Shades of Pemberley: a Pride and Prejudice Fic

by eggsbenni221

Summary

the patter of tiny feet at Pemberley can mean only one thing: Lady Catherine has come to inspect the new arrivals.

Notes

this is intended as a companion story of sorts to Sword-Play. I have heavily revised this since posting it about a year ago, principally the prologue, which wasn't included in the original. As usual, typos are mine. Feel free to openly "Sherlock" me.
Prologue
Pemberley, 22 March, 1803

My dear Aunt,
I write bearing news that will, I hope, give you pleasure. We expect an addition to our family shortly before Christmas, and I must confess that I can hardly think of a more appropriate way to mark the birth of our Lord than by welcoming a child of my own into the world. Pray, Aunt, do not think I am not cognizant of the perils that lie ahead. How can I be ignorant of them when I so vividly recall my own mother’s suffering to bring Georgiana into this world.

Elizabeth has, of course, resolved to bear the burden with her usual good spirits, and I find it far easier to follow her in this line of thought than to belabor the frightening alternative. Do let us set aside your concerns about Elizabeth’s ability to perform her wifely duties, which you have expressed to me and, I am told, to her, on any number of occasions. Pray instead rejoice with us in our hope for the future of our family.

You will forgive me for the brevity of this letter, but there is much to be overseen at Pemberley with springtime beginning to make her appearance on the estate. Elizabeth has never yet seen the miracle of Pemberley coming alive in the spring, and I do so long to share that joy with her while her condition yet permits her to be out of doors. You must think me quite sentimental in my happiness, aunt. I shall not bore you with such romantic nonsense lest you think me growing soft in my ways.

Pray pass along my regard to my cousin Anne, and convey my best wishes to the Collinses, though my wife is busy penning a lengthy letter to Mrs. Collins even as I sit writing these words.

Yours, &C,
Fitzwilliam Darcy

Rosings, 30 March, 1803

Nephew,
Would that I could offer you my congratulations upon receiving intelligence of Mrs. Darcy’s condition, but I think it prudent to refrain from such rejoicing until we have witnessed a favorable outcome. It is my sincerest wish that the Darcy legacy shall continue, and I hope, nephew, that you shall not have cause to regret your choice in the bearer of your offspring. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, as Mr. Collins would have me remind you. He sends his most effusive hopes that his cousin will continue in excellent health until such time as she is called upon to endure what all women must.

Anne suffers from a most persistent cough. I have resolved, come summer, to determine whether the waters of Bath shall improve her constitution. I had hoped that the Derbyshire air would suit her far better than that of Kent, but upon that subject we shall no longer dwell.

Yours,
Lady Catherine DeBourgh

Pemberley, 22 December, 1803

Dear Aunt,
I take up my pen with a hand quite as heavy as my heart to inform you that, following a most arduous birth, Elizabeth was delivered of a girl just past midnight this morning. The child—I can hardly find the strength to summon the words—took her first and last breaths almost together,
upon her mother’s breast. Elizabeth lives, God be thanked, and the physician has every hope that she shall make a full recovery given her resilient constitution, but I confess I am uneasy in my mind. Her grief is such that I can scarce bear to witness it, and yet tis agony to be away from her side. I have left her in her sister Jane’s care, that I might communicate the details to you before my own grief consumes me.

Pray convey my gratitude to Mr. Collins for his continued prayers on our behalf; they have, I suppose, been answered to some degree as the Lord has seen fit to spare my Elizabeth. Had He taken her from me as well as our poor darling—but you must forgive me, Aunt, for unburdening these dark reflections upon you. You would, I am certain, council me to gather myself and remain strong, and I must, for Elizabeth’s sake, if not my own.

I have left her for far too long, and so I shall bring this letter to a close and return to her. If you can find it in your heart to pray for us, I beg you would do so.

Yours,

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Rosings, 27 December, 1803

Nephew,

I would offer my condolences to you for the loss you have sustained, if loss it can truly be called. Be grateful that you have not been dealt the far more severe blow of having lost an heir. We must count our blessings in such times as these.

I fear that the concerns I foretold prior to your marriage have indeed come to pass; in choosing to marry a woman without proper breeding, fortune, or connections—a woman whom it would appear has not the strength to perform the necessary obligations of her station—you can sink no lower in the estimation of all you hold dear. If I grieve at all, it must be for the loss of honor and respectability that the Darcy name and reputation must assuredly suffer if such misfortunes continue. If you have any hope of the family retaining the position in life to which you have grown accustomed, I would urge you to advise your wife that she must guard her health far more prodigiously than she seems to have done. The future of Pemberley and of the Darcy name depend upon it, and if she respects you as she ought to do, she must see the wisdom of such advice.

Yours,

Lady Catherine DeBourgh

Pemberley, 10 January, 1804

Madam:

Your most recent letter gave me great pain. I am well aware of your disapprobation of my wife, but I supposed, foolishly it would seem, that you might have found it in your heart to set aside your prejudice in light of our present suffering. Neither Elizabeth nor I are in any way deserving of such incivility, and I must confess to being exceedingly astonished that your sense of honor and decorum would permit you to address your only sister’s son in such a manner.

I have, Aunt, always endeavored to extend toward you the utmost respect. Your (pray forgive my boldness) apparent lack of affection for me notwithstanding, so long as I hold the memory of my excellent mother sacred, I cannot dishonor those she held dear.

I have always wished, rather than believed, that the same memory would guide your actions toward your sister’s children, but I see now the folly in such hope. I shall, henceforth, cease all communication with you. Any correspondence you should attempt to direct to Pemberley shall not be opened. Should you of course wish to seek a reconciliation, my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam will gladly convey any message you wish to communicate.

Fitzwilliam Darcy
Dear Aunt,

Irregular as our correspondence has been since the distressing events of last winter, I take up my pen to send you intelligence that last evening, my wife was safely delivered of a pair of twins: a boy, William Bennet, and a girl, Anne Elizabeth. Mother and infants are all well, God be praised. I write to apprise you of the news of the birth of my children at the request of my wife, who has convinced me that such an occasion, in all its joy, must not be tempered by family discord. For the sake of my children, and in memory of my dear mother, who would, I know, have wished to share in my happiness, I have deemed it best to put behind me the misunderstanding that led to our estrangement. My mother has been much in my thoughts during Elizabeth’s confinement, and for her sake I write in the hope of being reconciled with you, Aunt.

I pray this letter finds you in good health.

Yours, &C,
Fitzwilliam Darcy

Rosings, 2 July, 1805

Nephew,

How fortunate that you have at last managed to sire an heir; may he live to inherit and preside over Pemberley as is his honor and his duty. I would advise you not to grow too attached to your daughter; daughters are weak and delicate things. It is best for all concerned that you not presume upon her longevity.

Regarding the matter upon which you spoke in your letter, I remain most seriously displeased. Your mother would have been most distressed by your show of disrespect toward her nearest and dearest kin. I am, however, willing to set aside my grievances should you admit, whole-heartedly and with due contrition, to your misconduct.

Yours,
Lady Catherine DeBourgh

Pemberley, 25 June, 1805

Fitzwilliam Darcy paced the corridor outside his wife’s chamber, alternately raking his hands through his hair and clenching his fists till his knuckles were white. Beyond the windows, the setting sun washed the grounds of Pemberley in a muted orange glow that would ordinarily have soothed his tired, aching eyes; since the first day he and Elizabeth had stood together, her head resting upon his shoulder as they watched the sun slip over the ridge beyond the estate, the view had been one of his daily delights. Tonight, however, his eyes held only the visions conjured by the wails of agony issuing from behind the door that separated him from his wife—that had in fact been intermittently piercing his ears and heart alike since just after dawn.

What Darcy would have given to be beside Elizabeth if he might have offered her any relief, though he knew a gentleman’s presence in such circumstances was far from customary; the physician had, upon his arrival, unceremoniously dismissed Darcy, advising him to "Take yourself off till the business is all over and done with, sir. Gentlemen customarily find the ordeal rather unpleasant to bear." Leave the house? Leave Elizabeth? When God only knew what might befall her! How could he think of it? So Darcy had kept vigil outside the chamber, touching neither food nor drink and refusing to leave his post. Behind the wall against which he occasionally rested his back, Elizabeth labored in the very room where, so many years before, his own mother had—but no, he must not think of it. Lady Anne had been much in his thoughts during Elizabeth’s confinement, particularly her death, which had left him and his sister motherless almost as soon as
Georgiana had been born. Dear Georgiana; how Darcy longed for his sister’s comforting companionship at this moment. He had naturally rejoiced at her recent marriage to an acquaintance of their cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam; yet although Captain Rivers was an admirable man and loved Georgiana dearly, Darcy felt her loss keenly since her removal from Derbyshire. He must not, however, succumb to his melancholy; not when his wife depended upon his strength. Elizabeth had a strong constitution, Darcy reminded himself, and—a particularly agonizing cry stopped Darcy in his pacing, and he placed a hand against the wall to steady himself before at last giving way to his fear and fatigue and dropping into the chair beside the door. How much longer, he wondered, resting his head upon his hand and closing his eyes.

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The boy sat alone in his room, curled beneath a heavy quilt. Though tall and strong for his age, he looked much smaller than his 11 years huddled in the depths of the armchair, his frame shaking with silent tears. As he pressed his cheek against one of the cushions, he could still catch her fragrance—rose-water and lavender and that undercurrent of warm spices that seemed to emanate naturally from her skin and always enveloped him with a sense of safety and peace. His mama would never sit in this chair again, never talk with him or laugh with him, never kiss his brow and tell him how much he was growing into a fine man like his father. When a knock sounded at the door, he wiped his eyes on a corner of the blanket, but remained silent. After another tap, the door unclosed, and Mrs. Reynolds, the family's housekeeper, entered his room.

"Master Fitzwilliam, will you come down and have something to eat?" The boy shook his head.
"Did Papa send for me?" he asked, his voice quavering.

Mrs. Reynolds sighed sadly. "No, child. Your father has been in his room since…” she lowered her eyes, leaving the sentence unfinished. Upon returning from Lady Anne’s funeral, Mr. Darcy had given brief orders that the children be seen to before shutting himself in his chamber and refusing to speak to anyone. "Your aunt desires to see you," added Mrs. Reynolds.
"Must I?" asked the boy. He had no wish to see Lady Catherine; she might be his mother's sister, but the two women could not have been less alike. While Lady Anne had commanded respect with her graceful manners and the quiet bearing of authority that, like her husband, she seemed to exhibit naturally, Lady Catherine demanded it with her dictatorial speech and cold, hard stares. The boy could always tell when she was about to enter a room; every morsel of flesh on his bones involuntarily shivered in anticipation of standing in her presence. The morning after Lady Anne's death, Lady Catherine had called the boy to her and instructed him on the proper attitude of mourning for a young gentleman, ordering him to stand straight, keep a suitably somber countenance, and never, under any circumstances, to shed a single tear. He had loved his mama; the very thought of her summoned fresh tears to his eyes, for which his aunt had scolded him, and yet, he reflected, as she had looked at him, he thought he had seen a glimmer of something in her eye as well. He supposed, though, that it had merely been a trick of the firelight.

Now Mrs. Reynolds crouched in front of him and drew him to her breast. "Poor child," she murmured, smoothing back his hair. "Come, dry your tears and I can take you to have a peep at the baby."

In the nursery, the boy gazed down at the sleeping infant, blissfully unaware that her entrance into the world had come at such a tremendous cost. Tentatively he reached out and stroked her cheek with one fingertip.
"Mrs. Reynolds?" he said finally, looking up at the housekeeper.
"Yes, dear?"
"Why did Mama have to die?"

The housekeeper sighed and gathered him into her arms. "Who knows why the good Lord sees fit to call us home when he does," she said gently. "But your mama is in Heaven with him now, you rest assured of that, and whenever you say your prayers, she will hear you. I have no doubt of it." The boy looked down at his sister for another moment before straightening his shoulders. "I must look after her now."

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With a jolt, Darcy woke as someone rested a hand on his shoulder. Blinking against the dim light,
he recognized Jane standing before him and sprang to his feet.
"What has happened? Is it over? Elizabeth! How is she? Is she... Is she..."
"Calm yourself, brother," Jane said gently, laying a hand on his arm. "All is well. I must offer you my congratulations." In an uncharacteristic display of emotion, Darcy embraced his sister-in-law. "I am so grateful to you for being here," he said, unable to suppress the tremor in his voice. "I would never have been anyplace else at such a time," replied Jane, smiling up at him. "But come. Lizzie is asking for you."
"And..." Darcy hesitated. "And the child?"
Jane only smiled. "Come. See for yourself."
Noiselessly Darcy entered the hushed, dimly lit room and approached the bed. Exhausted from her labor, Elizabeth gently pressed his hand and offered him a tired smile.
"Oh, Fitzwilliam," she whispered. "I am so glad you have come." Darcy lent over the pillow and kissed her cheek before turning his attention to the swaddled infant at her side. Reverently he lifted the edge of the blanket and gazed down in rapture at his sleeping son.
"How beautiful he is," Darcy whispered, brushing the infant's cheek with the tips of his fingers. When Jane approached with a second blanket bundled in her arms, he stepped aside, supposing she intended to wrap the boy, but to his great astonishment, she laid the bundle in his arms. Before he could speak, a tiny fist escaped the folds of the blanket.
"Perhaps you should sit," Jane advised, clearly amused, for Darcy's arms had begun to tremble, and he knew not for how much longer the strength in his legs would keep him upright. He had just time to catch a glimpse of the girl he held—his daughter—before Jane rescued the infant from his insecure grasp, and, with his heart overflowing, he dropped to his knees beside the bed.
"Oh, my Elizabeth," he whispered, touching his forehead to hers. "My dearest, loveliest Elizabeth. How happy I am. How happy you have made me."

One Month Later

(A dream)

The boy stood alone in the silent graveyard, the headstones buried beneath a fresh blanket of snow that reached almost to the tops of his boots. Blinking back tears and bowing his head against the cold, he bent and placed one gloved hand against his mother's headstone, brushing away the flecks of white that obscured her name and tracing a finger over each letter. Oh, what he would not give to have her back again—to bring her back, if he could. When she had been alive, Christmas at Pemberley had been a festive jubilee of activity, with balls and dinner-parties, and the house bedecked in resplendence, but such delights were no more.
"Oh, dear Mama," he whispered, "how we all miss you; Papa is not what he once was." He paused, endeavoring to think of something cheerful he might tell her. "Georgiana is flourishing. Mrs. Reynolds says she will be quite as pretty as you when she is a young woman. I shall bring her to see you, perhaps, when the weather is fair." As he shivered again, he felt a pair of warm arms encircling him, but he dared not turn round to see who embraced him; he both wished and feared it to be his aunt, who continually scolded him for his habit of sulking, and yet, with his mother gone, he craved even the smallest bit of affection from her. If only he could please her, if only he could...
Darcy woke suddenly and became aware that the embrace he had imagined himself wrapped in had not been a part of his dream; Elizabeth had gathered him into her arms and was holding him close, murmuring words of comfort. As he reached up to touch her hand, which rested on his brow, he noticed the tears on his face.
"Hush, love," whispered Elizabeth, pressing her lips to his cheek. "It was your mother again, I suppose?" she asked softly, correctly interpreting the subject of his dream. Unable to speak, he turned and allowed Elizabeth to draw his head to her breast as he nestled closer to her before closing his eyes and drifting back into slumber.

Darcy rose early the following morning despite having slept fitfully; he had business on the estate
that would likely detain him for most, if not all of the day. The past fortnight had brought with it a bout of severe weather, and heavy flooding had damaged several of his tenants' cottages. The summer sun washed Pemberley's grounds in a warm glow, ensuring that he would at least have a fair day in which to continue assessing the land and the extent of the damage.

When Elizabeth entered the breakfast room, Darcy laid aside his paper and stood to greet her, holding out a chair and inviting her to sit beside him. Elizabeth approached tentatively, studying his countenance for several moments before reaching up to touch his cheek.
"You look pale," she observed. "I hope you are not unwell."
"I am in excellent health," replied he coolly.

Elizabeth glanced through the window before again settling her gaze on her husband. "I wonder whether it would be advisable for you to venture out onto the grounds this morning. Some of the roads might still be impassible and dangerous, and such prolonged exposure to the damp cannot be wise."

"Our tenants cannot be left destitute," said Darcy. Each day had found him out of doors, directing efforts to find passable routes to and from the cottages and working to clear the land of debris where possible.
"I should not wish you to neglect your duty," said Elizabeth, "but I fear you are unwell, Fitzwilliam."
"I am quite myself," Darcy assured her. "You have no need for concern."
Elizabeth hesitated; then gave a resigned sigh. "Promise me you will take care," she said, moving closer and embracing him. Darcy held her for a moment, aware that his restless night had caused his temper to flair.
"I shall take all necessary precautions, dearest," he said, kissing the top of her head. As the clock chimed, Darcy disentangled himself with some reluctance. "I must go. I shall endeavor to return as soon as possible." His wife nodded. "Elizabeth?"
"Yes?"
"I may not return till after dark, but I should very much desire to speak with you this evening. There is a matter upon which I seek your advice."
"Of course," replied Elizabeth.
"Excellent." He drew her close again and bent to lay his lips on hers. "Until this evening, then," he whispered, pressing another kiss to the top of her head before releasing her and taking his leave.

Late that evening, Darcy paced the library as he awaited his wife. His muscles ached from the long day of exertion, yet he almost feared the thought of sleep; the dreams that had interrupted his rest troubled him, and Elizabeth as well, though he little knew what either of them might do to stop them. As he moved to his desk and perused the letter he had begun to write, a tap at the door signaled Elizabeth's arrival. She entered without awaiting an invitation, as was her custom unless he was engaged in business. The library belonged to her as much as to him, and they often preferred it for conversations on matters of importance.
"You wished to speak to me?" asked Elizabeth, taking a seat on the sofa and fixing her husband with an inquisitive gaze.
Darcy nodded. "I trust all has been well during my absence today?" he inquired. "The children are well? I had not an opportunity to look in on them before I took leave this morning."
"Quite well," replied Elizabeth.

Noticing that she sat nervously twisting her fingers in her lap, Darcy decided to come directly to the point. To allow himself time to gather his thoughts, he leant against the edge of his desk, crossing one long leg over the other. "Elizabeth, there is something I wish to discuss with you," he began, uncertain of how to proceed.
"You have been deeply troubled of late," observed Elizabeth. "I know your concern for the comfort and safety of the tenants has been much in your mind, but you are doing everything within your power to aid them—indeed, more than any of them expected, but not," she added with a smile, "more than I would have expected of you."
"That," said Darcy, "is not what concerns me just at present."
Elizabeth rested her chin in her hands and regarded him thoughtfully. "I wonder," she said at last, "has it anything to do with... the dreams that have been plaguing you?" Darcy averted his eyes. "Forgive me for mentioning it. I did not imagine you would wish to speak of it," continued Elizabeth, "Even with me, though I wish you would, because I have a theory about how you might find relief from the affliction."

Darcy ran a hand through his hair. "Which is?"

"Speak to Lady Catherine." Darcy's jaw clenched. Following Elizabeth's first confinement nearly two years since and the death several hours later of the daughter to whom she had given birth, Lady Catherine had written to renew her previous complaints regarding Darcy's choice in a wife. After Darcy, blood boiling with righteous indignation, had cut off all communication with his aunt, Elizabeth had persuaded him to write to give her intelligence of the birth of the twins. Lady Catherine's begrudging letter of congratulations had been addressed only to her nephew, acknowledging his son and barely taking notice of his daughter, and failing even to mention his wife by name. So outraged was Darcy at his aunt's continued show of disrespect toward Elizabeth that he had refused to receive her at Pemberley until she acknowledged the impropriety of her conduct and offered Elizabeth a suitably humble apology. None had been forthcoming, of course, which Darcy found hardly surprising, but though he had refused to alter his decision regarding Lady Catherine's banishment, Elizabeth knew how deeply it grieved him to be at odds with his relations.

Sighing, Darcy cast a glance at his unfinished letter and crossed to the sofa, taking a seat beside Elizabeth. Lowering his head into his hands, he murmured, "Elizabeth, I do not think—that seems hardly likely to resolve the situation."

Elizabeth rested a hand on his arm. "I know it pains you to be on ill terms with her. I admire and respect your willingness to defend me, but that should not come at the expense of your family ties."

"You are my family, Elizabeth," Darcy said gently, covering her hand with his and gazing down upon her with a look of tenderness that seemed to turn the darkness in his eyes a shade lighter. "You are the woman I love. You are the woman I have vowed to honor and respect for all of my days, and no one, not even Lady Catherine, shall stand against me in that."

"You forget," answered Elizabeth, "that I made those same vows. I will never pretend to be fond of Lady Catherine, but I know that you and she are fond of one another, in your own way. She is your mother's sister, after all."

"She is nothing like my mother," said Darcy, failing to suppress the bitterness in his tone. "I wish you could have known her, Lizzie," he continued, the hint of a smile softening the lines of tension etched into his face. "She would have loved you. I am quite sure of it. Had she lived, I like to believe that I should have had far less difficulty in securing your hand."

Elizabeth laughed. "And deprived me of the singular pleasure of humbling you?"

"I rather think she would have seen to that," said Darcy. "She was always something of a steadying influence, if she was sometimes given to spoiling me. My initial reservations about asking for your hand were, I confess, largely the product of Lady Catherine's influence on my ideas respecting my own social position as I became acquainted with life in society, though I suspect that you, having become acquainted with my aunt by the time I made my declaration, had deduced as much on your own. With my mother gone, it was Lady Catherine, naturally, who became my guide to the polite world following my dear father's passing." Elizabeth nodded. "You cannot know what it is for a boy to lose his mother—as if all light is gone from the world. I do not mean my father had no regard for either me or my sister, but he could not take the place of our mother, and well he knew it."

"And so you turned to Lady Catherine," murmured Elizabeth.

"Foolishly perhaps, but I thought if I could earn her affection, I could bear the grief more easily. I always seemed to fail in her eyes. I was always too soft; too quiet; too bookish. Then when my father died, and I assumed the responsibilities of Pemberley and of my sister, I began to find favor with her. Praise was still hard-won, of course, but it would come on occasion. I think," Darcy's lips quivered, "the kindest words my aunt ever spoke to me were that I would have made her sister
"You must speak to your aunt, Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth said gently, taking his hand. "Especially since..." her words trailed into silence. Darcy's cousin Anne DeBourgh had, several months previously, with a show of audacity that had hitherto been thought nonexistent in her, formed a secret attachment to a young curate who had arrived in Hunsford following a brief, though hardly life-threatening illness of Mr. Collins's; ever desirous of serving his little flock of parishioners, Mr. Collins had pleaded with his patroness to obtain assistance in his duties to his parish as he regained strength. Having been little accustomed to the society of gentleman aside from her male cousins, Anne had found the company and conversation of Mr. Edmundson quite engaging, despite her mother's disapproval of their interactions beyond a casual acquaintance; Mr. Edmundson's position as the second son of a gentleman had compelled him to enter the church, and given his unfortunate station in life, according to Lady Catherine, she had naturally forbade the attachment when she came to hear of it. Anne, however, surprisingly undeterred, had managed to enlist the aid of Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Darcy's own reservations regarding the match had been less concerned with the man's position in society and more with the possibility that he might prove to be no more than a fortune-hunter. His cousin had, however, assured him that her mind and heart were well made up, and after paying a visit to Hunsford to become acquainted with the young man, Colonel Fitzwilliam had written to assure Darcy that Edmundson was quite an admirable fellow and deeply devoted to Anne. Mr. Collins, true to Elizabeth's declaration that he was one of the stupidest men in England, had remained blissfully unaware of the clandestine affair, though Charlotte had discerned the growing intimacy and had done her utmost to conceal it from her husband and lady Catherine. After a private and necessarily secret ceremony in which Darcy had given his cousin away, Anne had left Kent with her new husband, and while she appeared happy enough in her freedom from Lady Catherine's overbearing influence, her occasional letters to Darcy expressed her deep regret at having grieved her mother.

"You must ask Lady Catherine to Pemberley for a visit," said Elizabeth decidedly, breaking into Darcy's reflection. "I know she wishes to see the children."

Darcy sighed. "Are you quite certain you can tolerate her under this roof? You shall have to endure all manner of criticisms on your inferior parenting."

Elizabeth smiled. "We shall manage, and in any case," she added, leaning forward to kiss him, "there is much I would endure for your sake."

"I must bear this in mind for future reference," said Darcy, drawing his wife into his arms and lowering his mouth upon hers to return the kiss.
"Darcy has been overseeing the restoration of several of the cottages that were damaged in the recent rains," Elizabeth informed her.
"Really, Darcy!" exclaimed Lady Catherine as the party made their way into the house. "I hardly see any reason for you to take such an active involvement. Your steward is more than capable of managing the details, surely."
"They are my tenants, and my responsibility."
"How very like your father you are," said Lady Catherine.
Darcy's eyes flashed. "There are many who would consider that a compliment," he said. "I say nothing against his generosity, of course," his aunt continued. "But the distinction of rank must be preserved, you know. In future I would advise you to be less familiar with your tenants. If you persist in the habit, they shall come to expect it of you. Next I shall be hearing that they are dining with the family!"
"Heaven forbid the shades of Pemberley should be thus polluted," murmured Elizabeth, chancing a glance at Darcy, who appeared with great difficulty to be suppressing a smile. "I see you have not lost your impertinent ways," observed Lady Catherine.
"Nor shall I," replied Elizabeth. "If my husband does not object to my disposition, I see no reason to alter it."
Darcy endeavored to fix a disapproving expression upon his features before turning to his aunt. "You must excuse my wife," he said, apparently ignoring the flash of indignation that lit Elizabeth's eyes as he spoke. "She forgets that you are not as accustomed to her rather… frank way of speaking as I have become." Before Lady Catherine could interject, he added, "But you must be fatigued after your journey. You would, I am sure, wish to rest before supper."

Once Lady Catherine had departed, muttering about improper breeding and the influence of Wollstonecraft and novel-reading on the current generation of young women, Darcy threw himself into an armchair in the drawing-room with a heavy sigh. "Well done, Elizabeth." He glanced at the clock above the mantle. "My aunt has hardly been at Pemberley above half an hour, and already she has succeeded in finding fault with both of us." Elizabeth laughed. "Oh, but it has hardly even begun. You forget she has not yet seen the children."
Darcy scowled. "If your intent is to raise my spirits, I must inform you that you have failed miserably in the attempt. I would remind you that our aim in arranging this visit is to mend our bridges, not to burn them entirely."
Elizabeth came and stood beside him, bending to press a kiss to his brow. "I apologize, my love," she murmured. "Considering that the suggestion to extend the Pemberley hospitality to Lady Catherine was mine, I suppose I could be more inviting."
"I know she does little to make that task easy for you," said Darcy, taking his wife’s hand in his. "But if she is more ill-tempered than we are generally accustomed to seeing her, even for Lady Catherine, we must make a few allowances."
"Make allowances? For her disowning her only daughter for choosing to decide her own future?" "Well," said Darcy, considering Elizabeth's words, "no, I suppose not."
Elizabeth sighed. "I wish I had had more of an opportunity to become better acquainted with Anne, though I must give her credit for showing rather more spirit than anyone thought she possessed. I have always wondered whether she might be… more lively away from her mother's influence."
"I confess to having thought the same," replied Darcy. "She and I saw very little of each other, even as children."
"In spite of the nature of your betrothal," observed Elizabeth, her eyes sparkling. "That," said Darcy, "was primarily my aunt's doing, or so I have always believed. I never managed to obtain the full details from my mother. She may have wished it; indeed, I am quite sure she did, given that such arrangements are fairly customary, but I cannot believe that she would have expected either of us to honor such an informal betrothal if our hearts had not been equally engaged. Still, my lack of romantic feeling notwithstanding, Anne might have had a different life if…"
"Fitzwilliam," said Elizabeth sharply, "I will not permit you to heap more guilt upon yourself than you have likely already done. In any case," she added with a toss of her head, "it would mean you regret your decision to ask for my hand instead."

Darcy smiled and, twining his arm around Elizabeth's waist, drew her onto his knee. "That is a decision I shall never regret," he said gently, holding her close. "But regarding my cousin, I only meant that I—perhaps all of the family—might have done more to counteract my aunt's overbearing nature. I suppose that is why the colonel and I have felt such responsibility for her."

"And felt compelled to ensure that she would not fall victim to any fortune-hunting husbands," laughed Elizabeth.

"Well, with no father or brothers, it fell to me to protect her interests."

"Very honorable of you, Mr. Darcy," said Elizabeth, encircling her arms about his neck. "Anne must not have realized that you would make such an admirable husband."

"Fortunately for you, as it turned out," replied Darcy. "Still, it grieves me to think that what ought otherwise to have been the happiest occasion of my cousin's life has created discord within the family. Lady Catherine's disapproval is hardly unexpected, though it still gives me pain to think of it."

"Even so," said Elizabeth, "She must miss her daughter; she cannot be so utterly unfeeling."

"No," agreed Darcy. "And in fact, while we are on the subject…" His words were interrupted by the hurried entrance of one of the housemaids. Elizabeth sprang to her feet and smoothed down the skirt of her gown, but the maid appeared too flustered to have noticed the somewhat intimate position in which she had discovered her master and mistress.

"Beggin' your pardon sir, mam," she said with a hasty curtsy. "But I was just passin' the nursery and…"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "Has something happened?"

"I—that is…" the maid swallowed.

"What is the matter, Polly?" asked Darcy calmly, getting to his feet. "Is it the children?"

Polly shook her head. "No sir, it's just that—she—her ladyship, I mean—she’s in the nursery, sir, and she’s quite displeased about something or other, by the sound of it."

Elizabeth gathered up her skirts and moved swiftly to the door. "I shall attend to this matter," she said, motioning for Darcy to remain when he made to follow.

Outside the nursery door, Elizabeth paused to compose herself; the nursemaid had never before encountered Lady Catherine and would, Elizabeth imagined, be quite beside herself with agitation. She must keep calm, for the girl's sake, as well as for the sake of maintaining some semblance of peace between her husband and his aunt. With a deep breath, she entered the nursery, offering Lady Catherine and the nurse what she hoped was a polite smile.

"Nelly, I wonder if I might have a word with you." She hesitated, recognizing that she was about to leave her children in the presence of Lady Catherine entirely unprotected. "Will you step into the hall with me?" Nelly, who had been endeavoring to comfort a whimpering William while blinking back her own tears, nodded and gently laid the boy in his cradle before following Elizabeth from the room.

"Oh, Mrs. Darcy, mam, please don't send me away! You know how badly I need this post, but the old lady—that is, her ladyship—I hardly knew what to say and…"

"Hush, Nelly," murmured Elizabeth, laying a hand on the girl's arm. "Calm yourself. It is I who must apologize; I ought to have better prepared you for Lady Catherine's visit. Here." She handed Nelly a handkerchief. "Come. Dry your eyes and tell me what happened."

"I wouldn't like to speak ill of any of the master's relations, mam," said Nelly.

"If you did, in this instance, you would find few who would disagree with you under this roof," answered Elizabeth with a smile. "Now, tell me what happened."

"Well, I was just sitting in my usual place, doin' my bit o' sowin' and singin' a snatch o' song, real soothin' like, and in comes her ladyship and tells me to stop that caterwauling and tell her how the children are getting' on. She starts askin' all sorts o' questions about how often I takes them out for fresh air, and do I make sure I don't lay 'em down on their bellies after feedin' 'em, and is the
master makin' sure I get plenty of rich foods so— so my milk is hardy enough and…" she hesitated, gesturing to her own bosom. "She asked if—if I was fit to bring up twins, mam."

"Oh dear," murmured Elizabeth. Though she had taken Nelly on to care for the children, Elizabeth had made what some women would have considered the rather unfashionable decision to nurse them herself. Darcy had, to her immense relief, offered no objection, but she supposed she ought to have foreseen Lady Catherine's disapproval. "And… what did you tell her ladyship, Nelly?"

"I only said you and the master see I don't want for anything, mam."

"You did not explain to her that I did not hire you as a wet-nurse?" inquired Elizabeth.

"No, mam; I would have done, but you came in, and the old lady was storming about muttering to herself and—and I couldn't think what to do, mam." Nelly dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief. "Oh, I hope I didn't do wrong, Mrs. Darcy, mam."

"Calm yourself, Nelly," replied Elizabeth. "All is well. I will deal with Lady Catherine. You run along; go to Mrs. Reynolds and have her make you a strong cup of tea."

"But the children," began Nelly. Elizabeth smiled. "They shall be safe with me. You run along to Mrs. Reynolds, now. She will look after you. I shall send for you if I require you."

Nelly nodded. "Yes, mam. Thank you, mam."

As Elizabeth reentered the nursery, she noticed, with some apprehension, Lady Catherine leaning over one of the cradles with a queer, unreadable expression. Hearing Elizabeth's entrance, she straightened, and the two women faced each other.

"I wonder," Lady Catherine said slowly, "if you would be good enough to satisfy my curiosity on a matter that has just been brought to my attention."

"What does your ladyship wish to know?" asked Elizabeth, meeting the older woman's gaze defiantly.

"Is it true," inquired Lady Catherine, "that you have taken it upon yourself to…" she shivered, as if unable to stomach the taste of the words in her mouth.

"To nurse my own children?" finished Elizabeth. "Yes, it is perfectly true."

"And my nephew?"

"Has no objection. As long as the children are healthy and well cared for, fashion is of little consequence," said Elizabeth. "You must surely know him well enough to be aware of that, your ladyship."

"This," exclaimed Lady Catherine, "must not, shall not be permitted! Have you no regard for the customs of polite society?"

"Not when such customs conflict with what I believe to be my better judgment," said Elizabeth calmly. "And you will excuse me, your ladyship, but I hardly think it is any of your business."

"The family's health, the family's reputation not my business?" shrieked her ladyship. "How dare you affirm such a thing?"

"I do not believe, madam, that I am jeopardizing either my children's well-being or my family's reputation by doing what many women, fashionable and otherwise, have deemed perfectly natural and acceptable."

"I will not be contradicted! You are being insufferably rude!" Both children had, by this time, commenced crying again, and Elizabeth crossed the room and leant over the cradles to soothe them.

"If you persist in your unbecoming behavior," continued Lady Catherine, "what sort of example, pray, do you expect you will set for your children?"

"A most admirable one, if I am an adequate judge," came Darcy's voice. Elizabeth whirled round to find him standing in the doorway, arms folded across his chest, his eyes ablaze with indignation as they landed upon Lady Catherine. Her ladyship appeared, if not altogether shocked, certainly discomposed by her nephew's sudden appearance, no doubt under the impression that he confined his nursery visits to the cursory daily inspection that would have been considered a just fulfillment of his paternal obligations. "I wonder," said Darcy, "if either of you might explain what is the matter here. Elizabeth," he added, turning to his wife with a frown, "I have just encountered Nelly
in a state of considerable agitation. I can surmise what might have been the cause of her upset, but would you be good enough to enlighten me?"
"I have just been informed," spoke up Lady Catherine, having apparently found her voice, "that your wife—the mother of your children, this would-be gentleman's daughter, as she wishes me to believe, is an enthusiastic supporter of Wollstonecraft's unfashionable notions on women suckling their own infants!"
Darcy arched a brow. "Really, Aunt, is that all? When I heard the disturbance, I expected to find that Nelly had managed to drop one of the children into the fire, or something equally alarming."
"Really, Darcy! Your children's health is no laughing matter!"
"Indeed," agreed Darcy, crossing the room to Elizabeth's side and bending to lift William into his arms while his wife endeavored to quiet little Anne. Ignoring Lady Catherine’s disapproving frown at what she likely considered an unnecessarily demonstrative show of paternal affection, he continued, "their health is of the utmost importance to me, Aunt, and they seem to me perfectly well, apart from the fact that—and you will forgive me for presuming to mention it—they do not appear particularly fond of your presence at the moment." When Lady Catherine remained uncharacteristically silent, Darcy continued, "I believe I made my wishes perfectly clear when I invited you into my home. You have hardly been here a single day, and you have already succeeded in disregarding my wishes."
"Your wife," began Lady Catherine.
"Has borne your insults with as much good will and humor as anyone can have expected of her," interrupted Darcy. "I will not allow you to continue to speak to her, and about her, with such incivility."
Elizabeth laid a hand on his arm, but he gently removed it. Keeping his voice calm so as not to frighten his son, whom he still cradled against his chest, Darcy said carefully, "It was my hope that you would come to Pemberley willing to be reconciled; I see now the folly in entertaining such a hope. I am sorry that you have made a wasted journey, Aunt, but I cannot allow you to remain under my roof if you will insist upon treating my family with such disrespect."
Lady Catherine stood still for a moment, regarding her nephew. Finally she said, "You have altered, Darcy. I believe I hardly know you now."
"I believe I am as I always was, Aunt," said Darcy sadly. "You simply never took the time to notice." Lady Catherine blanched, as if Darcy had slapped her. Finally, drawing herself up to her full height, she said coldly, "You will excuse me. If I shall not be staying on at Pemberley, I must make my arrangements for departing. You will, I hope, permit me to remain until morning, at the very least?"
Darcy inclined his head. "You may do as you see fit, madam," he replied with equal coolness, and watched as his aunt turned and made her exit without another word to either Elizabeth or himself. The two stood gazing at each other until Elizabeth finally ventured to speak.
"Fitzwilliam, I..."
"No, Elizabeth. Please." Darcy held up a hand. "Let us say no more on the matter, at present."
Still holding his son, he turned and strode to the window, gazing out at the darkening grounds. The boy had quietened and had dropped off to sleep with his head against his father's shoulder. Shifting Anne to rest upon her hip, Elizabeth went to stand beside Darcy, laying a hand on his arm.
"I am sorry, my love," she murmured.
Darcy sighed. "I wonder whether I have been foolish. All these years—all my life, endeavoring to win her approval, endeavoring to be a son to her. What difference has it made? None at all, I am afraid."
"Oh, Fitzwilliam." Elizabeth reached up to touch his cheek. "Do not blame yourself; you are a kind, compassionate, and generous man; you are not at fault if Lady Catherine cannot recognize that in you."
"You know, when—when my mother died, the only attention Lady Catherine showed me was to lecture me about the proper attitude of mourning."
Elizabeth refrained from laughing, given the gravity of the situation, but she could not suppress the
observation that slipped from the tip of her tongue. "I must confess, this hardly surprises me."
"No, it would have been quite characteristic of her, but—and I shall never forget this—she
instructed me that I must never display any outward sign of emotion in front of others. I could
never be seen shedding even a single tear. I still remember standing there before her, beginning
to… to cry, even as she scolded me."

"You were a boy. You had just lost your mother. What were you supposed to have done?"
Elizabeth demanded. "I vow, if you cannot find it in your heart to despise that woman, I shall
despise her quite enough for the both of us."
Darcy continued as if he had not heard her. "But as she watched me trying to suppress my tears, I
saw this queer expression pass across her face, and she turned away as if—as if she could not bear
to look at me, as if she were trying to conceal her own emotion from me. I remembered then that
she had lost a sister, and how she might have felt. I have never forgotten that look, Elizabeth; now
and then it returns to haunt me. It reminds me that in many ways, she is what society has made of
her, but that beneath that hard, polished shell, she must have a woman's heart."
Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders. "I cannot say that I have ever seen evidence of one, but…" She
paused, remembering the curious expression she had seen on Lady Catherine's face as she had
entered the nursery. "But I suppose I am rather prejudiced against her."
Darcy's face relaxed into a smile, and he drew Elizabeth to his side with his free arm. "My family
does have a history of making that unfortunate impression upon you."
"How fortunate for some of you that you learned the error of your ways," said Elizabeth, tilting
her head up to kiss him.

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The next morning, Darcy departed early to resume his survey of the grounds and cottages, and
Elizabeth took the opportunity to pay a visit on several of the tenants. They had not yet found an
opportune moment to discuss the previous day's altercation with Lady Catherine, but Elizabeth
had resolved that she would endeavor to address the situation and, more particularly, the role she
had played in it. While Darcy had, to his credit, maintained that she had borne his aunt's rudeness
with good humor, Elizabeth suspected, and no doubt Darcy would have agreed with her, that her
caucustic remarks had had their share in provoking Lady Catherine's temper. As she entered the
nursery to peep in at the children, she found to her surprise that Lady Catherine, not Nelly, sat
beside the cradles, the hard-set lines of her face seeming to have melted away as she gazed down
at the children.
"What in Heaven's name—I, that is—forgive me, your ladyship. I… did not expect to find you
here."
Lady Catherine raised her head to meet Elizabeth's surprised stare.
"I can explain," said she. "Your nurse offered to carry a letter to the post-office for Mrs. Reynolds.
I told her I would sit with the children in her absence."
Remembering her earlier resolution, Elizabeth made an effort to conceal her shock. "I—your
ladyship is most kind. I hope they have not troubled you."
"On the contrary," replied Lady Catherine in a tone that, never having heard it from her before,
Elizabeth did not at first detect as pleasantness. "I was glad of the opportunity to inspect the
children more closely. I do not believe," she paused, "that I offered you proper congratulations."
"Darcy did receive the letter in which your ladyship conveyed your congratulations," said
Elizabeth diplomatically, deeming it best under the present circumstances to refrain from adding
that the letter in question had in no way conveyed any congratulatory sentiments to her.
"I should add, I suppose, that the children are… rather pleasing to look upon, and appear generally
healthy."
Elizabeth could not help smiling. "I am glad your ladyship approves."
"It is rather soon to tell, of course," continued Lady Catherine, "but I have not thus far ascertained
that your method of bringing them up has been any great detriment to their development."
"I hope I shall do my best," said Elizabeth.
"My concern, you understand, is that they be brought up in a manner befitting their station in life,"
said Lady Catherine. Again Elizabeth smiled. "Which is somewhat different than my own upbringing, for though I am a gentleman's daughter, I had few of the privileges and advantages afforded the children who were fortunate enough to have been raised at Pemberley." Lady Catherine appeared uncertain how to respond, and Elizabeth took advantage of her silence to continue. "I do not imagine that my children shall ever want for anything, but my concern is, first and foremost, that they be happy and well-loved, and Darcy is in agreement with me upon this point."
"I have discerned as much," said Lady Catherine. "I will venture to say that, if his careful and tender guardianship of his sister is any indication, Darcy will prove to be an attentive and affectionate father."
"That is rare and high praise, spoken by you," observed Elizabeth, at last catching sight of the opening in the conversation she had been seeking. "I hope you will make a point of conveying those sentiments to him, if you have not already done so. It would mean a great deal to him, I believe." After a pause she added, "You will forgive me for speaking so boldly, your ladyship; you and I have always had our differences, but I know that Darcy has always been extremely fond of you, in his own way."
"Yes," murmured Lady Catherine. "He believes I have never taken notice of it—have never taken notice of him, perhaps, beyond the obligatory interest I owed my sister. His assessment is not altogether incorrect," she admitted, "but the fact of the matter is that my nature has never been a demonstratively affectionate one. I always believed, or perhaps it suited me to believe, that Darcy was much the same. He was always such a shy, reserved boy; his temper demanded regulation at times, perhaps, but no more so than any other child of his circumstances. His mother doted on him, you know, and once she was gone, his father could not bear to see either of his children unhappy, even for an instant; it is the way with fond fathers, I believe. I felt it was my duty to use what influence I had to see that they had more structure and discipline, less sentimental indulgence, particularly in my nephew's case, given the responsibility he would take on when he came into possession and control of the estate. The Darcy name and reputation carry great weight, one that only a strong pair of shoulders can bear. If I was harder on him at times than I need have been, well, it does not signify now, I suppose."
"He only ever wished to make you proud of him," said Elizabeth gently. "He accused me, and rightly so, I realize now, of never truly knowing him. The recent and I fear irreparable disagreement I have had with my daughter over her marriage has made this clearer to me even than—you will forgive me—your marriage to my nephew. I am a proud woman, I know; partly by nature, partly through the influence of the society through which I have moved for most of my life, but I am coming to realize, perhaps too late, that those things that I have always devalued are those that might have given my life greater worth."
"Not too late, perhaps," came another voice, and both women turned to see Darcy leaning casually against the doorframe, frowning slightly, his gaze fixed upon his aunt.
"I—Darcy!" exclaimed Lady Catherine. "I did not realize—that is, I was unaware—what. Pray, did you…"
"I heard all I needed to hear," said Darcy, moving into the room. "I spoke unkindly to you last evening, Aunt; pray forgive me."
"You spoke truthfully," said Lady Catherine with a touch of her characteristic impatience. "Heavens, did your father teach you nothing? A man of honor must stand behind his convictions!"
Darcy arched a brow. "Even when such convictions involve—pardon me—exposing flaws in a lady's character?"
"Yes, well, in this instance, and in the interest of reconciliation, I shall endeavor to overlook that rather unfortunate detail. I would advise you not to expect to be dealt with so compassionately in future, however."
"Your ladyship is all goodness," said Darcy, offering a mock bow and chancing to wink at Elizabeth, who stood observing the exchange with a smile. "I hope you realize," said her ladyship, "that I truly meant what I said. I am—I do… respect you."
Darcy opened his lips to speak, swallowed, endeavored once again to form words, and finally
averted his eyes.
After several moments elapsed in awkward silence, Elizabeth stepped to her husband's side and linked her arm through his before turning to address Lady Catherine. "We do hope that your ladyship will stay on at Pemberley, for as long as you desire to remain with us."
Lady Catherine shifted her gaze from her nephew to Elizabeth. "I believe we can come to an arrangement that would suit me," she replied. "But, if you will excuse me, all of this has been… rather trying. I think I shall retire for a while." As she moved to the door, Darcy suddenly called out to her.
"Aunt, a moment, if you please." Lady Catherine turned back, her features registering an inquisitive expression.
"Yes?"
"I wondered whether or not I should mention it, but, while we are on the subject of laying aside grievances, I feel compelled to inform you that," he hesitated. "Anne very much desires to be reconciled with you."
"You… have been in communication with my daughter?" inquired Lady Catherine, and Darcy wondered whether he had not just succeeded in rending his newly-mended relationship with his aunt.
"We have been in correspondence since her marriage." He prudently chose not to add that he had himself performed the office of giving her away. "I will gladly provide you with her address and place of residence, but that is as far as I am willing to interfere in the matter. What action you take beyond that is, of course, entirely yours to decide."
Lady Catherine considered him for a moment; then nodded. "I shall… consider it carefully," she responded. Then, without warning, she crossed the room to Darcy and, stopping before him, clumsily rested a hand upon his cheek. "You are a good man, Fitzwilliam," she murmured, and before he had time to fully comprehend the gesture, she turned quickly and took her leave.
Darcy and Elizabeth stood for several moments in stunned silence, before Darcy suddenly gathered his wife in his arms and engaged her in a long, ardent kiss.
"Oh, my Lizzie," he exclaimed, pressing her close. "My clever, clever Lizzie! How on earth did you manage to extract such a confession from her?"
"I did nothing," returned Elizabeth.
"You did what I have failed to do for my entire life. I had truly begun to wonder whether she had an ounce of human feeling within her."
"I think," said Elizabeth, "that however much we might disagree on all manner of subjects under the sun, we agree that your happiness means a great deal to us both."
"Lady Catherine certainly came as close to saying as much outright as I believe I have ever heard," admitted Darcy.
"Well, at any rate," continued Elizabeth, "I hope it shall be a step in endeavoring to put the past behind you."
Darcy smiled. "Henceforth, I believe, I shall endeavor to adopt a new philosophy; to think only of the past as its remembrance gives me pleasure."
"I wonder," murmured Elizabeth, her eyes twinkling, "where I have heard that spoken before. I cannot recall, though I am certain the expression is a familiar one. It is wise advice, though, is it not?"
"Indeed, though I believe I can improve upon it," said Darcy.
"And how, pray tell, shall you do so?" inquired Elizabeth.
"Simply put," replied Darcy, moving to gaze down at his sleeping children, "to think only of the future as its contemplation gives us hope."

The end
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