Contradictions and Varieties

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

As she threw a retrospective glance over the whole of their acquaintance, so full of contradictions and varieties, she sighed at the perverseness of those feelings which would now have promoted its continuance, and would formerly have rejoiced in its termination. -- *Pride and Prejudice*, Ch 46
Chapter 1

On the third morning of their stay at Lambton, Elizabeth and her uncle and aunt set off for a walk through Lambton. They walked very slowly, and though she enjoyed her aunt's pleasure at old, familiar sights and recollections, she found herself growing a little impatient.

They had not gone very far when Mrs Gardiner happened across an old friend of hers, a Mrs Williams. After the obligatory meetings, Elizabeth asked and received leave to visit the nearby shop, Mortimer's.

'Mr Mortimer is a very pleasant, obliging man,' Mrs Williams said in her clear piping voice. This turned out to be the case; it was a neat, prosperous place, and the proprietor diffidently asked if he could be of service. She turned a bright smile on him.

'I hope so. I have four sisters and I need gifts for them all.'

He gave a soft, whispery sort of chuckle, and guided her to where an array of beautiful ribbons were kept. 'Smith has some pretty, inexpensive jewellery,' he added.

She was absorbed in her examination of the ribbons for some five minutes, quite oblivious to the silent customer who was himself turning different ribbons over in his fingers; only the elegant hands, familiar from more scrutiny than she would care to admit, finally alerted her to his presence.

Elizabeth started and dropped her selection. 'Mr Darcy!' 'Miss Bennet.' He managed to retrieve the ribbons and execute a polite bow at the same time. She was not certain how he managed it, but after all she had long been convinced that contradictory behaviour was perfectly natural to him. 'I hope you have been enjoying your walk?'

'Yes, very much,' she said absently. After hours of reflection, she had discovered something that had never before crossed her mind - that whatever her feelings were or might become, she liked him. Despite everything she liked being near him and she liked talking to him and she liked the way he listened to everything she said with the closest attention, as if preparing to pass it down with all the éclat of a proverb. The old fascinated dislike had not vanished but rather transmuted into interest of a friendlier nature. Determined to conquer the awkward, near-impassable gulf between them, she said in a lively tone, 'Are you considering some frivolous accoutrements, sir? If I may offer my opinion, red is a garish colour on most people; I should not attempt it were I you.'

He stared at the scarlet ribbons in his hand, then his lips twitched. 'Thank you for the advice, Miss Bennet. Do you have any suggestions -- for my sister?'

'I am very fond of yellow,' she said, smiling. 'It is a wonderfully cheerful colour. But not for Miss Darcy. She has such remarkably fine eyes, I think something bolder -- green or blue, or perhaps violet -- would suit her best.' She selected several of those colours and deposited them in his hand with a flourish.

Darcy was silent for a moment, then coloured, coughed, and said in a rather choked voice, 'Thank you.'

They made their purchases and walked out as Darcy haltingly inquired after her aunt and uncle.

'Oh, they are just outside, Mrs Gardiner was talking to an -- ' She stopped, looking around. The Gardiners were both gone, though Mrs Williams remained.
'Oh, Miss Bennet!' she cried, 'Miranda asked me to tell you that she and Mr Gardiner have . . . have . . .' She stared at Elizabeth's companion. 'Why, Mr Darcy, sir!' 

'Good morning, Mrs Williams,' he replied. Elizabeth was amused to see a dozen transformations take place, each quite small, nearly insignificant and the general effect quite dramatic. He straightened to his full height, his complexion recovered its customary pallor, his usual sedateness conquered his expression, and unconsciously, it seemed, a note of quiet authority entered his voice. It was salutary, she thought, to remember that however out of his element in a ballroom, however uneasy with her he might be, this was his true, natural self.

'You were telling Miss Bennet where her aunt and uncle have gone?' Darcy was saying.

'Oh! yes, yes, of course, sir. She told me to tell you, miss, that she was a little faint and your uncle took her home. What a gentleman he is, ma'am!' Elizabeth smiled. 'Thank you, Mrs Williams.'

'May I escort you ho -- to the inn?' Darcy inquired hurriedly, reverting to the half-awkward, half-eager suitor she had almost grown accustomed to. Six months could pass and nothing happen; three days, and whatever did happen, certainly it was impossible that anything could be the same.

'Yes, thank you,' she said, with a smile. He seemed to recover himself to a degree, and carried his side of the conversation with poise if not élan.

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When Darcy and Elizabeth returned to the inn, the latter was for a moment discomposed. How would it appear to them? Would it be enough to justify enquiry? Despite her open and unaffected manners she had always been intensely private, she had no desire to explain the tangled web that was her perverse and contrary relationship with Darcy. Yet she wanted to know their opinion of him, she wanted - she wanted them to approve of him as much as the reverse.

'Will you come in, sir?' she enquired, her tone gentler than it had ever been with him.

To her astonishment, he politely declined. 'My guests will undoubtedly be wondering where I have gone,' he explained; 'please give my regards to your aunt and uncle.'

'Of course,' she said, suddenly horrified at the idea that her vanity might have led her astray again, that she might have completely misread his attentions. She extended her hand without knowing quite what she did; to her relief and disappointment, he merely pressed it with his own and took his leave. Elizabeth stared after him, aware as she had never been of his tall, upright figure; but he never looked back.

After a moment she recollected herself, colouring very deeply as she walked into their rooms. Mr Gardiner could not be seen, but Mrs Gardiner was lying on a sofa, looking pale and faint. Everything else fled her mind and she sprang forward, crying with more feeling than politeness, 'Good God! what is the matter? My dear aunt, you are -- excuse me, but you are very ill. Is there nothing you could take? A glass of wine;--shall I get you one? Where is my uncle?'

Mrs Gardiner laughed weakly. 'Lizzy, do not distress yourself, I am not ill. In fact this is an encouraging sign.'

Elizabeth stared a moment, then all the pieces fell together - the shortened trip, Mrs Gardiner so easily exhausted at Pemberley, her faintness today. 'Aunt, are you -'
'Miranda, here is your, er, this,' Mr Gardiner said with perfectly good cheer as he walked in. 'Ah, Lizzy, there you are. I thought I heard your voice downstairs. Did you find someone interesting to talk to?'

'I . . .' She flushed a bright red, and dropped her eyes. 'I, er, Mr Darcy was good enough to accompany me back to the inn.'

The Gardiners, excellent people that they were, did nothing to betray the curiosity they undoubtedly felt.

'I see,' said her uncle.

Mrs Gardiner sat up, some colour entering her pallid cheeks, and with her husband's support made her way to a chair, beginning to eat the meal before her. 'That was very kind of him,' she said mildly.

Elizabeth managed to smile. 'Yes, it was.'

'I like your Mr Darcy a great deal, Lizzy,' Mr Gardiner said with his usual forthright frankness.

'Oh, do you?' Without caring to examine the feeling too deeply, she was pleased at her uncle's approbation.

'He seems a very clever, sensible sort of man, - and confident enough not to be distressed by the existence of other clever, sensible people, which is less common than one might suppose.'

'Yes, I - I always noticed that.' Elizabeth belatedly realised what he had said. 'He is not mine, sir.'

'Very lord of the manor, but that is to be expected,' Mr Gardiner continued.

'Really?' Elizabeth looked up at him. 'I did not notice that at all.'

'A bit understated, of course, but there is a very definite sort of gravitas in his manner - not at all unnatural or affected, mind you, though perhaps a little unwieldy in so young a man.'

'He is much younger than I expected,' Mrs Gardiner added. 'Do you know his age, Lizzy? I cannot think him thirty.'

'No; six- or seven-and-twenty, I should think. He did say, once, that his sister is over ten years his junior, and I know Miss Darcy is sixteen.'

'Sixteen! I should not have guessed it. She has a very womanly appearance, does she not?'

Despite her eagerness for their approval - no, she reminded herself, their opinions - Elizabeth was quite glad to hear the conversation changed. Mrs Gardiner remained unwell for most of the day, and her niece retreated to her own room early that evening.

Her head was full of him when she went to bed, but she did not toss and turn as she had the night before. Instead she slept almost from the moment her head hit the pillow.

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Elizabeth knew perfectly well that Mr Bingley and his relations were only part of a larger party, but even so she was startled to find seven or eight unfamiliar people when they arrived at Pemberley. Mr Darcy performed a long list of introductions from where he stood by his sister, and Elizabeth surmised that the company entirely consisted of a few friends and assorted hangers-on of
the Miss Bingley variety.

Elizabeth found herself near some wealthy cousins of Mrs Annesley's and Mr Howard, a poor relation of Darcy's -- or at least what passed for poor among this lot. Darcy himself was almost as far from her as could be imagined, which at least spared her a degree of anxiety - yet she found herself more disappointed than anything, and when she thought the others inattentive she often stole glances at him. Once or twice he looked in her direction, but no more, and in general he seemed in high spirits and talked with more animation than she had ever before thought him capable of.

'I understand you are from Hertfordshire, Miss Bennet?' Mr Howard inquired. He was about forty and very handsome, though with his warm dark colouring and easy charm not at all like his cousins.

'Yes, I am. My father's estate is there, about twenty miles from London.'

'A very convenient distance,' he observed. 'I could not imagine living much further from town than that.'

'No, I daresay not,' Lord Annesley said dryly, 'though Miss Darcy might not be in perfect agreement with you - is it not so, Miss Darcy?'

She looked horrified at being spoken to. 'I . . . I am very fond of Pemberley,' she managed. One of Lord Annesley's sisters took pity on her and said,

'Who could not be? I defy anyone to find it less than a piece of perfection - though it is so very far from town.'

Mr Howard laughed. 'I would never dream of defying such a claim, Lady Isabel. I have never seen a place for which nature has done more - and where man has had the good taste not to interfere!'

'I thought very nearly the same thing when I first saw it, though that was only four days ago,' Elizabeth replied.

'Should you care to always live near town, Miss Bennet?' another of Lord Annesley's sisters inquired.

'No,' Elizabeth said instantly, then blushed, not daring to meet Miss Darcy's mild blue eyes, and said, 'That is, I have no great attachment to the city, except in that it allows me to spend time with my aunt and uncle.'

'They seem a charming couple,' Mr Howard said. 'Their house is on Gracechurch Street, I believe?'

'Yes,' said Elizabeth. She glanced towards Darcy. He was standing, his arms folded, and for a moment turned his head aside, looking utterly exasperated before he regained his countenance. Somehow the crack in his relentless good breeding was more endearing than anything else had been, and the sheer familiarity of it inspired a rush of affection, not because he was good or admirable or noble, though he was, but because he was him.

To her horror, he chose to glance up at her from across the room right then; his expression turned quizzical but a half-unconscious smile pulled at the corners of his mouth even as he turned back to his own companions. Elizabeth came back to herself with a start, and very much hoped her brief preoccupation had gone unnoticed. The others seemed involved in a conversation, except for Miss Darcy and Lady Sophia Annesley. The former's thoughts were as undetectable as ever, but the latter smiled at her with a hint of mischief.
'Miss Bennet, will you not take a turn about the room with me? It is very refreshing.'

Elizabeth's eyes danced as she remembered a similar application, and by the sudden elevation of her nose, so did Miss Bingley. 'Thank you, your ladyship,' she said, and joined her. It was in fact pleasant to stretch her legs after sitting so long. She was beginning to determine not to fix her eyes on Darcy when her companion said,

'Forgive me, Miss Bennet, but have you known the Darcys long?'

'Miss Darcy I have known scarcely four days,' Elizabeth replied, amused by the other's clear curiosity and complete lack of penitence, 'but Mr Darcy and I have been acquainted since last October. Mr Bingley rented an estate very near my father's.'

'Oh, Mr Bingley. That explains it,' said the lady. At Elizabeth's look she added, 'We do not really move in the same circles, except when Mr Darcy brings him along, of course.'

Elizabeth glanced at Bingley, who was being his usual amiable, agreeable self. 'It is a very singular friendship.'

'Oh yes; surely two more dissimilar men never existed. My brother simply detests the whole lot of them, though he is great friends with Mr Darcy. He is frightfully proud.' She directed an affectionate smile in Lord Annesley's direction.

'You are very fond of your brother, Lady Sophia?'

'I am. He is a very fine man, flaws and all. Why, if he had not written to Mr Darcy, I can hardly think where poor Jane would have gone!'

Elizabeth's mind instantly leapt to her own Jane. Why were there no letters? She bit her lip. 'Miss Bennet? Are you quite well?'

'Oh - yes, of course. I was only reminded of my sister Jane. I have yet to hear from her.'

'Perhaps she has fallen violently in love with somebody. There is no one like a lover for a dilatory correspondent.'

Elizabeth smiled, but with Mr Bingley in the corner of her eye said quietly, 'I do not think so.'

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Elizabeth and Sophia's conversation had moved to more cheerful subjects, and both young ladies were well on their way to being very pleased with themselves and each other when a manservant came for Mr Darcy. He excused himself, but after a very few minutes, both Elizabeth and the Gardiners were sent for.

Whatever irritation she might have felt at the peremptory command vanished when Darcy said, 'These arrived for you, Miss Bennet; your maid sent the post on.'

Sarah, of course, knew perfectly well of Elizabeth's anxiety over Jane. 'Oh, thank you!' she cried, eagerly accepting the letters. Jane was instantly forgiven her delinquency; the first had been misdirected. The Gardiners and Darcy both took their leave of her, and Elizabeth began reading the instant their backs were turned. However the latter had just passed the doorway when she gave a very different sort of cry.

Darcy instantly whirled about and was at her side. 'Miss Bennet? what is the matter? I beg your
pardon, but you are very ill. Is there nothing you could take, to give you present relief? A glass of wine?"

The similarity to the earlier scene at the inn struck her, but there was no happy cause to explain this away. 'No, I thank you,' she said, attempting to regain her composure. 'Where is my uncle? I must speak to him!' She tried to rise, but her legs trembled beneath her, and she would have undoubtedly fallen but for Darcy, who sprang up and supported her entire frame, his arm against her waist in utter disregard for the proprieties he usually deemed of such importance.

'Miss Bennet, you cannot go yourself - Lucy!' A passing maid stared at them in utter astonishment. 'Fetch Mr and Mrs Gardiner, they were returning to the saloon. Hurry!'

She scurried away and Darcy helped Elizabeth to a chair, which she sank onto gratefully, looking miserably ill. 'Forgive me, but is there anything I may do for you? You cannot be well, - '

'No, sir, I am, I am quite well. I am only distressed by some dreadful news which I have just received from Longbourn.' She burst into tears as she alluded to it.

Darcy murmured something indistinct. Elizabeth's spirits had never been so depressed in her life, and after a moment of incoherent thought, she blurted out, 'Jane says - it is such dreadful news. It cannot be concealed from anyone. My youngest sister has left all her friends - has eloped; - has thrown herself into the power of - of Mr Wickham.' She could hear him catch his breath, and did not dare meet his gaze, certain of the censure she would find there. 'They are gone off together from Brighton. You know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him to - she is lost forever.'

He was absolutely motionless at her side, his breathing harsh and loud in the silent room.

'When I consider that I could have prevented it! - I who knew what he was.'

'Lizzy?' Mrs Gardiner, her husband just behind her, hurried towards her. 'Lizzy, what is it? Are you unwell?'

'No, no - ' She finally dared to look at Darcy, kneeling beside her, and was astonished to see undisguised compassion in his eyes. Without quite knowing what she did, she grasped his wrist and said, 'Lydia and Wickham left Brighton together on Sunday night, and were traced almost to London, but not beyond; they are certainly not gone to Scotland.'

'Scotland?' Mr Gardiner exclaimed. 'And what has been done, what has been attempted, to recover her?'

Elizabeth felt Darcy's icy skin beneath her fingers, and flinched back, wrapping her arms about herself. 'My father is gone to London,' she said numbly, 'and Jane has written to beg your immediate assistance, and we shall be off, I hope, in half an hour. But nothing can be done; I know very well that nothing can be done. How is such a man to be worked on? How are they even to be discovered? I have not the smallest hope. It is every way horrible!'

They all seemed to agree upon this point. Darcy retreated some distance away, walking up and down the room with an expression quite beyond even his usual gravity. Elizabeth immediately understood it. Whatever his feelings had been, whatever his affection for her, nothing could withstand this. Perhaps, even if it had been any other man - but Wickham! The decision, which her fancy had told her was solely her own, was taken out of her hands; his objections at Hunsford must be increased twentyfold, his own judgment more devastatingly accurate than even he had guessed. What man of the merest respectability would have anything to do with them now? She had no fear.
of it spreading further through his means, but what did that signify? She would rather anybody know than him. What it meant she was not certain, but she knew with absolutely certainty that she could have loved him.

Mr Gardiner, his brow contracted, seemed entirely caught up in his niece's feelings, but Mrs Gardiner, though embracing a tearful Elizabeth, could not keep herself from staring at their host. Darcy hastily collected himself, speaking in a tone of mingled compassion and restraint. 'I am afraid you have been long desiring my absence, nor have I anything to plead in excuse of my stay, but real, though unavailing, concern. Would to heaven that anything could be either said or done on my part, that might offer consolation to such distress! -But I will not torment you with vain wishes, which may seem purposely to ask for your thanks. I shall tell the others that urgent business calls us home immediately.'

'Oh, yes. Be so kind as to apologise for us to Miss Darcy - conceal the unhappy truth as long as it is possible. - I know it cannot be long.'

'You may depend upon my secrecy.' He hesitated, then added, 'I am very sorry, and I hope there may be a happier conclusion to this affair than there seems, at present, reason to hope.' With one serious, parting look, he went away.

Elizabeth turned her face away, into her aunt's shoulder, and broke into fierce and renewed sobs.
Elizabeth and Darcy walked together, each overwhelmed by the same curious, contradictory feelings — familiarity and estrangement, ease and anxiety, comfort and misery. Kitty, thankfully, had escaped to Lucas Lodge, her general curiosity unable to compete with her fear of Darcy.

The silence was not altogether awkward. It was a beautiful day, the autumn sunshine illuminating the red-gold leaves all about them, and after everything that had happened, Elizabeth felt almost peaceful, even content. For weeks she had longed for the smallest scrap of news, strained to catch the unspoken sound of his name, been left bereft of that much, let alone anything more. To walk beside him, to feel alarm at his thinness, to notice the glints of red in his dark hair, it was beyond not only expectation but hope.

At first, she had not really believed herself in love with Darcy. She felt a certain affection, of course, admiration and respect and esteem, but so much of it was caught up in his feelings that she knew neither what to think or feel herself. Yet he had always been capable of commanding her attention, far more than any other person she had ever known. She had felt it even when she disliked him, always aware of him, his presence filling her mind so that every thought, somehow, led back to him. That, though, it was — she did not know what it was, but she knew it was not love, not anything like it.

Then, at Pemberley and Lambton, it was as if she only began to fit the pieces together, to bring that peculiar intimacy with his ways to her newer knowledge of him, pulling it all together to form a single coherent picture. It was still vague, she did not — she knew him, and yet she did not. She realised, when he left her in the parlour, that she would have liked the chance to know him better, that she could have loved him, that she grieved to see him leave, that it had comforted her to have him near in that first dreadful moment. Still, she did not think that love, either.

Yet it must have been, for when she next examined her feelings, she found that her cautious approval had somehow given way to a quiet, fierce passion. She had not seen him in that time, spoken to him, so much as heard his name, yet she had fallen in love with this complex, headstrong, infuriating man, while separated by several counties. It was, she supposed, a natural progression of their perverse and unpredictable courtship. Her feelings had rushed heedlessly ahead, and her rational mind could comprehend them only when he seemed irrevocably lost to her.

Elizabeth cast a quick, sideways glance at him. She had truly despaired of ever again setting eyes on him, until she heard that Bingley had returned to Netherfield. Then they were at Longbourn, Bingley talking away, Mrs Bennet beaming, and Darcy reverting back to the icily correct reserve of the winter before. Elizabeth could scarcely believe that, only a few weeks before, she had longed only to hear something of him, anything, and thought she could be content with that. It was not even enough to be in the same room; she was furious at the other young ladies for preventing him from seating himself near her, at the guests for wanting coffee, at her mother for consigning him to another whist table, and at herself for being so silly! She was really persuaded that events were hastening towards the same vexatious conclusions of December and April and August.

Yet now, with the announcement of Jane and Bingley's engagement, she knew otherwise — knew it inevitable that she and Darcy should be often together, as they were at this very moment.

Elizabeth gathered her courage, for before anything else, this must be said. 'Mr Darcy,' she began, her voice, his name, falling awkwardly into the silence.

He turned to her, looking quizzical, and she rushed ahead:
'I am a very selfish creature; and for the sake of giving relief to my own feelings, care not how much I may be wounding yours. I can no longer help thanking you for your unexampled kindness to my poor sister. Ever since I have known of it, I have been most anxious — ' her voice broke, a little — 'to acknowledge to you how gratefully I feel it. Were it known to the rest of my family, I should not have merely my own gratitude to express.'

Darcy's usual impenetrable composure failed him at this. 'I am sorry, exceedingly sorry,' he exclaimed, 'that you have ever been informed of what may, in a mistaken light, have given you uneasiness.'

Elizabeth blinked. She had felt many things upon receiving intelligence of his part in the affair, but uneasiness was certainly not among them.

'I did not think Mrs Gardiner was so little to be trusted,' he added. She flinched.

'You must not blame my aunt,' she cried, remembering the fond approval with which Mrs Gardiner had written of him. 'Lydia's thoughtlessness first betrayed to me that you had been concerned in the matter; and, of course, I could not rest till I knew the particulars.' She could see his emotion quiet at this, so she forged ahead, her voice trembling: 'Let me thank you again and again, in the name of all my family, for that generous compassion which induced you to take so much trouble, and bear so many mortifications, for the sake of discovering them.'

She knew, without an understanding of why or how, that that part of it, the necessary dealings in bribery and corruption, had been infinitely more painful for him than his meetings with the Gardiners, with Lydia, even with Wickham himself.

Darcy turned a little away, his fair skin reddening — though whether at past or present embarrassments, she could not have said. 'Miss Bennet, I . . . you are very kind, but no gratitude is necessary on your family's behalf, or your own. I sought only — ' he hesitated, then cleared his throat — 'I sought to correct my own error, to remedy an evil which my pride, my reserve, had brought about.'

From Mrs Gardiner's letter, she knew already of his sense of culpability in the affair, and she did not doubt the information from either source. His scrupulous, liberal character provided all the necessary explanation, and if he felt some remaining partiality for her — well, it could only add force to the other inducements which led him on. Peculiarly, she felt neither slighted nor disappointed, as she might have at some earlier juncture, but instead indignant that anyone should blame him for Wickham's perfidy, even himself. Were his debts in Lambton also your error, sir? she longed to ask, his attempt on your sister? His other misdeeds? How is any of this your fault? Why are you his keeper?

Her eyes blazed as they lifted to meet his, though she spoke in a tolerably disengaged tone. 'I hope, Mr Darcy, that you will forgive me if I continue to blame my wayward brother-in-law for his own want of principle and vicious conduct.'

Darcy's mouth twitched. 'I am sure you do not require forgiveness for such reasonable feelings,' he said, clasping his hands behind his back. After a moment of silence, he went on, 'Pardon me, but may I enquire if my aunt has recently called on you?'

Elizabeth blinked. 'Lady Catherine?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, I . . . no, she has not.' Still bewildered, she asked, 'Did she intend to call on me? Is there a
reason that she should do so?'

'None whatsoever,' he said, with a look of relief, and frowned at Bingley, who was walking some distance ahead, to all appearances about to embrace a very willing Jane.

Their scandalised voices rang out in unison.

'Bingley!'

'Jane!'

The conversation soon shifted to more neutral topics — the weather, and places they had seen, and the health of their assorted relations. Cordiality and friendliness, it seemed, were a far greater challenge than veiled barbs and cold reserve.

Then, with an abrupt vivid clarity, Elizabeth remembered the Netherfield ball, and she turned to him with a bright smile. 'What think you of books?'

Darcy tilted his head. 'Do you speak of all books, or of specific titles?'

'Oh, particular ones, to be certain. Miss Bingley, you recall, informed us of your general fondness for them — and the size of your library — last year at Netherfield.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I remember. I did not know that you did.'

Elizabeth chose not to inform him that she remembered every conversation in which his existence was so much as alluded to, but amused herself by imagining his likely reaction if she had. Instead she remarked, 'I suppose you never read novels.'

'You would be incorrect. I — prefer to ascertain that my sister's reading material is suitable.'

Elizabeth suppressed a smile. 'Oh? And what was the last novel you found suitable for your sister?'

'Self-Control, by Mrs Brunton.'

'Oh, I read that last year. What did you think of it?'

'I do not know whether Laura's passage down the American river is not the most natural, possible, everyday thing she does.'

'It seems I was mistaken, Mr Darcy,' cried Elizabeth, laughing, 'for plainly we have read some of the same books with the same feelings.'

Darcy smiled. 'I am delighted to hear it.'

The following day, Bingley proposed a walk to Oakham Mount, waxing enthusiastic over a view he had never seen. Nobody was deceived, but all looked on him with a sort of affectionate indulgence and assented to the plan. Therefore his friend and prospective sister once again found themselves free to wander at their leisure, and spared the society so little pleasing to both.

For a few awkward moments, neither could think of anything to say. They could only trail behind Jane and Bingley, their usual brisk strides slowing as they created a discreet distance between themselves and the engaged pair.

Finally, Darcy continued her practice of replacing past conversations with more promising versions. 'Bingley seems very fortunate in his choice of a wife.'
Elizabeth beamed. 'Jane insists all the good fortune is her own,' she said, 'but I must agree with you.'

'Miss Bennet, I believe, shares Bingley's modesty to an extraordinary degree.'

'They share many qualities to an extraordinary degree, though certainly not all.'

'That is fortunate,' said Darcy, a shadow flitting across his face as he glanced at his friend.

Elizabeth shifted. The realisation that often she had not the slightest idea what was passing in his mind was an uncomfortable one. 'Perhaps some small differences of disposition and genius are for the better,' she finally offered.

'It is possible to be too similar,' he agreed; 'to share and exacerbate one another's weaknesses, rather than elevating the characters of both parties. Such is not the case with Bingley and Miss Bennet, of course; your sister strikes me as very steadfast, very firm where she feels herself to be right.'

'That is an excellent description of Jane,' Elizabeth said, struck by the truth of it, and gave him a warm look. 'Truly, though, I cannot understand a desire for perfect accord in every thought and quality. I should find it quite tiresome, I am sure.'

He turned startled eyes to her, unable to miss the open friendliness in her face. He smiled. 'Yes, I daresay you would.'

They shifted to lighter, more trivial topics, matters of such supreme insignificance that Bingley and Jane managed to steal several embraces without being observed, let alone reprimanded. Some hours passed without notice, at least on Elizabeth's and Darcy's parts — they felt they could have wandered together for hours more, despite their friends' exhaustion, and returned to Longbourn with a considerable degree of reluctance.

Later that evening, Elizabeth sat at her window, heart and head full as she unfolded a worn and creased letter. They had talked and talked, of nothing and everything, of all but that which they most longed to say. The contrast between her open frankness and his stately reserve had never signified less; the longer their erratic, incoherent conversation went on, the better she understood his oblique replies — not springing, as she had once believed, from indifference or disapproval, but rather from that singular sense of intimacy, even affinity, between them. Despite everything that remained unsaid and unspeakable, only they two knew all that had occurred, keeping each other's secrets even when they thought to never meet again. Moreover, they had almost always spoken in that way, never saying exactly what was meant, yet expecting to be understood all the same. Only at Hunsford had they been really forthright.

She glanced down at it. The words she had tried to overlook, at the time, seemed now imprinted on her mind — not the plain recital of events, but the flashes of bitterness, hauteur, regret, charity. In recent weeks, she had found herself turning again and again to the evidence that once, at least, he had loved her, as much as any man could, with that rational passionate feeling which seemed so peculiar to him and his nature.

*If your abhorrence of me should make my assertions valueless* -- Elizabeth shut her eyes. She would not take it back, not everything, but -- women who tormented respectable men she had always believed unworthy of anything better than contempt. She had not thought him respectable, or she would never have spoken as she had, no matter how tactlessly he talked of what she already knew. As matters now stood, she could not imagine wishing pain on him, she could not imagine feeling anything less than fury at anyone who did.
She opened her eyes, let them drop to the resigned benediction at the end, his name signed in the painstaking hand she would always recognise, now. It was always a comfort — and today, he had been — not merely pleasant, but — more. She really felt that she had reason to hope, as she had scarcely ever allowed herself to hope before.

'Lizzy?'

'Jane!' She stared at her sister's strained, guilty face. 'Why, Jane, whatever is the matter?'

'I am so sorry, I was so preoccupied with my own happiness that I did not think of you. I must beg your forgiveness, Lizzy. I truly did not mean to be so selfish! I only did not think.'

Elizabeth stared. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Please do not be angry with me, Lizzy,' Jane went on, penitence exuding from every word. 'I shall keep it from happening again, I promise.'

'Jane, what are you speaking of? What I am to forgive you for?'

'I left you alone with him for hours! Yesterday and today. I did not realise — well, I thought Kitty would stay, but today, I knew you would have to endure his company for all that time and — '

'You are speaking of Mr Darcy, Jane?' Elizabeth said, hiding a smile.

'Of course I am! And I know how much you dislike him — '

Elizabeth drew herself upright. 'You know nothing of the sort,' she said firmly. 'Oh, I know I once did, but that is a very long time ago. I do not at all dislike him, now.'

'But Lizzy,' Jane protested, 'I thought you hated him! You said — and in Kent — and I have never seen you so grave and reserved, as you have been since he returned to the country. I do not understand.'

'I hardly do myself, but I assure you that I certainly do not hate him — indeed, I have long been ashamed of feeling any dislike that could be so called. I did not understand him until . . . well, I did not understand him very well, and now I do, and you must believe that I presently hold him in the highest admiration and esteem.' She gave her sister a sly smile. 'Why, if you and Bingley require it, I could spend hours in his company with no pain whatsoever.'

Jane's face lit up. 'Oh Lizzy, are you certain you do not mind? I have always had an esteem for him, and particularly since — well, he is Bingley's most particular friend, so you are certain to be much thrown together. I would not have you made unhappy.'

'Unhappy? Jane, I can scarcely imagine anything which would make me less so. He is very clever and amuses me a great deal.'

'Oh, I am glad to hear that. Bingley thought something of the sort, you know. He said you seemed quite friendly at Pemberley, but I thought he must have misunderstood.'

Elizabeth flushed. 'Oh! that. No, he — he did not misunderstand. Mr Darcy was very pleasant, very charming, in his way, and I — I suppose I was less determined to be displeased.'

Jane, of course, immediately denied even the possibility of anything such feeling on the part of her beloved sister, but she seemed quite delighted at this development, and not at all suspicious. Soon Darcy had been abandoned and they talked only of Bingley and his endless amiable qualities.
A similar conversation took place at Netherfield, wherein Darcy neither laughed nor smirked in the face of very great temptation. The matter thus settled, Bingley and Jane thought no more of it, and all four walked out almost every day.

Elizabeth half-expected some sort of demand for an explanation, but it never materialised. She and Darcy had clearly been appointed chaperones, their mutual dislike so well-established that no one considered what the charge must entail. They could spend hours together, their intense attention to one another broken only by occasional rebukes to Bingley and Jane, and nobody, not even her father, thought anything of it.

So their season of courtship passed, unobserved, in plain sight. Darcy and Elizabeth talked, of books and philosophy and relations, and later, of more personal matters, eager for any knowledge of each other. They had fallen in love with essentials, with a flash of intelligence and spirit, but knew little more. Darcy heard of her dog, and Elizabeth his cat — each of the solitary, intractable, overindulged children they had been, she climbing trees and he lost in books, both running half-wild over their fathers' estates.

Every day, the wedding drew closer, and though their acquaintance had ripened into friendship, neither had quite the temerity to risk it, just yet, on anything more. This was enough for the present; they were young, beautiful and brilliant, with their lives before them, and they had all the time in the world.
Chapter 3

My dear aunt —

Elizabeth hesitated, then postponed the inevitable, enquiring after her uncle and cousins in minute detail. With a sigh, she set her pen down and looked around the room.

Everybody seemed otherwise occupied, whether by lace, sermons, or cooing at one another, so she allowed herself a speculative glance at Darcy. The narrow confined space of the parlour was exerting its usual influence on him; he had retreated into a cool, stiff reserve, scarcely opening his lips, and then only to utter commonplaces. Presently, he was engaged in the same occupation as Elizabeth herself, the scratching of his pen just audible from across the room.

At that moment — to her acute embarrassment — his eyes jerked up and met hers. They both blushed; Elizabeth returned to her letter and Darcy's quick smile appeared and vanished.

As for Mr Darcy, I am delighted to hear that you think so highly of him, but you must believe that— She paused, knowing that she could not explain how things truly were between them, even if she understood it herself. —You must believe that, dear as his friendship is to me, and I am certain to him, there is not now nor has there been at any time an understanding between us. Moreover, as the wedding will remove him from Hertfordshire, at present there is little prospect of it.

From there, her spirits could only improve, and she wrote of gratitude, of Darcy's virtues and Jane and Bingley's happiness, in her usual style.

#

Mrs Gardiner invited her to London by return of the post.

'I suppose,' said Darcy, in a tone of affected neutrality, 'that you will remain at Longbourn when your sister goes to Netherfield?'

Elizabeth blushed and attempted to look less silly than she felt. 'No, I shall not. The Gardiners, very generously, invited me to stay with them for a time.'

'They seem fond of you.'

'Yes. I really think I have spent as many hours at Gracechurch Street as at Longbourn. I cannot imagine a more affectionate uncle and aunt.'

'Nor I.' At her startled glance, he hurried on, 'That is — they seem excellent people. It was very kind of them to invite me to another dinner.'

'You, sir?'

With far too much composure, he replied, 'I hope my presence will not terribly inconvenience you, Miss Bennet.'

'No, of course not. I only — I thought, from something Mr Bingley said, that you were to return to Pemberley and your sister.'

'He must have been mistaken; my sister is in town even as we speak.' His manner now seemed as
anxious and eager as her own, as it had been in Derbyshire. 'Miss Bennet, I . . .' She could see him swallow. 'I expect we shall meet quite often, unless that would be displeasing to you.'

Without another word, she knew that this was the moment when she would decide their fate, more crucial than another proposal could possibly be. When that came, they would both be expecting his request and her assent; now, however, just enough uncertainty remained that matters could go either way. Elizabeth met his eyes squarely and said, 'I assure you, Mr Darcy, I can hardly imagine anything less so.'

An expression of heartfelt delight lit up his face, becoming it more than anything else could do, and she would not have restrained her own brilliant, laughing smile to save her life.

The last few days in Hertfordshire rushed past in a flurry of preparations and nerves. Then Bingley slid an emerald ring onto Jane's hand — the vicar declared them irrevocably united — and it was done. The wedding breakfast, it seemed, was over almost before it started; Elizabeth stood next to Miss Bingley, both women talking with what seemed perfect amiability.

'What a perfectly lovely couple.'

'Yes,' said Elizabeth, 'I have always thought so.'

'Jane looks positively radiant. She will certainly be a credit to Charles.'

'I have no doubts of that, Miss Bingley.'

After a few strained minutes, they parted with a mutual, if vain, wish of never meeting again.

Some time later, Elizabeth and Darcy bade their farewells with rather more regret and sincerity, though scarcely less discomfort. Their courtship had plainly been so unobtrusive as to escape observation altogether, but surely in a room full of people, someone might see something?

The crowd, however, seemed only to protect them from notice more effectively than perfect solitude could have. Elizabeth slipped over to his side, unnoticed by all but Darcy himself, and one other.

'I believe the time has come, Mr Darcy, to say — au revoir,' she told him, holding out her hand.

Darcy instantly took it, their strong, narrow fingers clasping together. Then, with an intent look, he lifted her hand to his lips, the pressure a bare whisper of touch. Elizabeth caught her breath.

'Au revoir, Miss Bennet,' he said, colour burning into his cheeks. They both smiled as they drifted apart, oblivious to the incredulous pair of eyes fixed on them.

Several days later, at his request, Elizabeth joined her father in his study. She thought nothing of it, at first — these quiet evenings together had once been an almost daily occurrence, and remained frequent even now.

One look at Mr Bennet's grave expression, however, disabused her of any such tranquil expectations. She closed the door and sat down, facing her father with as much calm as she could muster.

'Lizzy,' he said without preamble, 'I will not sport with your patience by prevaricating. Are you out of your senses, to be accepting, nay, encouraging, this — this man's suit? Have you not always
hated him?'

'If you speak of Mr Darcy, no, I have not,' Elizabeth replied, her fingers shaking. Her initial anger had been reasonable enough, but why had she been so determined to build upon it every dislike which could be brought to bear? so determined that everyone should hear and share her feelings? She had never dreamt that the day would come when she would not only regret it, but when she would pin all her hopes of happiness on him. 'I did once, and I am heartily ashamed of it, but it has been many months since I have considered him as the most admirable gentleman of my acquaintance.'

She half-regretted the words within moments of speaking them; they were true, and she would not have taken them back even were it possible, but his mingled pain and astonishment cut her to the quick.

Finally he said: 'Many months, is it? How many, Lizzy?'

'I have not disliked him since April,' she admitted. 'My — more particular regard dates, as far as I can tell, from near the end of July.'

'If you accept him,' he said, 'you will have more fine clothes and fine carriages than Jane, it is true. But will they make you happy?'

Her look spoke for her, far more than the indignant, confused declarations which immediately followed. 'I require nothing more than a competence, sir, you must know that. His — situation has been more of a hindrance than anything else, it does not affect my feelings in the least.'

Mr Bennet sighed. 'Very well. We all know him to be a proud, unpleasant sort of man; but this would be nothing if you really liked him.'

'I do, I do like him,' she cried, wiping tears off her cheeks, 'I love him.'

He stared, then blinked, as if something had caught in his lashes — clearly this intelligence startled and affected him more than anything else had.

Elizabeth continued, her voice rich with feeling: 'Indeed he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable. You do not know what he really is; then pray do not pain me by speaking of him in such terms.'

Mr Bennet met his daughter's blazing eyes, unable to miss the fierce protective affection which had hitherto been extended only to himself and Jane. He knew, then, that she at least believed her feelings to be nothing less than the love of Rosalind and Penelope — almost certainly, she could not be persuaded otherwise. He remembered what it was to be young. Yet the attempt must be made.

'Lizzy,' he said quietly, 'let me advise you to think better of it. I know your disposition. I know you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband, unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery.' She flushed up, whether at the slight to Darcy or true understanding of his meaning.

'I do esteem him,' she said, as earnest and solemn as her lover. 'Papa, you must understand. He is very good, his principles are — humbling, but I do not speak only of that. We . . . I knew, even before I liked him, I knew he was intelligent, but I did not comprehend the depth and breadth of his mind. Except for you, sir, and my uncle and aunt, I never dreamt I might meet someone who
understands me as he does. We have talked and talked and think the same on almost everything, and even when we do not, he debates with me as readily as if I were a man."

'When did you find the opportunity for all this talking?' enquired Mr Bennet.

Elizabeth stared at him. 'Why, when we walked out with Jane and Bingley.'

He closed his eyes. Of course. Of course he had not noticed, had not thought, had not cared. Nearly every day for over a month, his sparkling daughter and a single gentleman had been sent out together, to spend — dear Lord, to spend hours alone together. Anything could have happened — Darcy struck him as more of a prig than a roué, but men would be men and . . . and plainly nothing had happened, except that Lizzy now imagined herself in love with this difficult young man's understanding. Presumably he returned the favour.

Well, there were worse things to fall infatuated with. True cleverness — and he had no great difficulty in supposing Darcy's arrogance to be burdened by a sharp intellect — would not fade, like beauty or good humour. It could neither be learnt nor taken away.

'Mr Darcy, then,' he said, 'is a man with a wit as keen and quick as your own, honour, youth, and an independent fortune.'

'Yes, Papa.'

'Yet your dispositions are unlike. I know how delighted you must feel now — but what will be left of your spirits, your vivacity, after long years at the side of a man so critical and capricious, more interested in his library than in the society of other people?'

'It has done me no harm yet.'

He could hardly restrain a wry smile. 'After a scant two months of friendly intercourse, I should hope not.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Elizabeth, lifting her eyes from her sleeve, 'but I was not speaking of Mr Darcy.'

He drew a sharp breath. 'Shall you see him in London?'

'I expect so. He is on quite friendly terms with my aunt and uncle.'

'The Gardiners like him, do they?' This seemed to reassure him quite as much as anything Elizabeth had said. 'I seem to recall my brother speaking of something of that sort. Well, if you are set on this, I have no more to say.' Then, in a peculiar choked tone, he added, 'I could not have parted with you, my Lizzy, to anyone less worthy.'

Elizabeth flew across the room and embraced him, wishing that this, somehow, could have been less bittersweet, and looking forward to the day when she could tell him all.
Elizabeth entered the Gardiners' house with a light step and a smile, her aunt's enthusiastic welcome brightening her spirits still further.

'Well, Lizzy,' said Mr Gardiner, in his no-nonsense way, 'you look astonishingly well. From your sister's account, we thought you must be wasting away.'

Elizabeth kissed his cheek and laughed. 'Poor Kitty longs for a bit of romantic nonsense in her life. I had a trifling cold, and she imagined it the worst sort of consumption.'

'Trifling, was it? You are too thin and pale still, Lizzy — but we shall cure you. There are to be no fainting heroines in my house. Come, you must eat.'

She did, with a voracious appetite. Shortly afterwards, Mr Gardiner was taken away on business, and Mrs Gardiner turned an expectant look on her.

'My dear Lizzy,' she said, 'we are delighted to see you again. I have so missed your company.'

'And I,' said Elizabeth warmly. 'Jane is only a few miles away, but somehow — it is not the same, I cannot confide in her as I once did. You cannot imagine how I have wished for your good sense and advice, aunt.'

'I hope you know, Lizzy, that you may speak to me on any subject; your confidences will go no further than myself and Mr Gardiner. I will not even speak to him, if you do not wish it.'

Elizabeth hesitated, then smiled with a hint of mischief. 'I am very glad that you are fond of — my Derbyshire friend,' she said, 'for that will make everything so much more pleasant. Otherwise, it would be awkward every time he called.'

'Every time, Lizzy?' Mrs Gardiner achieved an expression of superhuman discretion. 'Shall we see him very often, do you think?'

'Oh, I expect so,' Elizabeth admitted cheerfully. 'He asked if I would mind, and I said — well, I said I should not. I am afraid it did not occur to me to ask your opinion, but you seemed to enjoy his company so much . . .'

'Well, then,' said Mrs Gardiner, 'we must guard him from your uncle.'

'My uncle?'

'Yes, indeed.' She nodded soberly. 'He cannot be trusted with your friend, Lizzy; he will insist upon stealing him away, plying him with wine and talking politics until they are almost too tired to walk. Apparently they share many, if not all, of the same opinions and ideals. Unless we rescue him, I assure you we will see scarcely anything of them — whatever Mr Darcy may wish.'

Elizabeth laughed. 'I shall protect him,' she said.

Several days later, a note from Darcy himself arrived, bearing apologies of a sort. It seemed that he had been entrusted with the care of a cousin — or several; he was not entirely clear on that point. In any case, he asked if the child (or children) would pose too great an inconvenience. If so, naturally he would understand and postpone his call —
'Nonsense,' said Mrs Gardiner aloud, and wrote back. The cousin was perfectly welcome.

Elizabeth knew nothing of this. She had been walking out with the boys and a servant, and a brief misadventure involving an acorn, Neddy's thumb, and a Swiss baker delayed her return. In fact, Darcy's party arrived rather earlier; when she walked in, calling out to Mrs Gardiner, she received no reply.

'My dear aunt, are you — oh!' Elizabeth blinked at Darcy, who was holding a rather bedraggled flower in his hand. He showed not the slightest inclination of giving it to her, though he did spring to his feet. Several children — her other cousins and a fair-haired little girl — were clustered about him.

'Miss Bennet! I — er — Mrs Gardiner, I believe, was called upon to settle a dispute.'

'I see,' said she, with a brief curtsey. A thin, rather sickly gentleman accompanied him — a man she recognised, after one startled moment, as Colonel Fitzwilliam. He looked quite dreadful.

'Your aunt kindly extended her invitation to my cousins,' Darcy explained, twirling the flower. The youngest Miss Gardiner beamed.

'Miss Bennet,' said Fitzwilliam, his voice gravelly.

'Colonel Fitzwilliam, it is a pleasure to see you again.'

He only nodded, his expression queasy. She hoped it was indigestion rather than disapprobation of the company; in Kent, he had struck her as more prudent than proud, but perhaps the cousins periodically exchanged personalities. It would explain rather more than not.

'Emily, this young lady is the friend I spoke to you of,' Darcy went on, placing a hand on the golden-haired girl's shoulder. 'Miss Bennet, my cousin and goddaughter, Lady Emily Fitzwilliam.'

The colonel's diminutive sister acquitted herself rather better. 'Good afternoon, Miss Bennet. Did you enjoy your walk? Mrs Gardiner said you like to walk as much as Fitzwilliam and Georgiana. I think walking is very nice even though —'

'Emily,' said Darcy. She wrinkled up her nose.

'I am delighted to meet you, your ladyship,' said Elizabeth, smiling. 'However, I do hope you will excuse me for a few minutes. I am afraid I am in quite a state.'

Lady Emily eyed her dress. 'I think you look very pretty,' she said. 'Does she not, Cousin Fitzwilliam?'

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged a mortified glance; they both mumbled something and she dashed away, just able to hear the girl's loud, plaintive voice — 'But cousin, if she is pretty why should I not say so?'

Mrs Gardiner returned downstairs just after Elizabeth did, and they gladly went into dinner.

Elizabeth, brilliantly happy, was at her most effervescent; her fingers went through the motions of carving and slicing while she talked and laughed, setting everyone at ease and amusing even the colonel. Darcy, too, seemed in high spirits, responding to her sallies with dry, cheerful wit. Elizabeth had never seen him so animated — but his cousins' perfect unconcern persuaded her that they had. Indeed, as the gentlemen retreated, she heard Colonel Fitzwilliam say,
'It is good to see you more yourself, coz.'

Darcy only laughed.

As soon as they were gone, Lady Emily rushed over. 'Miss Bennet,' she demanded, fixing a familiar pair of dark green eyes on her, 'are you going to marry Fitzwilliam?'

Mrs Gardiner, fussing over the teapot, pretended not to hear. Even so, Elizabeth gathered the child close to her and whispered in her ear,

'Yes, if he asks me.'

The rest of the evening flew by, and before anyone quite knew what had happened, it was all over. Darcy shook hands with Elizabeth and the Gardiners, then solemnly thanked little Amelia Gardiner for her gift. Colonel Fitzwilliam roused himself to offer a warm if weary farewell, and his sister threw Elizabeth a conspiratorial smile.

A servant in Darcy livery arrived early the next morning, bearing a letter for Miss Bennet. Elizabeth, at first rather bewildered, took one look at the narrow, precise penmanship and dashed upstairs, breaking the seal with trembling fingers.

My dear Elizabeth —

Tears sprang to her eyes, blurring the words together. *I hope you will forgive the liberty I again take — my affections and wishes, as I believe you know, are unchanged — do me the honour of accepting my hand in marriage —*

Then, as she read the last line, her tears vanished, and she collapsed onto her bed, laughing so hard that her heart ached. Clearly, his pen had outpaced his thoughts, for he had been forced to cross out one word and replace it with another:

*I remain your humble devoted servant,*

*Fitzwilliam Darcy*

Elizabeth went to her desk, turned the paper over, and wrote,

*Mr Darcy,*

*I hope I never need address you so coldly again, for I shall certainly be the happiest woman in all the world when you honour me with your hand. You know, I hope, that I love you above any other person, and must forget anything I have ever said to the contrary.*

*Devotion, I think, is far superior to mere humility.*

*Elizabeth*

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