There was an unsettling wonder in his eyes as he looked at her, as if he were seeing her for the first time, or something in her that had eluded him before.

Lady Eleanor Fitzwilliam was decidedly alarmed. This had little to do with the proposal of marriage she had lately received, rejected, and was currently being pressured by her family to accept. That was a not uncommon event and, duke or no duke, she had no intention of allying herself with a man whose father and grandfathers would not have even entered the same houses as the Fitzwilliams of Houghton.

Her favourite cousin’s uncharacteristic moodiness occupied a considerably greater proportion of her mind than her erstwhile suitor’s claims of undying passion. They had been brought up together; born only three weeks apart, they had been close since earliest childhood, and only grew closer when Eleanor was sent to Pemberley after her mother’s death. She was only four years old, and her aunt doted on her quite as much as she did her own child. The Earl repaid his sister’s kindness by replicating her behaviour after her death, treating his nephew as a favoured son. The cousins were rarely separated until their schooldays, when they corresponded prolifically. They knew of the rumours about them, and could not have cared in the slightest. They had been raised to depend solely on their own understandings and consciences, and family expectations; all else was immaterial. After the inevitable experimentation in late adolescence, they had decided that
they were not well-suited for marriage, and therefore a tie of that kind would be probably
disastrous and certainly alter their perfect friendship. They discarded the idea of anything more,
and by twenty regarded one another as only the dearest of siblings.

Twenty-eight years of intimacy had given her a greater understanding of him than any other
person, quite probably including himself. Ever since the previous summer, he had been a little
odd. Almost brooding. Darcy did not brood. While he tried to avoid making mistakes, he also tried
to avoid thinking about them when he did. Moreover, he was not at all temperamental. His spirits
were tranquil rather than melancholy or cheerful. He was not easily upset, although it tended to be
unpleasant for everyone when he was. Yet lately he had been positively moody, ever since
returning from Rosings. Not that Lady Catherine wasn’t enough to put anyone out-of-sorts, but
still . . . The last straw came when, in the course of a single week, he quarreled with her brother,
napped at his valet, and was nearly sharp with the housekeeper.

Eleanor first talked with Georgiana -- not because she doubted her own judgment, but rather
because Georgiana would have seen more of her erstwhile brother’s behaviour than Eleanor, and
she was certain she would require corroboration when he tried to fob her off.

“It is my fault,” Georgiana said, looking at her with mournful dark eyes. Eleanor sighed.
Sometimes the Darcys were too alike for their own good. Doubtless Fitzwilliam was sitting in his
study in exactly the same frame of mind, punishing himself with English coffee, while Georgiana
suffered herself over some imagined transgression.

“How is your brother?”

A flush rose to the girl’s cheeks. “You know? Jack told you?”

Eleanor frowned. “My brother has not told me anything, but clearly something dreadful must have
happened.”

“I should have been better. I do not deserve such a kind brother. I was so selfish!”

“You are not selfish, and Fitzwilliam is not perfect,” said Eleanor tiredly.

Georgiana dashed tears out of her eyes. “He is the best man in the world.”

“Well, perhaps, but he is only a man nonetheless, and he adores you -- he would be angry to hear
you speak so of yourself.”

“I do not deserve him,” Georgiana said again. Eleanor sighed. Her youngest cousin was, in her
peculiar way, as wilful and obstinate as any of the others.

“How is he, Georgiana? Did he tell you he was upset about anything?”

“No, he insisted it wasn’t important. But -- ” She reached one hand out, grasping Eleanor’s wrist.
“You will make it right, won’t you? Ella, I don’t know what to do. He has been so strange since
he came back. He tries to hide it, for my sake, but I’m not blind -- anymore -- and sometimes he
says the oddest things. He asked me if he was ungentlemanly.”


“I think someone said something terrible to him. I don’t know why he believed it, usually he
doesn’t let nonsense bother him. He said it wasn’t Jack when I asked, though. Even after what
happened, he wasn’t like this. He tells me not to worry, but I can’t -- not worry, that is. He’s all I
have. I mean, there are the others, but Fitzwilliam is my brother, and with Mama and Papa gone . .
. oh, and I can’t stand him being unhappy. You’ll make him happy again?”
“I will do my best,” Eleanor promised. Georgiana smiled.

“Thank you. He’s in his study.”

#

Her cousin sat at his desk, coat discarded and sleeves rolled up. His fingers were pressed against his right temple. She glanced at the cup his other hand was curled around. Tea, not coffee. That was something, at least.

“Fitzwilliam.”

His head jerked up and he leapt to his feet. *Ungentlemanly indeed*, Eleanor thought.

“Fitzwilliam, what is wrong with you?” she began without preamble.

“What do you mean, Eleanor?” He seated himself and invited her to do the same: more, it seemed, out of good breeding than because he had any desire for her company. In his current state, she rather doubted he desired any company at all.

“You have been very strange lately, very unlike yourself.--Ever since last summer, and particularly since you came home from Rosings. I do not know what happened, only that Georgiana thinks she has done something unforgivable.”

“It was not her fault,” he said instantly, “she could not have known better.”

“John has not told me,” Eleanor replied, “I do not know anything, except what I have seen. If you do not have greater consideration for yourself, you must think of your family, your sister. She has quite enough problems of her own without having yours foisted on her.”

He stared at her. “Eleanor, you do not know -- ”

“Perhaps if people would simply talk to me, I would!”

Darcy sighed. “I will ask Georgiana if I may tell you. Is that all?”

“No,” she said forcefully. “That -- whatever happened is not what is concerning her, at least not primarily. She is nearly hysterical with worry over you. Something happened at Rosings, it must have. You have been quieter and more withdrawn since the summer, but now -- Fitzwilliam, you have never been temperamental, and now you have your sister, your servants, even John leery of your moods.”

He remained as inscrutable as ever -- his face was not a particularly expressive one, even when he was not concealing something -- but she caught the twitch of his jaw, and when he dropped his eyes to his hands, tightly laced together on top of some letter or other, she knew how overwrought -- for him -- he must be. “Fitzwilliam” -- she gentled her tone -- “if you have done something wrong, you should simply tell someone, or make it right, not torture yourself over it. You always allow such things to affect you more deeply than anyone else, and it is not good for you, or for anyone else.”

“Ella, I . . .” She started; he generally disapproved of nicknames, and had not called her ‘Ella’ since they were children. “I . . . I think that I have erred.” It was clearly a struggle to pronounce the words.

“You? I take it this was not a slight error, cousin?”
Darcy shook his head. "I do not make slight errors."

From anyone else, this would be arrogance. From him, it was nothing more than the truth. Darcy’s intelligence, sense, and solid judgment nearly always stood him in good stead. His friends, family, even Eleanor herself on occasion, had found him almost irritatingly reliable in all matters but those of the heart. He was scrupulous, fastidious, and very careful. His mistakes, when they occurred, were invariably momentous. He could do nothing by halves.

He had been with Bingley for the last several months. Eleanor, who had been the object of one of that gentleman’s many infatuations, did not care greatly for him, but she acknowledged that he and Darcy were good for one another. Usually. Clearly it must have had something to do with him. Considering that it was Bingley, the advice would have been over another love-affair. She thought over her cousin’s prolix letters.

“So Miss Bennet did care about Mr Bingley?”

He was too accustomed to her rapid trains of thought to be much surprised. “Apparently.”

Eleanor considered. “Their acquaintance was only a few weeks, and they are both young. I daresay they will recover easily enough.”

“But Bingley, yes. Miss Bennet -- ” Darcy shrugged. “She was not like the others. It seems that she is still pining after him.”

Eleanor struggled to entertain the idea of anyone pining after Bingley, who had all the personality of one of Darcy’s well-trained pointers, and failed. “How do you know? If you were so certain of her indifference, before, it must have been something quite remarkable to have changed your mind.”

“Yes, quite remarkable.” The faint arch of his brow, flush on his cheek, puzzled her, as did the sudden softness, almost wistfulness, of his voice. He cleared his throat. “Her sister told me.”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet? I can’t think you would have listened to any of the others. Oh!--she was at Rosings, wasn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“T knew you admired her, but you said -- I was certain you said something about her -- that she did not like you, at least not once she met Mr Wickham.”

Darcy flinched. “I . . . she seemed . . . rather friendlier, in Kent.”

Eleanor frowned, turning this over in her mind. “It still seems very odd, that she should have told you of her sister’s feelings.”

“She knew . . . Fitzwilliam told her of my advice to Bingley.”

“He did what?” Eleanor stared at him. The suspicion entered her mind that Darcy’s admiration might have been even more serious than she had given it credit for; he was clearly pained at the reminder of Miss Elizabeth’s antipathy. “What on earth possessed him?” she demanded vexedly. “Has he no delicacy whatsoever?”

“I believe -- ” Darcy coughed. “He did not mention Miss Bennet’s name -- well, I never told him. He had no idea they were sisters.”

“He must have known that the lady would have at the very least been an acquaintance,” Eleanor
snapped. “He had no right to talk about your private affairs.”

“He believed he was doing me a favour,” Darcy said quietly, “improving my character in her eyes. He was, I understand, speaking of my loyalty to my friends.”

Eleanor shook her head. “My brother is one of the worst gossips who ever lived.”

She was glad to see a faint smile cross her cousin’s face. “I cannot argue that, although if you had met Miss Bennet’s mother . . .”

Eleanor laughed. “That is not very likely, is it?”

“No, not at all.”

She returned to the previous subject. “Even so, I do not see why she would confide her sister’s feelings in you. I imagine she would be angry at you, rather than the reverse.”

“She was quite angry.” “Did she simply demand an explanation the next time she saw you? I suppose, were she angry enough, she might have revealed her sister’s feelings without thinking.”

“In a manner of speaking, she did.”

“The manner of speaking that involves leaving out large chunks of the story?”

He laughed shortly. “Yes.”

Eleanor put her intellect to work. Darcy admired, more than admired, Miss Elizabeth Bennet; she disliked him. John tried to make her think better of him. Eleanor frowned. Her brother, at least, had thought it that important. His recent display notwithstanding, John’s understanding in this sort of matter was usually not deficient. Were it merely a passing infatuation -- however little prone Darcy was to such things -- he would not have put himself to the trouble. Yet neither of them could have had serious intentions towards her -- a virtually penniless girl, daughter only to a modest country gentleman, and with connections in trade. Darcy had his family and estate to think of, John his expensive habits. Still, what if . . . A dread came over her.

“Fitzwilliam, please tell me you did not . . . you were not so foolish as to . . .”

He met her gaze steadily, raising one eyebrow. His composure seemed regained once more, although she could see that he was far from his usual sedateness.

“You did not ask her to be your mistress . . . did you?”

Darcy started violently. “Eleanor! What do you think I am?” His low-pitched voice rose several notches.

She sighed in relief. “I beg your pardon, cousin. You were so angry with Milton over that whole . . . debacle, I thought you might have more reason than what you said.”

“Need I more reason?” he said angrily.

“Yes. You should know, better than any of the others, that his behaviour is perfectly acceptable to the world -- even expected. It is no more uncommon than . . . gambling debts and drunkenness.”

A flush rose on his cheeks. “It is because of what I know, that I find it so reprehensible. I do not condone excessive gambling or overindulgence either, in others or myself. You saw the same that I did, Eleanor; I do not understand why you are so tolerant.”
“Perhaps because I am a woman, and less inclined to put other women on pedestals,” she offered tartly, then her voice gentled. “Fitzwilliam, I do not think you would ever become like . . . the sort of men that you loathed, but it is not as if Miss Bennet is married, a mother, someone of consequence in the world. It is not the same.”

His lips thinned. “Eleanor, I did not detest them because they took advantage of a woman who was married, or because she was an earl’s daughter; I hated them because they took advantage of someone I loved. I daresay Miss Bennet’s family, any lady’s family, cares about her as much, or nearly as much, as I did my mother.”

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence. “Milton says you have become an utter prude,” she said.

“And Milton has become an utter rake,” Darcy returned.

“Keeping a mistress and remaining faithful to her alone for five years does not make him a rake, Fitzwilliam.”

“If he truly loved her, he would not have dishonoured her,” Darcy insisted. “She was a respectable woman, before.”

Eleanor sighed. “Well, you seem as uncompromising as ever, cousin. I can at least be assured you did not ask Miss Bennet to be your mistress.”

“I did not,” he agreed, then paused. “I asked her to be my wife.”

Several responses rose to Eleanor’s lips. The first was an uninspired “What?” The next was a more elegant “Have you taken leave of your senses?” Instead, she remained silent, struggling both for composure and understanding, turning matters over her mind, making connections, and hoping that she was not adding two and two and coming up with twelve. When she spoke, she startled Darcy nearly as much as he had her.

“She refused you? Has she no sense whatsoever?”

“She found my character objectionable,” he replied stiffly. Eleanor considered this. She could perfectly understand rejecting a man of vicious propensities and depraved character, whatever his material worth -- but Fitzwilliam was certainly not such a man; quite the opposite, in fact.

“Your character,” she repeated blankly. “Why, does she think men of honour, sense, and integrity are to be found everywhere? What more does she want, than what you can offer?--and you know I do not speak of your property and birth, Fitzwilliam. You are the best man I know.”

She could actually see his fingers tremble slightly, before he bent his dark head and sighed. After a moment, he said softly, “Thank you, Ella.”

His pain was nearly palpable, and she felt a rush of anger, and something still worse, against the unknown Miss Bennet. Eleanor reached out and tentatively laid her fingers against his wrist. He did not like to be touched, but she could think of no other form of comfort, and after a moment, he uncurled his fingers, lifting his head. She looked at his pale, strained face, and knowing that, for all their intimacy, only at this moment was he vulnerable enough to speak of it, she said, “Fitzwilliam, tell me what happened.”

And he did -- slowly and reluctantly at first, then with increasing rapidity, and something like relief. For her part, Eleanor was so furious that she could hardly keep her countenance. Only the greatest of efforts kept her silent during his recitation.
“Well, Eleanor?” he said tiredly, once he had finished. “You are a woman. What do you think?”

“What do I think?” Full of indignation, she did not bother to check her tongue, or her temper. “If she is as intelligent and perceptive as you seem to think her, although I do not pretend to believe you unbiased, I have not the slightest idea why she should have believed a petty charmer such as George Wickham. At the very least she should have seen the impropriety in his confiding anything in her at all! And then, to base all her opinions of your character on that!”

“She disliked me before that,” Darcy said quietly.

“She said it was a month before she had decided on your character, did she not? And it was a month after you were first acquainted that she met Mr Wickham. I doubt, somehow, that it is coincidence.” She took a breath. “Doubtless she believed him because he flattered her and you did not. Of course, if she truly thought you so contemptible, it at least makes her behaviour somewhat more understandable -- but -- ” her anger rushed in anew -- “her reasons for thinking it are vastly insufficient, if you ask me, which you did. It is almost too degrading for words.”

“Yes,” Darcy agreed, with a twist to his mouth, “yes, that is a fairly accurate description.”

“Perhaps, if she were a woman of fashion, it might not be quite so outrageous, but a lady in Miss Bennet’s position cannot afford such poor judgment. Why, John says she is practically penniless! With such connections and no greater claim than that of a gentleman’s daughter, she will be quite fortunate to receive any offer again. A man of half your consequence would not so lower himself.”

Darcy opened his mouth, then shut it again, looking at her with an odd expression. It was somehow reminiscent of when they had found his cat’s first litter of kittens.

“I meant no offence,” she added hurriedly.

He shook his head. “I know you did not mean any, Eleanor.” Still, there was an unsettling wonder in his eyes as he looked at her, as if he were seeing her for the first time, or something in her that had eluded him before.

“I can see,” she added reluctantly, “why she was upset about Mr Bingley, if her sister did love him. I do think she would have done better to blame Mr Bingley, though. He is three-and-twenty and, if he listened to your advice, that was his own decision. I still do not understand why she encouraged you, though, if she had no intention of accepting you.”

He frowned. “I suppose, perhaps, that she may not have meant it as encouragement.”

“Why else did she suggest meeting you privately?” Eleanor demanded. Darcy shrugged. “Well,” she said decisively, “I am very sorry that you have been hurt, and I hope she suffers for it -- ” he smiled faintly at her blind loyalty -- “but I cannot say I regret it. You are far better off without the impertinent chit.”

This was too much for his composure. “Eleanor!” He took a deep breath. “Eleanor, you do not even know her.”

She calmed slightly. “That is true, but you -- you are like my brother, Fitzwilliam, and I love you dearly, and I hate anyone who gives you pain. I hope, for your sake, that you were only infatuated -- but I do not think so.”

He said nothing, and she sighed.
“I wish you had been like other men. It might pass more easily if you had.” She walked over and kissed his cheek. “You need not distress yourself over this. Any woman who would treat a respectable man in such a manner does not deserve you.”

“My behaviour was not above reproach,” he said quietly.

“Even if that explains hers, it does not excuse it. Fitzwilliam, please tell me you have listened, and that you will be yourself again.”

He paused, thinking it over; and she realised that she could not read him; his eyes, though as familiar to her as her own, were only colour, the expression utterly opaque. She felt as if, after twenty-eight years of walking together, he had taken a step, or turned a corner, to somewhere she could not follow.

Finally, he spoke, in a steady voice. “You have given me a great deal to think about, Ella. Thank you.”

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