A Literary Courtship
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Additional Tags: Regency, Angst, Fluff, historical realism, Touch of farce, Canon Compliant, Canon divergence at Netherfield, Courtship, Marriage, honeymoon period, A lot of pillow talk, Sexual Content, Darcy's history, Flawed characters, Maybe really flawed, Definitely no Mary Sues here, Not a Dark Darcy though, Just realistically gritty, Elizabeth takes on the haut ton, I'm a history geek
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A Literary Courtship
by LucyQ

Summary

A small literary coincidence puts Darcy and Elizabeth on a quicker and easier courtship path, but as it turns out, marriage is only the beginning of getting to know one’s life partner. Can they open up to each other and build the bonds needed to survive a most unequal match between a young lady of little fortune and a member of the aristocratic elite?

Notes

Revisions. An earlier and shorter version of this story was once posted online as A Literary Courtship. I then changed the name to A Marriage of True Minds, but was told that title is taken and have decided to return to the original title.

Angst Rating. This story is my attempt to flesh out Darcy’s background as described in P&P and examine the different experiences and expectations as between a wealthy male aristocrat and a young gentlewoman in the Regency era. It contains both fluff and darker elements, but no great suspense in the sense that D&E do not suffer any prolonged separations. In fact, an alternate blurb for the story could be: D&E flirt, fall in love, get married, have sex and talk. The main interest is intended to come from character development, the content of the
discussion and what comes of it. My best estimate is that this is a “medium” angst rating.

**Maturity rating (M).** This story at times deals with sex, death, exploitation and other sensitive themes. I am not a fan of gratuitous or graphic detail, but in the end I will do what I consider narratively necessary. This is all you will get from me in terms of trigger warnings. Consider yourself warned.

**Comments/reviews.** I appreciate and value all comments. I also value honesty, free speech and debate and discussion. Feel free to say whatever you like, and vent at me if you feel the need. All I ask is that you are courteous to fellow commenters/reviewers.

**Posting schedule.** This story has approximately 35 chapters. The first 25 chapters are complete and will be posted weekly. The remaining chapters are in draft form and will be posted when ready.

**Thanks & Kudos.** At various times, I have received beta and cold reader help on this story. Special thanks to Mary, Agnes, Daniela, David and other cold readers and betas who have asked to remain anonymous. Your advice and comments have been invaluable. Thanks also to commenters on the original (13-chapter) version, as their comments have been an endless source of ideas and assistance in developing this story.
Elizabeth Bennet, seated at the window of her room at stately Netherfield Hall, pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapped her shawl around them more tightly against the cold and eagerly turned the final pages of her book - only to find them blank.

Leafing through the pages, she realized what she had assumed to be a standalone volume was in reality only the first of a two-volume set - which meant she was left hanging in the middle of the story with no idea how it ended.

She sighed. Could this visit possibly become any worse? Two days ago she had walked to Netherfield to inquire after her sister Jane, who had caught a chill while on a visit to the ladies of the house and had been forced to extend her stay. The master of the house, Bingley, had very kindly insisted that Elizabeth stay as well to nurse Jane, but the rest of the party - Miss Bingley, fashionable Mr. and Mrs. Hurst and the haughty and superior Mr. Darcy - clearly saw her as beneath them socially and wished her away. Elizabeth would not leave Jane alone, but nor could she pretend any joy in being where she was clearly so unwanted.

Oh, why must her mother push so hard to marry her daughters off to wealthy gentlemen, she wondered. It had been Mrs. Bennet's scheme for Jane to make the trip on horseback when the skies threatened rain in hopes she would be asked to stay longer and have an opportunity to see Bingley when he returned from his sporting pursuits. As usual, however, she had given little thought to the risk to Jane's reputation or her health from such a scheme.

And what was so special about wealthy gentlemen anyway? Oh, her mother had been delighted to marry her father, a landed gentleman of means, but Elizabeth could not see how it had purchased her any great happiness. A more ill-matched couple was rarely seen, and when her mother was not nagging and complaining about her father, her father was mocking and deriding her mother. Much more inspiring was the happy and prosperous marriage of her aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, though Mrs. Bennet's brother was only a tradesman.

She would certainly prefer a tradesman to the unpleasant Mr. Darcy! Elizabeth would not soon forget his withering insult at the Meryton Assembly, when he had refused to dance with her. She is tolerable, I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt me. Wealth and good looks notwithstanding, Elizabeth had no time for such a man. He was the epitome of everything that was wrong with the breed: proud, conceited and uselessly fine. Oh yes, an attractive young man with five or six hundred a year -- or even two or three hundred if he was particularly prepossessing and ambitious -- would be far preferable to such a "gentleman."

Yawning, Elizabeth made her way to the bed. As she blew out the candle and tucked herself in, she thought of the lone, single volume of her unfinished tale, which must be somewhere in the house. Tomorrow she would find its mate and determine if the heroine, Emma, was really going to marry that coxcomb Frank Churchill. Tomorrow she would locate the final volume and discover whether the heroine's ending was a happy or bitter one.
Elizabeth's early efforts proved disappointing. A search of the library left her empty-handed, although the enticing space beside the first volume confirmed her hopes that the second volume was somewhere nearby. The book-tables where Bingley kept a selection on display proved similarly fruitless. On enquiry to a servant, she was informed that those were the only places that books were kept, so if the book she desired was not there, it was likely in use by a member of the household.

Careful observation of the ladies revealed no sign of the longed-for book. By evening, Elizabeth, despite reluctance to invite further censure from Miss Bingley, was resolved to make a general enquiry of the party gathered. She was spared from speaking, however, when the gentlemen entered the room - and she saw Darcy carrying the exact book she was seeking!

Elizabeth cursed the perverseness of the mischance that had put her darling book into the hands of the disagreeable Darcy. Still, she had to learn how the story ended. Her eyes followed Darcy as he settled himself on a sofa not far from her and opened his book. He was about one-third of the way in. She hoped the party would be silent so he could make progress.

"And what are you reading so secretly, sir?" asked Miss Bingley, who was wont to hover around Darcy like a moth to a light. Elizabeth would have swatted her long since.

"It is no secret. I am reading a novel," said Darcy without looking up from his book.

"It must be engrossing to capture your attention so completely. What is it about?"

"A rich but ignorant young lady, and all of the mischief she engenders with her matchmaking and meddling." He flipped a page and continued reading determinedly.

"Indeed! That is strange for a gentleman's choice of books, unless you are studying how to avoid such a creature."

"Not at all. I am simply interested in the author's portrayal of character. She writes with a deft hand and her characters are true to life."

Miss Bingley launched into raptures about Darcy's taste, which Darcy bore with equanimity. Presently, Elizabeth spoke up.

"Are you a fast reader, sir?"

"Miss Eliza, I assure you, Mr. Darcy is a very fast reader," said Miss Bingley contemptuously.

"On the contrary, I read rather slowly," said Darcy, looking up at Elizabeth as he answered for himself. "Do you consider quickness in reading to be a virtue, Miss Bennet?"

"Sometimes." When someone else is waiting for your book, she added silently.

"That is interesting. I am in the habit of seeing speed as inversely proportional to understanding and enjoyment, and prefer to slow down and savour the words. Those who rush through the text often miss the nuances."

"That may hold if you were referring to a rate of word consumption. But I am speaking of diligence at the pursuit. When I have a good story in my hands, I prefer to adhere to my task until the story is done. Those idle dilettantes who dabble in a story may find they have forgotten the beginning and middle by the time they finally make it to the end."
Darcy’s eyebrows lifted a fraction and a smile tugged at his lips.

"Perhaps we should settle the particulars of the purpose and context in which one reads before stooping to veiled insults. When one is reading for information, or under time constraints, then certainly diligence is to be prized. But for recreational reading of a novel, as in this case, there is ample opportunity to refresh one's memory after any interruption, and therefore no need to rush."

"Well, I do not wish to be the source of interruption, so I will let you return to your book."

Elizabeth excused herself and left the room on the pretext that Jane needed her. Slow reader indeed! He was probably saying that on purpose to annoy her.

The next morning, Elizabeth saw that Darcy had made some progress and looked to be halfway through the book. Observing that the biggest obstacle to his further advancement was Miss Bingley’s persistent attentions, she took it upon herself to distract Miss Bingley. Unfortunately, this was not as effective as she hoped, for every time she engaged Miss Bingley in conversation, Darcy would put down his book and join in. How unfortunate that the possessor of her beloved book was such an easily distracted reader! Clearly, something more drastic was required. She would have to separate Miss Bingley from Darcy altogether.

Immediately after breakfast, Elizabeth began shadowing Miss Bingley and Darcy, looking for an opportunity to lead Miss Bingley away. But in this, she had underestimated not only Miss Bingley’s determination to remain on Darcy's arm, but also Darcy’s apparent willingness to suffer her there. Instead of severing the pair, she found herself stuck fast for the greater part of the day as the unhappy member of a threesome.

Finally, towards late afternoon, after she had extricated herself to check on Jane, she found Miss Bingley by herself and enquiring of everybody whether they had seen Darcy. Elizabeth glibly informed her that Darcy had been sighted strolling the shrubbery.

Following this efficient dispatch of her obstacle, Elizabeth poked her head into the library, where she suspected Darcy had actually settled. She was happy to be proven right, and happier still to find that he was now two-thirds of the way through his book.

Her step aroused Darcy's attention, however, and he looked up, smiling. "Miss Bennet. We meet again."

"Oh!" Elizabeth groped for an excuse. "I was looking for a book that might interest Jane." She grabbed a random book off the shelf. "Well, good-bye."

"Your sister enjoys reading the dictionary?" Darcy said dryly, the quirk in his mouth breaking its usual haughty lines.

Elizabeth looked down at the tome in her hand and blushed. "My mistake. I thought it was a different book." She blushed harder when she realised that "DICTIONARY" was written in large, block capitals on the cover, spine and back.

"There is no need to rush off. I would be very happy to have your further company. Will you not sit down? I would be interested in hearing your further views on reading and the state of education."

"I do not wish to disturb your reading."

"It is no disturbance. It is a pleasure to converse with a fellow bibliophile who has actually engaged with the text before forming opinions." Darcy indicated a chair.
Elizabeth sighed and sat down. Hopefully, this tête-a-tête would last no more than a few minutes. But alas! Darcy seemed determined to have conversation, so she was forced to sit with him for almost half an hour. Missing Miss Bingley's sycophantic chatter, however, Elizabeth was surprised to find herself almost enjoying the conversation. Darcy was well informed and it turned out that they shared some of the same opinions and could discuss points of differences quite intelligibly, if a little heatedly. Perhaps he was not quite so useless as she had originally thought. And he did have good taste in books.

They were interrupted by Miss Bingley, who gave Elizabeth a dirty look on finding her alone with Darcy. Elizabeth immediately excused herself.

"Well! It appears you have made another conquest, Mr. Darcy," said Miss Bingley. "You have Miss Eliza hankering after you like a green girl. I am sure she sent me into the garden on purpose to steal time alone with you. I hope you will take care and not find yourself entrapped. These Bennets seem most aggressive in their pursuit."

Darcy shrugged and reopened his book. "She is not bothering me. In fact, she seems almost skittish. She tries to bolt every time I speak to her."

"Oh! She is probably tongue-tied to be in the presence of a member of the first circles. Sir William Lucas seems to be the limit of august personages around here."

Darcy was silent, contemplating Elizabeth. He was used to being the object of pursuit, but her methods of going about it were unusual. She was often hanging about him and looking at him, but if anything, discouraged his attempts at interaction. And yet she expressed herself too eloquently for shyness. He had experienced young ladies blowing hot and cold as a ploy to pique his interest, but this species of behaviour seemed of a different order. He was intrigued.

Diverted by his contemplation of the puzzle that was Miss Elizabeth Bennet, Darcy got no further in his book by evening. Elizabeth saw this with a glance when he entered the drawing room carrying the book. She stifled her annoyance in the joy of seeing Jane able to join the party at last, and well attended by Bingley. Her ire was renewed, however, when Darcy abandoned his book to join the group around Jane, taking a seat across from Elizabeth. Really? She could have finished it twice in the time he had had and given it back to him by now.

The evening ended in music, with Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst, and Elizabeth taking turns playing. Elizabeth would not have been inclined to play in such scornful company, but she was hopeful that music would mean an end to conversation and perhaps a return to reading.

In this she was partly right, for the conversation did cease and Darcy did read for a time. When it was her turn to play, however, she noticed that he set his book aside and fixed his eyes on her.

He was probably trying to intimidate her into making a mistake. Courage rising with her indignation, she played and sang the quaint Irish air with even more free-spirited abandon than usual and shrugged when she saw him move closer with widened eyes and uplifted eyebrows. Despise me if you dare, Mr. Darcy!

Next morning, Elizabeth surveyed the situation, pacing. Jane was better; they should soon be gone. If she obtained the book immediately and read very steadily, she might have time to finish it before she left. But Darcy had proven a disappointingly unmotivated reader since she had launched her campaign to win him reading space.

Elizabeth threw herself into a chair and crossed her arms in frustration. She would never find out what happened to Emma! And all because of that infuriating Mr. Darcy. She avoided both Miss
Bingley and Darcy for the rest of the morning, and when Jane went upstairs to rest, went outside, intent on walking off her ire. She was completing her circuit of the park when she spied Darcy again, apparently out for his own walk. She was about to strike off onto a different path when he called her name.

"There you are, Miss Bennet," he said as he approached her. "I was wondering where you had gone. I have become used to your frequent presence."

Elizabeth blushed. Perhaps she had overdone it. Well, it was time to lay her cards on the table. As he fell into step with her, she gathered her words.

"Mr. Darcy, it seems you have noticed my attentions towards you over the last few days. You will no doubt be shocked by my unladylike boldness, but as my time grows short, I feel the need to come straight to the point in order to procure what I am after."

Darcy stopped in his tracks and faced her, his eyebrows raised in astonishment, a slow smile spreading over his face. He took a step towards her.

"Yes, Miss Bennet? What can I do for you?"

Elizabeth's eyes widened and she took a small step back, surprised at his nearness and the scrutiny of his dark eyes. But she gathered her courage and took a deep breath. This was her last chance, after all.

"Over the last few days," she said, craning her neck to look directly up at him. "I have observed you reading a certain book."

"A book?" he said in bemusement.

"Yes, *Emma*. It is the second in a two-volume set. The truth is, I finished the first volume my first day here and was very much hoping to read the second volume. I do not wish to interrupt your enjoyment of the book, but I was wondering if you would mind lending it to me, just for a day. I can finish it very quickly and have it back to you."

Darcy reached into his coat, withdrew the volume in question, and held it out to her. "Is this the book you mean?"

"Oh! Yes, that is it!" Elizabeth took the book from Darcy, her face lighting with joy. She smiled at him warmly. "Mr. Darcy, that is most generous of you! I promise I will read it very quickly."

He smiled back at her and waited for her to continue speaking. When she only turned her attention to the book, his brow furrowed. "That is it?"

"What do you mean?" said Elizabeth, now looking hurriedly through her book. There were several hundred pages, but she was a fast reader … and it was unlikely Mr. Bingley would notice or care if she asked for extra candles …

"That is all you require?"

"I am afraid I do not take your meaning," she said, looking up in confusion, her mind still intent on the book. "What else is there?"

"Your attentions for the last few days - following me around, separating me from Miss Bingley. That was in pursuit of the book?"
"Oh!" Elizabeth blushed. "I am so sorry. I know I have been a nuisance and a pest. I can say nothing in my defence, but in recompense, I give you full leave to mock me as much as you wish to Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. My family often makes sport of me for being so single-minded once I have started a new story."

Darcy was quiet and subdued as they returned to the house, but Elizabeth did not notice. She was thinking of her book.

Steady to her purpose, Elizabeth's attention was fixed on her book for the remainder of the day. She was amiable but not encouraging when Darcy or Bingley attempted to engage her in conversation. She did not even bother to respond to Miss Bingley's pointed whispers about frumpy ladies who read too much and neglected their appearance. Jane, well-versed in her sister's predilections, simply smiled indulgently.

In the late afternoon, Darcy found her in the library, still reading. Whatever thoughts he had that her previous attentions had been directed to influencing his felicity, her behaviour of the last few hours provided very material weight in crushing them. There he sat, not six feet from her, pretending to read his own book, and she had not paid him the slightest heed despite his multiple attempts to catch her eye.

Darcy had spent the better part of the last few days sternly reminding himself that he could not allow himself to be tempted by Elizabeth's apparent interest in him. Considering her low family connexion and non-existent fortune, it would not do to raise her hopes of him, and anything else he could offer was improper considering her standing as a gentlewoman. But perversely, all of his cherished misgivings had evaporated in the face of her indifference. Now he found himself feeling strangely unsettled, frustrated, angry, hurt, and desperate for a crumb of her regard.

Elizabeth was ignorant of the feelings roiling in Darcy's breast. She was also unaware that she made a very pretty picture with the late afternoon sun pooling around her, her feet tucked under, and a slender finger twirling a curl while she smiled and chuckled to herself.

Darcy watched her out of the corner of his eye for a few minutes. As she continued to ignore him, he abandoned all pretence and fixed his eyes on her directly, examining every part of her person. Even so, it was many minutes before Elizabeth noticed his piercing gaze. When she did, she responded with playful defiance.

"Do you mean to disconcert me with your brooding countenance, sir, and shame me into returning to you this book?" she asked with a teasing smile. "If so, I must warn you that I have no scruple against repaying your extreme generosity with utmost selfishness, and intend to retain my prize to completion."

Darcy, pleased at having her attention at last, said: "You wilfully misunderstand me, Miss Bennet. I am merely enjoying the effect of the sunlight on a lovely lady."

Elizabeth, remembering his slight at the assembly, shook her head and half-rolled her eyes before returning to her book. Darcy, smiling, continued to stare at her openly.

"Mr. Darcy, this is unfair!" she protested with a laugh. "I really am trying to give this book back to you as soon as humanly possible, but if you stare at me in that fashion, I will not be able to focus. You must see that such conduct brings you no closer to your goal."

"Miss Bennet, your statement presupposes you to be aware of my goal and reveals your error at once."
"What error is that?" Elizabeth was bemused.

"That I wish the book returned."

"You do not wish that?"

"As I said earlier, I am not a hasty reader. I am prepared to be patient in order to savour my pleasures."

"Then what is your goal?"

He changed seats so he was seated directly across from her. "Perhaps I hoped that by sharing the book with you, you would share your thoughts with me."

"You wish to discuss the book?" She glanced at his face, surprised at his interest in conversing with her.

"I admit I had hoped for some interaction. Reading does not always have to be a lonely pursuit."

Elizabeth turned it over in her mind. If she paused in her reading, she might not finish the book in time before she had to leave tomorrow. On the other hand, Darcy had been surprisingly obliging and not nearly as proud and unpleasant as she had initially thought. On occasion she even enjoyed his company.

She smiled back at him. "Mr. Darcy, let me be frank. I would be delighted to discuss Emma with you. You have shown yourself to be a man of intelligent opinions and I would be glad to hear more of them. However, I am torn, for my time to consume this story begins to run out."

"If that is the issue, I would be happy to speak to Bingley and procure the loan of the book when you leave."

"Oh! Thank you, Mr. Darcy. That is very kind of you." It really was, she thought, because it meant that he had to postpone his own reading pleasure further.

Darcy observed that Elizabeth still kept her finger in the book to mark her place.

"Miss Bennet, I see that your heart remains with your book. In that case, I have one more suggestion to make wherein we both achieve our desires."

"What is that?"

"One of us must read the book to the other."

Elizabeth smiled appreciatively at this elegant solution. "Certainly." She held the book out to him. "You first."

Darcy took it from her, carefully preserving her place, then flipped it open to examine it. "You are a fast reader. I believe you are just about where I left off."

He began to read. Elizabeth was surprised and delighted. For Darcy was a great reader. When he read, his stiffness and formality fell away, and he entered with spirit into the story, even adopting different voices and intonations for the various characters. When he paused, Elizabeth clapped.

"That was marvelous!" she laughed. "Mr. Darcy, you are a man of hidden talents. It is too bad you have such a great estate to manage. To paraphrase Sir William Lucas, you could have been one of the brightest lights on the London stage."
Darcy dimpled at her, pleased. "My mother loved books and plays. She used to read aloud to me, and when she died I would read to my baby sister. Georgiana is fifteen now, but we still enjoy reading to each other." He held the book out to her. "Your turn, I believe, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth had not whiled away many winter hours reading to her father for nothing. Darcy was captivated, although not so lost in admiration that he was unable to form a resolution. He leant forward and tapped the book in her hand.

"Miss Bennet, enjoyable as this is, I find it presents a new dilemma."

"And what is that?"

"My enjoyment of the story is now dependent on having a companion in reading. And yet you leave tomorrow, and will take the book with you."

"I see your problem and confess that I am somewhat of the same mind. Do you have another solution to propose, sir?"

"Indeed, I do. You will permit me to call upon you so that we may partake in more of the story. And you will have to promise that you will not read ahead without me."

"You ask a great deal, Mr. Darcy, unless you intend to be at Longbourn very frequently," she teased. "You know my impatience for the conclusion."

He smiled into her eyes. "Depend upon it, I shall be there often."

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True to his word, Darcy called with Bingley at the earliest respectable hour the morning after Jane and Elizabeth's return home. Was it his fancy, or did her face light up at seeing him? But no, he told himself sternly, she was eager to resume their progress through *Emma*.

The gentlemen were shown into the drawing room, where Bingley immediately took up his post by Jane. Darcy sat down beside Elizabeth and asked her quietly if she had kept her promise to him. She twinkled at him. "Yes, indeed, Mr. Darcy, but you do not know what it has cost me. I had to make Jane lock up the book in order to avoid peeking ahead, and I almost broke down this morning and begged for the key. Jane is so tender-hearted she would have given it to me at once, and then I would have broken my word. So you see, Mr. Darcy, that was no inconsequential promise you extracted. You could have been the ruin of my honour as a gentlewoman."

Darcy felt his cheeks warm and a tingle of excitement go through his body. Was it him, or did her words have a double meaning? He looked at her doubtfully, but her eyes met his without any trace of consciousness. No, for all the fearlessness of her intellect and her womanly form, she was an innocent, and as a gentleman, he must treat her as such. He had already misjudged her intentions once.

He responded sedately, asking if she wished to continue with the book immediately. Elizabeth was all smiles, and the two resumed where they had left off. The gentlemen passed a large part of the morning pleasantly with the Miss Bennets, staying well past the usual fifteen minutes to half an hour allotted for a call.

The next day, Darcy and Bingley were passing through the village on the way to Longbourn when they spied Elizabeth and her sisters talking with three men, one in uniform, another a clergyman, and the third with his back to them.

Immediately dismounting, the two gentlemen led their horses over to the ladies. Darcy was too busy admiring the roses in Elizabeth's cheeks to look closely at the men. He was only a few feet away when he heard a sharp intake of breath from the man dressed in civilian clothes. Wickham! Darcy turned pale with rage, his hands involuntarily balling into fists, causing his horse to stir restively at the pressure on the reins. He calmed his horse at the same time he struggled for control of himself. What was Wickham doing here? His mind raced.

Wickham, whose face had flushed on seeing Darcy, recovered first. "Darcy. What a pleasant surprise. I did not expect to see you here," he said nervously.

"George," Darcy said through clenched teeth. "Nor I you. What brings you to Meryton?"

"I am considering a commision in the regiment on the recommendation of my friend here. This is Lieutenant Denny. Denny, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire."

Darcy gave Denny a terse nod. "You have known Mr. Wickham long?"

"No, sir, we have just formed an acquaintance in Town," said Denny respectfully, impressed by the cut of Darcy's coat and the quality of his horse.

"It seems you are quite unknown in these parts, George," said Darcy meaningfully. "How fortunate for you that I am here to apprise these good people of your reputation and vouch for your true
character."

"Ah … yes, fortunate indeed. If you will excuse me, the time grows short. Denny, shall we go?"

Wickham shot his friend a glance. "Ladies, Mr. Collins, I bid you adieu. It was indeed a pleasure."

Wickham hurried Denny away, glancing back once to see Darcy speaking to the luscious brunette Wickham had been eyeing, his hand on her arm. Resentment flared within him. Why did Darcy always get everything? Ah well, he was not yet fully committed. He could still make his fortune elsewhere.

The ladies remembered that they had not introduced their cousin. They did so now, and the group witnessed with amazement Mr. Collins's rapture on learning that Darcy was the nephew of his noble patroness, Lady Catherine De Bourgh. Darcy bore it calmly, but led Elizabeth ahead of the rest of the party at his first opportunity.

"It seems you have been acquainted with Mr. Wickham for some duration?" said Elizabeth, whose eyes had missed none of the tension between the men.

"He was my father's godson and the son of his steward. We grew up together at Pemberley."

"Indeed!" said Elizabeth curiously. "And - have you maintained a close relationship?"

Darcy turned and scrutinised Elizabeth, wondering how much to tell her. For years, he had adopted a policy of saying nothing, leaving Wickham to his own devices whatever they might be, so long as it did not involve him or his family. But somehow he was not content to let the man run amok in Meryton, where Elizabeth lived.

Finally, he said, "No, we have not. Mr. Wickham and I have been estranged for many years. I cannot approve of his manner of living and I wish that if he chooses to settle here, you and your family will keep your distance from him. I cannot provide you with any particulars, as they are not fit for a young lady's ears, but suffice it to say that Mr. Wickham is a scoundrel of the worst kind."

Elizabeth's mouth was a round O. She shut it and murmured, "Of course. Thank you for the warning. I shall make sure to apprise my family and acquaintance of your information."

They chatted about books the rest of the way. Elizabeth was pleased to learn that Darcy and Bingley had intended to call on them all along. They would soon be finished *Emma* at this rate.

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"… And it is odd, is it not, that two men who shared a childhood can barely stand to speak to each other now? I do not think we will see Mr. Wickham again."

"Mmm," said Jane, in her nightgown and brushing her hair. She was jolted out of her reverie when a pillow hit her on the side of the head, causing her to drop her brush with a clatter. "Lizzy!"

"Dearest, you are not attending to me at all," said Elizabeth from Jane's bed, where she had been lying on her belly, her chin propped contemplatively in her hands. She was now on her knees, a second pillow at the ready. "All I have had from you for the last ten minutes is 'mmm,' 'oh, yes' and 'interesting.' Has Mr. Bingley already stolen away my sister Jane?"

"I am sorry, Lizzy," said Jane contritely. "I will attend to you now. What were you saying?"

"What were you saying!" she mocked Jane. "Nothing to interest you, apparently. Perhaps we should talk of Mr. Bingley. How he looks in his fine blue coat and buff breeches. How sweet his smile
when he bids you good day. How strong his hand feels holding yours …"

"Stop it, Lizzy! I am not that bad!"

"Oh no? I suppose you did not notice that you said 'Yes, Charles' when Papa called your name at supper?"

Jane blushed and Elizabeth laughed, then moaned dramatically to the pillow she was still holding. "Oh, Charles! Darling …"

Jane fired the pillow Elizabeth had thrown at her back to Elizabeth, who dodged it by bouncing off the bed. She picked up her own pillow and flung it at Jane, starting an all-out pillow fight.

In the midst of this scene, Mrs. Bennet entered the room. "Girls, girls!"

Jane immediately sat back down in front of her mirror and picked up her brush again, trying to look sedate but smiling and pink. Elizabeth, still laughing, sat back down on Jane's bed holding both pillows, which she had won in the fight.

"Yes, Mama?" she said.

"Lizzy, you sly thing. I understand from Mr. Collins that Mr. Darcy walked with you through Meryton. And that was before he sat talking to you all afternoon!"

"Mr. Darcy?" said Elizabeth in surprise. "Oh! No, Mama, you must not think –"

"I do not know how you managed it!" Mrs. Bennet continued as if Elizabeth had not said a word. "He is so handsome, so rich, so tall! Bingley is nothing to him, Jane. It will be the talk of the town! Oh! I must call on Mrs. Philips immediately on the morrow. Two daughters soon to be married!"

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed in mortification at the idea that her mother was trumpeting it about the neighbourhood that she was casting her eyes to Darcy, especially after the Bennet family had ridiculed him so energetically for daring to slight her at the Meryton assembly.

"Restrain yourself, Mama. You read far too much into it. Mr. Darcy and I are friends, only friends. It is only natural, considering Mr. Bingley's interest in Jane. He said that he is used to reading with his sister. It is very likely that he misses having a reading companion at hand, and I am a convenient surrogate."

"He does seem to enjoy your company, Lizzy," Jane ventured slyly, glad to turn the tables on Elizabeth for a few moments.

"And I his, but consider, Jane. He did call me just tolerable. Surely, Mama, that is not the language of love. We are only friends," Elizabeth smiled.

At this, Mrs. Bennet grew sober. "Aye, that is true, Lizzy, a gentleman is never interested in a woman he does not find handsome, and Mr. Darcy would have his pick of the beauties of the land. Ah! It is too bad you are not as beautiful as Jane. What wealth and jewels you might have had if only you had been better-looking."

"My looks are not quite so impoverished as all that, I trust, Mama," said Elizabeth, piqued that her mother should agree with her so quickly.

"Oh! You are very good in your way, Lizzy, but nothing to what Mr. Darcy requires. He is so very handsome and rich!"
"Then it is a good thing I have no interest in Mr. Darcy in that way."

"Oh! Well," said Mrs. Bennet, as if Elizabeth had not spoken. "Perhaps you could catch Mr. Darcy in a situation where he is honour-bound to marry you."

Jane and Elizabeth both gasped at this.

"Mama, let me be clear, I would never resort to such tricks and stratagems to induce an honourable gentleman to marry me against his will. How can you even think of such a thing!"

"Oh Lizzy, don't be so missish! How do you think your father and me – "

Jane and Elizabeth gasped again, and Jane clapped her hand over her ears as her sister began speaking very quickly and loudly to drown out their mother.

***

The next time Darcy and Bingley called, Mrs. Bennet contrived to leave them alone with Jane and Elizabeth by taking Mr. Collins and her younger daughters to call on the Lucases. Mr. Bennet, she knew, was wrapped up in a translation project and would not stir from his library.

Elizabeth, embarrassed by her mother's scheme and fearful that Darcy might suspect she had a part in it, greeted Darcy with much of her old reserve.

Darcy, for his part, was quite pleased to see Mrs. Bennet depart. He had already decided that he had serious designs on the second Miss Bennet and looked forward to the day's reading with excited anticipation. If his interpretation was correct, they were reaching the resolution quickly, and it would likely involve a declaration and possibly a proposal to the heroine. It was his turn to read, and he envisioned gazing into Elizabeth's eyes, conveying his own meaning to her as Mr. Knightley conveyed his to Emma. What would Elizabeth's reaction be?

When the moment came, Darcy was disappointed, for Elizabeth would not meet his eyes. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed determinedly on her needlework, her posture stiff and awkward. What did it mean? Was she indifferent, and did not wish to encourage him? Or was she so innocent that she was embarrassed?

As usual, after they had both finished their allotted reading, they fell to discussing story developments.

"Were you surprised that Mr. Knightley proved to be Emma's ultimate choice?" asked Darcy.

"I cannot say I knew it from the beginning. But I believe about halfway through I could sense it coming," Elizabeth said as she continued on with her needlework.

"Halfway through?" he asked. "When was that? I do not believe I had an inkling until after the Box Hill scene."

"The dance at the Crown. When he rescued Harriet and then danced with Emma, I knew he was destined to be the hero."

"You cannot infer so much from a man dancing two dances," said Darcy incredulously.

"You misunderstand the importance of a dance, Mr. Darcy," said Elizabeth mischievously. She laid her needlework laid aside.
"Then I wish that you would enlighten me as to its significance."

"A man's willingness to dance is an indication of his eligibility. Everybody knows that," said Elizabeth in a lofty tone.

"How can that be so?" said Darcy in protest. "A man stands in a long row with other men, follows a repetitive, predefined pattern ordered by someone else, and attempts to converse with his partner on a limited variety of subjects while constantly being subject to interruption. There is no originality or wit required for that. It does not even require any feat of physical exertion."

"Men always think some type of physical exertion is required. That is exactly what the author capitalised on, when she had Frank Churchill rescue Harriet from the gypsies. It was a superficial act of heroism, which blinded Emma to the true heroism of a man willing to endure this 'repetitive, predefined pattern' as you term it, out of esteem for his lady, and a desire to be with her."

"I accept that a man's request to dance may be seen as proof of his regard," said Darcy, smiling slightly. "But how do you explain Mr. Knightley's request to dance with Harriet as proof of his regard for Emma?"

"That is simple. The fact that he is willing to dance with a woman close to Emma, a woman in whom he would otherwise never show any interest, shows the distance which he is prepared to go for love and the depth of his commitment to Emma."

"And you comprehended all of this when you read of Mr. Knightley's dance at the Crown?" Darcy said skeptically.

"Oh! Yes."

"Miss Elizabeth," Darcy said pleasantly, one corner of his mouth lifting, "There is nothing easier than claiming to foretell the future in hindsight."

She laughed at that. "But I am not! Truly, I am not, sir. I did think it at the time."

He continued to shake his head at her, causing Elizabeth to laugh.

"Such doubt, sir! It does not become you. It is impolitic too, for it provokes me to retaliate and point out that your conduct at the Meryton assembly was the very antithesis of Mr. Knightley's. It sent the clear signal that you were not amenable to the persuasion of the fairer sex."

"Perhaps that is the intended effect," Darcy said with a somber look.

Elizabeth's curiosity was piqued. However, she answered in a light-hearted tone. "Ah! In that case, I congratulate you on your skill in being so repulsive. But should a lady ever happen to catch your eye, I would suggest that you had much better dance."

Darcy smiled at that. "Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. I will take that under advisement."

Elizabeth was about to ask why Darcy would purposely intend to repel people when they were interrupted by a loud bustle at the door that indicated Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughters were home.

Lydia flounced into the drawing room followed by Kitty and Mrs. Bennet. Mary entered last, looking cross.

"Lord! You are just where we left you. Have you done nothing but read, Lizzy? How dreadfully
dull!"

Elizabeth ignored Lydia. "Did you have a good visit at the Lucases, Mama?"

"It was exceptionally dull!" Lydia replied. "I would much rather have gone to Aunt Philips's. We heard on the way home that all of the officers stopped in. Too bad that Wickham was so bad! He was fearful handsome. How fine he would have looked in regimentals."

Elizabeth, seeing Darcy’s face register disgust, said quickly, "Where is Mr. Collins, Mama? Did he not come back with you?"

"No, he was invited to stay for supper at the Lucases. I am sure that Charlotte Lucas is setting her cap for him. Well! She is welcome to him. I am sure my daughters do not need that usurper of estates." Mrs. Bennet looked with satisfaction at Bingley and Darcy, to Elizabeth's great embarrassment.

"Mary would take him," said Lydia. "She would be glad to. But even Mr. Collins does not want Mary; she is so very plain and dull!"

"I have no wish to draw attention to myself," sniffed Mary. "A proper female comports herself with sobriety. Female decorum is never bold."

"Oh lord," said Lydia as Kitty tittered. "Mr. Darcy, are you and Mr. Bingley staying for supper?"

"We have not been invited, Miss Lydia, and it is quite late. We do not wish to impose," said Darcy formally.

"Yes, I am sure Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley must be going," said Elizabeth, eager to separate the gentlemen from her embarrassing mother and younger sisters. Jane rose, followed by Bingley. At the door, he stopped.

"Oh, I almost forgot. My sisters and I wish to invite you to a ball at Netherfield. On the 26th of November. The invitations are going out tomorrow, but I wished to give you yours in person. The officers are invited," he smiled at Lydia and Kitty. "You will come, won't you?" Bingley addressed the last to Jane.

The ladies' response was all that he could have desired and the party broke up with smiles.

On the way home, Bingley waxed excited about the prospect of the ball, and the chance to dance with many beautiful women, but especially Miss Bennet.

"So, Darcy, do you intend to dance at my ball? Or do you intend to skulk in the corners as usual?"

"Certainly I will dance, Bingley," he replied. "I understand that nothing pleases a woman better than to see a man dance."

***

After the completion of *Emma*, Darcy suggested to Elizabeth that they move on to Shakespeare. Elizabeth agreed and, after much discussion of the merits of the Bard's various plays, *King Lear* was settled on as a fine example of pathos and tragic humanity.

After *Emma*, Elizabeth found *King Lear* to be somewhat heavy going. She loved *King Lear*, but it was a sober, serious work, more appropriate for a gloomy night in the theatre than drawing room discourse. She wondered why Darcy would push for a work so devoid of comedy and romance?
Perhaps his interest in spending time with her was purely intellectual?

It did not help that a prolonged bout of rainy weather kept Lydia and Kitty from walking to Meryton every day. Since, unlike Darcy and Bingley, they had no carriage at their disposal, this meant they were required to stay in. Deprived of their favourite activity of flirting with officers, they were able to do nothing useful. Instead, they were a constant nuisance, pestering for a part in Elizabeth's readings with Darcy, then doing it poorly with much interjection and disruptive commentary.

Even worse, Elizabeth suspected that Lydia had developed a partiality for Darcy, and where Lydia led, Kitty followed. They kept up a sustained teasing of the gentleman that not only humiliated and infuriated Elizabeth, but seemed to drive Darcy back behind an impenetrable wall of reserve. Quality conversation was impossible.

After a number of frustrating days trapped inside, the weather finally turned on the morning of the ball. It was ecstasy to at last be able to go outside and Elizabeth took the first opportunity.

As she jumped puddles and climbed stiles, her thoughts wandered back to Darcy. What did he think of her? He did not sigh and gaze soulfully into her eyes the way Bingley did with Jane. Instead, he met her teasing banter with sly badinage of his own, but only when they were comparatively alone. If any of her family with the possible exception of Jane was present, he became distant and formal.

Teasing out this puzzle so occupied Elizabeth's thoughts that she scarcely noticed the surrounding countryside until she realized she had headed in the direction of Netherfield. She could see the Hall in the distance. Perhaps she would run into Darcy out for a walk or a ride?

"You are being silly, Elizabeth!" she scolded aloud, then laughed at herself. How ironic that a man she had disliked only scant weeks ago was now turning her into a moony girl.

She eyed the log fence that delineated the farmer's field. On a sudden whim, she climbed the stile to the top of the fence and, glancing furtively around to ensure there was nobody to see her indulging herself in an old childish pastime, balanced herself and ran lightly across the top of the fence. What fun! Elizabeth took four more fences in the same way until she was suddenly startled by the sound of a dog barking and lost her balance. She jumped down.

"Ambrosius!" Elizabeth exclaimed as a large hound burst out of the brush and bounded up to her. "Sit!"

It was the dog she had played with during her stay at Netherfield Hall. Darcy's dog. She turned quickly to see if his owner was in the environs and felt her heart bound at the sight of him approaching her on horseback. Then she blushed as she thought of him seeing her run across fences like a child. He must think her a hoyden.

Darcy dismounted and walked his horse over to her. "Miss Bennet. Enjoying the fine weather, I see," his eyes crinkling with mirth.

She smiled roguishly back. "Yes, although I must warn you there is a strange meteorological phenomenon that occurs on fine days in Hertfordshire around this time of year."

"Indeed? And what is that?"

"The sun can play tricks with your eyes and distort reality to an extreme degree. For example, sometimes it makes people in the distance appear as if they were doing things that they were … definitely not doing."

He chuckled as he tied his horse to a post, loosely enough that the animal could graze. "Miss Bennet,
I do not know what you mean. I saw nothing other than a young lady walking decorously in the lane."

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy," she smiled appreciatively.

"And … " Darcy said as he mounted the stile, "I will not tell if you do not tell." Elizabeth watched in delighted amazement as Darcy balanced himself on the post, then ran across the top of the fence to the next post, Ambrosius barking in encouragement. She ran down the way laughing as he successfully achieved four fences.

"Well done, Mr. Darcy," she said as he jumped down and swept his hat off in a bow. He tucked it under his arm and raked his gloved hands through his hair. "Although, I do not think you were quite as light on your feet as I."

"My boots are heavier," he said in explanation. "It makes it harder to feel the contour of the log with your feet."

"Tut, tut," she teased. "A good carpenter does not blame his tools. I think you must admit defeat."

He lifted his eyebrows in amusement. "I had not realised it was a contest or I would have tried harder."

"And, of course, Ambrosius startled me," Elizabeth continued. "Or I certainly would have exceeded five fences."

"Rematch?"

"You first."

This time Darcy achieved eight fences, but again Elizabeth bested him, completing nine.

"It is these Hertfordshire fences," he complained as he untied his horse. "They are not built quite right. If we had been in Derbyshire – "

Elizabeth exploded in laughter. "I would best you in Derbyshire or Timbuktu, Mr. Darcy!"

"Then I challenge you to a rematch in Derbyshire or Timbuktu, Miss Bennet."

Her heart beat faster. "If we ever happen to be in those places at the same, I would be happy to accept. Although I do not think that is likely."

Darcy hesitated in his reply and, to fill the silence, Elizabeth informed him that she was due to return to Longbourn for breakfast and began walking in that direction. He fell into step beside her.

They chatted pleasantly of various topics. Before he left her at the gate to Longbourn, he informed her that he and Bingley had an engagement to go shooting in the morning and then Bingley would be too busy with preparations for the ball to be able to make their now daily call at Longbourn. Elizabeth's disappointment was sharp as she realized how much she had come to look forward to Darcy's visits. Oh well! She would see him at the ball. She was about to bid Darcy good-bye and turn away, but he stopped her with a touch on the arm.

"One more thing, Miss Bennet," Darcy said.

"Yes?"
"May I claim your hand for the first at the Bingleys' ball?"

Her heart leapt. "I would be delighted."

He smiled at her. "Thank you. Until tonight, then."

She watched as he mounted his horse, tipped his hat to her and rode away.

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The ballroom at Netherfield was a sight to send almost any young heart soaring. Fresh garlands hung round the room and candles lit even the furthest corner with a warm glow. By the time the Bennets arrived – late as usual, owing to Mrs. Bennet's disorganized fluttering and twittering – it was already a mass of excited, chattering people. Elizabeth was relieved to see Charlotte. They had much catching up to do.

From her mother's and Lydia's gossiping reports, she was not surprised to hear that her friend was engaged for the first dance and the supper dance with Mr. Collins. However, she was surprised that Charlotte should be so complacent about it.

"Not everybody can be so lucky as you, Lizzy, to attract the attention of the great Mr. Darcy," said Charlotte.

"Oh no, Charlotte, you sound just like my mother. Mr. Darcy and I are only friends. He is a good friend to Mr. Bingley. They are inseparable, it seems."

"Are you sure that is all it is? He pays you a great compliment in singling you out for a dance. We have hardly ever seen him dance. If it were Mr. Bingley, who loves to dance, it might mean nothing, but not Mr. Darcy, who is so very particular and discriminating."

"It is merely a reflection of his reserve where he does not know his partner, Charlotte. You see how he danced with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst at the Meryton Assembly." She paused. Here would be a good chance to counteract her mother's humiliating rumours that the second Miss Bennet was setting her sights on Mr. Darcy. "I beg you not to read something in it that is simply not there."

"Defending Mr. Darcy? That is a change from your attitude at the Meryton Assembly," Charlotte smiled slyly. "You must be good friends now."

Before Elizabeth could respond with a smart retort, Charlotte cleared her throat meaningfully. Elizabeth looked up to see that Darcy had approached, looking tall and handsome in a beautifully fitted tailcoat, green silk waistcoat and silk breeches. The ensemble accentuated the elegance of his form and Elizabeth thought he could not have looked finer if he had stepped off a Paris fashion plate. She could not quite contain her blush of excitement at seeing him.

"Miss Lucas, you look very well tonight," he bowed very correctly. "Miss Elizabeth, I believe you have promised me a dance."

Elizabeth smiled and put her gloved hand in his outstretched one and allowed herself to be led to the line of dancers. Owing to Darcy's standing, they held the place of honour at the top of the set, right beside Jane and Bingley, and Elizabeth felt the compliment that she and Jane should open the ball with two such handsome men. Somewhere in the large room her mother must be nearly prostrate with ecstasy.

"Mr. Darcy, allow me to congratulate you on your fine dancing," said Elizabeth archly as they moved gracefully through the set. "Had I known you were so accomplished I would certainly have
agree to stand up with you before now."

"Your loss, Miss Elizabeth," he smiled. "But I am glad you finally recognize my worth."

"Well, you know, no man can be esteemed accomplished only because he has a thorough knowledge of managing an estate, of shooting, riding and hunting; a certain something in his air and manner of walking, the tone of his voice, his address and expressions. No, to all of this he must yet add something more substantial in the improvement of himself by extensive dancing."

Darcy let out a short bark of laughter at Elizabeth's twisting of Caroline Bingley's words spoken just over a week ago. His mirth drew amazed looks from their neighbours who were unused to seeing him other than taciturn.

He smiled at her and lowered his voice. "I will endeavor to satisfy your high notions of accomplishment, Miss Elizabeth. Is there anything else you would prescribe for my general improvement?"

Satisfied that she had carried her point that he should follow up their first dance with another, Elizabeth left off any further teasing. "I think you will do very well for now, Mr. Darcy."

"I am glad to hear it."

They smiled at each other. For the remainder of the dance, they chatted in desultory fashion about the size of the room, the number of couple, the dances chosen, etc. Elizabeth was satisfied just to look.

He was so very handsome, towering above the crowd. Their progress drew every eye in the room, it seemed. And there was no need for conversation; did not the look in his eyes say enough? His eyes held hers throughout the dance, turned away from her with reluctance when the pattern required them to part, and sought her out again as soon as they began to come back together.

After the dance ended, they stood for a moment, her hand in his, and Elizabeth thought that now he must ask her for a second dance, surely. Then the assembled company would know that she was not chasing him, or, if she was, it arose from mutual interest. And more to the point, she would know it. Darcy turned to her and opened his lips, but before he could speak they were interrupted by Sir William Lucas, who approached with Charlotte.

"I have been most highly gratified indeed, my dear sir," he addressed Darcy. "Such very superior dancing is not often seen! It is evident that you belong to the first circles. I hope we will be treated to a further showing of your skill. You have deprived our assembly too long of your performance."

Darcy gave Elizabeth one last glance and a smile, then dropped her hand and turned to Sir William and Charlotte.

"Thank you, Sir William," Darcy said politely. "And if your daughter is not otherwise engaged, I would be pleased to dance the next with her, if she would favour me with her hand."

"Oh! Sir! You do us too much honour!" Sir William exclaimed, his friendly, florid face blossoming into with smiles. "Indeed, you are all condescension! My daughter will certainly be delighted to dance with you, eh, Charlotte?" Charlotte nodded her ready acceptance, blushing and smiling. "I trust she will acquit you as honourably in the eyes of our assembly as the fair Miss Elizabeth."

"What an amiable man Mr. Darcy is! Such condescension!" Sir William Lucas said to Elizabeth as they watched Darcy leading Charlotte to the set. "I recall we once thought he might be too proud for present company, but that seems to be all past, eh, Miss Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth, her eyes glued to Darcy dancing with her closest friend, knew not how she replied, but
evidently it was to Sir William's satisfaction for he launched into another litany of praise for her own dancing. Perhaps feeling some need to make amends for detaching Darcy from her, he also made haste to hail a passing officer and introduce him to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth danced with a number of officers next, then Bingley. She endeavoured to be good company, but she felt that she was not her usual lively self, as some of her attention was constantly claimed by what Darcy was doing. She noticed that he was always surrounded by young ladies and eager parents. Apparently she was not the only woman who was charmed by a Mr. Darcy who was prepared to dance. At least his partners were only Miss Bingley and Elizabeth's own sisters. Except – who was the pretty brunette he was now leading to the set?

"That is Miss Russell," Bingley informed her when she managed to slip an unobtrusive inquiry into conversation. "Her father is Sir Theodore Russell, a baronet from Essex. He is a longtime acquaintance of Darcy's family."

Elizabeth wondered what fortune she had, but decided it was too bold to ask.

The ball was half over and she had yet to speak to Darcy again. She was now dancing with Lieutenant Denny while Darcy was dancing higher in the set with a young blond woman. She also saw that the blonde woman was gazing quite soulfully into his eyes and had just said something that had drawn what looked like a half-smile from him.

Elizabeth turned back to Mr. Denny and smiled brilliantly. She teased him about Lydia's stories of the officers' hijinks and he responded with great animation and regaled her with more hilarious if slightly risqué tales, which set her laughing heartily.

At the end of the dance, Denny seemed reluctant to leave her side. He said, "Miss Elizabeth, if you would like to know about Mr. Chamberlayne's further trials at your sisters' hands, I would be pleased to tell you, but only if you dance the next with me."

The next was the supper dance. Elizabeth peered surreptitiously to where she had last seen Darcy, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Thank you, Mr. Denny. I am sure I will not be able to sleep tonight if you do not satisfy my curiosity about Mr. Chamberlayne."

She asked to sit down for a few minutes before the next dance began and Denny left to fetch her a glass of lemonade and a plate of ice. She moved to find a seat when she heard a familiar voice behind her call her name.

"Mr. Darcy," she turned with a bright smile, determined to hide her hurt.

He bowed. "Miss Bennet. I see you have been exercising yourself admirably. If you are not otherwise engaged, would you dance the next with me? It is the supper dance."

"I am sorry, Mr. Darcy, but I am otherwise engaged."

His posture stiffened perceptibly. "May I ask with whom?"

"With Mr. Denny."

"With Mr. Denny? But you have just danced with him."

"He asked for a second dance, which I was pleased to grant him." Elizabeth stressed the word "he" slightly.
"May I take you in for supper afterward, then?"

"I believe that privilege usually lies with the person with whom one has danced the supper dance, Mr. Darcy." She spoke with regret. She would have much preferred to sit with Mr. Darcy, but she would not snub Mr. Denny, who had done nothing to deserve it.

"You seem to enjoy the company of Mr. Denny."

"Yes, I find him quite agreeable." At Darcy's silence, she added, "I see you have found your own share of agreeable partners, Mr. Darcy."

He ignored her second comment and said, "It seems you and your sisters are rather fond of officers, Miss Elizabeth."

"I see no reason not to be when they are gentlemanlike men. They do service for King and country and should enjoy the support of the populace."

"Oh yes. Protecting Hertfordshire from the French," Darcy said scornfully, a shade of hauteur spreading over his features.

Elizabeth felt her colour rising. She opened her lips, but bit back her retort when Denny approached her smiling, his hands full.

"Miss Elizabeth! What a crush! But I have found seats in the other room and Sanderson is holding them for us. It is in a forgotten corner so we can enjoy some privacy. Will you come?" He stopped short when he noticed Darcy standing there and said jovially, "Excuse me, Mr. Darcy, but I need to steal away your conversational partner. She has pledged her hand to me for the supper dance, and we have only a few minutes before it starts."

"Of course." Darcy bowed coldly and left them.

Elizabeth watched him go with mixed emotions, then turned her attentions to Denny, determined not to make him suffer for her pique at Darcy. After the next dance, Denny escorted her into supper and they were seated in the middle of a sea of officers.

Elizabeth noticed that Darcy had danced the supper dance with Miss Russell and was now seated with her for supper. Her enquiries had yielded the information that Miss Russell had a fortune of twenty-five thousand pounds.

She turned a warm smile to Denny and the rest of the officers and teased them about whether they had learnt their fine dancing in each other's arms. This triggered an uproarious response, and Elizabeth found herself besieged with demands that she allow them an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities with her. She had little trouble disposing of the remainder of her dances.

It was near the end of the night when she looked up and saw Darcy gazing at her from a few feet away. She had danced with several more officers by then, and Darcy, she noticed, had stood up with Kitty, Lydia, Mrs. Hurst, Maria Lucas and, for some unaccountable reason, Lydia again. Elizabeth was beginning to regret her hastiness in disposing of all of her dances so quickly. Perhaps Chamberlayne, with whom she was engaged to dance the final set, would agree to split it with Darcy. Elizabeth was just about to give Darcy an inviting smile when it faded on her lips. Miss Russell had come up and given Darcy's arm an intimate squeeze, smiling up into his face and receiving a smile in return. Elizabeth turned away.

After the last dance, Elizabeth's head was aching and she was glad to go home. In the carriage, her mother's ecstasy at Jane's triumph in dancing four dances with Bingley and sitting with him at supper
seemed unbearable. Lydia and Kitty's giddy chatter did not help either.

"Goodness, how Mr. Darcy danced, did he not, Mama!" said Lydia. "And how very fine he looked! He could not have looked handsomer if he was an officer in regimentals. Every woman's eye was on him tonight. Did you see his tight breeches? Lord, I could not stop staring!"

"Lydia!" said Jane, shocked. "Do not talk about such things."

"Why shouldn't I talk about it, if everyone is thinking it?"

"We do not care what you are thinking, Lydia, but some things are not to be mentioned in polite company. Surely even you can recognise that," said Elizabeth, more nasty than was usual for her.

Lydia was not cowed. "La! I don't know who you are to lecture me, Lizzy. I notice you took a good long look at Mr. Darcy's breeches yourself."

"Lydia!" said Jane again, seeing that Elizabeth was struck speechless.

"Fine, then. Mama, did you see that I danced twice with Mr. Darcy?"

"Yes, I did. I am not surprised! You looked very well tonight, and I should not be at all surprised if Mr. Darcy should fall in love with you! It may be that he would like a good-humoured wife best. How very obliging he is, to dance with all of my daughters, and you twice! Why that was as good as Miss Russell, and of course she needed twenty-five thousand pounds to tempt him, and I heard that he had a prior acquaintance with her father."

"Yes indeed! I believe Lizzy misjudged him at the Meryton assembly. She said he was proud and disagreeable and did not like dancing, but I think it likely that he did not want to dance with her and therefore had to sit out the rest of the dances out of politeness. After all, Lizzy, he only danced with you once."

"Thank you for pointing that out, Lydia, I had not noticed," said Elizabeth coldly.

"Lizzy, I hope you see now where you err with Mr. Darcy," her mother lectured. "Reading indeed! No wonder you only had one dance with him tonight! And it is all very well to succeed with the officers, but do not forget that none of them have a penny to their name. When I was a girl, we had the sense to focus on the men of fortune first, if any were available. Work before play, you know!"

Elizabeth shut her eyes in exasperation at this advice and turned her face to the window. When they arrived at home, she was first out of the carriage, and stalked into the house.

"Goodness, what's wrong with her?" said Lydia. "I believe she is jealous of me. But I don't see how I can help it if Mr. Darcy likes me best."

"I don't know how you can say that," said Kitty. "Mr. Darcy asked me to dance as much as you. The only reason you got a second dance from him was because you pestered him and would not leave off until he agreed. And by then all of Lizzy's dances were gone."

Lydia and Kitty fell to bickering as the rest of the party entered the house.

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The day after the Netherfield ball, Bingley received a note that summoned him to Town. This would be a good chance to make arrangements with his solicitor over his plans to ask for his darling Jane's hand, he thought. He also thought his sisters might like to have a quick visit to Town. In this he was
correct, for the Hursts were tired of Hertfordshire, and Miss Bingley had all but given up her hopes of Darcy. Now he just had to find Darcy to see if he wished to come along.

He found Darcy in the billiards room, looking glum.

"What is wrong, Darcy? Too much wine last night? Mr. Vyse can fix you up something for that."

"No, I hardly drank. I was too busy dancing."

"Yes, I noticed that. It was a great pleasure to see you join the human race. Has this revised your earlier opinion on dancing?"

"No. It has confirmed everything I have ever thought. It was detestable standing up with all of those women, listening to their inane, vulgar chatter all evening. Once you start with one, they all come with their dreadful hints. And just when you find someone you do wish to dance with, you have to yield her to someone else. Bingley, I do not think there was any need to invite so many officers to the ball."

"I had to, Darcy, Caroline insisted that there needed to be enough men for all of the ladies. And I had not expected you to dance so enthusiastically. Besides, I did not notice that they monopolized the attention of the ladies. I was able to dance four dances with Jane. Four dances with my angel!"

"Yes, and that was a serious breach of propriety, as you well know. You gave every woman in the room without a partner license to excoriate you as ungentlemanlike. And since when did Miss Bennet give you leave to refer to her as Jane?"

"I could give you the particulars, Darcy, but then I would be breaching my honour as a gentleman, since a gentleman would never relate the details of a tender encounter." Bingley looked both smug and dreamy at once.

Bingley's preening annoyed Darcy exceedingly. Who was Bingley to lecture him on how to behave with a woman? On the other hand, at least Bingley appeared to be getting somewhere, Darcy thought sourly.

Bingley explained about his trip to London and asked Darcy if he wished to come.

"I do not think so. I have nothing pressing in Town and Georgiana is with Lady Fitzwilliam in Northamptonshire," he said, referring to his sister and his aunt, who had a family seat in that county. "Do you mind if I stay without you?"

"Not at all, especially if you do not mind if I make use of your townhouse."

"Certainly not. I will write you a note for my butler." He went over to the writing desk to compose a brief epistle. When it was dry, he handed it to Bingley.

"Thank you," Bingley said. "Sure you will not change your mind? We could take in a play, perhaps. I believe there is a Shakespeare running."

"I have seen it," said Darcy. "Besides, Miss Elizabeth and I are almost finished King Lear, and she hates to have her reading interrupted."

"Suit yourself. Deuce if I can figure out why you find that play enjoyable, however."

"King Lear?" said Darcy in surprise. "It is one of the Bard's finest. And it has a strong female character with a close relationship to her father. I thought Miss Elizabeth would be interested. What
is wrong with *King Lear*?

"Nothing is wrong with it. I saw it in the theatre and was so moved I spent half the week moping about thinking about treachery and death and futility. That is the problem, it is just so depressing. Nobody falls in love and everybody you like dies, do they not? That is a sure mood-killer. I would not be as serious and literary as you for a kingdom, Darcy. If I had to pick a play to read with a pretty girl, I would certainly not pick *King Lear*. No, I would pick something romantic. And short."

***

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"And so ended his affection,” said Elizabeth impatiently. "There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!"

"I have been used to consider poetry as the food of love," said Darcy. "Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away."

- Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice

"You wish to read poetry?" Elizabeth considered Darcy doubtfully. It was the first time they had spoken alone in three days.

The day after the Netherfield ball, Darcy had called at Longbourn around his usual time, but without Bingley. He was informed that Elizabeth was out walking with her sister Jane, and was forced to sit in the parlour with Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughters. It was an exceedingly unpleasant twenty minutes before he succeeded in extricating himself, and Darcy had had to revert back to his proud and disagreeable manner to accomplish it.

The next day, he arrived earlier than usual and found Elizabeth dressed for a walk, waiting for her sister. She acquiesced coldly to his request that he accompany her and Jane into Meryton. She seemed to thaw somewhat on the walk in, but when they arrived in the village, Darcy found himself besieged with attention from women with whom he had danced at Netherfield, or their relatives.

He was in the middle of a conversation with Sir William Lucas when Elizabeth walked on ahead. When he finally got himself free, he found Elizabeth and Jane laughing in an animated conversation with Denny and a group of officers. Darcy felt a sudden urge to break Denny's teeth. He responded coldly to their greeting and took his farewell of the ladies, saying he needed to continue with his morning calls.

That evening, Bingley returned without the Hursts and Miss Bingley, informing Darcy that they had decided to remain in Town. He was in remarkably good spirits and suggested that they call on Longbourn as early as possible the next day. Darcy was of half a mind to decline and tell Bingley that he was returning to Town, just to see if Elizabeth would even notice. However, Bingley was so pointed in his insistence that Darcy accompany him that he agreed. Perhaps he was giving up too easily.

The gentlemen found all of the family still at breakfast. After making their apologies, they adjourned to the drawing room. There, Bingley told Darcy that he needed to speak to Jane alone and proposed that they all walk out while Darcy drew off the rest of the ladies. Despite the season, it was a fine day, with the warmth of autumn rather than the nip of winter.

The proposal was met with general approbation with the exception of Mary, who expressed a preference to stay in, and Elizabeth, who remained silent.

Bingley and Jane fell behind the group and Darcy found himself walking with Elizabeth and Kitty and Lydia. Aware that Lydia had set her sights on him, Darcy resisted all of her attempts at flirtation and made his response as cool and flat as politeness would allow. After a while, she gave up trying to secure his attention, and fell to whispering and gossiping with Kitty. Elizabeth said little, but she seemed to warm up a little and allowed him to fall into step beside her.
When they reunited with Bingley and Jane on the return walk home, the glow of happiness on both their faces made it clear what had taken place. Darcy congratulated Bingley on securing Jane's hand with good will, and Elizabeth seized Jane's hands and gave her a kiss on the cheek, her eyes brimming with tears of happiness.

Immediately on entering the house, Bingley disappeared into Mr. Bennet's study and emerged a short while later beaming. The household was thrown into rapture at the news, and in the tumult, Darcy finally found a quiet moment alone with Elizabeth in the hallway. At the tender smile of happiness she wore on her face, he felt his heart thump painfully in his breast and he seized her hand.

"Miss Elizabeth, I must know. Are you angry with me? Have I done something to offend you?"

Elizabeth looked up at Darcy. She was so happy for Jane that her anger at his slighting of her at the Netherfield ball suddenly seemed ridiculously petty. She smiled saucily, "No, indeed, Mr. Darcy. At least not recently. Not since you pointed out the flaws in my interpretation of Cordelia's motivation in King Lear. In any case, I am prepared to make peace, as a wedding present to your friend and my sister so that they may be spared our bickering. We may be friends again."

Friends. He felt a stab of frustration. However, it was better than her being angry at him. He smiled and responded: "That will be a relief for Bingley. No matter how much I assure him that it is perfectly possible for two people to vehemently disagree and yet remain eminently cordial, he inevitably worries that it signals a quarrel. In this it appears that he is a good match for your sister."

Elizabeth laughed and acknowledged Darcy's reading of Jane. Suddenly they were talking again. They discussed the fine weather, Bingley, Jane and King Lear, only avoiding discussion of the Netherfield ball. This was when Darcy made the suggestion about reading poetry.

"That is an interesting idea. How will we choose what poetry to read?" Elizabeth asked.

"We can each choose our favourites," said Darcy. He added hastily, "Although of course we will stick to subject matter that is appropriate for a young lady."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "You need not have a fear of my sensibilities, Mr. Darcy. I have read very widely. My father believes that 'a little learning is a dangerous thing' and has not sought to constrain my pursuit of knowledge."

Darcy smiled at her naïveté. No matter how well-read Elizabeth considered herself to be, she was still raised as a lady, and therefore could have had no experience with the much more salacious material - and experiences - that were open to men only.

***

The next two weeks were happy ones. Everyone at Longbourn was in a good mood, even Mr. Bennet, who had emerged from his library to go shooting with his future son-in-law and his closest friend.

Starved of encouragement or even acquiescence, Lydia and Kitty had turned their noisy attentions from Darcy back to the officers and teasing Bingley for further balls. Mary looked forward to more use of the instrument at Netherfield. Mrs. Bennet was so involved in engagement parties and collecting the envious good wishes of the neighbourhood that she left off teasing Elizabeth about Darcy. In any case, she had determined that Darcy could not be interested in Elizabeth when he had stood up with her only once at the Netherfield ball, compared with the two dances he danced with each of Lydia and Miss Russell.
Darcy and Elizabeth read Milton's *Paradise Lost* and discussed the significance of meter in conveying meaning. They read Sir Walter Raleigh and laughed at the nymph's saucy reply to the shepherd. Their old camaraderie that had existed prior to the Netherfield ball had returned in full, but Elizabeth did not find it as satisfying as before.

Late one night, after the Bennets had entertained the neighbourhood, Bingley had stolen a few moments away with Jane, and Darcy had chatted pleasantly with Elizabeth in the drawing room with the rest of the company, Jane slipped into her sister's room. She sat down on a stool beside Lizzy and took her hand.

"Oh Lizzy! I am so happy! If I could but see you as happy!"

"Oh Jane! I am so happy for you. Do not think I am not. Even though I will miss you dreadfully! But at least you will remain close by."

"Lizzy, I must ask you a question, an important question. Although I will understand if you prefer not to give me an answer."

"Jane, this is being serious indeed. The occasion does not warrant such seriousness. I do promise I shall be civil to Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. I shall not tip the soup into their laps the next time I dine with them. No matter how accidental I can make it appear."

"Lizzy." Jane gave her a chiding smile.

"My apologies, Jane. Proceed, then. What is your question?"

"All right. It is this. Do you care for Mr. Darcy? Or do you think you could learn to?"

Elizabeth blushed but was silent.

Jane continued apologetically, "It is only that Charles believes Mr. Darcy may have feelings for you and he does not know whether to encourage him or not. I know how much you disliked him, but that appears to be long forgotten. Still, you always insist that you are only friends with Mr. Darcy."

"What makes Mr. Bingley think Mr. Darcy has feelings for me, Jane? Has he said so?"

"Not in so many words, according to Charles. It is only a suspicion on his part."

"Oh, Jane!" Elizabeth wailed, dropping all pretense. "I cannot tell. I cannot tell what he feels. He is always so proper."

"So you do have feelings for Mr. Darcy."

"Yes," Elizabeth admitted. "But I do not think he can return them. He only danced with me once at Netherfield."

"But you said he asked you for a second dance but you had already given it away."

"We-ell, yes. But by then the ball was half over and he did not ask again. Would not a man who wished to secure his partner have acted earlier? Or tried again? Mr. Bingley pestered you for dances well in advance of the ball. And Mr. Darcy danced twice with others."

"With Lydia," Jane smiled. "I think it is fairly clear that Mr. Darcy has no interest in Lydia. It is more likely that Lydia put him in a position where he could not refuse without giving offense."

"Not only Lydia."
"Perhaps he danced twice with Miss Russell for the same reason," Jane said gently. "Charles mentioned that he and Mr. Darcy have gone shooting at Sir Theodore Russell's estate in Essex, but he makes no mention of visiting Miss Russell."

"Perhaps," said Elizabeth, slightly mollified. "But Jane, I will not have feelings for a man who does not have feelings for me."

Jane stood up and kissed Elizabeth on the head.

"Dear Lizzy. You must not worry. If it is meant to be, it will happen. You must be patient."

After Jane departed and Elizabeth was alone in bed, she thought over her sister's words. It was all very well for Jane to preach patience, she thought. Jane was patience itself. But Elizabeth knew she was decidedly not patient. She liked to make things happen! She smiled to herself in the dark. Was there anything she could do in this case to make things happen?

***

If Elizabeth was not patient, Darcy was. He was also methodical and analytical. And according to his analysis of the situation, his greatest risk lay in rushing Elizabeth. He knew by this time that his affections were fully engaged. What he could not tell was the degree of regard on her side. Judging from her behaviour at the ball, she did not enjoy his company any more than that of some of the officers. If her heart was touched by his, it was but lightly.

Luckily, he reflected, he now enjoyed the upper hand in securing her affections. The union of Bingley and Jane granted him all the time he wished for. There would be engagement dinners, balls and house parties to look forward to. In such case, situations of intimacy were inevitable. He trusted that time and patience would allow him to conquer all that remained unsubdued of her heart.

He could not believe that at one time he had mistaken his Elizabeth's sweet and lively natural disposition as an attempt to seduce him. No, Darcy concluded. Elizabeth must be innocent of heart and mind as well as body. The greatest danger lay in a precipitous declaration that might frighten her off the enterprise altogether.

It was a very good thing that she could not see his real thoughts, he thought to himself with rueful amusement. Although Darcy knew his intentions were entirely honourable, he was unable to fully constrain the imaginings of his mind as she sat there reciting elevating lines in her pure, clear voice.

At this time, Darcy learnt exactly the power of poetry. Nothing expressed the powerful emotions that filled his thoughts so well as the lines of extravagant love and desire of the greatest love poets. He spent hours combing the offerings of Netherfield's library for verses and began assembling his own private collection of his favourite poems, many of them too racy to be shared with Elizabeth.

As it turned out, the best offerings were found in one of his own books, which he had brought with him from Pemberley for study and forgotten about. It was a small volume containing several hundred Greek verses dealing with a variety of subjects. Near the back of the book was a section of erotic verses, some so explicit he felt himself blushing with shame even when alone.

He thanked God that the verses were all in the original Greek, with no translation whatsoever. Once he had been foolish enough to carry the book with him to Longbourn and was horrified to learn that it had dropped out of his pocket. He had spent a nervous night worried that Mr. Bennet might find it, and that Mr. Bennet might know enough of the language to decipher a few phrases.

Instead, Elizabeth had greeted him in the hall on his next visit to tell him she had found his book. He
was just recovering his composure when she asked him to read the verse where he had marked his place. He felt a cold chill. The poem he had marked was unfit for a lady's ears. It said, in Greek:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ can't bear to watch your hips} \\
as you walk away \\
Untie me! \\
Your thin dress leaves you \\
nearly naked. You tease \\
and tease.
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{But one suggestion:} \\
dress me, too, in gauze \\
so you can see the shadow of my erection. \text{\textsuperscript{2}}
\end{align*}
\]

No, it would not do to read Elizabeth that.

"I am not certain of the pronunciation," he lied, for he had taken a first in Greek at Cambridge.

"What does that signify, Mr. Darcy?" said Elizabeth, smiling sweetly. "I am sure your Greek cannot help but be superior to mine, since as a woman I would not have had the opportunity for formal study like you. I only wish to hear what a foreign language sounds like aloud, and then perhaps you can explain it to me."

There was no way he could recite such a lyric to Elizabeth, even if she could not understand it. Instead, he recited her the lines from a love poem by Asklepiados, still daring but at least not obscene. He then translated and explained the beautiful images of the poet:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Think how unspeakably sweet} \\
the taste of snow in midsummer, \\
how sweet a kind spring breeze \\
after the gales of winter.
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{But as we all discover} \\
nothing's quite as sweet \\
as one large cloak \\
wrapped around two lovers. \text{\textsuperscript{3}}
\end{align*}
\]

He thought that Elizabeth looked slightly disappointed, and he wished she could understand the words in the original Greek, when she said, "Are you sure that is what it says?"

"That is generally what it says, although I cannot promise that my translation is exact."

"I was just wondering ... I do not pretend to be an expert in Greek, but the number of lines do not seem to match up."

God, she was clever, he thought. He lied again: "You are correct, Miss Elizabeth, but some languages are like that. The Greek alphabet translates into more syllables than English, and hence the lines spoken will not exactly correspond."

Elizabeth looked thoughtful, but did not press him further. They read William Wordsworth's poems, eventually reaching the ones about the countryside of Derbyshire, Darcy's native county. Elizabeth asked him if Mr. Wordsworth gave a faithful description.

"Indeed, yes. I believe the general sense in the county is that he captures it very well," he said with a
smile. "I wonder, do you have a copy of *The Beauties of England and Wales*?"

It was a popular book series published six years ago that described the local topography and history of each of the counties. Mr. Bennet had acquired the volumes as they came out and now proudly boasted the ownership of the full 18-volume set. On hearing that there was a copy in Mr. Bennet's library, Darcy informed her that Derbyshire was contained in Volume III and Elizabeth went to fetch it.

"Derbyshire comprises the last half of the book," said Darcy as he leafed confidently through it. He stopped at a page one-quarter from the end. "There, Wordsworth's 'romantic Dovedale's spiry rocks.' What do you think?"

Elizabeth examined the engraving. "Yes, it is a very good description." She smiled and gave the volume back to him.

He leafed through the rest of it thoughtfully. "There is a description of my estate in here if you would like to see," he said casually.

"Pemberley?" Elizabeth said in surprise.

"Yes, it is often featured in guidebooks, though this is the lengthiest passage on it that I have seen."

Elizabeth bent eagerly over the page that Darcy pushed toward her. The engraving showed a stone building of noble proportions, set against a wooded hill, before which ran a stream of some natural importance that swelled into larger as it wended its way into the distance. On the opposing page, she read:

**PEMBERLEY, the uniquely beautiful seat of George Darcy, Esq. whose holdings in the northern part of the county are surpassed only by the Duke of Devonshire's. The Darcy family's origins in the Peaks region may be traced to the Conquest. It is only one of two families, and the greater one, that can claim an unbroken line of descent from that time.**

*The manor house in its current location dates to the reign of Elizabeth, but has been extended and redesigned numerous times, the last major remodelling begun in the lifetime of Lady Anne Darcy, late wife of the present Mr. Darcy, and not yet completed. Prior to her marriage, Lady Anne was Lady Anne Fitzwilliam, daughter of the 1st EARL FITZWILLIAM (3rd in the peerage of Ireland), and sister to the present earl, the great land magnate who surely needs no introduction.*

*The situation of Pemberley is peculiar and striking, standing on a gentle acclivity in a wide valley marked by the confluence of the River Derwent and its tributary, the Pemberwash …*

"It is very beautiful," Elizabeth said, hoping her colour did not betray her thoughts over who might be the future Mistress of Pemberley. She understood now why Miss Bingley was so desperate to gain Darcy's attention.

"The book does not do justice to the woods, which are very extensive," said Darcy, whose own cheeks displayed a rosy tinge. "You would like it, I think. You seem to enjoy rambling in the outdoors."

Her blush deepened, but she said, lightly, "Sadly, my father's inclination to see the wider world is confined to the page. It is difficult to lever him past the boundaries of Longbourn, though my aunt and uncle have tried. They hope to take a trip to the Lakes sometime soon."
"They must certainly stop at Pemberley. You could show it to them, perhaps."

Elizabeth's eyes darted a glance at his face, but what she saw there immediately caused her to drop her eyes. His face was as red as hers felt. Was he going to ... ? She waited, but there was only a moment or two of silence. Then he spoke.

"Yes, you should certainly see if you can accompany your aunt and uncle. The Peaks are well worth the visit and I would be happy to receive all of you at Pemberley."

Elizabeth looked up, but Darcy was now looking at the floor. "That would be lovely," she said politely. "I am sure my aunt and uncle would be pleased to see Pemberley."

Darcy nodded, still looking at the floor. He looked cross, but at who or what she could not tell. She studied his profile thoughtfully, then changed the subject back to poetry. They chatted amiably for the remainder of the visit, and at the end, she announced, "I have an idea."

"I am ready to hear it."

"Let us make this more interesting. I propose a contest. Let us pick a theme. Each of us will have to find the poem that best expresses that theme and bring it to the next reading. We will then see whose selection is the superior one."

"Who will be the judge?"

"We will be our own judges. It will be clear whose poem is superior," she added pertly.

"Is that so? We shall see about that. What is the theme?"

"What do you suggest? It should be something fairly easy, which is written about frequently, so we have lots of choices."

He smiled, feeling daring. "Well, there is always the obvious - love."

"Love it is, Mr. Darcy. Let us see if your love poem will best mine. Until tomorrow then."

***

Darcy spent the night combing anthologies of poetry. He already had a few selections in mind, but wished to make sure that he had not missed anything. He narrowed it down to five options, then finally opted for Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds." He knew it was not the most original choice, but to him it captured the purest love and admiration a man could feel for a woman, what he felt for Elizabeth. It also lacked any hint of the coarse elements that could offend her maiden sensibilities.

She greeted him the next day in his favourite gown, a warm rose colour that brought out the creaminess of her skin and highlighted the dark brows and eyelashes of her remarkable eyes. She had never looked lovelier.

When he made to follow Bingley into the drawing room where the ladies were assembled, Elizabeth stayed him with a touch of her hand on his sleeve.

"Let us go into the library," she whispered. "My father is out visiting so we will not disturb him. And given today's subject matter, I would not want my mother to misconstrue our intentions."

Darcy smiled inwardly at her innocence. He knew his intentions were all that Mrs. Bennet hoped, it
was Elizabeth's feelings he was unsure of. At the first sign that she viewed him as more than a friend, he intended to open the idea of a courtship with her. He hoped that would be today, after he read her Sonnet 116.

They sat side by side on the long couch in Mr. Bennet's library, their bodies turned towards each other, their knees just inches apart. The library was silent, except the sound of their breathing and the birds outside. Darcy allowed himself the fleeting fantasy of pulling her to him and kissing her, but forced himself to focus. Such a forward move might frighten her and set them back weeks.

"Do you mind reading your selection first?" Elizabeth asked.

"Not at all. I believe that is where we started in Netherfield library that day. I always go first, it seems." He opened his volume of Shakespeare and recited:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Let me not to the marriage of true minds} \\
\text{Admit impediments. Love is not love} \\
\text{Which alters when it alteration finds,} \\
\text{Or bends with the remover to remove:} \\
\text{O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,} \\
\text{That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;} \\
\text{It is the star to every wandering bark,} \\
\text{Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.} \\
\text{Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks} \\
\text{Within his bending sickle's compass come;} \\
\text{Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,} \\
\text{But bears it out even to the edge of doom.} \\
\text{If this be error and upon me proved,} \\
\text{I never writ, nor no man ever loved.}
\end{align*}
\]

He gazed into her eyes as he read the poem, and her eyes did not drop from his, although her cheeks flushed becomingly and her lips parted. Their faces were inches apart. He could not help it; he leant in for a kiss, but at the last moment Elizabeth pulled back.

"Wait," she said breathlessly. "It is my turn."

Darcy sat up straight and cleared his throat. Under the disappointment at the lost moment, he felt a sense of elation. She had felt something, he knew it. He smiled at her tenderly, eager to hear what she would select.

"My poem is by Andrew Marvell. 'To His Coy Mistress.' "

Darcy's eyes flew to her face in shock. That poem? Surely not! It was not a poem for any respectable woman to read, much less a young lady. It was not even about love in Darcy's opinion; its purpose was clear and that purpose was blatant seduction. Darcy knew it well. At Cambridge, many an underclassman had been passed the poem by an older mentor as a means to overwhelm the virtue of a reluctant lady, and stained and well-thumbed copies circulated freely. Marvell's poem went by many nicknames, but George Wickham's had stuck and everybody had used it since, The Closer. As Wickham would say, if the lady was prevaricating over her virtue, this was the poem that sealed the deal. And now his dearest, loveliest, innocent Elizabeth was reading it to him.

\[
\text{Had we but world enough and time,}
\]
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.

Darcy watched in fascination as Elizabeth's lips moved, her sweet voice clear and unhurried.

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity,

And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust;

Was Elizabeth, his Elizabeth, really telling him about her lust? Did a genteel maiden even have lust? What did she mean by it? What could she mean by it? The meaning was unmistakeable, as was the look kindled in her eye. But she could not … could she?

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,

Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,

And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:

Oh God! If that was not an invitation, what was?

Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Darcy felt dizzy and realised he had been holding his breath. He let it out with a whoosh, looked down and saw that his state of arousal was readily apparent, and quickly turned his body away from Elizabeth, crossing one leg over the other. She appeared not to notice, and was innocently thumbing through her book.

"I love that poem," she said. "The language is so very inventive, the imagery so original and yet so apt. The juxtaposition of sweetness and willingness with the idea of "rough strife" and "tearing" through the gates - it captures the violence and tenderness of passionate love both. Would you not agree?"

Darcy made an inarticulate noise in his throat, his mind absolutely blank. She took it as assent and said, smiling teasingly, "So, Mr. Darcy, are you prepared to concede the field? Have I picked the
"Best love poem of all? Oh!" Her face changed to concern, "Mr. Darcy, are you unwell? You do look flushed." She rose and leant over him with concern, giving him an eyeful of her breasts, which did nothing to help matters.

"I am fine," he choked. "I am … it is hot in here, that is all. Perhaps I need some air."

"Yes, it is rather stuffy in the library in the afternoons. The windows let in so much sunlight. We had best go out. Would you like to turn the pages for me while I play? I do not hear Mary so the pianoforte must be free."

She pulled him to his feet and at the touch of her small, soft hand in his, he felt another wave of desire. Somehow they made it to the pianoforte, where she pushed him down to sit on the wide bench, then sat down next to him and began to play and sing.

The next half an hour was the most exquisite agony he had ever experienced. His body was keyed to a fever pitch. They said almost nothing. Their knees touched and she did not remove hers; her sleeve continually brushed his; and she made neither movement nor protest as he leant in to breathe the intoxicating scent of her skin and watch the swell of her breasts every time she took a breath. Gentleman or no gentleman, he had doubts that Elizabeth would have left the room with her virtue intact if her mother and sisters had not been in view in the next room.

He had no recollection of how he and Bingley returned to Netherfield, nor what he said to Bingley on the way. By the time they achieved the house, he was in such a haze of lust that he brushed past the servant waiting to take his coat and hat and took the stairs three at a time to his private bedchamber, where he slammed and locked his door and shouted to his valet that he did not need his assistance that night.

***

The next morning, spent and calmer, he considered the possibility that he had misread the situation. Could he be making the same mistake as before? Could Elizabeth be that innocent that she had not understood the nature of the poem, had not noticed the effect of her nearness on him? Surely she was feeling something, even if she did not fully understand it.

Darcy eagerly looked forward to speaking to Elizabeth the next day to gauge her reaction. To his disappointment and frustration, they had no opportunity to speak alone. She greeted him calmly and suggested that they next compare poems of political satire. His attempts at gallantry or flirtation were met with no verbal response. And yet she continued to torment him with her physical proximity, touching his arm and giving him the opportunity to stand close enough that he could look down her dress, could reach out and touch the soft curls that nestled erotically on her lovely neck.

On the third day after the episode at the pianoforte, the entire Bennet family was due to dine at Netherfield. Darcy decided that he would declare himself that night, whether to Elizabeth or, if he could not find a moment with her, her father. His patience and nerves had stretched to breaking point and he could take it no longer.

At the table, Elizabeth was seated across from him. Throughout the meal, his eyes kept returning to her face, trying to catch her eye, but she avoided his, instead chatting with good humour with her mother on wedding preparations. Finally, the talk turned to something else besides fripperies, when Bingley told Mr. Bennet what a pleasure it was to have seen more of him in recent days.

"Yes, Mr. Bingley, you have chosen a most convenient time to marry one of my daughters. If I was still in the middle of my translation project, I would have been indisposed and you would have had to solicit Mrs. Bennet for Jane's hand."
Mr. Bennet continued, "Speaking of which, Lizzy, if Mr. Darcy can spare you from your poetry readings, I need you to look over my translations. The metaphors are tricky in some of the Greek verses, and I want to know if you think I have captured the nuances."

Darcy, lost in reverie at the sight of Elizabeth's lips as she sipped her tea, suddenly jerked his head up and stared at Mr. Bennet, then Elizabeth as she answered her father.

"Of course, Papa, I would be delighted to assist you. You may wish to consider asking Mr. Darcy too. He seems to have an excellent grasp of Greek metaphor and imagery. Although sometimes," her lips twitched, "I am not so sure about his translation."

Darcy turned white and then red. She had known! She had known, all this time, about his lust and desire for her. The Marvell poem, the pianoforte, all of the inadvertent touches and revealing gestures over the last few days. She had been toying with him, with him, Fitzwilliam Darcy, the master of Pemberley. He felt outraged at this assault to his dignity, then a dawning elation as he realised what it meant. *She wants me.*

Elizabeth's face was pink with suppressed laughter, her smile hidden behind a napkin. This was replaced by uncertainty as she watched the emotions pass Darcy's face. Darcy briefly considered allowing her to partake of some of his uncertainty and torment, but dismissed it quickly. She was so maddening, so delightful, so dear. He grinned at her, raked her person with his eyes, then met her eyes again, causing her to blush deeply.

He said something that satisfied Mr. Bennet, but kept his eyes on Elizabeth. Their eyes continued to meet through the remainder of supper, hers laughing, his conveying his kindled passion. After supper, just as the gentlemen parted from the ladies, he heard Elizabeth mention to her mother that she wished to look for a book in the library. He did not miss the inviting glance she threw his way as she departed.

In the hallway, Darcy lost little time in excusing himself, then hurried to the library. He flung open the door and looked around. Where was she? Ah, there, behind the stack.

He walked stealthily around the corner and saw her, balanced on a stool, her skirts gathered in one hand to reveal her pretty feet and ankles and an enticing bit of calf as she reached up for a book. "Allow me, Miss Bennet," Darcy said.

"Oh! Mr. Darcy!" She scooted off the stool and tried to escape but he trapped her with her back against the shelf, his arms on either side of her.

"Mr. Darcy, this is so … forward of you," she said demurely, her eyelashes drooping down, a smile hovering on her lips.

"I believe we have things we need to discuss, Miss Bennet," he said, positioning his body so it was almost but not quite touching hers.

She looked up at him and smiled impishly. "Is this the part where you tell me how ardently you admire and love me?"

"I believe I may say something of that nature." He smiled at her rakishly. "Is this the part where you allow me to kiss you?"

"No."

"No?!!"
He had already leant in for a kiss. At her denial, he jerked his head back and looked at her.

"Mr. Darcy, did you not once impress upon me the need to delay gratification in order to augment your pleasure?" She played with the ends of his cravat. "I would by no means wish to minimise any pleasure of -"

His mouth on hers stopped her ability to speak. He pulled her against him and felt every nerve in his body scream with joy and relief. Her lips were soft; her skin unbearably so. She smelled faintly of peaches and honeysuckle; tasted like snow in midsummer; made him feel like a fine May morning, when all of Pemberley lay before him like a jewel in his willing clasp.

He kissed her more deeply and she did not resist. Dimly through the meeting of lips and tongues, the growing ache of his body, he felt her tug at his cravat and slip it off, then slide one hand around his neck and the other into his hair, pulling him down to her. He pulled her tighter, and she pressed herself against him. The feel of her body against his, its firmness and softness, its pliancy and activity, was undoing him. He crushed her tighter, tighter, his hands roaming upward, downward to caress … no! With difficulty and trembling hands, he parted himself from her.

"I am sorry. Forgive me," he whispered.

"It is well. There is nothing to forgive," she whispered back, smiling, although looking a little uncertain.

They stood gazing at each other, both shaky and breathing quickly.

Darcy pulled her closer again but gently this time. He lowered his forehead to hers and looked deeply into her eyes. "Will you marry me, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, Mr. Darcy." Her eyes were shining like stars.

He kissed her again, a quick, gentle kiss that would not carry them away. "My first name is Fitzwilliam."

"Yes, Fitzwilliam." She smiled shyly at him. "How long have you loved me?"

"Almost from the first moment I saw you," he said earnestly.

"Almost but not quite. Was I not only tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt you?" She dimpled at him.

Darcy smiled. "Elizabeth. No woman, no matter how beautiful, is more than tolerable until you know she has improved her mind through extensive reading."

She laughed delightedly. "Well said, sir! We will pretend that is what you were really thinking."

"I do not think it is appropriate for you to know what I am really thinking," he said roguishly.

She laughed again, then pulled his head down to whisper in his ear. He flushed and smiled at her.

"You are terrible, Elizabeth. You will be the death of me."

"Then I hope it will be only a little death."

His body shook with laughter. "Depend upon it, there will be multiple little deaths."

And he kissed her again.
NOTES:

1 Alexander Pope
2 Marcus Argentarius, ca. 60 BCE, beautifully translated by Sam Hamill, *The Erotic Spirit*
3 Asklepiados, ca. 320 BCE, translated by Sam Hamill, *The Erotic Spirit*
4 La petit mort = orgasm

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Across the desk, Darcy eyed Mr. Bennet with concealed outrage. His request for consent to marry Elizabeth was not going well.

He had expected his offer to be gratefully received. After all, by marrying Elizabeth, he was offering the Bennets an escape from financial insecurity brought about in no small part by Mr. Bennet's failure to exercise the due care and competence required of an estate owner and a father. Why was this man not groveling at his feet?

But Mr. Bennet had not appeared grateful. He had not even appeared interested. Instead, he had looked at Darcy over his spectacles in a manner somewhere between dismissive and accusatory and said, dryly, "I was given to understand that you and Miss Elizabeth were friends only. It appears I was misinformed."

When Darcy pressed his suit, Mr. Bennet had waved his hand airily and said, "Plenty of time for that. One wedding at a time is sufficient to absorb my attention. Come see me next week."

This did not accord with Darcy's plans. He had already fixed upon the day of Bingley's nuptials, or shortly thereafter, to wed Elizabeth. That was not quite three weeks hence. To accomplish that, certain wheels had to be set in motion.

Darcy opened his mouth to remonstrate, but Mr. Bennet had already returned his attention to his book, signaling the end of their discussion. It was useless. Mr. Bennet was clearly as strange and reprehensible in his own way as Mrs. Bennet was in hers. He wondered anew where the eldest daughters had attained their grace and understanding. Surely not at Longbourn. Their home was a desert of propriety and good sense.

At the door, Darcy heard Mr. Bennet call his name and Darcy paused. Was he coming to his senses at last?

"Yes, Mr. Bennet?" he said coldly.

Mr. Bennet drawled, "If it is not too much trouble for you, Mr. Darcy, please inform my daughter I wish to speak to her. Miss Elizabeth, that is."

Darcy nodded curtly and exited Mr. Bennet's study before he said something ungentlemanlike. He found Elizabeth in the drawing room laughing with Bingley and Jane over a newspaper report on the latest fashions. Elizabeth looked up at his entry and gave him a warm smile, which faltered when she saw his face. She came over immediately, pretending to show him a book.

"What is it?" she whispered in between explaining the merits of the volume. "He did not refuse!"

Darcy nodded. "He said he did not wish to discuss it at present."

"Not discuss -!" Elizabeth's mouth dropped open. She shut it, then said, "I had best speak to him."
"Yes, he asked for you," Darcy said stiffly.

Elizabeth threw him a look that mixed alarm, sympathy and shame and hurried to her father's study. She knocked on his door and was rewarded with a curt "Come!" from inside. When she entered, Mr. Bennet was seated at his desk, sipping a glass of claret thoughtfully. She could tell he was troubled.

"Papa?"

"Lizzy."

"Mr. Darcy spoke with you?"

"Yes."

"He said you did not wish to discuss it."

"No."

Elizabeth waited for her father to elaborate on his objections, but he only continued to look at her, his expression reproachful. Gradually it dawned that he was upset with her.

She sat down gingerly in the chair facing him. "I suppose - " she paused, then resumed. "I suppose you were ill-prepared for the news."

He raised his eyebrows ironically. "What gives you that idea, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth blushed lightly. "I suppose - because I have been insisting that we were friends only."

"Yes?"

"And saying that I am in no hurry to leave home now that Jane is departing."

"Yes?"

"But Papa!" she threw up her hands in frustration. "It cannot come as a complete surprise. Mr. Darcy and I have been spending a great deal of time together."

"Reading to pass the time, you said. As friends."

"As friends, of course. But sometimes friendship gradually ripens into something more."

Mr. Bennet's eyebrows crept minutely higher. "I fail to see what is gradual about being friends last Saturday, then asking to be married two Saturdays after next, followed by your permanent removal north."

"I will visit!"

"Yes. Once, twice a year, you will visit."

"Oh! Papa." Elizabeth huffed. "Did Mr. Darcy not explain why he wishes to wed soon? That he must return to Pemberley and does not wish to go without me?"

"Mr. Darcy explained his reasons sufficiently, Lizzy. It just so happens that I did not consider those reasons sufficient."

Elizabeth considered this, then said, "Is it my marrying Mr. Darcy that you object to, or the fact that
we wish to marry soon?"

Mr. Bennet sighed and gave his favourite daughter a wry smile.

"Both. I do not have particular objections against Mr. Darcy, although I must say his high-handed assumptions about the desirability of his suit can be grating. But I am concerned at how little we know of him and how quickly this has all come to pass. I was not aware he considered you with particular favour until his declaration, and I believe you have announced on more than one occasion that he is the last man on earth that you would consider acceptable. Yet now you both insist you must marry immediately." A strange look passed over his face and he said in some alarm, "Is there something you need to tell me, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth felt her cheeks heat, but replied coolly, "Of course not, Papa. But you overstate our indifference. You know Mr. Darcy has been here nearly every day for going on a month."

"Yet somehow he neglected to single you out for any special attention at the Bingleys' ball and in fact scattered his attentions amongst a great many ladies, one or two in particular who were not you. Miss - Russell, was it? Not that I am counting, but that is two occasions where he has publicly snubbed you, Lizzy."

Elizabeth inwardly cursed her father's good information. That wretched ball! But she would not be cowed.

"I believe it was only a misunderstanding, Papa. In any case, I hope you will admit that an offer of marriage will trump a second request for a dance?" She gave her father what she hoped was a winning smile.

"Typically an offer of marriage is preceded by a second request for a dance, Lizzy. And sometimes even a third and a fourth. As your sister received from Mr. Bingley," he said pointedly.

Elizabeth frowned. "In any case, Papa, I have received an offer now. Why would Mr. Darcy propose if he did not love me?"

"As to that," he observed drily, "Mr. Darcy would not be the first good-looking young man who feels the need to overcome a young lady's disinclination to him in order to prove himself to the world. Especially when the disinclination was so energetically and publicly expressed."

"I only told Charlotte and my family," Elizabeth said defensively.

"But as you are no doubt aware, your family includes your mother and younger sisters, who are not known to be models of discretion."

"I see," said Elizabeth, carefully neutral. "So Mr. Darcy must be a rake intent on conquest because it is the only way to explain why someone like him, with everything life can offer, could settle on someone like me."

Mr. Bennet's face softened. "No, Lizzy. Mr. Darcy would be fortunate indeed to claim you as a wife. I only wish to make sure that he knows it and does not underestimate the prize he would be receiving. Given his inconstancy and failure to make his intentions clear to the world, I am not entirely comfortable that is the case here."

Elizabeth was silent, thinking. She did not believe her father was correct in his assessment. She thought about Darcy's reserve and formality around her family, and his warmth and playfulness with her. No, her father must be wrong; his information was incomplete.
"Lizzy, let us speak rationally."

"I am always rational, Papa," she said automatically, twirling the globe sitting on Mr. Bennet's desk abstractedly.

"Is there a possibility that your feelings are not so strong as you suppose?"

She laughed ruefully at that. "Oh! No, Papa. There you are certainly wrong."

"Are you certain of that? Mr. Darcy is very rich and handsome and fashionable, is he not?"

"Yes," she smiled.

"And he has a fine carriage and horses and we hear much of his great estate?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Every young lady in the neighbourhood is dying to receive his passing glance, correct?"

Elizabeth looked at her father quizzically. "This is an odd way of convincing a young lady of her indifference, Papa. But yes, I suppose that is true."

"So I expect it is a great feather in your cap to - "

"Oh!" Elizabeth bounced to her feet in indignation as she realized her father's point. "Papa! Do you truly think I would accept an offer from a man solely because everybody else desires him?"

"Well, Lizzy, only last month you could not tell me enough about how you detested the man," said Mr. Bennet mildly.

"Which proves that I was never indifferent," she said triumphantly.

Mr. Bennet could not but smile at his daughter's logic.

Elizabeth, seeing the smile, sat down again and said persuasively. "Come, Papa. You know you must give way in the end. You cannot prevent my marrying Mr. Darcy. I will be of age next year."

"I would be much more comfortable in giving my consent next year, Lizzy."

"Papa!" she said in alarm.

Mr. Bennet snorted at the dismay on her face. "I am not actually refusing my consent, Lizzy. I only wish you to take a little more time."

"I assure you, I have taken all the time I need."

Mr. Bennet rolled his eyes and shook his head in exasperation. "Very well. You may inform Mr. Darcy that he will receive my answer once I see the marriage settlement. Perhaps that will slow him down."

"Oh! Papa. What matters a settlement when Mr. Darcy invites me to share of a fortune?"

"On this I am immovable, Lizzy. I wish to see it in writing, and then I will give my answer. We will speak no more."

"Very well," Elizabeth gave in, knowing she had won. "I will tell him."
"But not a word to your mother or anyone else, my dear. Excepting Jane, who I presume has already been apprised. But no one else. Not until I see the settlement. There is no point in … ah … exciting Mrs. Bennet's anticipation."

"Of course, Papa," Elizabeth said fervently. 

"Well, well. Get along, then."

Elizabeth left and sought out Darcy in the drawing room. He was sitting apart from everybody else, a book open in his lap. It was clear he was not reading, however. He was staring fixedly out the window, his back rigid.

She tried to see him as her father did, and for a moment he was Mr. Darcy as she had first experienced him: frighteningly handsome, but also proud, aloof and arrogant. Then he turned his head and his eyes met hers and the hurt she read in them swept away her doubts. She stepped up to where he was sitting and studied the landscape outside.

"It is a picturesque view, is it not?" she said in a conversational voice. Then, in an undertone, "He says he will give us an answer when he sees the marriage settlement. I am quite sure that means he will give his consent."

Darcy had also turned back to look out the window. He said, speaking low so that Elizabeth could not tell the tone of his voice, "Indeed. And did he prescribe the minimum terms of what he wishes to see in the marriage settlement?"

"No. That does not matter. He only wishes to see your commitment in writing."

Darcy nodded briefly. He placed the book on a nearby tea table and stood up. "Then I must go."

"Go? Where?" Elizabeth looked up at him in surprise.

"To Town. To see my solicitor about the marriage settlement."

"But - now? There is no need to rush off, surely. We had intended to invite you for supper."

Darcy shrugged. "Your father wishes to see the marriage settlement. I will show him the marriage settlement."

"Darcy, are you off?" Bingley said in surprise when he saw Darcy stride to the door.

"Off!" cried Mrs. Bennet. "Oh! No, Mr. Bingley, we had counted on you to stay for supper! The Lucases are coming! You must stay for supper! And Mr. Darcy too! Cook has dressed some very fine birds."

Darcy apologized stiffly and explained that he had just remembered urgent business he had to attend to. He ducked Bingley's offer to accompany him back to Netherfield and urged everyone to stay seated and resume without him as he would let the servant see him out. Mrs. Bennet, satisfied that Bingley, her chief prize, was still within her grasp, happily acquiesced.

Elizabeth, puzzled, watched him go. She stood for a moment thoughtfully, then made excuse to her mother and slipped out into the hall after him. He had his hat in his hand and coat on and was sending the servant for his horse.

She regarded him steadily, then said when she was sure they were alone, "You would leave without saying good-bye?"
"I will return soon," he said. He did not look up from pulling on his gloves.

She cocked her head and smiled at him. "Does this mean you do not wish me to - say good-bye?"

He looked up at her then. Something in his face melted and the stiffness of his shoulders eased. He gave her a little smile. "Do you wish to - say good-bye?"

She stepped closer until she was within arm's reach and turned up her face to him. "I do not wish to say good-bye," she smiled teasingly. "But since good-bye is thrust upon me, I would hope it would be a good one."

He smiled fully at her, his eyes crinkling, and closed the distance between them. He looked down into her face for a few moments as if memorizing it and taking her measure at once. Then he slipped one hand around her waist and tugged her gently closer until she was pressed against him. She felt his chest heave as he sighed heavily and her hands rose to the lapels of his tailcoat. His other hand - bare, he must have pulled his glove off - lifted to brush a curl from her face. Then he kissed her.

She closed her eyes and kissed him back tentatively, then more boldly, winding her hand around his neck above his cravat. She darted her tongue out to taste his lips. His body leapt in response and she could feel his hand jerk and pull her tighter against him. For a moment, she tasted triumph, but then Darcy cupped her cheek and slid his tongue past her lips. She clung to his coat and was grateful for his hand on the small of her back supporting her.

Papa is wrong, she thought. This is real, it must be, or it would not feel like this.

Too soon the kissing ended. Elizabeth looked up at Darcy. His eyes were blazing and he was breathing hard. They stared at each other wordlessly for a few moments. Then he smiled. "We will be married soon."

The rattle of the door broke them apart. A servant appeared, informing Darcy that his horse was ready. He smiled at Elizabeth one last time, bowed and disappeared out the front door. Elizabeth stood in the front hall and watched his retreating figure through the window, lone and proud and elegant on his tall horse, and thought of his kiss.

***

The Hon. Thomas Hedworth of Hedworth, Hedworth & Loseley, was not the most fashionable of London solicitors, but he was among its most exclusive. He had extensive chambers at Lincoln's Inn, an army of clerks and a stable of clients that consisted almost entirely of the country's ultra-elite.

The handsome young man being ushered into his personal chambers did not rank amongst that number, being untitled and only very rather than obscenely wealthy. Nevertheless, Hedworth was always glad to see Darcy. Not only was he the nephew of Hedworth's favourite client, the Earl Fitzwilliam, he was also intelligent, reasonable and in possession of a remarkably good head for business for so young a man. Hedworth thought he was much mistaken if Darcy did not turn out to be one of his more valuable clients in the end.

"Darcy! At last. I was beginning to think you would never emerge from the wilds. You are looking well." Hedworth rose in greeting and the two men shook hands.

Darcy seated himself and they discussed Town news for several minutes. Then Hedworth inquired after Miss Darcy and Darcy inquired after Lady Frances Hedworth and the small Hedworths. Pleasantries dispensed with, Hedworth invited Darcy to state his purpose for the visit.
"I am getting married, Hedworth."

"Are you!" Hedworth beamed. "My congratulations. And is it one of Lady Fitzwilliam's nieces? No - let me guess. Lady Priscilla? A handsome young lady with an excellent fortune."

"Priscilla? I was not aware she was out."

"This season, I understand. But since you were family - "

"It is not Lady Priscilla," Darcy interrupted. "Nor any of my aunt's relations."

"No?" Hedworth said in surprise. "I had thought Lady Fitzwilliam had you sewn up or I would have suggested you to my brother the Marquis, as he still has two of my nieces to dispose of. Miss Laurence, then? It cannot be Miss Tilney-Long. It appears she has fixed on young Wellesley-Pole at last."

With regret, Hedworth thought of how England's greatest heiress had publicly expressed on more than one occasion her admiration for Darcy's classical physiognomy, but Darcy had failed to act on the hint. It was a great pity. The twenty-one-year-old could do with Darcy's steady hand at the tiller of her million-pounds-plus fortune. But after wavering over the suit of the Duke of Clarence - nearly thirty years her senior - she had settled on young William Wellesley-Pole, a rake and a wastrel if there ever was one. Other than his aristocratic connections, silver tongue and facility with the waltz, Wellesley-Pole had nothing to offer. But women had terrible taste.

"It is not Miss Tilney-Long, Miss Laurence nor any other heiress," Darcy said, dashing Hedworth's hopes. "It is a young lady of whom I doubt you have heard in your entire life." He paused. "Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Hertfordshire."

"Bennet?" The distinguished solicitor's forehead wrinkled as he strived to place the family name. "I know there are Bennets in Hampshire, connected to the Duke of Portland. But Hertfordshire? It does not sound familiar."

"I doubt it would. Her father's family are small landowners and her family connexions on her mother's side are to trade."

Small landowners? Trade? Hedworth hoped his face did not show his dismay too plainly.

"Congratulations," he said swiftly, bringing his chair to rights. "She must be a charming young lady indeed."

"Thank you," Darcy gave him a small smile. "I certainly think so, and I trust when you meet her you will say the same. In any case, I am here to have the marriage settlement drawn up."

"Of course, of course," said Hedworth, now all business. He drew a sheet toward him from the stack conveniently placed in the shelves behind.

"In fact," said Darcy, removing a folded document from an inner pocket, "I have been giving it some thought, and I have written down my instructions."

Hedworth took the document from Darcy and scanned it once, then again. His well-trained face retained its impassive expression, with the exception of a small, involuntary twitch of his left eyelid. He looked up at Darcy.

"Very generous. I assume Mr. Bennet or the lady herself will be making a sizeable contribution to the settlement?"
The greater the inferiority of the lady's family, the greater the contribution expected. In this case, Hedworth thought, the bare minimum must be at least forty thousand pounds and Miss Bennet should not expect more than 3 per cent of her fortune back as annual pin money. After all, the Darcys were one of Derbyshire's ancient families, and his connection to the Earl Fitzwilliam brought him into the orbit of the wealthiest and most glamorous names of the day. And while Darcy's ten or fifteen thousand pounds a year was dwarfed by the great fortunes of the day - Lord Fitzwilliam would net over a hundred thousand pounds this year from land and coal interests - it was a very good-sized fortune even by the standard of nobility.

"Er ... no," Darcy replied.

"How much then?"

Darcy shifted his shoulders as if his coat was suddenly too tight. "Her father does not have the wherewithal to make much of a contribution so I have chosen not ask it. It is too small to be worth the bother in any case, and this way no negotiation is required."

Hedworth stared blankly at Darcy, who was pretending to examine his pocket watch. It was ridiculous. Couples who married for affection regularly did so without minding some disparity in the money, but for the Bennets to bring nothing whatsoever? Who would provide for the younger children and the widow's jointure? If the bride provided nothing, then it would all come from debt charges on Pemberley. For the first time, Hedworth questioned Darcy's financial judgment.

At length, Darcy looked up. "Can you make it work, Hedworth? I understand no contribution from the Bennet family is needed to make it enforceable."

"That is likely correct, but I will write in a nominal sum just in case. Ten shillings or so." Hedworth said absentmindedly. He cleared his throat. "You are certain about this, Darcy? It will be a heavy burden on your estate. Without any contribution whatsoever from the bride's family, you will find you must greatly delay a number of your investment plans."

"I am aware of that."

"Is this what Mr. Bennet requested?" Hedworth frowned.

"We did not discuss it. He demanded to see the marriage settlements before he would provide his consent."

"He demanded to see ... " Hedworth's voice trailed off and went silent. He eyed Darcy thoughtfully. Darcy met his gaze directly, though his crossed arms and the band of colour across his cheekbones revealed he was not ignorant of Hedworth's thoughts.

"I know, Hedworth."

"I am glad to hear it. It is a relief to know you have not taken leave of your senses entirely," Hedworth said crisply.

"She is not like her family."

"Ah. So it is not only the father who dangles his daughter before gentlemen of large fortune like a hook loaded with bait?" Hedworth said sarcastically.

Darcy shrugged. "Her mother. But she is not part of it. I am certain of it."

"Are you? What makes you so certain?"
A look of anger played out over Darcy's face. "This is my intended we are discussing, Hedworth."

"And I am your legal advisor, not one of the fellows at your club. If my looking out for your interests upsets you, you know the way out." Seeing Darcy made no attempt to depart, Hedworth continued, "How long have you known her?"

"A little over two months. We have been friends for a month and I declared myself earlier this week."

Hedworth's eyelid twitched again. "And when do you plan to marry?"

"I am hoping in less than three weeks. And that is my idea entirely, Hedworth."

Hedworth said nothing, only sank back into his chair with a deep sigh, steepled his fingers together and closed his eyes as if in pain.

"I know, Hedworth," Darcy said again. "But this is different, I am sure of it."

Hedworth eyed Darcy through slits. "Different in what way? In the way George Wickham was different?" He immediately regretted his words at the frozen look on Darcy's face. "My apologies."

Darcy shrugged off Hedworth's apology and, indeed, the whole subject of Wickham. "My mind is made up."

"Have you spoken to Lord Fitzwilliam?"

"Not yet. He and my aunt do not return to Town with Georgiana until tomorrow. But it will change nothing." Darcy's jaw was set. "Will you help me? Tell me now if you will not and I will find someone else. I wish to return to Hertfordshire as soon as possible so I must have the documents drafted within two days."

Fool, Hedworth thought. Young people were fools. If the fortune their ancestors had spent centuries painstakingly amassing was not lost with the flip of a card, it was signed away at the stroke of a pen. For what? Love! A fool's dream. How long before Miss Tilney-Long discovered Wellesley-Pole brought nothing to the marriage but debauched diseases that defied even the claims of the quack doctors? Before Darcy caught his lady love criminally conversing with one of his footmen? Why could Darcy not just marry in the family or someone of his own kind? So much safer and better for all concerned. Hedworth blew his breath out in a long sigh.

"I will do it. Come back the day after next. And please talk this over with Lord Fitzwilliam. As for your instructions," he flicked the paper Darcy had given him with friendly contempt, "we will need to work on this."

Darcy smiled, satisfied that he would get his way. He had no desire to seek another solicitor. There was none as excellent or intimately versed in his financial interests as Hedworth.

They spent the next half hour haggling. By the end, Hedworth was by no means satisfied with Darcy's ability to be reasonable, but he was perfrect content with curbing some of his worst excesses. The visit ended amicably, with the two men discussing unrelated business matters.

"Two days?" Darcy inquired at the door.

"I will do my best," said Hedworth, privately resolving to be in no rush.

Darcy nodded. They shook hands and he departed
"Fool." Hedworth shook his head after the door shut on Darcy.

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NOTES:

1 Catherine Tilney-Long, aka The Wiltshire Heiress, came out in 1809 at the age of 19. With a fortune initially reported at £40,000 a year and revised upward to £90,000 a year in November 1811, she was widely considered England's hottest marriage property. Miss Laurence was a distant second, with a fortune of only £21,000 a year, as reported by newspapers in January 1812.

2 By late 1811, Catherine Tilney-Long had narrowed down her long list of suitors to the Royal Duke of Clarence, nearly 50 at the time and with a long-time mistress with whom he had had 10 children, and William Wellesley-Pole, the extravagant and dissolute nephew of the future Duke of Wellington. Wellesley-Pole's strategy for wooing involved challenging his main rivals to duels which, though largely harmless, impressed Miss Tilney-Long so much that she agreed to grant him her hand in November 1811 and married him in March 1812 at the age of 21. The marriage was an unfortunate one for Catherine, who saw her husband continue his life of debauchery and extravagance and infect her with STDs. Catherine died at age 36 in 1825, likely due to medical conditions caused by the STDs. Her husband lived until age 69, eventually inheriting the family's Anglo-Irish peerage to become the 4th Earl of Mornington. He did, however, lose a pitched custody battle for his eldest son -- the heir of what remained of Catherine's personal fortune -- to his sisters-in-law. It was a rare instance where the Courts were so appalled by a man's immoral and irreligious conduct that they were willing to strip him of custody.

3 According to historian F.M.L. Thompson, author of *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, the standard dowry for an aristocratic marriage of equals at this time was £30,000, with the lady receiving 5% of her funds back as pin-money. The required dowry and the expected pin-money was revised up or down depending on the relative status of the two families. Great beauty and personal charms or love matches would skew these numbers.

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If not for Jane, her head would surely have exploded from the strain by now, Elizabeth thought.

It had been nine days since Darcy left and she had not heard a word from him. The festive season had begun and Christmas had come and gone with no sign. What had he meant when he said he would return "soon"? The word bore a world of possible interpretations.

Her father was no assistance. Whenever she attempted to broach the subject with him to see if Darcy had dropped any hints in their brief meeting, Mr. Bennet would look at her reproachfully, retreat into his study and lock the door.

Similarly, Bingley had no information to offer, or at least none that Jane could discover making gentle inquiries without divulging confidential information. It appeared Darcy kept his own counsel at all times, even from his closest friends. From what Jane could determine, Bingley did not even know of their engagement. If not for the fact that Jane confirmed that Elizabeth had told her of its existence, Elizabeth might have concluded that she had dreamt it all up.

By the second day, Elizabeth had resorted to surreptitiously scanning the newspapers, past and present, for a clue of Darcy's whereabouts. Thankfully Mrs. Bennet considered it nothing out of the ordinary to see her second daughter poring over newspapers, even if it was an activity she did not approve of. She had never understood Elizabeth's interest in current affairs. In her estimation, neighbourhood gossip offered all the knowledge that could be desired of the world.

For the first two days, Elizabeth found little of use, although there were plenty of snippets of Darcy's uncle's family, whose activities were the subject of frequent report. She learnt that the Earl Fitzwilliam had recently held a hunt at his seat in Northamptonshire; that the Earl's heir, Viscount Milton, had opened a race on his behalf with the announcement of a generous new purse; and that the Countess was co-sponsoring a musical fete for charity. Perhaps Darcy had gone to Northamptonshire to wait upon his family, she thought. He had been in Hertfordshire so long that surely he must wish to see them.

Elizabeth's theory was dashed on the third day, when the Morning Chronicle announced that the Earl and Countess Fitzwilliam were among the fashionable arrivals to Town. The Courier and Evening Gazette further informed her that they had attended the Countess of Buckinghamshire's evening concert the very night of their arrival. But it was not until the next morning that she was finally rewarded with a news item from a different newspaper reporting that "Mr. Darcy, Esq., nephew of the Earl Fitzwilliam," was among the distinguished gentry who had attended the concert.

"Oh! Well, he likely went to see his aunt and uncle. Or perhaps it was an invitation he had accepted earlier and felt unable to rescind," she told herself. "Most likely I will see him tomorrow."

Tomorrow arrived, as did Bingley, but to Elizabeth's frustration and disappointment, Darcy was still nowhere to be seen.

"I have not heard from him," Bingley replied to her carefully casual inquiry, giving her a curious glance and looking as if he could say more if she chose to ask it. "But I am sure I will very soon. Darcy left his books behind, which is a sure sign that he will return shortly."

Elizabeth, though dying of curiosity, was not yet prepared to broach such a delicate subject. She smiled brightly and launched into a new topic.
She was sorry not to have indulged her curiosity further the next morning, however, when the *Chronicle* arrived to inform her that Darcy had attended a ball given by Lady Tessaugh from ten o'clock the previous night until daylight the next day, at which her marriageable daughters had been resplendent in white and silver gowns trimmed with Brussels lace. She was further displeased to read that Mr. Darcy, Esq. had been among the fashionables at Mrs. Lang's *olla-podridical* the evening following. What was Darcy doing going to gay balls and parties while she languished in Hertfordshire waiting for him to complete the marriage settlement so they could obtain Mr. Bennet's consent and announce their betrothal? And what was an *olla-podridical* anyway?

"I shall think of him no more, Jane," she seethed after she had returned from a long tramp around the countryside, which had given her ample time to reflect upon Darcy's shortcomings. "He will be but a dim memory in the recesses of my mind, a ditty I sang for a few weeks and moved on from, a momentarily charming, but ultimately forgettable, story in a penny pamphlet distributed door to door."

"Lizzy, you must be patient," Jane replied. She had met her sister a ways from the house and intended to walk back with her. "I am sure it will be well. Charles says that Mr. Darcy is the most honourable man he knows. He must have good reason to take as long as he has. You know our Uncle Phillips says that marriage settlements may be difficult and complicated."

"Your faith in humanity and young men is admirable but unjustified. Mr. Darcy is welcome to take all the time he needs, but in such case, it behooved him to keep me apprised of the developments. Complete silence in the face of such uncertainty is unpardonable. Oh! Papa was right. I regret that I ever laid eyes on that man!"

Jane's response was lost in momentary distraction by an express rider coming up to Longbourn, riding hard as if his life depended on it. From a distance, they watched as the rider slithered off his mount, saluted and presented a packet to their housekeeper and was immediately off again. Elizabeth's heart lurched with fear and hope. Was it news from Darcy? Or had something happened to him? Surely anything was better than being left in this limbo of uncertainty.

"Jane …"

"I know, dearest. Let us go back."

They hurried back to the house, although too slowly for Elizabeth's taste. There were voices coming from the drawing room and they directed their footsteps in that direction. Their mother and younger sisters were all there, engaged in their usual activities, and Elizabeth and Jane sat down and joined them. Happily, Mrs. Bennet was already quizzing Hill, their housekeeper, about the express.

"It was another express from Mr. Darcy, ma'am. For the master."

"What can he want now?" Mrs. Bennet asked. "I will never understand why gentlemen make such a fuss over books."

Elizabeth threw her mother a look of incredulity at this comment. "Mr. Darcy has been corresponding with Papa?"

"Oh! Mr. Bennet said something about charging Mr. Darcy with a commission to locate a first edition for him. But the expense! Expresses and letters every day! Is it any wonder that we could not have new bonnets this month? Spending money like water! Lizzy, where are you going?"

Elizabeth had jumped to her feet and run out the door. She came to a halt at the door to Mr. Bennet's
study adjoining the library and knocked loudly.

"Papa!"

"Go away, Lizzy, I am busy."

"Papa, what you are busy with concerns me! Please open the door!" Elizabeth tried the knob, to no avail. She put her ear to the door and was relieved when she heard her father approach. He opened it and sighed when he saw her eager face.

"Well, well, come in, child. Close the door behind you." Mr. Bennet returned to his desk, where several rolls of expensive parchment were laid out. They were covered in an elegant script and weighted down by various objects and curiosities. He sat down heavily.

"Is that the marriage settlement?" Elizabeth asked eagerly

"Yes, yes. Your Mr. Darcy has been very active. You can tell him when you see him next that his solicitor's prose is horrific, nowhere near as interesting as Greek poetry. I have half a mind to send it all back yet again and tell them to start over."

"Papa, how long have you been corresponding with Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"Ever since he left, Lizzy. He is a most tiresome man. He will not stop badgering me. Letters every day! And drafts of the deeds! All of them requiring action and correction. And if I do not respond immediately, he sends more letters! I am sure I irritated his solicitor exceedingly with my insistence on more periods. But the man would use run-on sentences …"

"Papa. Are you telling me that Mr. Darcy has written every day and you did not tell me?"

"Why should I tell you, Lizzy? The letters are not addressed to you."

Elizabeth took a deep, angry breath. "Papa," she said sternly. "Tell me the truth. Did Mr. Darcy give you any messages for me? Or mention me at all?"

"Not in any significant way, Lizzy."

"Not in any significant way! What did he say?"

"He asked after you, of course. And sought permission to write. Oh, and suggested that he and his solicitor be received at Longbourn. But I would have none of that. What good would it do? A letter is just as well, and as to a private correspondence, I cannot think you would have anything of great interest to say to each other. 'Dearest, loveliest et cetera, you are the most et cetera, et cetera.' It is all so depressingly familiar and unoriginal."

"Papa!" said Elizabeth furiously. "Do you not think I would have cared to know such things?"

"Now, now," Mr. Bennet patted Elizabeth's hand. "I did not wish to bother you with such silly details. And" he looked sternly at his favourite daughter over his spectacles, "I saw no harm in testing your patience and resolve."

Argh! Elizabeth screamed internally. She suddenly understood why her mother so often demanded her smelling salts. It was more ladylike to take a moment while pretending to pass out than to jump up and down violently on the spot as she would have liked to do.

"I do not know why you must be married in any case, Lizzy," her father continued. "Jane's marriage
to Bingley puts the Bennet family on firm financial footing. If we need more, you can always sue Mr. Darcy for breach of promise. It seems the courts will give you a thousand or two with scarcely any evidence at all. I wager with his letters to me we can demand at least five thousand."

"Mr. Darcy has not breached any promises," Elizabeth said through gritted teeth. "Nor have I. Nor will we. I do not know why you are opposed to my marrying Mr. Darcy, Papa, but I assure you that it will happen."

"Yes, there does not seem to be any avoiding it now," said Mr. Bennet sadly. "Not when you both are so determined," He heard the crunch of horses' hooves outside of the house and said, "That must be your Uncle Philips now. He has made good time. I sent the footman after him to help me review these deeds. Perhaps he will enjoy reading them, since he writes very similarly. Simply awful. Will you excuse me, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth stalked out of her father's study, intent on seeking her coat and bonnet and walking away her ire at her father and remorse at having doubted Darcy. Perhaps she would run up and down Oakham Mount several times, that always worked. Five times. No, ten. She briefly registered Hill turning the corner before she strode past her into the hall and ran into a large, firm object.

"Oof!" she cried.

"Elizabeth!" Somebody caught her by the arms to keep her from falling backwards.

"Oh!" she cried, looking up at Darcy. He was smiling at her and handsomer than ever. His hair looked recently cut and his cheeks were ruddy from the ride in the cold.

"I know I sent a messenger just this morning, but I could not wait any longer and your father would tell me nothing so I came to see for myself. You are well?" His eyes eagerly took in her flashing eyes and flushed cheeks.

She gave him a brilliant smile and placed her own hands on his forearms. "I am fine, now that you are here."

"Lizzy!" came the unwelcome sound of her mother's voice from somewhere in the recesses of the house. "Lizzy? Where are you? Lizzy! I have not finished speaking to you!"

Mrs. Bennet's voice increased in volume, indicating she was on the move and approaching. But Elizabeth was in no mood to subject either herself or Darcy to the freaks and eccentricities of another of her parents. She pulled Darcy's hand and he followed her willingly down the hall.

"Lizzy! Where are you? Lizzy!"

Mrs. Bennet was gaining as Elizabeth paused at two diverging hallways and waivered which way to take. One led to the stairs and up to the bed-chambers. She led Darcy down the opposite hall.

"Quick!" she cried as they reached the door of a small room. She stepped in and pulled Darcy behind her. She gestured to him to close it, and he did so.

They were in the butler's pantry, a long narrow room primarily used for housing Mrs. Bennet's large collection of plates and linens. Slivers of light gleamed from under and over the wooden door and kept the room from falling into blackness. Elizabeth held her breath as she listened to her mother's voice with an ear to the door. It grew in volume, crescendoed just outside their door with an exasperated "LIZZY! Where is that girl!" then receded as Mrs. Bennet continued down the hall.

As her mother's voice faded into silence, Elizabeth turned from the door to find Darcy immediately
behind her.

"Elizabeth?" Darcy said softly. He was standing so close he loomed right over her and she could feel the whisper of his breath in her hair.

"I am so sorry," she stammered, looking up to try to discern his expression in the darkness. "My father said nothing whatever about what he had been doing. Had I known, I certainly would have found a way to send you word. Please believe me, I care nothing about any settlements ...

"There is no need to apologize. It is nothing, nothing at all, and would be naught if I was not so eager for us to be wed, my dearest, loveliest, most desirable Elizabeth..."

Leaning with her back against the pantry door, she dropped her eyes at the thrill of his words and then, remembering she had cover of darkness, looked up at him again. He was even closer than before, leaning down with his hand planted on the wall beside her and his lips almost touching hers.

"Elizabeth?" he asked again.

"Yes, Mr. Darcy," she sighed.

In an instant she was in his arms.

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In Mr. Bennet's study, Mr. Philips shook his head slowly as he sat back in his chair after poring over the documents that covered Mr. Bennet's desk.

"It is all in order."

"You are sure? Look again."

"I am not going to look again. This has gone beyond ridiculous. The content is irreproachable and they have made every change you demanded, right down to the correct shade of paper. You cannot ask for further changes. I doubt you can afford my legal bill as it is, and it is a good thing Mr. Darcy is so wealthy because he will feel considerably less so when he sees the size of his. At some point you must accept the inevitable."

Mr. Bennet frowned in reply.

"Why are you so opposed, Bennet?" Mr. Philips inquired of his brother-in-law, who had begun pacing on the rug before the fire. "It is an excellent match. An unbelievable match. Think what it will mean for Elizabeth and all your family. I know you will miss her, but you must not be so selfish."

Mr. Bennet's frown deepened. "It is not selfishness. She is acting too hastily. What does she know of being the wife of a member of the ton?"

Mr. Philips shrugged. "She will adapt to her husband's circumstances as other ladies have. I doubt that will prove difficult. It is usually privation and not luxury that one must work to become used to."

"I am not talking of wealth and luxury."

Before Mr. Bennet could elaborate on his meaning, a knock sounded on the door and the butler opened it to inform him that Sir William Lucas and Lady Lucas had called with their daughters and Mr. Collins. Mrs. Philips was also with them.
"I am sorry, Bennet, but they were all at my house when your summons arrived," said Mr. Philips regretfully. "They are likely drawn by the scent of news. Mrs. Philips has been suspicious all week with your constant messages."

"Perhaps they believe we have hatched a plot to bar the entail." Mr. Bennet pulled a sly face. Both men chuckled as they went out to greet the newly arrived callers.

The party was standing in the hallway with the Bennet ladies, chattering and divesting themselves of their cloaks and bonnets and gloves and scarves. Bingley was present as well, with Jane at his side. Judging from his lack of out-dress, it appeared that he had arrived earlier.

Nobody noticed the little maidservant hovering uncertainly in the hall, nor when she finally sidled up to Mrs. Bennet and pulled on her sleeve to whisper timidly in her ear. Nobody noticed, that is, until they heard Mrs. Bennet's reaction.

"Lizzy and Mr. Darcy are kissing in the butler's pantry!" Mrs. Bennet shrieked at the top of her lungs.

The room erupted into noise and exclamation. "Mr. Darcy!" "Lizzy?" "The butler's pantry!" "I knew it!"

Mrs. Bennet, surprisingly, was the first to recover her wits. She turned and rushed down the hall with the rest of the crowd hard on her heels. Mr. Bennet, who had been situated the farthest from the hall leading to the butler's pantry, found himself lost in the general hullabaloo, relegated to the back of the crowd.

The pantry door was slightly ajar. Mrs. Bennet flung it wide open to reveal a narrow room lined with shelves with a long table the sole piece of furniture. Not an eye noticed the gleaming plates lining the walls, however; they were drawn to the spectacle at the centre of the room.

There Elizabeth, seated on the table, had her arms wrapped around Mr. Darcy's neck, her knees planted firmly on either side of his hips and her lips fused to his. His arms were around her in a crushing embrace, one wrapped around her back and the other around her waist. But as the mesmerized crowd watched, his hand moved smoothly to the side of her breast, lingered for a long moment, then gave it an unmistakable caress.

The assembled party gasped, then, at Elizabeth's pleasurable shiver and murmur of approval, the women sighed - except for Lydia, who giggled.

At the sound, Elizabeth tore her lips from Darcy's and looked around confusedly. Darcy merely moved his eloquent devotions from her lips to her neck. "Papa?" Her glazed eyes focused on the shocked and angry face of Mr. Bennet, who had finally managed to push himself to the front of the crowd, then the avid gazes of family and guests. "Oh!"

Her exclamation - or perhaps the push on his shoulders - roused Darcy at last and he too looked up. When he saw the sea of faces, he released Elizabeth abruptly and jumped back, striking the shelf and causing the plates to rattle. Everybody held their breath, but the shelf did not topple.

For a torturous second, silence reigned as those assembled strove to assume the expression they deemed most appropriate for the occasion. Darcy's warred between extreme haughtiness at this assault on his privacy and mortification at being caught in such ridiculous circumstances - a butler's pantry! Elizabeth, her cheeks afame, observed the utter blankness of surprise on her mother's face and saw the humour in the situation.
"Congratulate me, Mama!" she sang. "Mr. Darcy and I are engaged!"

"Engaged!" Mrs. Bennet's blank face flowered into delight. "Engaged to Mr. Darcy!"

"It is true," Mr. Philips broke in helpfully. "I have just reviewed the marriage settlement. Which is very generous and excellently drafted, if I may say, Mr. Darcy. But then, I never saw anything wrong with it from the first."

"Marriage settlement!" Mrs. Bennet's face was now a fountain of joy. "A marriage settlement from Mr. Darcy!"

"EVERYBODY OUT," said Mr. Bennet authoritatively. "Return to the drawing room, if you please. Lizzy, my study. Now. Mr. Darcy, we will leave you to - ahem - sort yourself out. My butler will be at your disposal should you need him." He eyed Darcy's ruffled hair and cravat-less neck - bearing marks of his daughter's enthusiasm - with distaste. He chose not to look any lower.

Mr. Bennet held the door for Elizabeth to exit the pantry, then swung it shut on Darcy. The rest of the group reluctantly dissipated, headed back in the direction of the drawing room. Lydia, almost prostrate with giggles, was holding onto Maria Lucas's arm for support. "Did you see what was in Mr. Darcy's trousers? I hope he does not pop a button!"

"Lydia!" yelped Jane in protest. Beside her, Bingley emitted a sound somewhere between a whinny and a bray, which he immediately covered in coughing at Jane's pointed glance.

Upon entry into his study, Mr. Bennet took up the well-worn path on the rug before the fire. Elizabeth remained standing just inside the door looking only partially penitent.

"You are forcing my hand, Lizzy."

"I apologize, Papa."

"What were you thinking? Or perhaps," he said coldly, stopping his pacing to glare, "you were not thinking at all."

Elizabeth lifted her chin a fraction. "To tell you the truth, Papa, I am upset with you."

"Upset with me? What have you to be upset with?"

"At your abominable treatment of Mr. Darcy! He has behaved honourably to our family. You had no right to keep him in Town under the guise of demanding revisions to the settlement."

"He told you about that? I am surprised. It did not look as if either of you were greatly interested in conversation." Mr. Bennet said sarcastically.

Elizabeth flushed lightly, but with anger, not shame. "He told me a little. And I heard what my Uncle Philips said. There was nothing wrong with the settlement. You had no right to toy with his feelings so. Nor mine, for that matter, Papa. Our hearts are not yours to make sport of."

He looked slightly ashamed. "That was not my intent, Lizzy. I only wished to give you more time to make sure you are making the right choice."

"Papa, I have made my choice."

"Yes, you have now. Considering the display you have made of yourself, it will be nigh impossible to salvage your reputation if you decide not to proceed. But I will support you if you choose to break
it off, Lizzy. We need not consider what the world thinks."

"Papa, you are not listening to me! I do not wish to break it off. I have chosen Mr. Darcy. I wish to be his wife."

His face was dismayed. "Are you completely certain, Lizzy? A mistake of this nature has lifelong consequences for your happiness, which no amount of wealth or ease will alloy. Believe me, I know of what I speak, my child."

At this, some of her anger ebbed, replaced by sadness. Although her father was wont to make sly jibes at her mother's expense, he seldom alluded to his marriage or his unhappiness in it with any seriousness. The fact that he did so here spoke to the depth of his feeling on the matter.

"I appreciate your concern, Papa," she said softly. "But it does not follow that because you made a mistake I also will make one."

"If you do not, it will be a lucky chance," he said. "What do you know of Mr. Darcy in truth? You have not seen him except in Hertfordshire. You have no idea how he is in his own circle, amongst his own set, or how he will treat you in it."

"Considering your disinclination for Town, Papa, that would seem an insurmountable bar to your daughters being married at all, unless it be to someone who has never set foot outside of our corner of Hertfordshire. Were you thinking to marry us off to shopkeepers' sons or was it one of Charlotte's younger brothers who caught your fancy?" Elizabeth said ironically.

Mr. Bennet would not be diverted into witticisms. "You know of what I speak, Lizzy." He sat down with a sigh in a chair by the fire.

Elizabeth, serious again, followed him to the fire and sat down in the chair opposite. "Papa," she said gently.

"Yes, Lizzy," he said without lifting his chin from his chest or his contemplation from the fire.

"Papa, you always say that young women are perfectly able to make their own choices so long as they are willing to bear responsibility for it."

"You have inverted the proposition, my dear. What I always say is that a young woman who refuses to bear responsibility should not be permitted to make any choices." Mr. Bennet's voice was dry. The most common occasion for his statement was when Lydia had wasted her pocket money on some foolishness, then returned to Mrs. Bennet asking for a second, third or even fourth helping of the same. His remonstrances with his wife notwithstanding, the money was always forthcoming, even if done in secret in Mr. Bennet's absence.

"But the corollary is true, is it not?" Elizabeth persisted. "I am prepared to bear the responsibility, therefore I should be able to make a choice. And I am, Papa," she said. "I am prepared to bear the responsibility of my choice. If I choose Mr. Darcy and it is a poor choice, I will find a way to be content. So it should be my choice."

Mr. Bennet looked at his daughter with love and regret. He knew that sometimes, no matter the strength of the resolve, one could not be content. But he supposed it meant something that his daughter was determined to try. And he knew it was too late already. It was plain that his little Lizzy had transferred her affections. If he had been a more attentive father, he would have seen it weeks ago, regardless of her protestations of friendship. She was his no longer, not in the way she had been. The greatest share of her heart belonged to Darcy now.
He patted her on the hand and smiled, his eyes suspiciously bright. "Yes. Yes, Lizzy. It is your choice. If this is what you choose, then very well, I give you my blessing. You may be married when you wish."

Elizabeth smiled at her father, tears in her own eyes. She was about to lean over and kiss his cheek when a knock sounded at the door. They both stood up and surreptitiously dabbed their eyes. Then Mr. Bennet told the knocker to enter. In stepped Darcy, his cravat neatly tied with the same knot as Mr. Bennet's, with no trace of his former dishabille.

"Mr. Bennet," said he in formal tones. "Your solicitor has made it clear that the marriage articles meet your full approval. Considering that this was your sole expressed objection, and given the nature of the encounter witnessed by yourself and other prominent members of this neighbourhood, I must insist that you provide your consent so Miss Elizabeth and I may be married immediately."

Mr. Bennet shot his daughter a look full of ironic amusement. She hid a smile and looked at the rug.

"Mr. Darcy," Mr. Bennet replied equally formally, though with a twinkle in his eye. "I cannot withstand the eloquence of your arguments. Very well; you have my consent to wed."

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Betrothal

Wife and servant are the same,
But only differ in the name:
For when that fatal knot is ty'd,
Which nothing, nothing can divide:
When she the word obey has said,
And man by law supreme has made,
Then all that's kind is laid aside,
And nothing left but state and pride:

- Lady Mary Chudleigh, "To the Ladies"

With Mr. Bennet's consent secured, the wedding was scheduled to take place in eleven days, shortly after the end of holiday festivities and on the same day as Bingley and Jane's wedding. Darcy had had the foresight to secure a license for this purpose during his time in Town. But if Elizabeth thought she had the victory over her father, she soon learnt her error.

It seemed to Elizabeth that Mr. Bennet had decided to make up his years of indolence by watching his daughters like a hawk. After the incident in the butler's pantry, Elizabeth and Jane found that they - but especially Elizabeth - were never left alone in the company of their betrotheds for more than a moment or two.

If the heavy visiting that occurred every holiday season did not produce the necessary chaperonage, Mr. Bennet proved quite willing to provide it himself. He now conducted his reading and scholarly activities in the drawing room, the music room, the sitting room - anywhere the happy couples attempted to land themselves. If they went outside, Mr. Bennet insisted that they be accompanied by one of their younger sisters, typically Mary, who could be trusted to sermonize over any excessive display of affection before reporting it to their father.

It was easy for Bingley and Jane, Elizabeth thought. After a day in constant company, Bingley shrugged off constraint and began to express his ardour for Jane quite openly. Jane initially resisted, but it was not within her gentle nature to deny Bingley much of anything, and soon the pair could be found holding hands, snuggling on the couch and even kissing under the mistletoe liberally distributed throughout Longbourn and the other houses they happened to visit (thanks to Lydia and Kitty and the generous presents Bingley made to them). Nobody minded too much; a loud "ahem!" from Mr. Bennet when they went too far was enough to make Bingley moderate his conduct for the remainder of the hour.

It was different for herself and Darcy. For one thing Darcy was not so demonstrative. In company he rarely did more than smile at her. And, while she enjoyed knowing that with only a flirtatious glance she could force him to flee to the window under pretense of admiring the view until his blood cooled, it was a poor substitute for his kisses. But Darcy had become adept at avoiding mistletoe after being caught by Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Philips under a cleverly hidden sprig. Elizabeth knew that her mother and aunt meant well, but whenever either of them affected to express their admiration for his person and figure, they must be vulgar. She still writhed at the memory of it.

To top off the season of frustration, Miss Bingley had returned to Netherfield. Elizabeth did not know why. The Hursts had decided to remain in Town and would not be attending the weddings. There was no need for them to. None of those most concerned had any taste for finery or parade. Mrs. Bennet's imprecations notwithstanding, the weddings were to be quiet affairs attended only by the requisite witnesses, followed by a breakfast at Longbourn for any friends and family who wished
to say their last good-byes before she journeyed north.

Elizabeth had a glimmer of an answer for Miss Bingley's presence when Bingley brought his sister to Longbourn with him on his and Darcy's next visit. The men were to go shooting that day, leaving the women to entertain Miss Bingley.

"Miss Eliza, I am so happy to hear about you and Mr. Darcy. I wish to congratulate you particularly. You have caught a prize that many far more beautiful and accomplished women have sought."

"Thank you, Miss Bingley, I do appreciate your sentiments," Elizabeth said politely. But she shot Jane a look full of triumph and amusement. Elizabeth had wagered Jane that Miss Bingley would not be able to contain her ire at the match and Jane now owed her a crown.

The look did not escape Miss Bingley. She added, viciously, "I do hope you do not encounter difficulty maintaining his interest. These rich, desirable men are bored so easily."

Elizabeth said cheerfully, "We seem to be of like mind, Miss Bingley. I once taxed Mr. Darcy with being so bored by the unceasing flattery that must fall to one of his circumstances that he fell for the first woman who treated him ill. He did not deny it."

Miss Bingley changed the subject.

It was only the first volley in Miss Bingley's campaign, however. A day later, the Longbourn party received an invitation for Jane and Elizabeth to drink tea with Miss Bingley while the gentlemen were shooting. Sir Theodore Russell, his son and daughter were to visit Netherfield and, as Miss Bingley took pains to inform them, she was so looking forward to introducing the pretty and accomplished Miss Russell to her new sister and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was not eager to go. She knew that her chances at being left alone with Darcy would be even more reduced than ever on Miss Bingley's ground and under her malevolent eye. And the thought of re-encountering Miss Russell did little to fill Elizabeth with joy.

She was pleasantly surprised, then, to find the Russells to be a charming family, well-spoken and clearly fond of each other. Sir Theodore was an amiable gentleman and an indulgent father. His daughter, who fell somewhere between Jane and Elizabeth in age, was warm and friendly. Mr. Russell also cut a fine figure and had an air of easy, careless confidence.

The ladies met Miss Russell first, as the gentlemen had departed much earlier for their shooting party. Her first words to Elizabeth after introductions were to express her pleasure at hearing of their pending nuptials.

"Mr. Darcy seems very happy, Miss Elizabeth. And it is quite romantic how thrilled he looks when anybody speaks your name," she said with complete sincerity.

Elizabeth blushed with pleasure and thanked her. "You and your father knew Mr. Darcy's family well, I understand?"

"Yes. Our fathers had been friends for much of their lives and Mr. Darcy - his father, I mean - would bring his family for a visit sometimes. Our grounds are well-known for excellent game."

"So you knew Mr. Darcy when he was quite young?" Elizabeth inquired, curious at the idea of Darcy as a child.

"There was frequent intercourse between the families when I was young, but I have little memory of
it. By the time I was old enough to be much aware, our families had lost touch due to the sad coincidence of both of our mothers' passings. We did not see them again until Mr. Darcy was a young man. I remember that visit well."

She smiled consciously and Elizabeth inquired eagerly about what had made the visit so memorable.

Miss Russell chuckled. "It was only memorable to me. I doubt Mr. Darcy has any memory of it at all. I was only ten years old and he sixteen, but when he stepped out of the carriage I was certain he was the handsomest boy I had ever laid eyes on - that is, until I saw his friend, who had accompanied the family. I was quite in a quandary as to whom I loved best! But neither of them noticed me at all - not until one day I was so caught up in spying on them that I tripped and stumbled down a long set of stone stairs and scraped my hand quite badly. I remember my brother was disgusted with my noise, but Mr. Darcy was quite kind and bound up my hand before handing me off to my governess. After that, my heart was entirely his. I believe I kept that handkerchief for years."

Elizabeth laughed at this story, though she felt a twinge of jealousy.

Miss Russell saw her look and said cheerfully, "You need not worry, Miss Elizabeth. I believe to Mr. Darcy I have never been anything but the troublesome child he had to put up with on visits. And my father warned me years ago that I should probably not raise my eyes to him."

"Why was that?" Elizabeth asked.

"Oh! Simply that he was expected to make a brilliant match. After the Earl Fitzwilliam's immediate heir, Mr. Darcy was considered the best means for another family to ally themselves with the Fitzwilliams because he was already master of his estate at a young age and known to be a great favourite with them. The baronetage and my twenty-five thousand pounds was simply insufficient inducement." She laughed gaily.

And her one thousand pounds? Elizabeth thought.

Miss Russell must have realized what she had just said because she was suddenly covered in confusion. She stammered hurriedly, "N-not that title and fortune are the only things that matter, if two people are particularly well suited."

Elizabeth smiled to reassure her that she took no offence. An elegant tea arrived and was presided over with ceremony by Miss Bingley. As they sampled the delicate confectionary, Miss Bingley turned the conversation to Miss Russell, asking her how her music was coming along.

"Pretty well," she said modestly. "I have been working with a new singing master this year and he has me studying the Italians."

"You must sing for us when the gentlemen return. Mr. Darcy has spoken very highly of your abilities," Miss Bingley said, shooting Elizabeth a meaningful glance as she did so. "Not so long ago he mentioned that he knew only six accomplished women. I feel certain that you must be among that number."

Miss Russell disclaimed this, but readily agreed to sing for them.

She was indeed highly accomplished, Elizabeth thought an hour later, when the gentlemen joined them and Miss Russell took up her performance. Her voice was strong and clear as she sang an Italian aria to her own accompaniment.

Elizabeth stole a glance at Darcy, seated at her side. He was listening with keen attention and a smile of enjoyment. When he sensed her scrutiny, he turned to her and whispered, "You understand it?"
"It is quite an old piece, by Bononcini, which can be sung by a man or a woman. Per La Gloria D'Adorarvi means 'For the glory of adoring you.' A lover sings of loving with no hope of return. 'Loving I will suffer / But always I will love you.'"

It was an appropriate choice if Miss Russell harboured any lingering feelings toward Darcy, Elizabeth thought wryly. She noticed that Miss Russell did glance at Darcy as she sang. But then, she looked at all of them at intervals as any performer might. Perhaps it meant nothing.

Darcy had turned his eyes back to Miss Russell, but Elizabeth felt his hand close over hers. She smiled and relaxed in her seat.

The closing strains came, followed by warm applause. Elizabeth clapped enthusiastically, though she regretted having to take her hand from Darcy's to do so. Then Miss Bingley said,

"Miss Elizabeth? Will you favour us with a song?" She addressed the rest of the company and said, with a mendacious smile, "Miss Elizabeth is considered the brightest light that society can offer in these parts."

"Oh! I did not come prepared for song, Miss Bingley. And after Miss Russell's performance, I fear you will be greatly disappointed." It was clear to Elizabeth that Miss Bingley wished to humiliate her and perhaps all of Meryton by putting her limited talents on display after the accomplished Miss Russell.

Sir Theodore and Bingley were warm in rejecting this argument. Jane gave her an encouraging smile and Darcy merely looked at her and said, "Please."

"I am not sure what to sing, but I will look," she said. She rose and went over to the pianoforte. Miss Russell graciously relinquished the seat and took her time folding up her music, interested in seeing what Elizabeth would select.

Elizabeth leafed through the selection. Arias, she could not sing an aria, not without a great deal of practice and careful selection to verify that the high notes were within her range.

"There is Thomas Moore here, if you prefer," said Miss Russell, seeing her hesitation. She pulled out a copy of Irish Melodies from the bottom of the pile. Elizabeth brightened. She knew the songs well, as they were frequently sung at local gatherings. However, the music had only recently been acquired by Longbourn and she was not confident in her playing ability.

"Would you like me to accompany you?" Miss Russell offered. "I know most of them well." Elizabeth accepted gratefully and they leafed through until they found a song Elizabeth liked that Miss Russell could play.

By the time they were done, the party was watching them eagerly. She smiled at Miss Russell to signal her to begin and she did so.

Miss Russell was an even better musician than a singer, Elizabeth realized. Her fingering was sure and confident, she had layered in additional harmonic counterpoint to the arrangement, and her phraseology was wonderful. Elizabeth had never before heard anyone make better use of the dynamic range of the pianoforte. She opened her lips, eager to add her voice.

\begin{quote}
From this hour the pledge is given, \\
From this hour my soul is thine: \\
Come what will, from earth of heaven,
\end{quote}
Weal or woe, thy fate be mine.

Freed of the need to worry about reading the music and buoyed by Miss Russell's skillful accompaniment, Elizabeth gave full voice to the meaning behind the words. They were good, she knew. Every face but Miss Bingley's was rapt, and Darcy's eyes were fixed on her with a dark intensity. She smiled and sang to him.

Tho' the sea, where thou embarkest,
Offers now no friendly shore,
Light may come where all looks darkest,
Hope hath life when life seems o'er.

And, of those past ages dreaming,
When glory decked thy brow,
Oft I fondly think, tho' seeming
So fallen and clouded now,

Thou'lt again break forth, all beaming,-
None so bright, so blest as thou!

When they finished, the room erupted in applause.

"Bravo!" cried Sir Theodore, rising to his feet, followed quickly by the gentlemen and Jane and lastly and reluctantly, Miss Bingley. "Miss Elizabeth, I believe you and my daughter must give a concert."

Elizabeth smiled in thanks and turned to Miss Russell. "You play wonderfully, Miss Russell. I felt as if the piano was singing to me."

Miss Russell laughed. "Miss Elizabeth, I might say the same to you. You have such a lovely, expressive voice."

"I think you may have brought it out with your music," she smiled. They parted mutual friends and Elizabeth resumed her seat by Darcy.

As their hostess evinced no further desire to pursue music as entertainment, the party settled down into conversation about the subject. They spoke of operas and musical concerts and performers. Jane and Elizabeth had had only occasional experience with these, so their contribution was limited mainly to listening and asking questions. Miss Bingley, by contrast, had very fashionable opinions, which she made sure to impress upon the party. But it was clear that the Russells and Darcy had experienced music from a different perspective entirely, that of art patron.

"I saw Signora Catalini again," said Miss Bingley. "She is magnificent, such a range! Now that is a real singer."

"Do you think so?" said Sir Theodore. "I confess, she is not entirely to my taste. Her voice is impressive but I do not like too much coloratura. I prefer a simple song that speaks to the heart. As Miss Elizabeth here graced us with." He smiled at Elizabeth and she smiled back, causing Darcy to beam at Sir Theodore and Miss Bingley to frown.

"Papa far preferred Signora L'Orfeo to Signora Catalina," said Miss Russell. "We were so pleased with her at Lady Fitzwilliam's musical fete. We talked about her the entire carriage ride home. How did it turn out in the end, Mr. Darcy?"

"Very well, thank you. They exceeded their goal. I am sure you have received Lady Fitzwilliam's
card, but if you have not yet, allow me to pass on her sentiments of gratitude for your very generous subscription." Darcy explained to Jane and Elizabeth that his aunt had co-sponsored a concert with the Duchess of Buckinghamshire to raise money to build an infirmary in a hardship area of Northamptonshire.

"What is Signora L'Orfeo like in person, Darcy?" Mr. Russell inquired. He was a fashionable young man of about five- or six-and-twenty. "I was sorry we could not stay for the supper party, but my father was insistent that we go."

"You must forgive an old man his need for rest, Tom," Sir Theodore replied.

"Of course, Papa," Mr. Russell smiled fondly at Sir Theodore, then turned back to Darcy. "And yet there is no doubt I felt deprived. She looked like quite a beauty from my vantage point. I did prefer her in that to Signora Catalini, although some call her a beauty. What did you think, Darcy?"

"Very handsome," Darcy said. "Her English is excellent as well. Superior to my Italian. She found my accent quite amusing and teased me rather unmercifully over it."

"Did she?" said Bingley in surprise. "But Darcy, you are so fluent in Italian. I have heard you recite long speeches as if they were mere trifles."

"It is one thing to read Italian and mouth the words, and another thing entirely to converse with a native speaker, Bingley. No, I fear Signora L'Orfeo had ample reason to enjoy herself at my expense."

"And women do particularly enjoy themselves when it is at the expense of an attractive young man," Miss Russell smiled.

"Ah! Do not tell Lord Breton that!" said Mr. Russell. "She has reached an understanding with him, did you hear? He would not be happy to know that his lovely amore caro is already surveying the field. But how can she help it? It is really too bad when a beautiful woman must accept the protection of an old man when there are so many young and handsome ones about." He smiled consciously.

"As if she would consider you, Tom," his sister teased.

"She would if I had Darcy's means, as she so amply demonstrated at the concert," he grinned. "Well, one day, eh, Papa?"

"Not if I can help it, Tom. I will not soon forget that you called Lord Breton an 'old man' when he is at least ten years my junior," Sir Theodore smiled. "No, I believe revenge requires me to keep you on a tight rein, far from the expensive habits of opera singers."

"What about an actress, then, Papa," his son laughed. "Surely you would not begrudge me an actress. I hear they have more modest desires. Is it true, Darcy?"

Darcy, who had smirked at Sir Theodore's words, suddenly coloured at Mr. Russell's.

Miss Bingley, who had been following the conversation with avid interest, smiled maliciously. "I wonder what Lord Breton's young bride thinks of his new mistress. But perhaps the foolish, ignorant girl actually believed her husband would remain true. No doubt that is why he married below his station." And she looked at Elizabeth triumphantly.

There was an awkward silence and Jane gave Miss Bingley a shocked look and Bingley gave her an admonishing one. The Russells glanced at Miss Bingley and Elizabeth and then away again, and the young Russells blushed.
"Please forgive us," Sir Theodore said courteously to Jane and Elizabeth. "My children enjoy teasing me with scandalous gossip, and we sometimes forget ourselves. We certainly do not mean to distress you, speaking of such inappropriate matters."

He turned the conversation adroitly to other matters and the remainder of the visit was uneventful.

On the carriage ride home, both girls were quiet.

"Jane." Elizabeth said, breaking the silence after a few minutes.

"Yes, Lizzy?" Jane said.

"What do you suppose Mr. Russell meant, asking Mr. Darcy about actresses?"

"He was only joking, Lizzy."

"Yes, but not about that. He seemed to take it for granted that Mr. Darcy had experience with actresses. Or has experience with them. And Mr. Darcy seemed discomposed when he said it."

"Lizzy, I beg you do not distress yourself. I am sure it meant nothing. Mr. Darcy's aunt is clearly an important patron of the arts. His family would naturally know many people who work in the theatre."

They were silent for a few minutes, then Elizabeth spoke again.

"Jane, how common do you think it is that gentlemen seek diversions elsewhere once married?"

"I do not know, Lizzy. Not that common, surely." But Jane looked unhappy.

"What do you base that on, Jane? Papa?"

"Partly. He did not ever, I am sure. And yet he was unhappy enough with our mother." At Elizabeth's silence, Jane looked at her in alarm. "He did not, did he, Lizzy?"

"I have no reason to think so," Elizabeth reassured her. Presently, she added, "But Jane, I do not think Papa is a good comparator. He is such a recluse, preferring the company of his books, that I can see him thinking it would not be worth the trouble. I do not know if it is the same for gentlemen who live fashionable lives, especially if they were very wealthy and had constant opportunity. Oh!" she added, seeing Jane's distress. "I do not mean to imply anything about Mr. Bingley. It is clear he is wild about you, Jane."

"As Mr. Darcy is about you, Lizzy."

Yes, Elizabeth thought. She did think their respective fiancés loved them. But what was the strength of that love? Did it last after the man had bedded his bride and had his fill? Especially in the face of generous opportunity and social sanction? Because, judging from the Russells' laughing and joking, such activities were not considered out of the ordinary in his circle.

Even in their own circle such things occurred and were tacitly accepted. Elizabeth prided herself on not being naive. She knew exactly what to think of the young women relegated to the back pews of their church about whom much was hinted but nothing said - in her hearing at least. Sir William Lucas, Mr. Long, Mr. Henderson - at one time or another she had watched all of them pay their respects to a back pew while in front their wives lifted their chins and squared their shoulders in declaration to the world that they saw nothing, knew nothing, cared nothing.

"I have thought about it, Lizzy," Jane said in a small voice. "I suppose every woman must going into
marriage, especially if she marries a wealthy man. I simply prefer to hope it will not occur. Or, if it does, it will be exceptional - a diversion only, and not prolonged or serious."

"You are more sanguine than I would be, Jane."

"It is not sanguinity, Lizzy. It seems to me that dwelling on it would lead to suspicion and broken trust, which would simply hasten the division of husband and wife. And what can one do to prevent it if that is the way one's husband is? It is simply the lot of wives."

"But why should it be the lot of wives? How is that fair? Do men not pledge to cleave to us as we cleave to them? Why should it be allowed for one sex but not the other?""¹

"I do not know, Lizzy, it is simply the way it is."

"That does not mean that one must simply accept it." She flashed a sudden smile. "Just because a wife can do little to prevent it, does not mean there are not a great many things one can do to make him miserable if it occurs."

Catching Elizabeth's expressive eye and droll countenance, Jane giggled.

"Damp sheets?" Jane ventured.

"Mouldy wine."

"Horse droppings in his boots."

"Horse droppings in his food."

"Exceeding one's income."

"Running up vast gambling debts that he must pay for."

"Having the parson visit to scold him."

"Pretending to an intrigue with the parson."

"Lizzy," gasped Jane, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes a few minutes later after they had completed a long list. "If it ever happens to me, you must promise to visit and help me make him miserable."

"I will, Jane. If you promise to do the same for me."

They shook on it.

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Notes:

¹In addition to greater social acceptability, the infidelity of husbands received the sanction of law in this period. A wife could be kicked out or divorced for infidelity but a husband could not. Moreover, a wife who left her husband without his permission or that of the ecclesiastical courts could be sued for restitution of conjugal rights and forced to return, even to the point of tolerating his mistress ensconced nearby. And while a wife could obtain a separation on various grounds such as cruelty, the alimony was conditional on abstinence. A husband who could prove that a separated spouse had taken a new lover had the right to throw off the wife and any burden for her support entirely.
Because all of a woman's property became a man's upon marriage, this was a devastating outcome unless some of her fortune had been put into trust or there were friends or relatives willing to take on the burden of her support.

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The subject of a husband's constancy was dismissed but not entirely forgotten. At times, Elizabeth found herself studying Darcy, wondering.

She might have found some way to introduce the subject if they had had opportunity to speak alone for any length of time. But while Mr. Bennet was kind enough to allow them to sit alone at the piano or speak quietly together over books or backgammon, he did not permit them to wander off out of view. It was not a subject Elizabeth was willing to raise without a guaranty that they would not be interrupted.

Hope for relief came in the shape of her aunt. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner arrived five days before the planned nuptials, bringing with them their little ones. It was not an easy time for Mr. Gardiner to leave his warehouses, but they wished to meet their nieces' betrotheds and see Elizabeth one last time before her removal north took her out of easy reach.

Elizabeth was proud to introduce her aunt and uncle to Darcy and delighted to see that they got along at once. Before her marriage, Mrs. Gardiner had spent a considerable amount of time in the town of Lambton, which was not five miles from Pemberley. This ready source of conversation allowed all parties to take each other's measure with a minimum of awkwardness, and soon they were chatting away pleasantly. Darcy smiled several times during the conversation and at one point even looked on the verge of laughter.

"I like him, Lizzy," Mrs. Gardiner told her late that evening, when they had finally been released from the numerous company that Mrs. Bennet felt necessary to bestow upon any visiting friends. "He is not as easy and friendly as Mr. Bingley, but he is clearly a very intelligent and thoughtful man. And his sense of humour is quite delightful when it makes its appearance."

Elizabeth thanked her with a look. "I was glad to see you and my uncle speak to him. He has difficulty conversing with my mother and father. Although I hope the difficulty with my father will not be lasting. With so many similar intellectual interests, they really ought to be friends."

"I heard about the marriage settlements from Mr. Philips," Mrs. Gardiner smiled knowingly. "Mr. Darcy must have thought Mr. Bennet had taken leave of his senses. Did you explain?"

"Not yet," Elizabeth said impishly. "There has not really been the occasion, nor the need. At present we are both joined in resenting my father for not allowing us any privacy. Not that I blame him."

Mrs. Gardiner laughed. "I am glad to see I do not have to lecture you, Lizzy. What a sight you must have made! Especially Mr. Darcy. Your friends are used to you expressing yourself as you please, but I gather they are not used to seeing him so little dignified."

"No," Elizabeth smiled. "In fact, I think that may account for part of his present reserve. I am not sure whether it was our engagement announcement or our small scandal, but I feel as if we are stared at wherever we go."

A knock on the door was followed by Jane making her appearance in the room.
"Did you ask her?" she said to Elizabeth.

Mrs. Gardiner lifted her eyebrows. "Is it time for that already?"

"Time for what?" said Elizabeth.

"I have books for each of you. They are part of my presents to you, but I thought you would like them prior to the wedding. Excuse me one moment."

Mrs. Gardiner left the room while the sisters looked at each other curiously. When she returned she was carrying two packages wrapped in paper. She gave one to each of her nieces. They opened them to find two identical, new editions of *The Works of Aristotle, the famous philosopher, in four parts.* Elizabeth flipped a few pages and began laughing. It was clear this book had nothing to do with the ancient philosopher.

"It is not really so scandalous, Lizzy. Many married couples have this book. It tells you all about what to expect on your wedding night and what to do once you are with child..." she trailed off as Jane joined in the laughter and Elizabeth only laughed harder. "What is the joke?"

"It is a lovely present! I will greatly enjoy having my own copy. But my dear aunt, Mama has already given us an older version of this book to read, and I read the version in Papa's library years ago. It is even older than Mama's, and more scandalous." Elizabeth reached under her mattress and pulled out a battered book. She turned it over and frowned. "In fact, I think this may be our Grandpapa's copy."

Mrs. Gardiner shook her head. "I should have known. And so, you do not need information of what you can expect on your wedding nights?"

"Lizzy certainly does not, aunt," said Jane.

"Can I help it if Papa allows us free rein of his library? It is a good thing that our younger sisters have no interest in medical texts or learning foreign languages. I shudder to think what could happen if Lydia ever found Papa's store of wicked French novels."

"My goodness!" Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed. "Mr. Bennet has not raised you at all properly if he allows you to read such things, Lizzy."

"I do not think Papa knows," said Elizabeth, then added with a smile, "or perhaps he does not care, since they are scarcely well hidden. After all, he does say knowledge should go to those who will take the trouble to seek it."

Mrs. Gardiner shook her head in mild disapproval. "Very well, then. What was it you wished to ask me if not that?"

Jane and Elizabeth immediately became serious. They both sat down on Elizabeth's bed while Mrs. Gardiner sat in a chair facing them. Jane looked at Elizabeth to begin and she did so.

"How common is it for men to have lovers before they are wed? And - and after?"

Mrs. Gardiner's face immediately changed from amused to serious. "Why do you ask that? Has something happened to make you think-"

"No, aunt. We were only wondering," Jane said.

Mrs. Gardiner scrutinized her nieces earnestly for a moment. Then she sighed.
"I do not know."

"Oh! But surely-" Elizabeth said, then stopped, looking alarmed.

"I think, Lizzy, that you are asking me to tell you the truth, and the truth is I do not know."

The sisters sat silent, dismayed. It was clear they had hoped for another answer.

"My dears. I know you know it happens and it is nothing outside of the common. I think the real question you wish to ask me is whether I think it is likely to happen to you. Am I correct?"

They both nodded.

"The first thing you must understand - that I assume you already know - is that gentlemen have far more opportunity than ladies. The wealthier the gentlemen, the more opportunity they have, especially if they live in Town and live fashionable lives. So do I think Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy have already-? My answer is most likely, yes."

Jane, owl-eyed, nodded solemnly. Elizabeth looked rebellious.

"As for what happens after… There it is more difficult to say. You know it happens very frequently in the marriages of the great. It is expected and accepted and even, for men, a point of pride. You have only to read the newspapers to know that."

This was true. The scandal sheets reported gleefully or enviously on the liaisons of the wealthy and fashionable and even the more sober newspapers, the ones that Elizabeth read daily, referred to such doings with alacrity, although under more polite euphemisms. This was the circle that Darcy was part of, judging by the appearance of his name on the distinguished guest lists reported in the newspapers. Did he consider himself one of their number in every way?

Mrs. Gardiner, studying Elizabeth's expressive face, continued.

"But even among them it may not happen every time. For example, Lizzy, I have never heard anything of Mr. Darcy's uncle in that vein."

Elizabeth looked at Mrs. Gardiner sadly. "But that may not mean anything. That may mean only that he is discreet."

"Yes, that is possible." Mrs. Gardiner was silent, trying to choose her words carefully, then said, "My dears, it is impossible to make generalizations. Do men have opportunity everywhere? Yes. Do many of them choose to take it up? It seems so. But do all of them? I do not think so. There seems to be as much individual predilection and preference among them as us."

"Do you think, aunt …" Jane blushed, then continued. "Do you think our uncle has?"

Mrs. Gardiner smiled, a proud, happy smile. "Perhaps I am naive, but I do not think so, Jane."

"How do you know?"

"You just know. When you are very close with your husband and love him intimately, you know he could not."

Elizabeth broke in. "But aunt, perhaps when a woman is so much in love, it is her partiality that speaks and not the objective circumstances. Not that I am saying anything about our uncle…"

"I understand, Lizzy. It is a fair point and there may be some partiality involved. But I think it is more
than that. When you are intimate with your husband, you are a part of his life in so many ways. He wants to share everything with you - not only his bed, but his thoughts, his concerns, all of his time. Your lives are intertwined. It is difficult to see how he could have a whole life, a whole part of his heart and mind, of which you are not aware. And it is difficult to see how another person could fit in. There are no gaps."

Jane smiled happily, her eyes shining. "Aunt, what you describe, it is - it is perfect. That is what I wish for in my marriage."

Mrs. Gardiner reached over and squeezed Jane's hand. "I hope you will have it my dear. I think you will. Mr. Bingley loves you very much and there is no one more deserving."

She looked at Elizabeth, who was quiet. "Lizzy? I think the chance for you is also strong. Mr. Darcy is not so demonstrative of his feelings as Mr. Bingley, but I do not think that means they are any less strong."

Elizabeth stood up and began pacing. "Aunt, I know so little about him."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought I knew all about him because we enjoyed the same books, had the same tastes and opinions on some things and danced well together. But that is nothing! I have no idea what he is like outside of Hertfordshire, outside of this house even! I know hardly anything about his family and their great castles and estates, and nothing at all of the opera singers and actresses he is friends with."

She spun on her heel and faced away from Mrs. Gardiner. "Papa was right. I have been very hasty and foolish."

Mrs. Gardiner stood up and reached for Elizabeth's hand and patted it. "Lizzy, my dear. Be calm. You are exciting yourself for nothing. Of course you do not know these things. It is perfectly normal not to know everything about your betrothed as you enter marriage. You will learn once you are married. As for the actresses and opera singers - that does not mean anything, necessarily."

Elizabeth smiled wryly, calm again. "Necessarily."

Mrs. Gardiner led her to sit down again beside Jane, who was eyeing Elizabeth worriedly.

"My girls, I cannot tell you what the future holds. But I wish to say one more thing. Even if a man looks elsewhere after marriage, it is not necessarily significant, especially for extremely wealthy men who have all the choice in the world. Men are ... they are different from women. They seem to be able to have liaisons outside and yet still remain committed and loving to their families. So even if it happens, it may be merely a momentary pleasure for an evening, a diversion, nothing more. A wife can focus on their home together and be content."

"That is what I said, aunt," Jane said.

Elizabeth stared hard at her aunt and sister. "It sounds as if you both believe Mr. Darcy would. Else why would you say that?"

They both blushed simultaneously. "No, no, Lizzy," said Jane. "I would never think so ill of Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth smiled crookedly. "That is because you would never allow yourself to think so ill of anybody! But confess, Jane, you believe it to be a possibility."
Jane squirmed under Elizabeth's candid gaze and dropped her eyes.

"Aunt?" Elizabeth demanded.

Mrs. Gardiner, who had somewhat more fortitude than Jane, nodded slowly. "Yes, Lizzy, I think it is a possibility. But that does not mean it will happen. Mr. Darcy may be different from other men of his rank."

"But there is nothing to indicate that he is, is there, aunt?" Elizabeth said.

There was a long pause. Finally, Mrs. Gardiner said, "We do not know enough, Lizzy."

"Jane?" Elizabeth turned to her sister.

Jane took a deep breath. "I agree with my aunt, Lizzy. But I do not see how it would help you to go into your marriage with suspicion."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows skeptically. As she had told Jane earlier, she did not think there was much one could do to prevent one's husband from straying if he was determined to do so. But to prevent being made a fool of! Ah, there she did not feel so helpless.

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One day, Darcy thought. One day and he would be free of this tiny corner of Hertfordshire, where excitement was the vicar's daughter marrying the local brewer's son and enlightened discourse consisted of an argument over whether French cooks were superior to English ones. He would take Elizabeth and return to his old haunts, of great estates and powerful statesmen and momentous affairs. Thank God.

They were bound for Longbourn, he and Bingley and Bingley's sister, intent on making their expected daily call. Miss Bingley was chattering on about some nonsense, but he could not attend other than to give monosyllabic answers at expected intervals.

It would be another day crowded - nay, overcrowded - with visitors. For a woman who was a dunce, Mrs. Bennet displayed an instinctive mathematical sense. He was certain there was a linear relationship between the nearness of his nuptials and the number of guests. Last night they had sat down to dinner with thirty-six people. If the pattern held, today would be forty-two.

It had been days since he had had ten minutes of Elizabeth all to himself, days since her attention had been undivided on him. There was no corner of Longbourn that was not full of people, none of whom seemed to consider that he might prefer conversation with the woman he loved to their prolix congratulations.

Especially...officers. Darcy clenched his jaw. What was it with the Bennets and redcoats? They were everywhere in the house, being admired, laughing, flirting and being flirted with.

Elizabeth herself had spent much of last evening chatting with a group of officers and practically ignoring him. Oh, she was not flirting exactly. But she had been friendly and welcoming, and had listened and laughed at their jokes and looked up at them with her beguiling eyes. Several times he had caught an officer staring at the bodice of her gown. She had not seemed to notice. Or, perhaps, care. He scuffed the toe of his gleaming boot against the side of the carriage angrily.

And then she had gone off with Lieutenant Denny. They had not gone far - Darcy caught up with them in the music room where sister Mary was playing a plodding minuet - but they had been deep in earnest conversation. And when Darcy had reclaimed her company, Elizabeth had not seemed
glad. Instead, she had said, almost resentfully, "We were only saying good-bye. I have friends too, you know." What was that supposed to mean?

They turned the curve and entered the yard to Longbourn, the carriage bumping over a rut. He felt irritation. Surely it was the same one his horse had narrowly missed stumbling over a month ago. What kind of estate owner was Mr. Bennet that he could not attend to the ruts in the road?

In the house, neither Jane nor Elizabeth were to be seen. The mantua-maker was still with them, he was informed. The drawing-room was already full of visitors. The Gardiners were there, of course, but also the Philips and the Lucases.

He sat down by the Gardiners and they spoke about the new exhibit at one of the museums in Town, then the improvement in victualling and supplying the navy with the opening of one of the canals. Mr. Gardiner, whose customers held a number of naval supply contracts, was intelligent and well-informed. He began to feel a little more at ease. But then Sir William Lucas came over to relay messages and advice from his aunt, Lady Catherine, as filtered through the double layer of Mr. Collins's and Sir William Lucas's unctuousness. His irritation mounted. Lady Catherine was no friend of his marriage and he had told her in clear terms that communication between them was to cease for the time being. This was her way of getting around the injunction, apparently.

Where was Elizabeth? Did she not know he was here? Was she so secure of him that she no longer felt the need to make the effort? The officer contingent would be showing up before long to monopolize everybody's attention and … Lydia's delighted squeal in the hallway announced they had arrived. Blast. He excused himself on the pretense of wishing to consult Mr. Bennet on some logistical detail. In reality he sought the open air.

A few turns in the prettyish sort of wilderness beyond the house eased his agitation but did little to allay the knot of anxiety in his gut.

What was he doing here? He did not belong. These were not his people. They might as well be speaking a foreign language. The words that came out might be English, but devoid of its noble meaning, replaced by frippery, fatuity, nonsense.

Elizabeth. He was here for Elizabeth. Surely she must have come down by now. He returned to the house, passing by the dining room windows as he walked. His name spoken by Mrs. Bennet's loud, carrying voice brought him to a stop.

"Yes, Miss Lizzy's place right there, Sarah, across from Mr. Darcy. And one of the handsome officers on her left - Chamberlayne, I think, he seems to be her favourite after Denny. She certainly deserves what fun she can get before she is married, the dear, dear girl!"

The maid's murmured response was not distinguishable, but Mrs. Bennet's was. "Indeed, I had given up on it. It came as the greatest surprise when we discovered them in the butler's pantry. But you know, Mr. Bennet always said she was the cleverest of all of our girls. I did think she was ridiculous to be reading all of those books with Mr. Darcy. Poor girl, she must have found it tedious in the extreme! But it seems she knew exactly what she was about after all, she and Mr. Bennet. I am sorry I ever doubted him! Now Sarah, if you hear anything about the pin-money, you must tell me. Mr. Bennet will not say a word."

There it was. The knife in the gut. Hedworth was right after all. He had been played for a fool. Had he not been waiting for it, dreading it? And was it not his own fault for attempting to catch a falling star, get with child a mandrake root? The poet was right.³ Nowhere lived a woman true and fair, who would love him for himself and not for specious reasons. He tasted salt and realized he had bit his lip. He blotted the blood with his handkerchief and resumed walking.
It did not matter now. He was committed to the straight path of duty, honour a high wall on every side forbidding escape. With the calmness of despair, he traced his way back to the house, his step measured and deliberate.

In the house, Elizabeth had come down to greet the visitors and was standing talking with Mrs. Gardiner. She was wearing a light-coloured gown with no fichu, which showed off her lovely neck and slender limbs. Her dark head was poised and queenly above it all. At least his wife would be fair, certainly fair enough for bedding and begetting and showing off. So why did it feel like defeat?

"Mr. Darcy!" She looked happy to see him and came over to him, smiling. The darkness gnawing at him receded somewhat.

"Mr. Darcy, my aunt and uncle inform me that they plan to take a tour of the Lakes this coming summer and visit their friends in Lambton. May I-? Do you think-?" She stopped, hesitant.

*This will be my wife,* he thought. *It is my duty to make her happy.* It was not a hard duty, so winsome and alluring as she was.

"Yes, of course we must receive them at Pemberley," he said formally. "I hope they will stay with us as long as they wish."

She smiled her joy, then returned to Mrs. Gardiner and made the invitation. Mrs. Gardiner's face lit up and Elizabeth's glowed. She threw him bright glances, full of teasing and affection. Her happiness was infectious. When she was done, she returned to him smiling, and now he could not help smiling back.

"Would you like to go to the music room?" she asked, laying her hand on his arm. "Mary has new music."

They headed for the music room which was mercifully, delightfully, empty. "I will leave the door open so that Papa is not tempted to send anybody after us," she said with a conscious smile.

They sat down at the pianoforte. He should have asked her why she had shut him out and would scarcely look at him the last few days; why she had appeared to prefer the company of officers to his own. Instead, he found himself content just to gaze at her.

"You are lovely, Elizabeth."

She smiled at him, then frowned worriedly. "You are bleeding," she said softly.

She touched her bare fingertip to his mouth, a tender caress, which seemed to wipe away all the bitterness of the previous days. He sighed and reached up and clasped her hand in one of his own.

"It is nothing. I accidentally bit myself."

He took out his handkerchief, spread out her hand over his own and slowly and deliberately wiped the smear of blood from her fingertip. She took the handkerchief from him and dabbed delicately at his lip before giving it back to him.

Their knees touched. They looked at each other. Her eyes were clear and liquid, glowing like pools of amber in the sunlight. Her lips were soft and full, begging to be kissed.

She smiled, her mouth inches from his. "If you kiss me, we shall be in trouble again."

He laughed, his heart suddenly light, and sat back from her. "I can wait one day, I think."
She played and sang for him. Her playing was abominable - she had scarcely had any opportunity to practice the new songs, she told him - but her voice was fresh and tuneful as always and her eyes teased and dared him to criticize her performance.

He watched her in satisfaction. What did it matter if one had to purchase love so long as it was truly bought? Once wed, she would be his - her beauty, her body, her loyalty - and he would have all society and the law at his back to vindicate his claim. Should he not be content? Oh, what was love anyway?

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NOTES:

1 Also known as Aristotle's Compleat Master-Piece or Aristotle's Masterpiece. This was a popular sex and reproduction manual that was continuously in print from the 17th Century until the early 20th Century. The author was unknown and probably consisted of a number of people. The content evolved over time with changing views. For example, female sexual appetite, initially portrayed as lusty and even uncontrollable in the 17th Century, became glossed over or even denied by the 19th Century. Also, later versions placed less emphasis on sex instruction and more on midwifery and childbirth.

2 Erotic literature and illustrations flourished around this time. There was also a great interest in anatomy and detailed diagrams and wax models of human bodies and reproductive parts abounded. Statements in some medical manuals that the depictions were intended for academic and not erotic purposes were suggestive of how the books were actually used, and life-sized wax models of beautiful women known as "Anatomical Venuses" that could be dismantled and dissected down to the entrails were popular public displays.

3 John Donne, "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star."

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They were married on a cold, clear morning in January. Between days crammed with company and the expected crowd that awaited them at Longbourn for the wedding breakfast, the church seemed an oasis of quiet.

Bingley had been giddily resplendent in a bright blue coat, Jane the picture of the golden, glowing bride. But Elizabeth thought everyone was eclipsed by Darcy. He was impeccable, his dress coat smooth and richly black, his waistcoat silver-threaded grey, with every pleat and fold of snowy cuff and cravat arranged with mathematical precision. Only his jewelry was old, and valuable, clearly heirlooms passed from father to son for generations down a great and ancient line.

She had felt a little timid in her home-trimmed bonnet, new gown made by the local dressmaker and amber cross purchased at a seaside shop by her aunt on her last holiday. Not for the first time, she regretted not listening to her mother and delaying her nuptials so they could travel to Town to spend Mr. Bennet's money on a mountain of finery. But it was done now, and they were married.

After the ceremony, the party made up of the Darcys, the Bingleys, the Bennets, the Gardiners and the Philipses returned to Longbourn three or four in a carriage to the waiting crush. By some unfortunate shuffle of persons, she and Darcy had the misfortune to share his carriage with Mrs. Bennet, who spent the journey alternately praising her merits to Darcy and scolding her.

"You have chosen well, Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth will be a wonderful wife for you! You see how beautiful she looked today. Not as beautiful as her sister Jane, I know, but then there is only one Jane and Mr. Bingley made known his preference first, so that is fair, is it not?"

Darcy, seated backward facing the ladies, assured Mrs. Bennet that he was well satisfied with his wife's beauty.

"How kind you are! Yes, Lizzy is beautiful. All of my daughters are renowned for it, except perhaps Mary. I do not know who we can find to marry her without a proper dowry. But when one has five daughters, one cannot expect to be lucky every time, can one?"

Darcy muttered something vague about mathematical principles as he looked out the window.
"Very true, very true. The odds lie against perfection. How clever you are! You see, Lizzy? Your husband is very wise. You must listen to him and do everything he asks. He is your lord and master now."

Elizabeth gave her mother a look of disbelief.

"Do not look at me like that, Lizzy. It is true. You must do as Mr. Darcy tells you! That is what the law says! In marriage you turn into a husband now - or something like that. Although I admit it does sound a little odd that a woman would turn into a husband."

"'By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband,'" Darcy quoted, one corner of his mouth lifted in a faint smile. Elizabeth shot him an irritated glance, which he missed.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy! You see, Lizzy? How clever Mr. Darcy is? You need not think yourself so clever from now on. Mr. Darcy will set you straight. She never listened to me, Mr. Darcy," Mrs. Bennet complained. "She would always have her way, and if she did not, she would go running to her father, who would give it to her. But she cannot do that with you. She has no one to run to! And so you may order her to do as you please and she will have to obey."

Darcy turned from the window briefly to throw Elizabeth a look of amusement. Surely he did not believe such drivel! But her mother had continued on the rest of the way home and he had not protested, only continued to smile out the window in his superior way, drumming his elegant, doeskin-clad fingers on the knee of his immaculate breeches. If they had been in an open carriage, she would have wished for the horses to kick up some brown-stained snow into his lap.

At Longbourn, Darcy handed Elizabeth and Mrs. Bennet out to a crush of people waiting to greet them. They drifted apart as Elizabeth endeavoured to say good-bye to all of her friends. They had come to see her off in the two and a half hours that Darcy had allotted - nay, decreed - they could stay before they must be on the road to Northamptonshire, where Darcy had informed her he had a small property near the halfway point between London and Pemberley, and where they were to spend their wedding night before completing the journey to Pemberley. She noticed he did not attempt to mingle, but stayed fixed in one corner of the room accepting congratulations and observing her conversations with others with what seemed to her to be a triumphant, proprietary air.

At length, when she felt she had given everyone at least a few minutes of time, she slipped up the stairs and to her bedchamber, intent on finding a moment to compose herself and take one last look.

Gazing around the room, empty of her personal effects, she felt a pang. This was the place she had spent all her formative years. There was the window, there the view she had studied as she dreamt her girlish dreams. Here was the wall where on the other side Jane had slept, played, studied, prayed. Now they would be parted hereafter, never to live together again. They would be recast in different molds, as wives, occupying the roles their husbands required of them. She felt tears come to her eyes and blotted them carefully with her gloved hand.

There was the thorny question again, which she thought she had finally managed to laugh herself out of only a day ago. Why had Darcy married her? And what did he want of a wife?

Her meditation was interrupted when the door opened without a knock and in walked Mrs. Bennet. "I have come to fetch you, Lizzy. Mr. Darcy wishes to be on his way!"

Elizabeth turned back to the window to hide her tears. "I will be down in a moment, Mama."
"No, Lizzy. You must be down now. You cannot keep your husband waiting."

Elizabeth furrowed her brow at this. If there was anybody who kept a husband waiting, it was Mrs. Bennet, every time the family had to go anywhere.

"Mama, please. I am sure it will make very little difference to Mr. Darcy whether we leave now or two minutes from now. And it makes a great difference to me."

Mrs. Bennet shut the door, then walked further into the room. "Lizzy," she said sternly, her hands on her hips. "Since you seem to have no understanding of who Mr. Darcy is, I must inform you. Mr. Darcy is very rich and very important with wonderful connexions -.

"I know, Mama." Elizabeth said crossly.

"You may think you know, but you are not acting as if you know! His town coach is waiting out front now, the grandest coach I have ever seen, with brass lamps everywhere and six horses and footmen and postilions and riders enough to accompany a prince!"

"Lovely," Elizabeth muttered.

"And the interior! Oh! Velvet and silk and plush cushions. And the hangings and shades! Why! You will be comfortable as anything and have utter privacy!" Mrs. Bennet chortled. "I would not be at all surprised if he intends to importune you in his carriage and you reach Northamptonshire a maid no more!"

"Mama!" Elizabeth gasped. She hissed, "I am not consummating my marriage in a carriage."

"Lizzy, you will do whatever Mr. Darcy tells you!"

"No, I will not. Just because a woman gives up her identity in law does not mean she cannot express her own opinions!"

"Yes, you will, Lizzy! It is your job to please him. Why do you think he married you? It was certainly not to listen to your opinions, however clever you think they may be!"

She opened her mouth angrily, but bit back her retort at the polite knock on the door. "Miss Elizabeth?" said the maid's voice.

"It is 'Mrs. Darcy' now, Sarah!" said Mrs. Bennet, her voice gloating.

"'Miss Elizabeth' is fine, Sarah!" Elizabeth called. "Please come in."

Sarah opened the door and dropped a curtsy. "If you please, ma'am, Mr. Darcy says the carriage is ready to leave whenever you please."

"Thank you. Please tell him I shall be down shortly." The maid left and Elizabeth took a deep breath and picked up her bonnet, which she had cast on the bed. She knew the horses should not be left standing long in the cold.

Mrs. Bennet nodded in satisfaction. "Good, Lizzy. Now remember, your sole duty now is pleasing your husband. You must let him do whatever he likes, without question, no matter how strange or indecent. Men can have all kinds of notions, but it is not your place to judge! And if it hurts, for goodness's sake do not complain, for certainly someone as great as Mr. Darcy would find nothing more tiresome!"
Elizabeth glared at her mother, took an indignant breath, and swept from the room with her head held high.

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The final good-byes were emotional but short. She had spoken with all of her family one by one earlier that morning and so there was only time for a kiss and a quick embrace. Her mother accompanied her hug with a pinch on the arm and a hiss of, "Remember, Lizzy!" which she shrugged off. Jane said nothing, only embraced her tenderly, tears streaming from her eyes, which she wiped away with Bingley's already sodden handkerchief. Her father, when he clasped her one last time, whispered, "You have the packet I gave you, Lizzy?"

She nodded, her eyes bright. The packet contained a letter from him that had moved her to tears earlier that morning as well as one hundred pounds in notes. He had told her to keep it safe and use it to come home if she ever needed.

Too soon, she turned away from her friends and loved ones to Darcy and the waiting carriage. It was indeed an impressive equipage, with all the men in full winter livery trimmed with gold braid and the riders and footmen armed with blunderbusses, pistols and cutlasses.

Darcy, who had been having a few quiet words with Bingley, shook hands with him and smiled at her. He helped her into the carriage, then entered himself, seating himself on the far side beside her so that she was next to the unshaded window. The footman closed the carriage door and it slipped into place with a well-oiled click. She continued to wave at her family and friends as the carriage moved out of the drive. When they could be seen no longer, Darcy reached around her and pulled down the shade, then pulled the velvet curtain over it, shutting them in all sides.

"For warmth," he said.

In fact, it was quite warm in the carriage, despite the chill of the day. The oiled covers on the outside of the carriage offered an extra layer of insulation and hot stones had been poured into the warmers that ran all the way round the floor. Every surface but the floor was lined or upholstered and even that was covered in a plush rug. It was by far the most luxurious carriage she had ever been in.

She turned her head to see Darcy gazing at her, an intense expression in his eyes.

"Alone at last, Elizabeth," he smiled.

"I am not sure I can agree," she said lightly. "With a coachman, two footmen, two postilions and two outriders? I cannot think when I have been so well accompanied."

"Be that as it may, there is no one to disturb us in here. Will you not sit closer to me?"

She was right by the window, almost pressing herself against the side of the carriage.

"I prefer to remain here for the time being."

He frowned. They were married now. Was she to continue to play coy?

"But I prefer for you to sit by me, and I am your husband."

She arched her eyebrows delicately at him. "Meaning I must now obey you?"

"Meaning I would think that you would now wish to obey me."
She took a deep breath, then gingerly moved over a few inches toward the middle of the seat. His
eyes, dark with passion, followed her every movement. When she came within arm's reach of him,
he closed the gap between them so that his knees were touching the cloth of her long pelisse and the
skirt of her gown.
"Take off your bonnet," he said. She did so, trying to keep her fingers from trembling as she untied
the strings and took it off, placing it carefully on the seat opposite.

His hand reached out and touched one of the curls framing her face, letting it loop around his finger.
She saw his gaze rest on her hair. Would he ask her to take it down? How would she rearrange it
herself so she could appear with decency in the coaching inns where they would inevitably stop? Her
lady's maid and his valet and secretary had left earlier with the bulk of their luggage in his other
carriage so they could travel alone and more lightly and quickly. They would not see them until they
arrived in Northamptonshire.

He did not ask her to take down her hair. Instead, his hand dropped down to caress her cheek. His
eyes burned into hers. "You are so beautiful, Elizabeth."

"Beautiful enough to tempt you?" she said, trying to muster a teasing tone.

His intensity did not falter. "Beautiful enough to tempt anyone. Beautiful enough to turn my whole
world upside down."

He pulled her to him and kissed her then, his lips soft at first, then more insistent. She attempted to
match his passion but found she could not. When she felt his hand touch her breast, she pushed him
away.

"What is wrong?" he said breathlessly.

"I … I do not want to just yet," said Elizabeth.

"You need not be afraid. I do not intend to consummate our marriage here. But it is a long journey
and we have to pass the time somehow." He smiled, gazing at her lips.

"That is not what I meant."

"Then what is it?"

"I just do not want to at present."

His brow furrowed. "When will you want to?"

"I do not know," she said. He waited for her to elaborate. She did not.

"I see," he said finally. He sounded angry. "And this is all the answer I am to expect? I might enquire
why, with so little endeavour at affection, I am thus rejected. Might I remind you that we are married
now?"

She sucked in her breath indignantly. Her eyes narrowed at him. "Meaning what, exactly?"

"You know what it means."

"Oh! Yes. That you now have certain conjugal rights over my person. That I no longer have a
separate identity or existence from you and therefore my person is yours to dispose of as you will. Is
that what it means?"
"You chose this, Elizabeth; this was not forced upon you. I have given you everything – my name, my fortune, my family, and I will look after you and quite possibly your family as well for the rest of our days."

"I thank you for reminding me so forcibly of the relative disparity in our situations and of my family's indebtedness to your great generosity in taking us on as an obligation! It appears I have been well and truly bought and paid for."

"I did not put it thus."

"Yet that is what you think, is it not? Can you deny this is your implication in reminding me of your great goodness in deigning to marry me?"

"That is a wilful misunderstanding and you know it! But I would think a young woman of modest means who marries a gentleman of fortune would feel some obligation to grant her husband's caresses however little she apparently welcomes them - especially if she has led him on a merry chase to precipitate a hasty matrimony!"

Her eyes sparked dangerously. "And I would think that a gentleman would respect his lady's need for some time to recover her equanimity after making a final parting from her family and not demand that she submit regardless of her true feelings!"

The carriage fell silent. All that could be heard for a few moments was the thundering of horses' hooves and the click of the carriage wheels on the road. Darcy would not look at her. Instead, he stared at a fixed point behind her. His expression was stony and she waited with trepidation for what he would say. Finally, he spoke, still without looking at her.

"I am sorry to have violated your person," he said formally. "Please believe me when I say that I had no notion that my overtures would be so disgusting to you. You may be assured I will trespass no further."

And so saying, he moved over to the far side of the seat and looked out the window.

Elizabeth looked at him, his head twisted away from her so she could only see him in partial profile. His mouth was turned down in bitterness, but his expression was bleak. Studying his face, her initial sense of relief that he would importune her no further gave way to remorse. She supposed it would do no harm to grant him a few kisses. He had married her after all, and he had said he did not intend to consummate their marriage in the carriage.

"Mr. Darcy?" she said. He did not answer. "Fitzwilliam?"

He turned to look at her. His eyes were sombre.

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

She looked down at her hands. "I find I must apologize."

"For what?"

"I gave you the wrong impression just now, that I was … unwilling to receive your caresses. That is not the case. You do have the right to expect them."

"There is no need for that," he said formally. "It gives me no pleasure to force my attentions where they are not welcome."
"Oh! No," she cried. "They are welcome. They are very welcome, I assure you. I am just ... it has been a very hectic few days and I did not sleep well last night. I have had much on my mind."

"I am sorry for importuning you just now. I am sure it is very difficult for a young lady to part from her family. I should have been more sensitive."

His tone was still formal and distant. She could not stand it.

"It is not only that," she said, looking at him desperately. "It is something my mother has been saying that has upset me. I should not have let it interfere with my relationship with you."

"What has your mother been saying?" he said with concern. "Are you frightened of ...? I promise you, Elizabeth, I will be very gentle. There is nothing to be afraid of."

She looked up at him, perplexed. As his meaning sank in, she flashed him a smile. "Oh! No, I am not afraid of that. Every woman goes through that if she be married. I am quite certain I will survive as they all have."

"Then what is it?" he said anxiously.

"She said I must obey you."

"Obey me?"

"Yes. Oh, I know I must obey you legally. But the way she said it made it sound as if I am never to give voice to my own thoughts or desires any more. That all of my inclinations must give way to yours. It made me quite angry. And when you rushed me when I got in the carriage just now, it seemed you thought the same as she did."

"That was not my intention. I am sorry if I rushed you. I found myself...carried away by the strength of my passion."

"You did not truly rush me, only a little. I might have explained myself better."

He was silent for a few moments. At last, he said, "Elizabeth, look at me." She looked up. His expression was serious. "You do not have to obey me, at least not in the way that your mother means. I do not mean that I wish for you to actively defy me at all turns, but that we should respect each other and try to work together if we can. I want to hear what you are thinking, always, even when your thoughts are in opposition to mine. Especially when they are. I value your opinions very highly."

"Thank you," she whispered.

He studied her downcast face for a few moments, then said, "Elizabeth?"

"Yes?"

"I hope you also know that I would not force myself upon you. I would never force myself upon you. If there is something you do not wish, you have only to say and I will stop, immediately."

She scrutinised his face. "Truly?"

"Yes, truly."

She smiled at him in relief, blinking back tears. He returned her smile.
"Now will you come sit by me? You do not have to if you do not want to, but I would very much like it if you would."

In response, Elizabeth moved over, her pelisse dragging on the seat. She stopped and began unbuttoning it to remove it. She struggled out of it and Darcy laid it on the seat opposite and did the same with his greatcoat. When she was in only her gown and he his dress coat, she moved over by his side and he put his arm around her shoulders. He smiled down at her.

"Are you cold? Do you want one of the blankets?"

She brightened. "Do you have blankets?"

"Of course."

He removed his arm from around her shoulders and reached over to the opposite seat. Releasing some latch, he pulled down the upholstered back to reveal shelves and cubby holes full of all manner of supplies. On one shelf were blankets of various kinds. He took out the heaviest blanket, a dark fur lined with silk, and replaced the seat. Then he sat back down beside her, throwing the fur over both of them.

She marvelled at its softness. "I suppose it is very nice to be rich if it means you can have such a fine carriage and beautiful blankets," she said cheerfully.

He smiled at the reappearance of her sauciness. "Yes, it does have its uses."

They sat for a few moments without speaking, Darcy smiling at Elizabeth's loud sighs of contentment as she snuggled into the luxurious blanket and burrowed her head against his side. Suddenly she lifted her chin and said defiantly, "I would not obey you anyway."

"No, I never supposed you would," he said dolefully.

His tone was so droll that she laughed out loud, feeling any remaining tension slip away.

"Mr. Darcy?" she asked flirtatiously.

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"You may kiss me now."

"Thank you."

She waited with her face upturned to him, but he made no move to kiss her.

"Are you not going to kiss me?" she demanded after a while, opening her eyes to look at him.

"Not just at present, but I thank you for the sentiment," he said with perfect politeness.

"Oh!" She regarded his impassive face with frustration. Then she smiled, took off her gloves, got up on her knees on the seat, put her hands to his shoulders and leant forward and touched her lips to his. His mouth softened under hers, but he did not attempt to touch her or take over the kiss. She did it again, and again, and received the same response, although now he was smiling.

At last, she unpinned and untied his cravat, dropping the jewelled pin into one of the pouches in the carriage lining. He only continued watching her. She smiled, then slid her hand around his bare neck and began dropping soft, light kisses on it. For a moment or two he remained stoic, but within seconds he had made a strangled noise and pulled her into his lap.
"Does this mean I am forgiven?" she laughed breathlessly as he showered her face and neck with kisses.

"Teasing, teasing woman!" was all he said, before he put his hand behind her head to turn her face to his and claimed her lips with his own.

They began kissing in earnest then, his hands cradling her head and his tongue dipping into her mouth. Tipping the velvet, she had heard it called in vulgar slang. But it was not vulgar, it was utterly delicious and delightful. She tipped the velvet happily, exploring the fine, smooth wool of his coat and waistcoat with her fingertips.

His hands, which had been holding her about the waist, wandered down to smooth over her round hips and bottom, then back up to her waist and rib cage. She could feel his hard excitement underneath her and shifted experimentally on it, drawing a soft groan from him. Then he was touching her breasts, circling the sensitive tips through her gown and dipping his fingers below the edge of her bodice, and it was her turn to whimper.

He smelled wonderful, like good soap and clean linen and country air mixed with his natural masculine scent. She wanted more, more of his touch, more of him. She slipped a hand down the open neck of his shirt to touch bare skin, then felt for the buttons on his waistcoat, her fingers flying once she found them. When she made her way down to the last button and began pushing his coat from his shoulders, he let her go momentarily to shrug both coat and waistcoat off, but did not stop kissing her.

Wearing only the thin white shirt, he seemed even larger and more masculine. She smoothed her palms across his wide shoulders, then down across his chest and felt the pounding of his heart. But even that was not enough. She wanted to feel his bare skin under her hands.

She tugged at his shirt to pull it out of his waistband and did not stop until she could slip a hand underneath. Then she was touching the warm skin across his flat belly and running her hands over his chest, feeling the curious difference between the rough hairs and the smoother skin underneath.

"Oh, Elizabeth," he whispered.

His hands were pulling on her skirts. She felt the cool air swirl around her legs and then her thighs. She looked down and saw her skirts a pile of froth in her lap, her bare flesh swelling gently over the tiny silk bows of her stockings and his fingertips pressing into naked thigh above her stocking tops. Surely she should be scandalized. But she only clung more closely to him, panting a little against his neck.

She could feel his hands caressing her naked hips and taking her bottom into his hands and squeezing. Would he feel the wetness between her thighs and know that he had married a wanton? Would he be disappointed and disgusted? But he only continued kissing her feverishly.

"I love you, Elizabeth," he panted against her mouth. "I love you, I love you."

His hands continued busily beneath her skirts, where one hand cradled her bottom. She felt the other slide between her thighs and gently push them apart. Then his hand was between her thighs, and she thought he must know how wet she was. For a moment she stiffened, but he did not seem disgusted; he only growled a bit in the back of his throat. She went limp with relief against him, then stiffened again when she felt his fingers reach further, toward the tight, aching knot of desire between her legs. Was he going to -? She felt the light, electric brush of his fingertips, then his finger circling to spread the wetness over her sensitive, quivering flesh. Oh. Yes.
"Gee-up!" yelled the coachman, and the carriage, which had slowed down momentarily for some circumstance, leapt forward again.

Elizabeth jumped, then pushed Darcy's hand away. What were they doing! They were in a carriage on the open road, surrounded by servants and other equipages.

He looked up at her, dazed. "Too fast?" he said breathlessly.

She nodded solemnly. He loosened his hold on her and leant back in the seat, breathing hard. She remained on his lap but reached down and picked up the blanket, which had fallen to the floor.

He smiled at her sheepishly. "Excuse me; it seems I became carried away again."

"It seems we both did," she smiled back. She leant her body against his and tucked her head into his neck. "How long did you say it was until we reach our destination?"

He let his head fall onto the back of the seat and groaned. "Not until well after nightfall. We still have sixty miles to go." It was two o'clock in the afternoon.

"And this was your brilliant idea?" She was amused. "Why did we not stay at Netherfield Hall?"

"I wished for privacy. I suspect Bingley would not have protested if we disappeared into our chambers immediately, but Miss Bingley would have expected us to make an appearance at all the regular meal times." He added with a grin, "I also have a suspicion that she listens at doors and I am not sure what impact that would have had on my ability to perform."

Elizabeth laughed out loud at this picture. "In that case, I accede to your better judgment. The idea of Miss Bingley listening in is even worse than your servants. What about London, then? Do you not have a townhouse there?"

"My original thought was that I did not wish to share you with all the social callers who would have inevitably descended on us even if the knocker was not up. But I am beginning to revise my opinion. London may have been the superior option to spending the whole day in this carriage with you and going no further than a few kisses."

She arched her eyebrow at him. "I allowed you liberties beyond kissing."

"Indeed you did," he said with a broad smile and a squeeze of her bottom, which made her blush.

"Is it too late to turn around? We are closer to London than Northamptonshire, are we not?"

"Yes, but the servants await us in Northamptonshire, and all of our baggage is headed there. And it is three hours to London from here, or even four, if the toll gates are busy."

"But better perhaps than six or seven?"

He smiled at her eagerness and caressed her through her gown. "Cannot wait to get me into the marriage bed, Mrs. Darcy?"

She gave him a look that said two can play this game. Wriggling deliberately in his lap, she breathed against his ear and said, in her sultriest voice, "No indeed. I am looking forward to it with the greatest of anticipation."

At these words, Darcy promptly tipped her out of his lap onto the carriage seat and pinned her into the plush velvet with his weight. "Oh!" was all she had time to say before he was kissing her
frenziedly again. She responded with enthusiasm, and before long they were in almost the same situation as before, with his hands under her skirts, only this time her skirts were pushed almost to her hips and he was kneeling on the floor kissing her inner thigh.

"Why are we stopped?" she asked in shock. Her fingers, which had been pulling on his hair, were suddenly stilled.

Darcy looked up from her lap. "Stopped?" he asked stupidly.

"The carriage! It stopped!" With horror, she realized that she might have been moaning quite loudly. Had anyone heard them with the relative quiet of the stationary carriage?

"Toll gate," he shrugged briefly before rubbing his cheek against the soft skin of her inner thigh and kissing it again. "The riders go ahead to pay and ensure the gate is open. We will be on our way in a moment."

He was correct, as the carriage was already rolling again. But Elizabeth had had enough. She pushed him away and began pulling down her skirts.

"We must not."

"Elizabeth, there are no more toll gates on the next stretch. Our next stop is to change the horses, but that is probably half an hour away."

He tried to push her skirts up again, but she held them down. He rose off his knees and attempted to kiss her, but she turned her head. He tried to take her back in his arms, but she shook her head and pulled the blanket over herself.

"No, I do not want to."

Darcy studied her stubborn expression for a moment, then heaved himself onto the seat beside her with a huff of frustration. She studied his crossed arms and slightly distended lower lip.

"What is wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong."

"Something is wrong."

"I am merely contemplating."

"What are you contemplating?"

"How much I detest tollkeepers who are slow to open the gates!"

She widened her eyes at him.

"You said you would not attempt to consummate our marriage in the carriage."

"I was not. I am not. I was only-" He did not finish his sentence.

"Would we not have had to stop anyway?"

"Of course." He did not sound convincing.

"Then what upsets you?"
"Nothing."

"Are you angry with me now?"

He looked at her quickly. "No, of course not."

"They why are you glowering so?"

"I am not."

"Yes, you are." She peeped up at him through her lashes. "We have only been married for a few hours and you have already had call to" - she ticked off her fingers - "frown at me, raise your voice at me and now glower as if you would burn a hole in the floor with your eyes. At this rate I will soon be walking back to Hertfordshire with all my finery trailing in the mud."

As she hoped, this drew a smile from him. He pulled her into his arms, blanket and all, and buried his head on her shoulder, chuckling.

"It is no more than you deserve," he said at last, smiling at her. "You are the most maddening creature I have ever beheld. I have no doubt that by the time we reach Northamptonshire, I will be ready for Bedlam, and then you may take this carriage back to Hertfordshire or wherever it pleases you to go."

She nestled happily in his arms. "Must we go all the way to Northamptonshire in one day? Is there not somewhere we could stay? You said we would be changing the horses in half an hour. Could we not stay at the coaching inn?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Yes, but the accommodation will be very modest."

"Is it decent?"

"Decent enough." He paused for a moment, then said, "Although I know of a hotel, quite a nice one, not far from here. Would you like to go there?"

"I think it may be better for my honour and dignity if we did not consummate our marriage in this carriage."

"You injure me, Elizabeth. I would not have attempted such a thing," he said with stately dignity, then smiled. "But I am happy to take you to a hotel if you wish to go."

"Oh! Not if it is an inconvenience."

"It is no inconvenience," he assured her quickly.

"If you are sure."

"Are you sure?"

"I am not opposed to the venture," she said airily.

"Nor I."

"Well, then."

"Well."
She lifted her eyebrows at him. He seemed to rouse and, finding his walking stick, rapped it on the roof of the carriage to bring it to a stop. The footman came over to the door and Darcy cracked the window and they spoke at length, though Elizabeth could not quite make out the conversation through the whistle of the wind. After a time, he shut the window.

"What did you tell them?" she asked.

"Only that there was a change of plans."

"Will they suspect us?"

"They may have some suspicion that I am swept away with ardor for my pretty wife," he smiled at her, causing her blush to deepen. "It would be no more than the truth, after all."

The carriage was moving again. They sat quietly, Elizabeth nestled silently against Darcy while his arm hugged her shoulders, contemplating what was to come. Perhaps he was thinking the same thing. After a while, Darcy lifted the drawn shade, and she looked out and saw that they had left the Great Road and were approaching a pretty town set along the river.

About ten minutes later, the carriage rolled into a courtyard under the sign of a white swan. She donned her pelisse again and Darcy put on his waistcoat and dress coat, searched for his scattered sleeve-buttons and picked up his cravat from the floor, making a noise of disgust at the lint on it. Nevertheless, he brushed off the length of white silk and knotted it in a simple knot. The jewelled pin he left in the carriage pocket.

"I must commend you on your new-found facility with that thing," Elizabeth laughed.

"A gentleman had better learn to tie his own cravats if he has a wife who insists on removing them at the slightest provocation. I had to spend an hour in training with Roberts. I do not think he was very impressed with my explanation."

"Oh! no," she giggled, covering her mouth. "Another person on your staff who suspects us."

"Elizabeth, they all know what we are doing. My servants are discreet, not dull-witted."

After a while, the carriage moved again, but only a short distance. Then the footman knocked on the door and Darcy opened the window again.

"The room is ready," he told her.

The footman led them down a quiet passage and up three flights of carpeted stairs. They encountered no one; it appeared that this was a back way.

They turned from the stairs and continued to a corner where there were fewer doors than in other parts of the hotel.

"This is their finest suite," Darcy told her as the footman opened the door. "There is a sitting-room and dressing-chamber. I hope you will like it."

Darcy and his footman stepped aside for her to enter first. She did so and took in the large and luxurious room with its four-poster bed and sumptuous hangings. A newly-kindled fire crackled in the fireplace and tall, gleaming lustres sat on the table, at which stood another of his footmen, who was cracking open a wine bottle. He completed the task and set it beside its unopened pair. There were also wine glasses and a bowl of freshly chipped ice, she saw.
"That will do for now," Darcy said and the two men took their outer dress and departed, shutting the door behind them.

They were alone. She faced away from him surveying the room, willing the butterflies in her stomach to calm. Now that they were out of the carriage and in a proper bed-chamber, she was nervous. There was no reason to refuse him; nor did she want to; but she knew not how to proceed.

While those thoughts flitted through her mind, she heard his step behind her and felt his hands smooth over her shoulders, then his fingers brush the back of her neck lightly.

"Will you undress, Mrs. Darcy?" he asked, his deep voice tickling her ear. "I would be pleased to assist."

He had already removed his dress coat and waistcoat and was back in shirt sleeves again. She nodded her acquiescence and his fingers slowly unbuttoned the back of her gown. She felt his hands slide down her arms, and then her gown was a puddle on the floor. She stepped out of it and turned into his arms.

He was kissing her again, half-leading and half-carrying her to the bed, the wine apparently forgotten. She felt the bed with the back of her knees and sat down upon it. He sat down beside her, still kissing her. Then he broke their kiss to gaze into her eyes, his hand lightly cupping her cheek. He smiled at her.

"How much do you understand about what is about to happen, Elizabeth?"

"I understand a - a little," she stammered. "I understand basically what will happen."

He smiled at her again and ran his hand lightly down the side of her body to the tops of her stockings, easing them slowly down her legs. His fingertips left prickles on her skin. Then his fingers were at the hem of her short chemise.

"May I, my love?" he said softly.

It was the last article of clothing she wore. Once gone, she would be naked. She swallowed and nodded.

"Do you - do you wish to put out the candles?" she asked. The curtains were drawn against the afternoon light so the candles and fire were the only sources of illumination.

"No, I wish to see you."

She nodded again, then realized he was still clothed. She did not want to be the only one naked. Her hands flew to unbutton his shirt. He cooperated to let her lift it over him. In the warm glow of fire and candles, his skin was golden, the lines of his body lean yet powerful, like a fencer's, or a dancer's. He was beautiful.

"Your turn, Elizabeth," he smiled.

She allowed him to lift her chemise over her head, leaving her naked while he still retained his breeches. But she dared not undress him there. She blushed and blushed again at her nudity, at the weight of his eyes on her, not knowing where to look. Then her eye fell on the covering of the bed and she dove for it, sliding between the smooth, cool sheets.

She heard him chuckle and looked to see him sliding under next to her. "You cannot escape me quite so easily, my love."
His hand on her naked hip turned her toward him and he was kissing her again. Only now she felt the startling sensation of his skin truly bare against hers, her breasts and belly pressed to him, his flesh warm and smooth and alive against hers. Oh, it was heavenly, it was rapturous. She forgot her nervousness and wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed with pleasure between kisses. She did not even think about it when his hands were on her bare bottom again, caressing her buttocks and thighs.

He rolled her onto her back, still kissing her. She felt his hand on her thighs, nudging them apart and sliding up to find her hot, slick flesh.

He was kissing her neck now; she felt his breath hot in her ear. "Do you like this, my love?" he whispered low. His fingers were teasing, teasing.

"Yes," she breathed.

He probed further and she gasped, then whimpered as the pleasure overtook her. Her whimper turned to moans when he added a second finger and began to kiss and suckle her breasts at the same time.

"Oh God," she heard him say as she cried out and ground her hips into his hands and arched off the bed. "God, yes, Elizabeth, yes."

She opened her eyes to see him gazing at her intently. For a moment she was embarrassed by her display of wantonness, but realized there was no judgment in his eyes, only love and desire, so acute that it approached desperation.

He did not say anything, only lowered his head and began to kiss her body, trailing kisses all across her breasts and belly and thighs. He had pushed off the cover; it lay at their feet and she was entirely bare to his gaze.

"You are so lovely, Elizabeth," he murmured. "So lovely and pretty everywhere." He kissed her breasts again. "Like peaches." He opened her legs and kissed her inner thigh, running his tongue up. "Or a flower."

Then he was kissing her there, his head buried between her thighs. For a moment she went absolutely still with shock. But under his ministrations she was soon moaning again, moaning and crying out his name, heedless of who might hear or what anybody might think.

When he stopped, she was limp with sated pleasure.

"I think you are ready for me now, my love," he said when he came up to claim a kiss. His eyes devoured her face, glittering with sharp-edged desire.

She could only nod, happy for him to do whatever he wished. At this, he unbuttoned the fall of his breeches and slid them off. When she caught sight of him, she gasped, a little spurt of fear reigniting in her veins. But it would be well. It happened to every woman, if she would bear children.

He eased himself between her legs, supporting himself on his elbows, and kissed her gently.

"I am told it may hurt a little, but will soon pass," he said.

"I know," she met his eyes. "I know, I am not afraid."

"Bend your legs a little, my love," he whispered, his hands guiding her, and she did as he asked. Then he was against her, pushing into her tenderest parts.
Despite her wetness, it did hurt, much more than she had expected.

"Oh," she gasped, tears starting in her eyes. "Oh."

He withdrew a little and then pushed forward again, and then again, advancing a little bit each time, trying to ease into her. She whimpered and moaned, and not with pleasure. It hurt horribly.

"Not far," he panted. "Almost through, darling."

She nodded and squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself. The pain renewed and even became worse. She writhed to find a less painful position, trying not to push him away, but wanting it to end, wanting him out of her. It did no good; she was pinned by his weight and the thick, hard thing that invaded her.

When her moans became sobs, he withdrew, easing the pain immediately. "It is no use," he gasped. "I cannot hurt you so."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "But you must. You must, if there are to be children."

He brushed a damp strand of hair from her face and gazed into her eyes intently. His bore a mixture of disappointment, frustrated desire, grief and tenderness. The tenderness was paramount.

"We will," he promised her. "Only not today. You are so new, darling. You are so small there. I did not know it would hurt you so. We must go more slowly."

He was withdrawing, removing his body from hers. She did not want him to go.

"No," she said, tightening her arms around his neck. "No, please! I want to; I want to be your wife. Please. Please."

He looked at her again, hope warring with doubt.

"Please," she said again. "Perhaps...perhaps if you did it more quickly. Then it would be done."

He nodded and she saw the desire flame in his eyes again. He returned to his former position between her legs and kissed her deeply, his tongue flickering over the inside of her mouth. If only that was all that was required, she thought. If only they might do that forever, that and the things he did with his hands and his mouth. But it was not enough if she wanted to be his wife.

She felt him ease his instrument into her again and held her breath, but the initial part did not hurt quite so much. Then she felt his hands on her hips, pinning her in place while he withdrew slightly.

"I am sorry, my love," he said with regret. And then he thrust into her, hard.

She felt something tear inside of her and shrieked at the pain, seeing only stars and blackness for a moment. Then she felt him rushing into her, stretching and filling her deep inside.

"Oh, my darling," he crooned, cradling her in his arms and kissing her all over her face, kissing away the tears. "My brave, beautiful darling. You did it. You did it. It is over. It is over."

She caught her breath, then gave him a watery smile, of which pride was no small part. "I told you I would survive as they all have."

He chuckled delightedly that she would joke at such a moment and cuddled her closer. "Yes, you did."
She nestled in his arms. It felt good to be held after the painful ordeal. But he was still inside her, rigid, almost splitting her in two. What happened now? She squeezed her muscles around it, experimentally, and saw his face change, saw desire overtake the tenderness.

"Elizabeth," he said, his voice low and tense with warning.

She flexed again, as much as she was able to around his girth. "It does not hurt nearly so much anymore," she said wonderingly. "It only feels very big."

Darcy groaned, then groaned again when she writhed and pushed her hips against him, her eyes wide with the unusual sensation. She looked up to see what he thought, but his eyes were squeezed shut and his mouth open. He was moving inside her now, in slow, short, steady strokes. It did not hurt at all anymore. It even felt...pleasant, pleasurable. She curled her hands around his neck and kissed him wherever she could, whenever she could pull his head down, then curled her legs around his buttocks to ease the strange tension building between her legs. It only increased instead.

His rhythm changed, lengthened. "Uhhh," he groaned. Elizabeth felt a spurt of warmth between her legs, felt him sliding in and out more easily. His one hand remained at her hip, holding her in place; the other hand found hers and pressed it down into the mattress above her head. The position was exciting and she felt another spasm of wetness. She pushed back to meet him, reaching for something - something - something - to ease that strange, aching, growing tension.

At her gesture, his rhythm fractured and became erratic, the thrusts wilder and sharper and less controlled. "Onnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn," he grunted, his hands clutching at her hand and hip as he thrust deeply. With the final stroke he surged into her, then collapsed.

She recovered first, becoming aware of his pounding heart against her as he lay sprawled on top of her. She touched his head. His hair was damp and warm and soft. She ran her fingers through it tenderly, waiting for him to recover. It took him a few moments, but he did, and lifted himself on his elbows to look at her. His eyes were bright with emotion and she felt tears in her own eyes.

"I love you," he said, and she thought she might drown in his tenderness.

"I love you too," she whispered, smiling.

He rolled onto his side and gathered her against him and soon they were fast asleep.

Notes:

1 Blackstone's Commentaries

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Chapter End Notes

A suuuuper-long chapter, I know! Sorry, I just couldn't figure out a place to break it up. Also, I re-wrote large swathes of it at the last minute (I decided to stop being a coward
about necessary sex scenes) without beta or cold reader review, so if you see any errors or confusing passages, let me know. All other comments and criticisms are also very welcome. I freely admit to still developing my craft.
A Heavenly Day

Elizabeth woke to the soft hiss and crackle of the fireplace. She was enfolded in Darcy's arms, his legs tangled up with hers. *I am truly his wife now.* Her eyes roamed over his face, taking in the patrician brow, fine planes and sensitive mouth. She wondered how she had attracted such a handsome husband.

She reached up to touch his face. His eyes opened and lit up when they focused on her.

"Elizabeth," he breathed.

"I think it is the evening now."

He peered into the room, darker now that the fire had burnt low and a few of the candles had gone out. There was no light filtering from between the gaps in the curtains. "So it is. Are you - well?"

"Yes. I am more than well." She smiled at him. He smiled back. "Although I would like a wash. And I do not know what we do about … " She trailed off, gesturing to the bloodied bedding.

His eyes crinkled with his smile. "Pay no heed, that is easily remedied. The dressing room should be set up for you next door if you wish for a bath. If you ring, there will be maids to attend to you."

She nodded, then found her chemise and slipped next door. The dressing room was a scene of orderly luxury. A profusion of wax tapers cast a warm glow and the promised tub was waiting, flanked by fresh towels and half full of water in which fresh rose petals and dried herbs had been sprinkled. Someone had brought up her overnight case and unpacked it and her personal items were arranged neatly on the inlaid wood of the dressing table alongside a lavish bowl of winter irises. She wondered if this was a particularly good hotel, or whether all hotels had such splendours available, provided one had the wealth to pay for them.

She rang the bell, then sat down at the dressing table to comb out her curls. They had been too carried away earlier for her to think of taking her hair down properly, and it was now tangled and bristling with pins.

More quickly than she expected, a maidservant of a superior sort appeared and promised hot water immediately to fill the bath. Another arrived to act as lady's maid, and while she worked on Elizabeth's curls, yet another brought a tray of iced orange water. In the background, young maids ran in and out with cans of hot water, and soon enough the bath was steaming and the air filled with the aroma of rose and chamomile.

The servant acting as lady's maid pinned up her hair to keep it from the water and made as if to help her remove her chemise while another maid offered her a dressing gown. Unused to having servants attending to her every move, Elizabeth asked to be left in privacy to soak. With a curtsey, the maids
did so, leaving Elizabeth with a bell to ring when she wished for more hot water to warm up the bath.

Left alone, Elizabeth slipped off her chemise, stepped into the tub and sat down, sighing as the hot water soothed her sore and tender parts. As she soaked luxuriously, she contemplated her first time. In the end, it had been a greater ordeal than she had expected, but also far more wonderful. She had known what would happen in simple mechanical terms, but had not anticipated the thrill of his hands and mouth on her body or the heady excitement of his words whispered in her ear as he took his pleasure from her. She felt her cheeks grow hot and sank down into the water up to her eyes to hide her embarrassment.

She wondered where Darcy had learnt what to do. She supposed he must have had quite a bit of experience. After all, her aunt had said, it was practically inevitable for a man of his wealth and rank. Considering the positive result, she supposed she should bear it with philosophy. As Mrs. Gardiner had pointed out, it did not mean he would continue such activities, nor that he would tire of her quickly and move on. After all, he had married her and not somebody else. That meant something, did it not?

A maid returned with more hot water and soap and Elizabeth completed her bathing. She dressed in a simple gown, but decided to leave her hair loose and flowing, bound only by a fillet and dressed with a sprig of winter iris. She was rewarded for her choice as soon as she returned to the bedchamber and saw the blaze of desire in Darcy's eyes at the sight of her. He crossed the room in three strides and gathered her up in his arms.

"Did you have a pleasant bath? Did the servants help you?" he asked.

"Oh! Yes, they were wonderful. I had no idea a hotel offered such service."

"I am a highly valued customer," he smiled and buried his face in her hair and neck. "You smell like flowers."

"You smell wonderful as well." He was clean-shaven and wearing trousers and crisp, new shirt-sleeves and she noticed a dressing table with a large bowl of water had been set up in the bedchamber for him. "What is it?"

He had been gazing at her intently, but at her words, he smiled.

"It is nothing. I am simply glad you are here. And overwhelmed by your loveliness. And wondering when I may take you to bed again."

His boyish eagerness, so at odds with his usual stateliness, made her want to laugh and hug him at once. Instead, she said shyly, "You may take me to bed now."

He shook his head and brushed a curl behind her ear. "It is vastly tempting, but I would be a brute indeed to importune you so quickly after your first time. I thought we might have supper. Are you hungry?"

Now that he asked, she realized that she was famished. She smiled her agreement and he escorted her next door.

The sitting room was even larger than the bedchamber and handsomely fitted up to the same standard of luxury. A fire crackled merrily in the large fireplace and the table was covered with sparkling crystal and gleaming silver. As soon as they sat down, his footmen began to serve their supper, accompanied by a selection of the finest wines Elizabeth had ever tasted. Once again, she
marvelled at the wealth and splendor of the hotel, and Darcy's skill in directing the servants in every particular.

"Tell me a story," she said after they had eaten their fill and were lingering over their wine.

"What would you like me to tell you about?" He was elegantly casual, one leg crossed over the other and twisting his goblet in the candlelight.

"Tell me a story about yourself. I actually know very little about you. I know - tell me about when you were a boy and you did something very, very naughty."

He rumbled with laughter at her silly request, then thought for a while and said, "Very well. I will tell you the tale of when I got lost in a coal mine."

She looked at him with interest. "A coal mine? How on earth -? Did you accidentally wander into one and become lost?"

"Unfortunately, it was no accident. That is, I did not intend to get lost, but I did deliberately embark on wrongdoing. I was ten years old. My family had gone to visit Lord and Lady Fitzwilliam at their seat in Yorkshire, which is very vast. You have heard of Wentworth House?"

She nodded. Everybody knew of Wentworth House. It was the largest country house in the nation, built in the previous century by Darcy's great-great-uncle, the 1st Marquis of Rockingham, to be a Whig stronghold. It had been occupied since by his great-uncle, the 2nd Marquis of Rockingham, who had served twice as prime minister under George III, then by Lord Fitzwilliam, who had inherited it upon Lord Rockingham's death. It was so large it was said to have a room for every day of the year.

"We took with us my boyhood companion, George Wickham -"

"Mr. Wickham!" said Elizabeth in astonishment. "The Mr. Wickham whom I met? Did you not tell me he was a scoundrel of the worst kind?"

"Yes, that Mr. Wickham. He was not a scoundrel then. He lived with my family and was actually my dearest friend."

"Go on."

"It was summer, when Wentworth House is always full with visitors. My cousins, Viscount Milton and Richard were there, as were their cousins, the sons of the Earl of Bessborough, as well as the Lamb boys, Viscount Melbourne's sons. If I recall correctly, the Duke of Devonshire's children were also visiting, but they were girls or much younger than us so we took little notice of them. In any case, Lord Fitzwilliam was taking my father on a tour of his collieries and the older Lamb boys were invited to come along, but not us younger boys. We were told it was too dangerous and we were to stay away.

"That was enough for George. If you told him he could not do something, he immediately wished to do it. So that night, George hatched a scheme whereby he and I would steal two horses and hide them, then follow my father and his party on horseback until we came to the mines. We were up at dawn to steal the horses. We secured them on the moors, then came back to the house to make an appearance for breakfast. To cover our tracks, we wept and bemoaned the unfairness of not being permitted near the collieries - or at least George did. He did such an effective job that the ladies all took pity on us and plied us with extra treats."
He smiled in memory and Elizabeth smiled at how boyish it made him look.

"When my father and uncle departed in their carriage, George and I high-tailed it to our horses and followed. It was not a long ride; about half an hour or so. Their party entered one of the mine shafts. We snuck in behind them. We had torches and a little food and water. Unfortunately, we made a wrong turn and got lost and began wandering around in circles in the shafts. We were stupid boys and had not thought to bring anything that would lead us out of the mine. In retrospect, our stupidity was probably a good thing, because we never thought to panic. We simply wandered round and round for hours, arguing with each other over whether it was time to call for my father and uncle or not."

"What happened?"

"Eventually, I noticed there was a draft in the air and reasoned that if we could trace it to its source, we should be able to come to an egress. We were lucky and came to a place where there was daylight shining through the rocks. We dug our way out and found we were not more than half a mile from the horses. By then it was almost sundown. If we had been any more time, it would have been nightfall and we might have had more difficulty locating the opening in the rocks and would have been trapped the entire night, if not longer. So we were very lucky."

"Were you discovered?"

"No. We had no more harm come to us than two ruined suits of clothes. We were home late and missed dinner, of course, but claimed that we had got lost exploring the estate, which was actually quite a common occurrence due to its size. The servants likely suspected the truth because of our clothing, but George had said they would not dare question us because they would be in more trouble than we were if anybody found out they had failed to keep an eye on us. My parents never knew. If they had, my father would have tanned my hide for disobeying him. George probably would have got off scot-free, he always did." His face darkened, but then he shrugged and smiled. "As it was, we thought ourselves very fine and bold and lorded it over the other boys unmercifully for the remainder of the visit."

Elizabeth laughed. "And here I had pictured you as a proper, dutiful boy."

"And so I was, before George came to live with us. He did not like to follow rules, and when we became friends he often embroiled me in his schemes."

"You seemed so close. How did you become estranged?"

"That is a very long tale and parts of it are not fit for a lady."

"But I am not any lady, sir, I am your wife."

He shook his head as if casting off a bad memory. "One day, I will tell you perhaps." He smiled. "But I wish to hear about your childhood! Something naughty, please and thank you, madam. Perhaps a tale where you and Jane defied your parents' authority. From what your mother tells, it seems this was not an infrequent occurrence."

She smiled. "There is no tale where Jane defied my parents' authority, but I was certainly naughty enough for the both of us." She paused, pondering which tale to tell. "You know I cannot ride?"

"Yes, I have wondered why. I hope you do not dislike it as I was hoping you would agree to let me teach you."

"I do not dislike it at all. It is due to my wicked willfulness that I have not had the opportunity to
learn. When I was a child, I looked up to my father and wished to be exactly like him. When I was eight years old, my mother brought in a riding-master to teach me how to ride, as she had for Jane. It was important to her that we all had our share of proper female accomplishments. But when the time came to put me up, I refused to ride side-saddle. I wished to ride astride as my father did."

"And what happened?"

"My mother was very angry. She said I must learn how to ride as a lady did. I shrieked and kicked and refused to sit properly in the saddle. My mother appealed to my father. He should have whipped me for disobeying my mother, but instead he supported me and told her I did not have to do anything I did not wish to do. She became so angry that she dismissed the riding master. I was sorry immediately as I truly did wish to learn, but I was too stubborn to apologize so I never learnt to ride."

She sighed, thinking of her father's constant derision of her mother. It had given Elizabeth license to treat her with scorn as well, a fact she regretted now that she had had to bid her family farewell. She suddenly felt an uncharacteristic streak of sympathy for her mother. Perhaps she had gone into her marriage believing her husband would love her for the rest of her life, only to be disappointed. Then she noticed Darcy's fond look. "What are you smiling about?"

"I am imagining you as a little girl with your pony, all eyes and unruly curls."

"In a smart blue habit with matching hat and spotted veil?" she teased.

"Just so. He twisted the goblet again with a whimsical smile.

"I am sorry to disabuse you of such a pretty notion! I was actually a terrible hoyden, with muddy boots and torn skirts and dirty gloves. I was the bane of my mother's existence."

He chuckled softly. "I am not surprised. You were not so far from your past self when you arrived at Netherfield after your three-mile walk."

Elizabeth smiled consciously. "I wonder that you were so attracted. What does that say for the moral of the story when reprehensible conduct is so unjustly rewarded with the hand of a handsome and eligible young man? And here I had thought you were joined in scorn with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst over the 'six inches of mud' on my petticoat."

He smiled. "Ah, no. Do you not know that 'a sweet disorder in the dress'?

"...kindles in clothes a wantonness" she finished for him. She teased, "For shame, sir. I believe you have just called your wife a wanton."

"Indeed I did no such thing. But if I did, there may be some truth in it. Not" - he reached for her hand across the table and brought it to his mouth to kiss her knuckles - "that I am at all complaining. I believe I spent many nights at Netherfield dreaming of the sweet disorder of your dress - and how much I wished to disorder it further."

She blushed, then laughed at him over the rim of her wine glass. "I had no notion that you even thought of such things. Not until I found that Greek poem of yours and heard your deliberate mistranslation. You give a very proper appearance, Mr. Darcy."

"Protective colouring, Mrs. Darcy." He smiled at her.

Afterward, they sat on the giltwood sofa and told each other more stories from their childhood and recited verses from memory.
Elizabeth bent down to Darcy, lying with his head in her lap, and kissed him full on the mouth. He smiled up at her and responded:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{You are so fair, my love, you are so fair,} \\
\text{And your eyes are the eyes of the dove.} \\
\text{You are so fair, my love, and so pleasing} \\
\text{And our couch is soft and leafy.}
\end{align*}
\]

She laughed softly, for the sofa was covered in a leaf pattern. Then she ran her fingers slowly through his hair, marvelling at its silky thickness as it flowed through her fingers. He was so beautiful and she loved him so. What had she done to deserve such happiness? Surely it was a happy circumstance that had directed them to this hotel rather than continuing on the long road to Northamptonshire or stopping at some crude resting stop. No house, no castle could have been more special. Here they existed in their own private world, free from outside cares, with no friends or family to intrude. This would be their special place, she thought.

She asked him to tell her about his family. She knew about his sister, Georgiana, and knew that neither of his parents was living. He explained that his father had died over five years ago, and his mother when he was twelve years old.

"I had three other siblings - two brothers and a sister born between me and Georgiana. One of my brothers and the sister died before I had a chance to know them, but my youngest brother lived two months before he too passed. Their deaths were very hard on my mother, especially the youngest, but perhaps that was because I was old enough to remember that one vividly." He hesitated. "I suppose I did see George Wickham as a brother of sorts – for a time."

Elizabeth had difficulty fathoming how a relationship of such apparent intimacy could go so sour.

"How did Mr. Wickham come to live with you?"

"His father was my father's oldest friend. They had been friends in boyhood. Stanley Wickham was the son of a gentleman, but his family had fallen on hard times due to the profligacy of his father. Mr. Wickham - his father, that is - had trained in law, and when they lost their family wealth, he became my father's steward. George was his only child."

"And his mother? Did she approve of the arrangement?"

"I do not know, I never thought of it." He added, "She was not a very respectable woman. She was one of the reasons that Mr. Wickham brought George to live with us, I believe. He wished to remove him from his mother's influence. That, and my father had wished me to have a companion my own age, so it probably seemed to him to be providential. George was only a few months younger than me."

"How long did he live with you?" she asked.

"Quite a long time. I was eight years old when he came, and he was at Pemberley when my father died, when I was one and twenty years old."

"And you became close?"
"Very close. Especially after my mother died. My father mourned her very deeply and withdrew into himself and my sister was only a year old, so for a time it seemed like George was the main family I had."

Darcy remembered those days after his mother had been buried. Pemberley had been like a ghost manor, with impenetrably closed doors, black crepe everywhere and soft-footed servants creeping and whispering through the echoing halls. He had walled himself off in his bedchamber to relive his memories of his loving, golden-haired mother, while his father had retreated to his own study and posted servants at the corridor to his quarters to warn away visitors looking to disturb his solitude. Only Wickham had remained vital, alive, looking to connect with somebody.

***

_Pemberley, Derbyshire, approximately fifteen years earlier_

"Darcy? Darcy! I know you are in there. You cannot hide away forever."

"Go away."

"Open the door!" Wickham rattled the doorknob and pounded on the door. "Come on, Darcy. Do not leave me out here by myself. This place is a tomb. Come out for a ride. I want to go to Farmer Thomson's. He had a calf born with three legs."

"Go away, I said. Just go away!"

"No! Uncle George is locked in his study and I have not had word with anybody but stupid servants for three days! And Georgiana has been crying for two hours. The sound is driving me batty. That new nurse of hers is a slattern and has no idea how to handle her. Uncle George should dismiss her at once."

Georgiana. He had forgotten about his baby sister. How was she coping without a mother to hold her? With a father too stricken by grief to offer any comfort? Darcy raised his head from his desk and took a deep breath. He went to the door and opened it, just as Wickham was going to pound on it again.

Wickham smiled. "God, you look a snivelling mess. It is good to see you again. I was afraid you had died in there."

"No," he said, wiping his nose on his sleeve as he had not done since he was four years old. "How is Georgiana?"


"Let us go see her, then."

"Yes. And then after, how about that ride?"

"I must wash. And have something to eat. But afterward."

"Now you are talking sense."

Wickham threw his arm around Darcy's shoulder and the two boys walked down the hall to the nursery.

***
Elizabeth, wondering at the look of pain in Darcy's eyes, asked what he was thinking of. He looked at her and smiled. "Just ghosts of the past," he said. "Nothing to disturb us now." She ran her fingers through his hair again and delighted in how the look of heavy-lidded pleasure overtook his earlier melancholy.

Eventually, they drifted back to the bed-chamber and he took her again. Their second coupling was even better than the first. There was no longer much pain, only a lingering tenderness, and he was careful and gentle. Afterwards, beguiled by wine and firelight, she lay in blissful languor against the thick pillows, her head resting on his shoulder and her hand spread flat against his chest while he played with her fingers.

"Fitzwilliam?" Oh, how her tongue delighted in his name!

"Yes, my love?" He stroked the back of her hand dreamily.

"You have been with other women before?"

His hand stopped in mid-air and she felt his body stiffen slightly. "Yes," he said warily.

"How many were there?"

"It is not about numbers."

"Tell me."

"I really do not keep a running tally."

"Were there a great many?"

He did not answer; only sat up and took his arms away from her.

"Why will you not tell me?"

"There is nothing to tell."

"Please tell me. I promise I will not be upset. I am only curious."

"Elizabeth, this is not something that gentlemen discuss with their wives."

"Was there more than one other?"

He gave her an incredulous look.

"More than three?"

He shook his head, not in the negative, but as a horse shivers off flies, and got out of bed and began to pull on his trousers.

"More than five?" she pressed. Seeing him dressed and pacing the room, she retrieved her chemise and put it on. When he still did not answer, she ventured, "More than a dozen?"

He stopped pacing and looked at her. "Elizabeth, I am not discussing this with you!"

She ignored him. "Does that mean more than a dozen?" He had resumed his pacing and avoided her gaze.
"More than two dozen?" she gasped, and saw the barely perceptible shake of his head.

"Were you ever in love with any of them?"

The silence stretched on between them.

"Yes," he said at last.

As many as two dozen ladies, and he had been in love with some of them. She felt the fact sink in slowly and settle in the pit of her stomach. He had mentioned to her once that Bingley had an easy heart. It appeared that Bingley was not the only one.

"So what is so special about me?"

"Elizabeth, you are nothing like them."

"You mean I am not up to your usual taste?"

"No, that is not what I meant, do not be ridiculous!"

"Where did this occur?" she demanded, and caught the guilty, horror-filled flush that suddenly suffused his face.

A terrible suspicion bloomed in her mind. She recalled his servants' quickness in making arrangements at the hotel; the maidservants' elaborate and expert care; his facility in ordering everything exactly as he pleased; and his own words: I am a highly valued customer.

"You had them here?!"

She did not need a verbal answer. His stricken face said it all. He reached for her. "Elizabeth, please, I can explain-"

"Do not touch me!" She sprang back from his hand as if it would burn her. "Do not touch me ever again!" Darcy was rigid with shock as she backed away from him until she was at the door to the sitting room. By the time he recovered, she had opened the door and propelled herself through it and slammed it shut.

He heard the bolt of the latch thrown home, a sharp, metallic sound, the sound of finality.

It was his wedding night, and he was locked out.

***

Footnotes:

1 The 3rd Earl Fitzwilliam married Lady Anne Watson-Wentworth, daughter of the 1st Marquis of Rockingham, making the 2nd Marquis of Rockingham the 4th Earl Fitzwilliam's uncle. Darcy's "uncle" for the purpose of this fic is the 4th Earl.

2 The children referred to here are (1) the 5th Earl Fitzwilliam, Charles Wentworth-Fitzwilliam (1786-1857), Viscount Milton at the time of the story, and whose age I have advanced to make it fit with the conventionally accepted timeline for P&P; (2) the 4th Earl of Bessborough, John Ponsonby (1781-1847), then Viscount Duncannon, who was later to become an influential and respected politician despite the cruel sobriquet of Viscount Dumbcannon given to him due to his persistent stutter; (3) Major General Sir Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby (1783-1837), then the Hon. Frederick
Ponsonby, who survived terrible wounds at Waterloo; (4) Hon. Peniston Lamb (1770-1805), 24 at the time of this fic, who succumbed to sickness at age 35; (5) Hon. William Lamb (1779-1848), later 2nd Viscount Melbourne and a prominent politician, prime minister under Queen Victoria and husband of Lord Bessborough's only daughter, the notorious Lady Caroline Lamb; (6) Hon. Frederick Lamb (1782-1853), later the 3rd Viscount Melbourne and a prominent diplomat, who was about 12 at this time; and (7) Hon. George Lamb (1784-1834), later playwright, author and married to the Duke of Devonshire's illegitimate daughter by his later second wife. The other children present but too young or female for 10-year-old Darcy's notice include: Hon. William Ponsonby (1787-1855), Lord Bessborough's arrogant and tactless youngest son, who the Countess Cowper denominated "an ass and a jackanapes"; Lady Emily Lamb, later Countess Cowper (1787-1869), the most popular of Almack's Lady Patronesses and one of the most influential female political figures of the 19th Century; Lady Harriet Lamb (1789-1803), who died young; and the Duke of Devonshire's legitimate children Lady Georgiana Cavendish (1783-1858), later Countess Carlisle; Lady Harriet Cavendish (1785-1862), later Countess Granville; and William Cavendish (1790-1858), Marquis of Hartington until he became 6th Duke of Devonshire upon his father's death in 1811. In addition, there would be a number of illegitimate children of the Duke of Devonshire, who were raised with his legitimate children.

These were the leading Whig families of the day, and many were intermarried or associated by tight political affiliation and friendship and were frequent visitors to each other's homes. In particular, the heavily indebted Earl and Countess Bessborough stayed at Wentworth House for many months every year in an effort to save money on their own housekeeping, and the family of Lady Bessborough's sister, the Duchess of Devonshire, was in disarray due to the Duchess's recent exile to, then return from, France after her affair and love child with Charles Grey, later the 2nd Earl Grey.

3 Robert Herrick, "Delight in Disorder"


5 "The Song of Songs," translated by Sam Hamill

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Chapter End Notes

So I'm not trying to write an angsty story. If this is too much for some of you, you can let me know below, and I may post the next chapter a little earlier than usual. If you want to hate me, you can do that below too. For everybody else, I would be grateful for any comments, impressions, theories or analysis you want to offer, or if you just want to say hi. :)
Elizabeth clasped her arms around her knees and stared darkly into the fire of the sitting room.

Three times Darcy had tried the knob and called through the door. Each time she had pressed her hands over her ears and cried, "Go away!" over and over until he had stopped. She did not wish to hear what he had to say. She did not want to hear his *lies*.

It was her own fault. She should have known. How could a man so rich, so desirable, possibly content himself with one woman when he could have any for the asking? She had been a fool to think he could.

But he had treated her so well. He had been so kind, so gentle.

He must enjoy it, she told herself bitterly. Perhaps that was his specialty, to take maidens and introduce them to the pleasures of carnality. She had heard of such men. Once the maiden had lost her innocence and become as debauched as he, he would discard her and move on to the next budding flower.

But why had he married her then?

He must have known he could have her no other way. It was as her father had told her: she had made her disinclination toward him clear. Doubtless overcoming her resistance was a pleasant challenge for him. And she was a gentlewoman, just highly placed enough that he could not tempt her into sin with money alone. And, she thought wearily, he was at the age where he must find a wife to bear him sons. She was pretty enough and healthy enough and from a good enough family to be up to the task, a family that was not so powerful that it could make any protest to his treatment of her. Perhaps he had deliberately looked for a family with an indolent father and no brothers to defend her honour. Yes, it all made perfect sense now.

She pictured him lounging in a fashionable salon, a superior smile on his face as he listened to a beautiful Italian opera singer amaze the room. After the signora's performance, she would give him the glance that only they two knew the meaning of, and he would make his way up the stairs to her chambers to await her coming. She would come to him then, perfumed and clad in a sheer gown, and undress him with skillful fingers, whispering words of love to him in a voice no longer pure and soaring, but low and thrilling. And what would they talk of? Would she tease him about his stupid, ignorant country wife, waiting at home for him, perhaps heavy with his child?

Elizabeth savagely wiped away her tears. He was wrong if he thought she would simply lie back and accept it! What could she do? She knew what the women of *his* kind did. She would take one too!

She tried to picture herself with other men and failed. She did not want any other lovers. She only wanted *him*. No, she thought dully, she would have to return to her father's house. At least money would not be an issue. He was obligated to provide for her, and she thought he seemed honourable enough to do so with no protest. It was not as if he could not easily afford it.

She put her head down again. How ironic that she had once told Jane that she could not marry without *some* affection. If she did not love him so, none of this would matter. If she had not given him her heart, she would not care what he did with other women. She would be a happy bride, glorying in her fancy carriages and being the mistress of a grand estate.
Elizabeth wept into her knees, feeling sorry for herself.

***

Several hours later, in the dead of the night, the bolt slid back in the latch and Elizabeth entered the bed-chamber. Darcy, who had been sitting in one of the chairs by the fire, immediately stood up. He was dressed again, missing only his tailcoat. He watched as she walked over to the fire, her head high.

"I became cold," she said defiantly. "The fire in my room burnt down."

"You should have called a servant," he said.

"I did not know if I could call so late at night. I am not so well-versed in the workings of this hotel as you," she said as nastily as she could.

He said nothing to that and instead added more wood to the fire, sending a shower of sparks into the night.

"You are a profoundly stupid man," she said, facing him straight on. "If I were to have a love nest for my mistresses, I would certainly never take my wife there."

"It is not what you think," he said.

"Do you mean that you have never used this hotel for liaisons?" Hope briefly flared in her, even though she knew it would be a lie if he denied it.

"No, I am not saying that. I have brought a lady here."

"Well, then."

"It was a long time ago. I was not two and twenty. The reason I know this hotel so well is because the hotel proprietor was house steward to Lord Fitzwilliam before he was pensioned off. He keeps a well-trained staff and my family stay here frequently."

He glanced at her skeptical expression and added, "If you do not believe me, you can ask Georgiana when you meet her. She has stayed here often with me when we are on our way to Kent to visit our aunt, Lady Catherine."

So it had been many years and there had only been one, Elizabeth thought. Still, no doubt he had had a string of mistresses since. What did it matter if he entertained them at a hotel or his townhouse?

She sat down in one of the chairs and Darcy sat down in the other. She scrutinized his face, haggard and half hidden in shadow. He was looking at the fire rather than at her.

"Who was she?"

Darcy said, without looking at her, "Her name is Mary Castleton. Lady Castleton. She is a countess."

The name was vaguely familiar. Lord and Lady Castleton. It came up in society papers and scandal sheets that her aunt read from time to time, conjuring up a sense of great wealth and glamour. She tried to remember what she had read of Lady Castleton. Lady Castleton, the great society beauty. She felt a stab of anxiety.

"Did you love her?"

"At the time, I believed I did. Very much."
"What happened?"
He shrugged. "It did not end well. She was married. Is married." He corrected himself.

"When did you last see her?"

"You mean just see her and not speak to her? Last season. At some event." He shrugged again.

"Do you still love her?"
He looked at her, then away again. "No. I scarcely think of her. I did not truly love her anyway. I loved the woman I thought her to be. But it was not real. None of it was real." His voice was tired.

"And the others?"

"What about them?"

"Do you have a mistress now?"
He looked at her then, shocked. "Certainly not. Why would I be marrying if I had a mistress?"

She was pleased with his answer. It showed some ground of commonality between them. If the idea of having a mistress on his wedding day did not sit well with him, then some part of him valued the sanctity of his marriage vows. Elizabeth briefly wondered if she could ask him to promise never to take a mistress, but decided she was too afraid of the answer.

He sighed and slumped down in his chair. "I can see what you are thinking, but you are mistaken. I have not had an endless parade of lovers. You are actually the first woman I have been with in more than five years."

She looked up at him, unbelieving. His face was calm and did not flinch under her scrutiny. After a while she nodded in acceptance.

"So…can we lay this to rest now? It was a different time and I was a different person. I think that we are both tired and need sleep," Darcy said.

Elizabeth thought about it. She had what she wanted, did she not? Her husband was faithful to her in entering into marriage and did not appear to be the type to dabble. It appeared that all of his activities had happened a long time ago. Youthful indiscretions, Mrs. Gardiner would say. Best to let it lie.

He stood up and began closing the coloured glass fire screen for the night.

"Will you tell me about them?"
He shut his eyes and sighed, then opened them again. "Elizabeth, why must we go over something that will give us both pain? It is all past and done."

She studied the pattern on the carpet by her slippered toe. "I know this. It is only…I wish to know about you. I left my family for you - my father, Jane. You are...you are who my life will centre around now. Is it not natural that I wish to know who you are?"

His look was arrested. "And what if you do not like what you find out?"

She gave a small, rueful laugh. "I do not have a choice, do I? I am your wife now. I suppose I must learn to like it."
He gave her an odd, almost wistful smile. "Is that what marriage means to you?"

"Partly." She added quickly, "Within reason."

He crooked an eyebrow at her. "Within reason? You cannot guarantee me forgiveness for my sins if I confess?"

Her brow contracted quizically. "I am no priest, sir. Absolution is not within my power."

"Then why should I tell you anything?" His tone was light, but his eyes were challenging.

She met his gaze full on. "So that I know. So that somebody knows who you are. So that you can be close to somebody."

His eyes probed hers, but she did not flinch. After the space of several heartbeats, he looked away.

"It is a long story."

"I am not going anywhere."

"If I am to make you understand there are many things I will need to tell you that do not seem to be particularly related."

She nodded sagely. "A good setup is very important to a well-told tale."

"I will have to speak of things, bad things, of which you have no experience. You may find it upsetting or difficult to understand."

"I am familiar with fearful tales. Do you know, I used to read my Uncle Philip's law reports when he left them lying around? If you wish to learn about the extent of human depravity, I highly recommend this as a resource."

He smiled suddenly, sweetly. He said, "Very well. I will tell you." Then he looked over at her. She was pale and her eyelids drooped and her shoulders slumped in her thin chemise. "But not now. I think we both need to sleep."

"In the morning?" she said anxiously.

"It is morning now." The darkness was thinning in the early light of dawn. "When we wake. I promise."

"I am not sleepy," she said, but he could see that she was fighting to keep her eyes open.

"Of course you are not," he said soothingly, and led her to the bed. He tucked her in as if she was a child. The air was chilly but the sheets were cozy from the warming pans placed by the servants. She snuggled into them with a deep sigh, causing him to smile. Her eyelids drooped and her eyelashes fanned out against her cheeks and before long she was asleep.

He undressed quickly himself and slid in beside her, but did not take her in his arms. As soon as his own head hit the pillow, he felt exhaustion overtake him and closed his eyes against the light of the new day.

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Footnotes:
Not to be confused with a land steward. A house steward was considered a senior servant and oversaw the running of the household and managed the male servants. His function was often served by a butler, and only in the largest households was there need for both a house steward and a butler. A land steward, by contrast, managed the estate and was considered a professional, similar to an attorney or a physician, and in fact many land stewards were trained as attorneys or agricultural surveyors. Their relative status was reflected in their pay -- a house steward was paid about the same as a butler, £30 to £100 a year, while a land steward typically made about 4% of the rents under management. On an estate generating £10,000 a year, that would be £400 a year.

Servant life was not conducive to raising a family, and many servants chose to depart service when they settled down with children. Upon departure, a good employer often provided an excellent servant with a sum of money or a pension to start their new life, and a popular choice was for servants to leverage the skills they learnt looking after the wealthy by opening an inn or hotel. In such case, the servants would often use their previous service to a nobleman or major gentry as a selling point in newspaper advertisements and trade cards.

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The Morning After

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the lateness of this chapter! Just real life crazy as usual, but it got a bit silly in the last few weeks.

Elizabeth woke in the early morning, cold. The cover had slipped off. She looked over at Darcy, sleeping beside her about an arm's length away. He was on his back with one arm flung over his face. He was warm, she thought, remembering the glorious feeling of his arms holding her, his bare skin against hers.

She scooted across the bed and cuddled up to him, nestling against the side of his shirt-clad body. At her touch, he turned over and pulled her into his arms. She sighed with sleepy contentment against the fine, soft linen of his shirt, then closed her eyes, still tired.

Darcy was rousing, however. His hands roamed up and down her body and settled on her bottom. "Elizabeth," he said hoarsely. "God, I want you."

For a moment or two, she submitted to his caresses, but when he rolled on top of her and began gathering up the hem of her chemise, something in her rose in protest. "No. We are not yet clear."

"I am sorry," she whispered, her hands on his shoulders. "I am feeling a little tender there …"

Darcy stilled, then rolled off her and pulled her chemise down again, giving her a little pat. "Of course, my love. I was not thinking."

She nestled against him again. "You could still hold me?" she offered.

"Of course." His arms went around her.

She closed her eyes again, reassured. Always the gentleman. It was her last conscious thought as she drifted back to sleep.

Darcy sighed, holding Elizabeth and trying not to be aware of every enchanting dip and curve of her sweet body and what he wished to do to it. He forced himself to lie still so as not to disturb her and made himself recite the names of all of the MPs in the House of Commons by county and franchise. It took a long time, but eventually his arousal faded and he went back to sleep.

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When Elizabeth next woke, Darcy was sound asleep, lying on his stomach beside her. She regarded him with some contrition. She had not been entirely fair the night before, demanding he tell her about his past, promising not to get upset, then becoming upset and making terrible accusations. But he had not seemed angry. He had been…sweet. And a little melancholy. What did he have to be melancholy about? Did he not have everything - fortune, figure, connexions?

She slid out from under the silk sheets, parted the velvet bed hangings and padded softly to the dressing room to begin preparing for the day.
As the maid brushed and twisted her hair up, she thought about her husband. He was a deep and intricate character to be sure! At their initial meeting, he had seemed arrogant and disdainful, but as they had become better acquainted, she had been delighted by his intelligent and playful side. As a husband and a lover, he had been patient and tender - if occasionally impetuous, Elizabeth smiled to herself.

She considered what she knew of his past - many lovers, but five years since he had been with a woman. It was not, she reflected, because he lacked interest, for he seemed to be a man of strong passions. What had caused him to turn away from women? She thought of Lady Castleton. I was not two and twenty. Yes, that was five years ago; he was twenty-seven now. Lady Castleton must have broken his heart, she concluded.

What was she like, this rich, married beauty who had so captured a young Darcy's devotion? A woman of loose passions who could not be satisfied with her husband? A sophisticated society queen who enjoyed toying with the hearts of young men? Or - worst of all - someone who had truly loved Darcy as he had loved her, but had had to break it off due to her own impossible situation?

Elizabeth resolved to pay greater attention henceforth to the name Castleton when it appeared in the newspapers.

Left alone by the maid, she looked critically at her reflection in the glass. How would she compare among the society beauties of the day, whose charms were continuously extolled, whose charms Darcy, at one time, had perhaps sampled with liberality? Were they really such goddesses as described, or was it only the pedestal of wealth that elevated them to their celestial sphere? What did they offer that she could not? What did they know that she did not?

She lifted her eyes to her own gaze in the glass and smiled, banishing the look of thoughtful contemplation with a spark of mischief. After all, she was not so very ignorant and helpless. If he was ahead of her, she would catch up. Her father had always praised her for her quickness.

By the time Darcy woke, she was fresh and smiling and dressed in a pretty gown. She greeted him with a kiss and informed him that she had ordered breakfast and would meet him in the sitting room when he was ready. Darcy, a little bemused, left to perform his morning ablutions.

By the time he entered the sitting room, she was drinking coffee and reading The Times. She looked up when he entered and was pleased to see his gaze linger on her, and especially the daring bodice of her gown, which was normally worn with a fichu to cover her bosom, and which she had elected to omit this morning. He averted his eyes and picked up The Morning Chronicle.

He sat down on her couch an arm's length away from her and unfolded his newspaper, but before he began reading it, he explained that he had spoken to his coachman. They could leave this hotel immediately, he said, and if they travelled very steadily with few stops they ought to reach Northamptonshire only a few hours after nightfall.

"Oh!" said Elizabeth. "That is not necessary. I am not upset about that any longer."

"No, I should never have taken you here," he spoke gravely. "It was not an appropriate place to take one's wife on her wedding night. You will find my house in Northamptonshire much more to your liking, I think."

Perversely, Elizabeth felt no relief, only irritation that he thought her sensibilities were so fragile that she could no longer tolerate what was, by all appearances, an excellent hotel. "As you wish," she shrugged. Recovering her bravado, she added brightly, "I thought we could continue our conversation of last night."
He looked wary, but nodded in assent. "Yes, I believe I promised you information."

"You did, but I think the proposition was not entirely fair," she smiled, her newspaper now ignored in her lap. "It is too one-sided. After all, if I am going to demand that you tell me about your exploits, do you not think that I should be willing to regale you with tales of my exploits?"

"Your exploits!"

The range of emotions that crossed his face was so ludicrously transparent she almost laughed aloud. She could see him recalling the events of the day, wondering if he might have been mistaken in believing her to be a maiden.

"Yes, my exploits." She smiled saucily, placed the newspaper on the table and tucked her legs under her skirts on the couch as she turned to face him. "You surely did not think that I would reach the seasoned age of twenty with such an array of charms and have no conquests? Why, I would not be surprised if my achievements outshine yours in the end."

She ignored the confusion and suspicion on his face and took a delicate sip of her coffee. "It all began when I was ten years old and had fixed my affections on the vicar's nephew, who was visiting one summer and who at eleven was well on the way to being in love with Jane. But Jane did not want him; she did no more than seek to escape every time he sought to accost her. So I became his friend and confidante, and before the summer was out he had pledged his heart to me and sealed it with a chain of daisies woven specially for me."

Darcy's look of suspicion had relaxed into a smile. "Ah. Those kinds of exploits. For a moment, I had thought - but no matter. I surmise that you kept the daisy chain forevermore?"

"Indeed, it is a cherished layer of dust at the bottom of my wooden box of treasures. But that was only the beginning."

Darcy lifted his eyebrows at her questioningly and she smiled in return and continued.

"My next conquest was the cause of a minor scandal. Every spring, the village boys and some of the girls would gather to play cricket on the common near Longbourn and I liked to join them when I could. I was quite an accomplished cricketer, and therefore generally welcomed. One day, I batted fifteen runs to bring us to victory and the captain, who was the blacksmith's son, ran over and threw his arms around me and kissed me on the lips. Yes, you should be surprised," she said at Darcy's expression, "shocked, even. For I was; so shocked that I could not think of anything else to do but kiss him back - in full view of the vicar's wife, whose garden backed onto the green. Unfortunately, she then told my father, and I was barred from further cricket."

"I am not the only man to kiss you, then," he said in mock horror, entering into the spirit of the play.

"Far from it, I am afraid. You might be the tenth or the twelfth, but it is hard to say; kissing games and mistletoe were common, and the Bennet girls were popular targets. So I am afraid I did not go into marriage quite the untouched maiden."

"Madam, you break my heart."

"Oh, I hope not; if it is as fragile as that, it will surely not survive what I have to say next."

Darcy raised another eyebrow at her, unsure if he should be amused or concerned.

"You were not the first man I would have agreed to marry either."
"Mrs. Darcy," he growled, in real disapproval this time. "Who was he?"

"His name was Mr. Peabody. Somebody Peabody; I never caught his first name. He was a shipbuilder's agent and did business with my uncle. I was fifteen years old and visiting with Mr. Gardiner, and Mr. Peabody would come to the house sometimes on business and twice stayed to dine. He was very tall and handsome, like you" - she gave him a cheeky smile - "and he drove a dashing curricle. He had sailed the world before settling on land, and he told of distant shores and strange societies.

"I wrote him poetry," Elizabeth said dreamily. "which I signed Elizabeth Peabody. I did not give it to him, of course, but my Aunt Gardiner discovered it one day and Mr. Peabody was not invited to the house again. She told me only that he was a little wild in his private life, but I found out later that he had a mistress, a foreign woman brought from the colonies."

"May I see this poetry?" Darcy asked, his tone carefully neutral.

"Certainly not!" Elizabeth said sharply. "I burnt it long ago, shortly after that episode."

"I suppose you have not written poetry about me," Darcy said jealously.

"No, I have not. And you should be thankful too, for my poetry was truly wretched. I am ashamed to admit, but I rhymed violet with pirate." She shuddered, then smiled. "I decided after that it was best if I left the writing to others."

Darcy crossed his arms. "What else?" he demanded.

"Really, sir, you cannot expect me to detail every encounter! Suffice it to say that I eventually came to understand my arts and allurements and use them to some effect on the young men of Meryton and surroundings. I cannot tell you how many times I was told that so-and-so acknowledged me to be a 'charming girl. Nothing to the elder Miss Bennet, of course, but with such a winning way."

"Hmf. I can well believe it. I have felt the power of your 'arts and allurements' from the first."

"Did you?" She arched a questioning eyebrow at him. "Not consciously on my part, I assure you. I had already determined from your unpleasantness at the Meryton Assembly that you were not a man I wished to know better."

"I was not? You laughed at me and teased me."

"To avoid showing I was angry at you," she pointed out.

"Did you not seek out my company?"

Her forehead knit in confusion, then cleared. "Ah - yes, but only because you had my book."

"Before that, I mean." When she still looked confused, he added, "Why did you come to Netherfield if you did not wish to see me?"

She gave him an indignant look. "For Jane, of course."

"Jane only?"

"Of course, Jane only!" she cried. In a calmer tone, she added, "Mr. Darcy, I will not deny that my feelings for you eventually enjoyed a great revolution in sentiment, but I can assure you I did not walk to Netherfield in hopes of encountering you, only my sister."
For a moment, Darcy looked disappointed. Then he said, more hopefully, "Some of the gowns you wore while at Netherfield were very pretty. Were they not designed to catch a gentleman's eye?"

"One would not wish to look less than one's best under the very discerning eyes of Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley," she said primly.

"So you were thinking of the judgment of Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley only?" he said skeptically.

"Yes," she replied firmly.

"For every gown?"

"Most definitely."

"Even the pale yellow one that you wore for dinner the night we quarreled over Bingley's good nature? The yellow gown with the ribbons?"

Elizabeth suddenly coloured. Her yellow gown with pleated ribbons across the bodice was a daring concoction that never failed to attract her admiring glances and which she had, indeed, chosen to wear that evening, knowing that the gentlemen would be dining at home.

Seeing her hesitation, Darcy lifted his eyebrows, smiling a little. "Elizabeth?"

"It…it is not what you think," she stammered, her face hot.

"No?" he inquired.

"Very well, I did wear that gown for you! You had spoken so unkindly of all of the ladies at the assembly that I wanted to show you that the ladies of the ton do not hold the entire monopoly on charm."

He smirked and moved closer to her on the couch. "So you did care for my good opinion."

"Yes, but I was not seeking to please you. I wished to - to annoy you."

He smiled broadly and caressed her thigh with his hand. "I am very sorry to inform you, but I did not feel the least bit annoyed at the sight. Rather the opposite, in fact."

She looked at him with dislike. "Your behaviour at the time was unpardonable and merited the severest reproof."

"Oh, indeed," he agreed, his other hand now caressing her bare arm. "And if you wish to mete out further reproofs of that nature, I would bear them most willingly."

He leant in to kiss her, but she turned her head and batted his hands away, though playfully so he did not take offence. "You really are the most conceited man," she said, smiling.

"And you really are the most provocative woman," he retorted. But he did not attempt to touch her again, and instead laid one arm along the back of the couch, facing her.

"Now, sir, do not think you will be let off so lightly as that! You promised me information, and I am determined that you shall keep your promise. I have told you my story, so I think some reciprocation is in order."

For a moment, Darcy looked resistant, then capitulated. "Very well," he sighed. "What do you wish to know?"
"To begin with, how many?"

He leant back on the couch and looked up at the ceiling. "I told you, I do not keep an exact tally."

"Surely you can count."

He looked at her shame-faced. "Yes, but I am not certain I can remember."

"Ah," she said, clarity dawning. "You were drunk, then?"

"Quite."

"Every time?" she queried.

"Not on every occasion, of course, but enough of them."

"These were not women of the ton, then?"

"No, except for the one - Lady Castleton."

"I see," she said, though she did not entirely.

"It was mostly when I was at Cambridge," he confessed. "I was very wild for my first years there. My friends and I would go to London to gamble or Newmarket for the races, and we often met women there."

"And you have truly not been with any other woman in five years?"

"Truly, I have not."

Elizabeth, her arm propped up on the couch, leant her cheek against her hand, smiling.

"You are not upset?" he looked at her.

"No, I understand that is normal for men of your station."

"What station is that?" He was bemused.

"The peerage, and those connected to it?"

"Is that how you see me? My father was a mere gentleman."

"Not a mere gentleman. And your mother was the daughter of an earl and the niece of a marquis. And not any earl and marquis, but the most renowned in the land."

He traced a line on the soft skin of her forearm and said, slowly, "True, but neither my uncle nor my great-uncle espoused the licentiousness practiced by some of their rank. Nor did my mother. I have often wondered if she sought to flee from it, marrying my father."

"Did your father also disapprove, then?"

The corner of his mouth lifted, but his smile was abstracted, as if his thoughts were elsewhere. "Oh yes, he disapproved of it very heartily," he said. "We were always quite careful to keep it concealed from him."

"We?"
"Wickham and I."

His eyes met her curious expression and he continued in a serious tone, "I suppose it is not fair for me to blame my dissipation on Wickham, but I do blame him somewhat. I have often wondered what my life would have been like had he not been part of it."

***

*Trinity College,* Cambridge University, approximately eight years earlier

"Come, Darcy, leave off your books for a minute. This is important."

Darcy sighed and, suppressing mild irritation at the interruption, sat back from where he was bent over the mathematical tomes neatly laid across his desk.

"What have you done now?"

Wickham, who had let himself into Darcy's chambers moments ago, flung himself onto his friend's couch and helped himself from the tray of biscuits and other refreshments that Darcy's manservant-of-all-work, Parker, liked to keep his master's chambers supplied with.

"Not *what,* Darcy. Who." He chewed slowly, then said, after a pause for dramatic effect. "Polly Plimmer."

"Mrs. Plimmer from the George?" said Darcy, surprised. Mrs. Plimmer was the wife of the owner of the George and Dragon, a tavern located in nearby Chesterton, which many students frequented for its picturesque public houses and friendly billiards halls. No such amusements were permitted within Cambridge town lines, where the proctors and bulldogs -- as the university constabulary were called -- reigned.

"Yes, pretty Polly Plimmer. I went for a pint with Badger and ended up pledging my troth to Polly over a private barrel in the cellar. The lads will have to drink my health tonight."

"Mrs. Plimmer," said Darcy thoughtfully, then asked, "Do you think Old Plimmer knows that his wife is not faithful?"

Wickham shrugged. "He should. If he does not know, he is an idiot."

"They have not been long married, I thought." He felt a little sorry for Old Plimmer, who was good-natured and more tolerant of Cambridge students' antics than some of the other tavern owners, and who clearly doted on his much younger and high-spirited wife.

"Long enough to tire of being leg-shackled to that Old Shambles," Wickham grinned. "Surely you have noticed her making eyes at you. She even asked if you would be joining me. Why you have not taken advantage of it, I do not know."

"Perhaps I did not enjoy the thought of Old Plimmer serving us all poisoned ale the next time we visit," Darcy said dryly.

"Polly can keep a secret," Wickham assured him. "In any case, I doubt she has a care for *you* now, after the thorough going-over I gave her. You've missed your chance."

"I would not be involved with a married woman anyway," Darcy said with disapproval.

Wickham raised his eyebrows. "Always the dutiful son, Darcy?" he jeered affectionately. "Well, it is
easy to be choosy when you are the heir to Pemberley and all the women know it. But truly, I cannot think what you would be without me. I can see you now, half-strangled by your neckcloth with your nose buried in a book and ignorant of the touch of a woman."

Darcy bristled. "I cannot think what you would be without me. Up to your neck in gaming debts, no doubt."

Wickham laughed. "I admit, you have saved my skin on occasion. It can be damned hard keeping track of those cards when you have had a few too many. I really do not know how you do it, nobody does."

Darcy's indignation dissipated under Wickham's words of praise. "I have a knack, I suppose," he shrugged modestly.

"You with cards, and I with women," Wickham grinned. "Speaking of which, I am a little light in the funds. As a gentleman, I felt I ought to make Polly a present for the repair of her gown. I don't suppose you can see your way clear to --?"

Darcy reached around into the pocket of his tailcoat, which hung on the chair, extracted a full purse and threw it to Wickham, who caught it handily.

"Leave twenty," he said. "Lamb is having a sizing party in his chambers tonight, and we are playing whist after."

Wickham transferred notes and coins to his own pockets, then threw the purse back to Darcy. "Many thanks, you are a good friend."

"As are you."

Wickham gave him a warm smile, full of charm. "We have been friends for a long time, have we not? What did we used to say when we were children? Friends to the end? Brothers for life?"

Darcy smiled back. "Something like that."

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Footnotes:

1 It was not unusual for girls to play cricket, and Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is described as enjoying cricket and baseball as a girl. Cricket in the late 18th / early 19th Century was still evolving from its roots in lawn bowling, and was a more genteel sport than it is now. For one thing, no (fast) overarm bowling was permitted, and even side-arm bowling was controversial. Nobody bothered with protective equipment either.

2 Both London and the Newmarket racecourses were popular destinations for Cambridge students, much to the chagrin of the proctors and tutors who sought to uphold a strict morality among their charges. London, 51 miles away according to the 1803 edition of *Paterson's Roads*, was easily reachable by coach services that ran several times a day and through the night, while Newmarket at 13 miles away was an easy jaunt by horse or private carriage. The letters of Viscount Melbourne's family members show that the older brothers who had graduated from Cambridge would occasionally take pity on a younger sibling and drop in at their alma mater to take him to the Newmarket races.

3 Trinity was the largest of Cambridge's 16 colleges at the time, with 548 members, according to *The
New Cambridge Guide by M. Watson, published in 1804. Trinity and St. John's, the next largest with 465 members, attracted the bulk of the wealthy and connected students. The other colleges were much smaller, all with less than 150 students.

Cambridge University's charter gave it unusual control over the town of Cambridge, including the ability to prohibit amusements deemed corrupting to the morals of the students and raid houses suspected of gambling and vice. Nevertheless, the students found their outlets in the village of Chesterton a mile north, and the nearby "rookeries" of Barnwell and Castle End, notorious for the availability of women of ill-repute. At Cambridge, venereal disease was colloquially referred to as "Barnwell ague."

Provisions from college kitchens were referred to as "sizings," hence the Cambridge appellation for charity students, who ate after the other classes of students in the Commons or dining hall, as "sizars." A sizing party was Cambridge lingo for a potluck dinner. For a small fee, students could send the college servant boys known as "gyps" to the kitchen to get them sizings.

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"So you did not have liaisons with married women?" asked Elizabeth, skeptically.

"No, that was something Wickham did. I am not proud of my conduct, Elizabeth, but I did have limits. Wickham did not."

"How do you explain Lady Castleton, then? Was she not married?"

"It was a mistake. I believed her to be estranged from her husband. As soon as I discovered my error, I ended it."

"Oh!" She had assumed he had had a more prolonged affair. "How long did it last?"

"Two days."

"At this hotel?" He flushed, then nodded. "How many times?"

"Elizabeth! It is not about numbers." At the look of disappointment on her face, he added, "Twice."

An imp in her brain said, You are tied with Lady Castleton. But his answer was a relief. Truly, his relationship with Lady Castleton had been quite trifling; even if he loved her - very much, he had said, though Elizabeth would not dwell on it now - he had not had her for long.

"Was it in this room? This suite?" Her gesture took in their immediate surroundings.

Darcy sighed. "Yes, it was, once. These were her chambers. The other time was in mine."

"You took her here, then? You did not meet here?"

He only nodded in reply, but Elizabeth was too absorbed with these tidbits of detail to register his deep mortification. So he had brought her here, but they had occupied separate rooms. An intended elopement gone awry? A wife fleeing with her lover who, at the last moment, could not stomach the loss of all respectability and standing? But no - he had said that he had ended it, not her. A glamorous noblewoman, then, intent on seducing Darcy with her sex and experience, and resisted by him, except those two times when he could not help himself.

"Elizabeth," he said in distress, breaking into her thoughts. "I was foolish to bring you here, but I would not have you feel that these rooms are tainted with association. It was but a brief encounter,
one I have largely forgotten. I had put it so far out of my mind, in fact, that it did not occur to me even upon entry into these rooms again. If anything, I think of Georgiana in them, for they are her favourite and I take them for her when they are available."

He reached for her, tentatively, then let his breath out when she did not withdraw from his touch and laced his fingers through hers. Elizabeth looked down at their clasped hands, then up at his face.

"You wish me to draw comfort from the fact that we spent our wedding night in chambers you associate with your sister rather than your former lover?" She arched one eyebrow, then smiled and said with real humour, "I am not so certain that is an improvement."

Darcy chuckled with relief and Elizabeth laughed with him.

"The truth is," he smiled, "I was not thinking of anything but you, and how I might bed you as soon as possible. It was stupid and thoughtless of me, and I fully deserve your ire - yet still I cannot bring myself to regret even a moment of what happened. You were" - his finger brushed her knuckle and his voice dropped to a husky tone that thrilled her - "very beautiful that first time."

At his words, she blushed. "Was I?" she said tremulously.

"The most beautiful thing I have ever seen," he said earnestly. "So innocent and sweet, yet at the same time so natural and graceful and womanly. I - I cannot describe it."

She shifted closer to him. "I like your description," she said.

"And then the second time," he smiled in reminiscence, a little misty-eyed. "I thought you were lovely in my dreams, but they paled to the reality like the moon to the sun."

She entered the ambit of his arms. "What will you say about the third time?" she asked.

He smiled and traced the curve of her cheek with his finger tenderly. "That it gave me new dreams. Dreams and visions to fill all my waking years, until I am an old, old man."

Elizabeth laughed softly, leaning toward him. "Or conversely, it might be an awkward business, something best forgotten by both of us."

He pulled her toward him by the waist until she fell against him. "We will not know until it happens, will we?" he whispered against her lips.

Then he kissed her, teasing her lips with his and coaxing her mouth open. She sighed and melted into his body. She loved kissing him. She thought she might be content to sit there and kiss him forever.

But he was already working on the back of her gown, fingers releasing the buttons one by one until he could slip it from her shoulders. Dexterously, he untied the laces of her stays until they, too, fell away. So might he have undressed a dozen women, she thought. And Lady Castleton in this very room. But it was only an idle thought, one that did not hurt when he was here with her now, his clean-shaven cheek smooth and cool against hers, his hands touching her through her chemise.

"How do you feel, Elizabeth? I suppose you must still feel tender…?" He whispered in between kisses.

"No, I - I am well." But it was not entirely true. He had been very gentle and attentive so that any pain seemed to be swallowed up by excitement and pleasure, but afterward she had been sore.

He heard her hesitation. "There is no need to do anything you do not wish. Only tell me what you
like."

She nodded gratefully. He pulled her into his lap and, though she could feel his growing excitement, continued kissing and touching her languorously, making no move to advance their activities any further. After a while, however, when she felt the quicksilver delight flowing in her veins and desire unfurling in her like a flag, he broke off their kiss.

"What are we -?"

"Shhh," was all he said. He tipped her out of his lap on to the couch and gently pushed her to lie down. When he put both hands on her thighs to slide up the silk of her chemise and lowered his mouth to her thighs, she blushed in excitement and anticipation, knowing what was coming. It was strange that such a thing could give her so much pleasure, and even stranger that it seemed to give him pleasure. But soon, all thoughts were driven out of her mind as she trembled and trembled again, then finally shuddered with bliss.

"Do you enjoy it?" she asked him curiously a few moments later, when she had caught her breath. Her legs were splayed, her chemise revealingly wadded up under her armpits, but she found she no longer cared.

He was staring at her body, his eyes hungry, but at her words, he looked at her.

"Yes," he said with a little smile.

"Why?"

"I enjoy touching you," he reached out and cupped her bare breast with his hand, brushing the velvety tip lightly, "and seeing you when you experience pleasure. The sounds you make, the taste of you…it is intoxicating."

He looked at her nakedness intently for another moment, then drew her chemise down over her breasts and belly, covering her again.

"Are you done with me now?" she asked, disappointed.

"It is easier to resist you when I cannot see you."

She sat up and saw the telltale protuberance in his trousers, which he had been touching when he had looked at her nakedness.

"Why must you resist me? You do not appear to be satisfied."

She reached for him, only to have her hands arrested. He squeezed her hands with his.

"Elizabeth, please. I would not injure you for the world, but it is very hard - very difficult to restrain myself after a certain point. Even if I know it is for the best."

Her eyes widened. "A man's desire could be such that he would take a woman against his own will, his own reason?" The idea...thrilled her.

"No! No, a man can always restrain himself. That is never an excuse. I mean only that you are particularly difficult to resist."

"But I only want to see you. You have seen me. It does not seem fair."

Her eyes, wide and curious, pleaded with him. He had never been able to resist the power of her
eyes, nor did he want to in such a matter. She was his wife; she had never seen a man before him; of course she wished to examine and explore. It was one of the things he loved about her. All that was asked of him was his duty as a gentleman to treat her gently and with honour so that she learnt the joy of intimacy between a man and a woman free from pain or fear.

He released her hands and nodded slowly and she rewarded him with a dazzling smile. Tentatively, she slipped the first button of his trousers open, her eyes lifting to his for approval. He tried to smile at her, but was distracted by the plump ruby fullness of her lip, caught between white teeth. Desire reared in his tumescent flesh and he closed his eyes and breathed deeply until it was again contained.

She had released all of the buttons on the fall of his trousers, but finding her view blocked by the material of his shirtsleeves, was determined to divest him of that too. He cooperated to let her lift it over his head, and then he was open to her view.

"It seems very large," Elizabeth said wonderingly. "I do not know how you are able to fit it inside me."

The memory of her hot flesh caressing his as he had fit it inside her struck Darcy with a force that rendered him momentarily speechless. He could only squeeze his eyes shut and dig his fingers into the fabric of the couch. Would her examination never end?

Then he felt the touch of her fingertip, feather-light. His eyes flew open.

"Elizabeth," he said urgently, trying to keep the undignified plea from his voice. "Elizabeth, what are you doing?"

"I only want to see what it feels like," she said innocently, her fingers fluttering lightly all over him. She added in a wondering tone, "It is so soft. The skin of it, I mean. Underneath it is very hard."

Rock hard. Diamond hard. Mountain-blasting-explosive hard, his seed already leaking out of the tip to relieve the impossible pressure. He wondered if he ought to throw her hands off now. And yet...she was so softly eager, her cheeks pink, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Could he contain himself for just a few moments longer to allow her to satisfy her curiosity? No, this was too much to ask of any man.

He opened his mouth, but before any words could come out, her hand wrapped around him fully, soft flesh meeting warm soft flesh.

"Oh God," he moaned, and covered his eyes with one hand as she stroked him tentatively, then more firmly when he did not protest. He moaned and moaned again. "Oh God, Elizabeth. Yes. Yes."

He was undone. He accepted that now. He was going to spend indecently into her hand, and likely all over her, and would have to explain to his shocked and innocent wife what had just happened. His acceptance of this mortifying fate brought a sense of relief. The sweet torture would soon be over.

Just as the tension drew to a head, when his body had just about committed to the great leap, she suddenly...stopped.

He uncovered his eyes and looked at her in agony. Why had she stopped? He saw her lift her chemise and pull it over her head, her firm, lithe body writhing sensually as she freed herself of the delicate garment. What was she doing? Did she think he needed more stimulus than he was already receiving?

She flew into him, her body silken in his arms. His hands went immediately to her gloriously pert,
"I want to feel my skin against yours," she explained.

"Does this mean you are not so sore there? That you are ready to continue?" He tried to say it tenderly and patiently, and not with the desperation that he really felt. A gentleman did not rush a lady no matter how badly he wanted to, or what unspeakable things he wanted to do to her.

"Mmm, I am not certain yet," she murmured, kissing him. "Maybe."

Maybe? She was naked in his arms, knees on either side of him, adorably plump breasts pressed to him while she slid warmly against his turgid appendage and...maybe?!

"I think I am ready. But you said we should not rush. It is no trouble for you to wait, is it?"

Only in the sense that madness might be considered trouble, he thought. But he smiled at her, trying not to grit his teeth. "Of course not, my love."

She continued moving against him, her sighs turning into whimpers and moans. Of course! That was his only hope at this point, to make her desire for him reach even a fraction of what he felt for her. To that end, he attacked her breasts with his mouth, lapping and sucking, while his fingers sought the point of bliss between her thighs. Soon enough, she was keening her enjoyment, writhing erotically in his lap. He was just about to decide that there was no shame in finding release outside of a woman, not when one was pushed to the furthest extremity, when the opening of her flesh found the point of his.

Oh.

"Ohhhh," Elizabeth breathed as she slid down slowly, torturously, then raised herself to do it again. "Oh. Oh. Ohhhhhhh."

Darcy, slack-jawed at the exquisite sensations enveloping every inch of him, stared at the sight of his wife labouring on top of him. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her cheeks rose-pink and her head thrown back in ecstasy, while her breasts and body glowed with the sheen of her efforts. Damn the dreams of his old age, he thought. The vision would rouse a saint from the dead.

He shut his eyes swiftly, forcing himself to think of other things so he could prolong both Elizabeth's rapture and his own. Thankfully, she paused for a moment, and when he opened his eyes it was to see her taking the pins out of her hair and combing it out with her fingers to make the silken tresses fall around her shoulders. She smiled at him, and for a moment he stared at this new vision of loveliness. Then she began to move again, tentatively at first and then with more determination, and he was forced to shut his eyes to avoid the overpowering image. It was only when he felt her fingers dig convulsively into his shoulders and heard a change in her gasping cries that he trusted himself to open his eyes again.

She was close, so unbelievably close, her breath coming in ragged sobs. He reached out again to find that magical spot and was rewarded with a loud "Oh!" from her when he found it. She drove herself hard onto him once, twice, thrice, before her body convulsed and he felt her spasming all around him. It was too much.

"Oh God, Elizabeth!" His voice was a shout as he clasped her hips in both hands and forced them down against himself.

"Oh, Fitzwilliam," she sobbed against his neck as the shudders that wracked her body gradually eased. "Oh, oh, oh."
For a long moment they sat there, clasped damply in each other's arms. At last, she raised her head and they looked at each other.

"Did we ruin the couch?" she asked anxiously.

He kissed her tenderly and lifted the damp tendrils from her face and neck. "It does not matter," he reassured her. "The hotel can find another couch. I am buying this one to take back to my dressing room at Pemberley."

She laughed and hid her face against his neck.

He held her close and kissed her again. "Do you wish to travel today, my love? If you are in no hurry to leave, I will tell my men to stand down for the day."

She smiled at him beatifically. "I think I would like to stay. I am very tired all of a sudden."

Though he was not in the habit of napping mid-day, Darcy thought he too would enjoy a rest. Stripping the rest of his trousers off and kicking them aside, he stood up with Elizabeth still in his arms and carried her to the bed in the next room. Then dressing himself in the bare minimum for decency, he opened the door to speak to the servant posted there. The man nodded in comprehension and, Darcy thought, the barest hint of amusement. But what did it matter to him? It was his honeymoon.

He found his way back to the bed where Elizabeth was curled up, almost asleep. When he got into bed next to her, she nestled against him and said, smiling sleepily, "You know, Fitzwilliam, you had me three times in two days here, and Lady Castleton only twice."

Lady who? But he only said agreeably, "Yes, my love." The way he felt at that moment, he suspected he would be equally amiable if somebody told him Admiral Nelson had lost at Trafalgar and England was now a French colony.

Besides, it was much more than three times in the end.

After they woke from a short nap, he was bold enough to importune his wife again, and she was generous enough to indulge him a fourth time and, eventually, a fifth. And did it count when she …? Or when he …? Or when they both …? Or did one count by discrete sessions requiring a break of a certain length in between? By any measure it was a staggering total, he thought smugly.

It was early morning by the time they collapsed for the last time. Elizabeth twined herself around Darcy and promptly fell asleep. Darcy lay awake, his body utterly spent but his mind ablaze with the light of revelation.

Could he doubt now that Elizabeth loved him? His fears of the previous days, so brooding and palpable, now seemed groundless, brushed away like cobwebs and dust in the warm, alive air of spring.

He replayed the events of the previous two days. When she had rejected him in the carriage, every fear and suspicion that their marriage was a sham had come rushing back with full force. But then her apology had disarmed him, her shyness and eagerness softened him, and her innocently sensual response to their initial lovemaking delighted him. And then her sweetness and willingness to bear such cruel pain for his sake…perhaps she did not love him yet, he had thought, but he felt increasingly confident he could teach her to do so, woo her to it.

But then had come her jealousy. The hurt and bitterness in her eyes had mirrored all of his own agonizing doubt and suspicion. And then finally, the last few hours. He smiled in the dark exultantly.
In the last few hours she had shed all vestige of maidenly reserve and showed him an unabashedly passionate, carnal side that left him breathless. Kiss for kiss, stroke for stroke, she matched him. She had been as hungry for him as he was for her.

Could she be dissembling? Could it possibly be a deliberate illusion, a painting of reality into which the too ardent wishes of his own heart had breathed life? Slowly in the dark, he built the edifice of the argument again from every fact and circumstance of their relationship and came to the same conclusion. This was no illusion; this was real, and whatever Mrs. Bennet thought was due to the fancies and delusions of a mean, narrow mind that could never encompass the depth and richness of his lovely, most beloved Elizabeth.

He blinked against the sudden wetness in his eyes and gathered his sleeping wife closer in his arms, brushing her dark head with a kiss. He could not remember the last time he had been so happy and at peace.

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Chapter End Notes

I am sorry for yet another delay! I was re-reading the chapter, which I had written long ago, and realized I had made a mess of the POV and had to rewrite. The next few chapters will hopefully be posted on time.

This is the end of Book 1 of the story. Book 2 begins with Darcy's past. All comments are welcome, complimentary, critical or just general musings. I am always interested in what people think of Austen, P&P, canon characters and my own attempted approximation. (Obviously I know I am not writing in her style, though! Lol.)
The Companion of His Youth

Hail bounteous May that dost inspire
Mirth and youth, and warm desire,
Woods and Groves, are of thy dressing,
Hill and Dale, doth boast thy blessing.
Thus we salute thee with our early Song,
And welcom thee, and wish thee long.

- John Milton, "Song on May Morning"

"Mrs. Reynolds! Mrs. Reynolds!"

The middle-aged housekeeper looked up to see the young master clatter down the stairs into the servants' hall. He was cradling a large armful of wild orchids to his breast, their stems wrapped in a wet handkerchief.

"Oh, Master Darcy! Lady Anne will love those," she said, smiling warmly at her former charge. She had come to Pemberley for him when he was four years old and had lost his old nurse to the sickness that had also carried off his sibling. After taking charge of the nursery for a time, she had been promoted to housekeeper when he had outgrown his nurse and no more children seemed imminent.

The boy, seven now, but tall for his age, smiled proudly. "Are they not grand? Jeffrey and I rode to Fletcher's Bog to get them. I knew they would be out by now. But you should see them, Mrs. Reynolds! There are so many this year. They are her favourite. She told me."

Mrs. Reynolds bustled about fetching a vase to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes at the boy's gallant hopes. She had not the heart to tell him that only time would heal the latest wound Lady Anne had suffered. Let him think his flowers would do some good. Mayhap it would ease his own burden.

It had been two weeks since the Darcys had placed the tiny coffin in its final resting place in the family vault. The master and his young son had properly mourned but eventually resumed their normal activities, albeit with a sadness in their air. Not so Lady Anne. She had become a ghost of herself, palely loitering in the rooms where she had once held and nursed little Master George. But for the servants who dressed and fed her every day and placed the needlework in her hands, and the husband who came to sit and read to her every day when he was done his other duties, she might never have left her bed.

Mrs. Reynolds finished arranging the flowers in the vase, blinked away any lingering wetness of eye and turned and smiled brightly at Darcy.

"There! Do you wish to bring it to her?" She knew it was a superfluous question.

"Yes, please." He came forward and accepted the heavy vase in his hands.

Mrs. Reynolds frowned as the water sloshed dangerously within the vase before Darcy steadied it. "This one is too big for you, Master Darcy. Allow me to fetch a footman." Two of them nearby sprang forward to assist.

"I can do it, Mrs. Reynolds. Truly I can."

Darcy cradled the vase protectively against his chest. The footmen backed away. The servants
watched as he walked slowly up the stairs, his feet feeling carefully for each step as he balanced the loaded vase. Miraculously, he did not spill a drop.

Around the corner he inquired of a passing servant and was informed that Lady Anne was in the blue sitting room. He rejected further offers of help and pointed his footsteps in the right direction, making progress slowly because of his burden. Eventually, however, he arrived. The footman knocked and flung open the door at Lady Anne's soft, "Come in, please."

His mother was sitting by the window, her hands resting idle on top of her needlework as her maid worked industriously nearby. Lady Anne's eyes briefly flashed when she saw her son's eager face above the profusion of orchids, then resumed their former dullness.

Darcy placed the flowers on the table beside her and sat down in a chair opposite. He was content. Contrary to Mrs. Reynolds' concerns, he was not at all expecting to restore Lady Anne's usual good cheer quickly. All he was asking for was the sign of recognition, which meant that she still saw him and would one day come back to him.

He had been through it before. The little coffin in the family vault had been placed beside two others of similar size, and though he had been much younger at the time, he still remembered the periods of quiet and emptiness, when his mother had been in the house yet somehow painfully absent.

This time was bound to be worse because little George had lived two whole months before taking ill suddenly, and Lady Anne had been joyfully looking forward to the portrait painter coming to capture his likeness. Darcy thought about his brother, the sweetness of his first smiles, his joyful coos, the softness of his small hands, and felt his own dull ache. No, he would have to be patient. His father had said so.

"Thank you, Fitzwilliam. They are beautiful." Her lips curved up into an attempt at a smile, though it did not reach her eyes.

"You are welcome, Mama."

He helped himself to a biscuit from the tray before her. He expected her to turn her head back to the window and resume her silence, but instead her gaze lingered on him. A tendril of hope sprouted in his heart.

"You are well, darling?"

"Yes, Mama."

"They are taking care of you?"

"Yes, Mama." He recited dutifully, "I am riding out every day with Jeffrey and Dr. Miles says I am doing extraordinarily well with my mathematics and Mr. Kenrick has me taking the two-foot fences now."

She nodded. Suddenly she bowed her head and he saw tears fall into her lap.

"I am a poor mother," she whispered.

"No, Mama!" he cried.

"It is true. You should have brothers … and sisters. And now I cannot even care for you. You must look to the servants."
"No, Mama. I am fine. Truly I am. It is fine." He spoke firmly.

Her lady's maid came from her seat nearby and knelt and offered Lady Anne a handkerchief. She took it, but did not use it to wipe away her tears. Instead, she gripped the scrap of silk in her lap as her golden head drooped and the tears continued to fall. Like a broken flower in the rain, Darcy thought. He chewed deliberately, but the biscuit tasted as dry as dust in his mouth and he could not swallow past the lump in his throat. Finally, he managed it and said, "Dr. Miles expects me now, Mama. Unless you wish me to stay with you?"

"No. Go, son." She whispered it.

He nodded and rose to kiss his mother on the cheek, then left her.

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Several months later, Darcy's hopes had dimmed somewhat. His mother had picked up her needle and her books and resumed her visits to the tenants and the sick and the poor. But while she played her music, she no longer sang, and when she smiled at him, the sadness never left her eyes.

Darcy's eighth birthday came. Pemberley hosted its annual fete on the lawn for the children of the nearby parishes. There was the usual ringing of the church bells and flags and games, and afterward the children were served small beer, cakes and other good things from Pemberley's bounty while Darcy delivered his carefully rehearsed speech of welcome and thanks. But when he went to distribute the shillings to the hundreds of children who had come to congratulate him, it was Mr. Darcy who stood by his side and not Lady Anne as usual. His mother, his father informed him, had taken suddenly ill. What he overheard from the servants' talking was that Lady Anne had seen a babe that was the image of little George and had had to retire to her rooms.

He was pondering his mother the next day when he heard his father speaking to Mr. Wickham. He was in the library reading and his father and Mr. Wickham were just emerging from his father's study, which adjoined the library.

"I reiterate my offer," his father said. "Bring your boy. It will solve both of our problems. Fitzwilliam is far too quiet and bound to his mother. A playmate his own age will do him good."

"I appreciate your generosity, Darcy. You know I appreciate it. But George…he is a rough, wild boy. You will not find him a fit companion for Master Darcy."

There was a pause, then Mr. Darcy's voice said, "I am sorry, Stanley. I wish you had not married out of your station. She was not good enough for you."

Mr. Wickham laughed ruefully. "What station, Darcy? The station of a disgraced man with not an acre to his name? In her family's view she is now a great deal too good for me. They sought to marry their daughter to a gentleman."

"And so you are still. It matters not what your father did. It is in the blood, Stanley. It is in your blood and it will be in young George's blood, and blood will tell. You cannot leave him in her hands. She will ruin him."

Mr. Wickham's quiet reply was indecipherable, but Darcy heard his father's voice clearly. "Bring George. I have not seen my godson since his christening and have a desire to see how he is grown. If he is rough, we will polish him. We will make him into a gentleman, as his people were - and still are."

They left the library, not noticing the boy sitting quietly between the stacks, his eyes round with
A boy! Another boy his age, here at Pemberley! But a rough and wild boy. Would he be like the parish children who attended his birthday fetes? They were ill-dressed with clumsy hands and coarse manners, but Darcy had often thought it would be jolly to be one of them. They were always numerous, large families with many children, and they all know each other well, always calling to each other and laughing and arguing over endless schemes. How Darcy envied them sometimes! But his mother had said it was not mete for a boy of his birth and breeding to mingle too familiarly with the children of farmers and labourers. *You are the grandson of an earl, my son. Your forebears advised kings and held them to account. You must not forget who you are.* But now one of these boys would come to live at Pemberley, perhaps in the very house!

For a week, nothing happened and nothing more was said or overheard, but Darcy *thought* about it so often that he scarcely worried about his mother at all. By the end of a week, he was beginning to become impatient and fear that perhaps his father or Mr. Wickham had changed their minds. But one day, while studying Latin with his tutor, he was summoned to the drawing room and the boy was there.

He was not what Darcy had expected. He was not dressed in the sturdy, nondescript garb of farmers' children, nor the sometimes dirty and scanty clothing of the children of labourers and the poor. Instead, he wore a short-tailed coat with a white shirt and ruff, much like Darcy's own. Even more interesting than his clothing were his looks. He had long, curling blond hair and sea-blue eyes and his features were not thick and dull as Darcy had expected, but finely drawn and intelligent. Darcy thought he had never seen a prettier boy.

"Come, Fitzwilliam," his father said. "Come meet Mr. Wickham's son, George."

George! Darcy's eyes darted to his mother, who was sitting nearby on the sofa, to see how she took this reminder of the babe she had lost. But Lady Anne did not look sad, only interested in this strange creature that was George Wickham.

Belatedly, Darcy remembered his manners. He bowed and told George in his politest manner that he was happy to make his acquaintance. George replied in kind and, although his accent was not entirely genteel, his voice was so clear and pleasant to hear that one could not think him coarse because of it.

"George is my godson, Fitzwilliam. I have asked Mr. Wickham to allow him to live with us so that you have a playmate and a companion. He will attend all of the same lessons as you. Because he has not had as much schooling as you, you may find him a little behind. However, I have no doubt he will catch up quickly and expect you will give him every assistance. Yes?"

Darcy nodded at his father's words, still looking at George, who in turn was looking at him - suspiciously, Darcy thought, like a skittish colt or wary dog. He would have to be kind and gentle.

"Very well. Do you have any questions?"

Darcy looked up at his father then. "Yes, Papa. Will George live with us for always?"

"Most likely, son."

"Like Mr. Wickham, then?"

"Not quite. George will have rooms beside yours rather than with his father." Mr. Wickham occupied the steward's quarters on the first floor of Pemberley, near the back of the house.
Darcy brightened. "So he will be like family, then?"

Mr. Darcy smiled. "Just so. Like family. I hope the two of you will become very good friends and be friends always, as Mr. Wickham and I are."

Here, Mr. Wickham spoke up, "It will depend on your inclination, of course, Master Darcy. If you do not get on and you prefer that George leave, then I will take him back to his home in Belper."

"But that will not happen," said Mr. Darcy firmly. "I have no doubt that Fitzwilliam will afford George every measure of courtesy and respect. So of course they will get on. Is that not correct, son?"

Darcy looked up at his father. "Yes, Papa," he said eagerly.

Mr. Darcy smiled. "Excellent. Now Fitzwilliam, why do you not show George his new home? I am sure he would like to see it. On your way, both of you."

"Go on, George," said Mr. Wickham.

George threw his father a look, then followed Darcy from the room. As the door closed behind them, Darcy heard his mother say, "He is a fine boy, Stanley."

In the hall, the two boys stopped and eyed each other. Darcy said, "There are new kittens in the stables."

George shrugged. "There are new kittens everywhere."

"Would you like to see the library? Everybody says it is very grand. We have all kinds of jolly books."

"Books?" George sneered slightly.

"My tin soldiers then? I have lots. You can use half."

"Tin soldiers are silly."

"What do you like, then?" Darcy said, disappointed.

"Nothing." The golden boy was quiet, sullen. He darted a glance at Darcy. "I did not want to come. He made me."

"My papa?"

"No, my papa." He added, "I shall not stay. My mama will come and bring me home."

"My papa said you are to stay always."

"My papa said if we do not get along he will take me home." George eyed Darcy shrewdly. Darcy felt deflated. His one and only playmate did not like him.

George watched Darcy's dejection with interest. "Do you have no other friends here?"

"I have friends," Darcy said defensively. "My footman, Jeffrey, accompanies me everywhere I go. And Dr. Miles plays chess and games with me."
"Those are not friends, they are servants."

"Dr. Miles is not a servant. He is my tutor and the chaplain of Pemberley."

George ignored him. "My mama and I have servants too. They do as they are told."

"I like them."

"It is not the same. I have many friends. The older boys allow me to go to the mills with them and see the machines go."

"Oh," said Darcy, impressed. He knew there were giant cotton mills at Belper, where George had come from. He had even met the owner, Mr. Strutt, when Mr. Strutt had visited at Pemberley. But he had never been to see the mills, though Mr. Strutt had issued him the invitation and his father had said he might go one day.

"They let me take snuff with them too."

"Oh," said Darcy, even more impressed. He had never been allowed to take snuff. His mother said it was a filthy habit that should not be permitted to children, though his father took it sometimes, when he was with other men.

George, pleased at Darcy's reaction, became more at ease. He looked around at the halls of Pemberley. "This is your home?" he asked.

"Yes," Darcy said proudly. "The Darcys have held these lands since William the Conqueror and my great-great-great-grandfather built Pemberley." Darcy ticked off the "greats" on his fingers.

"My mama says it is not so very great a thing to have an old family. Half of them are poor as church mice for all they act so high and mighty, she said."

"We are not poor," said Darcy indignantly.

"My mama and I are not poor either. We have a footman and velvet curtains and I have a new suit every season. My mama said I need not feel bad that your family is wealthier than mine."

"I do not wish for you to feel bad."

George smiled then, a bright, charming smile that lit his face. "You have a very nice home. I shall enjoy it here."

"Thank you," said Darcy, a little surprised at the variety in George's temperament.

"Your mother is very pretty too. Almost as pretty as mine."

"My mother is beautiful," Darcy said hotly. "Much more beautiful than yours."

"You have not seen mine, so you would not know," said George reasonably. "I am hungry."

"We can go to the kitchen," said Darcy helpfully, always glad to be hospitable. "Cook lets me have a biscuit whenever I wish it."

The two boys trundled off to the kitchen.

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The first two days, Darcy did not know what to make of George. His temper was mercurial, alternating between cheerful amiability and irritation. At times, he complained of head-ache and stomach-ache and Darcy heard him crying out the first night. But when Darcy slipped out of his bed to investigate, there was silence again and he concluded his new friend was having a bad dream.

The second day was worse than the first. George did not wish to do anything and only stayed in his room and informed Darcy that he wanted to go home. Darcy did not tell anybody for fear that Mr. Wickham would take him home. But when George refused to eat supper and instead retched onto his plate, Lady Anne summoned the apothecary.

The apothecary was long in interview with George, then with Mr. Darcy, Lady Anne and Mr. Wickham. After that, Darcy was told he could visit George in his room.

He found George sitting cross-legged on his bed, eating a plate of ice and sipping from a glass containing a liquid that somewhat resembled the heavy, dark ale given to labourers, but which Darcy thought could not be. At Pemberley, children drank mainly fresh milk if they were part of the gentry, and small beer if they were not. Lady Anne abhorred the fact that the children of the poorest labouring families were given ale and gin to drink, and Darcy knew she fought a constant battle to stamp out the practice.

"What is wrong with you? Did Mr. Harris say?" said Darcy.

"Nothing is wrong with me. But the apothecary said that baby stuff you drink has made me sick because I am used to something much stronger."

So it was ale. Darcy looked with new awe at the glass, then at George taking a gulp and smacking his lips.

George saw his look and smiled. "I am to drink this until I am used to the baby stuff again. It is weaker than what I am used to but it is not bad. Do you wish to try?"

Darcy shook his head. He did not want to become like the labourers' children. He wondered that George had managed to escape the ill effects that his mother often pointed to, of slow wits and stunted growth and wild and savage behaviour. There seemed to be something special about George. After this, his new playmate became more consistently cheerful. As time went on, he experienced fewer headaches and stomach upset, and before long he too throve primarily on fresh milk that Darcy drank, with small beer given only as the occasional treat. The episode was forgotten.

The next few months were the most exciting that Darcy could remember. George's coming turned the order of Pemberley on its ears. George did not like quiet, so they were no longer quiet. Instead of reading in the library or his own chambers, Darcy found himself running through the halls hollering at the top of his lungs with George. Instead of riding decorously along the well-trodden paths in the woods, George plunged into unknown areas of the forest and would sometimes have to be chased and brought back forcibly by Jeffrey. And though George had not nearly Darcy's riding experience, he recklessly demanded higher and higher fences, causing Darcy to do something of the same. Before long, their ponies were taking solid barriers, and then were moved up to the two-and-a-half-foot fences.

Darcy expected a rebuke for his unseemly new habits, but to his surprise, his parents did not seem disapproving. Instead, his father seemed almost proud to see his son acting like a rowdy and his mother, after her initial surprise, seemed amused. It chased the sadness from her eyes.

One day he and George were having a rare quiet hour in the music room, playing a game of chess
while Lady Anne played the piano. Darcy, absorbed in the game and the beauty of the music, was startled when George suddenly protested.

"This is too slow and boring! I wish to hear something lively!"

Lady Anne immediately ceased playing, but instead of scolding George for his atrocious manners, she merely smiled quizzically and said, "You do not like Herr Bach? What would you like to hear, then, George?"

"I liked it, Mama," said Darcy. "What is it called?"

"It is Bach's first cello suite, my darling. One day I will allow you to stay up for a ball or a concert and you will hear it performed properly, on the right instrument."

"It is too slow," George complained. "My mama played jigs and the boys in town play on jew's harps and dance. Some of them do it for pennies and there is a fiddler who is very jolly."

"A jig?" Lady Anne's eyebrows were raised in amusement. "I think I have something here in that vein. And if I play, will you dance, George? I do not have pennies, but perhaps for a piece of Cook’s apple tart?"

"Yes, I will dance. The boys in town say I am a fine dancer."

"Very well, then, let us see what you can do."

Lady Anne pursed her lips thoughtfully, then went over to the music shelf and leafed through several sheets until she found what she was looking for. She came back and laid out the sheets. Colledge Hornpipe, Darcy read. The opening measures were bright and cheerful in tone, although with a stately pace.

"I know this!" cried George. Then he frowned. "But it is still too slow."

"The tempo will increase," said Lady Anne, smiling. "Now let us see you dance."

George stood up in the middle of the carpet, folded his arms in front of him, puffed his chest out, took a step and kicked, then another, promenading in a circle. Then one leg kicked out and the other leapt to meet it, followed by the second leg kicking out.

Darcy looked at his mother and they both smiled in delight. His mother played a little faster and George's feet moved faster. He tapped his feet behind each other, he beat them on his leg, he spun in circles, his arm held above his head.

Lady Anne played faster and yet faster. George's face flushed pink, his golden hair flopped around his shoulders, but his feet kept moving, unbelievably keeping time with the now frenzied pace of the music. By now Darcy was helpless with laughter. As the music built to a climax, George jumped in the air and clicked his heels together, then squatted and jumped up again. With one final crash, the music came to a close and George came to a standstill.

They were all laughing, even Lady Anne. She clapped enthusiastically and Darcy joined in. George, pleased and still flushed, bowed with deep dignity.

"Where did you learn that, George?" Lady Anne asked.

"Some of the fellows taught me. They learnt it from their brothers, who went to sea. They said their captains force them to dance for exercise."
She laughed. "You are a very accomplished young man. Perhaps Fitzwilliam would like to learn. Well, son? You cannot let George out-charm the ladies when the time comes."

"Darcy will never keep up," George scoffed. Mr. Wickham had insisted that he call him Master Darcy rather than by his first name, but between Darcy and George it was agreed that he would be simply Darcy.

Darcy rose to his feet at the challenge and George showed him the steps. Half an hour later, when Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham came into the room, they found Lady Anne laughing at the piano while Darcy and George, their cheeks flushed, their jackets discarded, danced in time to her music. George did so confidently and gracefully while Darcy, between brief flashes of brilliance, would lose his places and throw up his hands in frustration, then jump back in again laughing.

Mr. Darcy's eyes brightened. He went over to his wife. "What silliness are you about now, my love?"

Lady Anne looked up at her husband with eyes full of a mirth he had not seen in many months and which he was beginning to despair of seeing again. She nodded at the children and did not stop her playing. "It is not silliness. Do you not see how hard our boys are working? I suggest you and Mr. Wickham make the attempt before you are so quick to criticize."

Mr. Darcy smiled slyly. "Ah. It seems you assume I am not already a true proficient. But there is nothing new about the dance that young George is doing. It is well known in these parts."

His stately and dignified father then stepped into the middle of the carpet and bowed deeply to George. George stopped his jiggling and eyed Mr. Darcy suspiciously for a moment, then made a bow in return. Then George began jiggling with slow, prancing steps, his eyes challenging the older man. Darcy's father smiled, then followed suit, mirroring George's steps behind him.

Darcy looked at his mother in amazement. "Clap, Fitzwilliam!" his mother called. He did so, and so did Mr. Wickham. Lady Anne continued playing, as before increasing the tempo slowly but inexorably. Mr. Darcy and George continued jiggling, their feet moving more and more rapidly. George smiled in determined challenge, Mr. Darcy in amusement. He was chuckling, but it cost him breath. Finally, Mr. Darcy threw up his hands and laughed, conceding defeat and George jumped high in victory. Everybody clapped and even the usually impassive footmen smiled.

"Nicely done, young man." Mr. Darcy held out his hand and George took it and they shook enthusiastically. Then Mr. Darcy ruffled his hair. "A worthy namesake indeed."

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Footnotes:

1. Jedidiah Strutt (1726-1797) was a hosier and cotton spinner and the inventor of the Derby rib, an attachment to knitting machines that allowed the creation of ribbed stockings. When he opened his first cotton mill in Belper in 1777, it was a mere hamlet. By the mid-nineteenth century the Strutt family owned 8 mills in Belper employing 10,000 people and Belper had become the second largest town in Derbyshire.

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After the incident between George and Mr. Darcy, George said no more about returning home. By some agreement Darcy was not privy to, George began to call his father Uncle George, though his mother remained Lady Anne.

Initially, Darcy did not mind this new intimacy between George and his father. He even welcomed it, if it meant George would be happy to stay at Pemberley. In the first few months, George had spoken of returning to his home every time he received a letter from his mother, but over time his thoughts of home seemed to cease with his complaints. Mr. Wickham himself had not returned to his other home in many months, not since bringing George to Pemberley.

After a while, however, Darcy began to wonder why Mr. Darcy seemed so different with his godson than his own son. He was used to thinking of his father as an earnest, serious man, much concerned with Darcy's conduct and diligence. But for some reason with George, Mr. Darcy was lighthearted, even joking. And one evening, Darcy came into the drawing room where Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham were entertaining some of the minor gentry from the area to see George laughing and hanging over Mr. Darcy's chair and accepting a pinch of snuff from his snuffbox.

"Papa," he said a few days later when he and his father were at breakfast. "May I try some of your snuff?"

They were alone as usual. George generally preferred to lie abed as late as possible, coming down only before breakfast was cleared, while Lady Anne usually attended morning prayers in the chapel before breakfasting in her own chambers and Mr. Wickham rose at first light to begin his steward duties early.

Mr. Darcy peered over the newspaper he was reading and looked at his son absentmindedly.

"My snuff?" he said, his eyebrows lifting in surprise. "Certainly not. You are far too young and you know your mother would never allow it." He returned to his newspaper.

Darcy felt a flash of resentment. Why was he too young, but George not? George was six months younger than he was! He said nothing, however, but only took another bite of his oat-cakes and jelly. He had been taught not to question his father's edicts.

It was a few weeks later that his resentment came to a head.

Since George had come, Darcy's horsemanship had greatly improved. It was one activity they both loved, and the two spent many of their leisure hours in the saddle. Mr. Kenrick was delighted with the progress of both boys and that spring, they were told they might ride unaccompanied so long as they stayed within the boundary of the park.

The boys gloriéd in their newfound freedom, exploring Pemberley's extensive woods and dales. It was George's idea to pretend that they were knights in the army of William the Conqueror. It was fitting, he said, because both a Darcy and a Wickham had fought with the great king.

"We will battle for who will lead the charge," George said, referring to their imaginary army. "If I knock you out of your saddle first, I will lead, and if you knock me out, then you will lead."

They fought, and Darcy knocked George out of the saddle easily. When he wheeled his pony around to survey the scene, George was half-sitting, half-lying on the ground, his face pulled into a grimace. He did not look angry, however.
"Oof. The ground is hard." George winced, rubbing his bottom.

"I am sorry, I did not mean to hurt you."

George looked up at Darcy with friendly scorn. "You could not help it. You were supposed to knock me off. I will knock you off next time."

Darcy grinned, glad that George was not upset at him. "I doubt it. And if you persist in believing it, you will have a hard time taking your seat for dinner."

George got to his feet painfully and Darcy brought back his pony. "That is the problem. I do not mind being knocked off, but the ground is too hard. We need somewhere softer to land."

"We can go to the moors, I suppose. The grasses will break our fall."

"No, it is still too wet, and there are rocks and brambles there." George remounted his pony and surveyed the area around him, squinting into the distance at an inviting dark patch of earth. "What about Mr. Gladding's field? It looks like he has just plowed it up, so it will be perfect."

"It is outside of the park. And what if he has planted it?"

"What does that matter? It is Darcy land. A lord has the right to hunt on all of his lands."

"But we are not hunting. And Papa never allows anybody to hunt until after the harvest."

"But if he wished to hunt now, he could, because it is his land and Mr. Gladding is only a farmer."

"No. I do not want to. The Gladdings would not like it."

Mr. and Mrs. Gladding were an elderly couple who had long farmed lands just outside Pemberley park's nearest flank. Darcy had often visited them in lambing season, and had frequently stopped for a glass of new milk and hot biscuits when Mrs. Gladding was doing her baking.

George looked at Darcy in exasperation. "Darcy, they will not care! It is too early for anything to be planted. Look! There is nothing in the field but dirt."

It was true that there was nothing obviously growing there, but seeds took time to sprout, Darcy knew. Still, Mr. Gladding had always told Darcy to make himself at home. And Mr. Gladding's farm did belong to his father - and one day, Mr. Gladding liked to say, perhaps to Darcy himself.

Finally, Darcy said, "Very well, but let us ask first."

George rolled his eyes but agreed. They rode around to the front of the neat cottage and hallo'ed but nobody answered, not even a servant girl.

"That's that," said George. And before Darcy knew what he was about, he had spurred his pony for the field. Darcy could do nothing but follow.

"En garde!" George yelled, wheeling and facing Darcy and brandishing his wooden sword from the middle of the field.

"You do not yell en garde for a sword battle," Darcy yelled back, coming up to the field and checking his pony before he entered it.

"What do I care?" said George. "This is perfect. We can fall without any bruises!"
His pony was dancing among the brown clods and soft loam of newly turned soil. It did look fun, Darcy thought. But he still hesitated.

"Come on, Darcy! You will never get me off! What is wrong, are you afraid?" George taunted. "Yah! You are afraid! Yah!"

"Of you? Never!" Darcy rose in his stirrups, spurred his pony and entered the field of combat.

The battle raged all over the field, with Darcy consistently unseating George with his superior reach, strength and control of his mount. But one time, George, seeing Darcy's boot slip from the stirrup, was able to maneuver to his side. Deflecting a blow with his sword, he suddenly reached down, grabbed his friend's leg and threw it up so he went over his pony. He laughed and laughed to see Darcy's look of astonishment as he spit dirt out of his mouth.

When they were tired of that game, they refreshed themselves at one of the springs in the park, then adjourned to an open stretch of lawn to race. This time they were more evenly matched, though Darcy still managed to edge out George in most of the races.

It was the most fun Darcy had ever had.

***

It was a muddy and happy pair of boys who handed over their sweaty mounts to the stable boys and headed for the house to wash up for dinner.

At the door, they were greeted by the butler, whose usually solemn expression became positively sepulchral at the boys' appearance.

"Master Darcy, your father desires you and Master Wickham to go to Mr. Wickham's office immediately upon your return. Without washing up, he said."

"Did he say what about, Mr. Birnie?" Darcy asked, surprised at the unusual order. He very seldom went to Mr. Wickham's office, where Mr. Wickham transacted the business of the estate and met with tradesmen and tenants.

Mr. Birnie's face took on a tinge of regret. "I cannot say for certain, but I believe it is something to do with Mr. Gladding's field."

Darcy's heart dropped into his boots. He looked at George but George's face remained nonchalant. They made their way to Mr. Wickham's office, Darcy's feet feeling as heavy as millstones. There they found the master, his steward and the elderly farmer. Darcy's father was speaking.

"-Of course I will assist you whether or not the report proves accurate, but I cannot imagine that Fitzwilliam would -" The rest of his words faded as he took in his son's muddy attire. The room fell silent.

Darcy looked at the hurt on Mr. Gladding's face and the alarm on Mr. Wickham's. When he saw the barely controlled fury on his father's face, he dropped his eyes to the floor.

"Son," said Mr. Darcy in a carefully flat tone that Darcy knew was the result of supreme effort. "Were you riding in Mr. Gladding's field?"

"Yes, Papa," he whispered, not even thinking to lie.

"Even though it was planted?"
"I - I did not know, Papa, and George said -"

"Stop!" his father shouted and Darcy went silent. "If you have done this thing, then the last thing I wish to hear - the last thing do you understand - is that it was another person's fault."

"Yes, Papa," Darcy whispered again.

Mr. Darcy looked up at his footman and said, his voice steely, "James, fetch me a birch rod. Gentlemen, will you leave us, please?"

Darcy quaked. He had been spanked, but never caned before.

"Now, sir, I can re-plant," Mr. Gladding quavered. "With the warmer weather, it may only set me back a week."

"Mr. Gladding, I appreciate your forbearance, but it does not lessen my son's crime, nor his culpability for it. I thank you for your report and assure you that you will receive every assistance to restore your field. But I ask that you leave now so that I may deal with my boy."

Mr. Gladding nodded and, with one last sorrowing look at Darcy, left the room.

"You too, Stanley," Mr. Darcy said to Mr. Wickham. "Use another room for your other appointments until I am done here."

Mr. Wickham swallowed, bowed his head in acquiescence and exited the room, leaving only Mr. Darcy and the two boys.

There was silence as they waited for the footman to return with the birch rod. After a minute, he did so, presenting it to Mr. Darcy, who dismissed him from the room. Mr. Darcy then removed his coat and began rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"George, you may leave as well," he said.

Darcy's eyes flew up at that. It was George who had started everything! And it was clear from his soiled clothing that he was equally guilty if not more so.

"But - " he said in protest.

"Silence!" Mr. Darcy shouted again, and Darcy immediately lapsed into silence again. "George, out."

Darcy glanced up and met George's eyes. They expressed mild regret, but then George shrugged and left without another glance at Darcy.

"Remove your jacket, son."

Darcy removed his jacket.

"Place your hands on the table."

Darcy did so.

The birch rod whistled through the air.

***
Lady Anne pushed open the heavy oak door to the library and peered into the room. To all appearances, it was empty, but she was not fooled. The servant had said the young master had been seen heading in this direction and she knew it was a favourite haunt of his.

She stepped in quietly in her slippered feet and surveyed the large, handsome room, which reflected Pemberley's owners past and present as much if not more so than the portrait gallery in the west wing. Thousands of gilt-edged, leather-bound volumes collected over centuries filled the shelves that lined every wall in the long room, and at the far end low stacks had been brought in to house more volumes.

Lady Anne took a few more steps into the middle of the room, her feet sinking into the soft pile of the carpet and making no sound, then stopped and listened. She was rewarded by the sound of a sniffle. It came from the area of the stacks.

"Fitzwilliam?" she called quietly. All went silent. Lady Anne smiled a little to herself and began walking in the direction of the sound. "My son, I know you are in here."

She found him sitting on the floor cross-legged, still dressed in stained and muddy clothing, his back straight and stiff. He looked up when he saw her, and she saw the marks of dried tears on his cheeks.

"Oh, my darling," she said. Within a moment, she was on her knees and rocking him while he cried in her arms, grieving for his hurt, yet still, as always, glorying in the proud, dark handsomeness of her only surviving child.

"Papa hates me," he sobbed. "He hates me."

"No, no," Lady Anne soothed.

She patted him on the back, causing him to flinch and pull away.

"Oh dear," she said, her heart dropping. "Let me see, Fitzwilliam."

He turned slightly and unbuttoned his jacket and she pulled up his clothing and saw with chagrin the red, angry stripes. She hated that her husband had caned him, though she could not but admit it was fully justified in this instance.

"Well," she frowned, trying to be matter-of-fact. "The skin is not broken, but it is very red. You must have Jeffrey rub some ointment in before you go to bed." She cupped his face in her hands and said, "Now. About Papa."

At that, Darcy turned his face away, his expression stubborn. Lady Anne sighed. "He did not like to do it, my darling. But you left him no choice."

"I hate Papa!" Darcy said passionately.

"No! You must not hate your Papa," Lady Anne said firmly, almost sternly. "He was right to do as he did."

Darcy stuck out his lower lip.

Lady Anne sighed. "How can I make you understand? It is not only that you ruined Mr. Gladding's field. It is also that he and Mrs. Gladding are not as strong as they once were, and every bit of work costs them a great effort. They may not be able to farm for much longer, so Papa is anxious that everything go well for them. They have been there since he was a boy, you know."
"Why do they not hire more servants to do the work?" Darcy asked.

"They cannot afford it. They are trying to save money. You know their daughter lost her husband over a year ago," his mother said sadly. "Mr. Gladding paid for the apothecary bill, and now he is helping to support his daughter and all of her little ones."

"Oh."

Darcy suddenly felt very bad indeed. Mr. Gladding's young grandchildren often visited at the farm, and Darcy was used to seeing them out and about exploring the woods and streams with their cheerful young papa, but this year he had seen little of them. Only their heads peering wistfully out of the cottage window. But he was still angry with his father.

"Perhaps Papa should have caned me then. But then he should have caned George as well. He knew we both did it. And it was George's idea."

Lady Anne looked thoughtful. "I see," she said. "Did you tell your papa that?"

"I tried to, but he would not listen!" The tears started again, but they were angry this time. "Papa loves George best, I can tell."

"That is not true, son," cried Lady Anne.

"It is true! If it was not true, why did he punish only me when he knew that both George and I had done the same thing? He also lets George try his snuff and laughs at everything he says!"

Lady Anne looked troubled. At last she said, "It is true that your papa treats you differently from George."

Darcy looked at her, surprised. He had expected her to deny it. His mother continued.

"It is not because he loves you less, however, but because he loves you more. He loves you as his own flesh and blood, as part of himself, and he feels he must be hard on you the way he is on himself so that you grow to be a proper man. He does not feel so responsible for George."

"I do not wish to be loved like that then. I wish to be loved as Papa loves George."

"Oh, my darling. You cannot choose. You are Papa's son and heir whether you like it or not. That means that one day, all of these people who look to Papa will look to you." Lady Anne smoothed his hair back lovingly. "Fitzwilliam, my darling, in that your papa was right. Although you and George were equally guilty of ruining Mr. Gladding's field, it was more wrong for you to do it than George. Do you know why?"

Darcy shook his head. Lady Anne pressed his hand between both of hers.

"First of all, because you are older and stronger and wiser than George, and must look after him. Second, because George has only met the Gladdings once or twice, but you have known them your whole life and they love you and trust you. But most of all, because one day you will be master of Pemberley, and then the happiness of the Gladdings, George's happiness, the happiness of everybody who belongs to Pemberley, will be your responsibility. Look!" She turned his hand, palm up, on her own and spread out the fingers. "It is small now, my love, but one day this hand must be large enough, and strong enough, to hold the lives of a thousand people."

Darcy stared at his hand, confused. It was empty and smeared with mud and tears. How could he hold a thousand people in his hand?
"Fitzwilliam," Lady Anne squeezed his hand gently. "Mr. Gladding's farm may seem very small compared to Pemberley, but to him it is everything. It will determine if he can buy fuel to heat his daughter's house, put good clothes on his grandchildren's backs and save money so that they may find a good place in life. When you destroyed his seedlings, you signalled to your father that you did not understand this, that you saw the lives of others as a toy for your amusement."

"I did not think that," said Darcy indignantly, though he was filled with shame and sorrow for the Gladdings. "I was thinking about their field and wondering if he had planted anything yet. I could not tell so I made George wait until we had a chance to ask Mr. Gladding, but he was not home, nobody was at home. And then George went ahead before I could stop him."

"But you followed him and did it with him," Lady Anne reminded him.

"Yes," Darcy admitted.

"It is not an excuse to say that George made you do it, my darling. George will not be the master of Pemberley. When a man is a master of other men, he must be stronger and better, not weaker and more foolish. He must lead them and be of service to them, not use them for his own selfish pleasure. Your papa believes this with all his heart, but there are many men who see their high position as license to treat their dependents as if they were cattle or slaves, and raise their sons to do the same. Your papa and I do not wish for you to be one of them."

Lady Anne watched the thoughts bubbling across her son's face as he considered her words. Her heart swelled with pride to see the resentment flicker and die in his eyes, replaced by a calm acceptance. When he spoke, there was no more anger in his voice.

"I will not be, Mama," he promised.

Lady Anne put her arms around her son tenderly and kissed his forehead. "Your papa may have reacted too strongly without knowing the full facts. I will explain to him that you did not mean to injure the Gladdings and that you are sorry."

Darcy nodded. Then he pulled away and said, looking up at her, "But Mama, why should George be allowed to do it? Even if George will not be the master of Pemberley, he still ruined Mr. Gladding's field and Mr. Gladding may still not be able to buy clothing for his grandchildren."

Lady Anne smiled at her son's logic. "That is very true, my darling. And that is why I intend to speak to your father and Mr. Wickham about George. He must learn his lesson as well, for the good of others. I have already expressed my concern that he is getting a little spoilt, but he seems to be a special case for your papa."

"What do you mean, Mama?"

Lady Anne patted Darcy's hand. "I believe your papa particularly wishes to be of service to George because of his love for Mr. Wickham. You know that Mr. Wickham was once the heir to a fine estate?"

"As large as Pemberley?"

"Not quite so large, but still large enough that he would not have had to work and would have had many servants to wait upon him. But his father lost all of his money. Gambling," Lady Anne nodded solemnly to forestall Darcy's next question. "And then he died, leaving Mr. Wickham with little to live on and a wife and child to support. So he came to work at Pemberley. Your papa would have helped him further, but he said he was content. Nevertheless, your papa feels a great injustice has
been done to Mr. Wickham, so if he is unwilling to accept Papa's assistance, Papa wishes to give it to George instead."

Darcy was silent, digesting this new information.

"If only you had a brother or sister, someone to share the burden of your position with, you would understand better," Lady Anne said sadly.

Darcy looked up in alarm. He knew this was dangerous territory for his mother. "No, I like George. We are good friends. I do not need a brother or sister."

Lady Anne looked wistful. "We will see. You have missed your dinner, darling. I ordered some to be sent to your room. Are you not hungry?"

Darcy was, indeed, quite hungry. He rose to his feet and his mother shook out her skirts, then helped him set his clothing to rights. Order restored, they left the library, Darcy leading the way while Lady Anne followed, watching in pride as her son squared his young shoulders.

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Heir to Pemberley

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power
Dost hold Time's fickle glass, his fickle hour
- Shakespeare, Sonnet 126

It appeared that Lady Anne did speak to the men because the next day when Darcy sat down to breakfast, his father lowered his newspaper, peered at his son uncertainly and cleared his throat.

"Good morning, son. You are…ah…well?" he inquired.

"Yes, Papa."

"You did not have trouble sleeping because your back was too sore?"

"I slept on my belly." Darcy was pleased to see his father's chagrin.

"Ah."

Mr. Darcy disappeared behind his newspaper again. He said, from behind it, "I am surveying the canal works today and was wondering if you would like to come. Mr. Kenrick says if the party does not move too fast, you should be able to manage it. But we can postpone it to another time if you are not feeling well."

"I would like to go," Darcy said, any lingering resentment forgotten in the excitement of seeing the great engineering works of the canal. The man-made waterways that increasingly criss-crossed the countryside were the object of much fascination by boys and men in the county, and he and George had spent many hours diverting the streams at Pemberley in an attempt to build their own.¹

The newspaper came down again and Mr. Darcy looked pleased. "We will go right after breakfast."

"George too?"

"Ah. No, not George. Dr. Miles informs me he has not been diligent and should not miss any lessons, and his father wishes to speak to him."

They set off shortly after in the company of Mr. Darcy's servants, Darcy's footman Jeffrey and a number of men from the canal works. It was a wonderful day, the air clear and bright and smelling of spring, and the horses riding at a leisurely pace so that Darcy's smaller mount had no difficulty keeping up.

Once at the canal, they stopped frequently to examine the works. Mr. Telford, the designing engineer, and a number of the senior men led Darcy's father off to discuss some particular problem.² The younger men took Darcy on a tour of the parts of the canal and locks that had already been built, allowed him a brief peek into a tunnel under construction and answered all of his questions, of which he had a great deal. They were friendly and joking and Darcy thought it great fun.

At midday, they stopped for dinner under the oaks and beeches just coming into leaf and Darcy listened with avid interest to his father talking with Mr. Telford as the footmen served the cold meats, pies and other delicacies. It seemed that Mr. Telford had not been long with the project, joining it only last year.

"I can see why Jessop recommended you," Mr. Darcy said, referring to the chief engineer.³ "The
slop is a tricky one, but your device is ingenious. I believe it will work."

"I appreciate your faith - and your understanding. Believe me, there are many men who think water
 can be got to run uphill, or not run downhill, as easily as it can flow athwart the flats. It is a pleasure
to encounter an owner who understands the challenges involved."

"I doubt you could succeed with less in the Peaks," Mr. Darcy laughed. "We are all hills and valleys
here - if anybody counted on flat land, they would not count far."

"Are you really the owner, Papa?" Darcy interjected eagerly, unable to help himself.

Mr. Darcy smiled at Darcy. "Only one of them, son. It is a large burden for one estate to bear alone,
and I am no Duke of Bridgewater. But we do own a goodly portion of it."

"The greatest portion," Mr. Telford added. "Your father has been the driving force behind the
completion of the canal."

"That is to my benefit, of course, Telford," Mr. Darcy replied. "I have markets clamouring for
Pemberley's limestone and marble, if I can only bring it to them without using up half the horses in
the kingdom."

Mr. Telford smiled and turned to Darcy. "And how did ye enjoy the canal works, young sir? What
did ye see?"

Darcy described what he saw. Mr. Telford listened indulgently, then as Darcy went into detail, with
greater interest. After asking Darcy a few more questions, and quizzing him on some of the
mechanisms of the canal, he turned to his father.

"Your boy has your acumen, sir, and at a young age. He is - what, ten years old?"

"Nine this September," Mr. Darcy said proudly.

They rode for a few more miles along a flatter stretch, where hundreds of men were working to dig
out the canal, seal the walls, and survey the route for additional trenching. Darcy was introduced to
some of the foremen, and noticed that his father often stopped to speak to the workers. They smiled
to see him and those who claimed a prior acquaintance were eager to announce it to their fellows.

"How do you remember all of their names, Papa?" Darcy asked his father after they had completed
their tour of the canal with a peek in at the neat cottages built for the canal workers and turned their
horses in the direction of Pemberley.

Mr. Darcy looked approving that Darcy had noticed. "I make an effort, son. You will find that your
notice and attention are some of the most valuable things you can confer upon those who look to
you. More valuable than mere money, in some cases."

At the crossroads they parted company with Mr. Telford and his men, then rode the long way around
to approach the great house from the north. Darcy wondered until he saw the Gladdings' farm in the
distance. He rode on with some trepidation, wondering at his reception.

He need not have worried. Mr. Gladding rode out to meet the party on his old farm horse and was all
smiles at both Darcy and his father.

"Mr. Darcy, sir! How can I thank you? Truly, your generosity is unnecessary, it was but one field…"

"It is nothing, Gladding," Mr. Darcy cut him off, but shook his hand warmly. "We are neighbours,
and I appreciate you giving me the chance to rectify my family's error."

Mr. Darcy changed the subject until the old farmer was talking enthusiastically about his fields and sheep and chickens. As they entered the farmyard, Darcy looked around. It was a scene of unusual activity, with Pemberley's farm servants working in the field that Darcy and George had destroyed, but also painting and repairing neglected barns and sheds and fences, clearing areas of overgrowth and laying new gravel along the lanes.

"It is a special baking day," Mr. Gladding winked at Darcy as they dismounted and tethered their horses. "Mrs. Gladding is waiting for you in the house."

When Darcy ran over, he found her waiting outside, having seen the party ride in. She ushered Darcy and his footman into the house, gave him his old place at the head of the wooden farm table, poured him a glass of fresh milk, then began serving their favourite hot items from the stove. A quarter of an hour later, Mr. Gladding entered.

"Your papa had to leave," he told Darcy. "But he said you were to stay as long as you wish. Our ewes have just dropped some new lambs. Have you any interest in seeing them?"

Darcy was very interested. He spent a happy half hour or so playing with the lambs, then went outside to take his leave of Mr. Gladding. The farmer was puffing contentedly on a pipe, looking out over the neatly planted and limed field and freshly mended fences and barns.

Darcy remembered his transgression and that he had not yet apologized for it.

"Mr. Gladding, I am sorry we were riding in your field," he said earnestly. "We thought it might not be planted, but we should have waited until I checked."

Mr. Gladding turned to Darcy, took his pipe out of his mouth and smiled.

"Apology accepted, young sir. But I must thank you as well."

"For what?" Darcy asked curiously.

"For showing a prideful old man the error of his ways. If not for you and your friend, I would have continued to reject your father's help, and might not have been able to keep this farm." "My papa says one must always be helpful to one's neighbours," Darcy said.

"So he does. And your papa is a fine neighbour - the best neighbour. Tell him if there is ever anything I can do for him - anything at all - I would be heart-glad to do it."

"I will," Darcy promised. Then Jeffrey came with their horses and they mounted and rode back to the house.

It was a tired and happy Darcy who retired to his bedchamber that evening. He came in to find George lounging on his bed, his hands tucked behind his head and his boots still on. With some exasperation, Darcy sat on his bed and began tugging at George's boots. No matter how many times he was told by Darcy or Jeffrey, he never seemed to remember.

"How was the canal?" George asked, allowing Darcy to remove his boots and line them up neatly.

"Wonderful. We saw the locks and a tunnel and Mr. Telford, the engineer, said Papa was the main owner who was making sure it got built," Darcy bragged. "Mr. Telford showed me exactly how the locks will work."
"Lucky." George looked up at the ceiling and crossed his stockinged feet. "My papa thrashed me today."

"Oh." Darcy had forgotten about that. He felt suddenly guilty that he had had such a fine day. He said awkwardly, "I am sorry."

George shrugged, still lying down. "It did not hurt much. He let me keep my jacket on and he does not know how to hit hard in any case. My papa is not a man like your papa. He is a coward and a failure."

"Your papa?" Darcy asked, surprised. At Pemberley, Mr. Wickham was held in high esteem, by Mr. Darcy and Lady Anne as well as the servants.

"Yes. It is his fault that we are not wealthy like you," George said.

"I thought it was your grandfather who lost all of your money gambling," said Darcy, then immediately regretted it at the hostile look that George threw him.

"It was not my grandpapa's fault. He was playing a cheater. He would not have paid his money to a cheater. He even challenged the other man to a duel to show he cheated. But my papa insisted that the money be paid."

"Was your grandpapa killed in the duel?" Darcy asked, thinking of his mother's words. And then he died.

"No, he shot himself," said George flatly. "After he lost the duel and was wounded. He died then."

"What?"

Darcy was shocked. Self-murder, it was called, and an unforgivable sin. There had been a case at Kympton, where a farmer's family had been thrown on Parish relief because the father had killed himself. Darcy had heard his parents talking. 6 But it was the sermon he had heard in a Westminster church in Town that he remembered most vividly. The preacher had explained that any who would so grossly violate God's law must be cast out entirely, their property seized, their family shunned and their body mutilated and buried at a crossroads with a stake through the heart. But one of their Town servants had said that the stake was really to keep the body from rising and wandering, and the crossroads was to confuse its spirit, so it could not find and trouble the living, especially curious maids and young boys who did not drink all of their milk. He had had nightmares, he remembered, and his mother had been angry and his father had fired the servant who had been talking. 7

"Does he...does he lie at a crossroads?" asked Darcy hesitantly.

"No. My papa would have let them do it. He called my grandpapa wicked. But your papa fought them. He made them bury my grandpapa here, at Pemberley, just outside of the churchyard. He also made it so that my mama could keep the money she had from her father. They took all of the rest of my grandpapa's money, but they could not have her money. That is why my papa is a coward."

Mr. Wickham was so well thought of, and Darcy was so used to thinking of him as a devout and kindly man that he could not agree. But George was crying, angry tears spilling down his cheeks, which he wiped away with one hand, so that Darcy did not want to argue. He lay down beside George instead, putting his own hands behind his head.
"That was not fair. They should not have taken the money from you and your papa. You did not do anything wrong."

"The boys caught me once. They said my grandpapa was a cheat and I was a witch and they would drown me. They held my head down in the barrel and laughed at me."

Indignation flamed in Darcy’s heart. "I would not have laughed at you," he said fiercely. "I would have fought them. Like my papa."

George turned his head on the pillow and met Darcy’s eyes. "Your papa was my papa’s only friend after he lost his money. The only one who remained true. All the others abandoned him so they could remain friends with the man who had cheated my grandpapa."

"I would never abandon you."

George said triumphantly. "I got even with them. I told them that if they did not stop, my grandpapa would rise and stake them in the heart while they were sleeping so they would never wake up. They stopped."

"Good. I am glad."

George smiled. "You are my best friend."

Darcy replied, "You are my only friend." They both laughed. Then George sobered.

"We are both lone children. Neither of us has a brother or sister. We should be like brothers."

"Yes," Darcy said warmly. "We will be like brothers."

***

Approximately four years later

The bells of the chapel rang out silvery and clear. On Pemberley’s front lawn, servants bustled to set up dozens upon dozens of trestle tables and lay cloths for hundreds of expected visitors. From the window of his dressing room, Darcy could see that some were already beginning to approach in their carts and on donkeys and on foot. And in the wide sweep before the house, Mr. Darcy and Lady Anne greeted a stream of more distinguished-looking visitors emerging from carriages and directed them to the wide stone terrace, where tables were laid with crystal and silver and vases loaded with the early blooms of Pemberley’s hot houses and walled gardens.

"Hurry," he urged Jeffrey, his former footman turned valet, who was helping George get dressed.

"You would think it is your own birthday and not Miss Darcy’s, the fuss you make," said Jeffrey as he attached the sleeve-buttons to George’s outstretched arm.

"Lady Anne is making a great fuss," George pointed out. "She invited the gentry and not only villagers and tenants, as she does for Darcy’s birthdays."

"That is because it is Miss Darcy’s first. You should have seen Master Darcy’s first," said Jeffrey. "There was not only the gentry, but the Earl and Countess Fitzwilliam, the Duke and Duchess of Portland, and the Whig nobility from around the county - Devonshire and Melbourne and Harrington. Even the Tory lords sent very handsome messages of congratulations. It lasted two whole days, and there was a grand deer hunt and a pheasant shoot and a ball."
"How would you know? I thought Darcy did not have you until he was six," George said.

"I was in service to Lord Fitzwilliam at the time and I was chosen to travel with the family when they came to Pemberley," said Jeffrey with great dignity.

"That still does not prove Darcy's birthday was grander. Perhaps Lady Anne chose to invite more people."

"Of course it was grander. Master Darcy is the heir."

"And Lady Anne had all the portraits commissioned. They were not done for Darcy's birthday."

"There was plenty done of Master Darcy as a babe and a youngster. There are more now because there are more of you."

They continued to bicker over the issue, but Darcy paid them no heed. He knew which birthday was more important. Had not his mother spent the year hovering over Georgiana and fearing the worst? Her happiness over the past few months as Georgiana had grown from tiny infant to robust, rosy-cheeked toddler had filled the house with joy. It seemed to ring with her music and laughter.

At the entrance to the terrace, Darcy and George paused to be announced. The guests were numerous and clustered in small groupings or spilled out on the lawn. Darcy saw his father, with Mr. Wickham by his side, deep in animated conversation with Mr. Arkwright and Mr. Gell on the lawn. Lady Anne was holding court among some of the ladies on the terrace, Georgiana in her lap looking angelic with eyes like violets and golden curls peeping out of her soft, silk baby bonnet.

"Here are our boys," Lady Anne called out gaily when she saw them, and Darcy and George made their way over to the women to be examined and exclaimed over.

"My goodness, what fine young men you are turning out to be," teased Mrs. Eyre, an old family friend and neighbour. "We will have to be careful lest you break all of our girls' hearts."

"Or as is more likely, your lovely daughters break ours," said George with a courtly bow, which caused all of the ladies to titter.

"Listen to him! Not yet - what is it now - thirteen? - and already quite the gallant. Oh! You shall have trouble with this one, Lady Anne," said Mrs. Eyre.

"George is a silver-tongued rascal," Lady Anne laughed.

Georgiana, who had been hiding her face in her mother's bosom, came out on seeing the attention turned away from herself. She said suddenly: "Jorry! Fishy!" She lunged for her brother, and was just kept from falling by Lady Anne's swift arm.

George held out his hands. "Do you want your Georgy?"

Georgiana looked from Darcy to George. "Jorry!" she agreed and lifted her arms to be picked up. Lady Anne relinquished her and George danced her around the terrace to the ladies' delight.

"She certainly loves her brothers!" said a younger lady who Darcy did not recognize. "I could not coax her to come to me."

"She is a little shy," Darcy explained. "She does not like to be held by her nursery maids, even."

"It is my fault," added Lady Anne. "I have not let them do enough. Dear Mr. Darcy always tells me I
must let them do more, but it is so difficult. She is my only daughter."

"She adores you, Mama. Who would not?" said Darcy. He bent down and kissed his mother's head, causing the ladies to sigh sentimentally.

Lady Anne put her hand over Darcy's hand resting on her shoulder and introduced him to the ladies he did not know. The younger lady was Mrs. Addison, wife of the new vicar. He chatted with them amiably if somewhat stiffly, inwardly cursing George for his cleverness in escaping with Georgiana, then was released with a squeeze of his mother's hand.

George was still mingling with the crowd with Georgiana in his arms. When Darcy caught up to them, he was pleased when his baby sister demanded a transfer back to him. He dutifully made the rest of the rounds of the terrace showing off Georgiana. Eventually, he reached his father, who was standing with Mr. Eyre. Mr. Darcy plucked the baby from his arms, tucked her into his side and smiled at Darcy.

"The cravat suits you, son," he said, amused. "How does it feel?"

Darcy stretched his neck gingerly in the neckcloth. "Like I am being strangled."

Mr. Darcy and Mr. Eyre laughed. "You will become used to it in time. Tell Jeffrey he did a fine job, considering he has probably not had to tie one on a young gentleman for years."

"We went through half a dozen of them," Darcy commented.

The gentlemen laughed again and Mr. Darcy informed Darcy that he and George might go and amuse themselves now so long as they returned in time to dress for dinner. It was to be a feast for eighty ladies and gentlemen on the terrace and a further twelve hundred on the tables on the lawn. The portraits would be unveiled at that time and Mr. Darcy had announcements to make. This would be followed by a ball for the gentry and a dance for the villagers.

"Fine blood you have in that one," Darcy heard Mr. Eyre say as he turned to look about for George. "Mrs. Eyre and I would be pleased if you would consider our Mary when it comes time for him to marry. I will augment her dowry and leave all my lands to her when I am gone. You might do worse."

Darcy did not stay to hear his father's reply; it was talk he was accustomed to hearing and equally used to ignoring. He knew the Eyres' property, considerable though it was, and well located in the Peaks, was not sufficient to garner his mother's interest. She had often talked of his marriage to his cousin Anne, who would be a great heiress, though that had ceased with the manifestation of Anne's illness. Of late, she had spoken of Lady Fitzwilliam's nieces, or the young daughters of her friends among the nobility. He assumed his father's answer would be the same as it usually was when his mother broached the subject: Plenty of time for that.

He found George flattering a group of two ladies and nudged him on the elbow, whereupon George swiftly and gracefully extricated himself. He did not know how George did it. Darcy was prepared to suffer the attention and effusions of company, but George appeared to enjoy it. Of course, George did not have to put up with being talked about as if he was a prize ox as Darcy did.

On the lawn, the children's games were in full swing. They walked by the amusements for the younger children, stopped to watch the rope-dancers, tried their hand at throwing quoits and hammers, and waited their turn in the foot-races. Darcy emerged triumphant in most of the contests he entered, though as host he properly declined the prizes in favour of the next-place finisher.
"Must you be good at everything?" George demanded.

"You won a race," Darcy replied.

"Yes, but I did not win almost all of my contests as you did." George was thoughtful, then said, "Perhaps that is the answer. Perhaps you did not truly win. Perhaps they only allowed you to win."

"Allowed me to win?"

"Yes. After all, some of those boys were taller and older than both of us. And Hawkins from the village is quick. Surely they could beat you if they put their minds to it."

"You think they lost deliberately?" Darcy said in dismay.

George shrugged. "Perhaps. It would make sense. They would be afraid of offending you."

His victories suddenly seemed sour. After that, Darcy declined to enter into any more contests and instead watched the proceedings and helped to pass out the prizes.

In the afternoon, they sought refuge in the shade of the hedge and watched from afar as the young men got up their cricket match for the amusement of the ladies. Not all of the guests were content to watch the match; some were exploring Pemberley's park and every now and again Darcy heard voices coming from the path on the other side of the hedge. He thought little of it until he heard his name mentioned, then George's.

"Only the steward's son?" It was a lady's voice. "That is strange, is it not?"

"Even the rich require playmates," said the voice of another lady.

"Yes, but the steward. And to let him be mistaken for a brother! One would think the Darcys could contrive better than that for their precious heir. I can think of several likelier boys. Perhaps I will just mention them to Lady Anne."

Darcy identified the voices, already drifting away, as Mrs. Addison and the wife of one of the rectors. He looked over apprehensively at George, sitting propped up on his elbows in the grass, his eyes glittering with anger.

"They know nothing," Darcy said. "They are ignorant and stupid."

"Do not worry. It is nothing I have not heard before."

"I am sorry," Darcy said, wishing he could think of something else to say. But George only nodded and said something about the cricketers, and Darcy, relieved that his friend was not too upset, went along with the change of subject.

The rest of the afternoon was without unhappy incident. At three o'clock, Darcy and George went inside to wash and dress, then made their way back to the saloon to join Darcy's parents in greeting the day's guests anew and welcoming guests who were attending dinner only.

When Mrs. Addison appeared, Darcy looked over at George to see his reaction. George was, if anything, even more friendly and charming than usual. Laying it on thick, Darcy thought. But then, it seemed to work, as Mrs. Addison expanded under the twin onslaught of George's flattery and his youthful handsomeness in his fine coat and cravat. Good, Darcy thought. Let her see that his friend was not to be so easily trifled with, nor replaced.
After dinner came the speeches. Darcy's father was the first to rise to his feet, addressing the gentry and minor nobility on the terrace as well as the well over one thousand people spread over the lawn.

"Most honoured lords, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, beloved friends and neighbours," he said, speaking in a loud voice so he could be heard by as many assembled as possible. "I do not pretend this is a great occasion, the first birthday of a daughter. But for myself, because of the joy I feel on this day, it is among the greatest of occasions. For today, I celebrate not only the precious gift bestowed upon me, but the giver who hath bestowed it, my lady wife, Lady Anne."

Darcy listened with a smile to his father tell the story of how he had met his mother: how he had arrived in London as a young member of Parliament, a representative of the common people of Derbyshire; how he had spied Lady Anne in a crowded ballroom and only watched as she laughed and smiled and danced the night through with the most eligible and desirable nobles of the day; and how he had finally worked up the nerve to seek an introduction so he could ask for her hand for a dance.

"Believe me, my friends, that no armour-clad ancestor who graces the walls of Pemberley was ever called upon to do greater battle," Mr. Darcy continued with a knowing smile. "On my left flank were earls who would pierce me through the heart for daring to venture near the prize. On my right, dukes who would behead me for even braving a glance. Before me, her brother, Lord Fitzwilliam, newly crowned the greatest landowner in the country, who fixed me with a fierce and baleful eye…"

The ladies and gentlemen laughed and the villagers hooted and hollered, for Lady Anne's brother, the Earl Fitzwilliam, was of diminutive stature in comparison with the tall Mr. Darcy, and known as the most mild-tempered and gentle of men.

"But I thought of my native county and all of you who believed in me. I did not quail. I stood straight and proud; I bowed low; I said the fateful words: My lady, will you dance? And she said…she said…" His father turned to the crowd, raised a questioning eyebrow at them and smiled.

"Yes!" a gentleman yelled from the terrace, amid laughter.

"She said yes!" cried several villagers.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Everybody clapped and stomped.

His father stooped to pick up his glass and raised it to his mother, who was blushing and laughing and hiding her face in her friend's shoulder.

"She said yes," he confirmed with a smile as applause and whistling erupted. "And here we all are. I, the happiest man in the world. And you, the best friends in the world, to come here today to celebrate with me. Please stand and raise a glass with me: To love and friendship."

Everybody stood. "To love and friendship!" they cried and drank.

Mr. Darcy then introduced the two painters, Mr. Wright of Derby and Mr. Romney, who had spent the last month at Pemberley, painting portraits and conversation pieces of the family. He had the footmen raise the cloths to unveil the paintings to cries of praise and delight from the crowd and invited all who could not see to come by later.

There followed eloquent toasts by Mr. Eyre and Mr. Arkwright to their "dear friend, Mr. Darcy," then one from Mr. Wickham on behalf of the staff and servants of Pemberley. Dr. Miles, Darcy's tutor and Pemberley's chaplain as well as the vicar of the parish, stood next.
"My friends and parishioners. A birthday is an occasion for gifts, and today is no exception. The gifts today come from Mr. Darcy to you, though he has charged me with the delightful office of communicating them."

Dr. Miles then went on to explain that the last of the mortar had been laid in the High Peak Canal that spring, that water and the wealth of industry now flowed along its 16-mile route, and that Mr. Darcy had determined that all those who looked to Pemberley must share in the accession of prosperity.

He then unfurled a document and began to read. As he did, cheers sounded over different parts of the lawn. The villages of Pemberley and Kympton, he said, would see an expansion of the existing Sunday school into a full day school for children ages seven to eleven years old. At Lambton, where there was already a school, there would be a new infirmary and an addition to the almshouses. The villages of Shipton and Baggin-by-water would see Sunday schools established, and public wells and greens for cricket and bowling would be gifted to any of the villages and hamlets that did not already have them.

By the time he was finished, there was no part of the crowd that had not risen to its feet. Mr. Darcy smiled and bowed as the crowd remained on its feet clapping for several minutes, then approached Dr. Miles as the noise began to subside. But to Mr. Darcy's surprise, Dr. Miles smiled and held up his hand. He was not done.

"There is one more task that I have been charged with, laid upon me by all of you," he said, addressing primarily the people spread across the lawn. Then he turned back to his patron. "This spring, I received a number of visits. First, from the farmers of Pemberley, then the vicar of Kympton, then delegations from Lambton and other places. There was initially no coordination in any of it, though once each learnt of the other's object, a decision was made to act in concert."

Dr. Miles looked into the crowd and two men came forward, bearing a crate, which they began to pry open.

"The people would like to express their thanks to you and Lady Anne for your continuing care and concern." He smiled, "As you knew nothing of what they planned for you, they knew nothing of the surprises you had planned for them, and it was with both difficulty and delight that I kept the secret from both of you."

The men had by now opened the crate and extracted two heavy objects, wrapped in velvet. Dr. Miles unwrapped the first to reveal a gleaming silver platter with intricate workings, then the second to reveal a bowl of similar design. Both Mr. Darcy and Lady Anne gasped at their richness and beauty.

"The picture on the front of this platter is of Pemberley House, viewed from the front looking from the bridge. The bowl depicts the back of the house and its extensive woods and hills. On the back of the platter and the inside of the bowl are etched the names of every family who contributed to the creation of both platter and bowl, whether it was many guineas or a single farthing. There are 582 names, 582 families, on this platter and bowl. I will now read the inscription."

He cleared his throat. "From the parishioners of Pemberley and environs to Mr. Darcy and Lady Anne Darcy, on the occasion of Miss Georgiana Darcy's first birthday: There is no gift that can repay the debt of gratitude we owe, but please accept these small tokens as thanks for your unexampled generosity, and your unending care and concern. Nowhere in England resides a kinder lord and lady. Nowhere do we know of better FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE."

He smiled at Mr. Darcy, then looked at where Lady Anne was seated with Darcy and George. "I would ask that all of your family come to the front so that I may present these tokens to you."
Mr. Darcy looked at his wife, and she touched Darcy on the sleeve and rose with Georgiana in her arms. They made their way to the front, then looked back to see George still sitting down.

"You as well, George," Lady Anne said, and Mr. Darcy beckoned George to his side. The family assembled, Dr. Miles presented the heavy platter to Mr. Darcy while his helper gave Darcy the bowl. Mr. Darcy accepted his gift with deep emotion, both he and his wife dabbing at their eyes with handkerchiefs, while Darcy took the proffered bowl with pride.

"And now my toast," said the parson. He retrieved his glass and held it up, and all along the terrace and across the lawn, fourteen hundred people rose to their feet and raised glasses and mugs and babes in arms. "To the House of Darcy. May it live forever."

"To the House of Darcy!" they cried in unison. "May it live forever!"

**Footnotes:**

1. England's canal transportation network primarily came into being from about 1770 to 1830. In the latter part of the 18th century, "canal mania" gripped the population as they saw the profits and benefits from canal tolls and cheaper transportation costs for coal and other industrial products. The North and Midland counties of England, including Derbyshire, benefited tremendously from canals.

2. Thomas Telford (1757-1834) was a Scottish civil engineer best known as the "Colossus of Roads" for the far superior turnpike roads he built across England in the early 19th Century. He was a bridge and canal engineer before he turned his attention to roads, and designed the remarkable Pontcysyllte Aqueduct in Wales, now a World Heritage Site, as part of the Llangollen Canal.

3. William Jessop (1745-1814) was a leading civil engineer and canal builder in 18th Century England and the chief engineer on the 14-mile Cromford Canal, which was financed and built by Derbyshire's gentry families in the 1790s. The son of a shipwright, he was a modest man who encouraged others, and it was he who gave Telford his first chance on a canal project, though Telford's previous engineering experience was limited to bridges.

4. The Duke of Bridgewater, a colliery owner, and his engineer, James Brindley of Derbyshire, pioneered the construction of canals to bring the Duke's coal to market, opening their first canal in 1761. Brindley became renowned and the Duke became enormously wealthy.

5. The Peak District of England was full of valuable limestone, marble and gritstone, and lead and coal deposits were also not uncommon. However, isolation and difficult terrain made the cost of transport prohibitively expensive. The major landowners of the region proposed a number of solutions, and two, the Cromford Canal connecting Cromford to the Erewash Canal and the Peak Forest Canal connecting Manchester to Buxton, did come to fruition. Both presented major engineering challenges, and the Cromford Canal, opened in 1794, ultimately cost twice the original £42,700 estimate, but nevertheless proved profitable.

6. Suicide was referred to as *felo de se*, which translated into "felon of self" or "self-murder" and was considered a reprehensible crime. The property of suicides was seized by the Crown and their families were left destitute. The consequences of suicide could be avoided if you could establish the suicide was *non compos mentis* or mentally incompetent at the time of death.

7. In addition to the seizure of property by the Crown, the church punished suicides and their families severely, and superstitions abounded around them. Although there was plenty of objection to the way suicides and their families were treated from progressive elements of society, the penalties did not begin to be officially phased out until the *Felo de Se Act*, passed after the Marquis of
Londonderry cut his throat with his razor on August 22, 1822. Lord Londonderry, a figurehead for the government's reactionary and repressive measures, was deeply unpopular among the people and made allusion to being blackmailed for homosexuality, a crime punishable by death.

The Earl Fitzwilliam and the Duke of Portland were ardent followers of Lord Fitzwilliam's uncle, the Marquis of Rockingham, until his death in 1782. They remained close friends and political allies until a rupture in 1795 over Lord Fitzwilliam's lord lieutenancy of Ireland. The Duke of Devonshire, Viscount Melbourne and the Earl of Harrington were part of the Whig nobility in Derbyshire and thus political associates of the Earl Fitzwilliam and other of the Whig aristocracy.

Richard Arkwright Jr. (1755-1843) was the son of pioneering industrialist Sir Richard Arkwright of Cromford, Derbyshire. Initially a factory owner like his father, he diversified into banking and died a landed gentleman and immensely rich man with a fortune of three million pounds. From 1796 he resided at Willersley Castle, his family's newly built seat just outside the Peaks in Derbyshire overlooking the River Derwent. Philip Gell was a landowner and member of Derbyshire's gentry and a major driver behind the Cromford Canal. Francis Eyre, whose seat was at Hassop Hall near Bakewell, Derbyshire, acceded to the title of Earl of Newburgh in 1814, only to have it later taken away when a prior claimant was discovered. The earldom could pass through the female line.

George Romney (1734-1802) was the foremost fashionable painter of his day, famous for his portraits of Lady Emma Hamilton, mistress of Admiral Nelson. Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797) was a landscape and portrait painter known as the first to capture the spirit of the Industrial Revolution. Richard Arkwright Jr was Wright's foremost patron and he was a close associate of Erasmus Darwin, the famous physician, naturalist, sometime resident of Derby and father of Charles Darwin, author of *Origin of the Species*. As this scene takes place in May 1797, the paintings would be some of Wright's last works before his death at his Derby home in August of that year.

This is a nod to the Society of the Friends of the People, a club founded in 1792 by over 100 Whig MPs and aristocrats to promote the cause of Parliamentary reform, which aimed to devolve power to the middle and lower classes and move England peacefully and gradually from an oligarchy to something akin to democracy. Although the club suffered from smears that they were radicals and republicans - a serious charge in the wake of the French Reign of Terror - and was eventually outlawed, their ideals found fruition forty years later in the passage of the 1832 Parliamentary Reform bill. Founding members included Charles Grey (later 2nd Earl Grey and prime minister in 1832) as well as Lord John Russell (later 6th Duke of Bedford) and William Lambton. Russell's and Lambton's sons, future prime minister Lord John Russell and Jack Lambton, the 1st Earl of Durham, were instrumental in the drafting of the 1832 Reform bill. Given the politics I have imbued Mr. Darcy Sr. with, he would undoubtedly have been a member of the Society. The more conservative 4th Earl of Fitzwilliam opposed it, however.

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Firsts, Lasts and Onlys

Chapter Notes

Sorry I flaked off for a while! Between the more muted interest in this part of the story and reader outrage/misgivings over various things here and at FFN (ie Darcy not being a virgin, D&E having a 19th rather than 21st Century view of sex, and pleas that I stop writing about Darcy's past with Wickham and go back to writing fluff), I wasn't feeling in a terrible hurry to inflict more of this story on the fandom. As it turns out, though, you can't get rid of me that easily! Lol.

This one is for all readers who take the trouble to bookmark or leave kudos or a comment -- I really appreciate it. I am sorry I have been remiss in replying to some of you, but I will get to it as soon as I have a moment.

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For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes.

-- William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey"

A loud knock on the door the next morning roused them both, followed by the voice of Darcy's coachman advising him of the time.

"What - ?" said Elizabeth, startled out of sleep. She was curled up against Darcy, her cheek against his bare chest.

"It is well," said Darcy's voice just above her head. "I told him to give me alarm so we would be on the road in good time." He lifted his head and said to the door, "Thank you, Parker!"

Elizabeth sat up and rubbed her tangled hair. "I should dress, then."

Darcy pulled her to lie down again. "Not yet," he said, taking her back in his arms.

"You would keep your servants waiting, Mr. Darcy?" she teased.

"Any other day, no," he said, nuzzling her neck. "Today, yes. And why am I Mr. Darcy again?"

"It is what I am used to. You prefer that I call you by your given name?"

"You seemed to have no compunction against using it the previous evening," he said with a meaningful raise of the eyebrow.

She blushed scarlet and he grinned at her discomfiture. But she evaded his roving hands with a laugh and left for the dressing room.

They breakfasted in their chambers and three-quarters of an hour found them back in the coach.
Elizabeth watched through the window as the Inn of the White Swan receded into the distance. Was it only the day before yesterday? It seemed like a lifetime ago when they had first arrived in its courtyard. How different she was now from the naive, innocent girl she had been then!

In the carriage, Darcy pulled out the fur blanket again and Elizabeth leant against him and watched in contented silence as the naked trees and snowy fields rolled by. After a while, however, tiring of the scenery and in the mood for conversation, she turned her head to look at him.

"And do you like marriage, sir, now that you have sampled it for two whole days?"

He smiled at her teasing tone. "Avidly. And you, Mrs. Darcy?"

She screwed up her mouth. "We-ell," she hesitated. "It is not exactly as I expected. And one does not wish to be hasty in one's judgment -"

She was stopped by Darcy crushing her with his arm and kissing her. When he finally loosened his hold so she could catch her breath, she laughed. "Yes, I do like it. It is perfectly lovely and I am very happy."

"But it is not as you expected? How does it differ?"

"I think it is more that I did not know what to expect. But I did not - yes, I did not expect it to feel so intimate. I feel as if I can ask you anything and you will tell me. You will tell me, will you not?"

"Anything," he promised her recklessly, kissing her again. "Whatever you wish to know."

"One sees many marriages," she mused, "where husband and wife could not have less to say to each other than if they were two strangers at the market, and when they do speak, it is mainly to wound. And yet it is said they began their marriage with full passion."

At that, Darcy released her and looked at her with concern. "Why do you say that? Do you think my love will fade with time, or do you expect yours to do so?"

She glanced up at him and touched his lips with her fingertips. "I do not expect either," she said, then added honestly, "but you must admit that the sensibility and feeling that underlie many a marriage often do not last as long as the marriage does."

"No, I will not admit that. My father loved my mother long after her death, and her name was on his lips on his dying day."

"Did he?" she asked with interest. "I am sorry, I did not know."

"You could not have known, of course. But it does disprove your thesis that love inevitably fades with marriage. In some cases, marriage strengthens love."

"It does nothing of the sort, for I do not think one can say that such a marriage is the norm, wonderful though it may be for those who are so blessed. For every one such marriage, there must be ten, or a hundred, of the kind I describe."

"I will allow that my parents' marriage was not the norm, but I would not go to such extremes as you propose. In any case," Darcy said wryly, "I do not suggest that such a marriage is the ideal. My father loved my mother very deeply, and her death broke him. There is a price to be paid."

"Perhaps the wisest course, then, is to steer for the middle ground. Not passion, but respect and esteem, must be the foundation of connubial bliss." She glanced up at him and said ruefully, "Mr.
Darcy, I think we may have been going about it the wrong way."

"Not at all," he said, leaning down to kiss her. "I esteem you very highly."

She laughed softly as his lips tickled hers. "And your kisses, sir? Mere tokens of your esteem?"

"Exactly."

He kissed her softly on the mouth, then trailed kisses down her neck and throat and bosom. When he reached to slide her gown from her shoulder, however, she stopped him.

"You have objection?" He looked at her.

"The same as I had before. A carriage does not provide sufficient privacy for such things."

He glanced around, then reached over and pulled the shades down and the curtains closed.

"It is private now."

"Except for your servants."

"They know to knock, of course."

"What about a highwayman?"

He regarded her in disbelief. "A highwayman? You have been reading too many penny ballads."

"I have not been reading any penny ballads. The newspapers had an account of a highway robbery just this morning."

"They do not rob well-armed private carriages on the main road."

Her eyebrows lifted. "That sounds like hubris, sir."

"Not at all. It is fact."

When she did not protest this, he smiled and pulled her close again and resumed his kisses, which she allowed. Soon enough, however, he had strayed into prohibited territory again.

"Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth laughed breathlessly as she attempted to corral his hands. "Perhaps it has not occurred to you, but I am your wife now, and therefore such urgency is unnecessary, for 'the fair lasts all the year.' If you can but be patient until we are out of this carriage, I am sure you will find all you seek."

"Mrs. Darcy," he replied, his hands continuing their apparently tireless exploration of her person, "my patience appears to have fled, a victim of your all too manifest charms, which have also claimed my self-possession, my reason, and any vestige of restraint."

She was losing the battle, as she was fending off not only her husband but her own traitorous inclinations. Then an idle thought popped into her head.

"You are entirely too accomplished at this, sir."

He raised his head at that and looked at her, bemused, his hands stilled. "Too accomplished at what?"
"At this … this seduction."

"Elizabeth … as you have just pointed out, we are married."

"That does not change the fact that you exhibit an alarming amount of ease and facility for importuning a woman in a carriage."

An odd look crossed his face, as if he was uncertain whether to be flattered or offended. He said, with a little smile, "You prefer that I exhibit incompetence?"

"Not for itself, no. But it would not remind me of how highly experienced you are."

His eyebrows shot up. "I would not say I am highly experienced."

"Now really, sir. If I said that I had had more than a dozen liaisons, you would certainly describe me as highly experienced, if not something much worse."

"Yes, but you are a woman."

She shot him a warning look, but he did not back down.

"Elizabeth, it is … ah … not uncommon for gentlemen to have had experience prior to marriage. Quite the reverse, in fact."

"I am aware of this fact," she said coolly.

"And … compared to most gentlemen of my acquaintance, I would assuredly not be considered 'highly' experienced. Again, quite the reverse."

"I thank you for enlightening me." Her tone was now decidedly frosty.

She was seated away from him, at the extreme end of the carriage seat. Darcy similarly backed up so he could face her, his legs stretched across the width of the carriage. He scrutinized her.

"I cannot say I look back on my past conduct with satisfaction. Far from it. But it is done and I cannot change it now."

"I do not wish you to change anything."

"Then what is it?" His voice was frustrated.

"How were you chaste for five years?" she blurted out. "It does not make sense, given how much you enjoy … how often you wish … to do that."

"You believe I have been lying to you?" Now he was offended.

She shook her head slowly. "I did not say that. Perhaps what you are telling me is the truth. But the evidence suggests that may not be the whole picture."

"And this evidence, if I may rephrase it, is that I take an excessive delight in intimate relations with my wife?"

Put that way, it did not seem to be a very compelling argument. Then Elizabeth thought of her father's warning, Mr. Russell's comment about actresses and opera singers, and all of the women who sought Darcy's notice as soon as he displayed even a modicum of geniality. How did a man resist such unending temptation?
"Elizabeth, you say you do not care about the past, but I cannot see to what else these questions tend."

"They were … it was … the carriage," she stammered. Then, gathering herself, she said, "I do not care about your past, but I do not wish to be treated as one among another of the objects for your casual lusts."

His face changed from indignation to chagrin. "Is that how you see it?"

"Are those not the types of women who allow themselves to be seduced in a carriage?"

"Not necessarily. They may simply be indulgent wives, who look kindly upon their husbands' ardour."

"You are incorrigible, sir." But he had drawn a smile from her.

"And you are irresistible." He reached across the seat and pulled her towards him by the knees, making her laugh and kick her feet. Once within reach, he slipped his arm around her waist again.

"I promise I will be good this time." He smiled into her eyes, then kissed her on the mouth, the cheek and the mouth again. "I shall keep my hands above your gown. I will not allow them to touch any fastenings. I will even submit to having them tied behind my back, if you will be so good as to agree to sit upon my lap."

She laughed at his mischievous expression, so unlike his usual hauteur, and said, "I think I will not tempt fate, sir. But you may continue so long as you adhere to the parameters articulated."

"Thank you, madam." He trailed kisses across her collarbone until she lifted his face so she could kiss him on the lips. They continued kissing for some time and Darcy, true to his word, did not disturb her gown. But after a while, when Elizabeth was beginning to feel quite heated and regretful of her earlier stricures, Darcy broke it off.

"I think we must stop," he said breathlessly. "I will retire to my side of the carriage now, and perhaps you should do the same."

He matched his actions to his words, and when Elizabeth quit the centre of the seat, he placed a cushion between them, as if to make a barrier.

She laughed, eyeing the small plush object on the seat. "If I decide to jump at you, sir, that will not be very effective."

"If you do something so reprehensible, madam," he retorted, "be advised that I will consider it a breach of our agreement, thereby releasing me from any agreed upon limits." He lifted the shade on the glass, cracked it open and, removing his cravat and flinging it onto the opposing seat, closed his eyes and took deep breaths of cold air.

Elizabeth, still laughing, wrapped herself in the blanket and snuggled into it. "What shall we do now?"

"I do not know about you, but I intend to sit here and nurse my sense of grievance over my wife's hard-heartedness." He smiled to assure her that he was jesting and shut the glass.

"I will distract you," she said gaily. "I will ask you questions, and you must answer them. Will that cool your ardour?"
"I doubt it, and what sort of questions?"

"Whatever I wish to know. Remember, you said you would tell me anything."

"I fear you will make me regret that," he said wryly. "But a promise is a promise. Ask, then."

"Have you ever seduced a woman in a carriage before me?"

"Not exactly."

"Not exactly? What does that mean?"

"I kissed a woman, or she kissed me. I cannot recall who began it."

"Lady Castleton?"

"Yes."

"Did it go further than kisses?"

"In the carriage?"

"Yes."

"Not much, no."

"Did you wish to marry her?"

"I did not think of it."

"If you loved her, how could you not think of it?"

"She was married. I was one-and-twenty and still engaged in my studies. I did not consider it a possibility."

"Engaged in your studies? At Cambridge?"

"No, Lincoln's Inn."

"You intended to be a barrister?"

"Possibly. That was not my father's or my uncle's intention, however. Their intention was that I would contest the county election or hold one of Lord Fitzwilliam's borough seats in the House of Commons."²

"Hm. Did you ever wish to marry anybody else?" She saw his hesitation. "You did?"

"I cannot say how much I wished to marry another, but I did ask - my cousin Anne."

"Oh!" She had heard from Mr. Collins that Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine, had been displeased with their match and the hint that it was because she had hoped to keep Darcy for her daughter. But it was the first Elizabeth had heard that Darcy had also sought the match. "Then why - ?"

"Anne did not wish to marry me. She did not wish to marry anybody." He glanced at her. "By the bye, Lady Catherine does not know that I proposed to Anne, and I would ask that you preserve her ignorance from that fact."
"For my sake?"

"For Anne's sake, actually."

Elizabeth felt a pang. "Did you love her?"

"Not in the way you mean, and not in the way that I love you. But I do feel for her, deeply. She is close in age to me, and we saw each other frequently as children so that she seemed like a sister to me, almost as much as Georgiana. That was before she became ill."

"What is her condition?"

He shook his head. "I am not entirely clear. It is a delicate matter, and one I think it best you judge for yourself, or learn from Anne directly. You will understand, I think, when you meet her."

She scrutinized his face, but could see no loss or regret there, only - pity? But he did not appear to want to dwell on it.

"So I am not the first woman you have loved, bedded or asked to marry you. Nor am I the first woman you have kissed in a carriage. I wonder, shall I ever be first in anything?" She spoke lightly to dispel the shadow that had fallen over his face.

"You are my first and only wife." He smiled at her.

"Oh, but that is such a small thing," she teased.

"If you had allowed me to go further in this carriage …" he said suggestively.

"But I will not," she smiled. "Not at present, anyway. So we are at an impasse, it seems."

"Perhaps I should ask you some questions."

"No, it is not your turn yet. I began this game so I shall decide when I am done."

"Very well. Ask."

"What was your first time like?"

"My first time? My first time … ?" His voice trailed off as he raised an eyebrow.

"Your first time with a woman." She saw his face and said, "I promise I will not be upset. I only wish to know how it happened. And it is only fair, since you know all about my first time."

He smiled broadly at the memory. "Yes. Your first time. It was, erm, acceptable to you?"

"I think I have been sufficiently vocal about my appreciation!" she retorted, then laughed again at the expression of heartfelt delight on his face. She leant her head against the seat and looked up at him slyly through her lashes. "I think you are fishing, sir. And attempting to change the subject."

"I can have no memory of the original subject when you look at me so." He was by her side again, having thrown the centre cushion aside.

"The subject was your first time with a woman," she said patiently, but she allowed him to take her hand.

"The subject matter is not typical conversational fare for a newly wedded couple."
"Since neither of us has been married before, how are we to know what is typical conversational fare? Perhaps they all talk about this. And even if it is atypical, what does that matter? I do not set out to be the typical woman."

"God help me, no you do not," he mumbled.

"I thought you liked me for my frankness. I have certainly not concealed it from you." She withdrew her hand from his.

He took back her hand. "Elizabeth, I do enjoy your frankness. But your question … I have not spoken of this before. It was not an easy period in my life."

"I am sorry. I suppose if you truly do not wish to speak of it, we do not have to."

He looked at her. She was disappointed, her eyes downcast. A moment ago, her eyes had been on him, teasing, trusting. She truly wishes to know, he thought. Not for any particular reason, only because she is interested in me.

"No, we can speak of it," he said, and was rewarded by her bright smile. "What do you wish to know?"

"What led to it?"

"What led to it? For me, nothing in particular. She was pretty and I was a normal youth. As for her - I cannot say for certain what was her motivation. Money was part of it, but whether that arose before or after, and to what extent, I am not certain."

Her brow furrowed delicately. "You speak in riddles, sir. How can you not be certain?"

"It is a long story, and slightly complicated."

"It is hours to Northamptonshire yet, I believe." When he did not immediately respond, she asked, "How old were you?"

"Fourteen - that is, not quite. It was the summer I was to turn fourteen."

Her eyes widened. "That is young, is it not?"

His smile was wry and without mirth. "I cannot say what is the norm for young men. But I was - yes, I was probably too young, and rather confused."

She said nothing, only continued to look at him wonderingly as he rubbed his thumb against the petal softness of her palm. How could something so small and soft touch him so deeply, he thought. How did she stir the things inside of him that had lain undisturbed for so many years? He should have known that a woman like this would not be content with little; that it would not end until he had turned his very soul inside out for her.

He sighed. "It was after my mother died."

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Footnotes:

1. Elizabeth would have got this phrase from one of her copies of *Aristotle's Master-Piece*. However, it actually originates from a 17th Century book of ribald songs and ballads titled *Merry drollery, being jovial poems, merry songs, &c., collected by W.N., C.B., R.S., & J.G., lovers of wit*. The
Stuarts were masters of using inventive language to talk dirty.

2. As of 1811, the 4th Earl Fitzwilliam held the nomination of 5 MP seats in the House of Commons through his control of pocket boroughs, Parliamentary borough with such a small electorate that the major landowner effectively controlled who would be MP. He awarded these to family, friends and those whose politics he approved of, and some of the beneficiaries of Lord Fitzwilliam's patronage include the political philosopher Edmund Burke and the 2nd Viscount Melbourne, prime minister under Queen Victoria. At the time, over half the seats in the House of Commons were held in this way, and many of them were occupied by sons of peers and great landowners. For those with aspirations beyond seat-warming while they awaited their inheritance, it was not uncommon to seek training as a barrister at one of the Inns of Court to develop their speech-making and rhetorical skills, even if they did not intend to practice law.

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Amelia

"Good deeds ill placed, which we on most men heap,
Are seeds of that ingratitude we reap;
For he that is so sweet, that none denies,
Is made of honey for the nimble flies.

- John Donne, "On Friendship"

After Lady Anne died, the world changed.

Darcy's father went into deep mourning and Darcy scarcely saw him. At the funeral procession, he glanced at his son, then looked away, and all of Darcy's attempts to catch his eye were for naught.

It was like the time after his little brother had died, Darcy told himself, when his mother had retreated into herself and had scarcely seemed to acknowledge or recognize him. But then, he had had his father to share the burden of loss. Now even his father was gone.

He remembered the old lesson. You must be patient, son. So Darcy was patient. He knew he might have to wait a long time for his father to reappear and his own pain to become bearable. But he also knew that he was older now, almost thirteen years old, and capable of far more patience than he had at eight.

There was not much else to do but be patient, for Mr. Darcy was seldom at home and Mr. Wickham was more busy than ever managing the estate in his absence. And where did his father go? Darcy was not even sure. He heard mention of Town, Bath, Weymouth. At last, after one more brief visit that Mr. Darcy mainly spent confined to his own quarters, his father left for Naples, where he had spent some of the early years of his marriage and where Darcy still had childhood memories of heat and sunshine and the heady scent of jasmine and lemon blossom.

Loss followed upon loss. Three months after his mother's death and his father's departure, his valet Jeffrey announced he would marry his long-time sweetheart. Darcy knew it had long been his hope, for which Jeffrey and his betrothed were saving assiduously. But he had not expected it to happen so soon; his mother's plan had been for Darcy to remain at home for one more year before being sent to school and Jeffrey was to attend him until that time. Mr. Wickham informed Darcy that his father had determined to advance the plan. Almost before Darcy knew it, Jeffrey was pensioned off, married and moved to Leicestershire, and the servants began packing Darcy and George for Eton.

The first Eton half was a blur of misery. There were too many people and too much noise, and his indifferent tutor at Eton and the cranky dame of the house where he and George resided bore little resemblance to his beloved Dr. Miles and Mrs. Reynolds. Even so, he was lucky though he scarcely knew it, escaping the persecution that some of the other boys - younger, smaller, less important - suffered. His cousins had gone before him in the not too distant past, and some of their connexions who had lingered at Eton were kinder to him than might otherwise have occurred.

The Lent and Summer halves were a little better. By then he had become inured to the unremitting bustle and strife of the other boys. He no longer prayed for a missive bidding him home, had given up hoping for a letter from his father that never came, and had learnt to live with his resentment over being left at the school over the Christmas holidays.
By contrast, George found Eton's environment to be stimulating rather than bewildering. His connexion to the Darcys and thence the Fitzwilliams gave him standing over the bulk of the boys and Dr. Miles's tutoring and his many masters at Pemberley had ensured that he acquitted himself well in the sports and other pursuits of the gentry. George loved to lord it over the other boys, the sons of rich tradesmen and charity students, whose upbringing had not granted them the same privileges.

And unlike Darcy, George received regular letters from home. Those from Mr. Wickham were brief and to the point, advising him to apply himself diligently to his studies, but those from his mother, Mrs. Wickham, were long and full of gossip and other musings - or so George said, for he did not read them aloud but only chuckled to himself when he received them. He did, however, share with Darcy the generous treats she sent him, heedless of the extravagant cost of the mail. Darcy could not help wondering what kind of presents and treats he would have received from *his* mother, had she been alive.

The final term drew to a close with June and, to Darcy's great relief, Mr. Wickham sent instructions for the boys to be ready for their home journey almost immediately. Darcy was glued to the window almost as soon as the carriage entered Derbyshire, and when they entered the wilder, rougher country in the Peaks, he felt his heart swell with happiness. There was never so beautiful a sight as Pemberley when they gained the top of the eminence. Across the valley, the great stone house stood in handsome dignity against the dark green of thickly wooded forest, and the lights from its windows sparkled and danced in the winding stream. No matter what tragedy had befallen, it was still the seat of love and memory.

"You were *that* homesick, hey?" said George, looking across at his friend in the carriage. He handed him his handkerchief.

"Oh, shut it," said Darcy. He finished wiping his eyes and blew his nose.

The old gatekeeper was still at the gatehouse and hailed the boys warmly. He told them that Mr. Darcy was not yet home and Mr. Wickham was travelling to meet him. However, Mr. Birnie and Mrs. Reynolds were eagerly awaiting their arrival and Little Miss Darcy had the nursery maids in a pother in her excitement to see her "brothers."

As the carriage drew up to the house, Darcy peered out the window to see the butler and housekeeper standing on the steps, holding the hands of a little girl who must be Georgiana between them while a nurse hovered behind. Darcy marvelled at the change in his sister. When he had last seen her she had been a babe in arms.

The little girl strained against Mr. Birnie's and Mrs. Reynolds' hands. When the carriage came to a stop and the door opened, they released her and she ran to them as fast as her two-year-old legs would carry her.

Darcy caught her up and lifted her into his arms.

"Fitzy!" she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and giving him a hearty smack on the cheek.

"You did not forget me!" he said with delight.

Mrs. Reynolds came up to them. "How could she, Master Darcy, with all of your letters? We read them out to her every night. Nurse says it will be easy to teach her her letters, as she is already asking about writing back to you."

"I drew you pictures," Georgiana said. "I drew a picture of you, but you look different now. I will make your legs longer, but Nurse said you already look like a daddy long-legs in my picture."
Darcy looked over at Mrs. Reynolds in amazement. "Her talking is incredible."

Mrs. Reynolds smiled proudly. "It is quite wonderful. One forgets when one sees a child on a daily basis."

"I drew pictures of Georgy too," said Georgiana, looking over at George. "Nurse says they are very handsome though his smile runs off his face."

George grinned at her and held out his arms. "May Georgy have a hug?"

"Yes!" she cried and reached for him. Darcy handed her over and she hugged George as enthusiastically as she had him before demanding to be returned to Darcy's arms.

Mrs. Reynolds began to explain that Mr. Darcy was not yet home and looked relieved when Darcy assured her he had already heard the news from the gatekeeper. He hugged his sister tightly, angry that she would be left to the care of servants almost the whole year.

Mr. Birnie threw open the door and the children and servants made their way in with Darcy still carrying Georgiana. He was home.

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He did not see his father for the first week after his return. When Mr. Darcy finally arrived home, Darcy greeted him coolly and his father soon retired to his own chambers.

Darcy told himself he did not care. He did not need his father now anyway. Had he and George not been on their own all year? They were as good as men now.

They were not without supervision. Mr. Darcy, not entirely confident about the education they received at Eton, had engaged Dr. Miles to tutor them through the summer. Since he now resided in the village as the vicar of Pemberley, the boys rode over to his home every morning for lessons. This was followed by riding and shooting with masters. In the afternoon they were at leisure and were permitted to range into the surrounding country.

Normally they explored the Peak country, testing themselves and their mounts on the steep terrain and deep valleys. But one day, George expressed a wish to head south in search of the larger settlements.

"We are close to Belper," he said after they had gone for many miles. "I should like to look in on my mother." Since Darcy had no objection, they turned in that direction.

In the large and prosperous town, they attracted many admiring glances and Darcy felt like a fine young gentleman on his tall horse. He re-adjusted his hat to a more jaunty angle and smiled at some of the girls, causing them to giggle. Darcy looked back at George to flash him a grin and saw that he, too, was enjoying the attention. He pointed out the various scenes of his childhood to Darcy in a loud, carrying voice.

At length, they rode down a street lined with stone cottages of the better sort and stopped at the end, in front of one that was larger and handsomer than the rest. Its windows hung with rich draperies and fashionable gilt-paper hangings could be seen adorning the walls. It was very different from the plain style Mr. Wickham adopted at Pemberley, Darcy thought.

The trio dismounted and George rapped on the door. They were greeted by a maid, who said the mistress was within and told Sam to bring the horses round the back. Darcy found it odd that she did not recognize George nor ask their names, but George explained that his mother often changed
servants and this was a new one.

The boys sat down to wait in the parlour, a large room filled with plush lounges and tables covered in green baize. After a minute or two, the door opened and Mrs. Wickham entered.

"Oh! George!" she said, pressing her hand to the bare part of her bosom as if surprised to see him.

"Hello, Mama. We were in the neighbourhood."

George rose and kissed her on the presented cheek. Darcy was not sure what he had expected of George's mother, but she was not it. For one thing, she looked quite young, not yet thirty, and for another she was very pretty, in a way his beautiful mother had not been pretty. She wore paint, he realized. And the light, low-cut, clinging gown she wore was much more appropriate for the evening than the day.

Mrs. Wickham looked past George and eyed Darcy appraisingly.

"Is this your friend, then? The illustrious Fitzwilliam Darcy, heir to Pemberley? I am pleased to make your acquaintance, sir."

Something about the way she looked at him made Darcy's face feel hot, but he managed to stammer out a return greeting.

She ordered tea and they sat and chatted about George's life at Pemberley. She was very affectionate, he noticed, hanging over him and squeezing his arm and tousling his hair, but George did not seem to mind it, and laughed at her teasing.

"How did you manage to convince your papa to allow you this visit?" she said to him.

"He does not know I am here. We were out for a ride."

"All this way in a single morning? What horsemanship!" She included Darcy in her admiring glance.

"That is nothing. We did not even cut across the fields, but came by the road. We could cut the time in half if we wanted."

"You must come to see me more often, then, and meet my friends. And bring Master Darcy." She smiled at him again.

"I will, if Darcy wishes. Do you, Darcy?"

"Certainly. It is not far at all if we come by the fields."

He was rewarded with another glowing smile from Mrs. Wickham. She leant toward them confidentially, revealing more of her bosom than Darcy was used to seeing in the flesh. He immediately looked down at his boots and heard her chuckle softly.

"I will tell you what, you must visit me in the evenings," she said. "That is when all of the sport is. Do you think you can manage it? It would mean riding home in the dark."

"Of course we can manage it!" George said.

Darcy frowned. "I do not think we would be permitted."

"Who would know?" George asked. "We will say we are out for an evening ride."
"But … Sam. He will tell our fathers if we do not return home."

"Who is Sam?" Mrs. Wickham asked.

"He is my footman," Darcy replied.

"And how old is he?"

"I am not sure. Seventeen or eighteen years perhaps?"

"Does he ride? Can he ride with you here?"

"Yes, I suppose."

Mrs. Wickham smiled. "Bring him. I will think of something for him. Now try to come on Thursday or Friday, those are my evenings. And bring as much money as you can. Not for me, but for yourselves. You will have far more fun that way."

They did not go that week, as Darcy was concerned it would get back to his father, but the next, when Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham were away on business for several days, Darcy, George and Sam rode out to Mrs. Wickham's.

This time they were greeted by a plump, pretty maid who seemed to be expecting them. She directed Darcy and Wickham to the parlour again and informed Sam she would show him to the stables herself. George, watching her curl her arm through Sam's and press herself to his side as she led him away, winked at Darcy. They would have no more trouble with Sam.

Mrs. Wickham greeted them warmly and told them it was good they were early as she would have a chance to teach them some card tricks. They spent the next half hour at whist and faro until the first arrival, a young-ish, fashionably dressed man by the name of Smith, who Mrs. Wickham greeted with a kiss on the cheek. Darcy looked over at George to see how he took this, but he appeared unconcerned. Mrs. Wickham turned the boys over to Smith to take over their training as she departed to finish dressing upstairs.

Within another half hour, Darcy felt he understood the system of tracking the cards and was eager to play. By then, other guests had filtered into the house and were milling about the tables. They settled down quickly. George wagered recklessly and lost all of his money at Faro. Darcy still had most of his money, as he preferred to watch first to assess the level of play, which was more sophisticated than took place among the boys at Eton. When George came to him, he suggested they partner at whist at one of the tables where the stakes were low.

By eleven o'clock, wine and spirits were flowing freely and the crowd was beginning to be more raucous. Darcy, mindful of the time and still fearful of being caught, told George they should leave. They did so, rousing Sam, who was half-dressed and snoring on the hay bales in the stables. As they stumbled home by lantern light, Darcy and George agreed the evening was a success. They were up eight shillings on their original stakes of a guinea each.

Darcy waited the next few days to see if the incident had made it round to any of the senior servants who might report it, but nobody said a word. It appeared George was right, and the shilling they had left in the young stable boy's palm to keep their silence had proven effective.

They returned the next week, both days, and even began attending with Mrs. Wickham at other card parties at other houses given on different days of the week, whenever Mr. Darcy was absent from home, which was often. Initially they almost always lost more than they won, coming home with empty pockets that needed to be replenished from Darcy's saved pocket money. But Darcy was
clever and both boys were eager learners and by the third week they were again in a surplus position.

Their greatest success was at whist. It was a four-player game played in teams of two, where unspoken communication with one's partner was important. Here, Darcy found that his closeness to George offered a significant advantage as they could read each other's signals almost as plainly as speaking. By the end of the first month, they were playing at the higher-stakes tables and winning the majority of the time.

Initially their presence was only remarked upon by a few of the guests, but as they became more successful, Darcy heard many people inquire as to who the handsome youths were. He was not entirely comfortable with the fact that Mrs. Wickham invariably identified him as the heir to Pemberley. Nor did he like to see the exclamation or gleam of interest that was the usual response.

One other thing he was not entirely comfortable with, and that was the attention he and George had begun to attract from the women. Although he would be lying if he said he did not find any of them attractive, Darcy felt that he could have nothing to do with ladies who were so much older and more sophisticated than he. Especially Mrs. Wickham.

She did not act as she should, in Darcy's estimation. He did not mind that she took some of their winnings, for did she not, as she pointed out, supply everyone with food and drink and a place to play? But he did not like it when she stood so close to him that he could see down her gown, nor when she touched him as she did George and breezily referred to his family's wealth and ability to play high. He remembered his father's comment to Mr. Wickham long ago that he had made an unfortunate choice marrying outside of his own station.

After one incident at supper, when she reached over and unmistakably ran her hand down his thigh under the table, Darcy began to avoid Mrs. Wickham. When that happened, he noticed that she became less familiar, though no less friendly. He was relieved.

It was shortly after that Amelia arrived.

She was young, younger than any of the other ladies by two or three years at least, although older than Darcy and George. Darcy guessed fifteen or sixteen. She usually came as part of a large and shifting party of ladies and gentlemen, making it difficult for Darcy to determine exactly who she belonged to. She had soft brown hair and soft brown eyes and she was slim and lithe as a reed.

Darcy took pains to avoid showing any signs of interest. But sometimes, when he thought she was not looking, he would watch her. And a few times, he would turn to find her eyes on him. But he did not approach her.

Unlike Darcy, George flirted outrageously with the ladies who flirted with him. One night, it went further. When Darcy came to him and said it was time to leave, George told him he intended to stay the night.

"But … they will remark upon your absence," Darcy said, glancing at the woman clinging to his arm.

"I will come home early, before anyone notices."

"By yourself?"

"Yes, by myself," said George irritably. "I am not a child."

"No, he is not," giggled the woman, who must be least four-and-twenty. "He can look after himself, Mr. Darcy. Or I will look after him." She ran her fingers through his hair and George smiled at her.
Darcy left.

George told him what happened the next day, when they were out riding and had finally managed to lose Sam.

"It was amazing. The best feeling in the world. You must try it," he told Darcy.

Darcy demurred, muttering something about his father.

"He will never know. Who will tell him? Not you nor I, and certainly not Sam, or I will tell about what he has been up to in the stables with the servant girl. Come, Darcy, it is your chance. Any of the ladies would do it."

"Why - why would they want me? They are so much older."

"Are you mad? The heir to Pemberley? Of course they want you. But if they are too old, what about that girl? What is her name?"

"Amelia," said Darcy quickly - too quickly, he thought.

George smiled knowingly. "Right. Amelia. So you do like her."

"I have scarcely spoken to her."

"Do not worry, you can be as silent as a tombstone if you like. They will do all of the work."

"Amelia would not - "

"No, of course not," George grinned. "I am sure she is as pure as the driven snow, keeping her heart all for you. But she wants you, Darcy. My mother told me."

"Perhaps later."

"When?"

"Later … later in the summer."

"Fine," George said. "Just do not wait too long. You do not want to be like your cousin Milton. I wager Lord Fitzwilliam will have him married off to a cousin before he touches a woman and then it will be too late for him."

After that, George frequently stayed the night at his mother's house, even when Mr. Darcy was home. Since Mr. Darcy breakfasted alone in his chambers, it was not a problem so long as George returned by early morning. The times when he did not, Darcy made some excuse. With time, the lie came more easily.

It was on their last visit to Mrs. Wickham's, four days before they were to return to Eton, when it finally happened.

It had been a lucky night. Knowing it was the last time, Darcy had brought all of his accumulated winnings from the summer and given George freer rein to push the stakes higher. When the last trick was turned, they were hands down the winners of the night.

Basking in the thrill of victory and distracted by the toasts and wine pressed upon him, he did not notice when George disappeared. As he had a good idea what he was up to, he chose to await his reappearance rather than go looking for him. By the time most of the guests had left, however, he
had still not materialized.

"Is something wrong?" said a soft voice behind him. He turned to see Amelia framed in the hallway entrance.

"No," he said shortly, hoping the dim light concealed his blush.

She came over closer to him. They were alone, the room having emptied out, although voices could be heard elsewhere in the house.

He tried not to look at the front of her gown, which seemed even lower than the last time he had looked. He could not help noticing that despite her litheness, there was nothing girlish about certain parts of her person. He looked up to see her soft brown eyes looking at him speculatively as if she read his thoughts and the heat in his face increased.

"Did your friends leave you?" she asked. "Mine seem to have forgotten and left me behind as well."

She sat on a table about an arm's length from him and swung her slipper-encased little feet. The candlelight caught the gleam of silk stocking on the swell of her calf and Darcy looked away again.

"No, I think they must be here somewhere." He shuffled his feet awkwardly and looked down at them. His hands felt big and he closed them into fists.

"Is something wrong?" she said. "You seem ill at ease."

"No … no. I am fine."

"Perhaps it is my own nervousness then, being around you."

He looked up at that, surprised. "You are nervous around me?"

"Yes." This time, she blushed.

"But why?"

"Why not? You are the heir to Pemberley. Who am I? Just a girl from town."

"But you are very … very pretty. And all the gentlemen wish to speak to you."

She smiled and reached out and tugged his cuff. He stepped closer, his head buzzing a little, although he had not had anything to drink in the last hour.

"But I have always wished to speak to you. Ever since I was a girl."

"You have seen me before?" he said in surprise.

She laughed, a delicate, tinkling laugh.

"Oh yes, of course. I grew up in Kympton. Every year my sisters and I would come to your birthday fete. You gave us shillings, do you not remember?"

He blushed, for a different reason this time. "No, I … I am sorry. I do not remember you particularly, there were so many children."

She laughed again. "Oh no! I do not mean I expect you to remember me, only the shillings. Do you remember giving out shillings to the children?"
"Of course. But I have not done that for some time. The servants do it now. They started after..." He swallows. "...after my mother died. I was sent to school so I was not there."

"Yes," she said sadly. "I missed you last year. I looked for you but you were gone."

Darcy felt a glow of warmth for her. He often wondered whether the children registered him at all, or whether it was only the coins they were interested in.

"I am sure I would have noticed you last year, had I been there," he said gallantly. "You are very pretty. I am sure anybody would have noticed you."

She laughed at that, then said as if a thought struck her, "It is your birthday coming soon, is it not?" she said.

"Next week." He was flattered that she would remember such a thing.

"But you will be gone next week, I imagine. So I will miss seeing you on your birthday again." She pouted a little.

"You can still receive a shilling if you go to Pemberley on the day," he said reassuringly.

"Oh! No, I am far too old for that. The last year I went only to look after my little sisters and brothers. But I no longer live with them. And I do not want you to give me anything. I had actually hoped to give you something."

She smiled teasingly at him and he smiled back. The children often gave him things - rocks and shells and bird's nests when he was young, and bookmarks and handkerchiefs as he got older.

"Thank you," he said. "I am sure I would like it very much. You can keep it for me for when I return, perhaps?"

She slid off the table so that she was standing before him, almost touching him. "There is no need," she whispered. "I can give it to you now."

He felt his cheeks flame. Did she mean -? What did she mean?

"What - what is it?" he asked. Perhaps she would kiss him. The thought sent his pulse racing. It would be his first kiss from a girl who was not a relation.

She dropped her bare hand into his. "Not here. In one of the rooms."

She pulled on his hand and he hesitated. Definitely a kiss, he thought. And … perhaps more? He was not sure if he was ready for it. He thought of his mother and father, but his mother was gone and his father seemed very far away. Then he remembered what George had said. Don't be such a prig, Darcy. Everybody does it. I have done it dozens of times now. You have to be a man at some point.

"Will you come?" she asked. She looked uncertain and a little shy all of a sudden. His heart went out to her.

He went.

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Schemes

Only when my heart freezes
    do I covet the power
    to hurt an enemy
    as you and I can hurt
    each other, my son:
    with a thoughtless word,
    a careless glance,
    an unexpected departure.

- Alden Nowlan "Only When My Heart Freezes"

When he woke, it was morning and she was gone. So, he discovered, were his winnings. Had she taken them? Or had he given them to her? His head was fuzzy. They had started out kissing and she had said he needed some wine because he was too nervous. She had gone out and fetched some and they had drunk it together. It was strong, stronger than he was used to. His memory after they had completed the act was a little hazy. Yes, he must have given them to her. He did remember that she said something about needing money.

For the first months, it was little more than a pleasant memory tinged with doubt when he thought of the missing money. But shortly before the holiday break, George came to him and told him the news, which he had received from his mother. Darcy could not believe it at first.

"How … how did this happen, George? It was only one time. You and Sam did it dozens of times."

"You did not pull out?"

"What? No, was I supposed to? I only did what she told me to do, and she said nothing about that. How was I to know? It was my first time!"

"Well, at least you know you are potent," George grinned. "Look, she is not asking for you to marry her -"

"Marry her!" Cold dread wrapped around his heart. She was pretty, but he hardly knew her. And she had seemed to know what she was doing. But then again, she was not that much older than he. Perhaps it was an act, the worldly sophistication, and inside she had been as uncertain as he was now. And if there was a child, it should not grow up without a father. He thought of his own missing father. Yes, he supposed he would have to marry her. But what would his family say when they found out about the girl who might carry the next heir to Pemberley? He burnt with shame.

"No, there is no need of that," George said, as if in answer to his thoughts. "My mother said she only wants money."

"Money? What for?"

"So she can keep herself. With a proper dowry, she says she knows of someone who will marry her. That is what all girls like her do. God, Darcy, you do not know anything, do you?"

"No, I do not!" he said, horribly ashamed and ready to admit it. "If she needs money for a dowry, I had best go to my father. I do not have any money." He will hate me. But he already hates me. Or does not care. So that is no big loss.
"No, you do not want to go to your father!"

"Why not?"

"He will blame me, Darcy, and then we will not be able to be friends any longer. I should never have taken you there. If you had stayed at Pemberley, none of this would have happened. It was just - I could not fathom going without you. It would not have been the same."

Secretly Darcy blamed George as well, for pressuring him and then not telling him that what he did with Amelia could produce a child so easily. But George's confession was disarming, and Darcy reminded himself that nobody had forced him to do anything.

"Look, Darcy, you are right. Go ahead and tell him. I am being selfish, I do not want Uncle George to be angry with me. He may say we can no longer be friends." George looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "But your father has a right to know."

"No," Darcy said confusedly. He could not afford to lose George's friendship. Without him, he was all alone at Pemberley except for Georgiana, who was too young to offer any kind of companionship. And how was he to tell his father anyway? He did not even know where to write him. He would have to write his secretary or Mr. Wickham. It was unthinkable. "No, I did it, I must take responsibility. But what am I to do? How much money does she need?"

George named a sum. Darcy's heart sank. It would take years of pocket money before he could come close to such an amount.

George, seeing Darcy's face, said, "Look, I can help you."

"How can you help me? Your allowance is much smaller than mine."

"I know it is small, but you can have it. It was my fault too."

Darcy felt a glow of gratitude toward his friend. "I do not wish to deprive you-"

"What are friends for? Of course, you can have it. But it will still not be enough before the child is born. What can we do?"

Darcy's heart warmed further at the word "we."

"I have an idea," George continued. "Look, some of the final form lads play cards late at night. In Badger's room. Maybe we can win the money? Is that a foolish idea?"

Darcy thought about it. "It is a possibility," he said slowly. "Do you think we are good enough?"

"If we can best my mother and her friends, I am sure we can defeat mere boys. My mother says you are excellent. You always win."

"Not always."

"Often enough."

"Let us try it, then."

***

Initially, George's plan worked well. Not only were they able to accumulate a significant sum, which they sent to Mrs. Wickham to give to Amelia, but they also enjoyed an illicit fame for their prowess.
But this was short-lived once the older boys, not content to be constantly paying over their pocket-money, ferreted out a weakness.

"Damn it, George, what were you thinking? We had enough. Why did you go back?" Darcy was furious.

"I could not help it, Darcy, Busby goaded me, and he had smuggled in spirits. I lost my head."

"You lost everything! Now we are in debt and we do not even have a stake! What are we to do?"

Here, George had the answer again. They could pawn their valuables, chief among them Darcy's grandfather's pocket watch, which Mr. Darcy had pressed into his hand when he bid him good-bye. Mrs. Wickham had a friend who could meet them on his way to Town, George said. He would pay them immediately for their items and then take them away to sell.

The man gave them enough money to start them up and running again, and said he would pawn the pocket watch and send the remainder of the money directly to Mrs. Wickham.

It was not enough. Within a few weeks, George had fallen for the same trick and gambled away all of their money again.

"We must tell my father," Darcy said resolutely, after an agonizing week of sleepless nights and hollow-eyed days. "I will write his secretary."

But then salvation came. Amelia had lost the child, Mrs. Wickham wrote. Moreover, she was married so there was no further need of payment. But she would keep what had already been given as it had been used for her dowry.

Darcy, between moments of regret for the lost child, ached with relief. And then, two weeks later, he received a brief note from his father, mercifully in his own handwriting and not that of his secretary's.

My son,

I have returned from my travels. I will be going to Town next week and would like to see you as I have something of importance to discuss with you. The coach will come for you on Tuesday at six o'clock to bring you to my lodgings. Be ready to meet it.

Your father

The first, long-awaited letter from his father filled Darcy with hope. The debacle with Amelia was over, sad as the ending had been. And now his father seemed ready to resume his duties as a parent.

He dressed in his finest coat and was ready an hour before the appointed time, practicing his arguments for why his father should consider allowing him to return home to Pemberley and continue his studies there, under Dr. Miles's tutelage. The coach came promptly at six o'clock and carried Darcy to the inn where his father was residing. He was shown to a suite of handsome rooms, and the footman escorted him to the door of an inner chamber and knocked.

"Come!" said a voice from inside that he recognized as his father's.

"Good evening, Papa," he said with a smile as he entered the room. But Mr. Darcy only stood up, looking somber.

"Fitzwilliam." Mr. Darcy said. From his pocket he took a cloth-wrapped bundle, which he
unwrapped and placed on the table, his eyes watching Darcy's face the entire time. It was his grandfather's pocket-watch, the one he and George had given to Mrs. Wickham's friend to pawn.

Darcy flushed in shame.

"I see," said his father slowly, still studying his son's face. "I had hoped it was not true, son, that there was some mistake. But I see there was no mistake."

He continued. "I received a letter from an elderly gentleman who had served your grandfather. He said he had come across this watch at a pawnbroker in London and immediately recognized it. He placed a deposit on it and wrote to me to see if I was aware that the watch had been pawned or whether it could have been stolen. I have just been to Town to redeem it. I am glad that gentleman recognized it and that I was in time. This is a very important memento of your grandfather and would be a great loss to our family were it to be pawned away like some cheap trinket."

Mr. Darcy scrutinized his son, taking in the broad shoulders, the lanky frame. When had his son grown so? He was on the cusp of manhood, nearly as tall as his father.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Fitzwilliam?"

Darcy looked into his father's eyes and read the deep disappointment in them. Suddenly he did not feel shame, only anger. Who was this man who had disappeared from his life years ago to come to him now and demand an accounting of his actions?

"Nothing. I have nothing to say for myself," said Darcy sullenly.

His father looked immensely sad. "I am sorry to hear that. You are my son and I will always love you, but I can never countenance such vice and misconduct. I will speak with your tutor and your dame to be more watchful of your activities, but they can only do so much. In the end, the choice is yours."

Mr. Darcy studied his son's crossed arms and stubborn expression with chagrin.

"This is not what your mother hoped for you, my son."

At this, the anger flared out on Darcy's face.

"I imagine she would be disappointed about a great many things," Darcy bit out.

"I provide you with a generous allowance. Why did you need more money? Was it gambling, drink or women?"

Darcy looked his father in the eye, knowing his words would hurt and relishing the prospect of it.

"It was all of them," he said.

Mr. Darcy paled. But he said only, "I hope you will see the error of your ways and choose a better path." He signalled to his servant to open the door. "You may go now."

Darcy stumbled from the room, praying that he could hold back his tears until he was out of his father's sight.

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"That is a terrible tale," said Elizabeth, dismayed.
"As I said, it was not a happy time - for me or my father."

She considered his story quietly for a moment while he considered her. Presently, she said, "Was that girl - Amelia - ever with child, do you think?"

He shook his head. "I suspect not, but I was not ever able to confirm it. Years later, I attempted to locate her in case there was a child she had hidden from me. I discovered that she had not married after all, and had not remained in Derbyshire. She had gone to London with friends shortly after my last encounter with her, helped no doubt by the money she had from me. One of her sisters had had a few letters from her, which made no mention of any child, but after awhile they stopped. I could find nothing of her in London."

"Mrs. Wickham had lied to you?"

"Mrs. Wickham had lied to me," he agreed matter-of-factly.

"For the money?"

"I presume so. I once taxed her with it, but she denied it and insisted that she had acted on Amelia's information only, and had sent any monies received from me to her. But she could produce no correspondence with Amelia."

"Did Mr. Wickham know?"

"George Wickham or his father?"

"Both, I suppose."

"Mr. Wickham the elder certainly had no knowledge of his wife's activities beyond that they were not always of the most savory kind. But he supported her generously and would not have thought at that time that she had need for more money. Despite their estrangement, he continued to receive letters from her creditors and discharge her debts."

"And George Wickham?"

"I imagine he knew, but I have been unsuccessful in having him ever admit it." Darcy paused, then added, "He always coveted my grandfather's watch."  

"Was it a very handsome watch, then? Oh!" Elizabeth suddenly realized. "Is it the one you carry with you?"

Darcy pulled the watch from his pocket, unclipped its chain and held it out for Elizabeth to examine. She took it in her hand, marvelling at its weight and the beauty of the chased gold scene on the repousse case, of a warrior in skins in a wood. She turned the watch over. "Hercules at the Crossroads," she read, then the name of the artist.

"It is singular. I can see why your grandfather's servant recognized it so easily," she commented.

"Indeed. And I nearly sold it for ten pounds."

"Oh dear. And how much did your father have to pay to redeem it?"

"I did not ask at the time, and the subject did not arise again." He smiled wryly. "I fear it was a sum that would do me little credit."

"It might be hundreds of pounds," Elizabeth said.
"It might."

Elizabeth shook her head slowly in wonder. "Do other young men have such experiences, do you know?"

He frowned. "It is a common enough concern."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment, contemplating the difference between Darcy's childhood and her own.

"I forgive you," she announced.

He lifted an eyebrow. "You forgive me for - ?"

"For not waiting for me as you ought and avoiding such heartache and pain." She smiled.

This time both of his eyebrows rose. "Do I need your forgiveness?"

"No," she smiled cheekily. "But no doubt you are happy to know you have it just the same."

He laughed at that, then gathered her in his arms. She put her own arms around him tenderly and whispered, "I am sorry your first time was unhappy and you were not with a lady who loved you."

He smiled at her. "It matters not at all. I have you now, do I not?"

"Yes," she said happily.

"And ..." he kissed her. "You are mine forevermore?"

"As long as you are good."

He hugged her and laughed again.

The carriage slowed and Elizabeth looked out the window. They were entering a pretty town through which the river ran. Along the main street were prosperous looking shops with goods displayed attractively in their bay windows. At the end was a large and handsome church of some antiquity. The carriage slowed before a fashionable-looking inn that occupied all of its block, then rounded the corner. They passed through an archway into an extensive stable yard, which bustled with activity.

"The Janus Head Inn," said Darcy by way of explanation. "I thought we could take our midday meal here."

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An Interlude

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter and the next three chapters contain potentially controversial content. Reader discretion is advised.

Lol. I've never understood what those TV warnings mean and I've never known them to prevent anybody from watching anything. Maybe it's just a way for the show producers to say, "Don't blame us if you choose to watch!!" Or to prevent people from letting their kids watch or something. Same thing here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I have seen the victor Dioxippos subdue all contenders at Olympia
and be thrown on his back by the glance of a girl.

- Diogenes, Herakleitos and Diogenes (translated by Guy Davenport)

Despite the best efforts of Darcy's outriders, all of the private apartments at the coaching inn were occupied when they arrived, and they were given the choice of a further wait or a private table in the dining room for guests travelling by post. Elizabeth, unused to the luxury of a private dining room at any time, declared herself perfectly content with the latter. In short order, they were shown to a table in a quiet corner and provided with tea and chocolate and the bill of fare.

After the meal was done, Darcy moved his chair around the table so he was beside Elizabeth. He reached over and took her hand, then raised it to his lips and kissed the back of it. At this public display, she coloured prettily, causing a by now familiar glint to appear in his eye.

She shook her head at him chidingly, her eyes merry. "Oh no. Do not start. We still have half of our journey ahead of us, I believe?"

"Not quite half, but yes, you are correct," he said smilingly. He leant back in his chair, stretched his legs out in front of him, and folded his arms casually across his chest. "Did I mention this inn has an excellent reputation for comfortable lodgings with impressive vistas?"

"Oh?" She regarded him over the rim of her teacup. "You have stayed here before? With another lady perchance?" she inquired innocently.

He looked at her uncertainly, unsure if she was in jest. "I have not actually stayed here, but I frequently dine here on the way to town. My father and I also used to stop here on occasion," he said earnestly.

Her eyes laughed at him. "I am glad to hear it. I doubt I would have the wherewithal to throw another wifely tantrum so soon after my first one."

He breathed a sigh of relief and smiled at her, reaching for her hand again. "It was a long carriage ride, my love. You are not used to such journeys. You must be fatigued and in need of rest."

"Are you certain it is rest you are proposing?" she teased.
Darcy leant toward her and smiled meaningfully into her eyes. "Why, yes ... eventually."

"And your servants in Northamptonshire and Pemberley? Are they not expecting us? Will they not be concerned when we do not arrive?"

"I have already sent a messenger ahead. They will assume we stayed an extra day at The Swan. And my men will be glad to stay out of the rain." It had started drizzling an hour into their journey and had not stopped since, rendering the brightness and warmth of the dining room doubly inviting.

Laughingly, she acquiesced, and Darcy called a servant over to make the arrangements with the inn. They were chatting about the walks around the river and some of the amusements around the little town, which was apparently a popular resort, when Elizabeth happened to look up and meet the eye of a handsome and elegant man of thirty-odd years. He appeared to be just emerging from the hallway leading to the private apartments, a servant trailing behind. To her surprise, the man approached their table.

"Darcy. Is that you?"

Darcy turned in his seat, then rose when he saw who was speaking. The man came forward, smiling.

"Lord Kettersley." Darcy bowed formally, then said, a little stiffly, "May I introduce my wife, Mrs. Darcy? Elizabeth, this is the Marquis of Kettersley of Staunton Hall in Wiltshire."

They bowed and Lord Kettersley looked at her with interest. "Mrs. Darcy! Well, that is a fine piece of news. My congratulations, Darcy. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Darcy."

"And I yours, sir," Elizabeth replied.

"I had no idea Darcy was courting, let alone married. When did the happy event occur?"

"Tuesday in Hertfordshire," Darcy said. "I expect the announcement will make the papers shortly."

"No doubt. May I join you?" Lord Kettersley indicated a chair.

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, but said nothing. Wondering if she was expected to reply, Elizabeth said, "Of course! I am delighted to meet any of my husband's friends."

Lord Kettersley seated himself and relinquished his hat and gloves and cane to his servant. He waved away the serving boy who had rushed over, stating that he was only stopping for a minute.

"You are bound for Town, my lord?" Darcy asked.

"Yes. You?"

"Pemberley."

"Of course. It is a little early for anything to be happening, but Viscount Faris's untimely death has left me with a vacancy in the House of Commons and I thought I would come to Town and meet some of the candidates."

Darcy explained to Elizabeth, "Lord Kettersley sends two members to the House for the borough of Beralston and Mr. Chalmers, Lord Faris's heir, was one of them, but he will sit in the House of Lords now." To Lord Kettersley, he said, "Whom do you have in mind?"

"Oh - I do not know," he said with a note of irritation in his voice. "Everybody has been writing me
on behalf of themselves, their cousin or their wife's mother's aunt's nephew. I wrote Lord Fitzwilliam and Lord Grey on the matter, but have yet to hear back."

"My uncle has been travelling. He is due at Milton House soon. I can canvass for his opinion if you like."

"I would be obliged. But let us not talk of such dry matters."

"Tell me about yourselves instead. Where did you meet? How long have you known each other? Are you longtime friends or was the attraction immediate when your eyes met across a crowded ballroom?"

Since Lord Kettersley was looking at her expectantly, she replied, "Near my parents' home in Hertfordshire; about four months ago; and if there was any immediate feeling, it was probably antipathy rather than attraction. We were indeed at a ball, but he refused to dance with me and called me just tolerable to his friend."

"He did not!" Lord Kettersley exclaimed with delighted amusement.

"I am afraid he did. And as you might imagine, I did not take kindly to it."

"I should think not," Lord Kettersley said warmly. "For it shows my friend as not only ungentlemanly, but blind and stupid. Nobody who has seen you could honestly say such a thing."

"Mrs. Darcy caught me when I was in particularly poor humour," Darcy said uncomfortably. "I had only arrived that day and was not expecting to attend an assembly the same night and was determined against forming new acquaintance. My words were not intended for her hearing, and obviously I knew them to be untrue."

Elizabeth threw him a bright look. "You were not so obvious, sir. And the idea of attending a general assembly in a country town to meet nobody!"

"Indeed, it is an atrocious departure from logic," Lord Kettersley smiled. "But fret not, Mrs. Darcy, it is no more than we are all used to and have come to accept. My friends and I have also been the victims of Darcy's tendency to an unsocial, taciturn disposition. Would you not say, Darcy?"

"I would not."

"He will not admit his error with me, either," Elizabeth laughed. "However, as you can see, we did eventually make it up."

"I am glad to hear it. Not because Darcy plucked the freshest flower in Hertfordshire before anybody else had a chance to discover it, but because at least now we can all enjoy its bloom. Who were you before you became Mrs. Darcy? I am sorry we did not have opportunity to meet earlier."

"My father is a Mr. Bennet, of Hertfordshire, who owns an estate near the town of Meryton." She added archly, fully expecting his friendly manner to vanish, "And my mother's father was the principal attorney in Meryton. Not everybody is born to wear a coronet, I am afraid."

Instead of the coolness she expected, his smile deepened. "I was not born to wear one myself," he admitted. "It only came to my head upon my father's and brother's untimely passings several years ago. Until that time, I too was only a plain gentleman and expecting to remain so."

"Not so very plain." He raised an eyebrow at her and she explained, referring to the honorific given to the younger sons of marquises and lesser noblemen, "You were always an Honourable at least."
Lord Kettersley bent closer and gazed into her eyes with a smile. "Indeed, yes. And now as a marquis I am Most Honourable. If only it were as easy to be so in fact as in name."

"That is entirely within your control, I imagine," she laughed.

His eyes flicked over her. "Perhaps. But Lady Fortune does like to strew one's way with temptations, which can be difficult to resist."

"Perhaps they would be easier to resist by keeping a proper distance," Darcy said clearly and distinctly.

Elizabeth looked up at Darcy, surprised at the note of hostility in his voice.

"Undoubtedly," said Lord Kettersley smoothly. "But then, where is the challenge in that?"

Before Darcy could answer, Lord Kettersley's servant approached to inform him that his carriage was ready.

"I must go," the peer said, rising from his chair. "Mrs. Darcy, I hope we will see you in Town for the season?"

"I - I expect so," Elizabeth glanced at Darcy. He appeared to be angry, but she could see no reason for it. "Although of course it is up to my husband."

"Tut, tut. Such things are never left up to the husband. Especially by a wife with ample powers of persuasion, as you no doubt have."

"We will discuss it, of course. But I look forward to exploring Derbyshire, my future home, as well." She glanced with some trepidation at Darcy, who maintained his present stoicism.

"I will live in hope, then." He bowed briefly.

After he departed, they sat for a minute or two without speaking, Elizabeth finishing her tea while Darcy gazed out of the window with his arms crossed across his chest. She attempted to catch his eye, but his gaze was inflexibly fixed on the rainy fields and banks outside of the window. Was he angry at her, she wondered. Had she betrayed her country breeding and been too bold with Lord Kettersley? Perhaps the women of his set were more demure.

"Are you ready?" he said abruptly as she finished her tea and set her cup down.

She nodded and he waved over a serving boy to arrange for a clerk to show them to their rooms. As they ascended the staircase, Elizabeth resolved to broach the subject with Darcy. If she had done something wrong, they should talk about it.

"There are two rooms," the clerk explained after he had opened the door and they entered. "This is the bed-chamber, and a dressing-room is through that door. The servants will be around at eight o'clock to prepare your room for the evening, and the scullery maids are around at midnight and five o'clock for the fires and whatnot unless you wish to request other times. We supply fresh ice and hot water until ten o'clock, although of course if you wish for anything, you have only to ring and we will do everything in our power to assist you no matter what the time. Is there anything else you need, sir?"

She waited for Darcy to finish his instructions to the clerk, then turned around when the door clicked shut behind him. Before she could say a word, however, he had closed the distance between them in a stride and seized her in his arms and was kissing her.
Apparently he was not angry at her. She melted in his arms and did not resist when he half-carried and half-steered her toward the bed. Once there, he stripped off both of their garments without ceremony, flinging his waistcoat and her gown on a chair, and his cravat on the floor.

"Oh, let me - " she began, trying to help him with the strings of her corset, but was stopped by his mouth on hers again and his hands frantically pushing her fingers out of the way. Giving up, she wrapped her arms around his neck and left him to undress them both, pleasurably excited by the impetuosity she had not yet seen in her usually well-controlled husband. When he slid her chemise from her shoulders and pushed her down onto the bed, she pressed herself against him. And when he savaged her neck and bosom with kisses, she arched off the mattress and wrapped her legs around his naked hips.

He made an inarticulate noise in the back of his throat, then began gathering up the hem of her chemise in his hands. She raised her hips to help him slide it past and struggled to rise so he could lift it over her head, but he pressed her back down into the mattress. Then, when she reached for him, he seized both of her hands in his and pressed them above her head, holding them there with one hand. With the other, he positioned himself between her legs and entered her in one swift motion.

She winced at the deepness of his thrust. "Ow -" she began, but her exclamation was lost in his bruising kiss. She kissed him back, trying to align herself with his rhythm. Just as she thought she had succeeded and felt the now familiar excitement begin to build, he paused and raised himself up on his elbows to look deeply into her eyes, his own dark with some unknown emotion.

Her breath caught. "Mr. Darcy, I-" she said, then stopped when he flipped her over on her belly. Her eyes widened with surprise. When she tried to rise on her hands, his weight pinned her down and his hands pressed over top of hers.

"You are mine, Elizabeth," he hissed in her ear. "Mine. Do not forget that."

Momentarily paralyzed with shock, she did nothing as he kissed and nipped the back of her neck and fondled her breasts from behind possessively. Then she felt his weight ease off of her for a moment and felt both of his hands on her buttocks, pulling up her hips and easing her thighs apart. She suspected she knew what would come next.

"No, mmff -" she said, unwilling to submit to such indignity, but unable to articulate her objection with her face pressed into the pillow. He appeared not to notice, however, but continued holding her hips while he probed her with his fingers.

"I said no," she repeated more loudly and vehemently. She twisted under him until she was free of his grasp, then rolled slightly to the side so that she was still under him, but no longer pinned. Her breast was heaving.

"What is wrong?" he demanded, his breath coming hard and his voice impatient. "Why did you stop?"

"Why did I stop?" she gasped. "What were you doing?"

He huffed in frustration. "What do you think I was doing?"

"I have no idea."

He pushed himself off her, away, then arranged the pillows with great care without meeting her eye before lying back against them.

"There is more than one way to have marital relations. But if you do not wish to attempt something
different …" his voice, sullen, trailed off.

She sat up as well, pulled her chemise back over her shoulders and pondered his words, confused. She knew there was more than one way one might engage in relations. She could also hear the echo of her mother's advice in her head, advice she had repeated several times in various forms in the days leading up to the wedding. Remember, Lizzy. Men can want all kinds of things, no matter how strange or indecent. It is not for you to judge, but rather, submit. She wanted to be a good wife, of course. Still …

"It is not that I object to what you were doing," she said in a small voice. "However, you appear to be angry at me. Why should you be angry at me?"

"I am not angry at you. What have I to be angry about?" But she could still hear the sullen note in his voice.

The silence stretched out for a few moments. Finally, she ventured, "Lord Kettersley?"

His eyes, which had been fixed on the bed covering, flashed up to meet hers. He crossed his arms across his chest. "Very well, yes, I am angry about Lord Kettersley."

"I only answered the questions he asked. If you did not like country manners, perhaps you should not have married a country wife."

His brow furrowed. "That has nothing to do with it. Any wife should know better than to encourage a rake."

"Encourage a -! I did not encourage anybody! And how do you know he is a rake? And if he is a rake, why are you friends?"

"We are not friends. He is a political associate of my uncle's and I am required to treat him with courtesy. But I am not required to allow him to flirt with my wife, or to witness her flirting in her turn."

Her mouth dropped open in shock at his accusation. "I was not. Flirting!" With that, she got off the bed, pulled her stockings up and her chemise down with great dignity, and stalked to the dressing room with her head held high.

Darcy glowered at her retreating back, then at the bed cover. After a while, he determined to dress and speak to Elizabeth at greater length about Lord Kettersley. He flung the covers off, then froze in horror at the bright red spots on the sheet.

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In the dressing-room, Elizabeth fretted. Somebody had brought up their bags, but there were no maids at this inn to unpack them, and as she had not packed for herself, she did not know where anything was. Moreover, her bags had been mixed with Darcy's, which meant her gowns might be at the bottom of any bag. She did not want to unpack everything to find them when they were staying for only one night.

Frustrated, she sat on top of the big leather-topped trunk that held Darcy's hats and rested her chin in her hands. She was wondering if retrieving her gown from the other room was too great a blow to her dignity when a knock sounded on the door.

"Elizabeth?" came Darcy's voice, an urgent note in it.
"Yes?" she said sulkily.

"May I come in?"

"The door is not locked."

The door swung open and her husband's tall form, half-dressed, blocked the doorway. He looked around the room until he saw her on the trunk, then crossed to where she was sitting with quick steps and sank to his knees in front of her.

"Elizabeth!" he cried in relief, taking her hands. "Are you well? I did not mean to hurt you ... "

"I was not flirting with Lord Kettersley," she said resentfully.

"It does not matter. I should never have touched you like that. Why did you not tell me I was hurting you? I would have stopped immediately."

He was talking about their coupling, she realized. "It was not so very bad. Only a little uncomfortable at first. And I did try to tell you."

"And brute that I am, I did not listen. My God!"

She frowned. "Really, I am perfectly well."

"You are certain? You are no longer bleeding?"

She looked down and noticed with surprise a small stain on the edge of her chemise. "Oh! I did not know. But yes, it appears to have stopped."

"Should we call an apothecary?"

"An apothecary? I do not think so. My mother said this is normal for the first few days."

The relief flooded his face and he sank down on his heels, placing his head on her knee. "Thank God," he breathed.

She looked at his head in her lap, bemused. It appeared that Darcy had forgiven her, but she was not quite ready to let her own ire go. She tugged her hands from his and cleared her throat.

"Mr. Darcy, I would like to know on what you base your suspicion of me. I cannot think of anything I said or did that would justify it. I would think you would want me to show courtesy to any friend, and Lord Kettersley claimed your friendship. How was I to know it was not reciprocated?"

Darcy, who had raised his head when she began speaking, said, "You could not have known. That is the point, Elizabeth. You do not know. You must trust me to guide you on which men may be trusted, and which you must avoid."

She shook her head. "I am sure you are wrong. Lord Kettersley was merely being friendly. To attempt to seduce a newly wedded lady when her husband is right beside her? No one would be so bold."

Darcy attempted to refrain from rolling his eyes, but did not quite succeed. "You know nothing about men, Elizabeth. Lord Kettersley was not only being friendly. A man does not speak so to a woman unless he wishes to bed her."

"So any time a man compliments a woman, he is thinking of bedding her?"
"When he is like Lord Kettersley, yes."

"Sir William Lucas compliments every woman in his vicinity, be they young or old, plain or pretty. Is he thinking of bedding them all? And what about Mr. Bingley? He is agreeable to all and sundry. He told my mother that she was in very fine looks the day of our marriage. Was he thinking to bed my mother the same day he wed my sister?"

"There are exceptions, of course."

"It seems to me there are so many exceptions that it undermines the rule."

"Nevertheless, that is what Lord Kettersley was thinking, and as a peer of the realm, he expects to have his way. I will not have it. I will not have him even thinking it." He looked angry again.

"Perhaps you should say it to him, then, and not to me." She tossed her head.

"I shall, if he goes any further than he did today. I shall call him out at the first opportunity."

"Oh!" Elizabeth had not thought of that, that a confrontation between men probably meant a duel. Men were ridiculous. "No, I will not have you risking injury or your life over a trifle."

He seized her hands again, pleased. "Then we are agreed. I am sorry I hurt you. I shall be more gentle in the future."

"I am not sure we are agreed," she said cautiously. "What are we agreed upon? That you trust me to speak to Lord Kettersley without being seduced by him?"

He frowned. "That you will stay away from Lord Kettersley and any man who attempts to flirt with you."

She shook her head emphatically. "But our definitions are so very different. What you consider to be flirting I see as friendship. Most men engage in some gallantry when they speak to a lady. Am I to have no men friends?"

"You may have some."

"Only the ones you approve of? And do I have to report to you what they say? And say only the things you approve of?"

"Perhaps."

Elizabeth was silent, chewing on her lip. She was used to conducting her own friendships as she pleased, with men and women alike. Somehow, she doubted that Darcy would appreciate similar constraints in his relationships with other women.

"Elizabeth, I do not wish to be the overbearing husband, keeping his wife locked up at home," said Darcy, as if he knew the direction of her thoughts. "But you are very innocent. You think you are not, but you are. You know nothing of the world."

"And you know everything there is to know of it?"

"I know and have seen a great deal more than you."

"So that is the complete answer? You are a man, you have seen more than me, so in any dispute you must and will always be right? Is this what you meant when you said you wish to hear my opinions? That you will hear them for passing amusement and then freely disregard them?"
"No. I will take your opinion into consideration."

"But if I think you are wrong, you will overrule me? Regardless of the subject, and whether it concerns me particularly more than you?"

"Lord Kettersley does not concern you more than me," he growled.

"I am not speaking of Lord Kettersley! I am speaking generally." At his silence, she added, "I think you should trust me to judge for myself."

He sighed and rose off his knees to sit beside her on the trunk. "Very well. You may speak to him, but do not trust him. Will that satisfy you?" Inwardly he resolved to ensure that Elizabeth was never left alone with Lord Kettersley. But it was with relief that he saw her give a small jerk of her head in agreement.

They continued sitting there for a few more moments, Darcy contemplating the floor and Elizabeth contemplating the toe of her slipper. Finally, she said, "Are we going to spend the afternoon on this trunk, then?"

He chuckled, the tension suddenly gone. "Would you like to go out? It appears to have stopped raining and there is a good book shop here and a pleasant walk along the river."

At his words, Elizabeth perked up. "I would very much like to go to the book shop."

"Then we shall go."

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The book shop was wonderful. Darcy explained that she would receive the first of her pin-money at the next quarterly rent day, but in the meantime -

"Buy what you wish," he told her with disinterest, as if one pound or ten made no difference to him, which might in fact be the case, she reflected. It was her first true inkling of the delights of wealth.

They separated to browse in the areas of their choice. Elizabeth happily waded through dozens upon dozens of books presented by the clerks until the counter was piled high. After about an hour, Darcy came over to the counter and raised his eyebrows at the large stacks of books.

"I am not sure there will be room in the carriage for all of them," he commented.

"Of course I will not buy all of those," she said brightly. She indicated a small stack. "These are the ones I am still deciding upon."

He placed the few books under his arm on the counter and began leafing through her small stack. To her surprise, he removed some of the books in her stack.

"These are already in Pemberley's library." He indicated the discards. "You do not wish for duplicates, do you?"

She laughed in relief, glad that he was neither censoring her choices nor judging her for her extravagance. "No, indeed. Thank you, please continue." She looked at the titles of some the books he had removed. "I should have known you would have all of the books on Derbyshire."

"That one is sponsored by the Derby Literary Society, and I am a board member and receive a subscription copy," he explained. "See here." He flipped open the cover of A New and Historical
and Descriptive View of Derbyshire

and turned several pages to a list of nobility and gentry who had subscribed in support of the book prior to printing. Mr. Darcy, Esq., she read atop the list of the gentry.

She rolled her eyes. "I should have known. And is Pemberley written of in here as well?"

"Pages 531 to 533, and a fine plate on 529," he smiled.

"You have just saved twelve shillings by that book alone, in which case …" she reached over and took two books from another stack and put them in her "buy" stack.

He looked through her "buy" stack again, reading the titles more closely. "A New System of Domestic Cookery? You realize I have a very fine cook, do you not?"

"I assumed so, but it is not only about cookery. There is very useful information about marketing and budgets included. If I am to take management of the household, then I must understand all of this."

He chuckled and continued looking through the pile, past a French play, a volume of poetry and another book on household management, to a more substantial looking tome. His eyebrows went up again. "Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property? Are you intending to take over from me as master of the estate?"

"No, but I thought it might help if I understood how an estate works. My father did not encourage us to concern ourselves with such things, and he did not concern himself with it much either, but left it to his bailiff."

He flipped to the next book. "You do not need a Pocket Peerage and Precedency, my love. I receive every edition of DeBrett's and Collins when they come out. Lady Fitzwilliam sees to that."

"Oh, but that is a particularly good one. It is very practical and tells you how to determine precedence by algorithm. I thought it would be helpful if we have many titled people among our guests."

His smile deepened. It appeared his wife had set herself a course of education to become the mistress of a large estate.

He finished looking through her stack and observed that the last two books were Emma, Volumes I and II, the same as had been in Netherfield's library. Surreptitiously, he removed two books from his own selections to the "discard" pile, making a mental note to himself to buy her a different gift.

"What will you purchase?" she asked, turning back to him after giving instructions to the clerk to take away the "discard" books.

"Just the one book," he said, showing her a fine leather-bound volume on political economy.

"I read Mr. Smith's The Wealth of Nations with Papa a few years ago," she said. "It was fascinating. Perhaps I will borrow your book from you when you are done."

"Likewise."

Her total bill for eight books came to just over three pounds, while he paid nearly four guineas for his single book. She had been about to apologize for her extravagance, but decided there was no need.

The day was now clear so they walked down the street, stopping to gaze at the displays in the various bow windows, but decided against entering. Instead, they followed a walk that meandered
with the river, then crossed the bridge to walk the other side of the bank. By then, the day was turning dim and threatened rain again, and they were glad to return to the warmth and comfort of the Janus Head Inn.

They supped in one of the private dining-rooms, then after supper returned to their apartments to examine their purchases. Elizabeth took several of her tomes to the window seat in the bedchamber so she could read while enjoying the view. Darcy seated himself in a nearby armchair and they read companionably in semi-silence. After about an hour, however, Elizabeth looked up and scrutinized Darcy, who was absorbed with his book. There was a question niggling in her mind.

"Mr. Darcy?"

He looked up. "Yes, Elizabeth?"

"You said earlier today that you 'should not have touched me like that.' Are there women who you would have touched like that?"

He crimsoned. "It is all in the past, Elizabeth."

"I know, but I am still curious. You also said that you 'know and have seen far more than me.' I would like to know what this is."

He groaned inwardly. Blast her curiosity and her brilliant memory.

"And finally …"

"Yes?" he braced himself.

"You say it is all in the past, but why is it all in the past? What causes a man to be 'wild' as you say you were at Cambridge, but then decide to no longer be so?"

A shadow passed over his face. He marked his place in his book deliberately, then closed it and placed it on a nearby table. He waited for a moment or two, staring at the signet ring on his finger, but she did not volunteer to break the silence, only continued watching him expectantly. Finally he looked up and said one word, sighing heavily, "Wickham."

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FOOTNOTES:

1. Most boroughs allowed the borough proprietor, or major landowner, to nominate two candidates of his choosing to sit as MPs in the House of Commons. The proprietorship of a borough was considered a type of property, which could be bought, sold and inherited, and land that was otherwise near worthless was sold for tens or hundreds of thousands of pounds on political value alone.

2. The 1812 election was disastrous for the long-suffering Whigs, though the 4th Earl Fitzwilliam, one of the leaders of the party, emerged unscathed. Nevertheless, seats deemed safe in the election, which the Whigs had triggered, were turned over to the rival Tories.

3. The books referred to were all real books published around 1811 (except for Emma, of course, published later). I fudged the prices, as books were often published in a variety of editions, some on cheaper paperboard, and others in leather and gilt.

3. A guinea was 21 shillings, or a pound + 1 shilling. Guineas stopped being minted in 1813, but
prices were still quoted in guineas for psychological reasons, kind of similar to ending a price in .99 today.

Chapter End Notes

Before anybody rips a strip off of me for Darcy and Elizabeth's conceptions and misconceptions over the hymen and virgin blood, I'd just like to point out that this is an era where the doctors believed everything from fever to tuberculosis to bullet wounds could be cured by draining a few pints of the patient's blood. That is, it was a time of considerable medical ignorance, and this is intended as part of the story.
An Education

Chapter Notes

A brief lexicon of some of the period lingo in this chapter is set out in the footnotes.¹

_Alas I find the Serpent old_
_That, twining in his speckled breast,_
_About the flow'rs disguis'd does fold,_
_With wreaths of Fame and Interest._

_- Andrew Marvell, "The Coronet"_

In the elegant Combination Room of Cambridge University's Trinity College, gowned students and fellows lounged in knots over newspapers and cracked jokes, nuts and bottles. Chapel was over, there were no more lectures that day and the ground was too wet for a ride. Indolence appeared to be the order of the hour.

That was the case, at least, until the doors opened to admit the Earl of Seton. In one corner of the room, half a dozen or so backs sat up straighter and half a dozen pairs of eyes eagerly marked his progress.

"'Tis all arranged," said the young nobleman as he sat down by his friends, all third-year men. "The carriage will be at the Eagle at one o'clock and we will depart by a quarter after. Do not be late, for we will not wait for you. And fill your bellies beforehand; we do not sup until we arrive at Pall Mall."

"Did your man get the - you know?" inquired the Honourable George Lamb. He was the youngest son of Viscount Melbourne and the formidable Lady Melbourne, and godson of the Prince of Wales himself.

It was generally believed that Lamb was in fact the prince's natural son, but even his most intimate friends - Seton and Darcy - knew better than to say so in his presence. The last time he had been taunted, Lamb had knocked down a fellow student and nearly triggered a brawl outside of chapel, in full view of the university's proctors. Lady Melbourne had had to travel in state to Cambridge to prevent her son's expulsion, and the rumour was that even so she would not have succeeded but for the intercession of the Prince himself.²

"Oh yes. Here." Seton pulled a brown paper bag from under his gown - silk, as befit a nobleman - and passed it around. The young men helped themselves to the precious preventatives within, secreting them within their robes to avoid notice from the nosy senior fellows.

"And the return journey?" asked Wickham. A mere pensioner, he did not belong in the Combination Room, which was reserved for Trinity's fellows, noblemen and fellow-commoners, the latter of whom paid more than twice the normal tuition for the privileged state.³ Nevertheless, his presence was tolerated due to his closeness to the leading men of his year.

"Two o'clock in the afternoon. But if you are unlucky enough not to have found a soft bosom on which to rest your head, there is a mail coach at six o'clock in the morning."
Several of the students shuddered at that awful eventuality. The party broke up, the young men straggling off to their respective apartments around Great Court to dress for the excursion to London. As Wickham and Darcy walked through the cloisters leading back to their apartments, Darcy said, "I think I will forgo this time, George."

"What?" Wickham looked at him in surprise. "No, Darcy, you know I cannot do without you. And why would you not wish to come? It has been two weeks since our last visit to Town."

Darcy shrugged. "I know. But I have a geometry problem that I must work out before I see my tutor. I will go with you to Chesterton next time you go."

Chesterton was a romantic-looking village about a mile from town, beyond the reach of Cambridge's proctors and bull-dogs whose jurisdiction was limited to Cambridge town proper. Balls, routs and billiards-rooms banished from Cambridge had settled there. Darcy and Wickham often went with their friends to Chesterton to take part in the gaming.

"Darcy, do not tell me - please do not tell me - that you prefer maths to cards. That is a singularity that should never be admitted, let alone boasted of."

"What would you have me say? Dr. Milner sets interesting problems," he said, referring to the president of Queen's College, who also held Lucasian Chair of Mathematics. Dr. Milner was far too lofty to need to tutor lowly students, but he had taken Darcy as a special favour to Lord Fitzwilliam, and on proof of his mathematical abilities.

"And do you prefer maths to pretty smiles and warm flesh?"

The smile disappeared from Darcy's face. "What is wrong with that? Maths are cleaner and more simple."

"Oh, is that the problem?" Wickham smiled knowingly. "You are still upset over the episode with Leahy? Let me tell you, Darcy, it was his own fault for losing his head over a girl. Just be thankful we were not caught in the crossfire."

Leahy, a poor but brilliant scholarship student and a pet of Dr. Milner's, had earned his keep by tutoring the under-graduates. Two weeks ago, he had accompanied Darcy and his friends to their favourite gaming hell in Town, called out another man over a young woman and got himself shot. Though the wound was superficial, it was enough to bring him to the attention of the proctors and thence to Trinity's master and its governing body. None of them were of a mind to countenance such behaviour, especially from a dependent of the institution. Leahy was swiftly sent down in disgrace and his second in the duel rusticated for the remainder of the term.

His second saw this as no more than a boasting matter. Indeed, his father, a wealthy tradesman, had taken it as such, doubling the young man's allowance and bragging to his colleagues in the City that his son had gotten well in with the swells. But for Leahy it was a disaster. The last Darcy had heard, he and his widowed mother were trying to find him a place at another university, but the prospects were dim.

"Do you not feel ashamed, George, that we gave him the money on which he built his ruin?"

"Ashamed? Why should I feel ashamed? He knew what he was doing. He would have been fine if he had not lost his heart to a lightskirt, no matter how pretty. Women have their place, but it is certainly not in one's heart. Now hurry, will you? I do not want to miss that coach."

Sitting in Seton's carriage an hour or so later, Darcy thought about Leahy. He had liked Leahy and
he missed him. Alone of his friends, Leahy had shared Darcy's enthusiasm for the academic work of the university. In fact, that was how Leahy had become involved with Darcy's friends. Darcy had been attempting to work out a mathematical system of whist play and sought his advice.

In some ways, Darcy felt responsible. After all, it was he who had persuaded his wealthy and privileged friends to take Leahy into their circle and given him a stake to start him off. Otherwise, the tables in Pall Mall would have remained well beyond his ken. On the other hand, Wickham was right. Leahy had made out well with the cards; it had been a woman who was his undoing.

Women were nothing but trouble, Darcy thought. He would have preferred they be barred from the gaming tables for they did not play fair. Instead of relying on luck and skill like everybody else, they resorted to their arts and allurements to distract a man from his game. Then they cleaned up, pocketing his notes and leaving him tied in knots of desire. Or, if they lost, then one felt sorry for them. Either way, it was a cheat, and no way to play.

His friends were of a different mind. He knew it was because women were allowed at the hells that they preferred them to the more staid clubs, which were open to men only.

*A bested woman is a willing woman*, Wickham liked to say. He enjoyed playing against them, the prettier the better. It was true that when a woman lost badly, she often resorted to bartering her honour. But while Wickham appeared to find this exciting, to Darcy it was unseemly and uncomfortable. Better that women stayed away from the tables and contented themselves with looking decorative.

Darcy studied his friend across the aisle of the carriage, slumped in the opposite corner. Wickham's beaver was pulled over his face, his legs crossed at the ankle, looking boyishly handsome even as he slept. Wickham always had the upper hand on women. Everybody agreed that he achieved astonishing things. There had been Mr. Plimmer's pretty wife and the buxom barmaid in Chesterton and the widow Baxter. And then there were the ladies of Pall Mall - successful actresses and singers and dancers, and the mistresses and Cyprians of the wealthy and great - those young and beautiful *demi-mondaines* at the peak of their power who bowed to no man unless he had wealth or a title or both. But Wickham lacking both wealth and title still managed to get around an astonishing number of them. He had never had to catch the public coach home.

"Women wish to be the exception," he would lecture them when expounding about his success. "They wish to know they are the most beautiful, the most beloved, the sole eliciter of your tender passions. Make love to a hundred, gentleman, but make each one feel like THE ONE and she will yield you what you desire."

"But what if she is THE ONE? What if you truly believe it?" squeaked jolly little Lord Roxbury, a new entrant to their set, who had inveigled his way in by giving the most lavish wine-suppers in the courtyard.

"Then heaven help you for being a fool," was Wickham's reply, to general laughter.

Roxbury sat next to Wickham, blinking his round eyes now and then in awe at the honour of being included in the carriage rather than relegated to the outside. Beside him, opposite to Darcy, was Seton, the owner of the carriage. Seton, the grandson of a duke, had inherited the earldom at the age of five upon his father's death. Although this was generally enough to earn him the envy and dislike of lesser gownsmen, Seton's open-handed and easy nature - combined with the extremely generous allowance given him by lax guardians - guaranteed his popularity.

Beside Darcy was Lamb, and on the other side of him was Penhold Hesketh-Trotter, the heir to a Cumberland barony and a cousin of sorts to Seton.
They flew the fifty-five miles along the turnpike to London, stopping frequently to change the horses for fresh ones and making only brief stops at the inns along the way. In London, their progress was slowed and then halted in heavy traffic. At each cross-street, beggars and peddlers and low women of pleasure besieged them. The students on top of the carriage banged against it with their canes and shouted to clear them off.

"There are some pretty ones," said Roxbury, glancing out.

Seton and Lamb exchanged amused glances. "Shall we let him out here, gentlemen?" Seton inquired amiably of the carriage's occupants.

"And come back for what remains in the morning?" asked Hesketh-Trotter.

"It would serve him right," Wickham grinned.

"Why, what is wrong?" asked the innocent Roxbury.

"You do not fool around with such low-lifes, Roxbury," said Seton kindly. "If you are lucky, they will give you something nasty but at least curable."

"And if I am unlucky?"

"They and their flash-men will rob you blind, beat you and leave you for dead."

"Those fine young ladies?" said Roxbury incredulously.

Seton looked across at Darcy and raised his eyebrows. "What do you say, Darcy? Are they fine young ladies?"

Darcy glanced out at a group of ladies no older than his twenty years, colourfully dressed with large feathers in elaborate caps. But looking closer, he saw that their gowns were spattered in mud and road detritus, their gloves looked thin and worn and their hair could use a washing. When they saw him looking, they blew kisses and hollered lewd things and pulled down their gowns to flash their bosoms at him.

He withdrew his gaze scornfully. "At fifty paces with a nose plug perhaps."

The carriage rocked with laughter at this witticism.

"There you have it, Roxbury," said Seton, giving Darcy an approving grin. "They do not pass Darcy's exacting standards. I advise you to wait until we arrive at our destination."

Roxbury gave Darcy a worshipful look, which he accepted with complacency. As a privileged fellow-commoner with noble connexions and the best whist hand in Great Court, Darcy was used to cutting quite a dash among the under-graduates.

In that respect he was Wickham's superior, he thought smugly. Oh, Wickham was an excellent whist partner when not too far in his cups, but it was Darcy's genius that kept them in the funds. Which was just as well, for Wickham had expensive tastes. Darcy's allowance of twenty pounds a month and Wickham's of three were hardly sufficient to pay for their trips to the metropolis, visits to Chesterton and excursions to Newmarket for the races.

The carriage drew even with the red baize door in Pall Mall, one of their favoured destinations because both the treatment and the class of player was better than that found in the typical hell. The occupants of the carriage stepped out with dignity while those on the rooftop spilled over the side.
Supper was the first order of business, and it was served in the dining-room where the dim light made up for any missing white on the waiters' gloves. That out of the way, they exchanged their notes for rouleaus of guineas and adjourned to the gilded saloon that served as the play-room.

It was a busy night. The faro bank was doing a brisk business at the centre of the room, and the whist and hazard tables that ringed it were nearly full. Darcy was pleased to see that there were few ladies present. But that was not unusual - they typically turned out in force toward the end of the night, when it was determined which of the gentlemen were leaving with full purses.

He and Wickham sat down with a pair of traders from the East End. Darcy and Wickham had routed them last month, and it appeared they were out for revenge. Darcy was pleased to deny it to them. The nerve of working men thinking they could best Cambridge's finest.

They were next invited to play by two well-dressed gentlemen who had watched their last few hands. One of the gentlemen had a fine enamelled box full of beautiful and well-worn ivory and gold whist counters. Darcy suspected they would be very good players, which proved correct. They bid high and after the first two rubbers, they had wiped out Darcy's and Wickham's winnings so far and were beginning to cut into the one hundred pounds that Darcy always brought to work with. But Darcy ignored Wickham's imprecations to find easier opponents and instead whispered to him that they would prevail if Wickham would only trust him.

"And do not order any more brandy!" he hissed. Reluctantly, Wickham sat back down.

The honours flew back and forth as they played late into the night, Darcy keen-eyed and exhilarated, Wickham resentful but at least well-focused. A small crowd swirled around their table. By the end of the final rubber, they had recovered their initial losses and were even up by twenty guineas. Darcy sent a runner to the house to change some of the coins back to notes. It was a poor return for so much time and effort, but Darcy felt the contest alone had been worth it. The gentlemen had used a trick or two he had not seen and he filed them away to consider later. He flushed with pleasure when the man with the beautiful whist counters shook his hand and congratulated him on his skill.

Wickham was not happy, however. "I will choose the next players," he said.

Darcy shrugged and acceded. Wickham left him at the table nursing a glass of whiskey. He returned in a few minutes and Darcy's eyes widened when he saw who he had with him.

It was the young lady over whom Leahy had fought the duel.

"Bon soir, monsieur," she said, giving him a flirtatious smile. She introduced herself as Miss Joye and her friend as Miss Graham.

Darcy, who had automatically risen, bowed formally but did not smile as she and her friend gracefully seated themselves. He looked at Wickham, who flashed him a grin and quirked an eyebrow. Wickham mouthed a word at him. *Revenge.* Darcy nodded curtly.

Miss Joye had a reputation as a good whist player and he had seen it himself, though he had not played her. She had played against Leahy. Indeed, that is how she had come to Leahy's attention, although he had noticed her as every other member of the male sex had. She was one of the prettiest girls to frequent the hell.

The rubber started in business-like fashion with Miss Joye leading with hearts. Tricks were taken by both sides and the first hand ended with no points. They dealt again. Darcy sensed Miss Joye was trying to draw out his high cards and finessed her twice, ending with two points. It took three more hands for the rubber, which had cost the ladies fifteen guineas.
"Again?" Miss Joye inquired.

Darcy looked at her in surprise. It was clear she was out-matched.

"The night is young," smiled Wickham, showing all of his teeth.

Darcy shrugged and re-seated himself.

The next hands were tougher and Darcy suspected that Miss Joye had been testing them. When the ladies narrowly missed trebling, and only because Darcy had caught onto their ploy in time, he was sure of it. He was able to hold them to one point, but it had been a near miss.

That was when the ladies began employing their other arts. Miss Joye played with the ties on her bodice, pulling it down to reveal more of her bosom than modesty allowed. Miss Graham leant forward, apparently so absorbed in the play that she did not realize her gown had fallen open. The ladies sighed and pouted and tapped well-manicured nails on white teeth and sucked and bit on their fingers in concentration.

Darcy played grimly on, reviewing the tricks in his mind to ensure he had not dropped one in his distraction. Wickham, however, was enjoying himself hugely.

"I prefer playing with ladies," he said conversationally, taking the trick.

"Oh? Why is that?" Miss Joye gazed at him with her sparkling green eyes.

"It gives the game so much more dimension. One never knows exactly what is at stake."

"Your friend may not agree," Miss Graham pouted, glancing in Darcy's direction. "I have never seen a more dour countenance."

"My friend sometimes has difficulty enjoying himself. That is what he has me for."

"He owes you a great debt then," Miss Joye laughed. "It is too bad, for he has a handsome face. I can only imagine the effect on faint, feminine hearts were he to smile."

Darcy muttered something.

"Spectators must be quiet," Miss Joye scolded the crowd gathered around the table. "You prevented me from hearing what Mr. Darcy said."

"I said," Darcy said distinctly, "any effect on feminine hearts requires that they first have hearts."

There was a brief moment of silence, then Miss Joye said sweetly while her friend tittered, "That speech savours strongly of disappointment, Mr. Darcy. Has someone been breaking your heart?"

"Not mine, no."

Here Wickham interjected. "You may recall Mr. Leahy. He was a particular friend of Mr. Darcy's."

He gave Darcy a smile full of challenge, which Darcy could not quite read.

Miss Joye looked at Darcy with interest. "Was he? I did not realize. I do remember Mr. Leahy, of course. He was a particular friend of mine as well, though I have not seen him for going on these two weeks. Have you knowledge of his whereabouts, sir?"

"He has departed Cambridge. You will not see him again," Darcy said tersely.
Wickham took the last trick and Miss Graham tallied the points. Across the other corner of the table, Miss Joye and Darcy held each other's gazes. Finally, she smiled.

"Mr. Darcy," she said softly. "You should not blame me. Perhaps I should never have become involved with Mr. Leahy, but a woman's heart is tender and he was a kind and gentle man."

"Too kind," Darcy said bitterly. "How much did he give you? He had nothing left when he was sent down. Is that why you set it up for your flash-man to finish him?"

Miss Graham gave a little scream of protest at this, but Miss Joye only looked quizzical.

"Mr. Darcy, though you do not deserve it, I will forgive you your insult out of respect for Mr. Leahy. I know you will not believe me, but I was fond of him. Very fond."

"Not fond enough," Darcy muttered.

They started another rubber. By now, the ladies were deep in the hole, but nobody seemed to care. Miss Joye had also ceased with her feminine wiles. Now she sat straight and tall in her seat and followed the play closely. She looked at Darcy frequently, attempting to catch his eye. Once in awhile, their gazes met, but Darcy looked away quickly, cursing her beauty.

"In one respect you are correct," Miss Joye said as she took his trump. "I did not love Mr. Leahy. I wished to. I knew he loved me, and I was moved by his kind attentions to me. But he was perhaps too kind. It is difficult for a woman to love a man who gives too much of himself. He is not as attractive as a man who knows his own mind and stands firm against influence. Such a man is more likely to inspire ardent feminine devotion."

Darcy said nothing to this, though he felt his cheeks getting hot.

"For my part," said Wickham, "I have no difficulty with women looking out for themselves and accepting attentions where they are offered. Especially when given to a beautiful woman. Even the handsome ones must have something to live on, as well as the plain."

"Thank you, Mr. Wickham," Miss Joye looked at him gratefully and Wickham gave her a charming smile.

They played one more rubber, then Miss Joye declared herself and Miss Graham finished.

"You have cleaned us out, sirs, and the hour is late," said Miss Joye as the final tally was made. and the ladies paid over their coins. "A great pity, as I found our discussion fascinating. I wonder - Miss Graham has lodgings not far from here. Have you any interest in continuing our conversation there?"

"An excellent plan -" said Wickham. But Darcy cut him off.

"No, thank you. We must be off."

Miss Joye widened her eyes in surprise. "Now? But it is scarcely five o'clock. I understood your carriage does not leave until two o'clock this afternoon. What will you do in the meantime?"

"Do not trouble yourself. We will think of something."

"Darcy, we have nowhere to go."

"There is a coffee-house -"

Wickham rose. "Excuse us," he said to the ladies. He pulled Darcy to his feet and to one side, away
from the ladies and other spectators. "Darcy, what is it? I thought you wished for revenge."

Darcy furrowed his brow at Wickham. "Yes, and I have it. You heard them. We have all of their money."

"Their money - ! Darcy, who cares about their money? They are inviting us to their beds. You can make them do anything."

Darcy glared at George. "How is that revenge? They want us there. You are giving them what they want. And then who knows what they will do then, how they will try to ensnare us?"

"They just want their money back. Perhaps a little more. That is all. Come, Darcy. It will be jolly. They are both beautiful. I will let you have first pick."

"No. Not tonight, George. Not after what she did to Leahy." He looked over at the ladies, who were also now standing, talking with animation with a man. With a shock of anger he saw it was the man with whom Leahy had fought the duel. He nudged Wickham to look. "Who is he? Is that her lover or her flash-man? I want nothing to do with them."

"The devil! He is coming over."

The man, handsome and burly, though shorter than Darcy, approached them with a smile. Darcy looked at him with dislike. The man spread out his hands to indicate he came peaceably.

"No problem, gentlemen. But Miss Joye tells me that she had been promised that if you won, she and Miss Graham would have an opportunity to earn back their money."

"That is ridiculous. I made no such promise," Darcy said angrily.

"Perhaps not directly, sir, but your friend pledged your name."

Darcy turned swiftly to Wickham, who had edged himself behind Darcy at the man's approach. Wickham shrugged, but did not deny it. Darcy glared at him.

"Sorry, Darcy," he said sheepishly.

"So now you have to make good," the man said. "They are respectable working girls, they cannot afford to lose the ninety guineas you won from them. You've got a bit of a reputation, Mr. Darcy, and they would not have agreed to play you if they had known you would not honour your word. But as you can see, they are beautiful and good-natured. You will not be disappointed. And then we shall be quit and both sides may walk away, satisfied."

"And who are you to tell me so?" Darcy demanded.

"A friend," said the man. "Potts is the name."

The ladies came over, looking serious. Miss Joye looked at him beseechingly. "Honour bright, Mr. Darcy. I would not have played you if Mr. Wickham had not promised me. I thought I could win either way. I did not mind losing – to you. Else I would have played harder."

Before either of them could say anything further, the doorkeepers arrived. "Trouble, sir?" they said, in voices that indicated that they would make trouble for anybody who disturbed the peace of the hell.

Behind them, he saw Mr. Potts jerk his chin at a number of men in the crowd, who also began to
make their way over.

"Trouble, Darcy?" Seton and Lamb appeared at his elbow.

Darcy shut his eyes in disgust. How had he gotten into this mess? If he was not careful this would end in a brawl and they would all be sent down from Cambridge.

"No trouble," he told his friends. He turned to the doorkeepers and repeated, more loudly, "No trouble. We are simply making arrangements with the ladies."

The doorkeepers nodded but did not move away, and the spectators who had straggled away returned in hopes of a scene. Wonderful. Now he had a large audience. He turned back to Mr. Potts and the ladies, who were watching him eagerly.

"Thank you, sir, I knew you would see reason - " Mr. Potts started.

Darcy cut him off. "We are not going with the ladies."

He saw anger register on their faces and added, swiftly, "But I will give them their money back. In fact, I will offer them twice their money, on one condition."

"What condition?" said Mr. Potts suspiciously.

"They never come near to me and my friends again. And they never return to this hell. There are many hells. Find another."

"Darcy - " Wickham protested.

"Shut it!" he snapped over his shoulder.

Mr. Potts spoke again. "Now, sir, they have been playing at this hell a long time. There are other hells, true, but this is an important one for them. Working girls - "

Darcy felt like he would punch Mr. Potts in the face if he said "working girls" one more time. "My friends come here toward the end of the week. Surely they can avoid those days."

Mr. Potts rubbed his jaw. "True. They can change their rotation. And you will give them twice their money back, you said?"

"Yes, one hundred and eighty-nine pounds."

Mr. Potts rubbed his jaw again. "What about an even two hundred? I think we can swing it for an even two hundred."

Darcy, suppressing his disgust at having to bargain with such a personage and over such a thing, jerked his head once in agreement.

"I will need to see the money immediately."

Darcy handed him the coins he had won from the ladies and pulled out his pocketbook and extracted the remainder in notes. Mr. Potts took it from him eagerly. He counted it, then assuming an expression of concern, said, "Excuse me, sir, there seems to be some misunderstanding. I meant two hundred guineas, of course."

"Of course you did," Darcy said with angry sarcasm.
"Now sir, you are a fine young gentleman. Plenty of pelf, anytime you wish it. I would not think you would begrudge them another ten pounds," Mr. Potts wheedled.

Darcy gritted his teeth. Two hundred guineas to not enjoy a woman's favours! He could see Potts and his crowd all laughing at him for a plucked pigeon. But it was too late. Mr. Potts had already pocketed his money and to haggle over another ten pounds with feelings running high and a large crowd seemed too much of a risk. Slowly, he extracted another ten pound note and held it out. Mr. Potts snatched it up.

"All correct," he nodded approvingly. "Thank you, Mr. Darcy. This is very honourable of you, I must say. Always decent fellows you meet at good establishments like this one." He jerked his head at the girls. "Thank Mr. Darcy, girls."

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy," said Miss Graham. She dropped a curtsey, then followed Mr. Potts out of the hell.

Miss Joye lingered. Was she going to offer herself to him still? If she truly wished to, when she already had his money –

She placed her hand on his arm and squeezed it, looking into his face, her eyes shining with gratitude and relief. "That was very gentlemanly of you, Mr. Darcy. I want you to know that I do appreciate it."

And then she was gone. When satisfied there would be no altercation, the doorkeepers also departed the scene. The crowd, denied their thirst for sensation by this uninteresting mode of settling disputes, drifted away. Darcy was left standing with his friends.

"Well done, Darcy," said Wickham sarcastically, his arms folded across his chest.

Darcy rounded on him. "If you had not - "

"Hsst," said Seton, elbowing Darcy quiet. He smiled lovingly at a young lady approaching wearing a pelisse and smart bonnet with a veil, which was lifted to reveal velvety brown eyes and a full, pouting mouth. Behind her were several other young ladies, also dressed for departure.

"Êtes-vous prêt, monsieur?" she said.

"Pas encore, mon petit chou. Un instant, je dois m'assurer que mes amis vont bien," Seton replied.

The young lady looked Darcy and Wickham up and down and smiled. "Je pense qu'ils sont très bien," she said. "Veulent-ils une amie?"

Seton smiled. "Oui, oui, si vous en avez une à recommander."

Lamb interposed with a grin. "Il veut dire deux. Une pour chaque homme."

"Ah oui. Bien sûr. Je pense que n'importe laquelle de mes amis serait ravie de les divertir."

"It is not necessary, Seton," said Darcy, as the young lady beckoned her friends over.

"Ignore that old anchorite, Seton," Wickham said over his shoulder, then bowed over the gloved hands of the prettiest of the ladies.

Seton put his hand on Darcy's shoulder good-naturedly. "Come, Darcy. I hate to see my friends quarrel, especially ones as thick as you two. Indulge me."
Darcy pressed his thumb and forefinger to his eyeballs. Rescuing Wickham from his scrapes could be stressful. "I need a drink. Several of them."

"There is plenty where we are going."

"I only have ten quid left and I doubt George has any money," he said, eyeing the young ladies' sophisticated, stylish ensembles doubtfully. They were all pretty and radiated an air of pampered luxury, the kind of lady who demanded the best treatment.

"Do not trouble yourself," said Seton. "They are all old friends of mine. Dancers. They will be happy to look after us and if there is any deficiency I will deal with it. Here we go." A footman had come over with their cloaks and hats and canes. Seton tipped him handsomely.

One of the ladies came up to Darcy and curled her arm through his. "Viens," she said, smiling up at him. Her happy, friendly air was soothing and Darcy allowed himself to be cheered.

He smiled back at her, put his hat on his head, and followed his friends out the door.

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"What in the world were you thinking, Darcy?" asked Lamb.

They were enjoying a late supper hosted by Seton in his apartments the day after their return from London. Though Seton was famous at Trinity for his open-door approach to hospitality, on this occasion, the guest list was limited to Lamb, Darcy and Wickham. Seton had woke at two o'clock that day with a splitting headache and decided he could stand only the company of his most intimate friends as he attempted to eat and drink away the effects of the previous day's excesses.

Wickham helped himself to a sweetmeat, emptied his glass of audit, the College's excellent strong ale brewed every January for the auditors' inspection, and signalled to the footman to pour him another bumper. He smiled maliciously at Lamb's question. "Yes, Darcy, tell us what you were thinking."

It was the question Darcy had been dreading. What had he been thinking? Two hundred guineas to enjoy the favours of a woman was foolish and extravagant, but at least it made him an object of envy. Two hundred guineas to bribe a beautiful woman not to touch him? He would be the laughingstock of the whole university when that got out.

He said, with as much dignity as he could muster, "I was concerned with avoiding all of us being sent down. Potts was not the only whore's bully in the place, or did you not notice?"

"But if you had taken her to bed, she would not have called on Potts," said Lamb reasonably. "And it would have cost you only what you had already won from her. Not that and over a hundred guineas of your own."

"I did not wish to bed her," Darcy said stiffly. "She could not be trusted after what she did to Leahy."

"What does that matter?" Lamb inquired while Wickham rolled his eyes and downed another half-glass. "You are not entrusting her with any state secrets. Bend her over and take a flyer. She was certainly pretty enough."

"Or give her to me," said Wickham, who still smarted at the lost opportunity despite finding consolation in the arms of Seton's dancer friends. "I would have taken them both if you could not perform."
Darcy could feel the colour rising in his face. Seton, taking pity on his friend's discomfiture, interposed.

"No, Darcy is right, gentlemen. Who knows what Miss Joye's true intentions were? She is a clever minx, that one. I played her a number of times with Leahy and you see what happened to him."

"Leahy was a fool," started Wickham, but was cut off by Seton.

"Leahy was the best player after Darcy, and he saved his winnings. He told me he had over a thousand pounds saved. And do you know what he had left when he was sent down?"

"Not a brass farthing," said Darcy.

"Precisely. Darcy provided money for his journey home. He had given all of his money to her."

"He lost his heart to a woman. That could happen to anybody," said Lamb.

"Aye, but my point is that it did not happen by accident. She tried the same trick with Darcy as she did with Leahy. She lost to him on purpose. She speaks fair and plays a long game."

"I still say Darcy could have taken her," said Wickham sceptically. "Once he had his way with her, he could walk away. And then every time she saw him, she would remember who was her master."

"I agree with Wickham," said Lamb.

"And what if she had her bullies posted at the door to rob you when you were done?" Darcy said. "How would you prevent that eventuality?"

"Why would she do that?" Wickham shrugged. "You are too suspicious."

There was a moment of silence as all of the young men settled more comfortably in Seton's plush chairs and the footmen refilled their glasses.

"I do not think you and Lamb can truly understand," Seton said. "Neither of you are heirs to large fortunes."

"What does that have to do with it?" demanded Lamb.

"You only know how to spend money. Darcy and I have to preserve it. We must be more careful," said Seton. "Everybody pretends to be our friend, but nine out of ten of them are only after money and will stop at nothing to get it."

"What d'ye mean?" Lamb said indignantly, waving his bumper of audit. "I am here for the ale."

"I am after his money," said Wickham.

Seton threw a bread roll at Wickham's head, which he ducked. "You do not need my money. You will have a living from your godfather."

"I can handle more than one at a time if you are giving them away."

"Women? Or livings?" Lamb joked.

"Both, obviously."

"I am not talking about you two," said Seton.
"Then who?" Lamb asked.

"My tutor, for one. He had me convinced I was so brilliant I could go to Senate House, so I asked to sit the exams and was plucked in maths, Greek and Latin, outdone by even the poorest sizar! I suggested he had been mistaken about my brilliance, and he told me my humility did my noble forebears credit and augmented my greatness."

"Did you tell him he was an idiot?" inquired Darcy.

"Yes. I told him he had just proven that his powers of reasoning were even worse than my abilities in maths."

"What did he say then?" asked Lamb.

"He told me my logic was infallible."

His friends groaned.

"Thank God my tutor has more sense," said Lamb. "He is perfectly happy to tell me when I am being an idiot. Or perhaps it is because I have no livings to give away. What is Dr. Milner like, Darcy?"

"Not like Seton's," Darcy said dryly. "I brought him my proofs today and he told me if I attempted to present such rubbish again, I could leave and not return until I had found Fermat's Lost Theorem."

His friends howled.

"It is all of your faults," Darcy smiled. "You have driven me to dissipation. I had the previous day mapped out to work on it."

"He sounds frightening," Seton shuddered. "Perhaps I prefer my toad-eater of a tutor after all."

"What is he after, Seton? The living at Condover?" Darcy asked, mentioning one of the livings for which Seton would hold advowson when he came into his majority.

"Anything that he can get, I imagine. He was a sizar before he became a Doctor of Divinity and he has one of the college livings, but it only pays £25 per annum." Seton looked at Darcy. "I suppose Dr. Milner has no need for Pemberley's patronage, but you must be besieged by divinity students as well."

"Oh yes. They are like a pack of horseflies," Darcy said irritably. His father had six livings within his gift, his aunt Lady Catherine had three and his uncle Lord Fitzwilliam had thirty-two and half a dozen chaplaincies besides, each many times more valuable than the most valuable of the college livings. With such benefices at his family's disposal, Darcy was surrounded by obsequiousness, no matter how often he protested he had no say in the disposition of livings.

"I do not know how you two stand it," commented Lamb. "I would have taken a cudgel to them by now."

Seton shrugged. "You become used to it. But you do have to remind yourself you have bollocks for brains if you believe any of it."

"What about your dancer 'friends'?" Lamb inquired slyly. "They seemed very fond of you. At least, I suppose that is why they were mon amour-ing you everywhere."
Seton snorted. "They love my gold."

"Then why do you give it to them?" Darcy asked sharply.

"Because they look so sweet and pretty when they ask," Seton grinned, sinking lower into his chair and taking another pull of audit.

"You do not care if their regard for you is genuine?"

Seton shrugged. "It does not bother me. They gain their desire, I gain mine."

"Would you marry on that basis?"

"Marriage? Who speaks of marriage?" Seton demanded.

"Leahy proposed marriage. He told me."

"What!? When?" they all clamoured.

"The week before the duel," Darcy said. "She had asked him for time to consider and he thought he was returning for his answer when he saw her with the other man - that Potts."

"Ah." Seton considered. "That was why he was on the high ropes over seeing her with Potts."

"Yes," Darcy stared gloomily at the bottom of his empty glass. The footman hastened over to refill it. They nursed their full drinks quietly for a while in contemplation, then Seton said, his speech a little slurred. "I liked Leahy, but he was foolish to expect loyalty from a woman. They are not capable of it."

"That is why they are called the frail sex," Lamb nodded sadly, also slurring his words.

"You are content to wear horns, then?" Darcy demanded, outraged.

"No, but what can one do?" asked Seton. "Your only consolation is to marry them young. Get there first."

"Get there first!" Lamb raised his glass crookedly.

"Hear, hear," said Wickham, though he forgot to raise his glass. They emptied their glasses again and the footmen poured another round. After they had made good inroads, Wickham spoke again.

"How young?"

"How young?" Seton repeated, perplexed and slumping over. "As young as … as young as needed!"

"Hear, hear!" said Wickham.

"Needed for what?" asked Lamb.

"Needed for what?" Seton repeated, annoyed by these difficult questions. "Needed for what?" He scratched his head in befuddlement, then added brightly as illumination dawned, "Why … for bedding and begetting, of course. To the heir and the spare!"

"My father did not get the spare from my mother," he said worriedly. "Only Pen is his. William is
Lord Egremont's, and everybody says Frederick is too, though nobody is sure who Emily's father is."

"Poor Lamb," Seton said.

"My godfather is my father, everybody says. I am the Prince of Wales's son!"

"Prince Lamb!" Seton crowed.

"My mother is a whore!" Lamb moaned.

"Hear hear!" Wickham said.

"My mother is a whore too," Seton mused drunkenly. "Her new lover is scarcely older than I am. What about you, Darcy? Is your mother a whore?"

"No," he said shortly, then added, "She died young."

"Oh yes, I forgot," said Seton. There was an awkward silence, then Seton said, "What about your mother, Wickham? Wickham?"

The only reply he received was a faint snore. Wickham had fallen asleep.

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Footnotes:

1. Lingo from the period:

flash-man - an enforcer for sex workers. In using the term, Darcy has all but called Miss Joye a whore, although the reality might be more nuanced and she and Miss Graham as single ladies dependent on themselves may have chosen to hire somebody for their protection.

pelf - money

rusticate, n. rustication - suspended or temporarily banished from university.

sent down - expelled from university.

plucked - fail the exam, refused one's degree.

on the high ropes - in a passion

bumper - a glass filled to overflowing

flyer - sex with clothes on

2. Based on a true incident, as told in letters and alluded to in David Cecil's biography of William Lamb, Viscount Melbourne, in The Young Melbourne & Lord M. George Lamb had indeed been nearly expelled from Cambridge for knocking down a friend who had called his mother a whore.

3. At Cambridge in this period, there were 4 classes of students, each with distinctive cap and gown to denote their status and each with distinctive privileges or lack thereof. Noblemen wore full silk and were guaranteed a degree without sitting the exams, leading many to treat their time at university as an extended party. Hat-fellow-commoners, the immediate relations of nobles, and fellow-commoners, who were students from rich and connected families, associated with nobles and wore gold and silver trimmings respectively on their gowns. Pensioners were the most common class of
student and wore a plain gown and did not get to sit at the head table with the higher class of students in the commons or dining hall. Finally, there were sizars, who attended on subsidized board and tuition, were expected to work for their keep, and ate after everybody else was finished.

4. Pall Mall and the area around St. James' Street was a popular location for gambling hells. Unlike the gentlemen's clubs where no women were permitted, hells were not strictly legal, but hush money paid to constables allowed them to keep their doors open and some made vast sums and had pretensions of grandeur.

5. The translation of this conversation is as follows:

"Are you ready, sir?"
"Not yet, my sweet. Just a moment. I want to make sure my friends are well."
"I think they are very well (fine). Do they want a lady friend?"
"Yes, yes, if you have one to recommend."
"He means two, one for each man."
"Yes, of course. I think any of my friends would be delighted to entertain them."

(ETA: Thank you sooo much to readers Octavia and Ms_Pimprenelle for correcting my errors!)

The fact this conversation takes place in French does not mean the women are French. Rather, they aspire to be part of the top class of the demi-monde, who were typically well-versed in multiple languages (and liked to show it to distinguish themselves from their lower-class counterparts), and could be better educated and accomplished than many genteel women. While high-class courtesans did enjoy sexual relationships with aristocratic men of their choosing, their other function was to serve as political and social hostesses, and the lords and MPs leaving Whitehall often crowded into the fancy salons of courtesans in Pall Mall to discuss the days' events.

6. Now known as Fermat's Last Theorem. This was a mathematical proposition conjectured by the Frenchman Pierre de Fermat in 1637 in the margin of a copy of Arithmetica, but he did not have the space to expand on it in the margin and died before he could write it down elsewhere. The solution remained one of mathematics' enduring mysteries for 358 years until 1994, when Oxford University professor Andrew Wiles provided the proofs and won the 2016 Abel Prize for his work.
It was the end of Lent term and the beginning of Easter holidays. The students, temporarily released from their various labours, overflowed out of the university's courtyards and into the surrounding countryside. Even those vying for top honours had shut their books for the day and their wraith-like figures, eyes blinking in the spring sunshine, could be seen haunting the picturesque walks along the River Cam.

Darcy and Wickham went for an early ride in the Gogmagog Hills, then spent the rest of the day playing in a cricket match pitting the university's students against the gentlemen of Cambridge town. Like all Town versus Gown matches, tempers ran high as the young men vied for sporting supremacy and the admiration of the crowd who had come to see the contest. When the university gownsmen emerged victorious by six runs, they all agreed the celebrations should not be too quickly curtailed and adjourned to Chesterton to continue them.

Other students soon joined them at their chosen tavern and it was not long before the establishment was filled with young men in shirt-sleeves singing bawdy songs at the top of their lungs.

As Oyster Nan stood by her tub,
To shew her vicious Inclination;
She gave her noblest Parts a scrub,
And sigh'd for want of copulation ...  

"Come, Darcy," said Wickham after the night had worn on. "Time to celebrate."

"We are already celebrating," Darcy said drunkenly. The leading cricketers had been hailed as heroes and plied with drinks of all kinds. Darcy, with the second best strike rate of the match, was considerably elevated beyond his usual capacity.

"You are celebrated," Wickham said dryly. "I do not see anybody buying me drinks."

Darcy glanced at his friend. Something in Wickham's face made him rise and down the rest of his mug in a gulp. "Come, then."

He tried to put the mug down on the table but missed, swaying on his feet.

"Oh for heaven's sake," snapped Wickham, taking the mug from him. "You're completely in the gun."

"I am happy," said Darcy drunkenly, trying to sit back down. "Let us go later."

"No, I need you," said Wickham, hauling Darcy to his feet again.

Darcy threw some coins on the table and allowed himself to be pulled out of the tavern. The crisp, cool air as they waited for their horses to be brought round cleared his head a little. He shook it.
"Where are we going?" he asked after he had managed - just barely - to mount his horse and they were walking away from the tavern. Darcy kept his eyes fixed carefully on Wickham ahead of him so he did not lose his way.

"Somewhere new," Wickham threw over his shoulder at Darcy. "To see some young ladies."

Darcy looked in alarm at the state of his clothing, which bore evidence of spillage. "Oh no, no young ladies. 'M not fit for young ladies."

"Not those kinds of young ladies." Wickham sounded amused. "The kind you do not need to dress up for."

Wickham asked Darcy how much money he had on him.

"Seventy, eighty quid maybe."

"That will do. Give me thirty."

"Where is your money?"

"Spent."

Wickham reined in his horse so that Darcy drew even. When Darcy handed him his pocket-book, Wickham helped himself.

They walked until they came to another village full of low dwellings and mean buildings. Darcy recognized it as Barnwell, a small village just half a mile northeast of Cambridge. It was well-known for the houses of ill-repute that sprouted there, despite the proctors' frequent raids. Darcy had seen it in the distance on the way to Chesterton, but it was not an area he frequented.

They rode down the main street and turned onto a side street with more substantial-looking houses, stopping in front of an outwardly respectable-looking brick building, the largest on its block. Wickham dismounted and secured his horse on the post and gestured to Darcy to do the same.

"Who are we seeing?" Darcy asked.

"Some friends," said Wickham, his grin wolfish in the dark.

He led the way around the back of the house and knocked on the door. It was opened by a tall, imposing woman, soberly dressed, who nodded at Wickham's inquiry and led them through the hall to a large parlour. It was dimly lit and filled with about a dozen people of both sexes. The noise level was moderate, mainly hushed voices and murmurs and giggles. Through the haze of smoky tallow candles and his own drunkenness, Darcy discerned that both men and women were in various stages of undress and some were engaged in licentious activity.

It was not a scene the likes of which he had witnessed before. In his experience, such activities were conducted decently, in private. His native discomfort at new situations asserted itself in force and he stepped back.

"George!" He hissed. "This is a … a …"

"I know what it is, Darcy."

The dire warnings of friends, family and church rose in his mind. "But … are these women not diseased?"
This came out louder than he intended. He shut his mouth with a snap at the baleful glares from both Wickham and the women closest to them.

"Shut it, you idiot! If you do not want to stay, then go for a walk and come back in an hour or so." Wickham pushed him out into the hallway.

Darcy left, stumbling down the stairs a bit. He walked aimlessly toward the river. As his head cleared, he began to feel resentment towards Wickham. Why did Wickham always have to involve him in such tawdriness? It was one thing to experience life in the elegant salons and drawing rooms of the ladies of Pall Mall. They were properly the province of a gentleman. Why, the royal prince and dukes and many lords of Parliament went there to be entertained! But these women were little better than the ones at the crossroads of the City.

He thought about Wickham taking his thirty pounds and then pushing him out the door. Was it only because he needed Darcy's money that he wanted him at all? Well, Darcy had given him money. He was always giving him money, he had only a little saved. Leahy may have given Miss Joye all of his money, but Wickham spent most of Darcy's. Not that Darcy had ever begrudged it - he had liked seeing his friend enjoying himself. But now he was going too far.

He circled back to the house, resolved to speak to Wickham. When he knocked, he was greeted by the same woman who had admitted them the first time. When he informed her he had come for his friend only, she gave him a look of scorn but permitted him to wait in the hall. Darcy found a chair and dozed off as he planned out what he was going to say to Wickham.

He was roused by the sound of an oath in what sounded like Wickham's voice followed by the scream of a girl. Suddenly, one of the doors to the hall was flung open, slamming against the wall, and a girl burst forth.

Darcy was struck by the look of terror on the girl's face. She looked to be very young and was crying, her gown torn. He rose to his feet, only to encounter Wickham shooting out the door looking enraged. When he saw Darcy, he stopped short.

"Darcy. Back already?" Wickham was attempting to speak coolly and school his livid features. "It is getting late. I suppose we'd best go. Give me a moment."

Wickham disappeared back in the room and emerged with his missing clothing, which looked hastily thrown on.

During this time — a matter of seconds — the girl had stood frozen with her back to the wall. When Wickham came out and passed her, she shrank smaller into the corner. Wickham ignored her. Darcy, stunned, allowed himself to be pulled out into the street.

"What was that about?" Darcy demanded, recovering himself. "Did you hurt her?"

"Of course not," said Wickham calmly.

"Why was she crying then? And her gown torn?"

"We had a fight. She was jealous that I had chosen another girl before her tonight and she started attacking me. I was only defending myself."

"Why is such a young girl in a place such as that?"

Wickham threw him a look as if to ask why Darcy was so dull-witted.
"She is too young," Darcy said. "She should be at home with her family."

Wickham shrugged. "Her family probably put her there."

"It does not mean you should be with her. You are taking advantage of her situation," he persisted.

Wickham shrugged again. "If not me, then someone else would. And you said it yourself. Most of them are diseased. The only way you know if they are clean is if they are young and untouched."

Darcy's mouth fell open. "You mean she is a maiden?"

Wickham finally registered Darcy's horror and disapproval. His manner changed from callous scorn to friendly affection. "Of course not, Darcy! She is less a maiden than I am. I only meant in comparison to the other ladies, who are all used up."

Darcy faced Wickham full on, suddenly feeling almost sober. "George, you should not be doing such things," he said earnestly.

"Why not?" Wickham demanded. "Everybody else does. You saw the people in there. There were students among them."

"Yes, but they were with older ladies. Experienced ladies. That girl … she was scarcely more than a child."

"Tell that to our friends, Darcy. They all do it, you are just too simple to notice. You heard Seton yourself. Get there first."

Shocked, Darcy wondered if his friends did indeed engage in such activities. It was possible. Few of them studied as he did; there were many nights he spent in his apartments or the library when they were out gallivanting late into the night. He knew because they would miss the closing of King's Gate in the evenings and would sometimes climb up through his window to avoid fines and being reported.

Wickham had taken advantage of his momentary inattention to mount his horse and begin riding away. Darcy untethered his own horse and followed. As he stared at Wickham's straight back in front of him, it occurred to him for the first time that perhaps his oldest friend, that all of his friends, were not good men. Not at all.

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Merciful oblivion was cut all too short when Darcy woke the next morning to a pounding head and a gnawing sense of shame and horror.

The girl. Darcy did not believe Wickham's denials that she was no maiden. There was no other reason that he would need so large a sum as thirty pounds unless he was purchasing the privilege of taking her maidenhead, for Darcy knew that the price of a woman in a place like that would normally be in the shillings, not pounds.

What he did not know was whether his friend had completed his act of debauchery or whether the girl remained untouched. But if he had not, it was only a matter of time so long as she remained where she was. And if he had - well, it did not matter. She was too young to lead such life. Something had to be done.

"Parker," he said to his valet, groom and manservant-of-all-work when he arrived that morning to
assist Darcy in getting dressed. "I need you to carry out a somewhat peculiar errand."

Parker listened attentively, betraying no emotion as Darcy explained. He took the packet containing a letter and much of Darcy's remaining money and departed with a bow.

Darcy breathed a sigh of relief. It should be well now. He could trust Parker. Parker was one of Pemberley's own servants, sent with Darcy to Cambridge, not one of the College servants, who were sometimes known to be light-fingered with the students' belongings.

Parker's instructions were to find the girl in Barnwell, wait for an opportunity to speak to her alone, and assist her and any other of the girls from the brothel who would accompany her to depart on the first available coach. If she could manage to return to her home parish, she would have a claim to assistance. The money, Darcy hoped, should be more than enough to sustain her until she could find a place or establishment of some kind.

Now for Wickham. Did his friend understand that he had acted wrongly? He did not seem to. But how could he not? Darcy's father had always made clear what his expectations were for men in the house with respect to chaste women. One simply did not touch them. Ever.

The rule was strictly enforced at Pemberley and all of its manors. Any manservant who seduced a maid would find himself married or fired without character; any leaseholder who treated maidens as objects for his enjoyment might find himself supporting more than just his wife and children. The county magistrates had the power to summon any man to answer to claims of paternity, and with the backing of one of the major landowners in the area, they used it to full effect. Most of the time, the threat was enough, and men fell into line rather than risk losing the benefit of association with such a powerful estate.

For those poor wretches who had reaped the illegitimate fruit of their fall from grace, there were foundling hospitals, almshouses and charity schools. It had been one of Lady Anne's chief concerns, and many of Derbyshire's charitable institutions bore the Darcy name as either founder or subscriber on the plaques beside their plain but serviceable doors. After Lady Anne's death, it had been Darcy who had stood by his father's side as Mr. Darcy opened these institutions and welcomed their first beneficiaries. He had seen firsthand the glimmer of hope that lit bleak and frightened faces, and received the shy smiles of the tiny fatherless boys and girls when he squatted down to speak to them and give them their first pennies.

It was not fathomable that his friend, raised at Pemberley, could act in such a way. It must be a mistake; Wickham must not understand the consequences of his actions.

"George," he whispered during morning chapel, when the chapel clerk enforcing discipline had moved on from their row. "I would speak with you immediately afterward."

Wickham glanced at him, then turned his gaze back to the chaplain reading the prayer and assumed an expression of eager attention. The chapel clerk had turned back to them in an attempt to identify the source of noise. Unsuccessful, he moved on again.

Wickham whispered, "Darcy, the only thing I am doing immediately afterward is going back to bed."

"You can go back to bed later. We must talk."

Wickham gave the barest shrug of his shoulders and said nothing. After service was over, Darcy attempted to accompany his friend out of chapel but was arrested by a pair of first-year men who wished to chant his praises over his batting of the prior day. By the time he extricated himself,
Wickham was gone. At his apartments, he was sporting the oak and did not answer no matter how loudly Darcy knocked. He proved similarly elusive for the rest of the day.

At chapel the next morning, Wickham sat in a different row and Darcy could not speak to him. At breakfast, Darcy saw him but could not come near as he was surrounded by friends at the commons tables, while Darcy sat at the long head table with the noblemen, fellows and fellow-commoners. It was not until the evening that he caught up with Wickham in his apartments. He was dressed to go out.

"Not now, Darcy, if you love me," Wickham said when he saw him. "I am to meet Badger and I am late."

"I need a few minutes. This is important, George. What you did - "

"Is wrong, I know," Wickham finished. "But she was much older than she looked. They told me she was fifteen."

"It is not only that. If she was a maiden -"

"She was not."

"How do you know?"

"Darcy, I was there. Trust me, I know."

Darcy, dismayed at the implication of this for his hope that the girl remained untouched, went silent for a moment. Then he said, "Regardless of her age or her - her status, you cannot frequent such a place. If my father learnt that you went to such a place, he would not be happy."

"Oh lord. Darcy, if your father learnt of any of the places we went to, he would not be happy. Every time he writes me, he warns me against the evils of wine, women and song. What is the difference? Just the expense."

"It is more than that. The women in places like that - they are ill-used, they may have been tricked. Who knows how they came to be there? It is not the same. And what if they should come with child? Would you wish for your child to be born in such circumstances?"

"What if any of them should come with child? You think it is different for your actresses and dancers in Pall Mall?"

"They do not - we use preservatives and they know how to protect themselves - with cordials and other things. And they have money and friends should they run into trouble."

"Right," Wickham said cynically. "And none of them ever have babes that end up in a basket at the hospital door. There is no difference, Darcy. No difference between what you do and what I did. Now excuse me, I am late. Close my door when you leave."

He brushed past Darcy, leaving him standing there in rueful contemplation. Was Wickham correct? Was he no better?

It was true that Mr. Darcy would be horrified if he knew the extent of his son's activities, but Darcy had always dismissed his father's expectations of himself as unreasonable - an old prude, was how Wickham described him affectionately. At least as common in their set were fathers like Lord Melbourne, who was always willing to write Lamb a letter of introduction to the latest of lovely Cyprians, and who was loud in his displeasure if he felt any had failed to give his son his due.
Darcy thought about his own father. After the fiasco at Eton, their relationship had remained cool and Darcy had been careful never to allow himself to need his father for anything. Nevertheless, Mr. Darcy had returned to Pemberley more frequently the following summer. And in the ensuing years, he had taken pains to include Darcy in the business of the estate, taking him to meetings with tenants, engineers, architects and surveyors, and bringing him along to farm visits and agricultural meetings. It had been awkward at first, but Darcy knew it was in his own interest to educate himself about his patrimony, so he was diligent and his father had been approving.

What would his father say if he knew that his son had adopted the lifestyle of a young lord, the lifestyle that his mother, Lady Anne, had rejected in choosing to marry below her station? For the first time in a long time, he realized he did not wish to disappoint his father.

***

"You seem distracted, Darcy," Dr. Milner said at their next tutoring session. "Is something troubling you?"

Darcy looked up from staring at the advanced propositions from *Newton's Principia* without seeing them. Dr. Milner was leaning back in his chair, his hands folded over his ample belly, his gaze curious. Darcy wanted to tell him - or tell somebody - what was preying on his mind, but he did not see how he could possibly bring up such a subject.

"I am wondering if I have studied as hard as I ought," he said.

Dr. Milner smiled. "You know my answer to that. No, you have not. You have a top-notch mind, Darcy, and I believe you might be senior wrangler if you put your shoulder into it. But that requires many more hours of study than you seem willing to spare. You know the other men who seek such honours are fagging twelve, fourteen hours a day."

Darcy nodded. "I have found college life to be - absorbing. I have allowed myself to be led away from my studies."

Dr. Milner looked attentive and sat up a little straighter in his chair. "Yes, I have guessed as much. It is a hazard for all my rich students, for they have options that the poor ones do not."

"Except Leahy," Darcy blurted out, then regretted it.

A look of sorrow came over Dr. Milner's face and Darcy remembered that he had defended Leahy to the Seniority and attempted, unsuccessfully, to have his sentence commuted to rustication from expulsion. "Yes, Leahy. He became involved with a bad crowd."

Darcy did not mention he was involved with the same crowd, nor that it was owing to him that Leahy had become involved. From Dr. Milner's searching look, he wondered if he knew. At his next words, he was sure of it.

"Do you seek to avoid Leahy's fate, Darcy?"

Darcy's eyes flew up to meet Dr. Milner's, but they held only concern, not judgment.

"Yes," he nodded. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"You will have to make a choice, I think. Up until now you have been both a reading man and a non-reading man. There are few students who can attempt both and none that I know of successfully in the end."
"I wish to be a reading man," Darcy said emphatically.

Dr. Milner nodded in satisfaction. "It is not too late. You must study much harder than you have been and abjure vice. You attend chapel regularly?"

"Yes, mostly," he said. But Dr. Milner saw the expression of distaste cross over his features.

"Our chapel services are not as good as they might be," Dr. Milner admitted. "The chaplains rush through it sometimes and pay little attention to the meaning of their words. You may wish to attend the Sunday service in town. Holy Trinity is very popular with the students."

"And be a Simeonite?" Darcy said before he could stop himself. He had heard Dr. Milner had leanings in that way.

Dr. Milner lifted his eyebrows a fraction but only said, mildly, "I know Charles Simeon well. Like you, he came from wealth. His initial course at Cambridge was marked by dissipation until he found his way to a higher calling. I thought you might be interested in his views."

Mr. Simeon, a former senior fellow at King's College at Cambridge, held the living at Holy Trinity, one of the parish churches in the town. The fact that he was an evangelical meant his appointment to the office continued to be a controversial one, but he had a large and ardent following among the students, one that grew every year.

The students who belonged to Darcy's set viewed Simeonites with suspicion if not outright hostility. Darcy had little interaction with the Simeonites, who competed with him for top honours but were mostly poor. Nevertheless, he found them interesting. Two of the four students generally considered to be in the running for the senior wranglership were Simeonites. They were part of a close-knit but friendly group, meeting Fridays and Saturdays at Mr. Simeon's home, and their interactions with each other were marked by warmth and a joyful sense of belonging. Sometimes Darcy envied them.

Where was the harm? But it still took him two days to work up the nerve to walk to town for the evening service.

As soon as he entered the church, he regretted making the attempt. He had deliberately chosen to arrive just as service began and slip in the back to avoid notice, but it was impossible. His presence was marked by those sitting nearby, and he could see the whispers and curious gazes as the news spread throughout the congregation. Every few minutes, dozens of heads swivelled backward to look at him and he could read eagerness in their glances. He saw divinity students among them who had inquired about the availability of his family's livings. He also recalled a dinner he had attended at the house of a nobleman and church patron who had commented that the evangelicals sought parish livings to make inroads on Anglican power. "They will not establish a berth through me," the peer had said.

The service had started with songs and Mr. Simeon had not yet begun his sermon. As the songs drew to a close, Darcy stood up and quietly left. Here was no comfort and solution either.

***

For the next few days, he avoided his friends. With Wickham this was easy as the desire seemed to be mutual. But on Thursday, he was accosted by Seton after morning chapel.

"Darcy, my boy," he said. "We see nothing of you. Yesterday we went to Chesterton for billiards but could not find you anywhere."
"I was in the library," he said shortly, scrutinizing Seton. Wickham had said that Seton, too, had partaken of young girls at Barnwell. He had implied that Seton had led the way. Was it true? He could tell nothing from his countenance. It was friendly and congenial as always.

"Oh. Well, we are planning another excursion to London, so put your books aside for a day or two."

"No, I cannot. Go without me."

"Go without you? What is going on, Darcy? Are you cutting us?"

Seton looked so dismayed that Darcy softened.

"No, Seton. But I have fallen behind in my studies and Dr. Milner is concerned."

"Is that all?" Seton looked relieved. "You will soon remedy that. You have been fagging all week and need a distraction. Come with us. Do you not wish to ensure that Potts and Miss Joye are meeting their end of the bargain to stay away?"

Darcy gave him a small smile. "You do it for me."

"And what about your girl? My sweet lass in Town writes that she has been asking after you. You must have shown her a bang-up time."

His smile faded. "No. I do not think that is a good idea."

"Oh, no? Well, look, you do not have to settle on her. You can have any of them - my girl says they are all fighting over you now. Or we can find you some fresh talent. Something younger and prettier. Whatever you like."

Darcy shook his head and began walking. Seton walked with him. "Darcy."

Darcy stopped but did not look at Seton. Seton stepped in front and faced him, looking at him hard. "Lamb said he heard you went to Holy Trinity. Is it true?"

Darcy looked at him then. "What if it is?" He replied defensively.

"You are not turning Methodist on me, are you?"

"No, I only wished to see what it was like."

"It is all wrong, Darcy. I like Saint Simeon myself, but his preachy proselytes I dislike indiscriminately. I know you have pretensions of being a reading man, but they will turn you into a tea drinker."

"I must go, Seton. Sorry."

Darcy walked away, too swiftly for Seton to stay with him. Seton did not try, but only stood staring after his friend in angry bewilderment.

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**Footnotes:**

1. Period lingo:

Fagging - studying or working very hard. Used as such, there was no derogatory connotation whatsoever.
In the gun - drunk. A gun was a vessel used for ale at the universities.

Reading man - A serious student who vied for academic honours. Most of Cambridge's sizars (i.e., subsidized students who had to perform various labours for their keep) were reading men for obvious reasons.

Non-reading man - A student who attended mainly to form connexions, enjoy himself or because he had nothing better to do. Wealthy and titled students at Cambridge tended to be non-reading men, and in Alma Mater: Seven Years at the University of Cambridge by a Trinity-Man, published 1827, author and journalist J.M.F. Wright warned parents not to enroll their sons as privileged fellow-commoners even if they could afford it because it would inevitably lead to debauchery and dissipation.

Senior wrangler - The top dozen students of Cambridge's undergraduate math course, the mathematical tripos, were called "wranglers," and the #1 math student (who was also considered Cambridge's top student of the year) was called the "senior wrangler." It was an enormous honour that garnered national and international recognition, with the student's name published in the newspapers and yearly almanacs and all manner of opportunity opened to him.

Seniority - Trinity College's governing body, comprised of the Master of the College (Dr. Mansel at this time) and Trinity's 8 senior fellows. They made decisions on expulsion and rustication.

Sporting the oak - door closed. The student apartments around Trinity College's two courts had oak doors.

2. This is before the period of inter-varsity sports. The biggest pissing match was between the university's students, who considered themselves fine and learned gentlemen, and the young men of the town, who were referred to as "gentlemen" for cricket purposes, but were mostly working men.

3. "As Oyster Nan stood by her tub," is one of the broadside ballads collected by writer and wit Thomas d'Urfey in Wit and Mirth, or Pills to Purge Melancholy, published in six volumes 1719-1720. A broadside ballad was a song or story printed on a single broadsheet, usually with illustration, which became cheap, popular and ubiquitous following the establishment of the printing press. The full song of "Oyster Nan" can be read and heard here: mp3/1700s/1720ca-1995_pills_to_purge_melancholy_city_waits_(CD)/04_as_oyster_nan_stood_by_her_

4. Darcy makes a moral, not a legal, argument. The common law age of consent in this period was 12, the same age a girl was considered marriageable with the consent of her parents. However, that did not mean such a girl was deemed incapable of consent, but rather that it was possible for her to prove rape without having to show she had resisted to the limit of her capacity (e.g., by demonstrating serious injury). The statutory age of consent, below which a girl was deemed incapable of consent even if outwardly willing, was 10. In practice, age was often hard to prove considering the frequent absence of birth records, and poor people could not afford the money to launch a private prosecution. There was no state prosecutor at this time.

5. Venereal disease was a pressing concern at the time, and some men favoured young girls not because they were pedophiles, but because they believed them more likely to be disease-free. Some also believed that sex with a virgin could be a curative for venereal disease and an option when the expensive medical treatments (which were of questionable effectiveness) could not be afforded. In one famous case in the 18th Century that led to minor reform, a man repeatedly assaulted his landlady's young child, leaving her diseased and traumatized, because of his venereal disease and inability to pay for a cure.

6. Trinity College, the largest of Cambridge's 17 colleges at the turn of the century, consisted of
Great Court and Nevile's Court, which were connected and completely enclosed by walls that contained student housing and other apartments. Entrance to the courtyards was via two main gates manned by porters who monitored students' comings and goings. However, period prints and caricatures frequently showed students breaking the rules by climbing or smuggling women in through the windows of their apartments.

7. By law, a person was always entitled to relief and assistance from the parish of their birth. Such protections were increasingly lost as the population became more unsettled and itinerant in the 18th and 19th Century.

8. Birth control methods in the period included preservatives aka "armour" or "cundums" made of sheep's gut scraped thin, abortifacients and other preventative potions, and sponges and the withdrawal method. However, preservatives were very expensive (many more times expensive than the cost of a sexual encounter with a street prostitute), abortifacients were dangerous and potentially deadly, and the use of the sponge and withdrawal methods was apparently not well-known until radical publisher Richard Carlile published his explosive 1826 best-seller Every Woman's Book or What is Love?: Containing the Most Prudent Regulation of the Principle of Love and the Number of Family.

9. According to the famous courtesan Harriette Wilson, Lord Melbourne took offence when Wilson would not accept Lord Melbourne's tall and handsome son Frederick as a lover, and demanded that Wilson give Frederick a chance. At the time of the incident, a teenaged Wilson was living with the Earl of Craven as his mistress, a fact that Jane Austen made allusion to in a letter to her sister Cassandra. I am not suggesting that Lord Melbourne would believe his youngest son, while still a student in university, should have a claim to the sexual favours of the most desirable courtesans, but he probably would have wanted his son to at least be granted access to their salons.

10. Dr. Isaac Milner (1750-1820) was a famous mathematician, inventor and senior wrangler in his student days at Cambridge, which he entered as a sizar. He was responsible for the religious conversion of William Wilberforce in 1785 and aided him in his fight against slavery, and is credited with leading the evangelical revival at Cambridge during the Regency alongside the famous evangelical Charles Simeon. Nevertheless, he never formally parted ways with the Anglican fold.

11. Charles Simeon (1759-1836) was a younger son of a prosperous professional Anglican family, who experienced a religious conversion as a student at Cambridge. He eschewed his father's ambitions for him to accept the curacy of Holy Trinity in the town of Cambridge in 1783. It was a poorly paid position, but through it, the extremely popular Simeon went on to wield enormous influence over generations of Cambridge students and thence to the whole of England. The Gradus ad Cantabrigiam, a dictionary of Cambridge slang published in 1803, defined "Simeonites" as "disciples and followers of the reverend and pious Charles Simeon, M.A. Fellow of King's College."

12. It was true that evangelicals were eager to obtain church livings, though their professed motivation was not power, wealth or influence, but rather to spread the word of God. Simeon used the money from his own inheritance to augment a trust designed for the purchase of livings for evangelical clergy, which was established in his name in 1813.

13. One could be evangelical either within the Anglican church, or outside of it by joining one of the non-conformist religions such as Methodism. Evangelicalism in that time did not refer to a specific religion, but rather a more serious and sincere approach to religion, often combined with progressive goals such as the abolition of slavery, education of the masses and assistance of the poor and vulnerable. Evangelicals also sought moral reform and promoted a view of family and marriage that we would now consider traditional and conservative (but in those debauched and grasping times was seen as radical and innovative).
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