In Want of a Wife

by evitamockingbird

Summary

After his autumn sojourn to Hertfordshire, Fitzwilliam Darcy returns to London, determined to find a suitable wife. He knows he is rich and handsome, so it should not be very difficult. Or so he thinks.
Fitzwilliam Darcy walked confidently into the London ballroom and surveyed the gathered ladies and gentleman. This was the Season, he had decided, when he must choose a wife. He need not be betrothed by the end of the night, but such a large party provided an excellent opportunity to make a beginning. Darcy had always accepted that he would choose a bride based primarily on her connections and suitability for the position of mistress of Pemberley, sister to his sister and mother to his children. He would choose a woman for whom he felt at least some friendship, but love was not a necessary component. Still, he had for years half-consciously cherished the flicker of hope that he might find a wife he could love, and who could love him. As he made his way to the refreshment tables, he felt a bit grim, as though he were marching into a desperate battle. His perfectly tailored clothing and noble bearing were his uniform and his wealth and position his weapons. With these things at his disposal, he should have no difficulty finding any number of women happy to accept him, perhaps even a few who were amiable. Still, he did not relish the task, and he was not precisely sure why he was so ambivalent. Darcy appreciated a pretty face and an elegant figure as much as the next man, but he felt no anticipation for the chase. At least the ladies here would be more accomplished and offer more refined conversation than what he had found in the wilds of Hertfordshire last autumn. That was something to look forward to.

His thoughts were interrupted by one of these very ladies, who had appeared at his side, ostensibly to procure a cup of punch. “Mr. Darcy, how lovely to see you,” the young woman said, curtsying. Darcy bowed and returned her greeting. “It is likewise a pleasure to see you again, Miss Hetherston.” His purpose still firmly in mind, Darcy briefly considered whether Miss Hetherston might be considered a candidate. She was a pretty girl, about twenty, fairly intelligent, with a good fortune and noble blood. He had only a superficial knowledge of her character, but he knew no harm of her, so he resolved to observe her in order to learn more. “Have you been in London long?”

“Since just after Christmas, Mr. Darcy,” she answered. “My family spent the holiday with my uncle in the country. He is the Earl of Rountree, as you may recall. I visit several times a year, but I still cannot help but marvel at the majesty and prestige of that great estate. I imagine you can understand that, sir, being the owner yourself of such a magnificent estate. Pemberley! Although I have never seen it myself, I have often heard it spoken of as one of the most beautiful in England.” Miss Hetherston fluttered her eyelashes at Darcy.

“I am indeed, proud of Pemberley,” he acknowledged, “although I cannot take credit for all of its beauties.”

“And how is your dear sister, Georgiana? Shall she be making her debut soon?”

Darcy felt a prick of annoyance that Miss Hetherston should refer to his sister, whom she had never met, by her Christian name. “Miss Darcy is very well, but I believe it may be another year before she makes her bow. She is still quite young and I do not wish to bring her out before she is ready.”

“Oh, tush, Mr. Darcy! Girls younger than Georgiana have been presented at court. Do not worry so about her tender feelings. Within a week of her debut, she will thank you for it, I promise. She will be surrounded by beaux and you will not be troubled much longer with the care of your sister.” The young lady sent him a saucy smile.

“I cannot agree with you, Miss Hetherston,” Darcy said icily. “I do care very much about Miss Darcy’s tender feelings. Her health and comfort are, in fact, the most important things in the world
to me, so you will excuse me if I do not take your advice. I bid you good evening.” He bowed and abruptly left her.

As he walked away Darcy almost immediately regretted his curtness. Miss Hetherston had removed herself from his list of eligible young ladies by her speech about Georgiana, but if he had disagreed with her more tactfully or simply changed the subject perhaps she might have introduced him to a few of her friends. As it was, he would have to make his own way into the crowd. Quarrelling with the first woman he spoke to was clearly not the best way to begin the evening. Still, there must certainly be other eligible ladies who would not speak so unfeelingly about Georgiana. Surely a lady must be present who would value, love, and respect his dear sister. It was only a matter of finding her. The large room was crowded, and the task of sifting through the many guests in search of a bride might have been daunting, but Darcy had made his resolution and intended to carry it out.

He was not long alone, for the ladies were soon upon him. Darcy’s fine figure and fastidious attention to dress were nearly as effective as his wealth at drawing a crowd of female admirers. Young ladies wished to capture his attention for themselves, matrons schemed on behalf of their daughters, and some married ladies even wanted him in their beds. Fortunately for Darcy’s purpose, the former were the first to cross his path as he made his way across the room. Deep in thought and only vaguely aware of his surroundings, he nearly collided with a young lady who stood with a small knot of her friends, almost all of whom were known to Darcy.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Mosely,” he said, bowing to the petite blonde he had nearly knocked over. “I fear in my haste I did not look where I was going.”

“In your haste, Mr. Darcy?” Miss Mosely answered. “Where can you have been going so quickly?”

“No where in particular,” he answered with a self-deprecating smile. “But my mind was elsewhere and I have a deplorable habit of hurrying everywhere I go.” Darcy turned and acknowledged Miss Mosely’s friends with an elegant bow. “Ladies.”

The ladies all curtsied in return and a very ordinary conversation began. Once Darcy had been introduced to the two ladies who were unknown to him, he paid little attention to what was actually said as he surveyed his fair companions. They were competing for his notice, so little actual speech was required of him as he perused the faces and figures, linking each in his mind with what he knew about her fortune and connections. One by one he added every young lady in the group to the list from which he had a few minutes ago removed Miss Hetherston. Miss Mosely he nearly dismissed for her extreme youth - she had been at school with Georgiana - but in the end he decided that she might do as well as any other. Girls of sixteen did marry men much older than he, after all. She was rather a sweet girl, which was more than could be said for at least half of the ton. His initial appraisal complete, Darcy returned his attention to the conversation taking place, just in time to be addressed by Lady Charlotte Farnlow.

“Mr. Darcy, I understand from Miss Caroline Bingley that you were a few months in Hertfordshire last autumn. How did you find the country?” she asked.

“Yes, I was indeed in Hertfordshire for several months with Charles Bingley and his family. I found the countryside quite charming, but I am afraid the society left much to be desired.”

Lady Charlotte laughed. “So Miss Bingley said! You must tell us all, Mr. Darcy. What dreadful people and things did you see in Hertfordshire?”

Darcy hesitated for a moment, as images of his time in the country flashed through his mind. He knew that a relation of the antics of the Bennet family alone could provide ample amusement for his pretty companions, and indeed that family figured in almost every instance of the worst
behavior he had been exposed to in Hertfordshire. The two eldest Miss Bennets, however, he could not include in his reproaches. In spite of the pains he had taken to separate Bingley from Miss Jane Bennet, he knew she was a perfectly well-behaved young woman. As for Miss Elizabeth, although her behavior towards himself had sometimes puzzled Darcy, she was genteel, amiable, and warm-hearted. He could find nothing to censure in the conduct of either. It seemed improbable that two such unexceptionable young ladies should be the daughter of such a harridan as Mrs. Bennet, but so it was.

“It was quite an experience, I assure you,” Darcy said, determined to tread carefully. “I was acquainted with a family whose many daughters, all unmarried, behaved in rather a vulgar manner, caring for nothing but dancing and chasing after officers of the local militia.”

“Oh dear,” tittered Miss Olivia Wilton. “And was not their mother or their governess able to check their wild behavior?”

“Unfortunately, Miss Wilton, it seems the youngest daughters’ impropriety reflected that of the mother, who had never engaged a governess for any of her daughters, the youngest of whom is out in society, such as it is, at the age of fifteen.”

“How dreadful!” exclaimed Lady Charlotte. “Your account matches perfectly with Miss Bingley’s. I did think perhaps she had exaggerated the matter, but it appears not, for I know you never exaggerate, Mr. Darcy.”

“I know not what Miss Bingley has told you,” Darcy said, “but it is quite true that she was not at all pleased with society in Hertfordshire. To her credit, she played the gracious hostess when Bingley held a ball at Netherfield. It was well attended and enjoyed by all, but not all of Miss Bingley’s guests repaid her courtesy by behaving with decorum.”

“You must tell us of the ball as well, Mr. Darcy,” Lady Charlotte said. “Miss Bingley told me that she wished to forget the ball had ever happened, and will not speak in specifics. Surely you do not feel such hesitation to talk to of it?” she hinted.

“There is not much to tell,” Darcy hedged. He was a little surprised that Miss Bingley had refrained from her favorite pastime - disparaging the characters of her Hertfordshire neighbors. Perhaps she wished to avoid any possible mention of Jane Bennet. Lady Charlotte raised an eyebrow. “Come, Mr. Darcy,” she said. “You must tell your friends here about the Netherfield ball. In detail, if you please, or I shall know you are hiding something.”

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Darcy breathed a sigh of relief when he had finally extricated himself from the crowd of ladies clamoring for stories of the horrors of Hertfordshire without resorting to the sort of cruel derision that Caroline Bingley often employed. While Lady Charlotte had plainly been disappointed by his restraint, he had managed to leave the conversation without giving a hint of the Bennet family’s identity. They did not move in the same circles as Lady Charlotte and the rest, but Darcy would consider it highly dishonorable to speak ill of the family by name regardless of his company. He hoped that his story had been convincing. He had talked in general terms of the swarm of redcoats, the unladylike manners of some of the young girls, the lack of good conversation, and the impertinence of the strange, though unnamed, clergyman who had accosted him that night. Lady Charlotte perhaps had some suspicion that there was more to the story, but there was nothing he could do about that. He had nothing more to say on the subject and she would soon find something new to gossip about.

Darcy had to admit that the conversation he had just escaped was not at all superior to many he
had overheard in Hertfordshire, in spite of his expectations of refinement. The London ladies spoke in more sophisticated tones, but the topics of conversation were the same. Well, perhaps it was due to the setting. Even Miss Elizabeth Bennet had said that she could never speak of books in a ballroom, and he knew her to be quite as intelligent as she was lovely. He scanned the room, looking for a lady as handsome as Miss Elizabeth, but each was discounted. Her gown at the Netherfield ball was nothing, of course, in comparison to the finery here, but she had a prettier face than any he could see.

In his perambulations, Darcy reached the terrace door and stepped outside, where it was quite a bit cooler. The terrace was quite large, and a number of other guests had come in search of relief from the overheated ballroom. Small groups of ladies and gentlemen stood talking in the dim light cast from the house, while movement in the shadows told him that others less respectably engaged were barely out of sight. In the dim light his eyes continued to seek the like of Elizabeth Bennet. It was hard to distinguish anyone’s features in the murky evening, but he looked anyway. Suddenly he was brought up short in his walk when he caught sight of Elizabeth Bennet herself, in conversation with three or four ladies by the railing. What could she be doing here? Darcy stood still, flustered by her unexpected presence and undecided as to where his next step would take him. He knew he should turn back and return to the ballroom. He admired Elizabeth a great deal, but had no intention of pursuing her, for many reasons. Approaching her would only assure the continuance of their acquaintance, which would in turn make it more difficult to shake off his infatuation. He was planning to marry some well-connected lady or other soon, wasn’t he? On the other hand, it had been over a month since the Netherfield ball and the idea of looking at her, of speaking with her again was a very great temptation. He could hardly bear to turn away, although he thought himself a fool for having so little control over his own thoughts.

In the end, Darcy chose neither option, staying on the terrace but moving away from the group of ladies. He stationed himself much farther down the railing and stared out into the darkened garden, trying to contain his agitation. He strained to hear some trace of her voice, her laugh, but he was too far from the group to catch any hint of her. After some struggle, Darcy glanced surreptitiously in her direction, only to see that a handsome young man had joined the group and was paying special attention to Elizabeth. After a few moments’ conversation, she took the gentleman’s arm and they walked inside. Darcy found himself unable to keep from following the couple at a short distance, wondering who the lucky man was. As the darkness melted away, however, Darcy could see that he had been mistaken. The lady was not Elizabeth Bennet, nor did she resemble her in much aside of height and hair color. He stopped following the couple and stood at the edge of the ballroom, thinking himself a fool and conscious of a feeling of great disappointment. He had wandered about in search of Elizabeth’s like and in the dim light of the terrace he had grasped at the slightest resemblance and his imagination had filled in the rest. Darcy’s peace for the evening was destroyed. His agitation was beginning to subside, but his heart still pounded and his neckcloth felt much too tight. He had believed that thoughts of Miss Elizabeth had been put behind him once he had begun carrying out his plans to urge Bingley away from Miss Jane, but it seemed that they had only been pushed to the side temporarily, appearing almost out of nowhere and taking him completely by surprise. Darcy inwardly cursed his own lack of self control. In spite of Elizabeth’s many attractions, her situation in life made it impossible for him to pursue her, but he had not yet been able to forget her. He needed to cure himself of this imprudent fascination so he could concentrate on finding a wife. It would not do for his eyes to be constantly darting about the ballrooms and parlors of London in search of a woman who he knew was not there. Elizabeth was miles away in Hertfordshire, living her country life. Darcy wondered if she ever thought of him. As a gentleman, he hoped she did not, since he had no wish to have raised any vain hopes. As a man, however, he would have liked to know that she had admired him as much as he did her. He did not know what she thought or felt about him, though, and his mind told him that was best. He must make every effort to put Elizabeth Bennet out of his head for good.
Georgiana

Chapter Summary

Darcy spends an evening with his sister, Georgiana. He would like to avoid it, but somehow the topic of Hertfordshire comes up.

Chapter Notes

I like to think of Darcy as an affectionate brother, and that the shy Georgiana opens up a bit under his care. She looks up to her brother, but she also is not afraid to tease him a little. I hope you enjoy this installment!

The next day found Darcy in his study, buried under correspondence, ledgers, and books. After his pursuit of the shade of Elizabeth Bennet through a London ballroom the previous night, he had awakened still a bit perturbed, but no less determined to keep to his course. He had dressed, breakfasted with Georgiana, and plunged into his work, hopeful that it would distract him from thoughts of Elizabeth. There was much to do, and his wish seemed granted. He had been back in London over a month, but had not yet taken care of every item of business that had arisen during his stay at Netherfield. His steward knew where to forward the most urgent concerns, but there was still a great deal awaiting him in London when he returned last November, and he had been so much engaged with Georgiana and the Bingleys that he had neglected much of the business. The familiarity of these tasks, and the mental exertions they required, soon restored to him his usual composure. Thus occupied, Darcy was surprised when a servant came to his study to tell him that dinner would be served in an hour. He had taken tea hurriedly at some point in the day, but was surprised to find it so late.

He put his signature to the letter he had just finished writing and went to dress for dinner, feeling satisfied with the day's work. He had not had time for any fanciful musings about Elizabeth Bennet, and even now he could think of her calmly. With the right amount of activity, Darcy felt sure that he would soon be able to think of her as no more than a pleasant girl he had once met in the country. She would be supplanted by another, and surpassed by the future Mrs. Darcy, whoever she might be. As he made himself presentable for dinner with Georgiana, Darcy’s expression grew grave as he thought over this next problem. He felt confident that he could soon forget Elizabeth, but he now feared that his search for a wife might be more difficult than he had anticipated. There was no shortage of women who would accept a proposal from him, but he didn't feel certain he would find the right woman easily. He would be entrusting his future wife with a great deal that he held dear - Georgiana, Pemberley, any children they might have - so he could not in good conscience simply choose a pretty face and be done with it. No, although his marriage might not be a love match, duty required that he be careful in his choice, and last night's ballroom conversations had reminded him that there were some ladies of good birth and fortune who possessed very little kindness or sincerity. He would not inflict such a sister on Georgiana.

Darcy arrived in the dining room at the appointed hour and set about the business of making himself agreeable.
"And what have you been about today, Georgiana?" he asked.

"I have spent most of the day in the music room, brother," Georgiana answered. "Your gifts at Christmas have given me a great deal to practice."

"I hope I do not hear a complaint in your tone. I would be sorry to hear that you did not like my gifts!" he teased.

Georgiana laughed. "You know I would never complain of that! If I did not like to play I might suspect you had given me music just to vex me, but that is not at all the case, as you are well aware."

"And may I hear you play after dinner tonight?"

"If you wish. No one is expected tonight, I believe? And Mr. Bingley is out tonight?" Georgiana looked at him nervously.

"Yes, my girl, you have only your brother for company this evening. But you will someday play for a larger audience, you know. You need not be anxious, for your playing and singing are always so beautiful." He smiled at his sister.

"So you say, but you are a partial observer, brother," she answered, looking troubled. "I do not feel so certain of others. I cannot see so much sincerity in the world as I see in you, Fitzwilliam. And I fear I am easily misled." Her voice had sunk to a whisper, and she looked down at her hands, which were now clasped in her lap.

As Darcy took his sister's hand and spoke to her comfortingly, he felt a surge of anger at the absent George Wickham, whom he knew to be the cause of Georgiana's fears. He had deceived her with pretty words and gentle manners, talking her into an elopement, which Darcy arrived only just in time to prevent. It immediately became clear to Georgiana that Wickham had pursued her for her fortune only and she was crushed. The revelation of his true character had gone a long way to healing her heartache, but Georgiana now found that she trusted almost no one. Wickham had always been kind to her, since she was a child, and his professions of affection at Ramsgate had naturally seemed sincere to her. She had not the slightest apprehension that his emotions were feigned, and had been completely taken in. She now shrunk from kindness from almost anyone, not trusting her own judgment to tell her who might mislead or deceive her. Darcy had begun to fear that Georgiana would bear the scars of Wickham's treachery permanently when she met her new governess and would barely speak to her. He could hardly blame her, as Mrs. Annesley's predecessor had been Wickham's accessory. Thankfully, Mrs. Annesley had at last broken through Georgiana's reserve and earned her trust. Darcy now felt certain that Georgiana would fully recover, but she still was not herself.

"I am sorry to be so foolish, brother," Georgiana said. "If you say it, it must be so, and I will try to believe it."

"Don't apologize, dear. I know it has been difficult for you of late. In time you will feel better. We needn't talk of it right now. I only wish for your happiness and comfort, Georgiana."

She looked up and smiled. "Yes, you are so good to me, Fitzwilliam. That I will never doubt. But what have you been doing today? I did not catch one glimpse of you from breakfast to dinner!"

"I was busy in my study, employed with all manner of business concerns. There was so much to be done after I neglected my affairs spending time in the country last autumn with the Bingleys. But the work was refreshing, as it kept me distracted from...other troubles." Darcy could have kicked himself. He had not intended to discuss Hertfordshire, or any of his problems for that
A crease appeared on Georgiana's brow. "Troubles, brother? What troubles you?"

"Nothing of significance, dear," he said, casting about for some explanation that would satisfy her curiosity. "I have lately been thinking over some events that occurred in Hertfordshire. I am afraid Mr. Bingley may have lost his heart to a local girl. He bears it well, but he is a little cast down."

"Oh, poor Mr. Bingley! But what has happened? Has the lady rejected his proposal?"

"No proposal was made. The affair did not progress that far, thankfully for Bingley. It would have been quite an unsuitable match, and the lady did not love him."

"She was a fortune-hunter, then," Georgiana said flatly, an expression of grim understanding on her face. "I hope he will recover soon and find a more worthy lady. There is nothing lower than that sort of deceit. She would have made his life miserable. Mr. Bingley is well rid of her."

Darcy knew he could have let things go here, but he did not feel quite comfortable allowing Georgiana to think so ill of Jane Bennet, though a stranger to her. He felt no scruple in describing the match as completely unsuitable, but Miss Bennet could never be fairly described as low and deceitful. "I do not say that she was a fortune hunter, dear, although it is true that her dowry is insignificant. She seemed a most unaffected and modest young lady. Not worthy of Bingley perhaps, but I would not call her unworthy in a general sense. I am sure she will make some other gentleman a good wife, and likely sooner than later, as she is quite a handsome girl."

"I don't understand. How is the lady so unsuitable? She sounds to be quite lovely from your description, and a lack of fortune could not be a very great impediment to Mr. Bingley."

Darcy was becoming uncomfortable with the conversation. He had been feeling so confident of his ability to get over Hertfordshire, but he was back in the thick of those concerns again. "It is her family, Georgiana. Her father is a gentleman, but her mother is a most vulgar woman. It is she who was hunting Bingley's fortune in the most offensive fashion. She spoke very plainly to everyone she could of her expectation of their engagement and her anticipation of Bingley's finding rich husbands for her four younger daughters."

"Oh, dear," Georgiana said. "How dreadful. But did the mother not fix her attention on you as well, for one of her other daughters?" Georgiana gave him a teasing smile. "Tell me, brother, which of the young ladies did you prefer? Or were all of the sisters as vulgar as their mother?"

Darcy cleared his throat and resisted the urge to tug at his neckcloth, which once again felt too tight. Mrs. Bennet most certainly had not pursued Darcy for one of her daughters, but Georgiana was still approaching truths that he would rather not share. "Not all of the sisters, dear. The two eldest are unexceptionable young ladies, quite unlike their mother, but the other three have been allowed to run wild and I fear will come to evil by their imprudent behavior and manners."

"But the two eldest you do not include in this condemnation. What of the second daughter? Unexceptionable, you say, but I suppose she may not have been very pretty. Perhaps all the beauty in the family was in the eldest?" Georgiana looked at him curiously.

"Not pretty? No, Georgiana, I would not say that at all. I did not think her handsome when I first saw her, but after I knew her a little I changed my opinion." Darcy could not help smiling a little as his mind wandered to thoughts of Elizabeth in the drawing room at Netherfield, holding her own against the imperious Caroline Bingley. Although her presence and her verbal challenges had been disconcerting at the time, the memories were pleasant, amusing even. "She has a different sort of beauty than her sister, but all the same she is quite pretty. There is something about her
smile, and her very fine eyes...I can't do justice to her by description. But it makes one smile to look at her."

Georgiana covered her mouth with one hand and tried, without success, to stifle her giggles. "Fitzwilliam, are you sure it is only Mr. Bingley who has left his heart in Hertfordshire?"

"What?" Darcy started, then colored, returning from his reverie. "Of course it is! You must not mistake my admiration for love, Georgiana. And even had I fallen prey to that tender emotion, the lady is just as unsuitable as her sister, and even more in my case than in Bingley's. For I have you to protect, my dear, and to connect myself to such a family would subject you to the grossest impertinence and ill bred behavior you ever saw. I would not wish that for you or for Pemberley." He realized as he spoke that he had been saying these things to himself all day. Elizabeth's situation in life must argue against her every attraction.

"I am sorry for her, then, and for her sister," Georgiana said, regarding her brother thoughtfully. "Their prospects are not determined by their own merit."

"I am sorry, too," Darcy said gravely. "But it is the way of the world, Georgiana."

"You are right, I'm sure. And I am sorry for Mr. Bingley, too, for his disappointed hopes."

"Yes, I am afraid he was so smitten he did not see that she showed no signs of love. It was obvious to Bingley's sisters and to me that she was pleased with his attention, but not at all in love with him."

"But surely in time her pleasure in his company might have grown into love. It is a shame that nothing could come of it. Do you think he will return to Hertfordshire?"

"I do not think so. Not anytime soon, at least. He is much engaged here, as you know, and will not likely have the opportunity to visit Netherfield again soon." Darcy noticed Georgiana's troubled look and tried to shake off his gravity. "Come, dear, you mustn't think on this any further. Mr. Bingley will manage his affairs very well without our help," he said with a smile.

"Yes, of course," Georgiana said absently, still apparently pondering the problem. "In time he will recover his spirits," she said, more to herself than to Darcy. Then she looked at her brother. "And you mustn't think further on it, either. Why should you be troubled over it and then tell me I must not worry?" Darcy took a deep breath, searching for an answer, but Georgiana interrupted him. "Never mind, Fitzwilliam. I think I may safely guess, and relieve you of the trouble of coming up with an answer. You need not speak of it if you do not wish to." She smiled sweetly and did him the favor of changing the subject. "What shall I play for you tonight, Fitzwilliam?"

Darcy sighed inwardly with relief. Georgiana was really far more perceptive than he had realized.

_To be continued..._
Darcy travels to Rosings with his cousin Col. Fitzwilliam.

Darcy settled into the carriage that was taking him into the next season of his busy year. Col. Fitzwilliam, sitting opposite him, was already beginning to doze as they made their way slowly through London. He would wake in an hour or so, no doubt, but for now Darcy was glad to be alone with his thoughts. He reviewed the last few months in his mind, frankly glad to be putting one disastrous failure behind him and moving on. In spite of his repeated resolutions to the contrary, he had not been able to banish Elizabeth Bennet from his thoughts, or even prevent her silhouette from flitting about the shadows of the finest ballrooms, salons, and dining rooms in London. It happened just infrequently enough that Darcy would momentarily believe that this time it really was Elizabeth, only to discover that his mind had been playing tricks on him again. Worse yet were the dreams. He could tell himself that this or that lady really did wear her hair just as Elizabeth did, or laugh just as she did, so it made some sense that he should be reminded of her, but the dreams he knew were of his own making. He dreamed of her everywhere - back in Hertfordshire, here in London, even at Pemberley - and in all manner of situations, some more innocent than others. There was no escaping these dreams, for in the dreams he never desired escape. The Elizabeth of his dreams seemed sometimes to intentionally provoke him with her impertinence, as she always had in life, and at other times was openly affectionate, but his dream self seemed content in her presence regardless of her behavior. And every time Darcy awoke from another such dream, he set his will once more against allowing her invasion of his mind to continue. At times it seemed a hopeless cause, but Darcy was nothing if not steadfast in his purpose.

He was on his way to Kent now, for his annual visit to Lady Catherine at Rosings. He and Fitzwilliam had visited their aunt every spring at Rosings for as long as he could remember, and Darcy hoped that the sparse social activities available in the neighborhood would provide fewer opportunities for shades of Elizabeth to trespass on his waking life, though he had little expectation that a change of neighborhood would have any effect on his dreams. He almost laughed at the thought of her in his aunt's drawing room - Elizabeth at Rosings seemed more ridiculous an idea than all the unlikely places he had seen her in London - but he held his silence. It would not do to wake his cousin and have to explain his laughter.

Darcy had abandoned the unexpectedly exhausting search for a bride for the time being. He didn't know how he would accomplish it, but he was still determined to shed his foolish infatuation with Elizabeth Bennet.

Darcy could at least reflect with some satisfaction on one aspect of the past several months. Georgiana's mood seemed to be improving at last. Mrs. Annesley continued to prove herself a kind and compassionate woman, who nonetheless kept her young charge busy enough with study and practice that she had little time for despair and self-reproach. And since Darcy allowed her to attend a few concerts and small social gatherings, Georgiana had made a few new friends. She was not yet completely herself, but her heart was healing and her spirit was returning. Darcy would miss his sister while he was in Kent, but knowing she was under the care and protection of Mrs. Annesley, he felt it safe to leave her for this visit to Rosings. He was a man of independent character and means, but Lady Catherine's annual summons were not to be ignored lightly.
Unfortunately, Lady Catherine would no doubt continue hinting not very subtly that he should marry Anne. Neither he nor Anne had any such inclination, but that seemed to make no difference to his aunt. Darcy sighed heavily.

"That was quite a sigh, Darcy. What ails you? Missing London already?" Fitzwilliam's voice surprised Darcy. He had not noticed that his cousin had awakened.

"Ah, you're awake at last."

"At last?" Fitzwilliam looked at his watch. "I've hardly slept an hour! Just because you prefer to be up and about by the time the sun rises doesn't mean the rest of us must keep up with you."

"Perhaps not. I ought to be surprised you're awake so early. Fitzwilliam conscious before noon? A miracle!" Darcy smirked at his cousin.

"I blame the damned carriage," Fitzwilliam said, refusing to rise to the bait. "Even I can't sleep long on the bumpy road to Rosings. And with that blasted sighing of yours, Darcy, it's a wonder I slept at all. Come, tell your cousin all about it. Who is she?"

Darcy snorted, keeping his expression impassive. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The typical response of a man in denial," Fitzwilliam said, waving away his cousin's words. He smiled slyly, his sharp eyes assessing Darcy. "I hear you've been seen stalking about the ballrooms of town more than usual this season, but there's been nary a whisper of which lady's company you prefer. Perhaps you're pining from afar? But who is unattainable to the rich and handsome Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley?"

"Don't be ridiculous Fitzwilliam," Darcy said, trying to discourage his cousin's teasing by frowning darkly at him. "There is no lady. I do not pine, nor do I stalk about ballrooms, for that matter."

Fitzwilliam laughed out loud now. "You certainly do stalk, and I'll wager you pine as well, or at least you will someday. I know you well, Darcy. You're a practical man, but a romantic at heart. Now don't draw those brows together as though you could frighten me into meekness. I'm immune to that look of yours, for I've seen far worse. Don't forget I'm a soldier!"

Darcy's glower softened slightly. "I know better than to expect meekness from you, Fitzwilliam," he said. "You're an impudent rascal."

Fitzwilliam sighed in mock resignation. "I'm afraid you're right, but what can be done? I can't help being an impudent rascal, any more than you can deny your sentimental nature."

Darcy was provoked by how much his cousin was enjoying the conversation. There must be a way to stop this foolishness. "Well, if you'd like to see a man who can't hide his romantic nature, I could introduce you to a friend of mine whom I've seen in love more times than I can count."

Fitzwilliam recognized Darcy's attempt at misdirection and decided to let him have his way this time. He would find out the truth in good time. "Is that so? Charming with the ladies?"

"Yes, and they charm him as well. I think he has recently had his heart broken, but he will recover."

Fitzwilliam looked thoughtful. "Hearts do have a way of healing themselves. What happened?"

"The lady did not love him," Darcy said.
Fitzwilliam winced. "I am glad I have never had to experience having my proposal of marriage rejected."

"Fortunately for my friend, it did not go as far as that. She did not love him, but they parted before he could make a fool of himself. His sisters and I felt it best that they not see one another again and among us were able to effect a separation."

Fitzwilliam shrugged. "Well, I suppose he will just have to start again with someone else until he finds a lady who will accept him." He grinned. "A lady who is worth a little foolishness."

"A lady worth a little foolishness," Darcy mused. "That is an interesting way to put it, Fitzwilliam, but perhaps accurate all the same."

"Especially for one with romantic notions."

Darcy raised an eyebrow at his cousin and said nothing. After a few moments of silence, he picked up a newspaper and began to read, effectively ending the conversation.

Fitzwilliam sat back and folded his arms across his chest, looking very amused. He had to admit he was perversely entertained by pestering and vexing his cousin. No one else was quite as good at provoking Darcy as Col. Edward Fitzwilliam.
Darcy stalked down the hall and let himself out of the front door of Hunsford Parsonage before the servant had a chance to do it for him. He gritted his teeth to control his anger as he turned his steps back toward Rosings. He did not wish to return, not yet, so when he reached the woods of Rosings Park he struck out on a path that did not lead directly to the house.

Elizabeth's biting words rang in his ears as he walked, one accusation on top of the other. His mind was filled with a cacophony of her. Darcy shook his head to try to clear it. After a few minutes the clamor began to die down and just one voice echoed in his mind. "You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any way that would have tempted me to accept it." How could that be? Had he not made it clear that he admired her, loved her? She had certainly seemed to encourage his pursuit of her, but even if she did not actually love him, did she think nothing of the advantages he offered? As Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy she would want for nothing, her family would be protected in the event of Mr. Bennet's death, should any of her sisters find themselves still unmarried, and her social status would improve considerably. To give up all of this, she must be completely foolish or she must dislike him intensely. Darcy discounted the former immediately. Elizabeth Bennet was no fool. That left him with the unpalatable truth that he had completely misjudged her attitude toward him. She had not meant to encourage him, but rather believed him to be entirely heartless and uncaring.

Rosings came into view now, but Darcy turned and walked in another direction. He could not return until he was able to calm his anger, confusion, and mortification. He would have to sit in the drawing room, perhaps play at cards, and listen to his aunt expound on one subject or another. Her style of conversation would not require him to speak very often, but if he was not careful Fitzwilliam would notice that he was brooding.

How did it all happen? Darcy wondered. It was not so very long ago that he was in London, starting each day with the determination to forget her, but seeing her at Rosings and at Hunsford had put an end to those thoughts. He could not stay away from her and after debating with himself for weeks, he had decided he must have her, and to the devil with the consequences. He would find a way to shield Georgiana from the Bennet family, but Elizabeth herself would surely be the best sister Georgiana could wish for. Elizabeth had an indescribable, almost magical, way of making someone comfortable in conversation. In his mind's eye, he could see her meeting his sister for the first time. Georgiana would be shy, though polite, and Elizabeth would draw her out gently. He had watched her in Hertfordshire and seen her kindness and patience. Those beautiful eyes could flash in anger and her tongue could be sharp and impertinent, but he had no doubt of the goodness of her heart.

Darcy sighed, then set his jaw. It would be difficult to get over a woman like Elizabeth, for even in his anger, his estimation of her worth was unaffected. He would certainly stop loving her someday, but how long would it take? He had never suffered something like this before, had never been in love. It was most definitely just as dreadful as all of the poets described it.

Poetry would have been the best way to communicate his feelings when he saw Elizabeth for the first time at Hunsford. He and Fitzwilliam had gone together to pay a call on the ladies at the parsonage shortly after they arrived at Rosings. Darcy had been jarred by Lady Catherine's announcement that Elizabeth, his Elizabeth, was staying just across a lane from Rosings Park, but before the visit was made he was still determined to fight his attraction to her. However, once he stepped into the parlor with his cousin, the battle was lost. Darcy had seen an imaginary Elizabeth all over London and in his dreams, but nothing could come close to the reality of her, standing before him in the flesh, her dark eyes drawing him in and swallowing him up. He loved her. His
mind still protested with a list of all of the reasons she would be an unsuitable bride, but those thoughts could only delay the inevitable.

Darcy felt calmer now, although he suspected it would be quite some time before he regained his accustomed equilibrium. He struck out on a path for Rosings, preparing himself to face the gathering in his aunt's drawing room. It was a grim prospect, but he had already raised Fitzwilliam's suspicions by leaving so suddenly after Lady Catherine's guests arrived. If he retreated to his room now, his cousin would know there was something serious afoot, and in his current state Darcy doubted he would be capable of warding off the determined interrogation to which he was sure to be subjected. He was surprised he had been able to hold him off for as long as he had, although he had a vague suspicion that his cousin had observed much more than Darcy would wish. Fitzwilliam was like a brother to him, but Darcy was a private man and had no desire to reveal his personal affairs to anyone, even his cousin.

He entered the house and gave his coat and hat to the butler before returning to the drawing room. Lady Catherine was perturbed by his absence and questioned him minutely. Darcy somehow managed to contrive answers that seemed to satisfy her curiosity, though she was clearly still displeased with his behavior. He felt Fitzwilliam's eyes on him, but he also noticed Mrs. Collins's curiosity. She attended to Lady Catherine's speech and occasionally made some answer as it was required, but from time to time her eyes drifted in Darcy's direction, surreptitiously inspecting him. He wondered what she might be thinking.

The evening was deadly dull and Darcy had difficulty remaining still. He wanted to pace about the room and stare out the window, but his well-honed self control kept him from attracting notice from anyone else. Soon his mind wandered to a person he preferred not to think about, but who had repeatedly intruded on Darcy's life in the most painful ways possible. George Wickham. He had first demanded a clerical living he had previously declined, then attempted the seduction of Georgiana, and now had poisoned Elizabeth against Darcy with his lies. Darcy thought of her spirited defense of the man this evening, and hoped that she was safe from him. He could not judge whether Elizabeth was in love with Wickham, but surely her lack of any significant dowry made her unattractive to fortune hunters in search of prey. Darcy hoped it was so. He hated to imagine her married to anyone but himself, but the thought of Elizabeth as the wife of George Wickham made him feel ill. Was there some way to warn her of his treachery? He doubted she would listen to anything he had to say, after the scene this evening in the parsonage, but the thought of the potential consequences of Wickham taking advantage of Elizabeth decided Darcy. A letter, delivered into her hand, in which he told the painful story, was not ideal, but he believed it the best option under the circumstances. He had no doubt of her discretion. If he revealed Georgiana's sad tale, Elizabeth would keep it to herself, however much she disliked Darcy. Some might think him mad for it, but he knew somehow, deep down in his bones, that she would not betray his confidence.

A letter would also give him an opportunity to explain himself, to defend the other actions that had turned her so firmly against him. Her vehement rejection had so taken him by surprise that he had been unable to answer her charges. Her grievances were many, but they were burned in Darcy's memory. She would never accept him, she had said. The accusation that stung more than the others was that he had behaved in an ungentlemanlike manner. He prided himself on his gentility, both in birth and behavior. How could she say such a thing? Was there any truth in it? She had been deceived by Wickham because of his lies, but Darcy's manners she had seen and judged for herself.

At last the interminable evening ended. Darcy climbed the stairs to his luxurious room and dismissed his valet with an order to wake him early the next day. He had no desire for company of
any kind, and he had a letter to write. Sitting down at the desk, Darcy pulled out several sheets of paper and wrote Elizabeth's name at the top of one of them. He stared at it for a long time, trying to determine how he should begin. Writing about Wickham would be more difficult, so he decided to start with Bingley. How had Elizabeth discovered his part in separating them? It must have been Fitzwilliam. Darcy had never mentioned Bingley's name on the few occasions they had discussed the subject, but it would have been easy enough for Elizabeth to guess his identity, given her awareness of the situation.

He hesitated before beginning his account of separating Bingley from Miss Bennet. It was sure to cause Elizabeth pain, no matter if he had been right nor not. She loved her sister dearly, and clearly felt that she had been wronged by Bingley. Even so, Darcy felt that the charges against him must be answered. He had no expectation of ever seeing Elizabeth again, so he pushed away his reservations and wrote as truthful an account as he could. She must understand that he had done what he did out of friendship. He thought in all honesty that Jane Bennet felt no love for his friend, and it took no great skill of observation to see how Mrs. Bennet coveted Bingley for her daughter in quite a vulgar manner. The younger girls and even the father showed a general want of decorum. If Miss Bennet did not love Bingley, it would not do for him to connect himself with such a family. Darcy took pains to make it clear in the letter that he did not include the two eldest Miss Bennets in his censure of their family. He could not excuse the Bennets, but he must do justice to Elizabeth and Jane. Once again he wondered just how those two ladies could have come from such a family.

It was with great discomfort, however, that he admitted that he had known Miss Bennet to be in London and concealed it from Bingley. However, the same force that compelled Darcy to provide Elizabeth with an account of his actions also required that he be honest about this one transgression. After all, he had just declared to her his abhorrence of disguise. Perhaps the admission of his own guilt in this small part of the affair would increase the likelihood of her believing what he wrote, however much she disliked him.

With some anguish, Darcy then laid out every detail of his dealings with Wickham. He hoped he was not doing his sister wrong by telling her part of the story to a person who was a stranger to her, but he felt he could not let these things go unsaid. His account would carry more weight with Elizabeth if he included Wickham's attempt to seduce Georgiana than if he only told of his general character and the affair of the living at Kympton. As he wrote of Wickham's betrayal of Georgiana, he felt as though layers of his heart were being peeled away, leaving him defenseless and vulnerable. Darcy did not know how he would deliver the letter discreetly to Elizabeth, but for once he hoped that he could put it in her hand and then leave her to herself. She had destroyed his calm and his comfort with her maddening presence at Rosings and Hunsford and her sound rejection, and writing the letter was not improving his state of mind. One more sharp word from her...he was not quite sure what it would do to him.

Just as he had debated offering Elizabeth his hand, Darcy found himself questioning the wisdom of writing and delivering this letter, but in the end he decided that it must be done. He could only be thankful that he and Fitzwilliam were leaving Kent tomorrow. He would likely never see Elizabeth again, a fact which he knew brought only temporary relief. He would not have to face the awkwardness of seeing her nearly every day at Rosings, but he had no doubt that she would follow him wherever he went, in his mind and heart and in his dreams.

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