An Acceptable Arrangement

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Summary

It seemed that, at least in the opinion of the Meryton matrons, a landed gentleman without an heir was an eligible prospect for their single daughters, no matter his age.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

The business of Mrs Bennet’s life had, indeed, been to get her daughters married, and she managed to accomplish it five times, most remarkably, in the final instance, from her sick bed. Thus, it was with little surprise that, barely two months after the last Miss Bennet, now Mrs Mary Hamilton, delivered her first child, Mrs Bennet breathed her last, and departed this world for the next.

Mr Bennet mourned her as any husband whose regard had sunk into indifference might: he wore his black armband, and refrained from speaking poorly of her. As he had never been much for society, his absence at country dances and dinners was largely unremarkable, and the denizens of Meryton could choose to ascribe it to grief or mere habit as they saw fit.

The Bennets had lived in their own particular version of amicable disharmony for nearly thirty years, although in the last two, their estrangement was more pronounced than ever before. Mr Bennet was, to the last, unlikely to leave his library and his port for very many hours to sit beside his sick and ever-nervous wife, and she was unable to leave her bed or her rooms. It must be said that Mr Bennet was not overly upset to miss the company of his neighbours for that of a book, even in the year that constituted his mourning. So it was that, once his grief had likely passed, the callers began to come round. After a few months of social visits, Mr Bennet noticed a disturbing change.

It seemed that, at least in the opinion of the Meryton matrons, a landed gentleman without an heir was an eligible prospect for their single daughters, no matter his age.

Each morning, just as he had finished the estate business and opened his book, Hill announced a new pair of callers. At first he dismissed it as simple courtesy; Longbourn had long been on the circuit of village gossip, even when Mrs Bennet had been ill. Perhaps these well-meaning women felt it their duty to bring him the news that Mrs Bennet was no longer there to share with him. Later, when the same women started bringing their daughters and nieces to these visits, attired in their finest morning wear, he began to grow more suspicious.

Finally, when Miss King—who had not, he thought uncharitably, grown into her freckles or managed to leverage her inheritance against them—came to call with her uncle on an extremely trifling matter of business, Mr Bennet realized that he had been marked.

It was all a very good joke, he supposed, and would have laughed, if he had not been so shocked. For a moment, he considered writing to one of his sons-in-law regarding the matter, but Darcy would be horrified, Bingley would tell Jane, and Mr Morland would not understand. Hamilton, he presumed, was already well-aware of the machinations of the town; living so proximate to Mrs Phillips ought to take care of that. Wickham would likely advise him to marry money.

He had to admit, for a moment, at least, he was flattered.

After all, Mr Bennet thought one morning, while his man worked on tying his cravat and sorting out his appearance, he had never been an ugly man. His daughters had not gotten their beauty solely from their mother, whose chin, it had to be said, was a bit too pointed. His nose, now that he inspected it, was a bit larger these days and his eyebrows a bit unwieldy. But they gave his face character, and he had never been so much of a dandy as to worry over it before.
Besides, if these women were truly going to fight over him, they ought to get a good look at the object of their pursuit. They might choose to show themselves to advantage, hiding unsightly bulges and blemishes, but he certainly would not.

After all, if he did choose to marry again, there was no cause to go about anything differently than he had on the first round. Things had turned out well enough.

As one of the principal landowners in the neighborhood, Mr Bennet thought that he was perfectly well acquainted with the follies and inconsistencies of the surrounding families. Following two weeks of simpering female callers, however, he was forced to reconsider.

“All the neighborhood knows, Mr Bennet, that you are a great reader,” Mrs Goulding said on a Tuesday in August. “But were you aware that Martha is as well?” The lady beamed at her youngest niece, who made a show of staring demurely at the carpet.

“I was not aware. Tell me, child, what do you read?”

Mrs Goulding’s face pinched a bit at that, but she did not reply.

“Well,” Miss Hanson said. “I am very fond of Miss Stanhope’s novels.”

“Novels,” said Mr Bennet, “are the kind of books I find particularly trying. No, my dear, a girl of your age should be reading improving books, or the classics. They are so much steadier. Girls of your age need that.” He had conveniently omitted that Elizabeth had just sent him Mrs Radcliffe’s latest and he had been about to crack the spine when Hill had appeared.

The look on the girl’s face! He was tempted to ask if she’d enjoyed Milton but thought he would save that for next week.

“Well, if we cannot speak of books,” Miss Hanson said. “Perhaps you would tell me what you think of the new styles of dresses.”

“Oh! Not finery!” Mr Bennet chuckled. “I managed to see five daughters married without understanding the difference between satin and silk, and I certainly do not intend to learn it now.”

Mrs Goulding managed to talk of nothing else in particular for another fifteen minutes before they took their leave.

The following day, Mr Bennet ordered his things packed and set off for Pemberley.
Chapter 2

Pemberley--and its library--were all he had hoped for, namely, quiet and peaceful. The children, though still a bit young for Molière, nevertheless enjoyed Aesop, and Mr Bennet had a fondness for slipping the younger girl a sweet when Nurse was looking the other way. Although he had never been fond of young people, the Darcy children were not as noisy or spoiled as the Wickham--or even the Bingley--offspring, and if they squabbled, it was in their nursery and away from him, so he could not complain.

Still, he could not share all the reasons for his abrupt departure from Longbourn.

“You will not explain why you have come now?” Elizabeth asked one morning over breakfast.

“Does a father need a reason to visit his daughter?”

“In August?” Darcy’s voice came from behind a newspaper.

“What my husband means,” Elizabeth said with a smile, “is that you have traveled a remarkable distance on very warm, dusty roads without warning. One might think you had a reason for doing so.”

Mr Bennet shrugged and sipped his coffee. “One might remember other times her father has visited without warning. I do enjoy the look of surprise on your face when I am announced.”

Elizabeth smiled and replied, “I enjoy being surprised, it is true. But you are more quiet than usual now, Papa.”

“I am not so used to making conversation anymore.”

Elizabeth frowned, and Darcy’s paper shook. “That does not mean, I hope, that you are out of practice. You were never so quiet with me.” She paused. “With time, it will be easier.”

Mr Bennet smiled at her. “Don’t fret, Lizzy,” he said. “I am not so sad as all that. Having the choice to remain silent is a luxury not found at Longbourn so much as at Pemberley.”

He pushed his chair back from the table. “And I should say the same for the library. One of your volumes awaits, sir. Lizzy.” With a nod at each, he left the room.

His stay lasted but three weeks, a shorter trip than he had initially thought to make. As he watched Darcy ride out to visit tenants or meet with yet another farmer on the topic of the approaching harvest, Mr Bennet felt the pull of Longbourn more keenly than usual. At least, he felt the need to ease his guilt over abandoning his own property. Not that he could ever be what some might call an interested landlord. He certainly didn’t bother himself with the minutiae that caused Darcy to fret and Elizabeth to frown.

He kissed the children good-bye and promised to come again when he was least expected, which always made Lizzy laugh. Although this time, when he embraced Elizabeth, the laughter could not hide the tear she shed. Darcy was quick to take her arm, and thank him very cordially for his visit, which earned him a smile from both father and daughter.

Mr Bennet was more melancholy than he expected to be as he set off for home. The prospect of an empty house and not even a new book to welcome him did seem rather lonely. When his carriage reached the halfway point between Lambton and Meryton, the strange clenching in his stomach dissipated, and Mr. Bennet decided that perhaps it had been indigestion all along. The
Darcys did serve such rich food.

The intervening weeks had brought little change to the neighbourhood. Netherfield’s newest tenants had returned, presumably for the shooting they had enjoyed last year. As he had no unmarried daughters for Mr Haverson’s unmarried sons, there was not much cause to rush over for a visit, and instead Mr Bennet sent off a note requesting the pleasure of the man’s company for shooting, sometime in the next fortnight.

It was Mrs Haverson who responded.

She and her husband would love him to join their party for dinner on the fifth. When Mary came for her weekly visit, she mentioned that she and Hamilton would be attending; he was hoping for Haverson’s business and “besides, would it not be nice to have someone keep him company whilst he ate his soup? Man was not meant to live alone.”

He responded barely three days’ before the dinner with a brief note thanking them for their invitation. Whimsically he considered going out for a ride in the rain the day before the party, but the lure of Goethe he had begun was enough to keep him indoors.

He had just closed it on the final page when he realized it was time to dress for the party. He was still trying to sort out just what the story meant while his valet readied him.

“Benjamin,” he said, as his cravat was being tied, “what do you think about fate?”

The valet looked at him blankly. “I’m certain I don’t know, sir,” he replied. “Would you like the green coat or the black?”

“Oh, the black, I think,” Mr Bennet replied. “After all, I am a widower.”
The dinner itself was decent. Mr Bennet had not realized how much he had missed a well-turned pheasant. Hill never made them just for him anymore. The seating, however, was atrocious. Somehow he had forgotten that Mrs Haverson had a cousin staying with her; a girl of about twenty-one who had a father in some kind of legal profession in London. Thus the conversation consisted mainly of “have you been to Vauxhall?” and “if you love books, did you ever visit Foyles?” as though Bond Street were something they had in common.

Miss Watson was to his right and, worse, Miss Leighton to his left. Miss Leighton was the daughter of nobody-knew-who, and had been visiting the Gouldings for a fortnight already. Apparently, having married off all but one of her nieces, Mrs Goulding was now attempting the same favor for strangers, or near-strangers. Mr Bennet thought it more a case of luck than skill, and nearly said so. In any event, Miss Leighton had neither the gifts of beauty nor conversation and commented mainly on the sauce, or the quality of the soup—much better than what they had in Shropshire!—and Mr Bennet found himself glancing desperately around the table before he had finished half his bowl. Never before had a glass of port seemed so distant and unattainable as in that moment.

As he looked across the groaning tables, Mrs Collins happened to glance up and meet his eye. She offered a faint smile, and Mr Bennet immediately felt that, of anyone, she knew his pain. In fact, she probably did know it, better than anyone else at the dinner. Seated between the indefatigable conversationalist and squire Mr Lawrence and the loquaciously sullen oldest son of the Haversons, Mrs Collins seemed to be chiefly employed in attempting to eat her soup around making noises of understanding as both men prattled on.

He had noticed her briefly when he was announced. Hers was a familiar face, but it had not been part of the Hertfordshire landscape for some time. Not since she had married his fool of a cousin at any rate. Still, Mr Collins had survived the birth of his daughter and son before permanently leaving the service of the exalted Lady Catherine, presumably to fetch and carry for the only other Being she thought more deserving of Mr Collins’ worship than herself.

Mrs Collins had remained in Kent for some time, and Mr Bennet had not realized she was now back in Hertfordshire. She was not in mourning; for one, she was out in company, and two, she wore a blue frock. Collins had died in—the year seven or eight?—sometime during Mrs Bennet’s final convalescence. He had written condolences to Mrs Collins, he thought, and certainly Elizabeth had mentioned it. When had she come back to her family then?

He nearly shouted across the table to ask. Instead, he was forced to answer Miss Watson’s latest inquiry, “Tell me, Mr Bennet, do you ever go to St. James’?”

He sighed and reached for his empty wineglass.

He finally felt able to breathe a bit when the ladies departed and, with a cigar and a glass of port, he could lean back in his chair and listen to the other men.

“You might as well marry as not, Haverson,” Goulding said to their host’s son. “I’m sure my wife could set you up if you’re too busy to do the work on your own. It would keep her from trying to spend my money redoing the sitting room again, at least.” He and his neighbor, Mr Smythe, chuckled.

“We need a good wedding in Meryton,” Sir William added. “Since Bennet’s girls have all
married, there’s not been one. I would encourage Maria to marry, you know, but her mother cannot bear to be parted with her.”

More likely, no man could be persuaded to marry a plain girl with a small dowry, Mr Bennet thought. With Mrs Collins presumably back in residence, he suspected that Lady Lucas was not so lonely.

“Bennet might still give us a wedding, eh?” Mr Goulding joked, to the amusement of the older set. “My wife has plans for you too, old friend, and if you ask me, the only way to avoid them is to ask Mr Perry to send you to Bath for the gout or some other such nonsense.”

At this, some of the older gentlemen actually did start discussing some of Perry’s more ridiculous gout remedies, and the conversation turned to other subjects.

When they entered the drawing room, Mr Bennet saw the matrons start to poke and prod the younger girls to sit up straighter, and the quick fluff of hair and dresses that had amused him when he had unmarried daughters now only wearied him. He found himself drawn to Mrs Collins, who stood a little away from the group, near a window.

“Well, Mrs Collins,” Mr Bennet began, drawing her attention. “You must tell me your opinion of Meryton, now that you have come back to us.”

She smiled slightly. “It is much as it ever was,” she said. “Although I expect it must seem forever altered to you.”

“Aye,” he said, caught for a moment by the sympathy and kindness in her words.

“I received a letter from Elizabeth just this morning,” she said. “She asked me to, how did she say it, ‘have a care for my father, who must be at least occasionally taken out of his library and given a public airing.’ Is it so stuffy in your bookroom, then, sir, that you must be forcibly removed from it?”

He chuckled. “It will always be so to Lizzy, I imagine. I suspect she’s written the same to Mrs Hill. I’ve been finding my favourite volumes in the oddest places these past few months.”

“You’ve had no trouble leaving the library this evening I see,” she said, with a slight lift in her brow that for a moment made her seem again young and challenging, instead of middle aged. “Is it the company?”

He frowned. “More the opportunity to avoid a silent meal. Had I known what I was trading it for, however, I might have reconsidered.”

Mrs Collins grinned. “I understand you, sir. Although I had small children, there were days, after…” She paused here and he nodded, ever so slightly, acknowledging their peculiar affinity. “Well, it was always a heavy silence. There is a limit, it seems, to how long one can endure the sound of her own chewing.”

“And now you are once again at table with your family. I imagine all their varied habits are loud enough to soothe the soul.”

Her grin turned rueful. “I begin to think I will never be alone again. It is one thing to come home to Lucas Lodge for a visit, and another to think one may never leave.”

“You ought to join me the next time I travel to Pemberley,” Mr Bennet said, impulsively. “No matter how hard she tries, Elizabeth can never contrive to spend more than an hour or two with me before I am lost again in some unfamiliar corridor. Neither of us would be in danger of being
too much in company there.”

As he said it, he watched her expression change, and it was only when she actually blushed that he realized what his invitation implied. He shuffled his feet awkwardly.

“Mr Bennet, I thank you for your kindness,” she stammered, “but I think, that is, well, my children and I have not been invited to visit Mrs Darcy.”

“No, no, of course not,” he replied, almost automatically. “Excuse me, Mrs Collins. I must, er, could I bring you a coffee or tea?”

“No, thank you,” she said, still looking away.

“Well then,” he said, and walked across the room.

Ten minutes later, with Mrs Collins still on the other side of the saloon, he thanked his hostess and called for his carriage. He spent the three mile ride home shaking his head and wondering what had come over him.
Chapter 4

It seemed that, in attending that evening party at Netherfield, Mr Bennet had somehow given the neighbourhood the impression that he was, in fact, serious about the possibility of remarriage. The mothers of Meryton had redoubled their efforts to install their daughters as mistress of Longbourn, despite his resistance at every turn. Even Mary, whom he expected to frown and quote some Old Testament reference to remaining faithful unto death, had simply shrugged and said, “Even Saint Paul understood the necessity of marriage.”

Mr Bennet raised his eyebrows at this, but chose not to respond. Wisely, it seemed, for she went on to discuss Fordyce’s treatment of the passage, and at this he was able to wander away to the window, where he glimpsed a carriage pulling up to the house.

Lady Lucas emerged first, admonishing one of her daughters--ah yes! Maria-- to brush the dust out of her cloak and stand up straight and not act like such a meek little thing. Yet, it was only when the third person emerged from the carriage that Mr Bennet felt himself pale slightly. He coughed to cover his nerves and said, “Lady Lucas and her daughters have come to call.”

Mary looked up at him, but he could not say whether the look on her face was due to his not-quite-casual tone, or at being interrupted mid-sermon.

When the women entered the parlor, Mr Bennet felt the chill of the hallway chase them in, and peculiarly, it almost strengthened his resolve to behave more civilly. Mrs Collins did not seem wholly relaxed, but smiled and curtsied and, on the whole, greeted him so properly that he felt himself growing fully at ease without having to exert much effort to make himself so.

Lady Lucas, as always, needed little more enticement than a stationary human to carry the conversation toward a dull, unimaginative and tedious end, and Mary’s inquiry on the state of her health and her family’s was more than adequate to such a purpose. It left the rest of the company at leisure to stare out of windows, or, in the case of Mr Bennet, to stare at his visitors.

Miss Lucas, in the light of day, was even more plain and quiet than her elder sister had been at the same age. Where Mrs Collins had at least had some good humour to lend a kind edge to her features, Maria still seemed pale and shy, nearly always cowed into silence by the presence of much older adults.

Nevertheless, the sisters bore some resemblance to each other, in face if not in disposition. Yet a plain, unmarried girl of five-and-twenty was a much different and more pitiable creature than a widowed woman of middle age with merely ordinary features. The world looked much more kindly on women with two children, whose laugh lines deepened around their eyes and whose waistlines were more rounded than lithe. Even the late Mrs Bennet, a woman whose beauty had been much more remarkable, had lost her trim figure and young prettiness by the time her daughters were old enough for the schoolroom.

“She’s well,” he said, and the sound of his voice brought Lady Lucas’ soliloquy to an abrupt end. “May I ask after your children?”

“They are well,” she replied, seemingly not at all shocked to be the subject of his conversation. “May I ask after yours?”

He smiled. “At least one is before you, and the others I imagine do just as well.”
“Your daughters are typically in good health, I remember,” she said.

“Yes, we are all of excellent dispositions.” Belatedly, he thought of Kitty, but decided it best not to mention her.

“You might live another twenty years at least, Mr Bennet,” Lady Lucas said. “You never seem to suffer from even the smallest illness. Though,” she added searchingly, “some do believe that a broken heart might be just as terrible as any other malady.” She caught herself then, and at her eldest daughter’s sharp look, said, “I am sure, though, that if Sir William was to die, I should spend the rest of my life in mourning. I could not contemplate the thought of marrying again.”

He merely raised his eyebrows in reply.

“Mrs Hamilton,” Mrs Collins said. “How is your son?”

Mary began to describe the boy’s latest antics, which she had only just described to him, so Mr Bennet continued his silent perusal of Mrs Collins’ person. She really was remarkably unchanged, even after so many years away, and apparently despite his late cousin’s tastes for rich food and terrible conversation. She looked almost happy, if one was permitted to be so after the death of one’s spouse. He was cheered by the thought that one day, if he smiled in public, as she was doing now, it might not even be worthy of gossip.

“What are you smiling at, Mr Bennet?” Lady Lucas interrupted Miss Lucas’ feeble foray into the conversation. “Do share the joke.”

“I thank you, madam, for your interest, but I was merely considering something I read this morning.” It was a lie, of course, but should inhibit further inquiry.

“Oh, was it the Assembly announcement?” Mrs Collins asked. “Ours had an amusing little mistake on the page; someone missed a letter and apparently the Towne Payers will be providing the music.”

Mr Bennet chuckled, thankful for the reprieve. He smiled at Mrs Collins and was gratified by her answering grin.

The visit passed with more amiable discussion, mainly in part to Mrs Collins’ efforts to draw Mary into a discussion of raising children in Hertfordshire and her deft ability to keep Lady Lucas from having too great a share in the conversation, particularly as it turned to marriage.

When they parted, Mr Bennet thought that morning visits would not seem nearly so tedious if Mrs Collins would only be available to help him keep some unfortunate subjects from being discussed in his parlor. Perhaps, he mused, as he settled into his favorite library chair with a well-worn volume, he could offer her some kind of employment as a drawing room hostess at Longbourn.
Chapter 5

November 1810

Mrs Darcy to Mr Bennet

Dearest Papa,

My husband has informed me that his uncle intends to present some new legislation this winter and thus, we are all to meet in London in January. As I see no reason why our carriage cannot just as easily traverse the road to Longbourn, I have informed Mr Darcy that we shall break our journey for a few days in Hertfordshire. The children need a good measure of teasing from their grandfather and I must measure my nephew’s growth in order to assure Lady Catherine that the Darcy progeny have not suffered from their mother’s heritage and are, as ever, superior to all other children ever born, excepting their father and possibly their cousin Anne.

Should you like a visit from your favorite daughter and her extremely well-behaved children and husband? Perhaps I should have waited for an invitation, but such a lack never seems to hamper your visits to Pemberley. Thus I feel sure you will be ready to welcome us to Longbourn one week after Twelfth Night. The children ask to be remembered to you fondly, and Jenny asks if you might have some of your special sweeties for her when we arrive. My husband sends his greetings and particularly requests that you confirm our travel plans by return post, though I have repeatedly assured him that such an event is unlikely.

Nevertheless, we anticipate your letter, and our visit. I remain, as ever,

Your daughter, Elizabeth Darcy

December 1810

Mrs Darcy to Mrs Collins

My dear Charlotte,

I hope this letter finds you and your children well and happy at Lucas Lodge. Have you finished the dress you were working on for Catherine? Life at Pemberley is as quiet as always, though the children contrive to keep things exciting. Last week, Edward managed to hide from his nurse in one of the unused bedrooms in the guest wing. He fell asleep, but only after he locked the door from the inside! For hours we feared him lost, and Jenny was convinced he was kidnapped by old Mrs Rhodes--the washerwoman in Lambton whom they believe to be a witch. When Edward woke, he was hungry, like all boys of his age, and while he would not like for me to tell this to anyone outside the family (I can be assured of your secrecy, I am certain) he cried and wailed and made fuss enough that one of the footmen found him and convinced him to open the door.

You will certainly appreciate how much the children have grown when we see you next month. I wonder if my father informed you that we plan to visit Longbourn on our way to London. If he has not, would you be kind enough to remind him? You know that once the weather turns he hardly removes himself from his library, and I imagine Hill has not even been told of our coming. Do I ask too much? I fear only you, or possibly Mrs Hamilton, could penetrate his solitude, but she has been ill and will not visit him just now. You needn’t go if it is any trouble, and certainly if you do not like it. I do worry about him, though, alone in that great house. I am sure he would
The children are calling again, doubtless for some maternal arbitration. I remain, yours, &c.,

Elizabeth Darcy

When Mrs Collins called, alone, in December, Mr Bennet received her, alone, in the drawing room.

“Mr Bennet,” she said, and gave him a small smile, one he had come to recognize as the expression she wore when she was amused. “Your daughter summoned me here to extract you from your books and remind you that she will arrive next month.”

“Oh, Lizzy is meddling, is she? She wrote to me of their visit. I asked Hill to air out the nursery.” He shrugged.

“She fears that you are, well let me read it, ‘alone in that great house.’ Have you any response to that, sir?” Mrs Collins was serious, but her eyes gleamed with mirth. He was reminded suddenly of the night they met at Netherfield. She had quoted one of Lizzy’s letters to him, and it had amused her then as well.

“Only that when she and her children descend on me, I shall certainly not be alone.”

Mrs Collins smiled again. The two of them had developed a comfortable rapport over the past months, meeting at countless dinners and parties. Lady Lucas had nearly installed herself—and her daughters—as permanent inhabitants of Longbourn’s drawing room, apparently realizing that, should Mr Bennet die without an heir, her grandson would become its master. Failing that, perhaps she thought Miss Lucas might entice him to matrimony. Occasionally, Mr Bennet thought he saw her cast a calculating glance at the furnishings.

It was not, he thought, a sentimental friendship. He did not look forward to seeing her across the table, did not construct witty repartee before he met her. No, she was simply the only sensible person in the neighbourhood now. Her wit was neither as quick nor as invective as his, but she did know when to laugh, and had a quiet air of mockery about her, as though she always knew what the others were thinking, but was too polite to mention such a thing in company.

“Does Elizabeth not know that you are the most sought-after gentleman in the neighbourhood? Have you mentioned it in your letters?”

“I am a rather... dilatory correspondent.”

Mrs Collins smiled again. “As ever, it seems. Shall I return her letter with a description of Miss Leighton’s most recent schemes to capture your attention?”

He smirked. “By all means. But Haverson has invited me for dinner tomorrow, and his son is home. Perhaps I will mention the lonely widow at Lucas Lodge and her love of tales of heroic hunting exploits?”

She merely laughed. “No one seriously believes I will remarry. You may tell him whatever you like.”

Mr Bennet frowned. They had joked about the interest shown by the young Haverson for a fortnight. “Not even your family?”
Mrs Collins coloured. “I married when I was seven-and-twenty and I have two children.” She looked at him, but he merely shook his head. She sighed. “They expect that my settlement will be enough until my son—well, until William can care for me.”

Mr Bennet nodded absently. Certainly he hadn’t truly thought that she would marry again, but...he thought she would be asked. He wondered if she expected it for herself.

“Would you—that is...” he paused, staring at the weak mid-morning sun slanting through the window and across one of Mrs Bennet’s priceless figurines.

“Would I wish to marry again?” The grin had gone and she was looking at him calmly.

“Yes,” Mr Bennet answered, “would you?”

“Not particularly.” She looked at him, her face blank with an honesty that caught him off guard.

“Truly?”

“You must understand,” she said. “I was not in love with my husband—”

“My dear Mrs Collins, no one who met the two of you would have thought that,” Mr Bennet interrupted.

She sighed in amused exasperation. “It was a very disinterested match, on both of our parts. I enjoyed running my own household, I love my children. Yet, the freedom I have now... I am not certain I could...go back. My husband was...kind. But I would have no guarantee if I married someone else. I am content, Mr Bennet, and do not need the promise of anything more. I need not marry again.”

She looked away for a moment, and he was left staring at her profile. Still, she did not seem ashamed of what she had related, only a bit surprised by her own frankness. He had not expected it either, though they had become much more to each other than acquaintances over the past months. They were, it seemed, friends.

“I do not want to marry either,” he said, and caught her surprised glance. “I fell in love with a pretty face and youthful high spirits.” He shrugged. “It is no secret that Mrs Bennet and I were well suited for perhaps the first few years of our marriage, and not at all suited after that. Why would I want to concern myself with another’s happiness again, when it is not certain she would be concerned with mine?”

Mrs Collins smiled. “If you mean Miss Leighton, it is almost certain she would not be, sir.”

He chuckled. “I fear, however, that it is expected of me, and I cannot find another defense against what my life has become. You see, Mrs Collins, I am not content. I do not want to be hunted by the matrons of this neighbourhood, and I cannot tell my daughters, for fear that they would encourage me to marry, rather than the reverse. I simply want to be left alone.”

They stared at one another in silence for a moment, and Mr Bennet could not decipher the look on Mrs Collins face. He thought it might be best described as wistful, but then again, she was frowning, only slightly, and her eyes seemed a bit sad. No, not wistful. Pensive.

She straightened, and it made him realize she had relaxed her normally straight shoulders whilst he had been speaking. He almost asked her what she thought of him, now that he had revealed himself to be so callous and cruel toward the others in their neighborhood, if she thought him a coward for hiding from his children.
Instead, she looked at him and said, calmly as ever, “Well, Mr Bennet, shall I help you with planning the menus then?”

He smiled slightly, inclined his head, and replied, “Your assistance would be most welcome.”
In the early years of Elizabeth’s marriage, before Mrs Bennet had fallen ill, any occasion that brought the Darcy family to Longbourn was feted and announced with much aplomb. Now that Mrs Bennet was no longer able to inform the neighborhood of his expected guests, Mr Bennet suspected that Mrs Phillips had claimed the honour of announcing it for herself. In any case, the result was the same: his drawing room was full of people, come ostensibly to visit with their beloved former Miss Elizabeth, but in reality, to curry favour with her husband.

Darcy he typically admitted to his bookroom, and thus, the two of them were able to escape many of the worst callers on pretense of ‘meeting to discuss business.’ Elizabeth always rolled her eyes when she found them there after the visits ended, noses in different books or obscured behind newspapers. When she was particularly annoyed at their absence, she sent the children in to make sure that neither read anything, as Jenny demanded a sweet from her grandfather and Edward asked to demonstrate his own excellent abilities.

Occasionally, they were forced to join Elizabeth in meaningless conversation with neighbours he had met all too often over the past few months. These were the mornings Mr Bennet dreaded. Though she had lived in another county since her marriage, the residents of Meryton had changed so little in the intervening years that any anomaly in the course of conversation always drew Lizzy’s inquiry. She was certain to note that Miss Leighton’s questions were always directed at him, and that Mrs Goulding was so anxious for him to answer that she asked again when he failed to respond.

What Mr Bennet had not anticipated, as he sat making dull conversation was that Mrs Collins would be in attendance. As Elizabeth’s particular friend, Mrs Collins sat next to Elizabeth, and although the two women were politely involved in the discourse, they were also, as often as not, talking between themselves.

Mr Bennet had often met with Mrs Collins in the weeks before Elizabeth’s visit. She continued to visit Longbourn with her mother and Miss Lucas, but came also to speak with Hill about the menus. Mrs Collins thought he should host a dinner for Elizabeth and Mr Darcy, and had, with very little input from him, planned the details, sparing him a great deal of annoyance and bother in the process. He actually found himself looking forward to the mornings when she would walk into his library and, with patience and confidence, say, “Mr Bennet, we do need you to participate in this endeavor, if only a little.”

In return, he would reply, “Mrs Collins, I am ever at your leisure. How may I be of service?”

Now that Elizabeth and the children were here, though, those meetings felt like something secret, as though he and Mrs Collins had been overly familiar, engaged in a friendship that he would not have wanted Elizabeth to know about. It was not only that Mrs Collins was her friend, but that she was his now, too, and he felt that Elizabeth, and most certainly, her husband, would remonstrate him, somehow, for that. Oh, he had not behaved wrongly, not exactly, but there was something in this in-between state of affairs that bothered his conscience. Mr Bennet did not appreciate being bothered by his conscience, and generally struggled to avoid it, but now it seemed to be seated across from him in the drawing room, wearing a green frock and laughing at something his friend, Mrs Collins was saying.

For a moment, he wished that Mr Darcy would grow so impatient with the country manners of their neighbours that he would collect his family and storm out, putting an end to this vague displeasure Mr Bennet was now feeling.
Instead, the children begged to be allowed to stay for another week.

On the evening of the dinner, as their neighbours arrived, Mr Bennet was troubled by the late arrival of the Lucas Lodge party. Oh, Elizabeth had capably taken over the arrangements Mrs Collins had made, and everything was in good order; Mrs Bennet would have bemoaned the lack of greenery, but it was January, and exceptions had to be made. Still, he had hoped to at least acknowledge Mrs Collins’ effort, and that would be made much more difficult if she were not present.

At last they were announced, and Mr Bennet unhappily noted the serious look on Mrs Collins’ face, the line between her eyebrows which, he had learned, denoted a particular frustration with others—she had directed it at him on occasion, when he was ignorant of some party detail. As they came into the drawing room, Sir William announced to all who would listen that they were delayed on account of a broken carriage wheel, and that they were very sorry to have missed the start of the festivities. He then presented himself to Mr Darcy, who very graciously offered the Lucas family the use of his own vehicle to carry them home. Mr Bennet coughed into his fist at this, hoping it hid his smirk.

From the look on Mrs Collins’ face, she at least had noted his amusement.

The courses were well-prepared, and the conversation particularly fine, owing, in no small measure, to Elizabeth’s wit at the far end of the table, and Charlotte’s presence at his side. The rest of the party were spread out along the table, including many of the women—and men—who had been so intent on matching him with their daughters all through the autumn. Miss Leighton was staring sullenly into her soup somewhere in the middle of the group, and Miss Watson was eyeing him speculatively from a few seats away. The other matrons and their husbands were left to make the best of their dinner partners, and seemed to be faring well. He had only glanced at the seating arrangements when Mrs Collins had prepared them, so he could not be sure if she had placed herself on his left, or if Elizabeth had altered the placement to make it so. Between the three of them—Mrs Collins, Mr Darcy, and Mr Bennet’s own contributions—they carried on a spirited discussion of books and music, while Elizabeth was left to listen to Mr and Mrs Haverson and Sir William discuss items of local interest, while casting longing glances in their direction. Mr Bennet had never been so well-amused at his own table, without having to resort to baiting one of his guests for entertainment.

When the ladies left them for the drawing room, Mr Bennet offered cigars and port to the gentlemen, and carried on his discussion with Darcy, whilst the other men talked of farming. Still, he felt a peculiar inclination to join the ladies not very much later, and stood rather abruptly to lead the men away.

He entered the drawing room, Darcy next to him, and the sight that greeted them was rather odd. Elizabeth had a strange look upon her face, curious and guarded as he had rarely seen her since that long-ago talk in his library when he had tried to persuade her out of matrimony. Mrs Collins was standing, but turned away from the others. Lady Lucas, however, was sat upon the settee, proclaiming loudly that her daughter had been instrumental in carrying off the evening. “My dear Charlotte, as you see, is well prepared for helping her son become master of Longbourn,” she said.

Mr Bennet heard a strangled sound come out of Darcy, who in three steps was across the room and next to Elizabeth, directing a fierce glare at Lady Lucas. For his part, Mr Bennet could barely move from the doorway, arrested by the sad slump of Charlotte’s shoulders, the embarrassed flush that coloured her profile.

He wanted to speak, but could not. Not even wit, he thought, could save him now. He knew not
how to ease her suffering, or how to address the questions he could see dancing in Elizabeth’s eyes.

It was Mr Darcy who saved them all. “Lady Lucas,” he said, in a tone Mr Bennet had not heard from him since that same day in the library, “my wife is, of course, thankful for your daughter’s continued friendship, though I assure you, Mrs Darcy has already spoken to Mrs Collins of her gratitude.”

The majority of their guests had never heard him speak so many words together, and this, more than anything, was enough to shock them into silence. Elizabeth, taking advantage of this, rose, and asked, “Shall we have some music? If I open the instrument, perhaps Mrs Haverson will consent to play for us.”

Only when the first strains of the sonata sounded could Mr Bennet make himself move farther into the room. As he moved toward the back, where there was an open chair, he passed Mrs Collins, who had turned to face the pianoforte, still standing in the shadows.

He hardly knew what he did, but before he could check the impulse, he had placed his hand upon her shoulder. She turned, eyebrows raised in question and mouth open, half in astonishment, he supposed. For all their new-found friendship, they had never before touched one another.

“I am exceedingly sorry,” he whispered, turning his head so as not to be seen by the others in the room. “I did wish to thank you, but now...”

She had inclined her head slightly, and he could not see her expression as he related this. Now, though, she looked him full in the face, and with remarkable composure said, “I require no thanks, sir. I acted as a friend to Mrs Darcy. That is all.” She stepped away from him, then; his hand curled into a fist where the silk of her dress had been and fell to his side.

A draft blew in from the window directly behind him, and Mr Bennet shivered.
Elizabeth and Darcy left on a February morning, Edward and Jenny bundled in blankets and coats, and their parents only slightly less so. The carriage wheels creaked as they worked over the frozen ground, and Mr Bennet stood outside, watching, until they turned down a bend in the road. Then he ambled inside, called for tea, and ensconced himself in his library, hoping it would warm him.

The next week was full of a cold rain that turned quickly to snow and winds that howled against his windows in the night. Mr Bennet stared out at his fields during those dreary mornings, his house oddly silent without the footsteps of children or the conversation of unwanted callers. He enjoyed the reprieve, but it reminded him even more of how empty Longbourn was now. Perhaps to be left alone was not what he wanted after all. He wanted the option of solitude, not to have it thrust upon him.

It was Tuesday morning when the sun finally cracked the dull gray of the clouds. It was still cold, but bright, and Mr Bennet called for his horse. Deer blinked at him from the fields along the road to Meryton, and before he knew it, he was turning down the lane that would take him to Lucas Lodge. Perhaps it was the puffs of smoke rising over the chimneys that enticed him, or the long lonely days with only the servants for company. He dismounted, took a steadying breath, watching it steam out in front of him, and approached the house.

Sir William was not in his study, but was with the family in the drawing room. Only Miss Lucas was incapable of disguising a look of surprise as he entered, though Lady Lucas welcomed him with a rather queer tone. He greeted them all, noting that Mrs Collins was seated at the table with a young boy, whose face was pinched in concentration. Both of them rose when he came in; she nodded politely, and prodded the boy to say “Good morning, sir,” before they resumed their focus on his studies.

“Do sit down, Bennet! What brings you to us on such a cold morning?” Sir William, as ever glad of a new face and conversation partner, shook hands with him happily.

Mr Bennet sat, facing the table where Mrs Collins and her son were working, and replied, “I was on my way to Meryton, and realized I am many visits in your debt. I thought to begin to repay them.” It was a ridiculous excuse. As he sat there, the curious eyes of the Lucas family on him, Mr Bennet thought, ruefully, that the last time he’d felt so uncomfortable during a morning call was when he was courting his wife.

He sat there, making small talk with Sir William and Lady Lucas and glancing over to watch Mrs Collins and her son when he thought they might not notice. Mr Bennet suddenly realized that this was _exactly_ how his previous courtship had proceeded, with shrewd parents, a flighty young girl staring at him, and even a little boy working his sums in the corner.

Whatever Sir William asked him after that, he answered without knowing what he said. Certainly, he thought later, he had stammered his way through the answers to the Lucas’ inquiries. Mrs Collins had only looked at him once, offering a confused smile in response to something—he knew not what—he said to her parents. Lady Lucas contrived at one point to take Sir William from the room, leaving Mr Bennet only Miss Lucas for conversation. He stayed a few minutes more, without saying much to anybody, and took his leave as soon as politeness allowed.

The ride into Meryton was brisk; he had intended to check for a new book, and perhaps some gloves, and would not be deterred by his embarrassment. The wind beat at his cheeks, and for once, he was thankful, for it hid the flush that had crept into his face during that unfortunate half
hour in the Lucas’ drawing room.

His business was conducted fairly rapidly; the village was nearly empty and those on the streets merely nodded their acknowledgement as they bustled past. Mr Bennet found himself on the road to Longbourn much more quickly than he expected, and much less cheered. He had thought that a brief time in the company of others would make the calm and quiet of Longbourn easier to bear.

It was odd, he reflected, as he settled into his library, a glass of port in one hand and a book in the other, that the year of mourning had not felt so lonely. It had been a reprieve, after the daily visits from Mr Perry, Mrs Phillips tearful forays into the sick room, and the constant noise of Hill’s footsteps on the stairs. Now, the silence felt oppressive. For a moment, he listened for the servants. The clock ticked for a full five minutes before one of the maids could be heard humming in the hall.

He ate his supper, alone in the dining room. The table, after the various dinners he’d given in the past few weeks, stretched long and empty across the room, candles glittering only near his single chair. He sipped his wine, wondering, for the first time since his wife’s death, whether there were any invitations he might respond to for the coming week.

It was only later, as the creak of the staircase under his feet echoed through the house, that a strange thought occurred to him.

If he married again, he would not have to eat every meal alone.
Lady Lucas brought her daughters to call on Thursday. Miss Lucas whispered her greetings, wide-eyed and nervous. Mrs Collins, on the other hand, calmly made her curtsy with little in her expression to indicate any feeling at all. Mr Bennet frowned. He had hoped they might be beyond the unpleasantness of the last evening they had been in company together.

“Your call was very unexpected, Mr Bennet, though certainly not unwelcome.” Lady Lucas said. “We hope to see more of you at Lucas Lodge. My daughter, in particular, would be happy to see you.”

Only after he had glanced at Mrs Collins did Mr Bennet realize Lady Lucas expected him to look at Miss Lucas, but it was too late. Charlotte blushed and turned away from his gaze, and for a moment, Mr Bennet could not reply. He collected himself and answered, “I imagine she would like my assistance teaching arithmetic to her son?”

He grinned at Mrs Collins, who pursed her lips; he could not say if she was annoyed or restraining a smile.

Lady Lucas was much easier to read. Her brow was furrowed in confusion and her lips turned down in a frown. “Mrs Collins will welcome you at Lucas Lodge as well, I am certain, sir.”

“Excellent,” he replied. “I will visit. Though Mrs Collins should know that I much prefer to give instruction on the classics.” She did look at him then and he continued, “The follies of men are so neatly displayed in those works.”

“Aye, sir, they are,” she said softly. “But I find the tragedy is not in what men have done, but in what they have not.”

“Oh?”

“So many of their mistakes could be remedied by offering an apology.” Their eyes met for a moment, and it was not censure, but forgiveness, that he read in their expression.

“Mrs Collins, that is precisely the point.” He smiled. “Problems so easily solved are of little value for entertainment. Audiences demand much more for penance.” Mr Bennet turned back to Lady Lucas. “When I next come to visit, I shall bring my Sophocles.”

Again, Lady Lucas seemed unsure of what to do with such an offer, but she fielded it gamely, and turned the subject to matters of the neighbourhood. Mr Bennet allowed her the digression, and instead of teasing her, as he had been wont to do before, he conversed amiably and politely, always aware of Mrs Collins’ expression, which, by the time they departed, had warmed to such a degree that she granted him a parting smile.

“Mrs Collins,” he said, as they were making their goodbyes, “There is a matter of housekeeping I should like your advice on, if I could trouble you in such a manner.”

She tilted her head curiously, but nodded.

“I shall not burden you with it today,” he said, “but perhaps you could visit Longbourn sometime next week?”

“Of course, sir, I shall come when I am able,” was all the reply he received, but it was enough to be certain she was no longer offended. He smiled warmly in reply and watched them go, before
wandering toward the library, in search of his Sophocles.

The next morning, he gathered up his Greek tragedies and set off for Lucas Lodge. His reception, like the weather, was much warmer. Lady Lucas offered him tea and Sir William asked about his tenants. Still, it was the boy in the corner who drew his attention. Mrs Collins again sat next to him, though today she was sewing while her son completed his work. After making dull conversation with the elder Lucases for a few minutes, and after Miss Lucas had offered a meek inquiry on his daughters, Mr Bennet made his way to the table where the Collins family was seated.

“Mrs Collins,” he said, and she smiled up at him from her chair, “I have brought several volumes I feel your son might wish to study.”

“The Greek we were discussing only yesterday? I think William may not quite be ready for the tragedy of Oedipus.”

“I should say not. I thought we could start with Antigone.”

“Ah, excellent. William ought to be reminded of the consequences of burying his sister alive. He is nearly twelve, after all.”

“I should think with only a sister, he would be spared the trial of going to war, and thus she will be quite safe.”

“I am not certain that William views the matter quite as you do, sir. Outside of Thebes, it seems that sisters are perfectly capable of warring against their brothers.”

Mr Bennet smiled. “And as I have witnessed, also against their sisters, though your daughter is safe from that, madam.”

“I certainly count it as a blessing that there are only two of them in the battle.”

The child in question had been eagerly listening to their conversation, and Mr Bennet could see some resemblance to his late father in the furrow of his brow.

“Mama?” William interrupted, a bit cautiously. “I have finished my sums. Shall I go find Catherine?”

“No, dear. Mr Bennet has come to read with you. Put your other books away for now, please.”

As the boy obediently gathered his things and carried them away, Mr Bennet took the chair on the other side of Mrs Collins, aware that the other adults in the room were casting speculative glances at him.

“Was the boy told to expect my coming?” Mr Bennet asked Mrs Collins.

“He is no stranger to interference in his education, sir. Even if I had not mentioned that you took an interest in his work, he would not have behaved differently.” She had not looked at him, not directly, though her glance slanted up toward him at the last.

“You have provided all his lessons, Mrs Collins?”

“As I was able, sir. I believe my late husband intended to send him to school, but when he came of an age to go, his father died. I thought it best to wait, and since we came to Meryton he studies with Mr Franklin.”
“And now? Would you send him to school? He will need—rather, I was at Oxford, and I believe Mr Collins attended Cambridge.” It was awkwardly phrased. He wanted to ask if she could send the boy, if her finances would allow it, if her settlement extended so far, if there was any money for such an expense.

“I hope he will have such an opportunity. It would undoubtedly be to his benefit.” She did not look at him.

“Might I offer some assistance?”

“I believe you already have,” she said, and this time her look was nearly reproachful. She called to her son, who was speaking with his grandfather. “William, Mr Bennet is waiting.”

Mrs Collins did not move from her chair while he was present, and Mr Bennet thought he saw her smile occasionally as they read. The boy’s Greek was fair, though he stumbled on a few of the more difficult words, and Mr Bennet assisted with the more troublesome passages. It was, Mr Bennet reflected later, not a terrible way to spend a morning. He had not done so since his oldest daughters were quite young, and had not expected that he would enjoy it now.

He left Lucas Lodge after luncheon. His interlude with young master Collins had gone a fair way to answering the unspoken questions of Sir William and Lady Lucas, and their conversation while dining had been much more easy. Mr Bennet found himself wondering if they would act the same the next time they all met, especially at Longbourn. Still, there was something about their time together that had felt strange, and he could not say what it was.

That evening, after a glass of port, he stared into the fire, puzzling over his morning. Mrs Collins had seemed nearly resentful of his desire to help her son, and he could not understand it. He had the means, and William would be the heir, so it seemed right that he should, at the very least, offer to help educate the boy. Why had she refused such an advantage? He had not thought it in her nature to be so impractical. They were friends, and surely friends could be counted on in such a circumstance.

Of course, perhaps she regretted their friendship? But he had not seen that in her expression, and she had not been so circumspect in relaying such feelings before.

Had he overstepped somehow? He had always intended that when the boy was a bit older he should begin learning the estate. Educating him seemed a natural precursor to such an event. Mr Bennet thought of dispatching a note to Mrs Collins, asking her to please be clear on what he was or was not allowed to do—he seemed doomed to continually give offence without understanding why. Mrs Bennet had never let him wallow in ambiguity. She had been frightfully clear, if typically nonsensical, in enumerating the ways in which he had failed as a father and husband.

Mr Bennet sat up in his chair at this. Had he thought of Charlotte in the same way that he thought of his wife? Had he been thinking of her in such a way? For how long?

Other realizations followed these with rapidity: he had, essentially, been courting her, sitting in that parlor, teaching her son, asking her to plan his menus. He had called it friendship, and truly it was; he had ignored every other behaviour that might indicate there was more to the case, apparently believing that without feeling a heady combination of attraction and lust, he did not harbour any feelings of affection for her.

Had he raised her expectations? Had he behaved callously without meaning to do so? He slumped back in the chair, draining his glass in one long gulp.

There was nothing for it. He would have to propose.
Chapter 9

It was Tuesday when Mrs Collins came to call. They had met at church on Sunday, but he had only been able to speak to her of trifling matters: the weather, everybody’s health, and the price of beef. To be sure, he knew very little about any of those things, and hoped his ignorance covered up the sudden attack of nerves he felt in her presence.

How did one ask a widow to become a wife again? He’d had very little trouble the first time; Mrs Bennet had practically said the words for him. Then, before he realized it, they were married and then they were parents and now, here he was, of an age best reserved for complaining about the aches in one’s knees, contemplating proposals.

Mrs Collins would surely laugh at him, if she knew.

His only solace was in remembering that she had accepted an offer from his cousin. Mr Bennet was unable to believe that any man of sense and education could possibly make a proposal with less grace and style than Mr Collins.

Perhaps a letter? The very idea of writing it was appalling.

Thus it was that when Mrs Collins entered his study on Tuesday, he was little prepared for the interview he had requested. Oh, he had meant to ask her about some insignificant housekeeping matter, but now he could not remember even what that was.

He offered her tea and she accepted, and then they sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment before she spoke, a curious expression on her face.

“You had something you wished to inquire about, Mr Bennet?”

“Ah yes, Mrs Collins, though I cannot remember now what precisely the matter was.”

Her frown deepened. “It was housekeeping, was it not?”

“Yes, but now perhaps I could address a different matter with you?”

“Of course, sir.”

“It is, I suppose, also related to the housekeeping, in a manner of speaking...” He looked at her face, her expression cautious and confused. “Not only about housekeeping, but also about, well...”

He set down his teacup, if only to keep the it from rattling in the saucer as he held it.

“Mr Bennet, are you quite well?” Now she put her cup down, and began to reach across the desk toward him.

“Of course, of course, it is just that I find this a bit difficult to speak of; I am not sure how to proceed.”

She waited. Mr Bennet came to a decision.

“Mrs Collins, I am an old man, and not in the habit of making romantic declarations. I would like to ask, rather, to know: would you consider marrying me?”

Her expression in that moment changed swiftly, from shock to confusion, and finally to wariness.
“Is this a proposal, sir?”

“I intended it to be one,” he said. “Though I think it got a bit muddled in the middle.” He sighed and said, more gently, “I have come to respect you, and wish to marry you, if you will accept me.”

She stared at her hands for a moment, and he noticed they were twisted in her skirts. When she looked at him again, she said, very slowly, “Mr Bennet, I have never endeavoured to draw your notice, as some of the other young women in Meryton have done. I believe I made my feelings on matrimony quite clear to you once before.”

He smiled. She had not refused him, not precisely. “You did, but perhaps I failed to consider them quite the obstacle you intended them to present.”

“They were not an obstacle, sir. I desired what marriage offered me when I was younger, but I do not like the idea of it for myself, not anymore.”

“Come now, Mrs Collins,” he said, standing and walking around the desk to sit next to her. “I am not asking for anything so terrible. Matrimony is not the same as prison.”

She looked at him, and he was taken aback by the forlorn expression in her eyes. “Is it not?” She turned away for a moment, then looked back, this time with an intensity he had not previously seen from her. “I do not want more children. I will not displace the two I have, nor will I see them treated poorly.”

Mr Bennet laughed, before he perceived that she was annoyed and checked himself. “Mrs Collins, what would I want with more children? I desire a quiet life.” She seemed placated, but he reached over and took her hand, adding quietly, “I will not take away what belongs to your son.”

Mrs Collins tightened her hold on his hand and, a moment later, looked up at him, relief in her eyes and a smile working its way across her lips. “Mr Bennet, am I to understand you are asking me to marry you in order to stop the flood of callers and invitations you are currently receiving?”

“Oh of course,” he answered. “What other use have I for a wife?”

Now she smiled in earnest. “My dear sir, have you any idea what a wedding will entail? Or what the neighbourhood will think? They will not let us alone for six months, at least.”

He grinned. “Well then, you must endeavour to meet these obligations with equanimity. I am sure they expect me to do as I always have: stay in my library and allow my wife to care for the rest.”

Mrs Collins stiffened at this and withdrew her hand from his. He frowned.

“Mr Bennet, whilst I understand that you are no longer a young man and disinclined to change your habits, you must see that I am not of a similar disposition to your late wife, and will expect to be treated differently.”

“And I am not cut of the same cloth as your late husband. I should think you would count it a blessing. Do you think I am trying to recreate my first marriage with my second?”

She looked offended at this, but carried on, “I think nothing of the kind, but I will not be mocked and chided in front of company, nor will my children. They may have had a silly father, but he was not cruel to them. I would sooner be ignored than insulted.”

This was not what he had expected. Oh, he had not believed she would fawn about and prostrate herself with grateful acceptance, but to have his flaws as a husband and father thus presented was out of the ordinary in another way.
He pursed his lips and replied. “Well, then madam, if we are making rules for this union, allow me to say that I will not be managed. I will not enter into a marriage only to be stripped of my independence.”

She was shocked at his vehemence, he could tell. But a moment later, Mrs Collins laughed, and kept laughing, to Mr Bennet’s confusion and wonder. When he realized what he had said, and how ridiculous it sounded, he began to chuckle as well.

“Oh, sir,” she said, now all smiles and, it seemed, relief. “If we are arguing in this manner already, I see no reason why I should not accept you. There are worse things than to marry a man with whom one may be frank.”

He smiled at her tenderly. “I would prefer you to be Charlotte,” he said, and was pleased to see her blush a very little, “and I would hope that such an argument does not preclude a tumultuous union. I wish to marry you because I desire your friendship, and as such, I expect our marriage shall be a wholly new and pleasant experience.”

She tilted her head in acknowledgement, a small smile still playing on her lips. “You would not be yourself, sir, if you did not tease a little bit, and I would not be honest if I said I will not try to manage you. Still, I have every expectation that we shall do well together. A marriage of friends is not a hardship.”

They sat there, grinning foolishly for a moment, and Mr Bennet thought he knew exactly what she was thinking: that this unexpected friendship had been the happiest consequence of the death of both their spouses.

He collected himself and asked, “Shall I request an interview with your father?”

Here she laughed again, wryly this time. “Better to write to your daughters, sir, who are more likely to disapprove.”

He grimaced and said only, “Indeed. Shall you help me compose such an epistle? At least one of them is your particular friend.”

Mrs Collins sighed. “To her I must send my own letter, and I daresay she will be shocked to receive it.” Her eyes narrowed. “If I leave you to it, will you write the letters today? They ought to hear it from you and not Mrs Hamilton, or, oh dear, Mrs Phillips.”

Mr Bennet stood and went around the desk, removing paper and pen. “We shall write them together, lest I fail to honor my first promise to you as a betrothed.”

She smiled at him. “There are worse promises to break than failing to send a letter, but I agree. Let us begin as we mean to go on.”
February 1811
Mrs Bingley to Mr Bennet

My dear father,

Congratulations on your betrothal, and my best wishes to Mrs Collins as well. We were greatly surprised to hear of it in your latest letter, but both Mr Bingley and I wish you joy. The family is presently settled in London, and if you and Mrs Collins should like to travel there, we would be happy to host you. She is a kind and sensible woman, and you know I have always liked her.

The children are calling me, and along with my husband, they ask to be remembered to you. Do say you will come and visit Papa. It has been so long since we have seen you.

Your affectionate daughter,
Jane Bingley

February 1811
Mrs Wickham to Mr Bennet

Dear Papa,

So you are to be married to Mrs Collins. I wish you joy, though I am surprised to hear of it. Are you all to live at Longbourn? I do hope you will continue to remember your grandchildren and, if there is any money left from the wedding expenses, I am sure Wickham and I could find a use for it here.

Your daughter,
Lydia Wickham

February 1811
Mrs Darcy to Mr Bennet

My dear father,

The news you related in your previous letter was extraordinary, to say the least. To hear that you might be interested in marrying would be enough, but that Mrs Collins is to be your bride! To the lady herself, you know I can have no objections. Our friendship is of long duration and she is as sensible and kind as any woman I know. Yet if you are serious, but then again you must be. Even you would not post such a letter as a joke. I have repeatedly assured my husband of this, as doubtful as I am myself. He inquires as to whether you have some serious illness and are too kind to ask one of your daughters to come and nurse you? If that is the cause of your betrothal, you must know that we are ever at your disposal and you may convalesce at Pemberley.

Of course, if you truly mean to be married, and to my friend, you must name the day and we shall come, we are all in London now anyway, but for Kitty. You have my congratulations, and my husband’s, and we wish you joy.

I remain, your loving daughter,
The wedding of Charlotte Collins (née Lucas) and Henry Bennet was to be held on a crisp Thursday in March. The bride and groom, on the first day the banns were read, were the object of much speculation by their neighbours. Some suggested that Mrs Collins had set her cap at him from the beginning, others thought him a fool for not choosing from among the younger and prettier girls, and most wondered aloud at what his children thought of the forthcoming union. Unfortunately, as their main source of intelligence on this topic was Mrs Hamilton, this final question went sadly unanswered. She, unlike her younger sisters, had never been much for gossip.

As the principal participants in the wedding, Mrs Collins and Mr Bennet were either too occupied or too disinterested to worry overmuch about the opinions of their friends. Still, as the day approached, Mrs Collins’ typical calm was overwhelmed by the sheer number of callers she had received at Lucas Lodge.

“Mr Bennet,” she said to him, as she accepted the tea he offered her, “does the neighbourhood always make such a fuss when one of your family is wed?”

He laughed, and replied, “They cannot seem to help it, my dear. Our weddings are typically so momentous that everyone must have their say.”

They discussed some of the details of their forthcoming nuptials before Mrs Collins took out a letter she had received that morning from Mrs Darcy.

“Lizzy writes that they expect to arrive next week, and offers to assist me with any wedding preparations which may have escaped the notice of my mother or another of your daughters. I thought perhaps she might help me with the flowers.”

Mr Bennet waved his hand dismissively. “She sent word to me that they would be at Longbourn on Monday. The two of you can meet then and talk over all manner of trifling nonsense.”

“I will assume you refer to the details of our wedding and that you do not consider the event itself to be nonsense,” she replied, but with a smile.

“As long as we are wed, and we are happy, and our children are well, what more have we to wish for than that our neighbours would see fit to leave us alone for a time?”

“Oh Mr Bennet, you are a romantic,” she said, with a laugh.

“Mrs Collins, you cannot pretend to me that one of the reasons you accepted me was that you long to go over my pantries and cellars and make them your own--ah! you blush! So it must be true. We are a pair, then.”

“We are indeed,” she said, and they continued to talk of nothing in particular until she took her leave.

The event itself was remarkable mainly for its shocking lack of lace and finery. The bride wore a pretty, simple morning dress and the groom a blue coat. The breakfast was not a display of culinary excellence, but it was tasteful, and although several of those in attendance may have despaired that the days of Longbourn’s excellent dinners were over, others contented themselves with the fact that at least Mr Darcy approved of the fare.

There were those, who, it must be said, came not to rejoice in the match but instead to determine whether and how greatly the gentleman’s family were displeased with him. Some, given the history between Mr Bennet’s new wife and his eldest daughters, expected awkward displays of congratulations and hidden expressions of shock. Others hoped that Mr Bennet’s younger girls
would evince some of their mother’s high spirits with exclamations of disapproval–possibly even during the ceremony.

Alas, the curious onlookers were disappointed. The Wickhams did not attend, Mrs Morland was much more subdued since her marriage, Mrs Hamilton never made a display, and Mrs Darcy and Mrs Bingley were the very models of feminine decorum. Only Mr Bingley, as effusive as ever, could be heard to remark on what a fine day and what a beautiful celebration it was. Even Mrs Phillips was well-behaved, although her comments on the ‘frivolity of second weddings’ was whispered about for a few days after, mainly because no one had anything else of interest to report.

In due time, the second Mrs Bennet was established as one of Meryton’s finest hostesses, a fact that her mother never forgot to mention to anybody. To be sure, dinners at Longbourn lacked something of the spectacle they were when the original Mrs Bennet had presided over the table, as Mr Bennet was now much more congenial to the guests and much less disparaging of his second wife than his first.

Thus it was that the last of the Bennets married, and the neighbourhood was forced to content itself with gossiping about some other family.

At least, that is, until the tall and solemn Mr Collins returned from Oxford, with his father’s height and name, his mother’s intelligence, and an inheritance of his own.

End Notes

Thanks to lin and tree for the beta.

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