After an accident following the assembly ball, Caroline suffers from an unusual affliction.

‘Jane Bennet is pretty enough, I grant you that,’ Caroline Bingley said lazily, gracefully resting on the sofa.

‘She is an angel,’ her brother Charles said. Even though he scarcely knew it, he was juggling a couple of apples absent-mindedly.

‘Charles, I beg of you,’ Caroline said. ‘Would you mind not playing with the decoration? It took me two hours to arrange the apples just right, and you have messed it all up. As I was saying, Jane Bennet is pretty enough, there can be no doubt about that – although of course in a very rustic manner. Did you see the ruffles on her dress? I thought I should die with laughter. I have not seen such ruffles since the autumn before last, and they were dreadfully passé even then – her family, however! Did you hear that Eliza Bennet was called a great beauty in these parts?’

‘I should as soon call her mother a wit,’ Mr Darcy said dryly.

‘Her mother – a wit!’ Louisa guffawed. ‘Her mother – a wit! Did you hear that, Mr Hurst? Did you hear what Mr Darcy just said? So droll!’

‘Louisa, please,’ Caroline interjected. ‘Must you make that noise? I thought I should die with laughter. I have not seen such ruffles since the autumn before last, and they were dreadfully passé even then – her family, however! Did you hear that Eliza Bennet was called a great beauty in these parts?’

‘Oh no, I will not have that,’ Charles hastily said. ‘It is delightful here. I plan to stay at least until Christmas.’

He picked up another of the decorative apples and attempted to juggle four at once.
'Only over my dead body, Charles,' Caroline said. ‘I do not think I could live in this godforsaken place for another fortnight!’

With a sharp intake of breath, Charles dropped the apples. With a nasty crack of stone and bone, Caroline dropped down.

‘You know, Charles,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I think Caroline got her wish. It seems that last apple you picked up was no apple at all.’

With a loud wail, Louisa fainted.

‘I absolutely agree,’ Mr Hurst suddenly said. ‘Damn tedious waste of an evening.’

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‘Dagnabit, my head hurts,’ Caroline moaned and slowly sat up. ‘Dear me, those are ugly cushions. Whoever allowed peach to be a colour?’

‘But you chose them yourself, Caro,’ Louisa sobbed.

‘Oh, right, so I did,’ Caroline said. ‘I thought I would impress you, Mr Darcy, with my superior skills at interior decoration, since I saw the same colour in your aunt Catherine’s drawing-room.’

Mr Darcy gave a cough.

‘Dear me, did I just say that aloud?’ Caroline asked. ‘I suppose no harm has been done, though, Mr Darcy, you must know I have set my cap at you.’

‘Mrs Hurst,’ Mr Darcy said loudly, pretending not to have heard her. ‘I fear the incident has upset your poor sister. Maybe it would be best if you accompanied her to her rooms so she can rest.’

‘Yes, I should like some rest,’ Caroline agreed. ‘Sitting around with all of you every evening and none of you being able to hold a decent conversation is quite fatiguing. No, no, Louisa, I shall be able to manage on my own. You better hold tight to your husband, you know he cannot hold his liquor.’

Mr Darcy gave another cough.

‘Oh, please,’ Caroline said. ‘I know I should not have said that, but it’s not exactly a secret, now is it?’

She turned on her heels and marched out of the room, shaking her head.

‘Is it just me,’ Charles said slowly when she had left, ‘or is something the matter with Caroline?’

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‘My dear Georgiana,

‘Hoping you are enjoying good health, I am penning this epistolary to you from Netherfield Park, Herts, where I am residing, as I informed you in my previous missive, with Mr Bingley and his siblings. I am pleased to relate that I am feeling well myself, but I must confess to being rather astonished at the turn events have taken here, which I will relay presently.

‘Being acquainted with Miss Bingley as you are, you will no doubt be surprised to
hear how altered her character has been this past fortnight. I cannot say how it happened, but after an unfortunate incident involving my apple-shaped paperweight, which you gave me last Christmas, Miss Bingley suffered an injury to the head. At first it was deemed only mild; there were no symptoms of a concussion and Miss Bingley herself had no complaints about ill health to make; in the aftermath, however, it became clear that ever since then, Miss Bingley is unable not to speak the truth, however unpleasant that may be.

‘You may congratulate yourself; you were completely right in your theory that Miss Bingley had designs of a connubial nature on me; she has confessed to them repeatedly. You were also right about the sad affliction from which Mr Hurst is suffering; Miss Bingley has confirmed it. You were wrong, however, in thinking that Miss Bingley has never been in love. To be more precise, it turns out that Fitzwilliam is the object of her interest. His lack of fortune and prospects, as she informed me, made a connection impossible, but she cannot deny a strong physical and mental affection for, as she called him, one of the finest specimen of men ever to have graced England with his virile steps. Then followed a lengthy exploration of Fitzwilliam’s virtues, which are, or so I am told, numerous, and only surpassed by his forceful masculinity. I will spare you the details, as they are quite unfit for the eyes of one so young and innocent as you are.

‘Please give my best wishes to aunt and uncle; hoping you are well,

‘I remain,

‘Your affectionate brother,

‘Fitzwilliam Darcy.’

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‘Georgiana is coming to visit us,’ Mr Darcy said at breakfast a couple of days later.

He was alone in the breakfast parlour with Caroline, who was buttering a muffin.

‘Georgiana writes that she was unable to accept your kind invitation earlier, due to her obligations to our aunt and uncle, but that she is now looking forward to joining us today, especially after having learnt that – uhm – after having learnt that we are having such a great time here. My cousin, the Colonel, is to accompany her and – ahum.’

‘Col. Fitzwilliam?’ Caroline said, blushing. ‘Dear me, you will not tell him what I said about the sight of his strong hands making me all aflutter? It would be exceedingly mortifying to have my confessions of undying love repeated to him – even though I must admit of having wondered about what his thoughts on this matter would be. But no, I am determined that he must never know about it, for it would unnecessarily complicate matters.’

Mr Darcy gave a well-rehearsed cough.

‘I have said it aloud again, have I not?’ Caroline sighed. ‘I was really hoping I hadn’t, this time. I really have no idea how I can keep my feelings a secret from the Colonel if I am blabbering about them like a giant dimwit all the time. I’m even worse than Charles in his moonstruck ways.’

She sighed deeply again.

‘At least Charles has the safety of knowing his love is reciprocated,’ she said.
‘Is it now?’ Mr Darcy raised an eyebrow. ‘Jane Bennet does not strike me as particular to Charles.’

‘Oh, but she is,’ Caroline said. ‘I, err, accidentally mentioned my doubts about her feelings to her sister and Eliza confirmed that Jane is very much in love with Charles.’

‘So you talk to, uh, Eliza quite often?’ Mr Darcy asked, trying to sound disinterested.

‘I have no other choice,’ Caroline said. ‘She is the only one who is not offended by my condition. I told her that I was quite jealous of her because you sort of admired her, but she directly told me that she thinks you a pretentious, stuck-up, impolite bore and that was the end to my jealousy. I then explained about my condition and -’

She broke off. Mr Darcy had gone red in the face and was apparently choking on a muffin.

‘I said that aloud again, huh?’ she asked. ‘Well, in all fairness, you can be a bit stuck-up at times. You’re being so aloof at times, fancying yourself better than all the rest of us together, and revelling in your good manners and your upbringing, your pedigree and your connections – I do not like to tell you, but it can get quite annoying at times.’

Mr Darcy spat a bit of muffin on his plate.

‘Of course, I do not mind it very much,’ Caroline continued, ‘because I hope to marry you one day and have my share of your pedigree and your connections – not to forget your wealth – and because I have known you for such a long time that I know the man behind the rude manners. Those who know you but recently, however, do not have these advantages and -’

Mr Darcy was vomiting into his napkin.

‘Oh, for god’s sake!’ Caroline exclaimed. ‘You at least can improve your behaviour! You are not stuck with this disgusting condition that alienates you from all those around you. Do you know that no one will even talk to me any more, apart from you and Eliza Bennet? Louisa hates me for telling everyone about that incident at Weymouth. Charles has not noticed about my condition, mercifully, because otherwise he would probably hate me too for telling Jane all about his stash of secret love poems. All the clowns in this town hate me too for I told them what I think about them in no unclear terms. It is nothing short of a miracle Eliza Bennet will still talk to me, for I have behaved most dreadfully towards her. I have insulted and maliced her whole family, I have ridiculed her and lectured her, and she has had the greatness of character to overlook my condition and offer me her friendship. I tell you, Darcy, she has been a truer friend to me than any of my so-called London friends could ever be, and if you had any sense left in your body, you would seek her good opinion and ask her for her hand in marriage, for you could scarcely find anyone better suited to you.’

Now it was Caroline’s turn to retch on a muffin.

‘Did I just say that?’ she asked. ‘I cannot believe I am pushing you towards marrying Eliza Bennet, when I have been planning our union ever since I first set eyes on you. It is true, you have never intrigued me as much as your cousin, the Colonel has, but you can offer me the wealth and position I think are my due, and while you cannot hold a torch to your cousin, your looks are not bad at all and I will admit I have been looking forward to sharing a bed with you.’

She choked on her muffin.

‘It is your hands,’ she added. ‘They are very similar to your cousin’s hands, and you must know how often I have fantasised about having those hands roam all over my body. I do think it would
be exhilarating to feel your cousin’s touch on my exposed skin. You know, when he looks at me, my heartbeat goes out of rhythm and an urgent warmth spreads over my body. I think I have described to you also the sensations that his voice evokes in my -'

‘Yes, you have,’ Mr Darcy said in between retches. ‘No more discussion of your lady anatomy, I ask of you.’

‘Well, I suppose you will not want to marry me now,’ Caroline said. ‘You will marry Eliza and take her to the North and I shall have no one to talk to, for I have become a freak that everybody shuns.’

‘I would listen to you all day, every day, Caroline,’ a voice from the door said. ‘And if you knew about the sensations your voice evokes in my -’

Caroline jumped up.

‘John!’ she screamed. ‘You cannot know how much I have missed you.’

She ran towards him and flung her arms around neck.

‘Hold me tight,’ she said. ‘Never let me go again. I am hopelessly in love with you and I want to marry you.’

‘Well, if you say so,’ the Colonel said. ‘I suppose I could, err, if you want me to – I mean, I am not totally averse to the idea and, eh -’

‘Do not stop talking,’ Caroline said, ‘talk on, take me to my room and fuck me senseless.’

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