

We Met in Hunsford

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We Met in Hunsford

by [prhood](#)

Summary

Elizabeth is invited to partake of the London small season in the fall of 1811 and does not encounter Bingley or Darcy when they visit Hertfordshire.

Prologue

August 1811 – Longbourn, Hertfordshire

Mrs. Bennet was truly, truly vexed. All her plans had been overset and now what was she to do?

Her eldest and most beautiful daughter was to have gone to stay with Mrs. Bennet's brother and his wife in London for four months. The arrangement had been made to visit a modiste, there to acquire several new gowns, for Mr. Bennet had finally consented to allow one of his daughters to partake of a London season, albeit the small season in the autumn. The necessary funds had been set aside and Jane was to leave in a week's time. But now, how could she be allowed to leave Longbourn? For a prospect of greater significance had been made known.

A gentleman, a single gentleman, worth some five thousand a year, had leased Netherfield Park and was due to arrive before Michaelmas. If Jane was in London, he would never meet and marry her, for Mrs. Bennet could envisage no other outcome once he had seen Jane. She could not be so beautiful for nothing! But how was he to see her, if she was in London? It would never do! And yet to surrender, after several years of begging for such an opportunity, for one of her daughters, the possibilities inherent in a London season, was not to be thought of!

And then an event of singular rarity occurred. Mrs. Bennet had an idea and one that, once she had mulled it over for a few minutes, satisfied her on several accounts. She would send Lizzy, her second eldest daughter, to London in Jane's place. The funds made available for Jane could just as easily be spent on Elizabeth; and, as well, her departure would remove from Longbourn the single greatest source of agitation that Mrs. Bennet's nerves could suffer. Elizabeth was her least favoured daughter - impertinent, willful and clever, and, since such traits did not, in Mrs. Bennet's opinion, recommend their owner to gentlemen seeking a wife, her marriage prospects in Hertfordshire were poor. Perhaps in London she might unearth a suitor oblivious to such shortcomings, although Mrs. Bennet could not readily encompass such a possibility. She briefly considered sending Lydia instead of Elizabeth but her brother had made it clear in the past he would not accept her youngest daughter, citing her age, fifteen, and her poor behaviour, as his reasons. As Mrs. Bennet had no expectations of persuading him to change his mind, and was also reluctant to dispense with the presence of her liveliest and favourite child, the decision was made.

To London, Elizabeth was to go.

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Several months later when it came time for Elizabeth to return to Longbourn, she did so with expectations and hopes that were brighter than she would have believed possible a scant four months before. The source of her improved spirits would only be revealed to her elder sister. Not even her father would be allowed a share of her hopes, for, if they proved fruitless, his

sympathy would not prevent him from having his sport with her and it would then be known to many. Her other parent could then be expected to make her life a misery, much as she was now doing for her elder sister. That sister, Jane, she could be sure, would preserve her secrets as Elizabeth had preserved her own.

For the simple fact was that she had attracted a suitor. Mr. Northcott was a barrister but one in the process of building a career. His family was in trade in the north of the country and, as a third son, he was required to make his own way and law was the route chosen. He was an intelligent man but far from handsome, although Elizabeth had come to believe his features quite agreeable when he smiled. His was a serious disposition but not disinclined to such amusements as dancing, which, she learned, he did well-enough for her satisfaction. He was also fond of the theatre and quite well-read which allowed them to converse readily on a wide range of topics. She thought it unfortunate that his profession would require him to live in London, but the easy access to Longbourn might provide an escape from the vapours of London during the summer should they marry. As that seemed not altogether improbable, she had reason to be optimistic.

Mr. Northcott had been disappointed to learn that she would be returning to Longbourn at Christmas and that she was unlikely to return until next autumn. His intimations of intent had been cautious and carefully worded.

“Your departure is to be regretted, Miss Bennet. I have quite enjoyed our conversations. You plan to return next September, you say?”

“Indeed, although the matter is in the hands of my aunt and uncle.”

“Excellent! I shall be sure to call on you then.”

“You shall be a welcome visitor, Mr. Northcott.”

Elizabeth spoke to her aunt later that night.

“I thought it possible Mr. Northcott might offer for you, Lizzy.”

“As had I, aunt; however, I believe him to be rather cautious and to take such a step at this time would be against his nature.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded thoughtfully. “I spoke with Mrs. Ellison a few days ago. She knows the Northcott family well. Apparently Mr. Northcott is not yet able to support a wife and family and it may well take him another year or even two to be able to do so. I suspect he is reluctant to make an offer when his prospects remain uncertain. Certainly, any engagement would be of a year’s duration at the very least.”

“And I cannot provide even a small fortune to make marriage more feasible.” stated Elizabeth with no small amount of regret. How she wished her father had been a more prudent and concerned parent and set aside even a few thousand to enhance his daughters’ position. She suspected that even three or four thousand pounds would have induced Mr. Northcott to offer for her. She would not claim to love him but he was a respectable man, one she respected and who, from what she had observed, respected her. They could, she believed, build a good

marriage. She admitted to herself that, had he offered for her, she would have accepted and the prospect of waiting a year or two to marry would not be a hindrance to her. She rather thought that being so engaged would spare her much of her mother's disapprobation. But it was not to be and she would return to Longbourn much as she left it, albeit wiser and with hopes for the future.

## **In which Miss Elizabeth Bennet is introduced to Lady Catherine de Bourgh's nephews**

March 1812 – Hunsford, Kent

Elizabeth Bennet had come to the conclusion, after only a week's sojourn, that Kent would, if it were not for a few of her acquaintances there, be quite a lovely place to reside. The Garden of England it was called and she could well understand how it came to be named so. Even now, in mid March, the signs of spring were evident some weeks before they were to be seen in Hertfordshire. Trees had that small touch of green as buds on their limbs were close to unfolding, bulbs were pushing their shoots up through the damp earth and the air, if not warm, had lost that touch of cold damp that spoke of winter. If the ground was muddier than she liked, her boots were warm and well able to protect her feet from mud and water. Her petticoats were another matter but not one to bother her greatly. Who was to notice anyway? Her mother was at Longbourn. If her cousin, Mr. Collins, looked askance, he could be ignored. She was here at his wife's invitation and Charlotte knew her too well to be bothered by such trifles. Elizabeth was astonished that she was here at all. She had been visiting her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner when Mr. Collins had visited Longbourn. Her mother had wanted her home and had made it clear in her summoning letter that her least favoured daughter was to return home to be offered up as a prospective wife for Mr. Collins. Her father had been sufficiently roused from his customary indolence to provide a dismayingly accurate portrait sketch of Mr. Collins and his intentions of acquiring a Bennet daughter as a wife; a circumstance that her mother greatly favoured and was a source of substantial amusement to him.

Mrs. Bennet was always in search of husbands for her five daughters and, with an estate entailed away to Mr. Collins, she viewed her situation as particularly perilous. Elizabeth was sympathetic with her mother's concerns but she was in no wise interested in salvaging her mother's future by sacrificing her own in a marriage to a man whom her father assured her was, in every way, ridiculous. She had, upon her subsequent return to Longbourn, to be in Mr. Collins's presence less than an half-hour to learn that her father's description had been charitable. Mr. Collins was a respectable man but in no respect one she would accept as a husband. She could only marvel at her friend's decision, and, had there been any point in doing so, would have argued strongly against Charlotte's agreeing to marry him. However, as he proposed and had obtained Charlotte's consent whilst she was in London with her relatives, she could only stand by her friend at the altar as she became Mrs. Collins. To this day, she was not sure why she consented to Charlotte's request, after the wedding, to visit her over Easter, but accept it she had and now she was here in Kent.

She could only be thankful that her father had been kind enough to warn her of Mr. Collins's intentions and character, although the warning itself was unnecessary. The wishes of her mother had been obvious from the start but Mrs. Bennet had not been willing to stand against both her husband and her brother, Elizabeth's Uncle Gardiner, and had finally desisted in her attempts to have Elizabeth return to Longbourn. From the little Jane had disclosed, it appeared that their mother had tried to direct Mr. Collins's attentions towards Mary, the third

oldest and plainest of the five sisters and away from Jane, the eldest and most beautiful. Of course, if Jane had not been seemingly courted by Mr. Bingley, the gentleman who had leased Netherfield, it was not improbable that Mrs. Bennet would have directed him towards Jane. However, Mary was spared the indignity of Mr. Collins' attentions and, as he chose to court Charlotte Lucas instead of Mary Bennet, Elizabeth could only assume that Mary's attractions were deemed insufficient. Certainly, both Mrs. Bennet and Mary had appeared quite inconsolable at his wilfulness.

To further compound their misery, Mr. Bingley had departed Hertfordshire without making an offer of marriage to Jane Bennet and, from what little Elizabeth could learn, had never any attentions of doing so. At least that was what must be inferred from the letters Jane received from his sisters after his departure. For it appeared that his affections were to be given to the sister of his friend who had accompanied him into Hertfordshire. Even her Aunt Gardiner had opined that it was not infrequently the case that young men did not always moderate their attentions as they should and often gave rise to expectations that they had no intentions of fulfilling. Elizabeth thought it spoke poorly of Mr. Bingley's character to have behaved in such a way as to attach her sister's affections to himself, lead her to believe that they were returned, when all the while he had, or was forming, an attachment to another young woman. Jane was left to face the censure and derision of the neighbourhood for hopes that had been, it appeared, promulgated most assiduously by her mother.

In one respect, Elizabeth knew her time in London had been enlightening. She knew herself to be a romantic. A desire to marry where a strong affection existed between herself and her intended had been, prior to her visit, a foundation of her beliefs as to the type of suitor she would encourage. It had taken only a month of observing the gentlemen to whom she had been introduced, and no few conversations with her Aunt Gardiner, to modify that opinion. She had no dowry or connections worthy of mention, and only her charms to recommend her. If she hoped to marry, she would need to be practical enough to realize that finding the perfect suitor might prove impossible. Her aunt had convinced her, finally, that if she could find a man whom she could respect and admire, and who returned her sentiments, that love could develop after the marriage took place. As a consequence, she was able to assess those gentlemen who approached her with more discrimination than hitherto. That she was not approached by one who was prepared to offer for her was unfortunate; however, her aunt did give her to believe that she was viewed quite favourably and that, should she return in the future, her prospects might be more favourable. Mr. Northcott might well, she thought, answer her hopes.

If Elizabeth was slightly disheartened at returning unattached, her mother was even more so, and not slow or reluctant to apportion the blame fully on her daughter. She was sure that had she been able to accompany her, they would be preparing Elizabeth's wedding clothes. It proved fruitless for Elizabeth to assert that she was well aware of the need to marry; that the entail on the Longbourn estate left herself and all of her sisters to face genteel poverty if they remained unmarried was too obvious to warrant mention. Her mother could not be convinced that she had not spurned or discouraged suitors, and her lamentations were a constant source of aggravation to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had returned to Longbourn at Christmas in company with the Gardiners and had not been home a half day when it became obvious that her older and dearest sister was

suffering from a broken heart. She took upon herself the duty to try and mend that heart and, as she knew little of the gentleman other than what Jane had cautiously revealed in her letters, she was not disposed to think kindly of him, nor was she inclined to believe that her sister was anything but better for his loss. For, as she said to her, “His is an inconstant heart, Jane. If he could take such liberties with yours now, how much assurance could you place on his constancy, should you marry him? It is not to be thought of, surely!”

If Jane was quietly unhappy about Mr. Bingley’s defection, her mother was much more vociferous in her denunciations and was not above exclaiming several times a day that Mr. Bingley had used her daughter very ill. Such lamentations did little to soothe her daughter but Elizabeth felt she had achieved some success in alleviating her sister’s unhappiness and believed that, were Jane to return to London with the Gardiners, she would be restored to her usual happy spirits within a month or two, once relieved of her mother’s distressing reminders. As the Gardiners were sympathetic to the situation and Mr. Bennet not unwilling to part with Jane, it was so ordered and came to pass.

As Jane was inclined to think well of Mr. Bingley’s two sisters who had accompanied him into Hertfordshire, her inclination was to call upon them after she arrived in town. This Elizabeth and her aunt were firmly against. For it would not promote Jane’s peace of mind to be in company with the sisters of a gentleman who had treated her so poorly. Jane’s civility was such that she was reluctant to end the relationship with Mr. Bingley’s sisters, believing that they held her in regard, but agreed that she would only call on them if they were to call on her first. She notified them of her arrival and location, and waited for them to call. And waited. When more than a fortnight had passed and they did not call, she could not but agree that they did not wish to maintain their acquaintance and, with some difficulty, required herself to think of them, and Mr. Bingley, no more.

When Elizabeth arrived at Gracechurch Street to stay overnight with the Gardiners and her sister on her way to Hunsford to visit Charlotte, she was pleased to see that Jane had been restored to a semblance of good cheer and seemingly had decided to be pleased with the society in which her aunt and uncle moved. That her beauty and cheerful manner had already drawn some interest was vouchsafed by her aunt who nonetheless saw fit to caution Elizabeth.

“Do not suppose, Lizzy, that your mother would be greatly pleased with the gentlemen that are displaying an interest in your sister. They do not possess estates nor are they particularly wealthy; but they have, all of them, a decent competence and are well able to support a wife and family; however, they will not, at least in the near future, be able to support your mother and sisters in the way she might wish.”

“That should not be the main consideration. If Jane would be happy with one of them, then the rest of her family must be content.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded, “On this you and I may agree; however, your mother will be unhappy and may prove to be an obstacle.”

“Perhaps” suggested Elizabeth carefully, “any courtship should take place here and without our mother’s knowledge.”



“Perhaps.” replied Mrs. Gardiner, and then changed the subject to discuss their vacation that summer. The Gardiners were to travel to the Lakes and wished Elizabeth to accompany them. As this met with her approval and she hoped, rather than believed, her father would not object when applied to, the matter was settled until Mr. Bennet’s approval could be obtained; however, as Elizabeth had not relinquished her plans to return to partake of the small season in the autumn, she doubted her father would welcome her absence for such an extended period. His approval was far from assured.

So here she was, ensconced in the Parsonage in Hunsford. The first fortnight of her visit had passed comfortably enough and she had found sufficient amusement in the absurdities of her cousin and his Patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, as to make their company, if not pleasant, at least tolerable and certainly a source of some entertainment. At their last visit with Lady Catherine and her daughter, Ann de Bourgh (who, despite Mr. Collins’ proclamation of her as a beautiful and accomplished lady, was neither), Elizabeth and the Collinses were to learn that two nephews of her ladyship, a Mr. Darcy and a Colonel Fitzwilliam, were soon to visit her for a fortnight.

Elizabeth had not met either gentleman, however, her friend had met Mr. Darcy, for he had accompanied the Mr. Bingley who had leased Netherfield Park, which lay within a few miles of Longbourn, and treated her sister Jane so poorly. Mr. Collins also had a slight acquaintance with the gentleman; however, neither of the Collinses would claim to know him well. As for Elizabeth, while she had never met the gentleman, she had been apprised of some gossip about him to the effect that he had behaved poorly to an officer, a Mr. Wickham, whom she had met casually when she had returned to Longbourn. She had found that gentleman to be very amiable and certainly handsome but was somewhat shocked that he would speak so freely about another gentleman in his absence. As she was in a position to neither prove nor refute Mr. Wickham’s claims, she had long ago resolved to pay them little heed. Thus when Mr. Wickham began to pay her particular attention and sought to solicit her favour by speaking of his ill-usage at the hands of Mr. Darcy, she had no difficulty in making her disinterest in the matter clear to him and he importuned her no more. It seemed to her that once she had done so, his attentions to her declined markedly in favour of other ladies. As she had no particular interest in him – his poverty precluded any consideration of him as a potential suitor – his loss did not bother her at all. He remained a conversable acquaintance (provided Mr. Darcy was not the object), but nothing more.

The arrival of Lady Catherine’s two nephews excited Mr. Collins exceedingly, and the day that they were to arrive he spent walking the whole morning within view of the lodge’s opening into Hunsford Lane, in order to have the earliest assurance of it. Espying their carriage, he made his bow as it turned into the park and then hurried home with the great intelligence. On the following morning he hastened to Rosings to pay his respects. As expected there were two nephews of Lady Catherine to require them, for Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, the younger son of his uncle, Lord \_\_\_\_\_, had, indeed, arrived.

When Mr. Collins returned, it was with the news that the gentlemen would call upon the Parsonage the next day; and, true to their word, they did so. Mr. Collins, in anticipation of their visit had walked some way towards the manor house, met the gentlemen and accompanied them back to his home. Charlotte had seen them, from her husband’s room,

crossing the road, and immediately running into the other, told Elizabeth and Maria Lucas, who had accompanied her to Hunsford, what an honor they might expect.

Their approach was announced by the door-bell, and shortly afterwards the three gentlemen entered the room. Colonel Fitzwilliam, who led the way, was about thirty, not handsome, but in person and address most truly the gentleman. Mr. Darcy was viewed by Elizabeth with particular interest. The few reports she had of him, apart from Mr. Wickham's, were of a tall, proud man who thought poorly of the company he had encountered in Hertfordshire. She had, however, again discounting Mr. Wickham's claims, heard nothing bad of him other than he had declined to be agreeable to her neighbours. Civil, he apparently had been, but hardly more and frequently inclined to a degree of haughty behaviour that many found offensive. He had been termed disagreeable but it appeared that his real fault was that he was extremely reserved and disinclined to make himself agreeable.

With his current behaviour, she could find no fault. He paid his compliments to Mrs. Collins; and, whatever might be his feelings towards her friend, met her with every appearance of composure. Elizabeth merely curtsied to him, without saying a word. He looked at her with, she thought, some interest and assumed that he may have learned of her existence while in Hertfordshire. Colonel Fitzwilliam entered into conversation directly with the readiness and ease of a well-bred man, and talked very pleasantly; but his cousin, after having addressed a slight observation on the house and garden to Mrs. Collins, sat for some time without speaking to anybody. At length, however, his civility was so far awakened as to enquire of Elizabeth whether she was related to the Bennets of Longbourn and, learning that to be the case, asked after the health of her family. She answered him in the usual way, and, in an effort to engage him further in conversation, inquired into his impressions of Hertfordshire and whether he had enjoyed his visit there. She was to learn that he found the country pleasant and the hunting, excellent. On the society, he did not comment. Further conversation from him was not to be had and the gentlemen soon afterwards went away.

Colonel Fitzwilliam's manners were very much admired at the parsonage, and the ladies all felt that he must add considerably to the pleasure of their engagements at Rosings. It was some days, however, before they received an invitation thither, for while there were visitors in the house they could not be necessary; and it was not till Easter-day, almost a week after the gentlemen's arrival, that they were honoured by such an attention, and then they were merely asked on leaving church to come there in the evening. For the last week they had seen very little of either Lady Catherine or her daughter; however, both Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam had called at the parsonage more than once during the time. The invitation was accepted of course, and at a proper hour they joined the party in Lady Catherine's drawing room. Her ladyship received them civilly, but it was plain that their company was by no means so acceptable as when she could get nobody else; and she was, in fact, almost engrossed by her nephews, speaking to them, especially to Darcy, much more than to any other person in the room.

As Elizabeth sat alone in her room later that night, she began to recollect all the events of the evening with the hope of making sense of all that had transpired. Of Lady Catherine, there was little new to be gleaned. She was as officiously condescending and interfering as ever. That she, who had never learned to play the pianoforte, would feel compelled to offer advice

on technique and, more particularly, on proper fingering, was laughable and Elizabeth had felt no compunction at ignoring such foolishness, for foolishness it was.

About Colonel Fitzwilliam, she was less sure. He had, without a doubt, paid her uncommon attentions and had seemed really glad to see her. She suspected that anything was a welcome relief to him at Rosings. He had seated himself by her, and talked so agreeably of Kent and Hertfordshire, of travelling and staying at home, of new books and music, that Elizabeth had never been half so well entertained in that room before; and they conversed with so much spirit and flow, as to draw the attention of both Lady Catherine and Mr. Darcy.

Lady Catherine's interest was soon revealed to be a concern that a conversation was taking of which she had no part, a situation her nature could not allow to continue. It had led to Elizabeth being persuaded to play the pianoforte, an activity that had absorbed her time for the remainder of the evening. As it removed her, for the most part, from Lady Catherine's attention, she did not repine being so engaged.

It was Mr. Darcy who confounded her. The reports she had of him from Hertfordshire were of a proud, haughty, disdainful gentleman. If she were to credit Mr. Wickham, he was a dishonourable one as well; however, she had seen nothing in the latter gentleman's behaviour to lend credence to Mr. Wickham's assertions. In fact, as that gentleman had clearly directed his attentions to a Miss Mary King only after learning that she had inherited ten thousand pounds, Elizabeth was more inclined to believe him to be as mercenary as some of the men she had encountered, and been warned against by her aunt, during her visit in London. A fortune-hunter, in truth. She had seen nor heard anything in his actions that would improve her opinion of him.

If she had not been privy to such reports, she would have viewed Mr. Darcy as extremely reserved, undoubtedly proud - and with reason for he was in possession of wealth, an estate and was quite the handsomest man she had ever met - and no more. Disdain she had not encountered; he had been extremely civil in his behaviour to her and Mrs. Collins which, given the difference in their stations, would suggest the very opposite of disdain.

The evening that had passed only served to augment her good opinion of him. He had accepted his aunt's demand for his attention with civility, if not pleasure, had spoken firmly in support of his sister when Lady Catherine appeared to censure her for not practicing the pianoforte enough, had even been displeased, perhaps embarrassed, at his aunt's ungracious offer to allow Elizabeth to practice in a part of the house where she would not, as Lady Catherine put it, "be in anyone's way".

Elizabeth had, more than once, noticed that he appeared to be staring at her and she wondered at his doing so. She was not unaware of the reasons that a gentleman might act in such a manner but it was hard for her to believe that one of such consequence would be attracted to her, but she could think of no other explanation. She had seen nothing of disdain towards herself from him; in fact, his behaviour in the latter part of the evening had been rather solicitous. He had taken her quite by surprise when he joined Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had undertaken the office of turning the music sheets for her, at the pianoforte. To have deliberately removed himself from his aunt's company in preference to her own was not something to be ignored, and, while she could easily attribute it to a dissatisfaction with

being required to attend Lady Catherine exclusively, Elizabeth suspected that a small part of her own vanity hoped the pleasure of her company drew him hither. For he had come and had not been as reticent as usual. She had inquired of his sister and her enjoyment in music and it was a subject on which he was quite willing to speak. The picture she formed of the young Miss Darcy, for it appeared she was but fifteen, was of a shy girl, lacking confidence in company but possessed of a considerable talent in music. Both cousins were warm in their praise of her abilities although on one occasion she had made a teasing remark, which had elicited an unusual reaction. What had she said? Oh yes. "Does your charge give you much trouble?" Thinking of her own sisters, she had continued, "Young ladies of her age are sometimes a little difficult to manage."

The response had been odd to say the least, for Mr. Darcy had frowned and the Colonel had looked at her earnestly and inquired why she supposed that Miss Darcy likely to give them any uneasiness.

It seemed clear that somehow she had gotten near the truth; fortunately she was able to calm their concerns with her reply.

"You need not be alarmed, for I have neither met nor heard anything of Miss Darcy."

Shortly thereafter the carriage was called to return the visitors to the Parsonage and Elizabeth was left to her musings. Charlotte, who had not been so absorbed with Lady Catherine's discourse as to be unmindful of the attentions being paid to her pretty friend, had visited Elizabeth in her room to speak privately to her.

"Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam paid you a great deal of attention tonight, Eliza."

"The Colonel, perhaps. I am not sure that Mr. Darcy's attentions were designed more to avoid his aunt's company than to enjoy mine."

Charlotte shook her head, "I think not! It is possible, of course, but he did stare at you a great deal and certainly attended closely anything you said."

"I can hardly credit either gentleman with a serious intent, Charlotte. The son of an earl and a gentleman of Mr. Darcy's consequence do not form attachments to one in my position. It is not to be thought of!"

"I suggest that you do consider it, Eliza. I do not know the Colonel's circumstances, but he appears to like your company a great deal and it would be a most suitable match."

Elizabeth laughed, "I had not thought you a match-maker, Charlotte."

"Just consider the possibility, Eliza. That is all I ask."

Having elicited the required promise, Charlotte departed to leave Elizabeth to her thoughts. If she had known of Mr. Darcy's musings her discomposure might have been extreme.

For Darcy had found his eyes had been soon and repeatedly turned towards Elizabeth and his cousin. Curiosity was compounded by a feeling of regret that his aunt demanded such close

attention to her and his cousin Anne that he was not allowed a share in that other conversation.

When Elizabeth consented to entertain them on the pianoforte, he had not known what to expect. It was soon clear that her technical expertise was less than that of his sister and he could only suppose she had not the same access to masters that his sister had enjoyed. Nonetheless, she played with such emotion and understanding of the music as to make her performance extremely pleasurable. It had taken no small amount of self-control not to reprove his aunt for interrupting his enjoyment of the performance by resuming a conversation of some trivial matter that was of interest to herself and her parson only.

He had endured that situation for several minutes before his discontent was sufficient to remove himself to join his cousin and watch the fair performer. Darcy hardly knew what to think of her. He had heard the occasional mention of Miss Elizabeth Bennet whilst staying with his friend at Netherfield Park. He could remember Sir William Lucas referring to her on one occasion as a jewel of the county. As that gentleman was prone to hyperbole, he had discounted the report and indeed, upon meeting her for the first time at the Parsonage, he had considered himself wise to have done so. Now he had begun to realize that his first impression had greatly misjudged the lady's attractiveness. If there was a want of symmetry in her figure, it was light and pleasing. Her manners were not those of the society in which he usually moved but there was a liveliness and kindness that appealed greatly and, if not beautiful in the usual sense, her eyes possessed intelligence and a charm that he found enthralling.

He could not help himself. She had drawn him to the pianoforte. She deigned to notice his approach but cast only a fleeting glance his way before returning her attention to the pianoforte's keyboard. He listened with enjoyment as she performed. Their conversation was equally pleasing. Her manner was lively and teasing but he could not see that she distinguished between himself and his cousin. Certainly, she did not afford him those uncomfortable attentions that seemed to be the province of most unattached ladies with whom he was acquainted. The intrusion of his aunt had been most unwelcome and her manner was not one to recommend her to anyone; yet Miss Bennet responded to each insult with civility and he had yet to detect the slightest degree of deference to his aunt beyond what was due her as the hostess. That was, he thought, quite remarkable in and of itself, given the differences in station between Miss Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

He tried to recall what he knew of her circumstances. That she had little fortune he understood, and her father's estate was quite modest in size and, unfortunately, entailed away – to his aunt's parson, no less. He remembered his discussions with his friend. Bingley had been quite enamoured with Jane Bennet, Elizabeth's older sister. Darcy had spoken against the connection, citing those concerns he had with respect to the family. The lack of fortune and connections aside, the most serious objections he had voiced to his friend had been the uniformly inappropriate behaviour of all the family apart from Miss Bennet herself. With her he could find only one fault. She had not loved his friend and it was clearly implied, from her mother's very own words, expressed frequently and loudly in the public setting of the ball held at Netherfield Park, that Miss Bennet would not be allowed to refuse an offer of marriage should it be made. It was to spare his friend the burdens of a loveless marriage, obligations to support his wife's family after the death of her father, and the opprobrium

resulting from that family's behaviour, that he had argued so strongly against Bingley pursuing an attachment. His arguments had been successful, although he could not be happy that his friend's spirits remained poor even now, almost five months after separating himself from Jane Bennet.

All the objections that he had voiced with respect to Jane Bennet remained, although he could now affirm with confidence that any censure that might be levied against the Bennet family could not be attached to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Her comportment was without fault. He wished to know her better.

## **In which Mr. Darcy's admiration for Miss Elizabeth Bennet is formed**

March 1812 - Hunsford, Kent

Elizabeth was sitting by herself the next morning, writing to Jane, while Mrs. Collins and Maria were gone on business into the village, when she was startled by a ring at the door, the certain signal of a visitor. She had not heard a carriage and thought it possible that Lady Catherine had called, as she was wont to do. Putting away her unfinished letter, for her ladyship would not be above inquiring into its contents, she was surprised to see Mr. Darcy, and Mr. Darcy only, enter the room.

He seemed astonished on finding her alone, and apologized for his intrusion by informing her that he had understood all the ladies to be within. They then sat down, and when her inquiries into Rosings were made, seemed in danger of sinking into total silence; this she was resolved should not happen. Uncertain as to what subjects might be of interest to so august an individual, she began to speak of her appreciation for Kent and inquired of him whether he visited his aunt every Easter.

He admitted that he did so, and usually in company with his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Lady Catherine appears to enjoy your visits greatly.”

He allowed that to be so and added, “Our visits have a practical purpose. My cousin and I are here also at the request of my uncle, Lord \_\_\_\_\_, who wishes us to ensure that the accounts are in order, that tenant needs are being met and, in general, that all is well with the management of the estate.”

At Elizabeth's quizzical look, he added, “His lordship is a trustee for the estate which my cousin will inherit upon her marriage.”

At Elizabeth's nod of understanding, he looked around the room and said, “This seems a very comfortable house. Lady Catherine, I believe, did a great deal to it when Mr. Collins first came to Hunsford.”

“I believe she did — and I am sure she could not have bestowed her kindness on a more grateful object.”

“Mr. Collins also appears very fortunate in his choice of a wife.”

“Yes, indeed; his friends may well rejoice in his having met with one of the very few sensible women who would have accepted him, or have made him happy if they had. My friend has an excellent understanding — though I am not certain that I consider her marrying Mr. Collins as the wisest thing she ever did. She seems perfectly happy, however, and in a prudential light, it is certainly a very good match for her.”

“It must be very agreeable to her to be settled within so easy a distance of her own family and friends.”

“An easy distance do you call it? It is nearly fifty miles.”

“And what is fifty miles of good road? Little more than half a day’s journey. Yes, I call it a very easy distance.”

“I should never have considered the distance as one of the advantages of the match,” stated Elizabeth. “I am sure Mrs. Collins does not believe herself settled near her family.”

“It is a proof of your own attachment to Hertfordshire. Anything beyond the very neighbourhood of Longbourn, I suppose, would appear far.”

Mr. Darcy then drew his chair a little towards her, and said, “I find it hard to believe that you have such a very strong local attachment. I know you have not always been at Longbourn.”

As he spoke there was a sort of smile, which Elizabeth did not understand and so chose to answer bluntly, “I fear that attachment to one’s family is a luxury most women cannot afford unless possessed of an independent fortune. We needs must make our home where a husband has settled.”

The tinge of a smile that she believed herself to have seen was gone and his look was sombre but earnest, “Do you consider that a disadvantage of marriage, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth shook her head and a wry smile twisted her lips, “In some instances, and with some families, a greater distance is to be wished for.”

She did not know how well acquainted with her family he was and thought her allusion to it may well have escaped his understanding. She was unable to observe his reaction as his hand had covered his lips after she spoke.

She paused briefly. “But as to settling some distance from ones’ family, the far and the near must be relative, and depend on many varying circumstances. Where there is fortune to make the expense of travelling unimportant, distance becomes no evil. But that is not the case with Mr. and Mrs. Collins. They have a comfortable income, but not such a one as will allow of frequent journeys — and I am persuaded my friend would not call herself near her family under less than half the present distance.”

His next question quite surprised her.

“I was given to understand, Miss Bennet, that you enjoyed the small season in London last autumn. Was it the first time you had done so?”

Elizabeth agreed that she had and indeed it was her first season.

“For you see,” she added, “my father quite dislikes London and it was only by chance that I attended.”



Darcy looked interested and asked her to explain, which she promptly did, explaining that she had been a last minute replacement for her elder sister.

“And” she said, “I was quite pleased to be afforded the opportunity for, as it turned out, my absence undoubtedly spared me much aggravation.”

At the obvious questioning cast to Darcy’s features, she laughed, “It appears that Mr. Collins had come searching for a wife amongst the Bennet daughters and my mother was determined to throw me in his path. My father and my uncle were not agreeable to my returning to Longbourn for such a purpose and Mr. Collins turned his attention elsewhere to the satisfaction of us both.”

“Mr. Collins would have made you an offer of marriage?”

Elizabeth laughed at the incredulous tone of Darcy’s statement. “Indeed, sir! Is it so surprising that a respectable man would wish to offer for me? Mr. Collins is to inherit my father’s estate and my mother considered it a most advantageous match for her and my sisters.”

“And you did not?” he replied, “And I am sure you realize that I meant no disparagement of yourself by my comment.” “Quite the reverse.” he thought to himself.

Elizabeth shook her head, “I had no knowledge of Mr. Collins’s character at that time, although my father’s description was sufficient for me to understand we would not suit at all. No! I would not have accepted him if he were to offer and he would have been very much insulted by such a refusal. My father, I am sure, would have supported me, although my mother would have been greatly displeased. As my uncle observed, Mr. Collins’ treatment of the family after my father’s passing might not have been altogether charitable.”

“I think your uncle showed considerable discernment. Is his the family with whom you stayed while in London?”

“Yes. My aunt and uncle Gardiner – he is my mother’s brother – have been very close to Jane and myself through the years. We visit as often as our father will spare us.”

As Elizabeth was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the direction of their conversation, she began a short dialogue on the subject of the country which, on either side, was calm and concise — and was soon ended by the entrance of Charlotte and her sister, just returned from their walk. The tête-à-tête surprised them. Mr. Darcy related the mistake that had occasioned his intruding on Miss Bennet, and after sitting a few minutes longer without saying much to anybody, went away.

“What can be the meaning of this!” said Charlotte, as soon as he was gone. “My dear Eliza he must be in love with you, or he would never have called on us in this familiar way.”

Elizabeth could not say from his conversation that it was impossible but to them both it did not seem very likely, even to Charlotte’s wishes, to be the case; and after various conjectures, they could at last only suppose his visit to proceed from the difficulty of finding anything to do, which was the more probable from the time of year. All field sports were over. Within

doors there was Lady Catherine, books, and a billiard table, but gentlemen cannot be always within doors; and in the nearness of the Parsonage, or the pleasantness of the walk to it, or of the people who lived in it, the two cousins found a temptation from this period of walking thither almost every day.

They called at various times of the morning, sometimes separately, sometimes together, and now and then accompanied by their aunt. It was plain to them all that Colonel Fitzwilliam came because he had pleasure in their society, a persuasion that of course recommended him still more. Elizabeth was reminded by her own satisfaction in being with him, as well as by his evident admiration of her, of George Wickham; and, in comparing them, she saw that while there was less captivating softness in Colonel Fitzwilliam's manners, he might have the better informed mind. And, as the two men were much of an age, she wondered at the difference in rank. Mr. Wickham had but purchased his commission the past autumn, the Colonel had served in the military for a number of years. Why had Mr. Wickham not done so as well, given his circumstances? Such questions did not improve her opinion of that gentleman.

Why Mr. Darcy came so often to the Parsonage, it was more difficult to understand. And his manner, when he called in company with the Colonel or when Elizabeth was accompanied by Charlotte and her sister, was much different than when he encountered Elizabeth by herself.

He could not come for society, as he frequently sat there ten minutes together without opening his lips; and when he did speak, it seemed the effect of necessity rather than of choice — a sacrifice to propriety, not a pleasure to himself. He seldom appeared really animated. Mrs. Collins knew not what to make of him. Colonel Fitzwilliam's occasionally laughing at his stupidity, proved that he was generally different, and as Elizabeth had vouchsafed from how easily they had conversed when he had called on her alone, Charlotte could only be puzzled by such a difference in behaviour. As she would have liked to believe this change the effect of love, and the object of that love, her friend Eliza, she set herself seriously to work to find it out. She watched him whenever they were at Rosings, and whenever he came to Hunsford; but without much success. He certainly looked at her friend a great deal, but the expression of that look was disputable. It was an earnest, steadfast gaze, but she often doubted whether there were much admiration in it, and sometimes it seemed nothing but absence of mind.

She had once or twice suggested to Elizabeth the possibility of his being partial to her. Elizabeth had been unable to discount the idea altogether; however, Mrs. Collins did not think it right to press the subject, from the danger of raising expectations which might only end in disappointment; for in her opinion it admitted not of a doubt, that her friend would be too prudent to reject such a suitor. In her kind schemes for Elizabeth, she sometimes planned her marrying Colonel Fitzwilliam. He was beyond comparison the pleasantest man; he certainly admired her, and his situation in life was most eligible; but, to counterbalance these advantages, Mr. Darcy had considerable patronage in the church, and his cousin could have none at all.

More than once did Elizabeth in her ramble within the Park, unexpectedly meet Mr. Darcy. On the occasion of it happening the first time, she casually mentioned that it was a favourite haunt of hers. It was, she considered, an opportunity to determine whether Mr. Darcy was

interested in her. On the occasion of their first meeting it was not merely a few formal enquiries and an awkward pause and then away, but he actually thought it necessary to turn back and walk with her. She was pleased when she encountered him a second and then a third time. Such meetings could not be by chance and she began to accept that he was deliberately seeking her company. That she was encountering him thus she concealed from her friend for she understood that, if Charlotte were to learn of his attentions, she might feel an obligation to advise Mr. Collins of the situation, and, as she knew well, Mr. Collins had nary a single thought that would not be shared with Lady Catherine and that lady's interest she did not wish to incite. As well, should Mr. Darcy decide not to pursue his interest, only she would know what might have been and she would not be plagued by the type of speculation and gossip that attended her sister when Mr. Bingley departed Netherfield Park.

They did not meet every day and she could only suppose that his business with the estate made demands on his attention. At first he never said a great deal, and so she quickly undertook the office of initiating their conversations. It soon became apparent that his was an active, inquiring intelligence and that he had gained a considerable understanding of the world from practical experience and from a love of reading. He did not seek to limit their discussions to particular subjects and she learned that he would listen and accept any argument, even one he disagreed with, provided it was presented in a rational manner.

She found she quite enjoyed his company although it bothered her that he was so reticent when others were around. She was confused by this behaviour and began to ponder the reasons for it. She had made numerous attempts to involve him in the discussions that took place when he called at the Parsonage but his responses were invariably brief and she could detect none of the focus or warmth displayed so frequently when it was just the two of them. Of some import to her was his relationship with Mr. Bingley. It had puzzled her that the latter had apparently paid particular attention to her sister, to the point where the whole neighbourhood anticipated an offer of marriage, and then disappeared. She had convinced her sister that he was inconstant and unworthy of her affection and wondered if Mr. Darcy could enlighten her on Mr. Bingley's character. It was, she thought, rather odd that he had never mentioned his friend or his dealings with her sister, although, if his friend was the type to trifle with a woman's heart, that subject might be one he, understandably, would prefer to avoid. Another matter she wondered at was Mr. Wickham. She had seen nothing to lend credit to that man's story of infamous treatment at Mr. Darcy's hands. In fact, everything she had learned about Mr. Darcy would appear to refute the charges laid to his account. But, if the stories were indeed false, why would Mr. Wickham give them voice? What could he hope to achieve? It was as impossible not to wish to know, as it was to ask.

She broached the matter of Mr. Bingley on one of their strolls.

"Your friend, Mr. Bingley, still holds the lease on Netherfield Park, I believe."

Mr. Darcy agreed that he did.

"I think I have understood that he does not intend to return to Netherfield again?"

"I have never heard him say so; but it is probable that he may spend very little of his time there in future. He has many friends, and he is at a time of life when friends and engagements are continually increasing."

“I was not present, of course, while he was there and have never met the gentleman but it seems to me that he departed rather unexpectedly from Netherfield last November. I understand he was an extremely agreeable gentleman. My sister wrote me often and thought very well of him. But to leave so suddenly! Is he always so impulsive?”

“Bingley is, by nature, inclined that way.”

Elizabeth thought that Darcy seemed slightly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation and wondered at the cause. To press a little more did not appear unreasonable.

“He has been described as very amiable, perhaps too amiable.”

Darcy looked at her closely and several seconds passed before he responded.

“I do not take your meaning, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth grimaced, “I encountered, last autumn, several gentlemen who were all amiability.” She smiled wryly, “They flirted outrageously, made love to the most attractive woman in the room, frequently repeating their efforts at subsequent meetings and then dropping the acquaintance altogether. I saw several young girls whose affections were touched. It was most cruelly done. I hope your friend is not such a one.”

“I have often seen Bingley in love.” Darcy admitted. “He is young and amiable and sometimes is not as cautious as might be advisable; however, I have never known him to trifle with a lady’s affections.”

“Have you not?” replied Elizabeth, making every effort to mask the scepticism she felt. Darcy did not respond but she was not unaware of the look of displeasure on his countenance. She decided to ignore it and shift the subject slightly.

“Well, if he means to be but little at Netherfield, it would be better for the neighbourhood that he should give up the place entirely, for then we might possibly get a settled family there. But perhaps Mr. Bingley did not take the house so much for the convenience of the neighbourhood as for his own, and we must expect him to keep or quit it on the same principle.”

“I should not be surprised,” said Darcy, “if he were to give it up, as soon as any eligible purchase offers.”

Elizabeth made no answer. She was afraid of talking longer of his friend; and, having nothing else to say on the subject, was determined to leave the trouble of finding a subject to him. Fortunately for them both, the Parsonage was shortly in sight and he took his leave of her.

They did not meet the next day but as it was not uncommon for her to enjoy her walk in solitude she thought very little of the matter; however, she was unaccompanied the following day as well and began to wonder if she had somehow offended him. That question and another was partially addressed that evening. They had been invited to dine at Rosings Park and Elizabeth encountered Darcy and the Colonel shortly after their arrival. For once apparently determined to offer up more than the barest of comment, Darcy gave her to

understand that he and his cousin had been required for the last two days to visit tenants on the far reaches of the estate. Her mind relieved on that matter, the conversation, supported mainly by Elizabeth and the Colonel, drifted to other matters until they were called to dine.

When they had finished eating and removed to the drawing room, Elizabeth once more found her attention claimed by the Colonel whilst Darcy was perforce required to attend his aunt. For their part, Elizabeth and Colonel Fitzwilliam had begun to discuss the mischief that they had gotten into as children and the Colonel had related a story involving Darcy and himself on an occasion that they had visited Rosings Park with their parents.

“. . .and our fathers, Miss Bennet, were not at all amused by the incident. I assure you that neither of us sat when we ate that evening. We did not repine though and considered ourselves fortunate to have been fed at all.” He lowered his voice, “It is fortunate that our punishment was not placed in the hands of our aunt, for we would have been treated even more harshly.”

Elizabeth’s peal of laughter drew the attention of the remainder of the company and Darcy’s glance was accompanied by a scowl, which only the Colonel and Elizabeth noticed and only the former could account for. Lady Catherine was not disposed to ignore the incident and spoke in her usual manner.

“What has made Miss Bennet laugh, nephew? I would have my share of the conversation. If one must interrupt the conversation of others, one must expect to explain the matter to us all.”

Elizabeth replied before the Colonel could do so. “Colonel Fitzwilliam was simply speaking of himself and Mr. Darcy when they visited Rosings as boys, your ladyship.”

“And this caused such unseemly behaviour, Miss Bennet?”

Mr. Collins thought to contribute his share to the conversation. “My cousin’s behaviour is most inappropriate and you may be sure that. . .”

Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam spoke almost as one.

“Mr. Collins. . .” said the first, while the latter stated firmly, “I assure you, sir. . .”

A quick exchange of glances and a nod from the Colonel allowed Darcy the privilege and his words were quite firm.

“Mr. Collins, I assure you that I seriously doubt Miss Bennet would know how to behave in an unseemly manner. She is not the first person that my cousin has conversed with to find amusement in his stories.” He turned to Lady Catherine, “I am sure, aunt, that you did not truly mean to suggest that Miss Bennet’s honest laughter was inappropriate.”

That lady, who was not inclined to disagree with anything this nephew wished for, in the expectation that he would at some point offer for her daughter, was forced to concede the point. However, she was not to be gainsaid on the principal matter.

“Very well! It must be so. But I will have you explain yourself, Fitzwilliam.”

The Colonel did so; however, the story he related bore little resemblance to that told Elizabeth, for as he confessed later, "My aunt was unaware of the incident and it is not one which she would find at all amusing." As the incident involved dressing a scarecrow with his aunt's clothing, Elizabeth could well understand his reluctance. As it was, the tale that was revealed to the whole company involved Darcy, the Colonel and a boy of a similar age by the name of George.

Elizabeth noticed that Darcy's scowl increased when the latter was named and the Colonel had hardly finished when Lady Catherine spoke angrily, "George Wickham! He was a dissolute creature even then, Darcy. I never understood your father's preference for him. It was a disgrace. He was but the son of his steward and to treat him as well as a member of the family. It was not to be borne. I had to deny him Rosings Park, you know, after that summer."

Colonel Fitzwilliam looked surprised, "I wondered why he never returned with us."

"I spoke to your father, Darcy but he could not, or would not, see the problem. But George Wickham was, even then, not to be trusted. I had to insist the girl be sent away."

"I had not known" said Darcy, and while Elizabeth thought she discerned his features to admit of surprise, she could not tell whether it was because of his comrade's behaviour or his aunt's action.

This subject was allowed to drop and Elizabeth was shortly thereafter importuned by Darcy and the Colonel to perform at the pianoforte. Lady Catherine had, by this time, begun to be worried by the attentions both her nephews were displaying towards Mrs. Collins' pretty guest and soon called them both to attend her and her daughter. Elizabeth was allowed to play by herself and, to avoid disturbing the conversations that were taking place, chose such pieces as would not intrude or distract. Darcy, however, could not be satisfied with his aunt's company but, apparently warned by her previous actions, chose to remove to a seat near Mrs. Collins and engaged her in conversation. That his position allowed him to gaze upon the fair performer was noticed by Mrs. Collins only.

## **In which Miss Elizabeth Bennet receives unpleasant intelligence**

March 1812 - Hunsford, Kent

Elizabeth was walking the next morning in the hopes that Mr. Darcy would join her and those hopes were soon realized as he came upon her rather sooner than was his usual wont. They walked comfortably in silence for several minutes after the normal greetings had been exchanged. Finally Darcy asked, "Might I inquire whether the tale that my cousin regaled all of us with last night was that which he had been truly telling you?"

"Surely you are not suggesting that your cousin would be less than truthful to his aunt, Mr. Darcy?"

"I am not suggesting that at all, Miss Bennet. I rather consider it very probable as the story was not one which I would have thought to provoke your laughter." He retorted.

Elizabeth laughed again, "Indeed it was not! His tale involved a scarecrow and your aunt's clothes."

"Ah. I understand my cousin's reluctance to be forthright. My aunt never learned how that gown was destroyed and I fear she might be as angry now as she would have been then. Her sense of humour is sadly wanting."

"From what I have observed, Mr. Darcy, your cousin would have borne the majority of her displeasure."

Darcy shook his head. "On that you are indeed correct. My aunt has expectations of me that will never be realized and. . . well, enough of that. Let us speak of more interesting subjects."

Elizabeth rather thought that Lady Catherine had hopes that Mr. Darcy would offer for her daughter. She had intimated such hopes and Mr. Collins almost seemed to assume that the engagement was a reality. From Mr. Darcy's comments such an event seemed very unlikely. As she recalled the evening's conversations, she was persuaded to raise a matter on which she had given some thought after she had returned to the Parsonage. Her experience with Mr. Wickham was limited and she had considered him no worse than a common fortune-hunter; yet, her ladyship's words suggested his behaviour to be more reprehensible. Surely Mr. Darcy would be in a position to speak on the matter.

"I wonder, Mr. Darcy, if I might impinge on your good-will. There is a matter which has concerned me arising from the very discussion with your aunt."

Mr. Darcy looked at her quizzically and nodded slowly. If he had any intimation of what she wished to discuss, she could detect no sign of it.

"When I returned to Longbourn at Christmas, I was introduced to a George Wickham. He had taken a commission in the \_\_\_\_\_shire Militia."

Mr. Darcy grunted and she could hardly miss the displeasure on his countenance. But he said nothing and she continued.

“He . . . importuned me with a story about being poorly treated by you but as I knew neither of you well enough to discern the truth of the matter, I paid it little attention. He attempted, or rather wished, to engage my attentions but as I was not similarly inclined, he eventually desisted. I suppose that the poverty of my fortune rendered me unsuitable for his designs. I quickly labelled him a fortune-hunter, for he soon after began to pay his attentions to a young lady who had just inherited a small but respectable fortune.” It was with a tinge of regret that Elizabeth uttered the later as she realized that should she have had such a fortune, Mr. Northcott would likely have made her an offer. She would have accepted and be married by now.

Mr. Darcy interrupted her thoughts. “I believe that you have named Mr. Wickham well, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth was hesitant to pursue the matter but, if her worst fears were possible, her own sisters might even now be in danger, for they were quite enamoured with Mr. Wickham.

“I am concerned, sir, that his character might be worse than that. Your aunt seemed to imply much more heinous behaviour.”

They walked in silence for several minutes. Elizabeth could see by the scowl on Darcy’s features that the subject was unpleasant for him and she wondered if he would be willing to disclose his private dealings. At last he spoke.

“I am sorry he importuned you and relieved that you were not deceived by him.”

“I fear that your reputation in Meryton was not improved by his story, Mr. Darcy. He was believed by the majority of the people. In fact. . .” she chuckled, “the only person that seemed to discount his story was my sister, Jane, who seemed to consider that a misunderstanding existed between the two of you.”

“His story was believed?”

“Indeed it was. You were not viewed with much approbation even before Mr. Wickham appeared and his efforts appeared to sink your character completely. Did you really refuse to dance with any of my sisters?” she laughed, “My mother was quite annoyed and not unwilling to make her displeasure known.”

Mr. Darcy scowl reappeared, “I rarely dance and never with someone I am not acquainted with.”

“And one cannot be introduced at a ball?”

“We digress, Miss Bennet. I believe we were discussing Mr. Wickham and not my preferences in regards to dancing partners.”

“As you wish, Mr. Darcy, it is, I concede the more important subject. You must understand that I am concerned for those sisters. They hold Mr. Wickham in considerable esteem and I



have now reason to suspect his character.”

Darcy sighed, “As well you should. I am not aware of the particulars to which my aunt referred last night. Nonetheless, I suspect I could relate similar stories from my own experience with him.” He paused for several seconds as though to gather his resolve and began again, “Mr. Wickham is the son of my father’s late steward who was a most estimable man and had earned my father’s trust. In recognition of his services, my father stood godfather to George Wickham and promised to forward his career to the extent possible. You know how glib and charming George can be. He exercised all his . . . talents on my father who could see no wrong in him to the very day of his passing. I, on the other hand, was raised with George and quickly came to understand his dissipative character. He’s a gambler, Miss Bennet, a defrauder of tradesmen everywhere, accumulating debt wherever he goes and failing to pay his accounts. There is worse, however. You have named him fortune-hunter and that he is indeed.” Elizabeth could detect a degree of anger in Darcy’s voice as he related the last that was very pronounced and she wondered at its cause. She could not think on that for long as Darcy’s narrative continued, “The young lady he is pursuing in Hertfordshire should be warned away from him, Miss Bennet, else her fortune will not long survive the marriage.”

“As my sisters have no fortune, surely they will be safe from him?”

“My aunt’s words last night lead you to suspect otherwise, do they not, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth nodded, unable to mask her concern.

“And well they should. Mr. Wickham is not above dallying with young ladies and I have had to deal with the consequences on at least one occasion. There may be others but they have not approached me.”

“What can I do? His reputation is unblemished in Meryton.”

“I would suggest you contact your father. I will stand surety for what I have related to you should that be necessary.”

Elizabeth struggled with her thoughts. She could not be sure that Mr. Darcy’s reputation in Hertfordshire would establish the verity of his assertions and she doubted that she could reveal as much to him. As well, she could hardly be confident that her father would act to protect his daughters adequately. He had not done so in the past. She expressed this concern to Darcy.

“I fear my father will not take this warning too seriously, Mr. Darcy. He might well forbid my sisters to entertain Mr. Wickham but I cannot be sure they will abide by his decision, nor can I assume he will make the information more widely known.”

Darcy was thoughtful. His mien had lost those traces of anger and clearly he was giving consideration to her dilemma.

“Is there no other person in Hertfordshire that you can approach?”

“She shook her head. “If my Uncle Gardiner were there I could count on his good sense to be aware of the dangers and act accordingly.”

“Sir William Lucas, perhaps?”

It took Elizabeth but a few moments to discount Sir William. “He is too kind and I cannot believe he would act effectively. He tends to think kindly of everyone.”

They walked in silence for several minutes, each considering the matter with increasing frustration. Finally Elizabeth blurted, “The only approach I can believe to work is to inform my mother; however, as she quite dotes on a man in a red coat, I cannot be sure that she will credit the tale.”

“Perhaps you might ascribed it to Lady Catherine?” said Darcy with a slight smile, “I dare to say she would be delighted to be of use.”

Elizabeth nodded with satisfaction suppressing a smirk. “That should work. My mother will be awed that her ladyship condescended to provide advice. I shall also speak with Mrs. Collins and suggest she write her mother as well.” She turned to face Darcy. “You have my thanks, Mr. Darcy. This discussion has relieved my mind to no small degree.” She gave a brief curtsy and, as the Parsonage was in sight, made her way there quickly. Darcy stood and watched her progress. If she had been aware of his gaze, she could not have mistaken the admiration that it displayed.

Darcy was very much in a quandary. He could no longer deny the attraction he felt for Elizabeth Bennet. He had never encountered a woman who so captivated his senses and with whom he could converse so freely. He had detected in her no signs that his wealth or status was of material interest. She could not be unaware of his interest. No man would be as attentive if he had not formed an attachment. If it were not for her relations, he believed himself to be in great danger from her. And yet, he could not forget them. If he were to marry Elizabeth Bennet, they would become his relations. He could easily imagine the scorn which would greet them should they be encountered by those with whom he regularly associated. As well, he could not ignore the difference in their stations in life. She was the daughter of a very modest country gentleman but most of her relations were in trade and she had no connections of consequence. He was the grandson of an earl and had connections with the highest ranks of society. To marry such a woman would be a degradation and one that would leave him, and her, open to society’s censure and ridicule. And yet.

He shrugged and turned to make his way back to Rosings. These thoughts were not new. They had plagued him for days and, he suspected, would not depart until he separated from Miss Bennet and could push her from his thoughts. He had already agreed to prolong his stay an extra week and he almost regretting having done so. Almost. He was resolved. He would enjoy Miss Bennet’s company for the remainder of his visit; then he would leave and never would they meet again. He would forget her. He was resolved it would be so and so it must be.

Elizabeth, once she had entered the Parsonage was pleased to find Charlotte, unaccompanied, busily mending her husband’s shirt in the parlour. A quick glance at her work basket suggested that she would be so engaged for some time and resolving to lay the matter of

Wickham before her, did so immediately. Her friend's first comment took Elizabeth back altogether.

"So, Mr. Darcy conveyed all this to you, Eliza? Did you meet by chance this morning?"

Elizabeth realized that she could hardly expect her friend to believe that Mr. Darcy had confided in her to the degree the information suggested if it had been a casual meeting.

"No, Charlotte, I have encountered him with some frequency while out walking."

"Have you been agreeing to meet, Eliza." Charlotte's tone was slightly disapproving and certainly concerned – if word got out, the supposition that she and Mr. Darcy were meeting clandestinely might well arise and damage severely her friend's reputation - and Elizabeth hastened to try and reassure her.

"Indeed not! However, he is aware that I walk out every morning and where I am likely to be found. We do not, I assure you, meet every day."

Charlotte was not totally convinced, although her following words suggested that she would condone the meetings.

"It would be a splendid match for you, Eliza. Splendid!"

Elizabeth shook her head in denial. "I will not deny that I find him very attractive and could allow myself to fall quite in love, but he has never spoken words of love or shown signs of what I could call affection. It appears that he greets me as a friend and possibly a more agreeable companion than can be found at Rosings. I expect nothing more and will not allow myself to hope for more."

Charlotte looked sceptical and Elizabeth attempted to turn their talk back to the purpose that had prompted it in the first place.

"I have thought to write my mother and lay before her Mr. Wickham's character and dealings. Of course, I shall ascribe the information to Lady Catherine. Mr. Darcy assures me that she would be pleased at the honour."

Elizabeth made no attempt to hide her smirk and Charlotte simply shook her head as she reviewed her friend's proposal. "I suppose you wish me to write my Mama to do the same?"

Elizabeth allowed it to be so and Charlotte continued, "Write your letter, Eliza, and I shall use it as the basis for mine."

Several hours later, Elizabeth handed her friend a final copy of the letter she intended to send to Mrs. Bennet and an hour later both letters had been placed in the post to be sent the following morning.

Her morning walks continued as before, although some days were replete with rain and unfit for walking out. But when the weather was favourable, she did so, and it happened that on most such days, she was joined by Mr. Darcy. In the course of these rencontres she became aware that Darcy was asking some odd unconnected questions — about her pleasure in being

at Hunsford, her love of solitary walks, and her opinion of Mr. and Mrs. Collins's happiness; and that in speaking of Rosings, and her not perfectly understanding the house, he seemed to expect that whenever she came into Kent again she would be staying there too. His words seemed to imply it. This question bothered her and she wondered if he might have Colonel Fitzwilliam in his thoughts. The Colonel had continued to call on the Parsonage and she supposed that he may have been alluding to what might arise in that quarter. It distressed her a little, and she was quite glad to find herself at the gate in the pales opposite the Parsonage. She had no designs on the Colonel and found herself distressed that Darcy might consider that she did.

She was engaged one day, as she walked, in re-perusing Jane's last letter, and dwelling on some passages which proved that Jane had written in excellent spirits, when, instead of being again surprised by Mr. Darcy, she saw on looking up, that Colonel Fitzwilliam was meeting her. Putting away the letter immediately and with a smile, said, "I did not know before that you ever walked this way."

"I have been making the tour of the Park," he replied, "as I generally do every year, and intend to close it with a call at the Parsonage. Are you going much farther?"

"No, I should have turned in a moment."

And accordingly she did turn, and they walked towards the Parsonage together.

"Do you certainly leave Kent on Saturday?" said she.

"Yes — if Darcy does not put it off again. But I am at his disposal. He arranges the business just as he pleases."

"And if not able to please himself in the arrangement, he has at least great pleasure in the power of choice. I do not know anybody who seems more to enjoy the power of doing what he likes than Mr. Darcy." She laughed as she spoke.

"He likes to have his own way very well," replied Colonel Fitzwilliam with an answering smile. "But so we all do. It is only that he has better means of having it than many others, because he is rich, and many others are poor. I speak feelingly. A younger son, you know, must be inured to self-denial and dependence."

"In my opinion, the younger son of an Earl can know very little of either. Now, seriously, what have you ever known of self-denial and dependence? When have you been prevented by want of money from going wherever you chose, or procuring anything you had a fancy for?"

"These are pertinent questions — and perhaps I cannot say that I have experienced many hardships of that nature. But in matters of greater weight, I may suffer from the want of money. Younger sons cannot marry where they like."

"I am quite aware that some men indeed find themselves placed in such circumstances and must follow a profession and live within the means that it provides; but I have also observed that there are those who like women of fortune and prefer to pursue that path for mercenary purposes."

“For some, our habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money.”

“Is this,” thought Elizabeth, “meant for me?” and she coloured at the idea; but, recovering herself, said in a lively tone, “And pray, what is the usual price of an Earl’s younger son? Unless the elder brother is very sickly, I suppose you would not ask above fifty thousand pounds.”

He answered her in the same style, and the subject dropped.

“Do you see much of my cousin?” the Colonel asked.

“I have encountered him on occasion as I walk in the mornings.” Elizabeth was inclined to dissemble as to the frequency of such meetings. She could not see if the Colonel had some design behind this question.

“My cousin has mentioned that he might have encountered you in Hertfordshire last autumn but you were in Town enjoying the season.”

“That is true. Mr. Darcy was there in company with his friend Mr. Bingley. Do you know the gentleman?”

“I know him a little. He is a pleasant gentleman-like man and a great friend of Darcy’s.”

"What is Mr. Bingley like? Such reports as I have of him, make me wonder as to his character."

“I cannot speak to that with any confidence for I have met him but rarely. He is several years Darcy’s junior, very agreeable but prone, I fear, to falling in and out of love with some rapidity and frequency.”

As this was exactly the image that Elizabeth had formed of that gentleman, she was heartened that her suppositions were likely correct and that her advice had served her sister well. The Colonel, however, was not done for next she heard him say.

“I believe Darcy takes care of him in those points where he most wants care. From something that he told me in our journey hither, I have reason to think Bingley very much indebted to him. But I ought to beg his pardon, for I have no right to suppose that Bingley was the person meant. It was all conjecture.”

“What is it you mean?”

“It is a circumstance which Darcy, of course, would not wish to be generally known, because if it were to get round to the lady’s family, it would be an unpleasant thing.”

“You may depend upon my not mentioning it.”

“And remember that I have not much reason for supposing it to be Bingley. What he told me was merely this; that he congratulated himself on having lately saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage, but without mentioning names or any other

particulars, and I only suspected it to be Bingley from believing him the kind of young man to get into a scrape of that sort, and from knowing them to have been together the whole of last summer.”

“Did Mr. Darcy give you his reasons for this interference?” Elizabeth could not find it within herself to get too angry. She thought she knew Darcy’s character well enough to comprehend that he would not have acted capriciously or maliciously.

“I understood that there were some very strong objections against the lady.”

Elizabeth made no answer, and walked on, musing about what she had learned. After watching her a little, Fitzwilliam asked her why she was so thoughtful. “I am thinking of what you have been telling me,” said she. “Your cousin’s conduct does not altogether suit my feelings. Why was he to be the judge?”

“You are rather disposed to call his interference officious?”

“I do not see what right Mr. Darcy had to decide on the propriety of his friend’s inclination, or why, upon his own judgment alone, he was to determine and direct in what manner that friend was to be happy. But,” she continued, recollecting herself, “as we know none of the particulars, it is not fair to condemn him. It is not to be supposed that there was much affection on Mr. Bingley’s side.”

“That is not an unnatural surmise,” said Fitzwilliam, “but it is lessening the honour of my cousin’s triumph very sadly.”

Elizabeth hardly listened to the remainder of his conversation. The actions of Darcy did not disturb her in connection with her sister. She had long ago arrived at the opinion that Mr. Bingley’s affections were inconstant. The matter before her was more personal. If Darcy could have objections to his friend attaching himself to Jane, how much stronger might those objections be when taken in context of himself and a woman like herself.

When they finally reached the Parsonage, she excused herself and retired to her room where she could think without interruption of all that she had heard. The timing and the circumstances did not admit of anyone other than Mr. Bingley being involved.

“There were some very strong objections against the lady,” were Colonel Fitzwilliam’s words, and these strong objections probably were her having one uncle who was a country attorney, and another who was in business in London.

“To Jane herself,” she exclaimed, “there could be no possibility of objection. All loveliness and goodness as she is! Her understanding excellent, her mind improved, and her manners captivating.”

That he might object to her family, she considered. She had not missed the expression of distaste that crossed his face whenever she had mentioned her mother. The look had not been of long duration but it was unmistakable and she could hardly fault him for it. She had no idea how her mother and sisters had behaved while Darcy was there, nor even the degree to which they kept the same company. They had, of course, attended the Netherfield Ball

together, but would their behaviour there have been so awful as to cause such distaste? She could not know and knowing her family as she did, she was not sanguine as to their propriety. It was simple. If Mr. Darcy objected to her family on his friend's behalf, his objections on his own would be even greater.

She found this thought quite distressing. Having told herself that she could have no expectations with regard to him, the prospect that he would have none for her left her bereft. It was clear that he had worked his way into her affections, sneakily and by no design of his or hers; but there he was, and there he might remain unless she resolved to remove him. For it seemed clear that he would not offer for her.

The agitation which the subject occasioned almost brought on a headache; and to alleviate it, she ventured out to the Parsonage garden to enjoy the breezes and the fresh air. She was determined that none would know of her feelings and soon she had persuaded herself into a better frame of mind and could, with equanimity, attend her cousins to Rosings, where they were engaged to drink tea. She resolved as they walked the lane towards Rosings Park that she needed to distance herself from both the Colonel and Darcy. The latter had engaged her heart, albeit unknowingly, and she needed to protect herself. Civil she would be, as always, but no more. They were to leave the day after next and she would see neither again. Her future, she told herself, more probably lay with Mr. Northcott and her thoughts must be directed to that end. She could have wished, in hindsight, that he had offered for her. An engagement would have protected her for she would most likely have been less open and friendly with Mr. Darcy and not have put her heart at risk.

Thus when she entered Lady Catherine's drawing room, her composure was intact and, she hoped, her countenance serene. The former withstood the presence of Mr. Darcy and her serenity could not be disturbed by the Colonel. As was usually the case, Lady Catherine laid claim to Darcy's attention and refused to relinquish it for most of Elizabeth's visit. It was, she thought, fortuitous and she could ignore his presence most easily by focusing on the Colonel and his conversation. If she had realized that her determined avoidance of Darcy had been noticed by that gentleman, she would have been astonished. For his part, his glances in her direction were as frequent as ever and he could not understand why she was not behaving in her usual fashion for she had, unbeknownst to her, been inclined to stare at him as frequently as he at her. And he had noticed it. If Lady Catherine was aware of any difference in Elizabeth's behaviour, she gave no sign of it and it may easily be supposed that she could not believe Darcy to have any interest in the young woman. As her nephew was to leave in a two days, she could see no reason to worry further on the matter.

The visit proceeded much as such visits did in the past and Darcy did not endeavour to speak with Elizabeth until he and the Colonel escorted the visitors out to the carriage, which was to return them to the Parsonage. As casually as he could, and pitching his voice low so as not to be heard by the others, Darcy asked her, "I know you delight in walking in the mornings. Do you intend to do so tomorrow?"

Elizabeth was caught by surprise at the question. Never before had he made such a direct inquiry. She searched for an appropriate answer and could think of no reason to deny that she would walk without seeming impolite. "Ah. . .yes, I do."

“And your favoured path?” he asked.

Elizabeth nodded and then stepped forward to enter the carriage thus preventing further conversation between them. He bowed, took a step back and waited beside Colonel Fitzwilliam as the carriage drove away.



## **In which Mr. Darcy receives an answer not to his liking**

April 1812 - Hunsford, Kent

When Elizabeth woke the next morning and saw that the weather would not provide an excuse to avoid her walk, she wished to have had the presence of mind to manufacture an excuse that would do so. She had not and she could not now, in a point of honour, do other than undertake to stroll in her usual haunt. That Darcy would join her, she knew for a certainty, for had he not intimated as much by his inquiry?

What could be his purpose? She knew him to be an honourable man, or rather she had no reason to believe him to be anything other than honourable. He had never importuned her improperly. His attentions had never imparted the least trace of impropriety. He had, in fact, treated her as a valuable acquaintance, no more but certainly no less. She could expect nothing more from him. Such thoughts as these were her consolation as she left the Parsonage. She would not allow herself to hope for more, for such hopes must be fruitless. She schooled her emotions into a serenity that, by the time she reached the place where Darcy usually joined her, was almost unfeigned.

The sight of him waiting for her caused her heart to beat a little faster and it took all her resolve to calm herself so that she could greet him with her normal cheerfulness. He responded in a similar fashion and, although she thought there was a trace of excitement in his voice, the calmness of his demeanour convinced her that she was mistaken. She was very much aware of his presence beside her and, given her own feelings, a trifle resentful that he had appeared to be in his normal spirits.

For perhaps the first time on their walks, she chose to require him to begin their discussion. They were, she thought, meeting this morning more at his instigation than hers. The burden of conversation should, therefore, fall to him. Unfortunately, it was a duty he appeared reluctant to undertake, and so they walked in silence for more than five minutes. It was not the easy silence that they typically enjoyed. She rather believed he had directed a pensive look at her several times but, as she had nothing to say, she remained silent. She suddenly realized that his guise of equanimity was just that, a façade emplaced to mask his feelings, for it was clear to see, from his expressions and mannerisms, that he was becoming increasingly agitated.

Finally, it appeared he could no longer endure the situation, drew her to a stop and thus began:

“In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings cannot be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

Despite all her musings on the subject, Elizabeth still discovered herself amazed at this declaration and could think of nothing to say in response. This he considered sufficient encouragement, and the avowal of all that he felt since making her acquaintance at Hunsford immediately followed. He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be

detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than pride. His sense of her inferiority, of its being a degradation, of the family obstacles which judgement always opposed to inclination, were all dealt on with a warmth which seemed due only to the consequence of those whose opinion he wounded by such an attachment. He concluded with representing to her the strength of that attachment which, in spite of all his endeavours, he had found impossible to conquer, and expressing his hope that it would now be rewarded by the acceptance of his hand. As he said this, she could easily see that he harboured no doubts as to her giving him a favourable answer. While he spoke of uncertainty, his demeanour gave the lie to his words.

Elizabeth's feeling of surprise was quickly supplanted by anger at the mode of his declaration and then by a sense of dismay and loss. She canvassed those feelings carefully and realized that, despite the insult she had received, she harboured a strong affection for the gentleman. That she could not accept his offer she knew without reservation and could only worry as to how to express it without paining him unduly, as impossible as that seemed.

She turned from him and began to walk back towards the Parsonage, her eyes focused on the path ahead. Suddenly the Colonel's words were foremost in her thoughts and, without realizing she had done so, repeated them.

"I understood there were serious objections to the lady."

If she had speculated at what those objections might have been, now she knew. Beside Darcy had stumbled when she spoke and his voice was puzzled.

"I do not have the pleasure of understanding you."

"'Tis of no moment, Mr. Darcy. Just something said to me yesterday."

"May I expect your answer, Miss Bennet?" She could tell he was slightly affronted that she had not given him the assurances he so clearly expected.

"Indeed you may, Mr. Darcy. In such cases as this it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed. Allow me to do so now. I am not insensible as to the honour you have bestowed on me nor are your affections unequal to mine; however, those circumstances, those obstacles, which you have raised as . . . impediments to our union cannot be ignored. You have, sir, in presenting your suit displayed such a want of respect for me and for my family as to preclude any hopes of a lasting felicity in marriage. I cannot accept your offer, Mr. Darcy. To do otherwise would engaged us both in misery of the acutest kind."

She paused for a moment or two before continuing, her lips forming a wry grimace, "I regret causing you pain, it was done most unconsciously, I assure you, for I had no idea that your feelings were so far engaged. I hope that any pain I have caused will be of a short duration. I have no doubt that the objections which you have expressed to our union will soon allow you to forget me altogether."

She risked a glance at his countenance. It was pale with anger and the disturbance of his mind was visible in every feature. He was struggling for an appearance of composure. When he

believed himself to have attained it, in a voice of forced calmness and a manner that was more haughty than she had hitherto observed him show, he said, "I fail to understand your response. You have indicated that my affections are returned and yet you reject my offer. Would it have been more acceptable if I had not confessed to the scruples that had, for many days, prevented my forming a serious design. Should I have concealed my struggles, flattered you into the belief of my being impelled by unqualified, unalloyed inclination – by reason, by reflection, by everything. But I abhor disguise of any sort. Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related. They are natural and just. Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the acquiring relations whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?"

Elizabeth felt her ire growing and forced herself to suppress it. She could see the Parsonage some short distance away and knew the conversation must be ended. With a forced calmness, she stopped, turned to face him and replied, "I have, as any woman must, considered what I consider essential in a marriage, Mr. Darcy. I have had presented before me several cases where there exists a want of respect between the partners as to allow for only the most unhappy of marriages. Affection will not survive without respect and I am not willing to enter into a marriage where my partner's eventual contempt for my circumstances will surely erode whatever respect he might possess for me. Affection, love is not enough, Mr. Darcy. It will not survive contempt."

Elizabeth felt an overpowering need to escape his company and immediately began to walk briskly towards the Parsonage. She knew not what Darcy did, but when she reached the Parsonage and went to open the door, a quick look up the lane showed that he was gone. She was not inclined towards company and the prospect of a brisk walk to exorcise her bad humours was attractive. Choosing a route that she did not normally venture, she wandered about for almost two hours. Giving way to almost every variety of thought, she finally entered the house with the wish of appearing as cheerful as usual.

She was immediately told that the two gentlemen from Rosings had called during her absence and had waited above a quarter hour before taking their leave. The Colonel was almost resolved to walk after her but, not knowing which path she had followed, was dissuaded from doing so.

The two gentlemen departed as planned the next morning; and Mr. Collins, having been waiting near the lodges to make them his parting obeisance, was able to bring home the pleasing intelligence of their appearing in good health, and in as tolerable spirits as could be expected. All of this was related to Elizabeth before he hurried off to Rosings to console Lady Catherine and her daughter. For Elizabeth, their departure ended whatever lingering hopes she harboured in regards to Mr. Darcy. She did not repent her refusal for she could not, would not, willingly enter a marriage devoid of respect and his words were too clear an expression of his perceived superiority as to admit of no doubt of the degradation he would feel from their marriage. She would not have a marriage like that of her parents' where her father's disrespect of his wife was evident in almost every word he spoke and incited the contempt of his children for their mother. It would not do. Spinsterhood would be preferable.

## **In which Miss Elizabeth is extremely persuasive**

April 1812 - Gracechurch Street, London

Elizabeth had returned to Gracechurch Street from Kent to find Jane in the throes of a courtship with Mr. Cartwright whom she had met at a dinner hosted by friends of the Gardiners. He was a rector of a modest parish, possessed of a small independent income which, combined with that from his living, would provide very comfortably for a wife and family.

Mrs. Gardiner had been eager to impart all of the pertinent information the day Elizabeth arrived.

“He is a very respectable man, Lizzy. His income is almost a thousand a year and Jane and her children should be quite comfortable. He appears very determined, and if he does not offer for her in the next week, I shall be greatly surprised.”

“But Suffolk! Jane will be settled some distance from Longbourn.”

“That would perhaps be unfortunate for you, Lizzy, but I suspect that Jane will not be too unhappy to be somewhat removed from your mother.”

Elizabeth's eyebrows rose.

“Your uncle and I have persuaded your father to allow the courtship to proceed here and to prevent your mother from interfering. She was determined, once she learned of it, that Mr. Cartwright was not a good enough suitor for Jane. Your sister was quite upset at her mother's reaction and wrote directly to your father pleading her case. Successfully.”

“So Jane has recovered totally from Mr. Bingley?”

Mrs. Gardiner had nodded and smiled, “I believe she had done so even before you travelled to Kent. I have never seen her so resolved and Mr. Cartwright appears to suit her very well. He is a constant, determined gentleman and a conscientious pastor. I like him very well indeed.”

“Then I shall do so as well.”

She was introduced to the gentleman later that evening and had not been in his company more than an hour before becoming firmly convinced that he and Jane would do very well together. He had been the rector of his parish for about five years, was a man of about seven and twenty and had, over the past winter, come to the realization that he was in want of a wife and family. With the approval of his patron, he visited London for a fortnight, met Jane several nights after his arrival, and was immediately smitten with her character and beauty. This was his second visit to London and he was determined that when he returned to his parish it would be as an engaged man. As he was required to return home in several days, he intended to request an interview with Jane that very night.

The request was made, Jane's hand solicited and most happily awarded. As Mr. Bennet had delegated to Mr. Gardiner the responsibility of consenting to the marriage, all that was left was to arrange the settlement and establish the date of the wedding. Mr. Cartwright's duties did not admit of him travelling frequently from his parish and the earliest that he could arrange to be available was in late June. Jane was agreeable and thus, on the agreed date, Miss Jane Bennet and Mr. John Cartwright were joined in matrimony by the rector of the Longbourn chapel. If Mrs. Bennet was not altogether reconciled to the loss of her favourite daughter – and her distress at Jane marrying below what her mother had hoped for were compounded by her removal to a home so distant as to not allow for Mrs. Bennet to visit easily – she was intelligent enough to recognize the need to present the best face possible outside the family. She could at least claim Mr. Cartwright's income and person to be superior to Mr. Collins even if he did not inherit Longbourn.

May 1812 - Longbourn, Hertfordshire

“... At Brighton she will be of less importance even as a common flirt than she has been here. The officers will find women better worth their notice. Let us hope, therefore, that her being there may teach her her own insignificance. At any rate, she cannot grow many degrees worse, without authorizing us to lock her up for the rest of her life” concluded Mr. Bennet.

With this answer Elizabeth was not content to be satisfied and chose to revisit an argument he had disregarded earlier.

“Cannot you see, father, that her behaviour could hurt all her sisters? Can you not?”

Mr. Bennet's face grew a little pinched. He was not used to having his favoured daughter dispute his directions. At an effort to maintain his composure, he sought to repeat his earlier advice.

“As I intimated earlier, Elizabeth,” His daughter could not be unaware that his using her full name indicated a degree of displeasure. If she had, his features would have done so. “Any young man who would be discouraged because you and Jane have two or three silly sisters is ...”

“Father, I refuse to believe you so insensible.” Elizabeth snapped. She had never spoken to her father so and she wondered at her temerity. She continued before the ire she saw gathering on his countenance erupted. “You have but to sit in almost any parlour in Meryton or London, sipping tea with the ladies, to hear such gossip and warnings. Father, I have listened, more than once, to women dissuading their acquaintances from forming attachments to different families. And the behaviour of a parent or a child is the most frequent reason. Surely you must see this?”

Mr. Bennet allowed himself a moment or two to control his anger before responding, “I say again, any man who comes to know you, Lizzy will not be dissuaded.”

“Father, you are missing, or ignoring, I cannot say which, the point that such tales may prevent that young man from even approaching me or Jane. The choices that will fall to us

for a husband will surely be the poorer in such an instance, will they not?"

Mr. Bennet was silent as he considered his daughter. He knew that Lydia's behaviour was improper and wild but could not conceive that she would go so far as to damage her family's reputation. She was to go to Brighton under the responsibility of the Colonel of the regiment. Surely that should be adequate protection. Yet he could clearly see that Elizabeth was convinced of the danger. He was about to speak when he heard her say, "Papa. May I voice a suggestion that will allay my concerns and spare you Lydia's discontent?"

For her part, Elizabeth had almost resolved to be content to have her arguments rejected until an idea, which had been lingering at the back of her mind, surfaced and found expression. Her father replied quickly, perhaps relieved to avoid further confrontation.

"If such a thing is possible, I am not unwilling to hear it."

"Lydia cannot travel to Brighton until after Jane's wedding. I am also required to pass up my trip with my aunt and uncle. . ."

"Because you wish to attend the season in London this autumn. I might also note that you have been away from Longbourn once already this year and your aunt and uncle would not feel secure leaving their children in the care of only Mary and Kitty. There are good reasons for not allowing you to travel this summer, Lizzy. Very good reasons."

"I am not insensible to them, I assure you. I was going to suggest that Lydia and Kitty be invited to travel in my place this summer. It is not Brighton but perhaps a week or two in London might be an adequate inducement. . . if my aunt and uncle can be persuaded to the scheme. Mary and I can care for the children quite well by ourselves."

Mr. Bennet was about to suggest that his brother would surely be bereft of all sense to agree to any plan which would see him and his wife forced to travel with two of the silliest girls in the country when he remembered how strenuously Elizabeth had argued against allowing Lydia to travel to Brighton. Elizabeth had not burdened him with any remonstrance when required to surrender her trip with her aunt and uncle and she was obviously seriously worried about Lydia's behaviour.

"If my brother and his wife are agreeable, I will give my consent. Shall you write to them?"

Elizabeth agreed to do so, drafted a letter outlining her concerns about the dangers of allowing Lydia to go to Brighton and beseeching the support of her aunt and uncle. It might well be the most important letter she had ever written, she thought, for if she could not persuade her aunt and uncle, Lydia would be to Brighton. Her father would not withstand the importuning and lamentations of her mother and Lydia if permission was withheld.

Within a se'nnight, the Gardiners wrote to express their agreement to both concerns and Elizabeth's plan; all that remained was to inform the girls of their good fortune. Lydia and Kitty would return to London with the Gardiners after Jane's wedding and visit with them until it was time to travel northwards. The Gardiners would stop at Longbourn to hand over their children to the care of Elizabeth and Mary and be on their way the next day. The

satisfaction that Elizabeth felt at seeing her sisters in the care of the Gardiners far outweighed the regrets that she felt at being deprived of that trip.

August 1812 - Longbourn, Hertfordshire

The prospect of travelling with her aunt and uncle had been reasonably pleasing to Kitty, for she had never been encompassed in any plans that involved Brighton; however, Derbyshire held few attractions for Lydia. Grand houses and parks, and mountains and trees, could not hope to equal the pleasure of cavorting with redcoats in Brighton; but, as the option was presented as either staying at Longbourn to help with the Gardiner children or travelling to the north, to the north she would go. Not without much complaint and dissatisfaction, but go she did.

If her relatives were to be believed, the two youngest Bennet sisters did not disgrace themselves altogether and Elizabeth thought she even detected some slight improvement in their comportment upon their return. The travellers were most eager to inform the residents of Longbourn about the myriad sights that were encountered and, as one of the small towns through which they travelled, happened to hold an assembly the day they arrived, Kitty and Lydia were allowed to attend and had the satisfaction of being invited to dance by several gentlemen. That none of them wore regimentals was unfortunate, but the pleasure of dancing was sufficient to make that absence palatable.

However the trip was not without a major surprise. One of its objects was to visit the town of Lambton where Mrs. Gardiner had spent some years as a child and hoped to encounter some old acquaintances. In this she was successful; however, Lambton lay but five miles from Pemberley, the estate of which Mr. Darcy was master. As it was considered one of the finest in the county, to visit it was essential. The family was not at home; thus the presence of a small group of tourists would inconvenience no one. Such was the thinking of the Gardiners and, with no expectation of encountering Mr. Darcy, they had been given a tour of the house and had begun to walk the paths around the manor house when, to the surprise of them all, the master himself suddenly appeared. He recognized Lydia and Kitty almost immediately, sought to be introduced to the Gardiners, made all the polite inquiries about the Bennet family, expressed his pleasure upon learning of Jane's marriage, and requested that his congratulations be forwarded to her when they saw her next.

Further enlightenment proved impossible as the Gardiner children were eager to be reacquainted with their parents. While eager to speak further on the matter, Elizabeth was required to be patient until Mrs. Gardiner approached her later that evening when there was a chance to speak privately.

"Lydia mentioned to Mr. Darcy that you were supposed to have come on the trip but that she and Kitty were sent instead. He spoke to me later when an opportunity was presented to do so in private and inquired why you had decided against visiting Derbyshire. I was able to explain the circumstances and he seemed. . .relieved, Lizzy. He particularly wished to be remembered to you. He spoke quite nicely of your time together in Kent and how much he enjoyed your company." She looked at her niece more closely, "How is it that you never spoke of him to us?"

“There did not appear to me to be any particular point to doing so. I did not expect ever to see him again.”

Mrs. Gardiner pursed her lips, “Well, that may be so, and it may not. When I mentioned that you would be in town for the small season, he inquired as to when you would arrive. He was quite solicitous of us, you know. Your uncle was invited to fish on the estate and did so twice while we were there. He even had us to dinner and introduced us to his sister. He was uncommonly civil, more so than we had any right to expect.”

Elizabeth could not help the look of surprise that came over her features and Mrs. Gardiner, whose gaze had never left her niece’s countenance, wondered at it.

“You are surprised, Lizzy. Why?”

Elizabeth grimaced, “I had not thought that Mr. Darcy, with his pride and consequence, would admit any of my relations to his acquaintance, much less invite them into his home. Did he know uncle is in trade?”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded and Elizabeth’s confusion was almost complete. The last remnant of certainty she retained about his character was shattered when her aunt said, “He was exceedingly polite and kind. I must admit I had rather expected him to be proud and quite haughty based on the reports we had of him last Christmas but he was not so at all. Pride he undoubtedly has, for his is an excellent estate, well managed and beautiful, and his family is an ancient one but, if you could have heard the reference his housekeeper gave him, you would believe him to be one of the finest men in the country. She could not praise him too highly. Your uncle took great delight in encouraging her effusions.” She paused briefly, “But you must have seen this when you were in his company in Kent. Was he not amiable there?”

“Indeed he was, aunt, although we parted on terms that were not altogether friendly.”

Her aunt’s features expressed clearly a desire to have Elizabeth be more informative on that subject; however, as she was not inclined to accommodate her aunt and could think of nothing to deflect her interest, an uncomfortable silence began to develop. Mrs. Gardiner recognized her niece’s reluctance and saw no purpose to forcing a confidence at this time.

On Elizabeth’s part, she hardly knew what to think. The portrait her aunt had sketched did not match that of her last memory of Darcy; and what could he mean by inquiring into her presence during the London season? Did he plan to seek her out? And, if he did, could she, or rather did she, want to welcome his addresses, for she could see no other reason for him to approach her. The lift in her heart supplied the answer but she ruthlessly suppressed it. She would not allow herself to hope, not yet at least.



# **In which matters are resolved between Miss Bennet and Mr. Darcy**

London – October 1812

“Miss Bennet” said the voice at her elbow.

She turned to Mr. Northcott who had materialized, bearing two glasses of punch, accompanied by a rather handsome young man of four or five and twenty.

“May I” said Mr. Northcott, “introduce Mr. Bingley? Mr. Charles Bingley, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Elizabeth controlled her surprise, schooled her features to reflect disinterested politeness, acknowledged the introduction and listened as Mr. Northcott continued, “Mr. Bingley is an acquaintance of mine from the north. We were at Cambridge together, he observed me speaking with you and sought an introduction.”

“Miss Bennet, if you are not otherwise engaged for the next set, may I have the honour of dancing it with you?” asked Bingley.

“Too late, old man” remarked Mr. Northcott cheekily, “She is to dance it with me.”

Mr. Bingley smiled, “Then the next perhaps?”

Elizabeth found she had to exercise all of her civility for her immediate temptation was to refuse this request, even if it prevented her from dancing for the remainder of the evening. As the ball was only just underway, such action seemed impolitic in the extreme and, in addition, she would have to explain her actions to Mr. Northcott, and that she did not wish to do. She smiled coolly and affirmed that while she was to dance the next with Mr. Northcott, she was not engaged for the following set and would be pleased to dance it with him.

“Miss Bennet,” Bingley then inquired, “my friend indicated that your home is in Hertfordshire. I stayed there, near a town called Meryton, for some months last autumn. I recollect there being a Bennet family in the neighbourhood. Are they relations of yours, perhaps?”

Elizabeth acknowledge that indeed her family had an estate near Meryton and that she remembered them speaking of a Mr. Bingley. She was not inclined to impart more information unless Mr. Bingley sought it directly. She wondered if he would, and, given his history, whether he would behave towards her as he had done with her sister. She resolved that he would not receive encouragement of any sort from her.

“I seem to remember Miss Jane Bennet, your older sister, I believe, speaking of you. May I inquire as to her health and that of your family?”

“My family is in excellent spirits, sir, and my sister, Jane, was married this past June.”

“Married!” Bingley was clearly shocked and Elizabeth thought she discerned a degree of something akin to dismay, which she could not account for. Why would he be dismayed when it was he, rather than her sister, that severed the relationship?

“Indeed. She met her husband while in London this past spring. He is the rector of a parish in Suffolk.”

“She is happy then?” he asked.

“Very.” declared Elizabeth firmly.

“She was in London last spring?” he asked, his manner somewhat confused.

Elizabeth affirmed that her sister had been in London for about six months before her marriage.

Their conversation was interrupted by the music signalling the beginning of the next dance and Northcott led her onto the floor. As was his usual wont, he spoke very little while they danced. He was proficient at the exercise and on this occasion she was quite prepared to allow him to remain silent as it afforded her time to compose herself for her dance with Mr. Bingley. By the start of the second dance, Mr. Northcott apparently had recognized her distraction but allowed her to dissemble when answering his inquiries as to its cause. Supposing her to be displeased at his silence, he endeavoured to engage her conversation for the rest of their dance and she put aside her musings to contribute her share of it.

At the start of the next set, Bingley came to claim her hand and lead her into the line. He talked almost continually throughout the pair of dances but Elizabeth could, when later attempting to recollect the subjects he covered, remember little of any substance. She did not herself feel obliged to encourage any interest on his part, her responses were, for the most part, civil but disinterested. He was not an object for her consideration and she could only rejoice in her sister’s recovery and happiness. If Jane’s husband did not have Mr. Bingley’s five thousand a year, he could provide a decent living for her and her situation was such as to leave her very content.

Elizabeth was a popular partner that evening, sitting out only one set, and that by choice, in order to rest her feet. Mr. Northcott had asked to dance with her a second time to which she had agreed and she had reason to believe he might begin to call on her. Even if she retained a degree of affection for Mr. Darcy, she was determined that it would not stand in her way of developing an affection for someone else. She could not afford the luxury of repining his loss and it was far from assured that he would attempt to meet her again. Yet she admitted to herself that she had been looking for him the moment she arrived at the ball and could not conceal, from herself at least, her disappointment that he had not attended. That he had most likely not known that she was to be there, she conceded eagerly to assuage her disappointment.

Mr. Northcott did indeed call the next day and appeared much as he was the year previous. Elizabeth could not discern, from his manner or conversation, whether his situation had improved or not. He inquired into her activities since last he saw her, was pleasant to Mrs. Gardiner and was interested in her plans for the forthcoming weeks. Apprised that she

proposed to attend the Hawthorne's ball in a fortnight, he allowed he expected to be present also and asked that she reserve a spot on her dance card. This request was honoured and shortly thereafter he took his leave. Once Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth were alone, the former huffed and remarked that she had rarely seen a more cautious suitor, if suitor he was. To this Elizabeth could only agree and added that she supposed that either his circumstances were still unsettled or that he was considering more than one candidate for the position of Mrs. Northcott. As she offered this opinion with a slight smile, Mrs. Gardiner surmised that her niece's affections for the gentleman may well have cooled since the previous year, for she had believed, at that time, that Elizabeth had been rather disheartened that he did not offer for her. Now she could not be sure that his suit would even be accepted should he decide to press it.

Mr. Darcy called the following day; his visit lasted a half hour and before he left, Mrs. Gardiner's suspicions about her niece's heart had been fully awakened. Of the gentleman's heart, she had no doubt. He admired Elizabeth greatly and could hardly remove his eyes from her even if speaking to someone else. He made no overt moves to capture Elizabeth's attentions until he had been there a quarter hour and, when he did direct his questions to her, it was to speak of her sister's wedding and Elizabeth's care for the Gardiner children whilst their parents were travelling. Mrs. Gardiner was unsure how the subject of picnics arose but very quickly the antics of her children and the pleasure they took in venturing out to explore and holding impromptu picnics provided considerable amusement. She was pleased to see Elizabeth's demeanour relax – the girl had radiated tension when Mr. Darcy entered the room – and her increasing ease seemed to allow Mr. Darcy to converse in a more lively manner. Before he left, he leaned towards Elizabeth and asked, "I met Mr. Bingley yesterday and he mentioned encountering you at the ball. I was pleased to learn that you had arrived in Town as your aunt intimated you would do. Are you planning to attend another soon?"

Elizabeth allowed she was planning to attend the Hawthorne's ball. He nodded and responded, "I expect to be there as well. May I have the honour of the first dance, Miss Bennet?"

Elizabeth managed to mask most of her surprise although the twitch of Darcy's lips suggested that he was quite aware of her discomposure. "That was quite ungentlemanly of you, sir. To surprise me so. I understood from my sisters that you abhor the exercise."

He shook his head, "They quite misunderstand the matter. I have no objection to dancing with a partner with whom I am acquainted and whose conversation I enjoy." He paused, "And my request?"

Elizabeth flushed, "I would be pleased to dance the first with you, Mr. Darcy. I can only hope my conversation will entertain."

"I believe you are fishing for compliments, Miss Bennet. You know I have never found fault with our discussions."

As it was time for his visit to end, he rose and addressed Mrs. Gardiner, "There is a rather pretty little park a short distance from here. I was wondering if Miss Bennet and I might explore it tomorrow morning?"

Mrs. Gardiner looked at Elizabeth who smiled and nodded. A time was agreed upon and Darcy took his leave. He returned the next day and, as the weather was suitable, they prepared to venture out to stroll around the park. If Darcy had expectations that only he would be alone with Elizabeth, they were soon dashed. The Gardiner children had, upon learning that their favourite cousin was going out for a walk, made representations to be included in the outing. Elizabeth was not adverse to their company but rather thought Mr. Darcy might object. If he hoped to have her attention exclusively, she knew he would be disappointed. As it turned out, he was not at all disinclined to have the company of the children. He had greeted them very formally, sketching a deep bow to the two Misses Gardiners, young ladies of five and nine years, who responded with rather shaky curtsies. If there was a slight smile on his countenance, Elizabeth thought only she saw it. The two master Gardiners, boys of two and seven, were also greeted with a bow, which was returned by the eldest. The youngest Master Gardiner, however, could only gaze at Darcy with stupefaction before running to hide behind his mother.

“Perhaps” said she, “Thomas should remain home with me.”

While the lad was apparently bereft of words, the definite shake of his head conveyed easily his resolution to be one of the party and when Elizabeth held out her hand to him, he scurried to her, avoiding as much as possible coming too close to Darcy. She leaned down and whispered to him, the import of which Darcy could not discern; young Thomas’ response was a little more audible and he could make out the words “too tall”.

Darcy grinned and stooped to near the child’s level, “So I have been told by many of my friends, Master Thomas. My sister saw it as an advantage for she loved to ride on my shoulders.” He rose to face Mrs. Gardiner, “We will, at least, have no deficiency of chaperonage today.”

She laughed, “Of that you may be assured, Mr. Darcy. They rarely allow Lizzy out of their sight when she visits.”

“I see I shall have strong competition for your attention, Miss Bennet.”

“Indeed, sir, you shall. For what sensible young lady would discourage the attentions of such fine gentlemen.”

Darcy smirked slightly, “Then I shall endeavour to ensure that the two Miss Gardiners do not suffer from a want of a gentleman’s interest.”

Mrs. Gardiner chuckled, “May I suggest that you begin this walk before this. . .teasing escalates.”

Once the four children had been garbed appropriately, they, their nursemaids, Elizabeth and Darcy ventured out of the house. The park was but a short distance away but their progress could be no faster than that of Master Thomas Gardiner who remained firmly attached to Elizabeth’s right hand. Her left rested in the crook of Darcy’s elbow and he was content for the nonce to have it so. While he had hopes that he might enjoy Elizabeth’s company with some privacy, it was not going to happen immediately. Fortunately, Elizabeth’s small charge was not particularly talkative or demanding of her attention and she quickly directed her

focus to her large one who, though not talkative, might well demand most of her consideration.

“I must admit to no small amount of amazement, Mr. Darcy, that you called on me yesterday.”

“Did not your aunt inform you that I might do so.”

Elizabeth nodded slowly, “She did relate that she and my uncle had encountered you at Pemberley and that you had inquired after my family.” She did not wish to reveal all that her aunt had confided. “My aunt and uncle were very pleased to make your acquaintance and honoured at your graciousness. Uncle has, I believe, never enjoyed fishing as well as he did at your stream.”

Darcy was silent for several minutes before replying, “I was very pleased to encounter them. They are estimable people and, I rather suspect, bear a large portion of the credit for the comportment of you and your elder sister.” He paused and when he thought that Elizabeth was about to protest, resumed quickly, “As well, I must admit that your two younger sisters appear to have improved as a result of the Gardiners’ direction.”

Elizabeth could think of no response other than to nod in acknowledgement. Some other subject must be sought and she could think of only one.

“How long have you been in Town, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy wondered if she was concerned that he had been in London for some time before calling on her and sought to allay any such suspicions.

“I arrived several days ago. I had hopes of arriving sooner, but several problems at Pemberley arose and I could not leave as early as I wished. Then I had several matters of business to resolve here in Town before I was free to pursue my own interests.”

“Yes, I seem to remember my aunt saying you planned to contact her when you arrived.”

“And I was about to do so when I encountered Bingley as I left my solicitor’s office. I believe you met him at a ball?”

She nodded and he continued before she could comment further.

“Yes, well. Bingley and I went to my club to talk as we had not been in each other’s company for six or seven months – since before I visited my aunt in Kent, actually.”

Elizabeth flushed at the mention of Kent and was surprised when she felt his hand placed atop hers and pressed slightly. It was comforting.

“Bingley mentioned he had been introduced to you and danced as well.”

He was not sure what the sound that emanated from Elizabeth was. It was not a snort, nor a grunt, but whatever it was it did not signify pleasure.

“You have Bingley quite at non-plus, Miss Bennet.” He did not try to hide his amusement. “I must admit to considerable surprise and confusion at the situation.”

“Why so, sir?”

“On which point, Miss Bennet?”

“Any or all of them, Mr. Darcy. It shall be as you wish.”

“Then let me begin with the non-plus. Bingley is considered, by virtue of his manners, his fortune and being unmarried, quite an eligible prospect in society. He is used to being welcomed enthusiastically by most young ladies. While he has been rebuffed by those from the most . . . elevated circles, most marriage-minded mothers and their daughters actively seek his company. Imagine his surprise, therefore, to be introduced to a young lady, whose circumstances he knew quite well, and find a cool, disinterested, almost dismissive attitude. He knew not what to make of it.”

“I am sorry if I have injured Mr. Bingley’s good opinion of himself but I have few kind thoughts of the gentleman.”

“May one ask why? He truly is a most kind-hearted, amiable person.”

Elizabeth walked beside him in silence for several minutes. They had, in fact, just reached the park and one of the nursemaids had come to relieve Elizabeth of her young charge who, seeing his older siblings begging to wander off the pathway, wished to join them.

She finally spoke, almost in a whisper, “I should not speak. He is your friend.”

Darcy grew concerned. What could she have to charge his friend with?

“You may speak with me in confidence, Miss Bennet. I shall not speak of this with anyone else – and certainly not Bingley.”

Elizabeth hesitated, glanced at his face and took comfort from the concern it expressed.

“He came to Netherfield, paid such attentions to my sister as to attach her affections and then stole away like a thief in the night with no word or explanation other than a most patronizing letter from his sister. He was, we were informed, attached to your sister and yet he hesitated not to pay his attentions to mine. It took weeks for me and my aunt to repair her heart and I suspected that it was only when she was cruelly ignored by him and his sisters when she visited my aunt after Christmas, that she realized how inconstant his affections were.”

Darcy was dismayed. This was a picture of his friend and the situation that he had never expected. How could he defend his friend without revealing his part in separating him from Jane Bennet. He could not and wondered if he should attempt to do so now or wait until a more propitious time. He considered the matter for several minutes, although quite unconscious of how much time had lapsed. Finally, he resolved to address the matter immediately. If he and Elizabeth were to have a future, this could not remain between them. It might loom larger if he waited and, since he was sure that it would be revealed at some

point, his own character might be called into question. She would, undoubtedly, consider his behaviour to have been duplicitous.

“I fear you attach too much blame to Bingley on this matter, Miss Bennet. I must share a portion of it as well.”

“I know.” she said.

“You. . . know?”

“Your cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, unwittingly disclosed your role, sir. What was it you said? Ah, yes. . . ‘There are serious objections to the lady’.” She turned to him, “Her lack of fortune and want of connections, I supposed.”

Darcy reluctantly shook his head, “Those were impediments I will not deny, but I believe to Bingley they were insignificant and really of concern only to his sisters.”

“Only his sisters, Mr. Darcy? I find that hard to credit.”

“My primary objections were two-fold, Miss Bennet. Will you hear me out? And grant that what I held to be true then in one case, is no longer so?”

“I will certainly hear you out, Mr. Darcy.”

He could not discern her attitude from her voice. He rather suspected that he had dug himself a deep hole. Whether he could climb out of it was another matter altogether. He snorted at the image of himself scrambling to climb out of a muddy hole and Elizabeth laughing at him from above.

“You find amusement in this, Mr. Darcy?”

He could easily sense her resentment at a perceived slight and spoke quickly to reassure her.

“No! No. Not in the matter of Bingley, I assure you. I simply realized that I am in a quagmire of my own making. It was an image that reflected poorly on me.”

“Mayhap you might share that image with me?”

“I would suspend no pleasure of yours, Miss Bennet, but later perhaps? Let me first deal with the two objections that I raised with my friend. The first pertained to your family. There was, from my observation, an almost complete want of propriety on the part of your mother and two youngest sisters and, occasionally, even by your father and next eldest sister. Such criticism, however, could not be attached to your oldest sister. She was everything that is right and proper and, I might add, when I became acquainted with you, I encompassed you in that praise. This want of propriety proved to be of greater concern to me than to Bingley. Truly, I believe he would have ignored it altogether, although he was not insensible of it, and returned to Netherfield as he intended, if it were not for the final objection I raised.”

“And that was, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth found it difficult to conceal her confusion. His explanation had, so far, upset all her opinions about Bingley and, to a degree, Mr. Darcy as

well.

“You have stated that your sister’s affections were engaged, Miss Bennet.”

She nodded.

“I failed to see any such signs. I thought her indifferent to him. She appeared pleased at his attentions, but I could see no sign that her affections were equal to his, and his were, I assure you, most definitely engaged.”

“You were quite mistaken, Mr. Darcy. Quite mistaken! And this is the reason he did not return?”

“It is! And I should also note that while I might have harboured some hopes that Bingley would gain my sister’s affections, she is but sixteen now and will not be out for another year at least, perhaps two. I do not understand where such an idea originated but there is no truth in it.”

"You may credit Miss Bingley with this little piece of malice, for malice I call it. I have never met the lady and have no wish to do so."

“Hmmm. I see. That does not, I admit, surprise me greatly. Miss Bingley was strongly opposed to the match. That leads me to admit something else. Bingley had no knowledge of your sister’s presence in London last winter. None! We, his sisters and I, thought it best he be kept in ignorance. I believe he would have called on her had he known.”

They strolled in silence for several minutes, each wrapped in their own thoughts. Finally, Elizabeth broke it.

“I had thought poorly of Mr. Bingley, possibly too poorly. I had charged him with being inconstant. He might well plead innocent of such a charge and win his case.”

Darcy interrupted, “I have seen my friend fall in love before. He has a reputation for doing so, and falling out of it as quickly. I have never, however, seen his affections persist so long and even when I saw him before I left for Kent, his spirits appeared low.”

“I may not then charge him with inconstancy but I fear that a lack of resolution is no less serious. To be persuaded against his own judgement by someone who could not be as well placed as himself to develop that judgement, does not speak well for his character. Whether he be inconstant or irresolute, my sister is better off where she is. Mr. Cartwright may lack Mr. Bingley’s fortune but he has no shortage of constancy or resolution. She is very well married.”

“You are harsh with my friend. No! No.” he waved off her disclaimer, “I can see the justice of your opinion. I will not try to persuade you otherwise. Allow me only to say that Bingley is a sweet-tempered individual and incredibly modest in terms of his own capabilities. In this instance, I fear he placed too much reliance on my judgement and not enough on his own. I have, you see, been helping and guiding him in adapting to society.”



“Mayhap he should be allowed to fail a time or two. I have always found failure to be a most useful teacher. Although. . .” and she was thoughtful for several seconds, before continuing, “Although on the matter of marriage, I will concede that allowing for failure might not be the wisest decision as it is not a circumstance that allows for correction. Nonetheless, your friend needs to be his own man. No woman wishes to wed two men.”

“Am I forgiven, Miss Bennet, for what I can only concede was officious interference?”

“You were, were you not, acting to help your friend?”

“I was.”

“Then I suppose I will pardon you . . . provisionally.”

“Provisionally, Miss Bennet?”

“Aye . . . although should you offend again in such a manner, your punishment will be extreme.”

Darcy delighted in the teasing note that had crept into their discussion.

“And of what, pray, shall such a punishment consist? The gallows, perhaps?”

“I am not quite so savage, Mr. Darcy. I am considering the efficacy of having you construct a quagmire.”

“Ah. Punishment indeed. You may be assured of my proper behaviour, Miss Bennet. Quite assured.”

Darcy was very pleased at how things had progressed. He had thought yesterday that Elizabeth had greeted him with much of her former pleasure. This did not, he knew, mean that her opinion of him as a suitor had changed, but today there seemed to be something more. She had not taken umbrage, at least not too much, at his interference with Bingley and her sister. He was uncertain whether he should press his suit, but he had a piece of information that made him disinclined to be patient. Bingley had disclosed that his friend, Northcott, from whom he had sought the introduction to Elizabeth, had intimated his interest in her and was considering whether to propose. Bingley had also mentioned that Northcott had danced twice with her at the ball and appeared quite taken with her.

He felt he could not afford patience and the question was whether he would be better served by seeking a courtship or her hand in marriage. As the former would, in his estimation lead to the latter, it was the safer choice. If he were convinced of her feelings, however, he would offer for her directly.

Their stroll had completed a second loop around the perimeter of the park and the nursemaids were collecting the children who were all showing, in varying degrees, a desire to return home. Darcy needed more time and privacy and he was uncertain if he could achieve either if he and Elizabeth accompanied them.

“May I request another stroll around this park, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth was surprised at his request, but not reluctant to accede to it and they shortly separated from the children and resumed their walk. She assumed he had some purpose for his request and, rather suspecting, from his manner what it might be, was content to leave the timing and content of their conversation in his charge. It was several minutes before he undertook to do so.

“I wish to thank you, Miss Bennet.”

Whatever Elizabeth had expected, an expression of his gratitude was not among them. She listened as he continued.

“I also wish to beg your forgiveness for a most serious offence against you and your family. I was wrong, I was thoughtless, my behaviour was totally reprehensible. I cannot remember what I said without abhorrence. That I could insult in such a fashion, a woman I claimed to love shamed me. I will admit it was some time before I could admit the justice of your words. No! No! Allow me to finish please.” As he observed her about to interject. “My parents were good people, principled and just; but they allowed me to grow up believing too well of myself and too poorly of those I considered below me.” His laughter was sharp and harsh. “I came to you expecting you to accept me, nay expecting that you welcomed my offer, that you would be gratified that I had offered to raise you to my level. And you rejected me. As you should. As any woman of character should. I was a prideful man, Elizabeth, but you showed me how unworthy I was to attach the affections of woman of character. I remain prideful, I cannot deny that, but I also now recognize that I must judge others on their merits and not their station in life.”

He had kept his eyes focused on the path ahead, not allowing himself to look at her face, fearing her reaction. Now he risked a glance to find her silently weeping. He immediately turned to face her, shielding her from the gaze of any passers-by – of which there were only a few – and using his handkerchief began to dry her eyes. It was an impropriety but one she seemed willing to allow. When he was done, he took both her hands in his and spoke softly so only she might hear.

“You are too kind to trifle with me. My feelings for you have not altered. Nay, I have come to love and honour you more now than I did in Hunsford. I know not your feelings, but of my own you may be assured. I wish for your love, that you consent to be my wife, my partner, my companion. If you are uncertain as to your feelings, would you allow me to court you?”

“I am” she whispered, “not at all uncertain of my feelings.”

Her watery smile told him all that he needed to know and the happiness of his mien was such as she had never seen before as he asked, “Then will you, Miss Bennet, do me the inestimable honour of becoming my wife?”

She nodded, too choked for words and, by her expression, gave him to understand that her pleasure was equal to his own.

“I had begun to love you in Hunsford.” She said a short while later as they began to return to the Gardiner home. “I was angry and hurt after your proposal but I believe the portion of love that had developed did not die. It required, I suspect, learning that you appeared to have taken

my reproofs to heart. For I could see no other explanation for your welcome and kindness to the Gardiners and my sisters.”

“I had not realized that you knew of my dealings with Bingley. You must have hated me.”

“No. Not at all. I took away from it that if you could find a marriage between my sister and Mr. Bingley to be objectionable, then surely one with me would be even more objectionable. Your proposal then caught me quite by surprise, for I had resolved that you would not offer for me, despite my wishes that you do so.”

”It was a reasonable concern. Had you accepted me, I think I would not have succumbed; that you would have schooled me to proper behaviour.”

“I love you . . . Mr. . . . Oh! I cannot go on calling you Mr. Darcy. What shall I call you?”

“My name is Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth.”

“Fitzwilliam.” She rolled the name around her lips, “Fitzwilliam.”

He had to stop himself from kissing her then and there. He distracted himself with an important question, “Should I speak to your uncle for his consent?”

“Yes. My father ceded the authority to him when I came to town.”

“I should like to speak to your father as well.”

Elizabeth smiled, “He would much appreciate that. He will be sorry to lose me, but he is aware that it would probably happen, and sooner than he might wish.”

“That is the reason you came to Town, is it not?”

“Indeed. Jane and I have quite despaired of finding a suitable match in Hertfordshire. Our father was reluctant to allow it.” She began to chuckle.

“What has struck you as humorous?”

“The irony of the situation. I came to London last fall as a replacement for Jane because Mr. Bingley had leased Netherfield. Jane came to London to repair her heart and met her husband here. In my absence in London, Charlotte married Mr. Collins whom my mother had designs on as my husband. I went Hunsford to visit Charlotte and met you. I wonder what might have happen had I stayed at Longbourn?”

When they had returned to the Gardiner’s house, it was to discover that Mr. Northcott had called and had remained to greet Miss Bennet; however, he had not been in their presence for more than a few minutes when it became obvious that an attachment of some sort had arisen between Miss Bennet and Mr. Darcy to whom he had just been introduced. Any doubts that he might harbour were removed when five minutes after Mr. Darcy had excused himself to speak to Mr. Gardiner, he returned in company with him and announced Miss Bennet’s engagement.

He made a noble effort to conceal his disappointment and moved to congratulate them both. With the speed with which this surprising event had taken place, he could only suppose that she had met the gentleman after returning to her home. That Mr. Darcy had captured her affections was clear. She had never gazed at him so. As he left the building he wondered what might have happened had he asked her to marry him before she returned to her home. He had wanted to do so but his parents had raised him to be prudent and cautious in such matters. Advice which, in this instance, may not have served him well.

## Epilogue

Happy was the day when Mrs. Bennet saw one of her daughters wed a gentleman who would ensure that she would escape living in the hedgerows when Mr. Bennet died. Fortunately for the latter, that event was delayed for more than five and twenty years and he lived long enough to see several grandchildren married and to be introduced to two great-grandchildren. Of even great blessing to the gentleman, was that Mrs. Bennet predeceased him by almost ten years; and thus he was able to enjoy his subsequent years quietly spending most of his days in the Pemberley library, and became a familiar figure to the seven children that were born to Darcy and Elizabeth. His three Darcy granddaughters were all precious to him but the middle daughter, Anne, who in character and looks was the image of her mother, was particularly cherished.

Georgiana Darcy, to whom Elizabeth was not introduced until a week before their marriage, found in Elizabeth the sister she had long wished for. A shy young woman, she chose to live with her brother and his wife and put off for two years her coming out into society. She was greeted enthusiastically but now, confident in her abilities, was content to enjoy the benefits of society for four more years before finding a gentleman that she wished to marry. As he lived within a day's travel of Pemberley, all her wishes for a satisfactory life were achieved. The presence of three children over the course of their marriage could only enhance her happiness.

Of the other Bennet daughters there is not much to disclose. Jane remained extremely happy in her marriage, filled the Parsonage with a brood of children, most of whom inherited her looks and easy nature. Her husband would have been content to remain in Suffolk but when a better living under Darcy's patronage became available, he was persuaded to remove to it. The increase in income from the additional living was welcomed, particularly as they faced the task of raising five children, but he was not insensible to the increase in happiness his wife would enjoy from being able to live in close proximity to Elizabeth.

Catherine, was removed from Longbourn shortly after Elizabeth's marriage and split most of her days between Derbyshire and Suffolk. The improvement in her comportment was significant and she was, several years later, to encounter and marry a gentleman with a small estate in Cheshire.

Lydia's exposure to the benefits of the Gardiners' company did not last much beyond her return to Longbourn. Indulged and spoiled, it quickly became apparent that unless she was taken in hand, the prospect of her damaging the family's reputation was large. Discussions between Longbourn, Pemberley and Gracechurch Street continued for some months until it was resolved that, as she was too old to be sent to school, marriage was the only choice. Given her preferences, it was rightly believed that she would resist any suitor who was not in regimentals. Colonel Fitzwilliam was approached, agreed to canvas the officers under his command and ultimately determined that a strong minded captain, possessed of ability and a limited income, might prove amenable to wedding the girl, if a suitable amount of money could be settled on her. In a matter of months a settlement was arranged, the pair introduced and a month after the introduction, they wed. His promotion to major soon followed and, as

the regiment was based near Brighton, his new wife had available to her all the delights of lively society and a handsome husband. Of their domestic situation, this author will draw the curtain.

The middle daughter, Mary, remained at Longbourn for almost ten years before marrying shortly before Mrs. Bennet's passing. Her husband, a local rector, was some years her elder but her possession of a modest dowry - for Darcy had enhanced the dowries of all the Bennet sisters by four thousand pounds each to improve their marriage prospects - provided sufficient inducement for him to make an offer. Mary gave birth to a single child, a son, and outlived her husband by nearly forty years.

What of the minor characters in this story? Well, Mr. and Mrs. Collins were asked to move to Longbourn a few years after the passing of Mrs Bennet. Mr. Collins did not, by virtue of his ascension to the landed gentry, acquire wisdom, intelligence or even a modicum of sense. He was a silly man before that date, he remained so. Fortunately, Longbourn passed effectively into the competent hands of Mrs. Collins and later her equally competent son. They, and the estate, prospered, the entail was broken, although an unbroken line of sons in each generation till the present day would have made it irrelevant.

If we must speak of Mr. Wickham, let his tale be short. Elizabeth's letter to her mother and that of Charlotte to hers, set in motion such a storm of gossip about Mr. Wickham that, by the time the regiment was to remove to Brighton, his colonel ordered him there in advance of the regiment to prepare the facilities. Of his dealings there, we have no further word. Subsequent inquiries by Darcy revealed only that he resigned his commission in 1813 and was reported to have boarded a ship for the Americas.

Of the Bingleys I will say little. Mr. Bingley remained one of Darcy's best friends and, over time, he and Elizabeth became reasonably comfortable in company together. He visited Pemberley on occasion but was more frequently met in London. He married a young lady of modest fortune who bore a remarkable resemblance to Jane Bennet in appearance and character. Shortly after his marriage, he acquired an estate in Devonshire and there he and his wife raised a handful of amiable children. Intercourse between the Bingley estate and Pemberley was infrequent; but despite the fact that the children played together only rarely, the two families grew a little closer when the second oldest Darcy son, Thomas, wed the youngest Bingley daughter, Amelia. Nonetheless, Bingley and Jane Cartwright were infrequently in company together and both were pleased to meet as indifferent acquaintances.

As to Miss Bingley - who Elizabeth considered herself fortunate not to meet until after her wedding to Darcy - fates were relatively charitable. In her thirtieth year, she met and subsequently married Mr. Howard, a man of solid character, whose roots were in trade but was possessed of a significant fortune and a desire to join the landed gentry. He was able to acquire an estate in the south of England, which, in the words of Elizabeth Darcy, was "made more attractive by its distance from Pemberley". As the gentleman also acquired a townhouse in London and was not against residing there for upwards of half a year, Mrs. Howard was singularly content with her lot. Their union was blessed with several children, although their mother was said to have considerable difficulty in remembering their names. Those charitable fates were capricious in their favours and Mrs. Howard was overheard saying something particularly malicious and false about one of the Lady Patronesses of Almacks. As a

consequence of that Lady's subsequent direct cut in a most public setting, accompanied by the revocation of her invitation to Almacks, Mrs. Howard found that her country home to be a much more pleasant environment. It is not known to what degree her husband felt likewise.

Finally, Lady Catherine de Bourgh was as incensed at her nephew's marriage to Elizabeth as may be expected of one who was rarely unable to order events to her liking. A visit was paid to Elizabeth, an attempt to have the engagement broken was rejected soundly by the younger lady, and her ladyship chastised vehemently by her nephew. Her efforts to enlist the support of her brother, the earl, were equally rebuffed and she was perforce to retire to Rosings unsatisfied. Obdurate in her opposition to the marriage, she remained estranged from the Darcys for the rest of her life. As she had a limited position in society, having offended too many people of consequence through the years, her absence went largely unnoticed. Her daughter, Anne, remained in ill-health for a number of years but with the assistance of her uncle, the earl, was able to escape Rosings for extended periods. She became a welcome guest at Pemberley and had her revenge on Darcy for not marrying her (which she had never wanted) by shamelessly spoiling the Darcy children.

What of the good Colonel, you ask? Well, he eventually found the wealthy wife he sought. A widow, some thirty years old, possessed of twenty-five thousand pounds and a liking for the amiable man, agreed that he might suit her well enough and they married. He remained in the military, being promoted upon his retirement to Brigadier-General. The couple lived mainly in London, had two sons, both of whom followed their father's profession, and were, from all reports, quite content with their lot.

Of Mr. Northcott there is little to say, he progressed in his profession, married a suitable young lady and fathered a small brood of children. As he was never canvassed as to possible regrets about his failure to ask for the hand of Elizabeth Bennet in marriage, his feelings on the matter were never made known. Let us leave him in his ever-so-cautious peace.

The End

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