The Evening Before

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

And your assurance of it, I suppose, carried immediate conviction to him. -- Pride and Prejudice, Ch 58

starring:

CHARLES BINGLEY

FITZWILLIAM DARCY

NETHERFIELD LIBRARY — evening

[BINGLEY can be soon through a dimly-lit window, marching back and forth, gesturing wildly as he talks. DARCY is in a chair, legs stretched out, and reading King Lear.]

BINGLEY
— an angel more beautiful!

DARCY
Mm-hmm.
BINGLEY
Darcy, are you listening to me?

DARCY
Mm-hmm.

BINGLEY
Oh. Well, she is the best woman in the world. Do you not think so? The most beautiful, virtuous, sweet-natured, warm-hearted . . .

DARCY
Mm.

BINGLEY
I want to marry her.

DARCY [straightens slightly, otherwise unaffected]
Is that so?

BINGLEY
Yes, it is so! I know my sisters will disapprove of the match, and that, perhaps, there is a certain something to be wished for in the behaviour of some of her relations, but she is so above reproach in every way — and Miss Elizabeth too. Now, I know you dislike her . . .

DARCY [turns a page, mouth twitching behind the book]
Oh?

BINGLEY
But even you must admit she is very well-bred, and Mr Bennet too, and the younger girls practically so.

DARCY
Mm.

BINGLEY
And . . . and I think she likes me. I mean, likes me . . . a great deal, that is . . . holds some genuine, sincere, true, real, earnest affection for me.

DARCY
Yes, I think so too.

BINGLEY
And I . . . what?

DARCY
.

BINGLEY [spins around, facing DARCY]
You think she’s in love with me?

DARCY
There [he coughs] is a certain likelihood —

BINGLEY
Why didn’t you mention it before? I could have been spared a week of suffering and torment!
DARCY [looks unsympathetic and returns to his book]
Mm.

BINGLEY
What am I going to do? If only I could get a moment alone with her —

DARCY [under his breath]
I am sure Mrs Bennet could arrange something.

BINGLEY
What was that?

DARCY
Nothing.

BINGLEY [throws himself into chair opposite DARCY]
And what do I say? Darcy, would you put that book down? I need help — advice — a good speech! . . . Are there any eloquent quotations in there?

DARCY
How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.

BINGLEY
. . .

DARCY
I am not sure if it is quite suitable to the occasion.

BINGLEY [plaintively]
Do you have any advice? Any at all?

DARCY
Avoid mentioning the inferiority of her circumstances, and you should do well enough.

BINGLEY
What circumstances?

DARCY
Never mind.

BINGLEY [leaps up, begins pacing again]
Well, I’ll say ‘Miss Bennet’ — no, ‘Jane’ — yes, ‘Jane, I love you. I think I have always loved you. You are — ’

DARCY
Except when you loved Miss Preston-Grey, of course — and Lady Alethea — and my cousin Philadelphia — and possibly my other cousin, Di—

BINGLEY
You are not helping.

DARCY [unrepentant]
Sorry.

BINGLEY
‘Your beauty blinds me, your goodness humbles me, the light of your eyes gives me hope for’ . . .
for, well, for something good. I’ll think of it later.

DARCY [trying not to smile]
An excellent idea. Oh . . . [forces a composed look] You might want to mention something about having no idea she was in London last winter.

BINGLEY
But I don’t have any idea that she was in — she was in London last winter?!

DARCY [attempting to sound casual]
Mm-hmm. [fiddles with pages of the book]

BINGLEY [shocked]
How did you know . . . ?

DARCY
Your sisters might have mentioned something about it.

BINGLEY
Caroline and Louisa knew? [eyes wide, jaw dropped, beginning to look furious]

DARCY
I, er, understand that Miss Bennet once called on them.

BINGLEY [eerily calm]
You knew of this? At the time?

DARCY
I knew of her presence, yes. I never saw her.

BINGLEY
You lied?

DARCY
I never said anything untrue . . . oh, very well, I did sink to a certain amount of . . . [he almost spits the word] deceit.

BINGLEY [begins pacing again]
I cannot believe this! Good God . . . what must she think of me?

DARCY
Once the truth is known to her, that you are a very amiable gentleman who fell under the influence of pernicious friends, or that the entire affair is a great misunderstanding. Either would be essentially correct.

BINGLEY
How could she possibly have any tender feelings for me now? She must think me an utter cad!

DARCY
Apparently not.

BINGLEY
What do you mean?

DARCY
I seem to have been . . . [he grimaces] mistaken. She loves you, I am certain of it. I . . . apologise
“he pronounces the word with palpable distaste” for my interference. It was both impertinent and absurd, as I am neither your father nor your brother, and my arguments against the match were founded on . . . principally . . . faulty premises.

BINGLEY
Oh! Well, really, I hardly know what to think, or do, or, or . . .

DARCY [stands and stretches]
You are in love with a handsome, sensible, sweet-tempered young lady who fully reciprocates your affections. Propose to the girl.

BINGLEY
Are . . . are you sure she loves me?

DARCY
Yes, Bingley.

BINGLEY
She’ll accept me?

DARCY
Yes.

BINGLEY [beaming]
I’ll propose at once!—Tomorrow!

DARCY
You might want to wait until her relations are out of the room.

BINGLEY
Yes . . . of course. You are sure, Darcy?

DARCY [sighs]
Yes, Bingley.

BINGLEY
I am the happiest man in the world! [calming] Er, Darcy?

DARCY
Yes, Bingley?

BINGLEY
I, er, you don’t, er . . . mind at all, do you? I mean . . . you were rather set against it, and now . . . well, you know, we’ve been friends awhile and . . . well . . . I just wanted to make certain that you were, er, not unhappy or . . . you know, that I have your blessing.

DARCY [very sincerely]
I wish you and Miss Bennet the best of happiness.

BINGLEY [grins rather sheepishly, then hugs a clearly horrified DARCY]
Thank you. I’ll never forget this, you know . . .

DARCY [choking]
Mmph.
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