Summary

A scene from a slight AU of First Impressions, where Colonel Fitzwilliam accompanies Catherine to Netherfield. Bingley decides they should all amuse themselves with a Dramatic Reading, Henry has a cunning plan, Charlotte is ambivalent, and Catherine is confused by everything.

They were not putting on a play, of course -- just reading Shakespeare for the edification of all.

At least, Henry supposed so; after two days of enduring Miss Darcy’s frozen presence, following her with his eyes and envying everyone to whom she spoke, he had little attention to spare for such trivial proceedings.

Perhaps, he thought hopefully, she was simply unwilling to betray her feelings further, without any hint of his own. With her sense of delicacy -- yet, he could not bring himself to make his intentions known to anybody beyond their two selves. If she were truly indifferent, she would be placed in an impossible situation, and he, humiliated. No; he must find a way to communicate with her away from the others, or so surreptitiously that nobody else would notice.

Bingley’s voice rang out: “Naturally, Hal will be the King; he is the best speaker among us. But who shall read for the princess?”

Henry’s head snapped up, and a plan instantly formed in his mind. “Miss Darcy, of course,” he said promptly.
Charlotte Lucas smiled with a peculiar twist of her lips. “Harry for Harry and Catherine for Katherine? How -- suitable.”

(Charlotte loved them both, in different ways -- the lovely heiress who offered uniform disdain to almost everyone else, but, inexplicably, friendship and patronage to her, and the childhood companion who still called himself her friend. And she had half-expected this. She approved heartily, for they were suitable, in taste and disposition and intelligence and principles and everything she could think of. Why, she could not have found a better lover for either if she had made the match herself. Yet, somehow, it was uncomfortable and bittersweet and -- and hard.)

Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had accompanied his former ward to Netherfield, scowled at Henry and promptly claimed the part of the Duke of Burgundy. Though his usual agreeable self in general, he seemed unable to breathe the same air as Henry without indignation.

They all read together in the evenings, when nobody wanted to talk, and even the avowed lovers had grown tired of cooing at each other. While the others declaimed their parts, laughing as they traded three books among a cast of over a dozen, Henry delivered the King’s speeches in his most ringing tones, trying not to watch Catherine sit in abstracted silence.

She only seemed jarred into awareness when her own turn came; not so much out of attention to her own rôle, but in sheer amusement at watching Miss Bingley play Alice. When Henry, desperately trying to keep his face sober, met her eyes over Miss Bingley’s head, she even smiled at him.

He waited impatiently through his mother’s surprisingly effective stint as the Chorus, and carefully looked away as Kitty handed her book to Miss Darcy.

In a moment, he found himself addressing her, as anxious as he had ever been in his life. “Fair Katherine, and most fair,” he began, and lifted his head to look directly at her.

She seemed almost to flinch, and when her lines came, spoke them with a coldness unusual even for her.

Henry hesitated. “Do you like me, Kate?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam sat a little straighter, his clever, ugly face turning to glance from one to the other. Kitty yawned.

“Pardonnez-moi,” replied Miss Darcy, stiffly, and yet she managed to sound vaguely offended. He hoped it was what passed for acting with her.

“I am glad thou canst speak no better English,” he said, “for if thou couldst, thou wouldst find me such a plain king that thou wouldst think I had sold my farm to buy my crown. I know no ways to mince it in love --”

She turned pale and looked away, but Henry determinedly continued,

“-- but directly to say ‘I love you.’ Give me your answer, i’ faith, do: and so clap hands and a bargain: how say you, lady?”

“Sauf votre honneur, me understand vell.”

He bit his lip, lines tumbling out with little comprehension of what he said.

Then, slowing, he told her, “If thou would have such a one, take me; and take me, take a soldier; take a soldier, take a king. And what sayest thou to my love? speak, my fair, and fairly, I pray
Catherine, who had kept her eyes fixed on either the page or the ground with uncharacteristic demureness, now lifted them to meet his in considerable bewilderment.

She hesitated, then said quickly, “Is it possible that -- dat I should love the enemy of France?”

The colonel now seemed to be trying to slay him with a glance.

“But Kate,” said Henry, ignoring her outraged cousin, “dost thou understand thus much English, canst thou love me?”

He studied her face. She was flushing a little now, which might be promising, but her expression seemed almost unhappy. He considered their number of lines and cheerfully leapt ahead.

“Therefore tell me, most fair Katherine, will you have me? Put off your maiden blushes; avouch the thoughts of your heart with the looks of an empress; take me by the hand and say, ‘Harry of England, I am thine.’ ”

She glanced up again, white-faced and solemn, and dropped her hands on the book in her lap. From her, it practically constituted encouragement.

“I will tell thee aloud, ‘England is thine, Ireland is thine, France is thine, and Harry B -- ’” He turned a vivid red, Catherine’s eyes widened, and Charlotte Lucas smiled wryly at them. Nobody else seemed to notice. “-- Plantagenet is thine.”

Fitzwilliam, lips compressed to a thin line, took Mrs Bennet’s book and said loudly and insincerely, “God save your Majesty! My royal cousin, teach you our princess English?”

“I would have her learn,” said Henry evenly, “how perfectly I love her; and that is good English.”

Catherine gave up her book in considerable relief. Henry watched her hands tremble and did not know whether to consider his attempt a failure or not. Its general effect seemed to have been to amuse Charlotte Lucas and infuriate Colonel Fitzwilliam.

The next day, when Miss Lucas and Miss Darcy walked out together, the latter said to her friend, “Last night, Mr Bennet -- Mr Henry Bennet -- seemed . . . rather peculiar, did he not?”

“A little, perhaps.”

“I suppose it must be -- Mr Bingley was right, he speaks well, with a good deal of -- feeling.” Her brow furrowed. “Still, I rather had the impression that he was trying to tell me something. If only wish I knew what it was!”

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