The Domestic Comforts of Roger and Bess. Or, The Engagement of Mr. John Bennet and Miss Charlotte Bingley, as Told By a Rather Partial Observer

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Summary

A slice-of-life story from the universe of "A Long Engagement."

How did Mr. John Bennet come to discover the whereabouts of Miss Charlotte Bingley on the day of their engagement?

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

- Inspired by A Long Engagement, or the Improvement of Human Reason, as illustrated in the long and tortuous courtship of Edward Bennet, squire, and Philadelphia, Lady Darcy by hl (hele), Tulina

It was bitterly cold on the sweep, and Roger shivered, despite the heavy wool coat that just stretched across his front—the coat had fit better before Bess had come along with her meat pies and potatoes. Of course, he didn’t regret the pies, or Bess, and just the thought of her happy smile when he came home tonight warmed him by a degree or two.

He bit his lip to keep from grinning at that. It wouldn’t do for Albert to see him mooning over Bess. He’d been soundly told off for it only last week when he’d been a bit slow to pull out the step for Mrs. Bingley, what for thinking of Bess, and the hearth fire, and the new kitten that she’d brought home, saying it would be an excellent mouser when it just grew into its claws a bit more. Puss, as she called it, had taken to following her around and curling up in her lap as she knitted scarves and socks for him in the evening. That cat would be petted and spoiled and never hunt a mouse in its life, Roger knew, and he had made the mistake of saying it, and that what was the use of a cat who wouldn’t catch mice? Oh, she’d nearly cried, and he’d left her without even a chance to say he was sorry and that Puss could stay and even sleep in a little ball at the end of the bed if it
would make her happy.

Oy, he really ought not to let his mind wander so much when Albert was right there. But it was far, far better to imagine the comforts of home than to think about his frozen toes and whether the next gust of wind would blow his hat clear off his head. At least he still had hair underneath his hat to keep his daydreaming brain warm. Albert, after twenty years with the Bingleys, barely had any hair left. Perhaps that was why the poor man always had a dour look on his face these days.

Roger straightened up as the doors to Bingley House opened and Mr. Bennet walked out, pulling on his gloves, or rather, attempting to, and nearly stumbling over the bottom step. Roger had never seen the man so agitated, though he didn’t have much room for comparison.

They had seen him only a few times when the family was at Netherfield, but Mr. Bennet had been very friendly, offering blankets and mulled wine to the coachmen when they waited on a brisk fall night. Rarely had Roger felt more welcomed; his own employers often forgot they’d called for the carriage as he and Albert shivered in the cold or tried to keep the horses watered in the heat of summer.

Roger chanced a look at Albert, as though the older man could read his thoughts. Devotion to the family, no matter what, was Al’s way of doing things. Roger couldn’t help it if he wasn’t always happy to be left standing outside yet another great house while the Bingleys lost at some high-stakes card game. Albert didn’t have a new wife at home—didn’t have any wife at home—he wouldn’t understand.

But that Mr. Bennet had been gracious, indeed, and his staff had said there was no better master. They had, all of them, been waiting to hear when he and Miss Bingley would be married. The young Miss had never looked prettier than after she’d had a visit from Mr. Bennet, or sat for an hour in his drawing room, and Roger thought that, excepting Bess, he’d never seen a girl her age look so much in love.

Mr. Bennet was forced to wait for his horse to be brought round to the front, and when the man looked up and gave a nod to the coachmen, Roger saw his expression, one so forlorn Roger felt colder than he had only a few moments before, as though he stood there in no coat at all.

Later, he would tell Bess he wasn’t sure why he had done it, that all he could think at the time was that the man looked, well, crossed in love. Bess, when he said it, would smile sweetly and sigh, and say, “Oh, Roger. You want everyone in the whole world to be as happy as we are.” Well, he couldn’t help it if it was true.

Mr. Bennet scuffed his boot against the loose gravel of the sweep. With a quick cough, Roger darted a glance at Mr. Bennet, before saying, possibly a bit louder than he normally would—though he was a boisterous young man, with a voice to match—“Oy, Albert, d’you think we’ll be assured of a bit of tea and biscuit at Darcy House? It’s mighty cold out just now.”

Albert gave him a sharp look, probably more than confused; they weren’t to take the Misters Bingley to Darcy House at all that day, but to White’s.

“And, Albert, d’you think we might want’ter bring the extra ropes? Are we fetching the young Miss”—and if his voice was certainly too loud at this, well, what else could he do?—“back home today?”

Albert turned to him then, eyebrows narrowed and that monstrous nose of his looking even more unpleasant tinged with red from the cold. “What in the devil—you know we’re not to fetch Miss Bingley from Darcy House at all today. Has the cold addled that tiny brain of yours? Have you gone and got some kind of fever?”
Roger shook his head, all the while watching as Mr. Bennet—whose head had jerked up at the mention of “Darcy House” and whose eyes had widened even further at the mention of the young Miss—scuffed his toe again, but not at all in agitation, more in thought.

When Mr. Bennet looked up again, he smiled directly at Roger, and even touched his finger to the brim of his hat. It was a piece of civility that left Roger just about speechless—and that was really saying something, he thought.

Just then, Mr. Bennet’s horse was brought around and he leapt into the saddle with a force Roger thought ought to be reserved for battles or emergencies or—well, riding off to find true love. As he trotted past the coach, Mr. Bennet stopped, and flipped a coin toward Roger. “I am far more in your debt than this, but I hope it will do.”

With another bright smile, he was off again, and not in the direction from whence he’d come, but the way that Roger knew led to Darcy House.

Roger grinned and fingered the silver coin for a moment, before Al’s quizzical look made him tuck it away and straighten up. He’d have quite the story to tell when he got home later. In front of the fire, while Bess’ knitting needles clicked away and Puss purred in her lap. Perhaps, on the way home tonight, he’d pick up some extra milk for Puss, and a bunch of violets for Bess. Roger shivered again as the wind picked up. Yes, violets would be just right.

End Notes

Thanks to hele and lin (and Anghraine) for letting me play in their sandbox and for enthusiastically supporting this little bit of fluff. It fits in with the longer narrative in the middle of chapter six.

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