of being tiresome." The words tasted strange on my tongue, like the first sip of strong tea without sugar. He laughed—not unkindly—and said he preferred honesty to artifice, his fingers idly straightening his perfectly tied cravat. Then he asked my genuine opinion about the new landscaping at Vauxhall Gardens. I gave it to him. Every devastating criticism, every genuine appreciation. The gravel crunched beneath our feet as we walked, my kid slippers growing quite damp with dew. He looked rather stunned, then intrigued. We ended up talking for nearly an hour, long enough for my cheeks to grow pink with the evening chill.

---

### Later That Evening

I have again been thinking about artifice versus authenticity, as I sit here in my chambers, the beeswax candle burning low and my writing desk scattered with visiting cards and unopened invitations..

Perhaps they are not as opposed as I once thought.

Perhaps the real art lies in knowing when to deploy each—when to be diplomatic and when to be direct, when to position oneself advantageously beneath the crystal chandeliers and when to simply let matters proceed naturally. I came to the conclusion that Elizabeth Bennet is not actually as artless as I once assumed.

She chooses her moments, her battles.

She is natural, yes, but also clever about when and how she deploys that naturalness. This strange new inclination toward honesty, it is growing strong, for me. Like a particularly stubborn vine, it keeps sprouting up in the most inconvenient

moments.

as persistent as the morning glory that defies the gardener's shears.

I find myself blurting out actual opinions when artificial ones might seem to serve far better.

Most alarming of all, I am beginning to enjoy it.

I am beginning to think that true sophistication lies not in constant calculation nor in complete carelessness, but in knowing how to balance both.

To be genuine does not mean one must be artless.

I shall never be Elizabeth Bennet. Nor do I wish to be. I have yet to develop an affinity for mud. But I find I am becoming rather interested in discovering who Caroline Bingley might be, when she allows herself to simply... be.

—

Wednesday, the Tenth of November, 1812

Mr Harrison called, arriving just as the morning light was casting long shadows through the drawing room's tall windows. He brought a volume of satirical writings on modern garden design, its leather binding worn soft at the corners, its pages bearing the evidence of frequent study. We sat in the pair of gilt chairs near the French doors, where the autumn air carried the clean, sharp scent of the last late roses from the kitchen garden, those stubborn blooms that defy the season. He read aloud the most amusing passages, his quizzing glass catching the sunlight as he gestured to emphasize particularly witty observations about the follies of artificial grottos and geometrically trimmed shrubbery.

I found myself laughing—not the practiced, musical laugh I had perfected at Mrs. Tyler's seminary, but something far less elegant and far more genuine. My Indian muslin gown was quite crushed from leaning forward in my eagerness to see the satirical sketches in the margins, and I had entirely forgotten to maintain the proper degree of distance between our chairs. I am beginning to think I might rather prefer being myself, even if it means occasionally forgetting to hold my fan at the most becoming angle. How entirely unfashionable. How very... freeing. Like stepping out without a bonnet and feeling the sun on one's face, propriety be hanged.

---

Thursday, the Twelfth of November, 1812

The Eve of Lady Rotherham's Grand Ball

Tomorrow evening's ball shall host the finest of society, including His Grace the Duke of Clarence's second son. I have instructed Adèle to lay out my newest gown—the champagne silk with golden threaded roses. She has practised the latest Parisian method of hair dressing until her arms grew weary. All must be without fault.

I must confess to a most troublesome feeling of disquiet. Never have I felt such trepidation regarding a social gathering these past months. Though indeed, never have the stakes seemed of such consequence.

---

Friday, the Thirteenth of November, 1812

The Morning Following—Written with an Unsteady Hand

I scarcely know how to commit to paper the events of yesternight. Yet perhaps I must, if only to guard against such folly in future times.

The evening commenced most favourably. My appearance was beyond reproach—even dear Louisa remarked that I cast all others in shadow. Upon my introduction to Lord Julian, I felt all my former uncertainties rise within me like the tide. And then...

I hardly know how to record last night's mortification. But perhaps I must, if only to prevent myself from ever making the same mistake again. Oh, how it pains me to record it. I reverted to my former manners. Completely, utterly reverted to my old self. Like putting on a comfortable old dress without realizing it had become hopelessly outdated. "Your lordship speaks with such wit!" When he had said naught of humour.

"I quite agree, the weather has been shocking." I had just spent yesterday rhapsodizing about the perfect autumn days.

"How utterly fascinating!" In response to his rather mundane observations regarding his stable.

Simper, simper, simper.

I could hear myself doing it, like watching a theatrical performance of my former self. Worse, I could see Mr Harrison who watched from across the room, his expression shifting from confusion to disappointment. He had been showing particular regard to me lately, and I had found myself looking forward to our debates about garden design and literature.

But when faced with a lord, I became the old Caroline. Calculating. Fawning. False.

The nadir came when Lord Julian mentioned Byron.

“Oh!” I twittered, “I find his work so very... what is your lordship’s opinion?”

He looked at me rather oddly. “I was not aware you had such malleable literary tastes, Miss Bingley. Mr Harrison told me about your rather passionate defence of Wordsworth over Byron.”

I felt myself flush scarlet. In that moment, I saw myself so clearly—and so did everyone else. The contrast between the real conversations I had been having these past months and this shabby performance was mortifying.

Lord Julian soon made his excuses. Mr Harrison maintained a most pointed distance throughout the evening. I cannot blame him after my behaviour.

But the worst part? As I watched Miss Maxter chatting easily with Lord Julian later, her amber silk skirts falling carelessly as she leaned forward in her chair, making him laugh genuinely at some story about her family's misadventures in Brighton—his starched cravat actually shaking with mirth—I saw him become a person rather than a title. She talked to him exactly as she would anyone else, not even bothering to modulate her voice to the refined whisper deemed proper for addressing peers.

And he loved it.

I came home in the early hours, my thoughts in such tumult that sleep proved impossible. Even now, the evening’s bright candles seem to mock me from every mirror—the elegant dress, the perfect coiffure, all my careful preparations rendered worthless by my own folly. And beneath it all sat a woman so eager to please she forgot everything she had ever learnt about the value of being real.

The night hours crept past, marked only by the dying fire and my own wandering

thoughts. How many times had I rehearsed such performances? How long had I been playing at elegance rather than simply being?

Dawn Found Me Still Wakeful, Despite the Bitter November Frost

The household stirred to life below stairs. I heard the familiar rhythm of the maids' footsteps, the distant clatter of kitchen preparations. All so ordinary, while I felt so utterly changed.

Mr Harrison's note arrived with the morning post. All it said was: "I much prefer the real Miss Bingley to any imitation, no matter how polished."

My temper flared, but very soon I dissolved into tears. Through the window, I watched the sun rise fully over the frost-rimed gardens. When did his good opinion come to matter more than a lord's?

When did my own good opinion of myself begin to matter most of all?

—

Monday, the Sixteenth of November, 1812

A Raw November Morning, the Frost Thick Upon the Window Panes

I did something shocking today. I approached Lord Julian after the dinner-party at the Rutherfords', where the candles cast a gentle aspect upon even the sternest countenances and the last chrysanthemums lent their subtle fragrance to the air. My hands trembled, but my voice remained steady.

"Your lordship, I behaved like a perfect fool at Lady Rotherham's ball. I have been inclined to believe assemblies and gatherings would never be so good as when I

played the perfect society miss, but I was quite wrong. I can only say that your rank occasioned me great anxiety, and I reverted to some very bad old habits. With your permission, may I begin again? I actually find Byron's recent work rather melodramatic, though his command of imagery can be stunning. Would you be interested in discussing why?"

He looked startled, then intrigued. The evening shadows lengthened across the Turkey carpet as we ended up having quite a spirited debate about modern poetry.

Lord Julian confided in me as we stood near the ornamental firescreen, its Chinese silk casting mottled shadows in the candlelight. He is an old friend of Mr Grantley's. He spoke movingly of his concern about that poor man—who had once been so fond of fine prints and whose hand had trembled so noticeably at cards last season. It seems Mr Grantley has quite lost his eyesight and is no longer able to be in society. I felt a pang of genuine regret at Mr Grantley's misfortunes, remembering how he had once stumbled into that pier glass, and later upset poor Lady Jersyey's fern, incidents I had attributed to...other matters. As I was leaving, Lord Julian said, his voice pitched low enough that the dowagers by the card table could not hear, "That was much better, Miss Bingley. Much more like the woman Mr Harrison described."

---

### As My Carriage Made Its Way Through the Darkening Streets

After that encounter, I began thinking about masks and faces; about who we are and who we pretend to be; about how taxing it is to maintain a false aspect, and how such exertions might be better employed in cultivating one's true nature.

The old Caroline would have been thoroughly delighted to have a lord's attention. The new Caroline finds she is rather more interested in the way Mr Harrison contests her opinions and makes her laugh.

How very unexpected life becomes when one allows it to be real.

---

The Following Morning, As the Frost Yielded to a Fine, Cold Rain

Mr Harrison arrived with a new book on garden design and a question about whether I still find mixed flower borders “chaotic and unfashionable.”

I told him my honest opinion. All of it. At length.

He remained for two hours, while the rain traced patterns upon the glass and the fire cast shifting shadows upon the wall.

I did not simper once.

One shows improvement , after all.

---

The Twenty-Third of November, 1812 One Week Following the Lord Julian Incident

Mr Harrison called today. I find I feel an unseemly thrill when his name is announced. Something he said captured my attention and would not release its hold.

“That is nonsense, Miss Bingley, and you know it,” he declared when I made some fashionable comment about the new French styles. “You were saying but last week how impractical they are for anything but standing about in drawing-rooms.”

I found myself quite speechless. No one but Elizabeth Bennet had ever so directly challenged me before. But instead of feeling offended, I felt... seen.

---

The Twenty-Fifth of November, 1812 A Grey Morning

I cannot cease thinking about that conversation with Mr Harrison. The late afternoon sun made it impossible to hide behind one's fan in the usual manner. He has this unnerving habit of gazing directly upon one whilst speaking, his green eyes as steady as a compass needle, as if he is searching for something behind the social pleasantries. The ribbons of my best morning dress fairly trembled under such scrutiny. And when he catches even a hint of artifice—a too-practiced tilt of the head, a response borrowed from Lady Spencer's famous repertoire of elegant phrases—he simply... calls attention to it. It should be horrible. Instead, it is oddly liberating.

---

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

### The Second of December, 1812 A Drizzling Afternoon

Another encounter with Mr Harrison today, beneath the dripping portico of the circulating library, my kid slippers quite soaked from puddles despite my best efforts. I heard myself beginning to simper about the weather, my voice rising to that artificial pitch deemed elegant by the ton, and caught his raised eyebrow over the rim of his slightly rain-speckled quizzing glass. Without thinking, I stopped mid-sentence and said, "In truth, I find all this rain quite deplorable. My new bonnet is utterly ruined—touching the sodden silk flowers that had cost a small fortune at Madame Devereaux's merely yesterday.

He smiled—not the polite society smile to which I am accustomed, but something warm that reached his eyes, creating little creases at the corners that spoke of genuine pleasure. "There you are," he said softly, his voice barely carrying over the steady drumming of rain on the cobblestones. "I had been wondering when the real Miss Bingley would appear."

I felt myself flush, the warmth spreading across my cheeks despite the damp chill in the air. Not with embarrassment, but with... something else entirely.

---

### The Second of December, 1812 As Night Falls

I stood at my window this evening, watching the stars emerge one by one.

How different everything appears now! I recalled all those evenings I spent in idle

gossip at parties, alone, desperately seeking attention and approval.

But now I look at the night and it does not seem so lonely.

Rather, it feels full of possibility.

Mr Harrison spoke to me of his plans to improve his tenant farmers' cottages today.

Once, I should have dismissed such conversation as tediously practical.

Now I find myself eagerly offering suggestions about proper ventilation and the importance of good glass in the windows.

He values my practical mind—how strange that I spent so many years concealing it!

—

The Third of December, 1812 At Morning Breakfast

Charles remarked at breakfast that he hardly knows me any longer.

I smiled and replied that perhaps he is only now truly making my acquaintance.

Mr Harrison, who was calling early to discuss the cottage improvements, met my gaze across the table.

That look of his—I shall never tire of it.

—

The Fifth of December, 1812 Following the Assembly

I did something shocking this evening. When Mr. Harrison asked my opinion of his friend's new painting, I told him the truth—that I found it pretentious and poorly composed. My heart was pounding throughout, but I looked him directly in the eye and said exactly what I thought.

He threw back his head and laughed. “Magnificent,” he said. “And what else?”

I found myself speaking of composition and light, about how the artist clearly wished to imitate the Italian masters but had not the skill to carry it off. All my actual knowledge about art, usually hidden behind bland compliments, came pouring forth.

Mr Harrison merely watched me, that intense look in his eyes. When I finally fell silent, he said, “Who would have believed you would come along? How wonderful you are when you are real.”

I have never felt more exposed. Or more exhilarated.

—

The Sixth of December, 1812 Dawn

I lay awake through half the night thinking about Mr Harrison's forthrightness. He does not calculate or manipulate—he simply says what he thinks and feels, yet somehow manages to do so without giving offence. Well, usually. And when he does offend, he does not appear to mind.

How does he dare? How would it feel to live so freely?

—

The Tenth of December, 1812 At Tea Time

Mr Harrison brought his mother to call today, her dove-grey visiting dress as practical and unfashionable as her sensible opinions. She settled into the damask chair near the fireplace, her jet beads catching the afternoon light as she gestured, while her son stood by the mantelpiece wearing a smile that suggested he knew exactly what he was about. Once, I should have been calculating the value of such a connection, measuring every word as carefully as one measures ribbon at the milliner's. Instead, I found myself genuinely interested in her thoughts on managing a household, leaning forward in my chair quite forgetting the proper posture drilled into me.

She has such practical wisdom! We spoke for nearly two hours about preserving fruit and training new maids, her hands demonstrating the proper way to fold household linens even as she spoke. The tea grew cold in my best Wedgwood cups, and I quite forgot to ring for fresh. When she opened her reticule to share her personal recipe for quince preserves, written in a hand as firm and practical as herself, I found myself taking notes on my own visiting cards! The Caroline of six months ago would have expired from mortification at such a conversation, would have steered the discourse toward opera or the latest London scandals. Instead, I found myself thoroughly engrossed in Mrs Harrison's discourse on the proper rotation of winter stores, her voice as brisk and refreshing as the herbs she recommended hanging to dry in the stillroom.

—

#### The Twentieth of December, 1812 A Clear Winter's Morning

Today I watched Mr Harrison tell Lord Rotherham exactly why his new policies for his tenants were shortsighted. The scene unfolded in the drawing room at Mrs Ashton's, where the morning light streaming through the tall windows made it impossible to hide any expression. No hedging, no flattery—just clear, logical arguments delivered with perfect courtesy but absolute firmness, his cravat remaining immaculate even as Lord Rotherham's grew rather crumpled with agitation. Mr

Harrison's quizzing glass lay forgotten beside his untouched cup, his hands sketching figures in the air as he detailed the mathematics of fair crop rotation and reasonable rents.

I found myself quite overcome watching him, my fingers pleating and unpleating my handkerchief beneath the table, my tea growing quite cold in the finest Sevres china. The forced smile I had cultivated was entirely forgotten as I watched his unwavering defense of what was right. Is this what Elizabeth felt, seeing Mr Darcy's fundamental integrity beneath his pride? My cheeks grew warm at the thought, and I had to take a rather hasty sip of cold tea to cover my confusion. Lord Rotherham's pinch of snuff went quite neglected as he was forced to actually consider Mr Harrison's arguments, while the other guests pretended a fascination with their plates that deceived absolutely no one.

---

#### The Twenty First of December, 1812 A Notable Day

Today I held my first niece. Little Margaret—named for our mother, her grandmother, is quite the tiniest person I have ever encountered. Once, I should have maintained a careful distance, making the expected polite noises while secretly dreading any threat to my silk gown.

Instead, I found myself utterly captivated by her impossibly small fingers and the way her entire hand wrapped around just one of mine. When she opened her eyes and gazed at me with that unfixed infant gaze, I felt something shift inside my chest.

“Would you like to hold her a bit longer?” Louisa asked, clearly surprised by my lingering presence at her bedside.

“If you do not mind,” I replied, unable to look away from Margaret’s perfect little

face. "I believe she is quite the most fascinating person I have met this season."

"Caroline!" Louisa laughed. "You cannot mean to tell me you prefer my red-faced infant to Lord Rotherham's sophisticated discourse on wine vintages?"

I smiled, remembering how once I would have preened at any attention from such an eminent personage. "My dear, your Margaret has already shown more genuine emotion in her first day than his lordship has in half a decade of my acquaintance."

The look Louisa gave me was startlingly like Mr Harrison's when I speak my mind. "You have changed, sister."

"Yes," I agreed, watching Margaret's tiny fingers flex against my gown. "Though perhaps it is more accurate to say I am becoming who I always was, beneath all the artifice."

"Mr Harrison's influence, I suppose?"

I considered this as Margaret made a soft, snuffling sound against my shoulder. "No. He merely made me realize I was worthy of being real."

"Well," Louisa said softly, "I find I quite like this real Caroline. As does your niece, it seems."

Indeed, Margaret had fallen asleep in my arms, her small form radiating a surprising amount of warmth. I discovered I did not mind in the slightest that she was creasing my new muslin.

The old Caroline would have been horrified.

The new Caroline thinks some things are worth a creased gown.

Like tiny fingers, and honest hearts, and being exactly who one is meant to be.

---

The Twenty-Third of December, 1812 After the Whipples' Dinner Party

Something strange is occurring. This evening at dinner, Mr Harrison was defending his position on Catholic Emancipation (quite unfashionable, quite correct). I found myself joining in, supporting his arguments with facts I had recently read. The words simply came forth, clear and true and unplanned.

He turned and looked at me, and—oh! That look! I have seen it before, on Mr Darcy's face when Elizabeth speaks her mind. That tender pride, that delighted recognition of a kindred spirit.

I quite forgot to breathe.

---

The Twenty-Third of December, 1812 In the Late Hours

I truly understand. All those years pursuing Mr Darcy, attempting to win his good opinion through careful flattery and agreement—but this is what he wanted. What any worthwhile man wants. Not a mirror to reflect his own opinions, but a real person to challenge and support and grow with.

Mr Harrison's estate is modest. His connections are merely respectable. He shall never be the catch I once dreamed of.

But when he looks at me with those clear, honest eyes, seeing through to the real Caroline and finding her worthy... I feel richer than if I had caught a duke. These past

weeks have brought me more true joy than all my years seeking advancement—the laughter we shared over Byron’s latest, our spirited debates about the garden designs, even those practical discussions about tenant cottages that I once would have scorned. Good times never seem so good as when one is truly oneself. Indeed, I find myself wondering why I ever thought happiness must come wrapped in titles and grand estates.

---

The Twenty-Fourth of December, 1812 Following Yesterday’s Walk

“You are doing it again,” he said today when I began to make some elegant nothing of a comment about his sister’s pianoforte-playing.

“Am I? Oh dear. Well then, in truth? She requires more practise. But her enthusiasm is charming.”

He took my hand. Just for a moment. But the way he looked at me...our touching hands...

I begin to think that true intimacy—the meeting of actual minds and hearts—is worth far more than any social triumph.

How very unlike the old Caroline to think so.

How very much like the woman I am becoming to know it is true.

---

The Twenty-Fifth of December, 1812 Christmas Morning

“You are thoroughly spoiling me, you know,” I told him over tea. “I am becoming shockingly forthright.”

“You are becoming yourself,” he corrected. “And I find myself quite deeply attached to who that is.”

For once in my life, I did not calculate or plan or consider. I simply spoke from my heart:

“I find myself quite deeply attached to who you are as well.”

The look in his eyes... no estate in England could be worth half so much.

How strange that in learning to be genuine, I have found everything I once tried so hard to manufacture through artifice. True respect. True affection. True love.

The old Caroline would be appalled.

The new Caroline is simply, absolutely, genuinely happy.

—

The Third of January, 1813 A Most Troubling Morning

Adèle came to me today, her eyes cast down in a manner most unlike her usual forthright demeanour. She stood twisting her apron, a gesture I had not seen since she first came to us.

“Mam’selle Caroline, I must speak wiz you of a matter most... délicate.” Her accent, usually softened by years in England, grew more pronounced with distress.

“What is it, Adèle?” Although I knew. Lord help me, I had known for weeks and chosen to be blind.

“Je suis... that is to say... I am in ze famille way.” Her eyes remained fixed upon the carpet. “Monsieur Faxon, ‘e promised to marry me, but now...”

“Charles’s valet?” I interrupted sharply. As if there had been any doubt, as if I had not seen them in the garden at twilight, as if I had not heard their whispered endearments in the servants’ stairwell. One does become rather accomplished at avoiding uncomfortable truths when one has practised it as an art form .

“Oui, Mam’selle. But ‘e says now zat ze time is not right, zat perhaps in a year or two...” She lifted her chin, and I saw a flash of her usual spirit. “I told ‘im zat ze bébé shall not wait for ‘is convenient time.”

I felt myself stiffen with proper indignation. “Really, Adèle, this is most inappropriate. A lady’s maid in such a condition...” Oh, how grand I sound, how very proper. As if she had not held me while I wept over Mr Harrison last week.

“Mam’selle Caroline,” she said, using that old childhood name that always makes my heart soften, “Pardonnez-moi, mademoiselle. I know that I ‘ave disappointed you most grievously” As if she had broken a piece of china rather than the rigid rules of our society.

I heard myself begin to speak of dismissal, of references, of the shame such a situation would bring upon a respectable household. Good Lord, I sound precisely like my mother. How provoking.

Yet even as the words left my lips, I remembered:

Adèle, holding my hand through my first London season. Adèle, listening to my

tearful confessions about Mr Darcy. Adèle, gently suggesting that perhaps my “refined” manners were not serving me as well as I imagined.

“I know, Mam’selle.” Her voice caught. “I shall pack my things zis afternoon. But... may I beg one favour? A character reference? Without it, I cannot...”

“Adèle.” Her name caught in my throat. “How long have you been with me?”

“Eight years, Mam’selle. Since you were sixteen.” A tiny smile touched her lips. “Since you tried to dress your ‘air like ze Princess of Wales and nearly set it afire.”

Since you became more sister than servant, though I never had the grace to acknowledge it.

“And in all that time, have you ever known me to make a proper decision without your counsel?”

“Non, Mam’selle.” Her smile grew knowing. “But you are learning.”

—

Later That Day

I found myself relating the entire unfortunate circumstance to Mr Harrison during our morning walk. Though “relating” suggests more coherence than my actual stammering account achieved.

“Miss Bingley,” he said, when I had finished explaining my plans to dismiss her with a character, “do you recollect our discussion about the flower borders in your garden?”

I stared at him in bewilderment. “Indeed, sir? Horticultural metaphors at such a moment?”

“You insisted that formal arrangements were the only acceptable choice for a lady of taste. Yet wild roses are the envy of the county. Sometimes, the unconventional path yields the most beautiful results.”

“Sir, we are speaking of a servant in a... delicate condition. Not flowers.” Though I must admit, the parallel between cultivating gardens and cultivating compassion did not escape me entirely.

“Indeed. And what do you do with your most valuable plants when they require special care? You shelter them, nurture them, and trust they shall bloom again.”

Oh. Oh dear.

“I have a small property in Hampshire,” he continued. “The cottage there stands empty. A lady’s maid might find it a pleasant place for a period of... retirement. And afterward, should she wish to return to service...”

I felt my eyes fill with tears. “You would assist me in this?”

“I would assist you in doing what I believe your heart already knows is right.”

—

The Twelfth of January, 1813

Mr Harrison had written to the cottage’s caretaker. Adèle shall go there in a month’s time, before her condition becomes apparent. Faxon has agreed to marry her—though I suspect my brother’s intervention in that quarter—and she may return to me once

the child is settled with her sister in the country.

“You are too good to me, Mam’selle,” she said, when I told her.

I thought of all the times she had been good to me. Of all the times I had taken that goodness as my due.

“No, Adèle. I am only beginning to be good enough.”

Although in truth, Mr Harrison deserves the merit. How provoking to find oneself becoming more worthy through his influence. Almost as provoking as how very much I find myself enjoying it.

—

The Tenth of February, 1813

My new maid, Mary, has managed to both tear my best morning dress and style my hair in a fashion better suited to a milkmaid. Though perhaps I am being unkind. Milkmaids likely possess more skill with pins.

“I am most dreadfully sorry, miss,” she stammered, her fingers trembling as she attempted to repair the damage.

I felt my lips form the words of dismissal. So easy to slip back into that role, like donning a familiar glove. But then I caught sight of Adèle’s empty chair by the window, where she used to sit mending my gowns and offering tart observations about my suitors.

“Mary,” I said instead, forcing patience into my voice, “let us begin again. Adèle taught me that the key to a proper coiffure lies in the foundation...”

Charles burst into my sitting room, waving a letter. “Caroline! The most extraordinary news from Pemberley!”

“Unless Mr Darcy has found good sense and rejected that fortune-hunting country miss, I cannot imagine what...” Though really, why do I still persist in this charade?

“Better! They are married! Last Tuesday, at Longbourn.”

I felt myself reach for my old phrases about connections and unsuitability. They died on my tongue as I recalled Mr Harrison’s words about gardens and unconventional beauty.

“Charles,” I said slowly, “are they happy?”

He looked at me as though I had begun speaking Greek. “Entirely so, from all accounts. Though I expected you to be rather more...”

“Bitter? Spiteful?” As I was but six months past, measuring worth by birth and fortune rather than character?

”My dear brother, I find I no longer have the strength for such careful cultivation of malice. It exhausts one so.”

“I say,” Charles settled into a chair, studying me. “You have changed, Caroline.”

“Have I?”— I have altered in every particular and yet somehow I feel more myself than ever— “Perhaps I have simply learned to tend my own garden rather than criticizing others’.”

“I do not know what that means,” he admitted cheerfully, “but you seem happier for it.”

Mr Harrison called that evening, his riding boots still bearing traces of mud from his journey, as the day's earlier rain had left the roads in a shocking state.

We spoke of the Darcys' marriage only briefly, the topic fading as naturally as the last rays of sunlight through the drawing room windows, before turning to a spirited debate about the proper placement of rose bushes.

He sketched possible arrangements on the back of a letter with his pencil, his normally precise handwriting growing rather enthusiastic as he argued the merits of southern exposure.

I found I preferred it so, watching the firelight catch the amber depths of his eyes as he defended his horticultural theories with the same passion he had shown that morning defending his tenants' rights.

Though I did allow myself one small moment of satisfaction—Miss Elizabeth will have to deal with Lady Catherine. Some comeuppance is only natural, after all. Though I may be improving, I have not achieved sainthood.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

Monday the Eighth of March, 1813

I have done something quite shocking today. Something Caroline of old would never have dreamed of doing.

Mr Harrison called to discuss the garden borders—he has most decided opinions about informal planting schemes—and found me already at work. The fact that I was in the garden at all would once have been remarkable enough. But there I was, actually handling plants and soil!

“Miss Bingley,” he said, sounding quite astonished, “whatever are you doing?”

“Planting sweet peas and larkspur,” I replied, trying to sound as if I regularly knelt in garden beds. “You convinced me that formal borders need not be stern and regimented. So I am experimenting with a more natural arrangement.”

“In your walking dress?”

I looked down at my skirts, now quite thoroughly besmirched with earth, and felt a moment of my old horror at appearing less than perfectly turned out. But then I caught his expression—that wonderful look of delighted surprise—and found I did not care a whit about the dress.

“Well,” I said, pressing another sweet pea seed into the warm soil, “one cannot garden properly in evening dress.”

He laughed that real laugh of his—the one that makes his eyes crinkle at the

corners—and without another word, knelt down beside me in his good coat to help.

We worked in companionable silence for a time, our hands occasionally brushing as we planted. I found myself thinking how strange it was that I had once thought a lady's hands should never show signs of real work. My gloves are quite ruined, my dress beyond redemption. Who would have thought true contentment would be found in ruined gloves and honest work?

“You never cease to astonish me, Miss Bingley,” he said softly as we finished the last section.

I looked up to find him watching me with an expression I dared not interpret. “I find I never cease to astonish myself,” I replied.

The moment stretched between us, full of a sentiment I scarce dare name. Then he helped me to my feet, his touch lingering perhaps a fraction longer than strictly proper.

I shall have to burn this dress. And yet, I cannot find it in myself to regret a single moment of this afternoon. The sweet peas will bloom just as summer arrives—how fitting that something so lovely should come from such delightful impropriety.

How vastly different from my former self. How much more true to what I am becoming.

—?—

Sunday the Fourteenth of March, 1813

Through the window, a weak March sun contended with scattered clouds, matching my customary winter temperament. Charles entered my sitting room as though he

were approaching a tiger's cage. Never a promising sign from my usually ebullient brother. The pale light illuminated the dust motes drifting around him, reminding me absurdly of the way he used to fidget during our childhood dancing lessons.

“Dearest Caroline,” he began, fiddling with his cravat, “I have the most wonderful news...”

“You are to marry Miss Bennet.” His expression of shock was really quite gratifying. “Charles, you forget I have known you since birth. You only wear that particular expression of sheepish delight when discussing Miss Bennet or particularly good port.”

“But you... that is to say... are you not going to...”

“Tell you she is beneath you? Bemoan our family’s degradation?” How strange that the words no longer taste bitter on my tongue. “My dear brother, I find I have quite exhausted my supply of sisterly disapproval.”

“Caroline, are you ill?”

“Merely reformed. Though perhaps ‘ill’ is not far off - I do feel rather feverish about the whole business. When shall I call on my new sister?”

—?—

Later That Day - The Dreaded Cheapside Residence

I confess, upon arriving at the Gardiner residence, I was forced to revise several long-held opinions. How vexing to discover one has been wrong about yet another matter. The house, while not palatial, possessed an elegance I had willfully denied in my previous visits. The drawing room particularly showed evidence of refined taste - the

pianoforte was of excellent quality, and the furnishings, while not ostentatious, spoke of quiet wealth. The afternoon light streamed through immaculate windows, casting warm patterns across a Aubusson carpet that I grudgingly admitted was finer than my own. A subtle fragrance of hothouse flowers - lilies, perhaps - drifted from an elegant arrangement that would not have been out of place in any fashionable home.

“Your aunt has excellent taste, Miss Bennet.” There, that was not so difficult to admit.

“Indeed?” Her tone suggested polite disbelief. “I had thought Cheapside too unfashionable for any display of taste.”

I winced. “Miss Bennet, I believe I owe you an apology.”

“Do you?” Her tone was perfectly polite. And about as warm as a January morning.

“Indeed. I have been insufferable, superior, and unkind. I can only say that I have lately learned the value of authenticity over artifice. And if I am being authentic, this room puts several Bond Street drawing rooms to shame.”

She studied me with those clear eyes. “That is... a most unexpected admission.”

“Yes, well, one cannot spend all one’s time being entirely disagreeable. It leaves so little room for other pursuits.” Like gardening. And certain conversations about gardening .

The corner of her mouth twitched. “I understand you have developed quite an interest in horticulture.”

“Oh, do not you start. I can well imagine what your sister thinks of Mr Harrison's influence on my horticultural education.”

“Lizzy can be rather...”

“Direct? Like a calvary charge? Yes, I have noticed. Though I find I prefer it to the simpering ways of the ton.” I paused, then added, “I prefer your candour as well, Jane. Even when it is... uncomfortable for me to hear.”

She poured the tea with perfect grace. “Caroline, I hardly know what to make of this new candour of yours.”

“Nor do I, most days. Though Mr Harrison seems to approve, which is... not unwelcome. But I find it rather refreshing, like taking off one’s stays at the end of a long evening.”

She actually laughed then. “Caroline!”

“Was that too direct?”

“Perhaps. But as you say... refreshing.”

—?—

Thursday, the Twenty-Fifth of March 1813, Lady Day

“You actually prefer natural flower borders now?” Jane’s voice held genuine amazement as we walked among the early crocuses and snowdrops.

“Mr Harrison has been most... persuasive on the subject.” Among others.

“Caroline,” Jane’s eyes twinkled, “are you blushing?”

“Certainly not. It is merely the fresh March air.” Though how one becomes flushed

while merely looking at flowers, I cannot quite explain.

The wind carried the sharp, clean scent of newly-turned earth and the sweet promise of spring blooms. Above us, the bare branches showed the faintest hints of green, while beneath our feet, the gravel paths still held winter's dampness.

"Of course," she said gravely. "Just as Charles merely admires my skill at arranging the spring blooms."

We shared a look of perfect understanding.

"Who would have believed you would come along so splendidly in your gardening endeavours?" Jane mused, bending to admire a cluster of early daffodils.

"Jane," I said suddenly, "I am so very glad you are to be my sister."

"As am I," she replied. Then added with uncharacteristic mischief, "Though I do hope Mr Harrison has discussed the proper placement of spring bulbs."

The breeze caught my shawl, and I noticed how the early spring light softened Jane's features, making her look even more like the angel Charles always claimed her to be.

I scattered a handful of dampened leaves in her direction. Most unladylike.

Improvement indeed.

—?—

The Twenty-Sixth of March, 1813 A Most Peculiar Afternoon

A gentle spring breeze stirred the early daffodils as Mr Harrison arrived in a state of

evident agitation. His cravat was actually somewhat askew—a sure sign of approaching calamity.

“Miss Bingley,” he began, pacing before my favourite garden bench, “I find myself in a most uncomfortable position.”

“Have the roses offended you, sir?” Though really, he had planted half of them himself.

“The roses are perfect. You are perfect. That is precisely the difficulty.”

I blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“You see, I had a speech prepared. Several, in fact. I have been rehearsing them for weeks.” He ran a hand through his hair, disturbing its usual precise arrangement. “But now I find I cannot recall a single word.”

“Mr Harrison,” I said carefully, “are you quite well?”

“No. Yes. That is...” He dropped onto the bench beside me. “Caroline, I fear I have fallen quite desperately in love with you.”

“Oh. How... inconvenient.”

He actually laughed. “Inconvenient?”

“Well, yes. I had only just learned to be genuine, you see. And now you tell me this, and I find I cannot remember how to breathe properly.” When did my heart learn to beat so quickly?

“I do apologise for the timing,” he said gravely, though his eyes danced. “Shall I

come back next week?"

"Do not you dare." The words escaped before I could arrange them into something more elegant. How mortifying . Though his smile suggests he does not mind .

"Caroline," he took my hands in his, "I love quick tongue and quicker wit. I love that you no longer pretend to be less than you are. I love watching you flourish into your true nature, like one of your beloved roses. And I would very much like to spend the rest of my life arguing with you about garden design."

I found my eyes were wet. "That was much better than any rehearsed speech could have been."

"Was it? Thank heavens. Though you have not actually answered me."

"Have you actually asked me anything?"

He laughed again. "Always so precise. Very well." He slid from the bench to one knee. "Sweet Caroline, would you do me the very great honour of becoming my wife? I promise a lifetime of spirited debate, unconventional gardening, and absolute authenticity."

I discovered I was crying and laughing at once. "Yes. Though I warn you, I still maintain that formal gardens have their place."

"My love," he said, drawing me to my feet, "I would not have you any other way."

How strange. I seem to have fallen in love quite unawares. Like a garden growing wild—unexpected, unplanned, and utterly perfect .

"Though really," I added, as he drew me close, "you might have proposed before I

ruined my new walking dress kneeling in the dirt to plant those silly borders.”

“My dear,” he murmured against my hair, “that was precisely when I knew I must make you my wife.”

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:02 am*

Monday the Fourteenth of June, 1813 A Most Perfect Day

The orangery at Harrison House blazed with June sunlight during the wedding breakfast, transformed by what seemed like every rose in the county into something between a formal garden and a fairy grove. The morning rain had threatened the festivities, but I found I could not regret being driven indoors. There was something fitting about celebrating surrounded by our combined horticultural triumphs.

“You seem remarkably calm, sister,” Jane observed, adjusting an errant flower in my hair. “I distinctly recall being rather more agitated on my own wedding day.”

“I believe I have finally learned which battles are worth fighting,” I replied.

At that precise moment, a tremendous crash from the entrance drew every eye. My brother-in-law, in an apparent attempt to assist with a particularly large arrangement of York and Lancaster roses, had managed to upend not only the flowers but himself as well. He now lay sprawled among scattered petals and broken pottery, looking rather stranded in his formal attire.

“Oh, good heavens,” Louisa sighed, though I noted she made no immediate move to assist him. Elizabeth Darcy, hiding her smile behind her hand, did go to help him up.

A year ago, I would have been mortified. Six months ago, I would have been quietly furious. But today...

I found myself laughing. “Well, he has given us something to remember besides the rain.”

“Caroline?” Jane peered at me with concern. “Are you quite well?”

“Perfectly.” I caught sight of my husband in the doorway, trying very hard to maintain a properly solemn expression and failing utterly. “Though I do believe we should rescue those roses. They are a particularly fine variety.”

“Trust you to think of the flowers first,” Elizabeth said, having succeeded in returning Mr Hurst to his feet.

“But of course. They are, after all, what brought us here.” I shared a private smile with my new husband. “Though perhaps we might move that arrangement slightly further from the tables?”

The day passed in a happy haze of congratulations and conversation, the hours marked by changing light through the orangery's windows. During a quiet moment, I found myself thinking of Adèle and her month-old son. She had visited last week to show him off—quite improper, perhaps, but then she had always been more than a mere lady's maid to me. Her tart observations had been the first crack in my carefully constructed facade, and I found I could not regret either her frankness then or her happiness now.

As the celebration drew to a close, James suggested we might show our guests the gardens while the evening was still fine. As we took our first turn about our combined gardens as man and wife, the breaking sunlight transformed everything it touched. The rain had left each petal jeweled with drops that caught the sun like tiny diamonds. Our guests dotted the lawn in cheerful groups—Jane and Charles sharing a private joke, Elizabeth eliciting a reluctant smile from Mr Darcy, even Louisa fussing over her still-dishevelled husband with poorly concealed affection.

My silk skirts rustled against the stone path as Mr Harrison led me along the steps. My heart still had not quite settled from the ceremony, from the moment I had finally become his wife. His eyes had not left mine, his smile soft and private.

Then my slipper caught – a loose stone in the path, treacherous beneath the delicate kid leather. I felt myself pitching forward, a small gasp escaping my lips. Mr Harrison moved instantly, breaking from the formal path to catch me, but the momentum carried us both. We spun, his arms tightening around me as he twisted, taking the fall himself.

We landed hard, Mr Harrison's shoulder and palms scraping against the rough stone path. A collective gasp rose from the assembly, and my heart seized with panic as I saw him wince.

"James! Oh heavens, are you hurt?" I struggled to right myself, mindful of my fine silk gown, my hands fluttering over his shoulders. The beautiful day suddenly seemed on the verge of ruin. He was injured at our own wedding breakfast!

But then he smiled – that particular smile that never failed to make my breath catch. His hand, scraped though it was, came up to cup my cheek. he murmured, "How can I hurt when I am holding you?" so softly only I could hear.

The tension melted from my body as he drew me closer, his arms steady and sure around me. Louisa was already hurrying forward with concerns and calls for vinegar water, but for a moment, we remained in our private moment. I ducked my head, aware of the impropriety but unable to resist the solid strength of him.

When we finally stood, Mr Harrison keeping my hand properly on his arm, the guests were torn between concern and being charmed by the tableau we presented. But I barely noticed, too caught up in the way my husband – my husband! – was looking at me, as if a few scrapes were nothing compared to the joy of having me by his side.

James guided me to a smoother section of the path. I noticed he stayed particularly attentive to my steps as we entered a secluded section of the garden.

I paused beside the flower border that had started it all, remembering my ruined

walking dress and his laughing eyes. The sweet peas and roses we had planted together were thriving, formal and wild varieties unexpectedly complementing each other, much like us. A year ago, I would have found such symbolism unbearably common. Now...

“So good,” I murmured, watching the evening sun gild the rain-fresh roses. “So good.”

“I beg your pardon, my love?” James Harrison—my husband—raised an enquiring eyebrow.

“I was reflecting on how felicitously everything has arranged itself. Even our little misfortune seems providential, somehow. A gentle reminder of the folly of excessive gravity and self-importance.”

“My sweet Caroline,” he said, drawing me close, “I do believe you have bloomed into quite the philosopher.”

“Nonsense. I simply know now which gardens are worth tending.” I paused. “Though I still maintain that some degree of formality—”

He silenced me with a kiss, and for once, I did not mind having the last word stolen.

So good.

\* \* \*