A Long Engagement, or the Improvement of Human Reason, as illustrated in the long and tortuous courtship of Edward Bennet, squire, and Philadelphia, Lady Darcy

by hl (hele), Tulina

Summary

'Well,' said Edward, uncomfortable, but knowing he could not avoid making the invitation now, 'I would consider it an honour if Lady Darcy would accept my hand for this dance.' She would surely reject him now, and he could not say he was entirely unhappy about it; he had no desire to dance with her.

She surprised him -- she dropped in a small curtsey, and said, 'Thank you, sir, it would be a pleasure.'

Notes

The awesome artist who did all the art in this story is purplu @ tumblr. If you want to see all the art on its own go here.

See the end of the work for more notes
September, 1796

'My dear Mrs Bennet,' said her husband one day over breakfast, 'have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?'

Their sons looked at each other, and Mrs Bennet replied that she had not.

'But it is; Mr Gardiner told me Mrs Long was there yesterday and told Mrs Gardiner all about it.'

His wife made no answer, quietly demolishing her plate of kippers, while the tension at the table rose. Finally, John, their eldest son, intervened. 'And does Mrs Long know who has taken it?'

Mr Bennet's tone was as enthusiastic in answering the question as he had been when raising the issue. 'Why, of course! It has been taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; he came in his chaise and four to see the place, and he liked it so much he agreed with Mr Morris immediately, and they are to take possession by Michaelmas. Some servants will be over the place by the end of the week.'

'Is he married or single?' asked Edward with a satirical smile in his mother's direction. 'That is the main point of enquiry, I should say, for most of the county.'

'Married, and his name is Bingley. But he is sure to have a sister or two, which detail should be of interest to you.'

'How so?' asked Mrs Bennet from the other side of the table. 'How can it be of interest to Edward?'

'Edward, or either of his brothers, I should say — although Edward may do well to start thinking about it. The girls are sure to have fortunes of their own — you must know I am thinking of them marrying one of the boys.'

'Is that what they are planning, you think, in settling here in their brother's house?'

'Of course not, do not be tiresome — but they may very well fall in love with one of them. I shall call on Mr Bingley as soon as possible to secure an introduction.'
John caught Edward's eye, his expression alarmed, and Edward felt compelled to speak. 'Surely, sir, that is hardly necessary. We are certain to make their acquaintance soon enough.'

'Not necessary? Suit yourself, if you have no concern for your future, but your brothers have more sense.'

Mark looked as if he wanted to differ — or perhaps even agree, though Edward wagered his words would have not pleased their father all the same — but John was faster. 'Indeed, it would be best, perhaps, if Edward and I called on Mr Bingley ourselves?'

Mr Bennet looked dubious. 'I am the principal landowner of the neighbourhood — surely I should be the one to welcome him?'

'Mr Bingley must be John's age, did you not say?' said Edward, catching his brother's eye. 'He may like to meet someone who enjoys hunting, and perhaps the sisters will be there, and John can be introduced immediately.' John appeared about to speak, a slight frown on his face, but Edward continued heedlessly, trying to repress a smile. 'He is, after all, the heir to the principal gentleman in the neighbourhood. He can even inform them of the coming Assembly and ask them for the first dance.'

'Indeed, you must go, John.' Mr Bennet wore a thoughtful expression. 'And of course, Edward, you must go, too. If he has two sisters, John cannot dance the first with both of them. He must ask the eldest, or at least the prettiest, and you must ask the other one.'

'What, is poor Mark to be left out?' asked Edward, almost despite himself. 'What if there are three sisters? I am a fair dancer, but even I cannot take two.'

His mother hid a smile, and Mark appeared both scandalized and alarmed.

'Mark is too young,' said Mr Bennet, 'and a dreadful dancer, to boot. No, Mark must not go.'

Mark did not appear to feel the insult; he had no care for dancing. Edward took a sip of his tea, and looked across the table at his elder brother — John smiled calmly at him and nodded slightly; Edward could only respond with a roll of his eyes.

'Well then, that is settled!' Mr Bennet, oblivious at his son's true feelings on the matter, was undeterred.

'How delightful,' said Mrs Bennet from her place at the head of the table opposite to Mr Bennet. She did not raise her eyes from her plate.

Mr Bennet's mouth took a downward turn, as if he suspected the feelings did not correspond with the words, but said nothing. After a moment, he asked, 'John — are the horses needed at the farm?'

'I have no notion, sir, but they are usually needed. Should I ring and ask for them?'

Mrs Bennet's mouth tightened.

'Please, do — I will need them later today.' Mr Bennet drained his tea and got up. 'I must go see Mr Gardiner — he sent around word that my brother Evans has seen the prettiest mare for hunting at Tattersall's, and it is sure to go too quickly.'

Mrs Bennet's cup rattled against the small plate, and Edward frowned, trying to think of a way to divert his father. But he could find none, and in a matter of moments, Mr Bennet was out of the room, whistling.
Mark had stopped paying attention and was eating with a rapidity that could only mean that he had left a book partially unread. John was frowning too, but rather than angry he seemed sympathetic, and looked in their mother's direction. After a moment, he said, 'Do you need to go into Meryton today, madam?'

'No, I will just stay and take advantage of the morning — Lady Lucas is sure to call in the afternoon to tell me the great news herself.' Her smile was sardonic.

Edward finished his tea, poked at his kippers, who looked at him with dead, accusatory eyes, and stood up. 'I should go riding — John, did you not say you wanted to go visit Mr Davis today?'

John glanced at Mrs Bennet and said, 'Yes, I should like to. My mother said the other day that his roof is in danger of caving.'

Mrs Bennet smiled at them. 'Go, go, enjoy the day before you are both contracted to be married to the highest bidder.'

Mark looked up from his plate with a censorious expression, but did not say anything.

Not an hour later, Edward and John rode side by side, slow enough that, not one minute atop the horse, Edward had no difficulty being heard when he said, 'I find you remarkably at ease, brother, in the face of my father's machinations.'

'He cannot make me marry,' John pointed out.

'Indeed, the worst — and I should add, the least! — he can do is to embarrass us thoroughly.'

John coloured slightly. 'He does not mean to.'

'The road to hell, as they say! And you will not convince me that his intentions are that good in any case.'

'He is just concerned.'

'Is he? I cannot think why. You are well enough off, since he cannot do any major damage to the property; Mark cannot fail to find some parish in which to read sermons, he does it so well; and I, why, I am the better off of the lot.'

'What, no desire to marry some heiress and settle on a nearby estate?' asked John, with a slight, knowing smile.

'Marry? At my age? Besides, I doubt anyone would have me.'

'I had started to wonder at your own desires, to be truthful, and I know my mother has. Do you plan to stay in London next year?'

Edward raised his eyebrows. 'Does she worry? I am only enjoying what is probably my last extended time here, you know; I will stay at the Inns next year and be dutiful and studious forevermore.'

John smiled, but his expression did not seem to express the doubt that Edward would have thought more than fair. 'It is good to know it. In any case, calling on Mr Bingley when he arrives at Netherfield has naught to do with our marrying or not.'

'Does it not? I know of someone who would disagree.'
'You must come with me, of course.'

Edward flashed his brother a quick smile. 'I am.'

'And Davis will be happy to receive us both, I am sure. You must call on Netherfield Park with me when Mr Bingley arrives,' repeated John, with infinite patience. 'You know what I mean.'

'Why, I did not know you held Bingley's second sister in such regard. Of course I will call and ask her for the first dance.'

'We will go,' said John, 'speak with Mr Bingley, who is surely perfectly agreeable, mention the Assembly, and be away at once.'

'What, you will not even let me ask after Mr Bingley's second sister? Cold, cold heart — not a moment ago, you were worried she would be without a partner for the first.' But on seeing John's expression, Edward relented. 'If I must — you know me well enough already: I will go if you want me to, though I do not understand why you need me. You are the eldest, surely it is perfectly acceptable for you to call and pay your respects for your father and mother?'

'We will not even ask if he has any sisters.' John smiled easily at him and shook his head. 'I want someone with whom to discuss the famous Mr Bingley, that is all.'

'Gossip? You should have said so in the first place; of course I will go.' Edward tightened one hand on the reins and pointed with the other. 'What say you to a race to that tree?'

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Letter from Lady Darcy to Lady Darcy

Netherfield, Thursday evening October 18

I am writing, my dear Madam, as soon as we reached our destination, as I know you were anxious about Fitzwilliam's little throat cold. He is very much improved, as he spent most of the day buried in Mrs Bingley's new furs and being fussed over by her, and when Mrs Bingley's attention was elsewhere, there was Miss Bingley, who you know loves him so, and of course she was obliging enough to coddle him to his taste. To be sure, I never had the chance to nurse my own child!

He behaved exceedingly well—and I only indulge in such display of maternal pride since I know that you, his beloved grandmother, must be as biased as I am. Indeed, he is as kind as his father was, and every day I see him more of my late husband's brilliancy of intellect and superior integrity. Miss Bingley had promised him Turkish delights if he behaved well—it was but an excuse, of course, for he always behaves particularly well with her and she wanted to spoil him. She gave him two treats, and was about to produce a third when he stopped her, remarking that he was to eat one and she the other. I cannot say if this is a sign of generosity of heart or of love for Miss Bingley, but I was suddenly reminded of my courtship with your son. I am afraid Miss Bingley is very handsome and lively, and Fitzwilliam, even at four, seems very enamoured.

On this sentimental note, upon which we must not linger, I must end this letter. I have the unpacking to oversee, since I let Marie pack like we were going to Paris instead of Hertfordshire: no less than six different bonnets and four ball gowns. I think she wants me to marry again—you know how sentimental these French maids are!

I remain your most attached grand-niece and daughter, &c.,

Philadelphia Darcy
Chapter 2

More than a week after first hearing of the new neighbours from Mr Bennet, Edward found John at their father's desk. He entered the library without knocking, came to sit across from his brother, and raised a small missive with a sardonic smile. 'Mr Bingley regrets to say he cannot come to dinner, since he will be obliged to attend to his wife and sister, who lately came from London and are indisposed.'

'Ah,' said John, raising his eyes from the paper he had been studying. 'A shame; he is a pleasant man. We can invite him at a later date with his wife and sister, then. If they are as nice ladies as he is a gentleman, then it would be an agreeable enough party even for you.'

'He, a pleasant man? If I did not know you better, I would think you were teasing me. You stretch the words too far, certainly, by calling him a 'nice gentleman', though he dresses nicely enough, I grant you.'

John put away his quill, and sat back. 'What did he do that so displeased you? He is personable and agreeable— ' He made a pause, and then added with a pained twist on his mouth. 'He certainly appeared to take no offence from my father.'

'A saint, from your telling. But clearly, he did take offence — or he would be dining with us. But I cannot fault him for it, nor do I require men to be saints; sainthood inspires me into villainy. Furthermore, were I at liberty to decide whether to dine here...' He grinned. 'No, he did not show himself to disfavour, but still, I do not like him. There is too much artifice in him.'

'Artifice,' repeated his brother, serious. 'No, I cannot agree with you. I do not think him false. He is perfectly amiable.'

'Everyone is perfectly amiable by your account — I do not dare imagine such a world. It is a strange and dire prospect.'

John smiled, but did not respond.

After a moment, with a grimace, Edward could not help remembering the call itself. 'He does have an admirable amount of restraint, and a fine education. I am not certain how I would have responded if someone would have told me it was a shame I did not have more sisters to marry off.'

John winced. 'My father is too forthright.'
'A first! I do not think I have ever heard you call someone 'too' anything. Though forthright is not the word I would use, myself.' Edward leaned against the high back of the chair and made a gesture towards the desk. 'What were you doing?''

'Writing to Mr Gardiner — he is researching a matter at my mother's request.' He vacillated, and appeared to be about to add something else, but stopped.

He appeared to be more serious than before, and Edward has a sudden foreboding. 'What matter?''

'The common recovery.' John looked at the papers in the desk and then at him again. 'Do you know what it is?''

'I know enough,' said Edward warily. 'But she cannot do it. It would have to be you — my father and you, certainly.' But he knew it was ridiculous as he said it. His father would not say no — not if the result was more control over the estate, and thus more ready money — and John... John would not say no if their mother asked, even if the result would be their father squandering away his inheritance. John did not answer, and after a moment, Edward said, 'Why would she want to?''

John did not answer immediately, and in that small pause, Edward suddenly knew the answer. 'It is for me, is it not?''

'You, and Mark, of course.'

But Mark would go to Oxford, and he could not really fail to find a patron; he did not need the amount of money Edward needed. 'Is there not enough for my three years at the Inns, then, without breaking the entail?''

Until this moment, Edward had not thought he wanted it so. He always thought it a good plan, certainly; being a barrister was something he found agreeable enough as an idea. But he had felt no urgency, and a year without cares in his childhood's home was a perspective that he had not been able to reject when the other option was the city, even if one should account his father's presence in the first and not in the second.

'I would not say that,' answered John, slowly. 'I am only exploring the possibility, and I have not talked to my father. My mother, in any case, has thought of an alternative. You must not worry.'

Edward found it all too easy to follow his brother's advice and push it from his mind.

At the assembly, he was much in demand. Gentlemen were scarce, and he was expected to stand up for every set; it was fortunate he enjoyed dancing. The activity kept him well occupied, as did attending to the Lucas sisters, the Misses Taylor and Miss Wilson, who, though they transparently preferred John as much as the other ladies, were young enough to be gratified with the attention and to be entertaining company. He did not see the Netherfield party enter, though a brief hush towards the entrance in the middle of the third gave him the idea that they had.

His theory was confirmed when, set finished and young companion escorted to her mother, he spotted his brother to one side, accompanied by a very pretty girl of perhaps three and twenty, who had the features, if not the air, of Mr Bingley.

'I would like to think,' Edward remarked to his brother when he reached him, 'that I am sought after for my charming disposition and handsome countenance, but I am afraid it is just a matter of numbers.'

John smiled, though his brow arched slightly in mild reproof. 'This is my brother, Mr Edward Bennet,' he said to his companion, and turning towards Edward, 'Miss Bingley has only just arrived in the neighbourhood.'
Edward bowed. 'I am very pleased to meet you at last, Miss Bingley. And I am sorry if, like my brother's expression seemed to want to convey, I alarmed you or gave you the idea that the county is all inhabited by lunatics.'

The lady's lips twitched slightly, and her smile was warm. 'Not in the least, Mr Bennet. I am, however, exceedingly curious. A matter of numbers?'

'Indeed.' Edward stooped slightly and smiled. 'There are few gentlemen, you see. Rather lowering — it is far more pleasant to think oneself irresistible.'

Miss Bingley's smile broadened, and she looked as if she would laugh. She had a very pleasant, open countenance, easy to read. It was strange, indeed, how the same features sat so differently in her brother's face. 'Oh! Then I am afraid we have skewed your numbers further.'

'Indeed? Shame on the gossips, then! By their account, your brother brought three ladies and half a dozen gentlemen.'

'They were half right, then! My sister, my dear friend, and I make three ladies, but only my two brothers complete the party.'

'And the elder married — I cannot imagine how you may compensate the community for such a grievous harm.'

'I surely do not know!' said Miss Bingley, laughingly.

John was smiling, Edward could see, with his eyes trained on Miss Bingley's face. There was such a peculiar expression in his face, Edward could not identify. He was sure he had never seen his brother sport the like.

'And you bring, not one, but two unmarried young ladies? Tsk tsk; very bad of you,' said Edward, and when she looked to one side, he followed her gaze and found a handsome young woman standing by Lady Lucas. She was tall, her figure womanly and her features almost more elegant than pretty, and she looked as out of place in her surroundings as he imagined he would look at whichever place she had come from.

He had not expected to ever be so arrested by a lady's looks, though he would have admitted readily enough he had met many a pretty woman, and had liked them all well enough. She looked commanding and self contained. He was still staring when a man in elegant scarlet regimentals who looked like Mr Bingley, and must be his younger brother, went to her side with a glass of punch.

Miss Bingley, who had turned to John, followed his gaze, and said gaily, 'You must allow me to introduce you to my party, Mr Bennet.'

'I am already acquainted with your elder brother,' pointed out Edward, though he was not the least put off by the idea of being introduced to her friend. Her younger brother's acquaintance, on the other hand, if he was the least like Lewis Bingley, Edward could spare. However, he was closer in age to Miss Bingley, which made him hopeful. 'But I will be glad to meet the rest.'

She led John and him to the rest of the Netherfield party, who gathered in a corner, observing the proceedings around them with supercilious eyes. Miss Bingley's sister was flushed with drink, and more fashionable than elegant, while her two brothers were more soberly attired. (They were, indeed, very fine dressers, as Edward had pointed out not so long ago to John.) Her friend, as he had observed before, was all that was elegant, and though her look was serious, her mien was agreeable enough not to need her smile.
'Philadelphia, allow me to present to you Mr Bennet and Mr Edward Bennet, my brother's neighbours. Mr Bennet, Mr Edward Bennet, my friend Lady Darcy.'

Philadelphia — her name, thought Edward, seemed at odds with her general demeanour, which was distant — acknowledged them. He bowed the appropriate depth, though some mischievous spirit almost prompted him to greet her as he would the queen. It was a fine thing to be a man grown, and to be conscious that some teasing would not be welcomed; it was almost enough to make him hug himself.

John, at his side, was saying the appropriate pleasantries, so he was free to observe her for a moment. She stood with them, and yet, apart. Suddenly, he was conscious of it being five minutes before a set and acknowledged to himself the urge to invite her to dance. He had never thought to curb such an impulse and he did not think of it now — why would he? It was entirely appropriate, and he wanted it. He had no thought to spare for fearing rejection, and if he had, he would have invited her anyway.

'I am afraid this set is Captain Bingley's,' she said, with a slight, polite smile in her lips.

She said nothing else, did not suggest an alternative set, and he smiled, inclined his head slightly, telling himself it did not rankle (though it undoubtedly did, if only a very little), and excused himself to look for a partner.

Two sets after that he still felt chagrined. He could not ask her again, of course — he had never been a bore and planned to never be one; she was clearly not dancing, and seemed happy enough. It was, perhaps, the novelty of the situation that bothered him; he was accounted in the area as a very desirable partner.

He danced, as always, almost every set, and entertained his partners in between sets to the best of his abilities (which were, if he did say so himself, very ample) — if he could not impede his gaze from sliding through the company until it found her every half hour, it was only the novelty, he was sure.

The neighbourhood liked the newcomers well enough. They were pleasant, fashionable strangers, and if they had brought only one single gentleman in their midst (a Captain!), they more than compensated that lack with the handsome widow.

She was that, he learned, the young Lord Darcy having died in an unfortunate hunting accident not long ago — though certainly long enough that she did not wear mourning, he noted to his interlocutor, and was dismissed with a huff for shading the tragedy with practicalities. He also learned that she was worth 30000 pounds, and that her brother would inherit an estate of no less than 10000 pounds a year. She was granted by everyone to be very handsome, and more than one young man looked at her with favour.

Her handsomeness, however, had soured by mid-evening, when she was found to be very proud and above her company — why, she had sat by Lady Lucas for a full half hour and said not a word! She had rejected Mr Goulding when he asked her hand for a set!

Edward felt a spurt of some indefinable feeling in his gut when he heard the last — she had not, after all, rejected him in particular; perhaps she did not feel well enough for dancing (the weather was very damp), or perhaps she thought dancing an insult to the late Lord Darcy, for all that she was not still in mourning, it did not much signify — Edward could at last watch her with untainted admiration.

He was being told the story of Mr Goulding's rejection for the tenth time, and he had shared his
Edward purposefully softened his tone, which he knew would sound irritated otherwise. 'I cannot say — what is it?'

'Well, Charles heard her telling Miss Bingley that you were far too young to tempt her — she said, “Why, he is but a boy!”'

Charles Lucas, who had just reached them, exclaimed, 'Matty, can you not be trusted farther than two steps?'

Matty flushed. 'I thought Edward ought to know, that is all.'

'Indeed,' said Edward, with composure enough, he thought, 'I am glad to. One always ought to know what other people think of one, if one cannot possibly avoid it.' He managed a grin. After the initial swift feeling of offence, he almost felt like laughing at himself for it. At Lucas' meaningful look — his friend knew him too well — he widened his smile and cut a glance towards Lady Darcy. 'Why, there are worse things. Age, or at least having too little of it, is a defect easily fixed, in time. I had not thought, however, that Lady Darcy's age was so advanced.'

He was convincing — after two minutes, and his nonchalant answer being circulated among his friends, he felt equal enough to the feelings expressed in it. He did not mind the tale being retold, nor the teasing he received for it. Indeed, he so strongly did not mind it, that he told it himself to Mrs Bennet as soon as they arrived at Longbourn.

From Lady Darcy to Lady Constance Tilney

Netherfield, Saturday October 22

When your last letter reached me, dear cousin, I was on the point of leaving London for some weeks, to go with Miss Bingley and her family to the country. You know that I do not particularly care for London during the Season, and much less during these months, and that I would rather be at Pemberley or Northbrook with a party of close friends.

But of course George is at Eton now, not Pemberley, and Northbrook is as dreary as it always was. My great-aunt Darcy does not want to stay there, on account of the painful memories the house brings her. It affects me too, which is why I would redecorate it if I thought it would not upset her further. It is very draughty, if you recall, and lacks the comforts of modern houses. So far, I have only contrived to obtain her permission to renovate the kitchen and the servants' quarters. My steward is investigating the matter— would you tell me about the improvements that were done in Northanger Abbey some years ago? It is such a well-appointed house, despite being ancient; it would be a good model for Northbrook.

Miss Bingley was kind enough to invite Fitzwilliam and me to Netherfield (in Hertfordshire), which her elder brother rented and is thinking about buying. I think you might remember Captain Bingley, whom you found to be a man of fashion— he is her younger brother, and has also joined us here. Her elder brother and his wife (she was Miss Hurst two Seasons ago) are every bit, if not twice, as fashionable as the Captain. And this is the extent of our party. They are all very kind and refined, but I do believe Miss Bingley is the kindest and most sensible of them all, even if being refined is not a great priority for her. She is a dear girl, and you know she cheered me much during my mourning— I am set on chaperoning and showing her around London next season. It is
very rude of me to say so while I am their guest, but her brothers do not seem to esteem her as she deserves, and I would be happier if she were to settle with a suitable (and besotted) gentleman.

Netherfield is a fine estate, but the neighbourhood does not make up for such a small party. I have yet to meet one well-mannered gentleman with interesting conversation— few are polite, and cleverness seems to be a very rare trait in the county. All of them seem enchanted with Miss Bingley and her dowry, and all the matrons and their daughters seem to think Captain Bingley the height of gentlemanly perfection. And thus we are always busy, and never truly entertained. It proved a great difficulty to find time for my correspondence, because all day we receive visitors, and when we do not have company, my hosts insist we must play cards.

We went to a ball just yesterday— it was a public ball, and apparently the grandest affair there was to be this year. Truly, Constance, I have never attended a worse planned event. The music was mediocre at best, the lemonade warm and dull, there was hardly any light and everybody danced as energetically as they could and stared at us as much as they dared. The company, as I said, was hardly tolerable, except for a handful of young gentlemen who were kind enough to dance with Miss Bingley and leave me to entertain myself. I know you will disapprove, but there was nothing to do; only an hour after my arrival, I was already bored to tears.

I must leave to play Commerce again; Mrs Bingley has fallen asleep and they need me to join their table. Give my regards to Captain Tilney and to my aunt Fitzwilliam; I will try to write to her soon.

I am, &c., &c.,

Philadelphia Darcy
Mrs Bennet was reading in the drawing room when they arrived, but she laid down her book. She was, Edward could tell, curious about their impressions of the newcomers, and seemed particularly eager to know what Mr Bennet had thought.

*His enthusiasm knew no bounds. Miss Bingley! Her 20000 pounds! A lady of certain rank! Who was, indeed, a very handsome and young widow, if very proud and above her company; still, it lend the assembly a certain charm. Noble charm, no doubt.

He remarked on the very apparent pleasure Miss Bingley took in being invited to dance by John, and how she seemed perfectly happy to stay all evening by his side. Which, John added, frowning, she had not. He had invited her to dance *once*, as she was a very pleasant young lady.

'But I hope I did not show her too much attention; it would be regrettable if my behaviour would cause talk.'

'It would be surprising indeed if it did not,' said Edward, failing to withhold his smile. 'Gossip is indiscriminate — it will latch on every polite smile and amiable gesture; and hers were not merely polite; no, I am afraid I must agree with my father in this case.'

Mr Bennet, driven perhaps by this show of filial feeling, added, 'And indeed, she seemed almost as pleased by Edward. Madam, you can be happy: your two sons are a credit to us.'

'A credit!' said Mrs Bennet, diverted by the idea. 'I have often thought so — they can be clever boys, in their way — but I never considered they could bring credit to my name by dancing.'

His mother's words brought to mind the most remarkable part of his evening, and Edward intervened. 'My mother is not the only one to think so! At least, part of it — indeed, I was deemed *not* old enough to dance with.'

Mrs Bennet only raised her eyebrows, though her smile twitched at the corners of her mouth.

Mr Bennet hurried to explain. 'Lady Darcy — a proud, disagreeable woman, to be sure; 'tis no loss for Edward.'

John, who had heard of it at the Assembly, intervened. 'I am sure she meant nothing by it. It is, I daresay, only her natural modesty which makes her disinclined to accept a near stranger's attentions.'
'You are, as always, brother, very impartial and just. If no one may judge anyone else, except from their perspective, and as we are all disinclined to judge ourselves, we would be free to live pleasant lives, indeed. But allow me to be glad that in this world I may judge at my leisure; I did not perceive in Lady Darcy any overgrown feelings of modesty.'

This required, certainly, a re-telling of what had happened — John told the story in more detail, finishing by saying, 'Lady Lucas allows that her husband died quite recently — many a pleasant disposition may turn retiring under such conditions.'

'She wore a very becoming red gown,' added Edward. 'She meant every word — dead baron or not. After all, a lady's imagination is a fine thing; I asked her hand for the length of a set, she could already see me asking it for far longer. What a dreadful prospect! We will agree on this, I'm sure; we cannot blame her from shying away from such a future.'

'Nicely said, Edward.' There was a shine to Mrs Bennet's eyes her son could not like.

'And we must have her!' said Mr Bennet, his expression one worthy of a Christian expecting the lions.

'Whatever do you mean, sir?' Edward could not avoid sounding wary.

'If we are to have the Bingleys for dinner, we must have her, of course. And we are to dine with them in three days.'

'Three days?' Mrs Bennet sounded as if her peace were to be threatened by an invading army; though Edward supposed not even Napoleon would disgust her so. 'Have the Bingleys been invited?'

'Not yet, of course, but I imagine I will call on them tomorrow.'

'Call on them?'

Edward and John had spoken at once, though their tones differed substantially.

Mr Bennet was reproachful. 'I must entertain them before Sir William — I am the principal man in the neighbourhood, after all — and he will not wait.'

Edward knew such a dinner was unavoidable — they were sure to entertain the whole neighbourhood at least once a month, and with such eminently important personages to compete for, Sir William and Mr Bennet would spare no expense.

'I say, would it not be — better, to send John with the invitation to the Bingleys? I am sure he wanted to call on Miss Bingley in any case.' Edward avoided John's eyes.

'Capital idea!' said Mr Bennet. 'I am afraid this cannot be comfortable for you, Edward — but fear not, although I planned to sit you by Lady Darcy, I will not. Mark will do.'

'Mark!' Edward knew a new kind of horror; he almost wanted to laugh. It would be a particular revenge, indeed, to allow his father to sit his younger brother by her, but he had no interest in them all looking like fools, and Mark would do them no credit. 'That is not necessary, I assure you. The offense was not so great that it would warrant such measures — and if I was too young to dance with, surely Mark would be too young to dine with.' He winked at his mother. 'No, we must have her happy if we intend her friend for John — if you insist in sitting one of your sons by her, it must be me. But I would consider Lucas.'

Mr Bennet did not look happy with the idea. 'I think not.'
Mrs Bennet rose, bored, and taking her book with her, took her leave. It was the excuse Edward was waiting for, and knowing that insisting with his father never served, he did not hesitate to imitate her.

It was the next morning, and they were riding towards Meryton, when it occurred to him to ask John if he was going to call on Miss Bingley.

'I will not,' said John, and after a moment, he added, 'I will call on Mr Bingley in some hours, and invite them to dinner the day my mother sets.'

Edward looked at him from the corner of his eye. He had a serious expression, but that was no different than usual. 'She is very beautiful.'

John smiled briefly. 'Miss Bingley? Indeed, she is.'

'And very charming, do you not think so?'

'I do.'

'Do you like her, then?'

The smile reappeared. 'I do — I have rarely met a more amiable person.'

Edward stifled his smile, and said, 'Why not call on her, then? I approve of her — brothers and friend notwithstanding.'

John said nothing for a moment, and then turned to him. 'I do not know her — an evening's acquaintance and one set do not signify. I like her — I will call on her when I can say more than that.' He made a pause, and then he added, 'I was afraid you had taken what Lady Darcy said badly. She was perfectly pleasant when I conversed with her; I am sure she meant nothing by it.'

Edward snorted. A night, sleep, an evening of laughing at himself and her for it had worked on his initial offense. 'I am sure. Still — I have met many a more amiable person, and in that you will have to agree that Miss Bingley and her friend are very different. I meant nothing but that.'

'If you say so.' John's expression was dubious.

A figure atop a horse could be seen, however, in the distance. 'Lucas — he must want to call on Longbourn.'

But if Edward was planning to use him as a diversion from the subject, he had no luck, because, it was clear from the first thing he said after the greetings, the assembly and the new neighbours were what Lucas wanted to speak about; his innocently raised brows belayed the humorous twist of his mouth. 'Lady Darcy is not as agreeable as her friend, is she?'

'Is she not?' said Edward, mildly, avoiding his brother's gaze. 'I hardly noticed.'

John shoot him an exasperated look, frowning.

Edward laughed. 'You need not make such horrible faces at me; what has the world come to, that a gentleman cannot use good old English understatement in peace? She is pleasant, you say; I congratulate you — it seems you met her exacting standards.'

'She did not dance with him,' pointed out Lucas.

'No, she did not — he did not ask her, either. I had asked first — clearly, she would not dance.'
'Truly, you seem very disgruntled, Edward. I did not think you had liked her that much.'

'I did not,' said Edward, shortly. Goaded by Lucas' mocking eyes, he continued, 'She is handsome enough. I like to look at her; I daresay she needs not be agreeable.' He felt John's disapproving gaze, and struggled not to wince. Truly, it would not do; he did not care enough to be a bore about it. 'But her friend, what manners! Miss Bingley is indeed beautiful and charming — just ask my brother.'

'She is.' John was looking on into Meryton, as if someone of interest held his gaze.

'I need not ask your brother, the whole neighbourhood is in love with her. Ladies and gentlemen alike are charmed. So very elegant! And her brothers, every inch the gentlemen, though their air was felt to be — but well, it was nothing to Lady Darcy's.'

John's head dipped into a bow, and when Edward turned to look — there she was. Lady Darcy sat on a curricle, a child of no more than four by her side. She acknowledged John, and then Edward and Lucas, when they by turns bowed their heads, but did not seem inclined to draw to a stop besides them, instead continuing on her way.

'She must go up to Oakham Mount,' pointed out Lucas under his breath. 'Is that her child? She is a widow, so it should not surprise me, but—'

'But the gossips knew nothing of it,' finished Edward with a smile. He did not say that it surprised him, as well. It was strange, but he had never considered — she appeared to be very young, after all. The sudden impression of his apparent immaturity nagged at him — but it made no difference, he told himself. 'John, do not let your spirits be depressed — surely you can still get a glimpse of your fair maiden when you go up to Netherfield.'

John, whose expression revealed nothing, let the corners of his lips curl up slightly, though he only said, 'Your teasing is premature.'

'See, Lucas, how unthinking he is? He falls in and out of love; 'tis the work of a moment, like changing his shirt.'

Lucas did not insist on teasing John, saying instead, 'If Miss Bingley is his fair maiden — is Lady Darcy yours?'

Edward made a gesture of deliberate horror. 'Mine? Never! Yours, if you want her, though I do not expect she could be anyone's fair maiden.' He felt tempted into mentioning evil witches, but he refrained — it would not do to protest too much.

'No, I do not suppose she could,' said Lucas with a private smile. 'Besides, fair maidens tend to have a certain air of hopelessness about them — I do not think she would need a knight.'

'I imagine she would not want one, in any case. I can only imagine the poor man who was her husband.' Edward, convinced that dragon imagery would spur Lucas into drawing the wrong conclusions — she was handsome enough, after all — stopped at that.

John only rolled his eyes at them. 'Let us go — Lucas, care to join us? We are to visit my uncle Gardiner.'

'Gladly — I was setting out to see you.'

Their horses fell into step, and none spoke while they rode into Meryton.
From Lady Darcy to Master Fitzwilliam

Netherfield, Monday morning October 24

You were right, George, and I do not know how we shall contrive to amuse ourselves in this neighbourhood. Society is scarce and uninteresting, when not decidedly uneducated. You would bear it much more gracefully than I—and you would be more entertained, as there are a handful of amiable young gentlemen with whom you could hunt, and fish, and do these things young men do all day in the outdoors without constantly having to talk about fashion.

But even the landscape is bland, compared to Derbyshire; I long for Pemberley. Do you think we could have Christmas at home, with a party of a dozen friends and cousins (not counting children)? The Fitzwilliams would be glad to attend, and so would my great-aunt Darcy, as you know she cannot attend to guests since her bout of rheumatism, but enjoys merry celebrations, and we could also invite the Tilneys of Woodston, at least Mrs Tilney and her children—Constance is removing to Bath. I would like Fitzwilliam to spend such days with his cousins, playing with soldiers all through the gallery at Pemberley like you and I used to.

Miss Bingley has done everything in her power to entertain us, but there is no helping her brothers and sister's insistence to play cards night and day. We attended an Assembly at Meryton, the little town nearby, a few days ago, but it did not alleviate our dumbness. Everything about it was mediocre, except for certain young Mr Bennet, who was extremely amiable with our party and promptly distinguished himself as the only person with proper gentlemanly sensibility in the whole of the neighbourhood—or so the Bingley brothers ascertained. He seemed pleasing enough to me, and just as well, since he is now a favourite here at Netherfield, and we are longing for his company. Even Miss Bingley is, but of course she made friends with everyone she talked to and is very distressed when anyone criticizes the society here—which is why I do not dare say much in her presence, and must thereby bore you with the details.

Captain Bingley, upon discovering I am writing to you, sends his regards. So do Miss Bingley, Mr Bingley and his wife. Fitzwilliam is taking his nap, but if he were here, he would send regards to you and to your dogs, whom he misses very fiercely. Miss Bingley takes the greatest delight in asking him about them; they spent an entire half hour yesterday going over their names, features and abilities. She would very much like having a dog of her own, to teach it to bring her her slippers and have lay on her lap, but Mr Bingley does not like dogs.

On the topic of animals, I liked your description of the bays very much, and do think you ought to buy one if they caught your fancy so. I read that fragment of your letter to Fitzwilliam, and he got so enthusiastic I had to read it again five or six times until he felt he knew the description by heart, and then Captain Bingley took him down to the stables to feed apples to his bays, which were sadly declared to be "not as fine as my uncle's". He asks for his piano lessons often, but he seems to have inherited my lack of patience, and tires very soon. Do include some encouragement for him in your next letter; he fears I will tell on him to you.

I wish you your own share of patience for your Greek, even if I know you do not need it—I have the utmost confidence in your ability to sort those provoking verbs and their moods and tenses and fanciful vowel contacts. So much, that I shall take up Greek only so you will teach me next summer, when you will no doubt have mastered the language and declare Demosthenes a light read fit for restful evenings.

I remain, &c.,
Philadelphia Darcy
When Edward found him after coming down, Lucas was standing by a window, and observing
the Longbourn drawing room and the people filling it with an absent smile.

'There you are, Lucas — I feared I would not be able to speak to you until after dinner.'

He turned towards Edward, his smile widening into friendliness. 'We are not sitting closely, I take
it?'

'Not at all.' The gloom from Edward's tone was not half feigned.

'Your father will escort Lady Darcy — at least you are spared that fate,' said Lucas, his mouth
twitching in a way Edward chose to ignore.

'Indeed. I would rejoice in my revenge — and 'tis revenge indeed, dinning by my father! — if I
did not have to escort Mrs Taylor and sit on Lady Darcy's other side.'

Lucas let out a startled laugh. 'Do not say your father desires to make a match of it!'

Edward exaggerated a very real shiver — he could think of few things more humiliating than
being pushed towards Lady Darcy and she realizing it. And she would realize, if his father were
doing the pushing. 'Do not speak of it; of course he does not. He is not so unnatural a parent as
that.' He lowered his voice. 'He is attempting to secure another match, and it served him well to
have me take John's place.'

'Ah. Do you know where I am sitting?'

'You happen to sit, and I expect you to thank me, by two very amiable young ladies; one Miss
Bingley, and one Miss Wilson.'

'How delightful! Thank you?' Lucas threw him an incredulous glance.

'Indeed — at least you will not lack lively conversation. If Miss Bingley proves much too
absorbed with my brother, speak to Miss Wilson about the season; I have it from your mother that
she will be given one. Or horses — her uncle has just bought her a fine gelding.'

Lucas' expression was faintly disgruntled.
'I know, you would have preferred a pretty view of Lady Darcy's set downs — I am afraid I could not have obliged you.'

Lucas' lips curled up slightly. 'You mean you would not have. That is fine — I am sure to hear them from your father or my mother at a later time.'

Edward felt himself smile. Some enjoyment would be gleaned from it; Lady Darcy's horror at her dinner companions should at least prove entertaining, if not entirely free from shame for himself.

At length, the party was complete, dinner was called, and Edward went to Mrs Taylor. She was delighted with him — he was something of a favourite with the neighbourhood ladies, although of course not as much of a favourite as John — and so at least from that side he could expect pleasant, if not entirely entertaining, conversation.

Natural curiosity made him observe Lady Darcy's countenance with attention, and he thought he could detect something like dismay in the tightening of her mouth while she was being escorted to dinner. When they were seated and being served, Mr Bennet said, 'You were telling me, Lady Lucas, that you are displeased with your youngest?'

'Her purse netting has suffered terribly since she has discovered novels.'

Mr Bennet had behaved very well for some time, but it was not, perhaps, unexpected, when he said, 'Novels! I'm no novel-reader, I confess—' he appeared not to be confessing anything particularly regrettable '—but I have always thought that, when overindulged, they injure the mind and common sense dreadfully.'

'Injure the mind!' Lady Lucas seemed disconcerted. 'I vow, I had no thought so.'

'Indeed. I daresay it is a very feminine weakness, to be drawn to them. But if a lady — a young lady specially — must read, and I am not altogether sure she must, she would do much better in informing her mind with some more serious minded, reality-inclined text,' said Mr Bennet placidly, and did not realize, perhaps, that his wife spent a good portion of her time reading the very type of written word he was dismissing.

Edward thought his father did not, and still there was something like real anger clouding his mind for a moment, so that he could not speak.

'Indeed!' said Lady Lucas, and it was apparent to Edward that she had no more idea of what a more serious minded text would be than Mr Bennet himself, but was politically declining to pursue the subject.

No one else said anything about it, and Mr Bennet appeared to concentrate on his food. A moment later, he was telling Lady Lucas to taste this or that on the table, and serving her himself.

Edward could contain himself no longer, and leaned slightly towards Lady Darcy. 'I need not ask — only see your expression. Are you perchance a great reader?' He had not thought before speaking, and despite his antipathy (which he thought natural and just), it came out friendly.

She, to his unexpected disappointment, did not turn his way. 'It would depend, I should say,' she said in a measured tone, 'of what you understand by it.'

'What do I understand by a great reader?'

She turned, finally, and Edward could see her smile was mocking. 'Indeed. There is many a person, I daresay, that define it as reading a great deal of any thing.'
'I am afraid to tell you that I do, as well. Clearly, we are not of a same mind about it. But I am willing to venture you do consider yourself a great reader, by your own definition, if not by anyone else's. Dare I ask what that is?'

She looked at him in the eye — his height conferred him only a slight advantage even standing — one eyebrow perfectly raised. Her lips curved slightly again. 'Do you?'

He had to smile, concede the point with a slight bow, and then turn to his other companion and offer to serve her; he had to avoid Lady Darcy's eyes, sharp and intelligent, and her smile. He felt resentment; she made him feel young. And he would not have felt so, he thought, with a flash of insight, if he did not know she thought it of him.

Later, on the other extreme of the table came out the embarrassing fact that Lucas had lent his younger sister her first novel, and was thus responsible for her sudden dereliction of duties; he seemed to feel the guilt and the shame not at all.

Mr Bennet looked as if he wanted to talk some more about feminine weakness and deplore the tastes of the young men nowadays, but he contained himself, as Edward expected. It was one of the only points in which his father was tactful — he would not criticize Lucas at such a party, even if he would do it privately and took great comfort on his own sons being so much more gentlemanly and personable — perhaps because of his being his neighbour, perhaps because of his being the child of his friends.

Edward was relieved, though not on behalf of Lucas, who would not take anything Mr Bennet said seriously enough to be hurt by it. He felt certain compulsion to shield Lady Darcy from the worst of his father, if not out of any concern for her good humour, for his own pride and vanity. He had lied to himself, he realized, thinking he would enjoy his father's inanities. Lady Darcy would not enjoy them, certainly, and her discomfort mattered to Edward not at all (and could have, indeed, provided with some amusement), but her scorn was not something that Edward relished.

Perhaps it was this relief that made him lean her way again, and say, with some mischief, 'You are, by your own account, a great reader. What say you? Is it liking novels a feminine weakness?'

His tone had had a teasing tilt, but she seemed to consider the matter seriously. 'Novel-writers are generally female, certainly, but—' she seemed to vacillate and looked at him, and Edward looked down at his plate, uncomfortable under her scrutiny.

'But?'

She seemed to come to a decision, and said, 'But that, of course, can only account for how widely they are decried, and not for any intrinsic and elusive quality that marks them as feminine.'

He raised his eyes to hers, and tried to summon something witty to say.

She spoke before he could. 'Ah, but I see, I should have, as a representative of females everywhere, dismissed novels and declared I only read the Spectator.'

His smile was then involuntary. 'Not at all — I greatly admire novels. I should not wonder at you wanting to claim their authors for your sex.'

'Only the majority,' she added, immediately, though it was said with an answering smile.

He bowed his head. 'And no doubt, the best.' Politeness, and a lack of subject, perhaps — Mrs Taylor was occupied with the gentleman at her right — made him ask, 'What novel would you name as the best?'
'I would hesitate to name any one.'

'Why?'

'A name, only one name, to represent the whole of my tastes and my character to a near stranger? You may find deciding on it easy, but I do not.' Her smile was small, and Edward wondered at her opinion of himself.

'No, indeed, I mean no such thing. Your tastes, perhaps, but your character must stand on its own.' There was a silence, and Edward much feared that his hostility had been obvious in his words; it would not do to be a bore, after all. He started again. 'But I can see you would prefer not to tell me in any case. Very well, we shall have to discuss a third's tastes. Have you heard of *The Female Quixote*? Mr Lucas lend it to me with quite effusive praise recently; undoubtedly he expected to use it to correct his sister's exaggerated love for novels.'

'I have read it, yes.'

There was a short silence, and it was clear that she would say no more without prompting. 'No, no, Lady Darcy. I have produced a title; now it is your duty to comment on it. You could say something like “it is really very well for a novel” and restore my faith in the fashion of your taste, though I am very much afraid you will refuse. But you should at least pronounce it fair or foul, diverting or terribly dull.'

Her smile had widened during his speech, and he was afraid he felt very much like a jester who had managed, for a short while, to amuse his mistress; he was not sure he disliked the feeling as much as he ought. 'Must I?'

He nodded gravelly. 'You must. And now I feel compelled to add that you need not give a review, complete with erudite citations and sage references to classics. Simply answer this: did you like it?'

There was a slight pause, but she finally said, 'I did.'

'Ah, I knew you would. It came to mind as something almost specifically designed to your tastes. And yet, it appears to contradict your opinions on your sex and literature awfully.'

'I agree — and I enjoy it, I think, in the exact same sense you suspect me to enjoy it; it is clever, in its way, and an insightful critique. And yet, I cannot hold by such overwhelming condemnation of a whole genre. Perhaps I would be swayed if the same pages would not respond so well to its conventions.' She did not sound, however, at all convinced.

'One could argue that the very fact that it is a parody would protect it from so harsh a critique. Its purpose to amuse, it would be almost unmannerly to ask logic from it.' He said it with a smile, and was relieved to note she did not appear to take offense.

'But it is not absurdity itself to condemn some fiction for absurdity and then perpetuate it in the very same breath? Oh, I do not doubt the author sought to divert, but cannot that defense be used also on behalf of those criticised by it?'

'You speak very eloquently. You almost make me doubt myself; I had thought I heard you saying you liked it!'

'I have not said otherwise since then,' she said. 'I can see you equate critique with dislike, or even contempt.'

'Apologies if I mistake you; I am not so great a reader, clearly, that I am accustomed to vilify the
very literature I enjoy.’

'I see you are determined to misinterpret me,' she said, though her smile had not faltered. 'I said I like it, and I do. I am not entirely sure I would go as far as to say that I enjoy it, or at least I must say that I cannot read it with unalloyed pleasure. It is perhaps more complicated — somewhat resembling your mentioned reviews — to explain it further. Why do you enjoy it?

She seemed to speak from true curiosity, but Edward was suddenly as uncomfortable as she had apparently been when he had asked for a title to her liking — he felt young, and uncouth, and about to prove it to someone who would be able to recognize it as no one in his life had recognized it him before. He laughed. 'As I said, I am no great reader. It makes me laugh — mockery being perhaps a low form of wit, but one I enjoy nevertheless. Nothing delights me more than ridiculousness.'

Her smile widened, and Edward felt a fresh burst of resentment at what he divined behind it; her words, which should have soothed him, did not. 'I must confess, then,' she said, 'that those are the very attractions it holds for me.'

He forced a smile and turned away, grateful that Mrs Taylor had chosen than moment to touch his sleeve and call his attention back to her.

Not much time later, dinner was done, and the ladies, guided by Mrs Bennet, rose and went to the drawing room. Mr Bennet would not have countenanced the separation of the sexes in that particular night — one could not promote a match, after all, by keeping the couple apart; at least not with people as reasonable as John and Miss Bingley — except that Mr Bingley and Captain Bingley seemed to like John a great deal, and enjoy his company.

Edward approached Lucas' side of the table and sat, thankful, next to him.

'Well, were you well entertained?' he asked.

Lucas' eyebrows rose. 'Not as much as, I wager, you were. You spoke with Lady Darcy a great deal — her set downs were not, then, as scathing as you had expected?'

'As scathing and more,' said Edward, but not without a smile. 'I daresay she thinks me a child, and is amazed that my father allows me to the dinner table.'

'What did you speak about?'

'This and that,' said Edward, uncomfortable with the knowledge that he had been trying to win a discussion, and that he hadn't. 'Nothing of much importance.'

'And yet, you both ignored your other partners for at least twenty minutes.'

Edward twisted his mouth into a smile, 'Well, you know how I enjoy being made ridiculous — I daresay she enjoyed it, too,' and turned to the general conversation.

The separation of the sexes done, it would have been inevitable to play cards, but Mr Bennet never was one to avoid doing what he pleased when convention dictated otherwise. 'It would be a shame to make all these young people sit down at cards for the evening,' he said, managing to miss the shared look between Mr Bingley and Captain Bingley. 'Miss Lucas,' he said, turning towards Lucas' younger sister, 'would you do us the honour of playing some country dances?'

And without more ado, and ignoring his son's protests, Mr Bennet sent two men to move the furniture and roll the carpet.

Edward stood back — it was undoubtedly an embarrassment for his mother (for them all), but it
would do no good to try to persuade his father. It was not possible, and it would only expose them further. In a moment Mr Bennet had approached Miss Bingley, held her hand, complimented her, and delivered that same hand to his eldest son, entreating them to entertain each other. His father, thought Edward, did not value subtlety well enough. Miss Bingley, to be sure, did not seem to care, smiling up at John as if nothing could make her happier than dancing with him in a drawing room.

Edward avoided looking for the rest of Miss Bingley's party — he did not want to risk meeting Lady Darcy's scornful eyes. He did not want to dance, either, to be part of what his father had called the 'young people' — he was sure Lady Darcy would sit down at cards, though it was not at all that he wanted to sit down at her table (God forbid!). He had glimpsed, however, a chance of escape. He always asked for Miss Lucas' hand for the first dance, as she was considerably younger than Lucas, but close to his own age; she could not dance, clearly, but would perhaps need company at the pianoforte.

He was crossing the room when he was detained by Sir William. 'There you are, Edward!' he said, genially. 'I was just telling Lady Darcy that it was a shame for her not to stand up for this dance.'

Lady Darcy seemed startled. 'As I said, sir, I have not the least intention of dancing.'

'Nonsense! I derived great pleasure from seeing you dance in the assembly some days past, though you did it so little — you would not deny me today? I can assure you that Mr Edward Bennet here is as superior a partner as you could find anywhere.' And grabbing her hand, he delivered it to him, saying, 'Surely, you will do the lady the honour, Edward? I know you do not enjoy anything more than dancing.'

'Well,' said Edward, uncomfortable, but knowing he could not avoid making the invitation now, 'I would not go as far as that, sir, but I would consider it an honour if Lady Darcy would accept my hand for this dance.' He had to make an effort to keep his expression neutral and knew his smile was fixed. She would surely reject him now, and he could not say he was entirely unhappy about it; he had no desire to dance with her.

She surprised him — she dropped in a small curtsey, and said, 'Thank you, sir, it would be a pleasure.'

What could she mean by accepting him? She had said she had no intention of dancing. Both her partners during the assembly were sitting down at cards, and she had shown before she had no compunction in rejecting him. Edward looked at her from the corner of his eye — she seemed to feel his gaze, because she raised her own to it.

'Dancing,' she said with a private smile while he was guiding her to the end of the set, 'is not my favourite diversion — but we have been playing cards each evening since we arrived.'

'Indeed? It will be my pleasure to entertain you, then,' he said, dryly. 'A pleasure second only to the dance itself, as you have just heard, of course.'

She danced gracefully, as was to be expected from the general elegance of her manner — but even in that Edward found reason to resent her. If she had been anything less than graceful, showed any awkwardness, perhaps he would have found it in himself to think of her with more sympathy. As it was, only his general disposition and his love for the activity kept him in good humour. He had not wanted to invite her, and had expected her to decline when he did — that she had not seemed to him the very height of her obvious general perversity; it was clear, she cared not for her own comfort if she could rob him of his.
The set was small, and so they did not have many opportunities for speech. When they did, she
was silent, but he could not be thankful for it — it forced him to search for words himself. 'I hope,'
he said, at one point, surrendering to the awkwardness of the moment, 'that you will not judge us
too harshly for the lack of entertainments. I do not doubt the city would prove more agreeable to
you.'

She fixed him with a smile, and said, 'You mistake me, I am not pining for the city, varied as its
attractions may be compared to a neighbourhood of as limited society as this.'

'I do not dare guess at what you may be pining for. I am afraid I have not much experience outside
of this neighbourhood of limited society,' he answered before the figures of the dance separated
them. He was very much afraid his tone only bordered on politeness.

Edward was glad when he could walk her to a chair, and he fled without more ado to the other
end of the room. It was perhaps understandable, given his friend's custom of teasing him about it,
that he also avoided Lucas' eyes for the rest of the evening.

______________________________________________________

From Lady Darcy to Lady Constance Tilney

Netherfield, Saturday night October 29

I thank you, dear Constance, for such a long and witty letter—it has been yet another dull week at
Netherfield, though Miss Bingley tries to keep Fitzwilliam and me entertained. The trouble is, you
see, that Captain Bingley tries, too— with much less success.

He flirts with me—at least he tries; I think he might have been trying to woo me for a while, now,
but you know how I do not realize this sort of thing. But just the other day we attended a dinner,
which later turned into dancing, and I was at great pains to make him understand I did not wish to
dance with him more than once. I wish he were not so foolish— then either I could be flattered by
his attentions, or he would realize that I do not care for them.

In short, I do not pay him any particular attention, and thus now he seems to be paying court to my
son. It vexes me, especially as there is no polite way to tell him to desist of playing nice with
Fitzwilliam. He has not had much success, at least, as he keeps telling him long stories of the
army, which have the power to scare him rather than enthral him—or me— into any sort of
appreciation. And so he has not managed to win him over, but he has alarmed him; Fitzwilliam
asked merely an hour ago, as I was putting him to bed, 'You are not going to marry him, are you,
mama?'

I went down to dinner so cross that even Miss Bingley realized, and I had to pretend I did not feel
well. Thus are the passions of a mother's breast; more than enough to turn
me into an disagreeable
guest! And I know you should say that they are also enough to turn my letters into reports of my
son's welfare, and could I please talk about something else until you have your own children to
fret over, so that we may be in equal terms?

I could. When I planned this letter—that was this afternoon, as we played Vingt-et-un again—I
thought I would include some little gossip and a couple of intellectual pursuits. Those are the most
urgent and least interesting, and I shall address them very plainly. Dear Constance, send me books
and scores—I need very good excuses to avoid the cards and, moreover, I had a very engaging
conversation about novels with a young man of the neighborhood, and now I crave some Cecilia
or even some Udolpho. If you could send Camilla, there would be no creature more grateful than
I, as I have not had the chance of reading it yet.
You will ask the name of the gentleman, but I shall spare you the intrigue: his name is Mr Edward Bennet and he is the second, and very young, son of an exceedingly foolish country gentleman. His elder brother provides perfect manners, and he a most entertaining conversation, and they are both handsome; I am sure the neighbourhood never invites one without the other, for they complement each other very well.

Oh, but I do not mean to say one is boring, and the other rude; merely that Mr John Bennet is very mild for my taste, and Mr Edward Bennet a bit impertinent. But I will have you know that I danced with both, and Miss Bingley managed to dance twice with the eldest. She is of the opinion that John Bennet is the most perfect of men—this, dear cousin, was my gossip—indeed, she thinks herself half in love with him already, and I worry she will start planning her wedding any of these days. The gentleman in question, though undoubtedly kind, does not seem to be in the throes of any passion; he smiles a lot and to everyone, and does not mark her with any special attention. If it was not for dear Charlotte’s dowry and the matchmaking fool Mr Bennet’s father is, I should think her very safe. As it is, I am not at peace—you know I want the perfect match for Miss Bingley, and I shall find the most doting and love-sick of husbands for her, or nothing at all.

Write to me soon, and send entertainment. Maybe Miss Bingley would appreciate fashion plates, too, and they would keep her from thinking of marrying a merely amiable man.

I remain quite exasperated, but your most faithful friend,

Philadelphia Darcy.
It was more than a month after the dinner party at Longbourn that John admitted for the first time that he thought about Miss Bingley in anything more than friendly terms. Edward was about to call on his uncle Gardiner in Meryton, when John stopped him on his way to the door.

'Wait for me, will you, Edward? I will accompany you, I plan to call on Netherfield.'

'A bit out of your way, no?' said Edward, puzzled, but stopped. 'I am walking, though,' he said after John, who was going to the stables.

'Never mind,' said his brother, leading his gelding moments later. 'I will walk him while I am with you. Hotspur is being re-shod?'

Edward nodded, and they set off.

'Calling on Mr Bingley?' asked Edward after some time.

'No,' said John. He made a pause; when Edward looked at him, he was smiling. 'I am calling on Miss Bingley.' He seemed to want to add something else, but he stopped.

'Is that how it goes?' said Edward, looking at his brother side-wise.

'I have not the remotest idea of what you could be referring to,' answered John.

'No, indeed, poor innocent babe. I can see you do not in the least know what you are about. You will be asking for her hand in a week.' He paused for a moment. 'You do not think I believe that, do you? Come, you can tell me — I am hardly going to tell anyone if you do not want me to. Hardly anyone, that is.'

John rolled his eyes at him. 'I have no definite plans, so I have nothing to tell you.'

'No? And yet, you wanted to walk with me — I must say, I would not chose to go through Meryton to go from Longbourn to Netherfield — it is a mighty peculiar path. It adds a mile and a half, at least, to the exercise.'

John snorted. 'Well, as you like — I would much like to know her better.'

'A worthy goal, indeed.' Edward hesitated, and then added, 'Your calling will raise expectations.'
'I can hardly not know that, can I?'

'If you are happy with that, then there is no more to say. She is a very amiable girl, not mentioning beautiful, which an amiable girl ought to be, if she can. I approve, if that was your object. She will not mind my father too terribly, surely, with those brothers of hers for comparison.'

John frowned, but said nothing in response.

Their walk had brought them into Meryton’s principal street. They stopped, and John was about to take his leave, when a lieutenant in the militia lately quartered in the village caught Edward's eye from across the street, and bid them to wait with a gesture. He was leaning slightly towards a lady in his arm; she was fair and graceful, and, Edward guessed, about six or seven and twenty. In a moment, they had crossed the street and were upon them.

Mr Miller performed the introductions — she was a Lady Elliot, widow of the late Sir Robert Elliot of Cornwall. They all pronounced themselves delighted to make the acquaintance, and then Lady Elliot said with a smile, 'But do not let me keep you — you must have come to town for a reason. Business, perhaps?'

'Not at all,' said Edward, with an answering smile. 'I was just about to call on my uncle.'

'I say, Bennet, what a coincidence!' exclaimed Miller. 'I was escorting Lady Elliot to call on your aunt.'

'Mr Miller is very kind,' said Lady Elliot. 'But, Lieutenant, don't let me keep you from your duties! You have done enough for me, and if these gentlemen are going that way in any case, I can walk with them. That is, if they do not mind?'

'Not at all!' said Edward. And how could he? 'It would be my pleasure.'

'Oh, I say...!' said Miller redundantly, disconcerted.

'Two gentlemen are enough for security for walking two streets, surely. I will have the pleasure of seeing you later this afternoon at Mrs Taylor's?'

He seemed to recover at this, and smiled again. 'To be sure.'

'I regret,' said Edward, though he did no such a thing, 'that you will have to do with only one gentleman; my brother has to leave us. But you must not despair — I am as gallant, and I daresay, much more handsome.'

She laughed throatily, and looked up at him — she was delightfully small — through her eyelashes, while she exchanged Mr Miller's arm for his.

John, who had been waiting, smiled slightly at Edward, tipped his hat to the lady and the sad lieutenant, and mounted. Mr Miller took some more time assuring Lady Elliot that she would see him in the afternoon, and that he hoped nothing would detain her, as they would all be extremely despondent without her, before finally taking his leave.

They started walking, and Edward said, 'I hope you will not think me terribly rag-mannered, but what brings you to this county? It is a fair way from your late husband's seat.'

'Very rag-mannered,' she said, with a teasing tilt. 'My cottage is owned by a relative, who told me this was a delightful neighbourhood.'

'I wager your relative is leasing you the cottage, or I would not understand why he would make up
such scandalous falsehoods. It is a very confined neighbourhood — I daresay you will be bored out of your wits.'

'Oh, not at all! I love the country. I am happiest when I can stay in it. My late husband was much fond of London society, but I only endured it. I was raised in the country — though a very different one. But Hertfordshire has nothing to envy Derbyshire.'

'I should think the peaks and lakes are of little attraction when compared to our green pastures.'

'Mr Bennet, I do believe you are teasing me; that is very discourteous of you.' She smiled very prettily up at him. 'But I do like your county exceedingly, despite anything you may believe. The north counties have a very harsh beauty.'

'I do believe you,' he said, tipping his hat. 'I am afraid I cannot resist teasing. It is one of my many faults, and surely the most provoking one.' He took on a serious, contrite tone. 'You will forgive me?'

'Of course,' she said, airily. 'But here we are on your aunt's doorstep. And now you will take yourself off to speak with your uncle in his office and leave me to the ladies in the drawing room.'

'I planned to do no such a thing,' said Edward, and he did not mind at all his change of plans — his enquire to his uncle could wait. 'Unless, of course,' he added, trying to affect a serious tone again and failing, 'you want me away.'

She only smiled, looking at him sidewise, and let herself be conducted to the drawing room. His aunt Gardiner and the ladies in her drawing room were as glad to have him as ever.

The general conversation was very light, turning from the weather to fashions to neighbours, with slight mentions and winks in his direction when John or Charlotte were mentioned — though of course, he said nothing about the subject, and he was even good enough to mostly constrain his grin to only a social one.

There was only one awkward moment — Lady Darcy was mentioned, and the elder ladies shared many a sly smile and significant look; it passed in an instant — his aunt looked at Lady Elliot, who was red in the face, and civilly ordered some wine, forgetting to share with her the cause of their merriment.

Some time later, his aunt being occupied discussing with Mrs Goulding something or the other about fabric and ordering from her brother's in London, Lady Elliot, no longer discomposed, leaned into him slightly, caught his gaze and said, in a low tone, 'You have met, then, Lady Darcy and her friends? What do you make of her?'

'I have met her and them, yes. It is only a slight acquaintance, but I have no desire to make it a deeper one.' He refrained from mentioning John's interest — it was true, in any case; Edward had no desire to know more of Lady Darcy.

'I daresay I should not call on her, and she will not call on me, despite our long acquaintance,' she said, with a sigh.

'Indeed?' Edward asked, trying to temper his tone to one of mild interest.

'We would have been termed friends, once upon a time; though of course,' she added, obscurely, 'I knew not how wrong I was to think of her so.'

Edward did not, for a moment, know what to say. The report was both incredible — they were as different as a warm summer day and a frigid winter night — and excited his curiosity exceedingly,
but the very nature of it made it difficult to express either with any politeness. After a moment, and seeing Lady Elliot would not speak, he said, 'How did you become acquainted? Your temperaments, if you will allow me to venture my opinion, are very different.'

Her look was sober and sad. 'Indeed, they are. And we would not have been more than very distant acquaintances if it were not for the fact that Lady Darcy's esteemed mother — the best woman I have ever known — was my godmother. I wonder how much time Lady Darcy expects to stay in this county.'

'I do not know, though I have not heard of them going away. I hope her being in the neighbourhood will not cause any awkwardness for you.'

'No, no; I have nothing to be ashamed of. If she wants to make it her home for the time being, she will have to endure my presence in it, and any embarrassment will be on her side. But tell me, how did you like her?'

'Not at all! I found her very proud and cold — very disagreeable.'

Lady Elliot seemed surprised. 'Did you? That is not often the case. Her situation in life is such that scarcely anyone sees her in any light other than what she wishes.'

'Then I daresay she was not interested in impressing this neighbourhood favourably at all,' said Edward dryly.

'Oh! Well, that may be so.' Lady Elliot's smile had a tinge of sadness. 'I cannot pretend to be sorry that I can count on your friendship, even if it pains me that anyone should have such an unfavourable impression of my godmother's daughter.'

'Indeed — you are not to blame at all for that. If anything, she is responsible herself for causing it, or at least me — that is, the neighbourhood — for adopting it.'

'Respect for the mother would, in any case, always prevent me from speaking against the daughter. It would pain my godmother greatly if she were alive — but I daresay she knew her own daughter well enough. That is, I believe, one of Lady Darcy's grievances against me.'

'Indeed,' murmured Edward. He did not want to interrupt — he was extremely curious — but it seemed, by Lady Elliot's silence, that some sort of comment was necessary.

'We were constant companions in our infancy, but I suspect she would have loved me more if her mother would have loved me less. And of course, Philadelphia is no stranger to jealousy.' Lady Elliot smiled somewhat bitterly. 'It was, in fact, the impetus behind our last rift. You did not, I believe, meet Lord Darcy?'

'The late Lord Darcy? I had not that pleasure,' said Edward warmly, who felt a sort of pity for the esteemed character.

'He was the best of men... but I should not speak so, I know,' she said. 'Though my husband is now dead, I do not like to disrespect his memory.'

'Surely admiration for Lady Darcy's late husband would not imply disrespect to him?'

'If it were only that, I should think it would not.' She appeared to hesitate, and then she raised her eyes, wide and troubled, to him. 'You will not be horrified?'

'I do not know what you mean to say, but surely, I will not. Nothing you could say would make me so.'
She smiled, grateful, and said, 'When we were very young — I am sure part of it can be blamed in our inexperience — the late Lord Darcy and I fell in love. He was a cousin of Lady Darcy, and visited Pemberley — for that was Lady Darcy's father's estate — every year.'

Edward had a sudden inkling of what would come, and felt vaguely uncomfortable. It was not, however, beyond what he knew of Lady Darcy. He did not speak.

'He was the best of men, and had a great care for his family and his parent's honour,' continued Lady Elliot, warming to her subject. 'And when Lady Darcy learned of our mutual regard, she went to her aunt and uncle. They would not, of course, countenance such a misalliance — despite being Mrs Andrew Fitzwilliam's goddaughter, I was still merely her former companion's daughter. Her pride, I know, could not have countenanced it.'

'And Lord Darcy obeyed them?' asked Edward, with a sort of horrified fascination. His own deep respect for his mother could not, he thought, ever induce him to do something so opposite to his own desires; and assuredly, he could not call his feelings for his father anything like respect. And then again, he doubted his mother would require it of him.

'He had a great deal of family pride, and would not disoblige his parents.' She paused, and sighed. 'I have reasons to suspect Lady Darcy may have convinced him of my unworthiness by other means, as well — certainly they were not lovers before that, and they married only a short time after.'

The tale got worse and worse! But he could believe it about Lady Darcy, if about anyone — she was very conscious of her own position in the world, and he could very well imagine that she would have found it an insult to have the daughter of her mother's companion as her cousin. Of course, other explanations could be made — after all, she had married Lord Darcy — but he could not imagine Lady Darcy doing it out of passionate jealousy, despite what Lady Elliot said; she was too cold, too aloof for any such motivation to move her.

'It is strange that her pride could let her expose herself and her feelings in such a manner!' he said at last, too astonished to contain his incredulity. 'I would have thought her too cold to act in such a manner.'

Lady Elliot look at him considerately. Finally, she said, 'It is wonderful, as pride is at the root of most of her actions. But I believe the better part of it is family pride — in more than one aspect on her life she has let it lead her.'

'What do you mean?'

'It has often led her to be liberal and generous — to give her money freely, to display hospitality and relieve the poor. Family pride, and filial pride, for she is very proud of what her father was, have done this. Not to appear to disgrace her family, to degenerate from the popular qualities, or lose the influence of the Fitzwilliam name, is a powerful motive. She has also sisterly pride, which with some affection, makes her a very kind and careful sister to her brother.'

'What sort of man is Mr Fitzwilliam?'

'A mere boy, and I wish I could call him amiable. I mourn the day she was given influence in his education; I am afraid that Lady Darcy was young still when she let her pride kill any feminine feelings of delicacy in her character. She was never warm, even as a child, but she has allowed herself to grow bitter — I suspect Lord Darcy played his part in that, poor man, as he could never hide his feelings as much as he would have liked.'

'But you have not seen her, surely, since that occasion?'
'Oh, no, I have not seen her, but I have seen her brother, and her influence in him, who was such a warm, happy, expansive child, and who used to love me as much as anyone, is very clear in him now. She has made him in her likeness, and I am afraid that, from what I have heard, she is doing the same to her child. Her child! It is Lord Darcy's, and I shudder to think what he would say to see him now. A child who should have been mine!'

Her opinions coincided so neatly with his own, that Edward almost commented his agreement — but he had nothing to add, really, and it would be perhaps ungallant to speak of the child after having seen him only for a moment, and that in passing, and not having heard a word out of his mouth. But Lord Darcy's look was of a child repressed by maternal tyranny, and he did not doubt Lady Elliot's words.

After a short moment of tactful silence, he changed the subject to one of more ready interest for him. 'You married Sir Robert Elliot long ago?'

'Quite a few years, yes. In fact, very soon after my disappointment.' She sighed. 'I am afraid that I was sure I could not ever love as I had, and married merely for companionship.' She raised her gaze to his, looking at him through her eyelashes, with a sad smile.

Edward, after a moment, looked away. Her eyes were very clear, and her whole countenance sweetness itself — it distracted him and made thinking what to say difficult.

'I hope,' he said, and to his embarrassment, he had to clear his throat to be able to continue. 'I hope you do not still think so? You are very young.'

Her smile turned coquettish, but she glanced away and turned to make some remark to the lady sitting on her right.

The talk was very banal — though Lady Elliot's participation added to its interest — but he did not have long to endure it, nor to enjoy Lady Elliot's smiles; his uncle had heard him being in the house, and came in to enquire about his brother's health, and Edward was reminded of his duty — his business was nothing too time-sensitive, but it was, nonetheless, something he wanted settled. John and Mrs Bennet had been conspiring, he thought, and making enquiries and plans about his mother's portion on his behalf, and he felt he ought to at least know what was being done.

He rose, asked his uncle for his time in the office, and took his leave from the ladies, wishing he could know when he could see Lady Elliot again, and noting with some gratification that she seemed to regret parting ways with him almost as much.

Despite what Edward had told Lady Elliot about the confined and dull nature of the neighbourhood, his days were almost always taken up by some sort of social obligation. It was not that he resented it — except a few, he enjoyed them all exceedingly — but he had expected to spend his last year at home in quiet reflection.

Instead, he observed how his brother's courtship progressed, because, despite what he would say about not having proposed and not planning to do it yet, a courtship it was — even if it seemed sometimes that Miss Bingley courted him more than John courted her; dined with the regiment; attended Lady Elliot in drawing rooms and in a ball thrown by the Colonel of the regiment, though he could ask her hand for merely one dance, all her others being taken; and saw rather more of the Netherfield party than he thought he wanted.

Hunting was, as a fashionable pass-time, one of the only things that could get Mr Bingley and Captain Bingley from the house and away from their cards, and they were, courtesy of John's friendship with them, often asked to attend to them at Netherfield's grounds.
Having been abandoned in the gardens to wait for the rest while Captain Bingley showed John a gun he had had lately brought from London, Edward wandered into the library through the wide French doors, leaving his weapon leaning against the wall by them. It was a sadly lacking library, but surely something, he thought, could be found to pass the time.

He went to the shelves, and was perusing them, when a slight movement caught his eye towards one of the windows. He turned; the same slight, pale boy that he had seen riding with Lady Darcy sat on the window-seat farthest from the door, an out-sized, heavy book open in his lap. The boy watched him from the corner of his eye, but pretended to be completely engrossed with his volume.

Edward hesitated. He had never had much to do with children of that age — his aunt and uncle in London had some, but it was always John they ran to when they wanted to be carried on the back or other things of the sort children required from indulgent elder cousins. He supposed, though, that the polite thing to do would be to greet the child. He walked towards the window seat and stood some feet from him — it would not do to scare him, after all. What age could he be? He thought John had mentioned he was four. Four? He looked younger. Or so it seemed to him, though, Edward admitted to himself, he had no idea how a child of four ought to look.

'Good day,' he said, finally.

The child looked up, his eyes wary, but said nothing.

'I suppose I ought to introduce myself, given that there is no one here to do the honours. I am Edward Bennet of Longbourn — a estate some three miles from here. You must be Lord Darcy.'

The child looked at him, still not speaking.

Edward essayed a smile. 'I am afraid I interrupted you — I will bother you no more; I am just looking for a book to pass the time until the other gentlemen deign to join me.' At not getting an immediate answer, he shrugged inwardly and turned away, going to the shelves again.

'Mama says,' the child said, in a small, serious voice, 'that there is nothing in the library worth the trouble except for this one here.'

Edward turned, an eyebrow raising and his mouth twitching itself into a smile despite his determination to keep a straight face. 'She does? And what do you have there?'

'Come see; it is birds — of all kinds. We can share for a little while.'

Edward hesitated for a second, but his curiosity proved too strong. He went to the window seat and leaned over the child to look at the book upside down. There was, indeed, a very nice, detailed drawing of a linnet.

The child looked up at him. 'You cannot read that way,' he said, seriously. And then he dropped his legs from the window seat and turned to seat himself straight, leaving some room at his side for Edward.

He sat himself at the child's side, and looked over his shoulder.

'This one is,' said the child, 'a Car Duel Is Cannot Been. A linnet. They all get two names because one is difficult.'

'Ah,' said Edward, and tried to sound knowledgeable.

'There are some in the garden — I saw one.'
'Indeed?'

'Yes,' said the child, and gazed at him. He resembled his mother, Edward thought, but it had more to do with them having the same serious expression and, perhaps, similarly shaped eyes. The colouring, instead, was all wrong.

He seemed to be waiting for Edward to say something, and so he did, though his question was silly and reminded him of standing in drawing rooms being interrogated by well meaning relatives before drawing rooms had become a place of entertainment for him. 'You can read then?'

'A little,' said the child. 'But this one, I remember from last night.'

'Your mother reads you this before bed, then?' asked Edward, between amused and appalled; asking though he could guess at the answer. There was something incongruous and sad at the sight of such a young child being so pale and confined to the library instead of playing outside, and being read scientific names of birds before sleeping — but not at all unlike Lady Darcy, he thought.

'Yes,' said the child, turning towards the book again, paging through it decidedly, as if looking for something in particular. Finally, he seemed to find it, and turned the book towards him. 'Have you ever seen one?'

There was a bird with a great crest of plumes over the head.

'This,' said the child, without waiting for his answer, in a vaguely didactic tone, 'is a parrot.' He paused, and thought for a moment. 'I cannot remember its scientific name.'

'Only once.'

'Captain Bingley says it talks.' The tone was so distrustful it almost made Edward laugh.

'I had heard the same thing — though like you, I did not believe it until I had seen it - or rather—' he said, with a smile that was almost reciprocated, 'heard. But it does not talk — it repeats the words that are spoken to it.'

'My mother says they are not from here, so I am not likely to see one unless I travel, or unless someone brings one to London.'

'And what does your mother says about the talking?'

The child had been about to answer, perhaps, but the door to the hallway opened, and then Lady Darcy entered the room, and stopped, apparently disconcerted.

Edward stood up and bowed. 'Lady Darcy.'

'Mr Bennet,' she said. 'I did not expect to see you — you are to go hunting with the gentlemen?'

'I am,' he said. 'I was only passing time until they came back — apparently Captain Bingley has a new Manton-style—' he interrupted himself. He did not like to note he was babbling.

There was a silence. Edward looked down — the child was gazing into the picture again, apparently disinterested in the proceedings.

'I crossed your brother and Captain Bingley on the stairs,' said Lady Darcy. 'Though I think they were going to the kitchen.'
‘The kitchen? Was that noise about the garden? ’But there they are, I believe. Lord Darcy, I am in your debt for the entertainment. Lady Darcy.’ He bowed briefly to both, and strode out, grabbing his gun as he crossed the doors.

He was not fleeing, he thought to himself. It was just that he had no interest in enduring Lady Darcy’s piercing eyes and mocking smile a moment more than he had to.

______________________________________________________

From Lady Darcy to Master Fitzwilliam

Netherfield, Thursday evening November 17

Your first lesson in Greek was very well received. I was so pleased that my hosts declared that they had to see the letter—Miss Bingley was amazed that I should be interested in the language, but obligingly spent the afternoon going over the alphabet with me, and her brothers were thrown into raptures of your superiority of mind and character—they are very fond of you. Fitzwilliam had not known there were two different alphabets, but liked the shape of the letters very well, and wants to know if the Greeks had dogs and horses and books about birds.

His latest interest is the study of ornithology (he cannot pronounce the word yet), as it was the only book in the Netherfield library that I thought would interest him, and I took to translating the interesting descriptions to him at bedtime. It has proven a great motivation for him to venture outside and romp with Miss Bingley in the garden, even if there are no friendly dogs to wrestle with. He manages to dirty his clothes just as well, and insists every bird he sees from afar is either a swallow or a pigeon or a raven. I enclose a picture he drew of one robin that chirped at us from the nursery window. He wrote ROBIN under it, in case you wonder what that scrawling underneath means. Miss Bingley and I believe it to be a very superior attempt, considering his age. I fancy he will make a great scholar some twenty years in the future.

He asked me to tell you that he has been practising his piano, and that he would play for you at Pemberley. I myself am very happy that you agreed to my Christmas scheme, and have started planning out a party accordingly. You must invite any friends of yours that you wish, and I will contrive to even the numbers.

Meanwhile, I am growing accustomed to the scarce society the neighbourhood can provide; there is already a handful of people I do not mind conversing with. One of them is Mr Bennet, the great favourite—he truly is very amiable and obliging, and it is generally agreed that he is also the handsomest man in twenty miles. I find that quite the exaggeration. He has a younger brother, a Mr Edward Bennet, who I think you would like. He is highly personable, if a bit impertinent at times—nothing a few more years and a better society could not improve, I believe. He is often kind enough to shield me from other, less engaging, acquaintances, and he never lacks conversation. Sadly, the one we see more often is still John Bennet; Captain Bingley and Edward Bennet do not like each other much—they hold battles of wit every time they meet.

We attended a dinner party at Lucas Lodge the other day; the Lucases are one of the most important families of Meryton—yet of no interest to the world, or to me. Lady Lucas is always making me dance with someone, in all the dinners and parties we have attended, and so I offered myself to play the piano for the 'young people' (that's what I said; Mr Edward Bennet nearly swallowed his tongue); and she felt it very deeply, as I would not dance &c., but I stood my ground. What a happy idea! I shall always play when everybody dances, at least until I am in a more congenial situation, and able to be fearless of matchmakers. Mr Edward Bennet stayed by the instrument to turn my pages and give conversation to the people with whom I did not care to talk for at least an hour, as, for once, there was an abundance of gentlemen (the Bennets and the Lucases have three sons each). You see why I prefer him to his brother! Mr John Bennet had to
dance every single dance, as he is the universal favourite, and could not spare any set for me.

Tell me more of Albery in your next letter; your account of his boyish exploits is enormously entertaining, and I am very curious as to how the 'accident' with cousin Henry's protegée ended. Marie is not half as entertaining as that boy, but on the other hand I would not trust Albery with a curling iron.

Yours faithfully, &c.,

Philadelphia Darcy
Not many days after that, John came back from Netherfield with an idea that would wreck Edward's careful determination to avoid seeing Lady Darcy. Edward was in Mr Bennet's office — they still called it that, though he used it little enough. He was reading over the papers Mrs Bennet had had her brother draw up when John came in, and said with a wide smile, 'Well, there you are! I was looking for you. You have no plans for today, do you? If so, you will have to cancel them, of course.'

'What?' said Edward, who had been thinking about the papers in his hands. It was not an easy matter. He could not decide between being glad other people thought of him and his future, or being annoyed that they chose to happily sacrifice themselves for him, without even consulting him.

'I just came down from Netherfield,' said John, as if it were an explanation, and then he seemed to remember something and added, 'I almost forgot! Apologies, Edward, I will go to the kitchen and be back. You do not, in any case, remember if there is still some of that nice mead we ordered from London with my uncle, do you?'

Edward just looked at him.

'I thought not,' said John, and went out again, with uncharacteristic animation.

He acted strangely, thought Edward, and his manner was unlike his usual sedate demeanour. It was clear, of course, that the only reason for it could lay northward in the Netherfield lands. He got up and followed John, already resigning himself to the idea that his brother's plans would most probably involve the whole party. What were the chances, Edward thought, that he would only have to see Miss Bingley? He liked Miss Bingley, very much; he looked forward to calling her his sister, and would even be able to endure her brothers if pressed. But what were the chances? Slim indeed.

He found John coming out of the wine cellar, his smile as bright as ever. 'Well?' asked Edward. 'Is there still a bottle of that nice mead?'

'There is — are, actually; two.' John was already striding away towards the kitchen.

'What do you want them for?' asked Edward, following him. And then had to wait while John
ordered the two bottles to be packed along with some apple pie the cook had prepared that morning.

Finally, John turned back at him, and drew him away from the kitchen by his arm. 'Well, do you have plans?'

Edward had managed to resign himself to his fate in the meantime. 'No, of course not. That is, Lucas had told me — but no, I am at your leisure. What for, though? If you will deign to tell me, that is,' he finished, with some asperity.

'Lord Darcy got better from his chill, and the day is astoundingly warm and sunny. Miss Bingley thought we could picnic by the stream and make an afternoon of it.'

'Did she? I would wager she does not much fancy the thought of having brothers and friends and children all making a day of it, too.'

'Not at all! She said the child needed some sun.'

'Of course, I was clearly mistaken,' said Edward, his mouth quirking into an involuntary smile. 'Did Lady Darcy agree? She looks like she would prefer her child in a library than in the dirt by a stream, picnic or not.'

John frowned for a moment. 'Of course she did — she is no ogre. From where did you get that idea?'

'I did not say she was an ogre, though I will not say I did not think it — but never you mind. So, are we to go to Netherfield at once?'

'In one hour.'

'And are we to eat pie and drink mead as our only sustenance? I may have to use that hour to provide myself with something more, if so.'

'No — Miss Bingley loves apple pie in a picnic, and I had mentioned the mead to Captain Bingley; Miss Bingley is ordering all the rest. Do not worry — she knows what you like by now and she is amazingly obliging.'

'She knows what you like, I wager. But I can live with that.'

'So? Is your mood improved at the perspective of food? What is the matter? Are you still disturbed by the matter of my mother's portion?'

'I was never disturbed by it. I am just...' but he did not know how to end the thought. Feeling guilty? 'I do not like the idea of her using it now, for such a reason. You know better than I that my father is not making any provisions for her.'

John smiled slightly. 'And who inherits after him? Or if I should die, after me? Do you not trust me, or you, to do well by her?'

Edward frowned, unaccountably irritated. 'You know it is not that.' But John did not know, and they had never discussed these matters between themselves, nor had Edward ever verbalized these thoughts to anyone, even himself. They were half formed, but still he said them. 'We should not have to. All this should be hers.'

John looked at him, frowning. 'What do you mean?'
'I mean, contrary to my usual habits, exactly what I say.' He did not want to think more about it. 'In any case, it is not at all what makes me out of sorts.' He corrected himself, 'I am not out of sorts. I only do not like the idea of spending the afternoon — you will go walking with Miss Bingley and I will be left to talk with Lady Darcy and Mr Bingley and Mrs Bingley and Captain Bingley.'

'They are all perfectly amiable, and I will not go walking with Miss Bingley.' He hesitated, and then smiled. 'Not for the whole afternoon, in any case.'

'Ha! There you are. I would not even begrudge you the fact that you have so congenial a company in your plans — if I only had one half so much with which to make mine. But no matter. After all, they are perfectly amiable, are they not?' He smiled, and he thought he could surely be forgiven if his smile was a somewhat sardonic one.

John looked at him, seemed about to say something, but refrained. After a moment, he said, 'I will have Hotspur saddled for you,' and went out.

The afternoon was certainly excellent. They would surely have miserably wet weather the next day, but in the meantime, they had sun, and almost real warmth, and the party was in correspondingly high spirits, especially Miss Bingley.

She was voluble and all smiles, even when redirecting her footmen to lie out the picnic by the stream, along with some convenient shades. Even the pale, serious Lord Darcy was almost skipping by his mother's side.

The first point of discussion was, of course, what would they all do. Some sort of game was quickly decided on, as none of them wanted to eat at the moment, and pall mall was settled upon almost immediately after.

Lord Darcy, however, and despite the enthusiastic encouraging words he got from Captain Bingley, wanted none of it. He did not say so aloud, but settled by his mother's side in the ground and refused to come up for the game. By the time Captain Bingley had given up on him, John had wandered away with Miss Bingley, off to show her some feature of the grounds or another they had enjoyed in the company of the previous family's sons when they were children.

Edward felt he should be able to earn a living by predicting the future, if only everyone in the world were as amiable as his brother and his nearly-intended bride. There was little choice now — Mr Bingley had settled by his wife's side, and was offering her a glass of mead, and Captain Bingley had stayed standing by Lady Darcy, attempting to converse with the almost silent boy, though clearly much more desirous of conversing with his mother. Edward wished him well — he could not see Lady Darcy ever accepting anyone as low as the good Captain as a second husband, but if she did, they would deserve each other.

Edward considered what to do — if he sat, he would be resigning himself to staying besides Lady Darcy and perhaps even conversing with her for a good while; on the other hand, he could see nothing else to do that would not imply he found the present company distasteful. He was looking at the white clouds on the horizon feeling a little foolish when Captain Bingley took choice away from him. He seemed to have found something that the child was interested in, and was accompanying him to the stables to look at the animals and perhaps take one of them out — Edward could not leave Lady Darcy now.

'I am sure Hotspur will be amenable to a carrot,' said Edward to Lord Darcy, after the child asked his mother if he was allowed to feed the horses.

Lady Darcy rose one eyebrow at him in incomprehensible comment, but Lord Darcy just looked
blank for a moment before asking, 'Is he your horse? The gray one you came in with?'

He assented, to the child's obvious happiness, and shrugged inwardly, resigning himself to look for subject after subject for the next twenty minutes — or perhaps even forty, he thought as he watched Lord Darcy begin skipping again, some steps ahead of the Captain.

'I would have thought,' said Edward after a moment, 'that you would have already acquainted him with the classics.'

Lady Darcy just looked at him. After a moment, she said, 'He is four.' Her expression mingled amusement with incredulity.

She thought him daft, though Edward, his mood darkening even further. 'Clearly, but as you read him scientific tomes before sleeping, I thought he was some sort of prodigy. But perhaps,' he continued, purposefully lightening his tone and smiling, 'you think the classics too unimportant and light for his age, and you will start with Greek and Latin and leave Shakespeare and other English poets for Oxford.'

She seemed about to say something, and then stopped. After a moment, she said, 'I do think you are only half teasing me. You disapprove of my letting him have the ornithology book? He likes animals.'

Edward shrugged. 'Children will like what one will show them.'

'Spoken,' she said, with the ever present mocking smile, 'like someone who does not have any children in his charge.'

It was true. Very true. He had no children in his charge, and he paid no mind at all to the children that were not in his charge but were part of his family. But still, it did not mean he was not right. It only meant, he thought with a renewed burst of annoyance, that he could not make his point. He forced a smile and bowed slightly to concede hers.

John and Miss Bingley walked up to them — there were no visual signs of their attachment, no clasped hands, no dishevelment; and what was more, Edward was sure there had been nothing that could be considered improper during their walk, probably nothing at all besides amiable conversation, but still, John was smiling slightly, and Miss Bingley had the flushed, happy look that she always sported around him. They were as obvious as they could be without actually announcing it.

It would be strange, thought Edward, to have Miss Bingley living at Longbourn. He was not sure he would like it, as amiable as she was, and could not imagine John liking the idea either, to have a stranger witness his father's small and not-so-small absurdities daily. But of course, she would not be a stranger to John, and John was not likely to resent such a thing in any case. For a moment, Edward felt relief at not being the elder, at being able to study in London and to live forever at some other place rather than Longbourn after that. He felt a pang for his mother, who he knew would miss him, but it was not at all enough to sway him. He was, after all, he thought, very selfish; he was glad John, with his seemingly infinite patience, would stay.

Edward was also glad that it was on Miss Bingley that his interest had finally been fixed. Edward did not think any other lady could endure the surroundings with more grace, or have a character that so perfectly complemented his brother's. She seemed delighted with the country, and her surroundings, and what she had seen of Longbourn in particular.

She finally said, 'But I see we have interrupted a conversation. I am so glad you have found congenial company, Philadelphia!'
Lady Darcy did not answer immediately, and Edward felt Miss Bingley's mistake most acutely. He hoped it was as much an embarrassment for Lady Darcy than it was for him, but he knew that ridicule was best dealt with head-on. 'I think circumstances have not given Lady Darcy any choice this time, unlike at our first meeting.'

Lady Darcy frowned slightly, and seemed to be really annoyed, though when she spoke her tone was clear of anger. 'That might be,' she said, 'but I also find the circumstances changed in more than that one regard. I did not reject you on the basis of your being non-congenial company.'

'No, of course, you did it on more factual grounds,' said Edward, his smile this time effortless.

Miss Bingley laughed. 'You are quite right!'

'Factual, and, I must say, innovative. I have never heard of it being a common complaint. Have you, Miss Bingley? Ah, but you will not be able to answer, you are too amiable to so reject a gentleman for any reason.'

'I am not sure,' said Lady Darcy, though she seemed puzzled by his words, 'that it is a matter of amiability. It seems to me that it is more of a case of being possessed of a gregarious, sociable spirit or not. I do not much like to dance with strangers.'

'But you are unenterprising, Lady Darcy — I know you think one must read a book to give an opinion on it; why not meet those strangers by dancing with them?'

'If people were generally like novels, and their meeting as full of interest, I daresay I would.'

'Oh, you are harsh; and very to the point. But you will not tell me you enjoy reading all novels equally well, nor that you have never, upon reading the first or second, or fifth page of some new volume lend to you by the good vicar's wife, felt the urge to throw it against the farthest wall of the room.'

Miss Bingley laughed again. 'He knows you well.'

Lady Darcy was smiling. 'Indeed, I will not tell you so.'

'Well — there you have it. And still, you did start the novel that the good vicar's wife lent you.' He was about to add, and you did not dance with me — but it would have felt too much like recrimination, too much as if he had really wanted it. And if he did — he did appear to remember he had wanted it some at the time — then he did not want it anymore.

'And if discarding strangers who are not quite to one's tastes were as easy as discarding a book that were likewise, then perhaps I would be as gregarious as my cousin, or you. But I do not have the talent you possess, in speaking with strangers once I've arrived to that first, second or fifth page.'

'You speak too much truth,' said Edward, 'though you are unsympathetic with your fellows.'

'Philadelphia,' said Miss Bingley with good humour, 'has very exacting standards, I know, both in humanity and novels. But where is Fitzwilliam?'

'At the stables with Captain Bingley,' said Edward, before Lady Darcy could speak. 'I will go see if he is ready to come back.'

He did not wait for an answer, but got to his feet, and made his escape with some relief, even if it was an escape that entailed talking to a pale, singular sort of child. He found himself close to being very boorish in Lady Darcy's presence, and he could not like it, nor completely understand it.
There were, perhaps, plentiful reasons to dislike her, but it would not do to be discourteous to a lady, no matter how despicably she acted or how mocking she was in her manner towards him.

The child was well entertained, but even to Edward's untrained eye, he showed no partiality for Captain Bingley's company, and reacted with alacrity when it occurred to Edward to offer to accompany him to see the chickens. Captain Bingley, to be fair, showed himself to be a good sport, and went back to Lady Darcy with barely the appearance of regret.

Edward and Lord Darcy arrived to the hen house almost without speaking — the child was not talkative or chattering like children often were, and Edward himself did not quite know what to say to him. There, they set themselves to find a nest, and once they found it, Lord Darcy wanted first to be raised to its height to see it, and then for an egg to be fetched down for him. Edward shrugged and complied.

They went back, the child, serious, cupping his hands around the egg with deliberate care, and Edward walking by his side and redirecting him with a hand on the shoulder when he got too distracted with his great treasure to pay attention to where his steps were leading him.

The adult group, which comprised Lady Darcy, Captain Bingley and John, was almost silent, and with a seriousness that jarred with the amity that had, despite Edward's small discussion with Lady Darcy, characterized it before.

'Mama,' said Lord Darcy immediately, his excitement expressing itself in low hurried tones, 'I have an egg! Can I draw it? Can I draw it and then give it back?'

'Of course,' said Lady Darcy, and raised to order a writing desk to be brought down from the house.

Lord Darcy sat himself with extreme care.

'What happened?' asked Edward lowly to John, but he was already turning, called away to assist Miss Bingley towards the tree line.

It was Captain Bingley who answered. 'Someone distasteful was mentioned — I do not think we should say in front of the child.'

Despite the Captain having shown remarkable ignorance at children's temperaments (or even just human temperament — who could contain their curiosity after such a declaration?), the child paid him no mind, gazing into his cupped hands with studious concentration.

'Surely a name would not be too scandalous?' said Edward, looking down at the small egg that held all of Lord Darcy's attention with studied indifference. The Captain was silent for a moment, and Edward saw that they had both of them looked at Lady Darcy, who talked with a servant some ways apart, and appeared not to have heard.

'It would depend on the name,' said Captain Bingley, almost harshly, and in a low tone. 'Though of course, you care not of that. But allow me to give you the benefit of my experience, at the very least; if you have a care for your father's name, you will not involve yourself further with Lady Elliot.'

'Involve myself?' said Edward, his incredulity unfeigned, and deciding to refrain from correcting the Captain's error. He would not care half so much about his father's name.

'You think it is not spoken about? You show her remarkable partiality despite her age and situation. It is not seemly.'
'You are speaking very openly for someone who less than a minute ago did not want to pronounce a name in the child's hearing,' said Edward, irked. 'Why would the fact that I have sat by the lady in two or three drawing rooms and conversed in Meryton's main road once, or danced with her at some country dinner matter at all? What is her situation if not one similar to Lady Darcy's, and only worse in matters of economy, owing, perhaps, more to the perfidy of others than chance or the very real value of her person?'

'I beg you not to repeat that in Lady Darcy's hearing,' said Captain Bingley, in a stiff tone. 'That woman is no lady.'

'That is a grave accusation,' said Edward, in a low tone. 'What do you base your opinion on?'

'Only the best of evidences — she is the daughter of Lady Darcy's late mother's companion, and Lady Darcy herself advised me not to have anything to do with her.'

It was as Edward had thought, and though he felt a burst of white fury, he spoke calmly and dryly. 'That is fine evidence indeed, though you will have to forgive me, I expect, if I do not abide by it. I have a very natural repugnance, I fancy, to blackening a lady's name unnecessarily.'

'You will do as you wish, clearly,' said Captain Bingley with sneer. 'And believe that which gives you more ready pleasure.'

His meaning was insulting and clear, and Edward felt for the first time in these last five years the urge to rearrange a fellow's physiognomy with his fists. He had never been much of a fighter, and even in the height of that age in which boys sometime delight in it, had seen it as a necessary, if tasteless endeavour to involve himself in pointless tussles. Unavoidable, but away from the hot feelings that propelled him in the moment, somewhat alien. It was no trouble now to exercise restraint and not answer Captain Bingley at all, but he could not avoid seeing Lady Darcy with renewed enmity when she came back.

The child set about his task with a concentration worthy of a scholar, and his mother sat herself by his side, offering her opinion when called to, and dictating with a clear voice the letters of the name that ought to be written, Edward thought, at her urging, underneath the spotted blob representing the egg.

Edward was in no humour later to accompany the child to anything, much less to carry, as careful as you could, an egg to a chicken nest indistinguishable from any others. He was in no humour, and still felt compelled to do it, when Lord Darcy turned finally towards him again with something resembling childish animation in his features and declared himself ready to go.

It was perhaps fate that something ought to go wrong in such an occasion, thought Edward some minutes later, with him only behaving gently by too conscious decision, and no real interest in either the boy, nor the nest, nor the blasted hen — no real interest, indeed, except in going away from there. He raised the boy, perhaps too high, perhaps not high enough — at the moment he thought nothing of it, and afterwards there was no knowing it. The egg rolled away from the eager hand, tumbled out of the parental nest, and smashed with no sound at all into the straw covered ground.

*What little things are calamities in a child's world!* Edward would think later. At the moment, he had an armful of noisily crying child who wanted none of him. His mother, he cried — only she would do!

Well, thought Edward, blast his mother, anyway.
From Lady Darcy to Lady Constance

Netherfield, Saturday evening November 3

Lady Elliot is here, in Meryton. I have not seen her at all, but reports from her were brought to Netherfield by Captain Bingley. He made her acquaintance briefly after her arrival, during a parlour visit I had managed to avoid. Apparently not knowing that I was his sister's particular friend, and not three miles from that parlour, she behaved as she usually does. He thought that she was noble, she believed him in possession of a fortune, and thus Captain Bingley decided at first to not to mention her to me.

He did at length, undoubtedly expecting some sort of jealous reaction. I remained silent on the subject then, but I could not let him make a fool of himself, and asked his sister to inform him of lady Elliot's character and situation in life. Furthermore, I wrote a short note to the woman herself, strongly recommending her to leave the neighbourhood at once.

She must have known that I was there by then (and indeed I would be very disappointed in Meryton's gossips if she did not), for this is what she answered:

I regret to inform you, dear madam, that I am very well liked in this neighbourhood, and plan to stay for some months at least. Give my regards to your family.

I am, &c.,

Georgina, lady Elliot

The nerve. I do not think she has much to live on by now, and thus doubt that she will stay here long in any case, but I am very vexed nonetheless, and very thankful that I do not care much for the neighbourhood and will thus be saved from having to disclose her scandals here. I suppose she knows this.

What upsets me further yet is that she has been seen a handful of times with one of the Bennet brothers. I am sorry to say it was not the eldest, but the witty one. The eldest, Mr John Bennet, is still pursuing Miss Bingley with as lukewarm an affection as ever, and I am worried for her. With every day that passes I am more certain that he will ask for her hand, and she will say yes. How helpful would Lady Elliot's schemes would be here! I would rather see dear Miss Bingley disappointed now than after her marriage, but clearly the small estate of Loungbourn is not enough to tempt that woman.

I have to finish the letter and dress for dinner, but rest assured. I am calmer now than I was before writing to you, dear Constance. Do write back soon, and tell me all about your plans for Bath. A piece of advice in regards of this situation in Meryton would also be greatly appreciated.

I am, &c.,

Philadelphia Darcy
It was more than a week after that before Edward had to see Lady Darcy and Captain Bingley again. He was not thrilled — he would have gladly missed the opportunity — but it would have been the height of rudeness to avoid a ball in Netherfield without a good excuse when the families kept such a close contact. As all in life, he supposed, it had its compensations. He was sure to see Lady Elliot there, and she had promised him the first set — he was both happy about it for its own sake, and perversely glad Captain Bingley and Lady Darcy would surely see it.

He arrived later than the rest of the family, and only Mr and Mrs Bingley remained in the receiving line; the ballroom was already more than half-filled. The first thing he did was to look for Lady Elliot — he quickly discovered she was nowhere in sight, but he had almost no time to wonder at it, that he was called with a gesture by Miller to a group of militia officers.

'Bennet! There you are,' Miller said when Edward reached them, and after he had greeted everyone. 'Lady Elliot sends her regards — I was tasked with escorting her here, but she was not feeling at all the thing.'

'We are all disconsolate, Bennet,' said Colonel Haines, that had arrived in time to hear the last phrase. 'I was specially looking forward to dancing the first with her.'

Edward smiled, and simply thanked Miller for delivering the message. It did not seem worth it to disabuse the good Colonel in front of his officers. Edward was not disconsolate, but he felt a very definite disappointment. Moreover, he could not help but think that Lady Elliot's absence had something to do with Lady Darcy's presence, though he no longer felt the anger Captain Bingley had provoked. Now, seeing him guide Lady Darcy to the first set while he escorted Miss Lucas, Edward could even feel a stab of pity.

Poor Captain! He must have felt like the cleverest man in the kingdom, to have defended Lady Darcy's interests so; he must have expected her to have heard, and to swoon right into his arms. He certainly appeared to know her not at all. Even Edward knew that she was not the swooning kind, and that the poor Captain had no chance, even after his efforts to besmirch the other lady's name.

The first set was soon over, and by the time he walked Miss Lucas to his brother he had almost forgotten about Lady Elliot.

Lucas greeted him and then said with a too sardonic smile, 'Bennet, I see Lady Elliot has not conceded the first to you after all? Were you too late into the doors? Did the Colonel's military
status take precedence?'

'I will have you know I was not passed over for anyone else,' said Edward, echoing his friend's smile with his own, refusing to be annoyed. 'She felt indisposed and could not attend.'

'I am afraid to depress your spirits with the news, then — but you would have been, my boy, if the report my mother heard was correct. Colonel Haines has been paying her a remarkable amount of attention, you know.'

'Has he been?' Edward asked, unconcerned. 'That is not quite to say that I would have been passed over, but even if I had been — and what bad manners you are attributing to the very amiable Lady Elliot, Lucas! — it would not depress my spirits a great deal.' He smiled, and added, 'Now, my vanity may have taken a hit, I grant you.'

'There you go. I am forever confusing the two, but you must agree that you do not quite make the difference yourself.'

'Very amusing,' said Edward, but his smile widened. 'Have you danced, Lucas? I did not see you.'

'No, not yet. It is not my favourite pasttime, as you know, and I caught no poor wallflower's eye before the beginning of the set.'

'Thus, you are free.'

Lucas' sister, who had been standing by their side with an expression of deep boredom, was carried away by one of the Goulding boys.

'I am,' agreed Lucas, following his sister with his eyes. 'To stay at the card-room, or observe humanity's follies with your mother, who must be suffering my mother's talk badly enough.'

'What a gentleman!' said Edward. 'Not much of a son, but there you have it.'

'Your brother is being very attentive, himself,' said Lucas, suddenly, making a slight gesture with his head towards John, who was carrying a glass of punch to Miss Bingley to one side of the room. 'Is he planning to call on Mr Bingley soon?'

'Would I tell you if I knew?' Edward made grimace. 'But I do not need to, do I? The whole neighbourhood is expecting it. I will tell you the truth: I do not know. My guess is as good as yours — and my guess, by the way, is tomorrow or thereabouts.'

'Capital!' said Lucas. 'I suspect Miss Bingley must be in a dither. I would not have expected someone as placid as John to take as long as this.'

'How long has it been since John would not have known Miss Bingley from Adam? Or Eve, rather? A month and half on the outside?'

'Well, when beauty and fortune and good humour rest thus united, one would expect the decision to be easy. There are not better chances, you know, and most men do passably well with less.'

'Chances! You speak as if it were a race, or dice, or perhaps a particularly clever card game.'

'What, something with more ability would serve better? Billiards? But you must tell me what that ability consists of.'

Edward laughed, vaguely appalled. 'Judging the intended's character, perhaps?'
'You will tell me, then, that four or five evenings playing cards, and dancing as many times again will tell a man if a lady would make him a good wife, with a much greater certainty than half that number? Your brother would have had as good a chance at happiness a month ago as he will have tomorrow, and no knowledge that could be gained about each other's character in the meantime will have advanced their felicity in the least. Better, I should say; he can only hope Miss Bingley has not started to doubt his attachment.'

'What balderdash!' A matron standing besides them raised her eyes to him, and Edward smiled and bowed briefly to her. He started again, lowering his voice slightly, 'What nonsense you speak, Lucas — it is easy enough to say that after the fact, but then again none of us knew Miss Bingley as well a month ago. And she would be a silly chit indeed if she doubted him just because he has done the sensible thing and made sure it was what he wanted.'

'A silly chit! You do well to lower your voice, Bennet — that is your future sister you speak of.' Lucas smiled and shook his head. 'I would have expected you, of all people, to agree with me. Have you not seen the marriages around you? Most entered into by inclination, I believe, though not, of course, without an eye for material concerns. Are there any of them truly happy? Has any previous discovered similarity in the turn of their minds endured the years, and helped them in any way?'

'I have seen them, and I would agree with your assessment of their felicity. But we must disagree on the reason why,' said Edward. 'I think, if you will allow me, that though no one would agree with your words as expressed, the feeling of them or one very similar was the driving force behind these marriages. One must marry, you know—'

'Must one?' said Lucas, with a strange smile, but did not say anything more.

Edward raised an eyebrow, but continued. 'And most people are quick enough to follow their inclination when it corresponds with material concerns, when cooler heads would have them wait and learn if they were, indeed, compatible.' He smiled at Lucas and added, 'Or would be happier, perhaps, unattached. No, I think John did well.'

'All being equal,' said Lucas, 'your brother and Miss Bingley have the greatest chance at happiness I have ever seen. Though, of course, I am not at all sure her brothers will think so.'

'They would not. But she is of age, and they are his friends, after a fashion. I would not expect them to be too terribly annoyed. Now, Lady Darcy...'

'Lady Darcy?' asked Lucas; his smile this time was teasing, and he looked at one side pointedly. Edward followed his gaze and found her — she stood by Miss Bingley and John. 'Have you paid your respects? Signed your name on a set? Exchanged a couple of witticisms that you can fume over tomorrow?'

'You are extremely comical, I wonder that you do not take to the stage.'

'Well, have you?'

'No, and as a matter of fact, and I have not spoken with my brother this evening nor bowed to Miss Bingley. I suppose I should go over, and make your night, too. Will you walk with me?'

'Of course. I like the three of them exceedingly.'

'And you would like nothing better than seeing me forced to ask her to dance, again, and be rejected.'

Lucas raised his eyebrows. ' Forced? Truly?'
'Go to the devil,' said Edward under his breath, good-naturedly.

They reached the group, bowed to the ladies and shook hands with the gentlemen — clearly, he had no luck, as Captain Bingley had joined them while they walked over.

There was a moment of silence, but the next set was about to begin, and John excused himself to lead Mrs Bingley, while Haines walked over to claim Miss Bingley for it.

'I do not like to leave you standing here,' said she to Lady Darcy, and Edward fancied she directed a pointed look at him. He smiled, but said nothing, and studiously avoided looking at Lucas.

'Do not trouble yourself,' answered Lady Darcy, her voice cool. 'You know I manage very well.'

'Oh! But you always say that — I cannot believe you will not dance.'

Edward smiled at Lucas, amused, and could not contain himself from saying dryly, 'Will you not, Lady Darcy? You would deprive all of us gentlemen from that great pleasure, then?' He raised his eyebrows in the Captain's direction and added, 'But Captain Bingley, of course. He has been indulged.'

He could not say exactly why he said it — but he certainly did not want to stand around her and make conversation. If he declared his intention to dance, and she rejected him, which she would, then he could bow and walk again, and get himself a more agreeable partner for half an hour. Perhaps Miss Stone, if no clever man had asked her before — she was very pretty and very lively and not at all mocking.

Lucas would have not, perhaps, believed he looked for the rejection purposefully. He believed Edward had been deeply offended by that first one — and perhaps, Edward could admit now that a good deal of time had passed, that was not terribly far off the mark — and would think he disliked the very idea of a second, but it was not so. He felt almost amused by it — certainly it would be preferable to both spend half an hour in a set or at the sidelines of it with her.

He had come, he thought, to see Lady Darcy with something very much resembling amiable enmity — and it was the first time he learned such contradiction of terms was even possible. Oh, her airs did irritate him, and he believed that — good natured as he clearly was — he almost despised her when thinking of her actions regarding the angelic Lady Elliot. He was determined to hate her with all the cordiality in his disposition.

She was not a good humoured woman, nor even a good one; she was cold and satiric; she mismanaged her son's education dreadfully, all the while thinking herself very clever indeed. But perhaps they were all these very characteristics that perversely amused him in their encounters, as short as he would like to cut them.

Lady Darcy raised one eyebrow in his direction, and was about to speak, when Lucas said, 'You are very clever, Bennet. I see you will have the lady say yea or nay first in this general a manner before risking a direct question. But it will not do, you know, it is not at all the thing.'

Lucas was smiling, Edward could see. Very well, he would entertain. 'Lady Darcy,' he said, with a serious bow, 'Mr Lucas is certainly right — that was badly done. Would you do me the great honour of dancing the second set with me?' He smiled in Lucas' direction, and then had to concentrate on not letting that grin freeze on his face at her answer.

'Thank you, I would, Mr Bennet.'

What a time for the lady to be amiable! Edward thought, though he did not believe it. She clearly
had seen he was not serious, and had resented his teasing. Fair enough — it had not been exactly gentlemanly of him to joke with Lucas so — but it was galling to find the joke turned on him in such a manner.

He guided her to the set; at first they were silent, but at length his resentment — that he would be forced to dance with her, and would not be able even to see Lady Elliot! — made him comment with a calmness he did not quite feel, 'I see everyone of any notice in the neighbourhood is here — or almost every one, I should say.'

His look, almost without his prompting, had turned too significant — she understood him. Her expression grew colder and more distant, her smile disappearing, an ever deeper shade of hauteur invading her manner. She said nothing for a moment. 'I cannot pretend to mistake you — the lady has pretty manners on a *first* acquaintance, and that, I suppose, is what you call being 'of notice'.'

'It is true, then, that the lady was unfortunate enough to lose your friendship.'

She did not speak immediately, and Edward thought she would not answer at all. After moment she raised her eyes to his, and said coolly, 'It is *unfortunate* that she has so publicly decided to discuss our personal affairs.'

It was a very harsh set down, indeed, but Edward had never considered himself a coward and would not start now. She wanted none of the subject? Of course she did not! It reflected very poorly on her character.

'She has spoken to her friends, as I am sure you have spoken to yours.'

She paled, with anger, he guessed, and he smiled. It was the first time, he believed, he had ever discomposed her in the least.

'You will paint my behaviour as you will, of course, but I do not believe what I did — warning the brother of a friend in good faith about a very certain danger — is at all the same.'

'A certain danger? Being smiled to death, perhaps,' he said, but contained his sneer. 'Or you mean making love to the lady? If you think she would have him — I doubt it, myself. Are you so decided to leave her without friends that you would subject yourself to a dance with every man who showed her sympathy to convince him to act otherwise?'

She flushed and met his gaze. 'You overstep yourself, Mr Bennet. I do not believe I owe you any explanations.'

'My most sincere apologies, Lady Darcy, I certainly did.' His countenance was grim, he knew, and he could not make himself smile.

The silence endured, and grew thick and heavy, until the dance was at an end, and he prepared himself to escort her to the side of the ballroom. She lay one hand on his sleeve, and said, frostily, 'It was a pretty apology, Mr Bennet, but I daresay you would have been in no need of saying it had I flattered you, or, like that lady, acted in a manner that gratified your male pride.'

Her very calm infuriated him — her confidence in ruining another lady's name without hesitation. 'I have no care for your flattery!' A military man standing against the wall looked at them, and Edward avoided his eyes and lowered his voice. 'I have no care for your manners, as un-lady-like as they are. I do not care two figs for my male pride. What *angers* me is how you have *acted*; it must gall you, but you have no power to damage me or mine. You took pleasure on destroying the life of someone far more vulnerable.'

She stopped walking and looked at him.
'Well,' she said firmly, face and lips bloodless, 'let me hear you, then. But, I think, we may as well walk out onto the balcony.'

The doors to it were closed, and outside the temperature dropped several degrees.

She did not shiver, but dropped her hand from his arm and held her shawl closer. She was, he thought irrelevantly, like a winter queen. The cold did not appear to touch her.

He turned away and walked some steps towards one of the sides, away from the glass. They did not speak, and at last he turned back. She was illuminated by the light spilling from the ballroom, and he knew he must be in shadows — in some strange way, it made him feel better. She did not move.

After a moment, she said, 'You accuse me, I gather, of besmirching the lady's name.'

'That is the least of the accusations, though given your history, it is very grave indeed. You would ruin her attempt at making a life for herself after the death of her husband...' His tone, he knew, was growing heated, and he breathed once to calm himself and started again. 'You would ruin her, and make it impossible for her to be in society.'

'Would I?' she asked. Her tone was distant.

'Do you deny it?'

'Society,' she said, and her lips curled slightly upwards. 'I warned Captain Bingley away, through his sister, out of respect for her. I have no interest in the rest of this society.'

'We are lowly indeed,' sneered Edward. 'And despite it all, I do not doubt Captain Bingley has spread your lies to all who would hear.'

'Has he? Then he has violated my trust dreadfully. But you say — 'my lies'. What are those? What is the truth, according to you?' Her tone was contemptuous.

'Would you deny it, then?' he said in a low tone, and he was so sure of his success that he advanced a few steps her way. He wanted to see her face when she admitted it; she did not move. 'Would you deny that you separated Lady Elliot from the late Lord Darcy, using his own respect for his family's wishes, and God knows what arts? And that you married him, perhaps only to secure him away from her?'

'I do not deny my marriage,' she said, looking into his eyes, her own cold. 'And though I do not owe you any explanations, you are young, and I daresay it is something that may pass in time if given half a chance, so I will tell you: I deny that I played any part on their separation, since they were never in any way connected, except in her fondest imaginings. Though the warning is needless: she has always sought to marry money, and position; she succeeded once and doubtless will again — you are in no danger, except any that you invoke willingly, and in any case the worse that can happen to you is to appear foolish.'

He only half heard her words, as her very first had fanned the flames of his anger too high for reason. 'I am astonished, then, that you will exert yourself to give it. I had thought you would think any embarrassment well deserved.'

'If I had not known before her great influence on people I respect and like, perhaps I would have.'

'You will call me foolish, and think me easily led — I can very well see why you classify me along with such an eminent group. But are you not angry because I am not as susceptible to your
influence as your brother, your child, or Captain Bingley? Whatever you think of my youth, I am not a child, to be soothed and directed and restrained — and I am not as easily impressed by rank as Captain Bingley.'

'I can very well see you are not susceptible to my influence,' said she, contemptuously. 'She flattered and fawned over you. I do not doubt you have listened to her.'

He was about to deny her any chance of influencing him whatsoever, to strike back in some way, when a loud laugh drifted from the window and he realized where he was.

The moment that followed was loud with silence.

The wind made him shiver, and he wanted to chafe his hands together. He stood still, and he looked at her, though part of him wanted to look away.

He was still prodigiously furious, but the silence itself made him think. Realization at what he had said, and to whom, slowly dawned, and despite most of his anger still being directed towards her, he was not happy with himself — he had said too much. Too much, certainly, for conventional politeness, but also too much for any kind of reparation.

He could not call back the words. Part of him still did not want to make amends, but she was the dearest friend — the mysteries of friendship! — of his future sister. He did not approve of his own behaviour, and knew John would approve even less.

At length, he looked away. 'I... wish I could recall my words. I am forever, I suppose you know, speaking before I think, and I have been unpardonably discourteous.'

She said nothing.

'I am truly sorry for speaking as I did. It is no matter if we disagree on our opinion of a mutual acquaintance, I was more than boorish. I will not ask for your forgiveness, and I would not — in any case, I do not think either of us would change our mind. But I should not have said what I did.'

He offered his arm to her, and for a moment he thought she would not accept it. At length, she did.

She said nothing else while he escorted her to Mr Bingley's side and took his leave. He did not expect her to, but then again, only speaking the words had made him feel better. He had behaved badly — but he could not entirely regret it. The words he regretted, but the content was as truthful as it could be, and he could not regret that.

From Lady Darcy to Master Fitzwilliam

Darcy House, Sunday morning December 11

Oh, George, the most wonderful thing happened! But I must start from the beginning, or you will not understand that I should be so surprized!

I never told you, but Miss Bingley showed, from the moment they met, a very marked preference for Mr Bennet (the eldest brother, not the impertinent one). You know how she is incapable of deceit or concealment of any kind; and she was so artless in her admiration, that the whole of the neighbourhood, and no doubt the gentleman himself, were soon very sure of her affections.
Mr Bennet is very amiable and handsome and good-natured, and truly everything a young woman can hope for in a husband, except for being heir to a property in such a humble neighbourhood and having a truly foolish father. This father promoted the match with very little discretion; I even heard him mention Miss Bingley’s dowry to his acquaintances! It reached a point where everyone in the neighbourhood winked at the mention of any of the two lovers, as if the engagement, the wedding and the acquisition of the dowry by the Bennets were all fait accompli. His son, on the other hand, despite executing all the morning visits, petitions for dances and other common activities suitors usually engage in, showed no passion or marked interest either in Miss Bingley or her dowry.

She was ecstatic and unsuspecting, but her brothers were less than happy with Mr Bennet’s situation in life, and I found his demeanour towards her bland where it should be fervent, accommodating where it should be vehement and, on the whole, rather unsatisfactory. I truly believed that his courting originated from filial duty and a good-natured appreciation of Miss Bingley’s qualities.

And so we had her removed to London, where she was to stay with me. The poor dear was devastated; such a nature as unassuming as hers did not find it difficult to believe that she was not loved. She did oppose very ardently her brothers’ disapproval, and said that she would marry Mr Bingley even if he was a mere farmer; but all the wind went out of her sails the moment she became convinced of his indifference. She was so dispirited, I invited her to Darcy House for the night—her siblings, I’m sorry to say, did not rise to the occasion, and were as unsympathetic as they could be.

I was trying to distract her the very next morning, having united efforts with Fitzwilliam, my great-aunt Darcy and half the servants, and we were sewing Christmas decorations in the drawing room, when who called but Mr John Bennet himself! You should have seen the state he arrived in; he came from an appalling row with Mr Bingley and Captain Bingley, and he was more agitated than I ever thought I could see him.

Upon visiting Mr Bingley, he had been told that Miss Bingley was not at home, and then that he was not to see her, and much less marry her. Mr Bennet would not have this. Being half-sure of her affection, and with Miss Bingley of age, he thought that, if his suit was to be rejected, it should be done by the lady herself. The behaviour of her brothers was very suspicious indeed! He did not know what to do.

Is this not exceedingly like a novel? It does not get much more convoluted than this, but hear: as he was leaving the house, a tender-hearted coachman Mr Bennet had been kind to one day (he gave him a blanket and mulled wine when the family had visited Longbourn) secretly told him that Miss Bingley was to be found at my house. Such is the power of amiability!

And so he came, and they met in my drawing room; the servants stared, Lady Darcy laughed, I stabbed my finger with my needle and the happy lovers smiled at each other and saw nothing else for a long while. It was all very lovely, and I knew then that I had badly misjudged the force of his affections. He promptly returned to his usual discretion when he realized Miss Bingley was not alone in the room, and from then on, everything was merry and easy. I paid a call to the Bingleys and talked some sense into them. Miss Bingley went home and Mr Bingley and Capt. Bingley agreed to make peace—Mr Bennet, was, of course, all-forgiving.

The wedding will be soon after Christmas, at Netherfield. I shall not mind being proved wrong if it makes my friends so happy!

I long to see you in Pemberley. We are to arrive on the 20th, but definitely without the Tilneys—Constance wrote that Captain Tilney is very ill, and his brothers and sisters prefer not to travel. Do write to my cousin; your letters never fail to cheer her.
Yours, &c.,

Philadelphia Darcy
At first, Edward consciously avoided thinking about his last conversation with Lady Darcy. Every time his mind strayed to the subject, he felt a deep pang of embarrassment. He could not think about what he had said without blushing, and could not think about her words without anger. And that same anger shamed him, as he knew it was not entirely born out of righteous feelings.

John’s situation was of acute interest, but not a restful distraction; it made Edward think about her. He was sure she was instrumental in it, and he partly blamed himself — perhaps, if he had not been so offensive, she would not have wished to prove him wrong in his assertion that she could do no damage to him or his.

John would have been equally eligible — or ineligible, as the case was — no matter how Edward himself would have behaved, but he suspected her pride would not have allowed her to stand by after he said it, and she certainly would not have endured her friend allying herself with his brother, even it would advance the happiness of both.

His mind, thus, came back to their discussion.

Her assertions about Lady Elliot he readily discarded as falsehoods, and he likewise rejected her opinions on himself, and the reasons she gave for his actions. All this he decided, and promptly attempted to put behind him, but his mind, more perturbed perhaps than he would admit to anyone, returned again and again to it.

The second time he revisited the subject, decided towards rationality, he determined that he had no proof in any direction — both parties had only assertion on their side, and he had no more reason to believe Lady Darcy than Lady Elliot. His inclination towards the latter, which he thought to be unbiased on first reckoning, was the first thing he doubted.

He had known nothing of Lady Elliot before her entrance into the county; he had no proof of her character, or her previous way of life; no dependable opinion on any of those subjects, as no one in the county had greater experience than him. Why, then, had he trusted her so readily?

Was it that she had spoken easily enough about Lady Darcy's perfidy when he was most disposed to hear it? He shied away from admitting it to himself.

But once his own behaviour, and his own feelings and impressions were shaded with doubt, he could not help to recognize in Lady Elliot's manner that which had made her so amiable: she flattered him.
It was not a pleasant realization.

He did not have to wait to know the outcome of his brother's journey until his return a week later, as John wrote a quick missive as soon as the matter could be arranged to satisfaction, but once he did come back, having ridden besides his betrothed's carriage from London to the very gates of Netherfield, Edward wanted nothing less than a complete report. The letter had been brief, and had said nothing of the difficulties John had surely encountered.

'Well?' said Edward, following John into his room and obligingly closing the door behind himself. 'The brothers and Lady Darcy were the ones opposed, no?'

He was suddenly aware of wanting John to confirm his worst opinions about Lady Darcy — but surely, he was not as petty as that?

He was.

'You are partially right,' said John, taking out his coat and stretching. 'Would you order hot water brought up? I believe I will pay a call at Netherfield this afternoon, and the road was filthy.'

'I will,' said Edward, and pulled the bell. 'They were not opposed? Only some of them were?'

John sat on an armchair and started to work on taking off his boots. 'They were opposed, but not on the grounds you were supposing them to be.'

Edward scoffed. 'Ah, do not tell me, they thought you a fortune hunter. They are innocent of any wrong doing and of any wrong thinking, I can see already.'

'They are. I do not think they acted wrongly. They could not know, I suppose, my feelings — I am not the most open person — and under such misapprehension, what else could they have done?' John leaned back.

'Let their sister and friend decide for herself? Who, by the way, is of age?'

'Would you have, in their position?''

'I would,' said Edward, with conviction. 'Especially considering her not at all hidden feelings.'

John looked at him gravely. 'I cannot agree with you, though in this case the decision very nearly did both Charlotte and me a great wrong. And yes, I am very much considering her feelings. If I would have been what they thought, their actions would have been entirely correct. I cannot begrudge them for protecting her.'

'There you go, being fair to a fault. If we believe the premise, then they seem blameless indeed. Quite innocent and even responsible.'

'But you do not.'

A servant came in to ask what they wanted and Edward ordered the hot water. After that they did not speak for a moment.

At last John said, firmly, 'I wish you would acquit Lady Darcy of any wrongdoing in this. She cares for her friend, and Charlotte and I owe her our happiness. It is true, she at first convinced Charlotte to come away, but the moment she knew of my regard, she supported us. I know you often think me a fool — but I assure you, it would not have been half as easy if not for her.'

Edward said nothing. He had, in the past, thought John a fool, and he had been thinking the worst
of her; and no matter how she had acted in any other matter, he had not known... had not known for sure how she had acted in this. He had, perhaps, been out of line to think she would have hurt her friend to damage him.

John added, 'I believe — Charlotte's brothers are not entirely happy with the match, and given my position in life and what she could expect, I understand them. But Lady Darcy has not, for one moment, been any thing less than happy for us once she knew. I wish you would not believe so readily in her guilt on every matter.'

Finally, Edward said, 'It cannot quite matter what I do not believe, after all, if you do not.' He vacillated, and then said, 'The Bingleys are to be your brothers, so I will have to learn to endure them, if not like them — I will follow your example and forgive them. And given that there is nothing to forgive Lady Darcy, I will not forgive her, but esteem her as someone responsible for my brother's happiness.' He blushed at the lie, though as lies went, it was as white tinged as they came. 'There, are you happy? I am very happy to learn that Charlotte does love you.'

John's brows raised. 'You were quite, quite sure before I went.'

'Well, yes,' said Edward, and smiled. 'But to be quite sure and to know are two different things.'

'I have not thanked you for telling me that,' said John, 'but I believe I should. I would have never gone without that assurance.'

'Nonsense, you went not quite two hours after they had gone. Truly, the decision was your own.'

'Of course. But I would not have made it without someone whose judgement I trust telling me she did love me. I would not have risked being a nuisance to her.'

Edward smiled. 'You could have never been. But very well, you are welcome.'

After that Edward could not hide from it: where he had not proof of Lady Elliot's goodness, he now had received something very near it for Lady Darcy. And had he not, perhaps, a sort of proof in Miss Bingley's friendship? Did he believe his own judgement so above hers that he could determine, on a slight acquaintance, her friend to be unkind and wanting where she found her the opposite?

Miss Bingley was not, perhaps, brilliant, nor an acute judge of character; she tended, like John, to believe the best of everyone. But would John, faced for years with such wretchedness as Edward had imagined in Lady Darcy, be deceived? Edward thought not.

And how different every interactions between him and Lady Elliot now appeared! How her words, considered now with a mind less avid to find reasons to hate Lady Darcy, contradicted themselves from one phrase to the next! If she truly regretted finding someone who thought meanly of her godmother's daughter — why prod the conversation in that direction? If as a sign of respect for the mother she would not speak against the daughter, why do it?

How meanly their conversations spoke of his understanding!

Finally, he could not esteem Lady Darcy, despite what he had told his brother, but he could acquit her, in his mind, of every terrible thing he had not hesitated, in his wounded vanity, to lay at her feet. He was ashamed, and thankful not to have to admit it to any one.

The days succeeded one another after that with startling alacrity. The Netherfield party, with the exception of Lady Darcy and her son, had come back to stay until the wedding, and Edward was forced to be often in their company.
Miss Bingley’s brothers were colder than ever with anyone from the parish who was not John himself, and as disdainful of a country wedding and country manners as they had ever been. Edward was convinced that they would have attempted to delay the wedding indefinitely, but John’s steady and amiable determination, as well as Miss Bingley’s impulsiveness, made it quite a rushed affair: not a month had passed since the betrothal that they were all at the wedding breakfast.

Lady Darcy did not come to the wedding. Edward told himself he had half expected it, but it was still very startling, as close a friend as she was of Miss Bingley. He was afraid he was the reason she kept away, and then feared he was assigning himself too much importance. But why else? John and Miss Bingley said nothing about it to him, and he was half grateful, half curious.

Perhaps Lady Darcy would not tell her friend that — but she must have given some sort of excuse; in any case, Charlotte and John did not share it, and he did not ask.

He did briefly consider what at another time he would have felt were more compelling reasons for her absence, like John’s position as the heir of a mere country squire, and her disapproval of the neighbourhood, and was ashamed of himself anew for thinking it. She did, undoubtedly, find the neighbourhood provincial and confining, the neighbours silly and uneducated, but she had, according to John, proved her love for her friend very thoroughly.

He was determined not to be unjust to her again, even in the privacy of his thoughts.

The good Captain was standing at a front-facing window in Netherfield when Edward came in from saying goodbye to John and his wife and went to stand by his side.

'A pity,' he said, without having a clear idea of asking the man about it, but spontaneously starting on that vein nonetheless, 'that more friends of Miss Bingley could not be fetched for the momentous occasion.'

Captain Bingley raised an eyebrow. 'She had all those who are most important to her, and is in her way to seeing the rest.'

'But not Lady Darcy,' said Edward, with forced casualness.

The Captain looked at him steadily. 'No, indeed. You are, clearly, devastated by her absence — and I have heard you have not seen Mrs Haines in some time. Does her marriage trouble you, after all?'

Why, he made it sound as if Edward had been angling after both of them! He could not be more wrong — at least, in one case, and there was never quite anything serious enough to get that term applied in the other either, surely. Edward was momentarily disconcerted, but he recovered enough to say, 'Why, Captain, I did not know you cared about my personal affairs quite so much. I would have taken the trouble of keeping you apprised.'

Captain Bingley made a noise of disgust and walked away without farewell. Which was just as well for Edward, really.

But the Captain had been right in one point, and that was that Edward, now that Lady Elliot was firmly Mrs Colonel Haines, did not feel it was quite right to talk and dance and play cards with her as much as he had done before. It was not at all the thing, even if Colonel Haines did not appear to mind, and Mrs Haines seemed to expect it.

It was not that it had meant anything untoward before, nor had he begun to have real hopes for a greater intimacy — but their interactions had always been light flirtations more than anything else,
and even if innocent, they seemed to take on darker shades of meaning now that she was a married lady. And, perhaps worse of all, they all brought to his mind Lady Darcy's words.

Now, and despite himself, he saw them in everything Mrs Haines said and did, and the charm of it all felt forced. Once he had started, he could not continue to believe in her words — at the very least, they were very partial. She contradicted herself — she would dislike, she had said, to speak badly of Lady Darcy, but had proceeded to do just that, and even by her own account Lady Darcy did not behave as badly with anyone else.

He was determined that his realisation would not change his behaviour further than Mrs Haines' new situation merited, but sometimes he suspected she was not quite sure of him anymore.

In any case, she was very disappointed in him.

'Bennet!' she said on one such an occasion, on spotting him across his aunt's drawing room. 'You sly man, where have you been?'

He walked up to her, bowed, and shrugged with an easy smile. 'As you must have heard, my elder brother got married, and I have been... well, taking care of other business.' It was no lie, and he was disturbed to recognize that it was still was gratifying to recognize her disappointment in his nonchalance.

'We have missed you,' she said, in a lower, softer tone, looking up at him, though it was not at all clear who was the **we**. 'Now, dear man, sit by me and tell me what is this business that keeps you so engrossed and away from your friends.'

He made some evasive answers. It was not that it was a secret, exactly, but he still felt some embarrassment, both at the seriousness of the occupation he was aiming for, and at how he would be able to complete the education for it. It still rankled that his mother would have to use her portion — the only money, after her marriage, that was rightfully hers — and he was not ready to expose it to the world — even a world composed of kind friends who professedly missed his company. And he suddenly did not like the idea of confiding in Mrs Haines.

After some time, observing her animated, flushed face, he said, 'I see marriage has been kind to you, despite not being able to do a wedding journey.'

'It has! The Colonel is very kind.' She lowered her voice. 'As men of his age tend to be, I have learned.'

'Do they? You are fortunate, then,' he said, looking away.

She continued as if he had not spoken. 'He is very kind and protective — he is, after all, my father's age, if he had lived.'

Edward said nothing.

'But I see I have embarrassed you,' she said, looking up into his face. 'I apologize, I did not mean to. It is just I thought you would understand — women in my position do not have many choices.'

'They do not,' he said, gravely, discarding his discomfort. 'You had not. I do know that. I am happy you are contented with the Colonel. He is a very good man.'

She looked up at him through her lashes, and seemed to consider something before speaking. Finally, she looked up, and said, with a conspiring smile, 'You did not tell me, but I heard Lady Darcy is not in the neighbourhood any more.'
He stiffened, but managed to make his words nonchalant. 'Yes, she went before my brother's betrothal and was not back for the wedding.'

'How strange! Was not Miss Bingley her friend?'

'She is,' he said, and then smiled. 'I am not quite sure — I am not a close friend of her, as you know — why she did not come.'

Mrs Haines assented, her smile partly disappearing. 'She can be very kind to her inferiors, but she is proud; she would have found it a great degradation to attend such a wedding.'

'It is as I supposed!' said Edward, not without irony. 'You, who know her best, agree. No one else would concede the point. My brother would not even hear about it, and I fear to think what my sister would have said to it.'

Mrs Haines smiled sympathetically. 'It is a very terrible feeling to know such ugly things about our friends. One sometimes cannot believe it. I was like that, despite knowing how she was, proud and unfeeling, from a tender age; I could not believe her betrayal that last time. I supposed it to be a mistake.'

'You are kindness itself,' said Edward, forcing a smile down at her. 'Yes, it must have been easier to think it a mistake, but I could not do it in a similar situation. I cannot close my eyes to a person's real character once I have seen it.'

'And you are very perceptive,' she said, sadly, looking down. 'You see through all disguises. I wish I could have.'

Blood rushed to Edward's face, and he had occasion to be thankful she was looking elsewhere. How easy he was to deceive! How far he had fallen! How sure of himself he had been! He could barely think back on any encounter with either Mrs Haines or Lady Darcy without embarrassment, and he was profoundly glad he would have little occasion to see either of them in the future.

Mr Goulding came then, and engaged them for the lottery table. They were in the middle of a game when Mrs Haines leaned his way and said, 'You have never said, but I have heard from Mr Gardiner that you are going to London soon?'

'Yes,' said Edward, looking away. 'I wanted some time at home after Oxford, but I find that finally, idleness wearies me.'

Not long after that Edward took his leave.

He bowed at her. She smiled, gazing into his eyes, and said, 'I wish you luck, then. I suppose we will not see each other again.'

'And you said,' he responded easily, 'that you were not perceptive.' Her eyes widened slightly. 'No, I do not think I will see you before I go to London. And I doubt Meryton will be lucky enough to have you in residence by next year. I wish you well.'

He was truthful — he wished her well, but he did not wish to see her again. She was too embarrassing a reminder of his immaturity.

From Lady Darcy to Miss Bingley
Pemberley, Monday morning January 2

Your letter, dear Charlotte, brought sunshine into my quarters. The weather has been dreadful this week. If we contrive to go on happily, it is only because of the high spirits of my brother and his guests.

First of all things, let me address the wedding matters on which you asked my advice. It is very bad of Mr Bennet not to have a sister interested in such feminine pursuits as bonnets and wedding clothes, indeed! I am afraid I can only give you general warnings, such as never to buy anything that is too small for a start, no matter how pretty it is and what your maid says (as Cathy is slighter than you and will benefit from such a mistake). Do ask for her opinion in terms of muslin and silk, if you doubt of the quality of the material, as she is used to handling such fabrics. Green and blue suit you well, but red does not, and whatever you choose to do, do not wear any yellow darker than butter. Make sure that your spencers, shawls and pelisses will protect you from the cold before having them made. For this purpose, Merina cloth is generally better than velvet, though you should have at least one velvet spencer and one silk shawl, to wear in tempered weather or special occasions.

I have sent, along with this letter, a selection of fashion plates and a length of some fabrics that I thought would be useful. Wouldn't the pink silk do wonderfully for a wedding gown?

But I am afraid that I will have to dent your happiness; it will be impossible for me to attend the wedding. My cousin Lady Constance writes that her husband died last Tuesday in London; Captain Tilney was a horrid man, but she is devastated nevertheless. The only reason I have not rushed to her side already is this wretched weather. I do not think I will be able to leave her side presently, and I do not believe that you will miss me dreadfully, either. You will have a whole new family to care for you, and I have already decided that Mr and Mrs John Bennet are to be the happiest married couple of my acquaintance. I shall be at your doorstep every time I doubt of the goodness of the world.

As for the other matter, let me assure you that wifely duties are as pleasant as the husband is kind. Since Mrs Bingley's reports sound as alarmingly inaccurate as her reports tend to be, and I doubt very much that your new mother will address the matter, I will admit, in the strictest confidence, that I did enjoy my husband's attentions, and that I miss them (and him) a great deal. Dear Charlotte, if anything about the matter troubles you at all, do talk about it with your intended. He is sure to do anything in his power to put you at ease.

I have one last request, upon hearing that you will be probably settling in Longbourn for the greatest part of the year: do inform me if Mrs Haines does something untoward towards you or your family. I would not want her to cause any pain to them, though I do not think it likely — I hear Colonel Haines is worth enough that she should not feel the need to pursue anyone else.

George sends his kind regards. Please give mine to your family, and particularly to your Mr Bennet.

I remain, &c.,

Philadelphia Darcy
March, 1800

Edward looked around the moment he was led into the drawing room by the butler — it was already half filled with people, though he was not at all late. He did not know who he would find. There were, of course, his brother and sister, and her brothers with the eldest's wife — who were, after all, the hosts — but everyone else was a mystery.

He did not particularly enjoy the dinners at the Bingleys', though he had not told his brother so, and so he kept getting invited. He supposed he would be invited in any case, as John would probably think him too good-natured to really mean it when he said he thought his brothers' friends insipid, pretentious, and hypocritical.

But he was being terribly judgemental, he knew. Not everyone at such dinners was so, and he had the slight hope Mr Palmer and his sister would be there — he liked both of them exceedingly. But his eyes drew over the company recognizing no one but his family — there were three, no, four young ladies — until his eyes rested on her.

He had not seen Lady Darcy since before his brother's wedding more than three years ago. It seemed to him to be more like a lifetime, though she did not look any older. She was still regal-looking, handsome and elegant and upright; she still looked as if removed from the company, her mind elsewhere in more interesting pursuits.

He had thought of her often at first, but after some months, he had stopped. After he had remembered her only sporadically, and then for not discernible reason. He had not liked her three years ago, and he had acted accordingly and with appalling manners; the shame still stung when he thought of their last encounter, of his words and actions, of how he had been deceived. With the benefit of more time, and more reflection, and Charlotte's sporadic comments about how good Philadelphia — that is, Lady Darcy — was, he could no longer avoid that knowledge, though it was not something he cared to dwell on.

He had been an impudent puppy back then — so very sure of himself that her attitude towards him had offended rather than hurt. Part of him suspected that he did not care to dwell on it because
he had not changed in essentials. He looked back at his past with a knowing, superior eye, and still thought himself very clever.

He smiled, despite himself.

But there the hostess was coming to receive him, with the same bored, assessing look as always, and leading him towards the group made by the three young ladies and two gentlemen he did not know. Captain Bingley (what a pleasure! He had not wished him ill during battle, but he had not regretted not seeing him during the season along with his brother when he had been away, either) was in another group, but he was introduced to Mr Foster, who was the younger son of a baronet, and Captain Coleman, along with the three very young misses.

It was clear he was relegated again to the group of very young people, and though the three young misses must have been invited on Captain Bingley's behalf — John had mentioned something about him wanting to sell out and settle — he was deemed gentleman enough to escort one to the table. Captain Bingley, of course, was still hoping for Lady Darcy.

Edward was curious — would she want to? He could not see why she would. He did not think Captain Bingley was so handsome, so rich, or so interesting as to make Lady Darcy leave her independent state, though love, of course, was a very strange thing and made gentlefolk act stranger. But he could still not see her falling in love — a look confirmed his old impression: how cold she looked!

When the time came, he was to escort Miss Kelly — he sat between she and Miss Cox and enjoyed a whole dinner speaking about the weather, how interesting his work was, how dull the season, and a long et cetera that did not greatly excite his — or, he suspected, his companions' — attention or interest. His eyes kept being drawn towards Lady Darcy's side of the table. She sat by Mr Bingley, with Captain Bingley at her other side, but she had Charlotte across from her, and she kept leaning slightly across the table to speak with her, and smiling at her warmly.

How strange! He had not expected her to be there at all. Charlotte had forgiven her for missing the wedding, he knew; but then again, Charlotte, like John, would not find it beyond herself to forgive murder, much less something as trivial as that. He had heard about her every once and again, but he had not enquired, and so knew next to nothing. Even thinking about her had made him uncomfortable, and he had been grateful that for some reason they had never met again. He would have suspected her hand on it, but he was afraid he was not as important as to merit such manipulation.

It had been an age since he thought about her at all.

The after-dinner port was as excruciatingly boring as the dinner conversation had been. Mr Foster spoke about his horses and his curricle, which were both the best this side of the world, or perhaps in the whole of it, and mentioned with false modesty his ability with the ribbons, which was (apparently!) renowned. Captain Coleman was Captain Bingley's old comrade, and was also thinking of selling out; he was scarcely more entertaining — and could speak of nothing else than the young misses, and how hounded he was by his female relatives about settling down and marrying, and how it was martyrdom itself to be a man, and have a fortune, and be liked by everyone, and sought after by every matron for their daughter.

It was, perhaps, made worse by the fact that Edward had not even Lady Darcy to watch, and be puzzled by.

It was a relief to be led into the drawing room again, and procure himself a cup of tea, and move to a corner far away from the misses. They had attracted the preening Mr Foster and the very indifferent Captain Coleman with their tittering. It was perhaps his luck that Lady Darcy sat on an
armchair in the same corner. (It was, to be fair, a very good corner — not too far nor too close to
the fire, and far away enough from the card table that one could not be asked to join it without
considerable trouble.)

'Lady Darcy,' he said, bowing slightly, uncomfortable with the fact that he had not been
reintroduced when he had arrived (had that been on purpose? Had she asked it?).

'Mr Bennet,' she said, her curtsy barely there, her smile as he remembered it.

'I did not know you were in town this spring,' he said, decided to not to show his discomfort. 'I
expect you are happy to see your friend—' with a gesture to Charlotte, who spoke and laughed at
the card table— 'and in such good spirits, as well.'

'She is,' she said carefully, looking up at him, 'I believe, as she ever was. I doubt if your sister has
been unhappy a day in her life.'

'Yes, she and my brother are well matched in that regard,' he said, and wished he had been able to
thank her three years ago for her intervention, even if she had, initially, convinced Charlotte to go
to London.

She was looking towards a window, and Edward had a moment of acute awkwardness — he still
stood by her armchair, but he held in his hand a cooling tea-cup, and she said nothing. 'Can I bring
you a cup of tea or coffee?' he asked, at last.

She smiled at him, and said, 'Oh! Yes, thank you, the latter.'

She looked startled — she must not think him polite enough to have thought it, or else she
imagined him still resentful, as if he were an out-of-sorts child. He nodded, and went off in search
of her cup, taking advantage to leave his at the tea-tray when he did.

At his return with the coffee cup, Captain Bingley, who had managed to evade the card table, sat
in an armchair he had moved by her side, and observed him with keen, suspicious eyes while he
delivered it.

'I say, Bennet,' he said, 'did I see you in Holborn the other day? Are your lodgings near by?'

'Tolerably so, — I have rooms at Bartlett's Buildings.'

'Indeed?' he asked, looking significantly at Lady Darcy.

'Yes.' Edward did not want to show himself nettled, but was compelled to add, 'It is close to my
offices, though that is their only recommendation, I must confess.'

'Ah, yes, you are a barrister — Lewis did say something of the kind,' said the Captain, but he
seemed disinterested in continuing the subject, and looked away to the other not-card playing
group, which seemed very merry indeed, despite the unevenness of their numbers. 'Miss Kelly is a
delightful girl, is she not, Mr Bennet?'

'She is very lively,' said Edward evenly. 'I am afraid I have only the slight acquaintance of one
meal's conversation in which to base my opinion. But I bow to your superior knowledge, like
always.' He had to restrain his smile from widening too much for politeness.

'Ah, I do not remember you doing so! And yet, we both know, I expect, what became of your
erstwhile favourite.'

'Though I must protest you describing her thus — yes, indeed, I do know what happened to Mrs
Haines. But she was no friend of Lady Darcy,' he said, disliking the idea of discussing her with the Captain in front of her, 'let us leave off the subject.'

Lady Darcy did not protest, and the Captain seemed to find it more politic to say nothing else. He had already fulfilled his goal, though, if it had been to remind Edward of her, and Lady Darcy of Edward's ungallant behaviour on Mrs Haines' behalf.

The silence for a moment was almost deafening, and Edward did not know how to ease it.

At last, Captain Bingley turned to Lady Darcy, and said, 'Lord Darcy must be full grown; how is he?'

'He is seven — perhaps not as full grown as he would like. He is well, thank you.'

Edward, who had almost decided to give up on any effort to speak with Lady Darcy, or set her at ease, or talk politely with the Captain, was prompted by his natural curiosity to speak before he thought what he was speaking. 'Is he still very much interested in the natural sciences?' He had found the child's interest at the time bizarre, and was half convinced he must have abandoned it as he got older.

Lady Darcy smiled. 'His interest in animals has endured, and has driven him to study Latin, but it does not extend very far from them.'

'Do you send him to school? But if he is no more than seven, then you must not be considering it yet.'

'I have — I have decided that I should not send him even when he is old enough for it. I would regret the lack of companionship of an age with him, but there are children in the village, and his cousins visit us often enough, or we visit them.'

Captain Bingley nodded knowledgeably, though Edward would have wagered he had no more idea of what was ideal for children than he. After a moment, the Captain said, 'You must be very proud of him — he is very like his father, then?'

'In his scholarship?' asked Lady Darcy, her brows raising to delicate incredulity. 'Not at all. Physically, the resemblance is very strong, but I am afraid he is too much like his mother in temperament.'

Captain Bingley blushed and looked away, and Edward almost felt compelled to laugh — did the good Captain not know her at all? Was his desire for her rank and fortune blinding him to the woman behind them, the woman he clearly wanted to marry? Edward's acquaintance with her may be reduced to a series of confrontations, but he knew very well how she was in temperament, and that unless the late Lord Darcy had been very like herself, her child must have naturally got it from the one parent who had overseen his education. But the poor Captain must have wanted to avoid calling her a blue-stockling.

Edward smiled, and bowed, and declared his intention to speak with his brother to be able to walk away. And what a relief it was to do it! To arrange for riding the next day, and be able to take his leave mentioning an early morning (it was true enough), tolerably sure he would not have to see Lady Darcy again for a long time. It had been, after all, three years altogether at the least since he had last set eyes on her, and three more could go by without him uttering a complaint — rather the opposite.

He could offer neither apology nor explanation, not after three years, and without them he felt he could never feel anything other than awkward in her company. It was regrettable — Charlotte and
John valued her friendship very much, and he had, even at their most acrimonious, enjoyed her acquaintance.

He did not hold such high hopes about the Captain — not at least while he remained in town and asked his sister for introductions. But the Captain would marry — at least, amended Edward to himself, he would marry if he were just wise enough to know he could hold no hopes for Lady Darcy — and how likely it was that he would be unable to do so this season? As the other good Captain had said, Captains of the army, recently come from the Continent, personable enough, and charming enough, fresh from shows of bravery and plump enough in the pocket did not abound in the city (especially, thought Edward, for this latter characteristic) despite their greater share of seats at that particular table. The Captain would be able to take his pick — if he wisely decided that his pick was not Lady Darcy.

But then, it would be amusing to hear from John how this latter endeavour progressed. Lady Darcy definitively could ask for someone with a better understanding, not only of herself, but of the world, than Captain Bingley. Well, she was not liable to be deceived in those regards, in any case; she had nothing to fear.

Edward walked into his rooms with amusement mingled with relief, and he woke up in the morning in much the same demeanour.

John started to speak as soon as they met in the park. He had wanted, he said, to speak to him about it as soon as they had arrived to the city, but the dinner had provided him with little opportunity. Did Edward accept to be Harriet's godfather? John and Charlotte hoped he did. It was, perhaps, one of the most flattering things John had ever done or said to him, and John was not a brother that stinted his compliments.

'Well,' Edward said once they had settled the issue and begun to ride side by side, 'I hope the evening went well after I left. Lady Darcy insulted no new acquaintance? Neither of the younger gentlemen went down on one knee at an inappropriate moment? Did Captain Bingley declare himself? And more importantly, was he rejected?'

'What nonsense you speak,' said John, but Edward heard the affection in his tone. 'Everything was much as you left it.'

'How lowering, no one missed my presence, then.'

'Charlotte and I did, as you know,' said John, in his usual serious tone, and then he smiled. 'And I rather thought Lady Darcy did, too. She did not look half so bored when you stood by her side.'

Edward grimaced. 'I expect she regretted me behaving so well earlier, that she could not deliver one of her magnificent set-downs.'

John looked at him, eyebrows raised. 'Is that still your tune? By God, you have not seen her in three years!'

'Am I being terribly childish?' said Edward, but then he answered himself. 'I rather think I am. I apologize.' He smiled. 'It is as it always was — she has the power to discomfit me, as much as I do not like to admit it. But it is not as bad as that — she dislikes me, I suspect, rather more now than she did when we first met, but you do not need fear I will ever be uncivil to her again.'

'Again?'

Too late Edward remembered that he had never told John any thing of his discussions with Lady Darcy. 'Well,' he edged, 'I was never actually uncivil. We just disagreed on some subjects, three
years ago, and I misspoke. But I daresay she disliked me already, and it made no difference whatsoever.'

John just looked at him. It was difficult to know if he believed him or not — Edward would have not believed himself, and he would have been willing to bet his brother would believe him anything, but John was often difficult to read.

'Yes — I wager you were not as terrible as all that,' said John at last. 'She seems to like you well enough, despite what you say.'

John was, as always, perfectly sure that everyone thought like he did, or at least, ought to think like he did. Lady Darcy had too many reasons to dislike Edward to choose, instead, to 'like him well enough'; Edward almost wanted to laugh. Instead, he only said, 'Indeed.'

It was then that he saw, ahead and coming in the opposite direction, a black gelding and a tan pony, cantering their way, with the lady at the gelding's back riding and leaning gracefully towards the pony, to tell instructions to the pony's less than graceful rider.

It was, inevitably, Lady Darcy. Edward snorted to himself with some amusement. Three years without even catching each other's shadows and now, twice in two days! Was the city not big enough for them? But then, both times, he was with John. He could not entirely stop seeing his brother just to avoid seeing her.

Then again, she could yet bow her head in their direction coolly and continue with her son's instruction — and the moment Edward thought it, he was sure that was what she would do.

She did not.

She caught sight of them, leaned and said something to Lord Darcy (the child had lost even more roundness about his face, and looked even paler and leaner and more serious than ever), and brought their horses to a halt when she reached them, as they did.

She bowed after them, smiling, and then said, 'Fitzwilliam, this gentleman with Mr Bennet is his younger brother: Edward Bennet — you met him three years ago when we went to Hertfordshire.'

Edward wondered for moment if she would ask the child if he remembered him, but she did not. She would not, thought he, do anything so absurd.

'Lord Darcy,' murmured Edward, 'you have greatly grown. I would not have known you if it were not for your mother.'

The child's mouth curled up the tiniest bit — the smile resembled, if smaller, his mother's.

'I do not remember you, sir,' Lord Darcy said after a moment of thoughtful silence.

'You would not,' said Edward, amused despite himself. 'I do not think we saw each other above three times.' He suddenly remembered the egg, and the disconsolate cry that followed its demise — he had not thought about that for the longest time, though it had been uncomfortable enough an occasion. He did not mention it.

'I hope,' said Lady Darcy, who had been exchanging pleasantries with John, and looked over at him, 'that you will do us the honour of calling on us for tea when Charlotte and John do? My mother-in-law would like to meet you, I think — the Bennets are great favourites at my house.'

'Are they?' he said, surprised despite himself. 'I do not know when...'
'Tomorrow,' said John. 'Did I not tell you? I am sorry. We are to meet, and introduce Harriet to her godmother.'

Edward wondered at Lady Darcy — she could not really want him to go, could she? Had he misjudged her even more than he had thought? Could she be so charitable? She must, he thought, suddenly realizing it, be doing it for Charlotte's and John's sake. And their future shared responsibility.

He assured her he would come.

He told himself the same thing again the next day, when he, of course, was true to his word and called on her with Charlotte and John, and their daughter. Harriet was judged to be very big for her age and very beautiful — a fine child.

He was uncomfortable at first. Lady Darcy's mother in law appeared to be about one or two and seventy, a still-handsome, tall woman of proud bearing, which made her resemble her daughter in law despite the physical difference. She sat in a chair with more grace and self-assurance than far stronger and younger people stood in. When he walked over to greet her, she looked him over with a too keen eye, and declared him to be handsome enough.

'Why, thank you, ma'am,' he said, determined not to be laughed at without participating. 'I have always been told my elder brother was much more handsome than I.'

'They did not lie,' said the heartless woman, with a raised eyebrow.

'Oh,' he said, 'a hit!'

'But I do not see that your opinion of yourself has been greatly injured by the knowledge, so I will not pity you for it.'

'I would never desire it,' said he, eyes twinkling with suppressed mirth all the same. 'I know few more lowering things than that.'

'That is because you are very young,' she said.

He almost laughed aloud. 'Indeed — a child still, I daresay. I do not know why they let me address the courts.'

'Do they? Philadelphia has not told me that.' She looked at him with renewed interest. 'What age are you, then?'

'Three and twenty. And I should not wonder at her not mentioning me — our acquaintance is very slight.' Despite the truth of the words, they felt very much like lies.

'Indeed?' But she did not seemed so much puzzled as mocking. He was irresistibly reminded of her daughter-in-law, and he had to force himself not to look in her direction.

Lord Darcy then came to his grandmother, and stood by her chair. He stood very much like his mother, thought Edward — a straight, proud posture and an inward, pensive look to his face.

'Fitzwilliam — do you know the gentleman?'

'I do,' the child said, and bowed.

Edward greeted him as well. 'I have been told,' he said after that, 'that you still dedicate yourself to the study of the animal kingdom.'
The child looked at him, and seemed to ponder if an affirmative at such a stupid phrase was needed. His grandmother answered for him. 'He does — he studies it far more than he studies his numbers, much to his tutor's displeasure. I fear he would prefer the life of a scholar to that of a gentleman.'

Lord Darcy bit his lip.

'He does enough, I daresay,' said Edward, though he knew not why he came to his aid. He was not at all sure the child needed it. 'I could not avoid my numbers enough, myself, and even John, dutiful son that he is, endured them rather than enjoyed them. It is not at all strange for a gentleman.'

Lord Darcy smiled slightly.

The dowager looked at Edward with a penetrating eye again. 'And you were cunning enough to be able to avoid your numbers, too. You do not look like someone who has been much thwarted — it would not have done you any great damage if you had been.'

'You are very perceptive, ma'am, I was very spoiled. Although,' he said suddenly serious despite himself, looking at Lady Darcy, who sat to one side, 'I hope I have grown, and I am not as terrible as I used to be.'

He was assaulted by the need to make peace with her. They would never, perhaps, be the very best of friends, but they could surely be civil, and he was determined to manage it. He could not tell, at first, if she had heard. He could not look away, and finally, when she raised her eyes to his, he was not sure of the meaning of her expression.

'Ah! There you go,' said the dowager, as if that settled it.

Edward smiled, resigned, and excused himself to go pay his respects to the younger Lady Darcy. She had returned his niece to her parents, and was in the process of serving the tea. He took a cup, sat by her, and tried to think what to say — everything they had ever touched upon had been subject of their quarrels — if their discussions could be called that, and he did not dare to attempt to find out if she had heard, or understood, his attempt at an apology.

She began, taking him by surprise. 'Your brother tells me you do very well for such a new practice.'

He did — and he had not hidden his pleasure from his brother. He had expected to do well, but nonetheless, he had not been sure. 'I do well enough — brothers, and John in particular, are very partial.'

'And is your younger brother well? Your mother and father?'

'They are well, yes, by the last word I had from them. John will know better — he writes to my father regularly.'

They were silent once more.

Edward said, after a moment, 'Do you often ride out with Lord Darcy in the morning?'

'Quite!' she said. 'He likes his pony a great deal, and I am endeavouring to teach him to ride. Your brother and you do it often, as well?'

'No, not really,' said Edward, thinking that he would gladly leave Hyde Park to her in the mornings — she would not, surely, want him intruding in her time with her child. 'I more often
walk out to St James'. It is, I am afraid, the closest thing to real exercise I get in the city.'

She met his gaze, though he could not understand her expression. 'You must miss Longbourn a great deal.'

'I do — ' he thought it was not quite true. Not a lie, of course, but — 'I miss the country, I should say. I like to visit Longbourn well enough — and I would not see my mother otherwise, but I could be equally contented in any country home.'

'Would you?' she asked, with a great deal of interest. But if she had been about to say something else, he never knew it, because they were interrupted by Charlotte. Edward realized that more time than a half an hour had passed, and that he could go knowing that he had been polite and had actually managed to talk with Lady Darcy without either of them being offended — even if they had discussed nothing of interest, and strange, disconnected subjects at that.

Darcy House, London

From Lady Darcy to Mr Fitzwilliam

Darcy House, Friday March 14

London is going to be very entertaining this year, dear George! Oh, I know it is full of things to see and do every year, but it is not this often that it is full of friends. The Mainwarings arrived last week, and also did Lord Christopher and Andrew, away from Rosings for once, and even the Bennets are here at last, at Bingley's house. They have the most beautiful baby girl I have ever seen, and as good natured as both of her parents. They have asked me to be her godmother. And to think I wanted Charlotte to marry Mr Knightley!

I attended a dinner party in Charlotte and John's honour, and had the pleasure to see some old acquaintances again — Captain Bingley, who is back from the war and in search of a wife, Miss Cox, and Mr Edward Bennet. He is a barrister now. I had heard it from Charlotte, but I did not realize until I saw him that he would be so changed! He remains as cheerful as ever, and is still very witty, but I daresay there is a new seriousness about him — I like him all the better for it. He seems the sort of gentleman his friends and family — and also his clients — can depend on.

We met by chance at the Park again while I was riding with Fitzwilliam and Mr Edward Bennet with his brother, and we invited them for tea, as I was sure Lady Darcy would like them a great deal. She did, of course. Her hip is still not improving and she cannot leave the house yet, but Darcy House has been full of callers since the moment we set foot in it. I do not complain, as it makes her very happy, but I do generally avoid having tea in my parlour.

Fitzwilliam is rapidly improving his riding, and he takes excellent care of his pony. He does not even let the groom brush it and does so himself, although that could be an attempt to delay his afternoon lessons. We are still in great need of texts in easy French featuring animals of any sort — Fitzwilliam can already read his ornithology manuals, but he is easily bored by anything else. As it is, he prefers to learn Latin to the French verbs. I have told him that he will grow tired of Greek and Latin when he is older, but to no avail; he wants to read the tomes on botanical science that we found in the library. He is as hard-headed as his father was, bless him. He is also as disdainful of sums and arithmetic as Darcy, but I have managed to enlist him to help me with Northbrook's ledgers. Apparently Fitzwilliam likes his learnings better if they have a practical application. I sometimes fear that all I do with my son is teach him to do useful things, but he is the most contrary thing: he will not run, will not shout, will not climb trees, and will never have tantrums as long as there is not cabbage to eat or a stray we cannot adopt. It worries me very
much. Will you teach him to swim?

On the subject of animals, there was a little sparrow (*passer domesticus*, mind you) that we found half-starved in the garden. The stubborn creature refused to eat anything we gave him, and Fitzwilliam was very upset about it. It is now well and thriving, thanks to the Bennets, who, on their second visit and at Charlotte’s instigation, searched the grounds for bugs and insects that we could feed him. It turns out the sparrow is quite the *connoisseur*, and likes ants with his chewed almond. Mr Edward Bennet became the hero of the hour by managing to make it swallow, and Fitzwilliam paid him the great honour of playing for him — the Mozart four hand sonata he likes to play with you. Then I had to play alone too. You will say I hate playing for strangers unless it is to avoid dancing, and you will be right; but the Bennets are hardly strangers, and I did avoid dancing very successfully. Charlotte and John tried to teach Fitzwilliam to dance the *cotillon*, with Edward Bennet as the second lady and my great-aunt Darcy laughing gleefully from her armchair.

Cousins Constance and Violet will arrive from Bath on Sunday, and maybe the Tilneys will come later this spring. I know you dislike London, but will you not come for a couple of weeks, to see your sister? In good faith, I cannot say that I am bored or miserable or lonely, but still I would like to see you very much.

Your affectionate,

Philadelphia Darcy
After the second time Edward had to oblige his brother and sister by calling on Lady Darcy with them, he did not expect her to see her again. He had hinted again at his decision to stop riding in the Hyde Park in the mornings with John, and was decided to do it despite John's puzzlement. He felt it was the good, mature step to take.

It was, then, with considerable surprise that he saw Lady Darcy one morning when walking out in St James'; she was with her cousin, and they stopped to speak with him, so that he felt compelled to offer to turn back and walk them to the other side of the park. The cousin was a somewhat older lady — older than Lady Darcy, that was — and though considerably less handsome, she was also considerably more charming. She and Edward spoke of trivialities under Lady Darcy's watchful eye; Edward was careful not to try to force the latter into the discussion.

He did not think more on the chance of finding them — in the same park he had warned Lady Darcy he would be in — until he spoke with Lucas, who had travelled to London for business and was visiting him in his rooms, about it.

'And you think it chance?' asked Lucas with a smile, from his spot in the armchair by the fire, after Edward has finished telling him how agreeable Lady Constance was.

'You are laughing at me,' said Edward, throwing him a pencil and leaning on the desk. 'What a fine friend. Of course I think it chance! Lady Darcy dislikes me enough. Perhaps the cousin is fond of the particular park, and Lady Darcy would not deny her the pleasure. Or perhaps you are right, and Lady Darcy purposefully managed the affair so we would meet walking (and what work! — I do not walk out every day) so that she could show her cousin the fine young man she laughs at when no one more amusing is at hand.'

'You say I am perhaps right, but I never said any thing like it,' pointed out Lucas.

Edward scoffed.

He almost walked by them three days after that. He was taking his usual walk, and thinking on completely different things when a lady hailed him from a side path.

'Mr Bennet!' she said.

It was Lady Darcy's cousin; Edward smiled. 'Lady Constance! I did not expect to find you here on another such an early morning.'
'You would believe us idle people, I see.' But she was also smiling, and walking to him.

'Not at all! I perfectly comprehend your love for a walk. But it is not close to Lady Darcy’s home, I believe? I would have thought you would much rather walk in Hyde Park.'

'Hyde Park? No, indeed — why would we, when we know you favour this one?' She smiled and glanced mischievously behind her, and Edward saw that Lady Darcy was indeed with her, and Lord Darcy, too.

'You flatter me,' he said, but he was thrown into some confusion. She was clearly teasing him, but he could not think why they would come all this way for a walk, when Hyde Park would serve them as well.

'Do I?' she asked, raising an eyebrow and widening her smile.

Lady Darcy had reached them, and greeted him very civilly, if less effusively than her cousin. They stood a moment in silence, and at last Lady Darcy turned away and trained her eyes on Lord Darcy, who knelt beside a pond.

'You see, Mr Bennet,' said Lady Constance, 'we are not at all idle. Some of us come in pursuit of scholarship and the rest are merely guardians.'

'You must not find it very entertaining,' said Edward, who was recovering from the surprise he had felt when he realized Lady Darcy was of Lady Constance’s party. She seemed distant, and Edward suspected that she wished him to the devil; he regretted for a moment he had not chosen another path.

'Oh, I do! I enjoy my time with my cousin thoroughly, and as I am more at my leisure than she, I must come to her.'

'Two such charming guardians,' observed Edward with a smile, 'are rather too many for any young man. But I see Lord Darcy does not know his luck.'

Lady Constance laughed. 'I see my cousin was right. You are extremely charming.'

'Am I?' said Edward, not allowing his smile to slip. He could not lie. 'I am glad Lady Darcy thinks so — I fear I had not made such a good impression three years ago.'

'First impressions tend to be deceiving,' said Lady Constance, not appearing to detect any thing darker in his manner than a modest disclaimer.

Edward suddenly realized that Lady Darcy, though she was turned towards her son, was close enough that she must hear the conversation. He wanted her to hear, though he suspected it was just another sign of his selfishness; for the first time, words did not come easy. 'Especially in those cases in which the person does not care to know the truth,' he said, at last. 'I do not think, however, that Lady Darcy lets herself be deceived by prejudice so easily.' He was conscious of the fact that he should not speak too seriously for Lady Constance, but he had needed to say it — as a as a sort of apology? Or explanation? He was not sure. He wondered, suddenly, what Lady Darcy had told Lady Constance; it would not do to say too much. 'But I will not let you lure me into this too serious subject,' he said, smiling. 'She said I was charming — charming I must have been. Ah, I see you are laughing at me, as Lady Darcy has always delighted in doing.'

'Has she?' asked Lady Constance with real interest.

'I made a fine target, I daresay. I was not one and twenty, and thought myself a fine figure of a man already.' He lightened his tone, though it still embarrassed him to think about it.
'Many a man of not one and twenty thinks so.'

'But I see you would have been much more charitable than your cousin — I think she used the word 'boy' when we first met.'

Lady Constance laughed aloud. 'I can well imagine!'

Lady Darcy seemed startled.

'Oh, this is cruel,' said Edward, finding humour in the situation at last and nodding towards her. 'You see she does not even remember. I thought myself monstrously wronged at the time. But I will not speak of it,' he added, looking at Lady Darcy, and trying to see what she thought. She did not seem someone who would easily laugh at herself. 'I am embarrassing your cousin.'

'I would dearly love to know how she acts with strangers,' said Lady Constance, her eyes full of merriment and fixed on her cousin, but still speaking to him. 'Shall we go walking, and you will tell me all about it?'

'Not at all,' said Lady Darcy at last, smiling slightly. 'I do not object to hearing it.'

Edward leaned slightly towards Lady Constance. 'The first time I saw your cousin was at an assembly ball. She rejected me, of course, when I very hopefully asked for a set. I was convinced — convinced! — she was not dancing, even if she did, very cruelly for the rest of us, concede one to Captain Bingley.'

'The horror!' said Lady Constance.

Edward repressed a laugh. 'You must admit that it is — passed over for that gentleman! I daresay I would not have been wrong to object to it as a very grievous insult. But I was very reasonable, you will see, and supposed her being polite to the brother of her host.'

'Very reasonable,' echoed Lady Constance.

Edward could not help stealing a look at Lady Darcy's expression. Her lips were tight, but not with disapproval — she seemed to be containing a laugh.

'My tale,' he said, 'must end in a low note. Very soon after that first rejection, and while I was philosophically communicating my conclusions to all my acquaintance, I was told by that very same group that Lady Darcy would not dance with a boy and had publicly said so.' He affected a sad expression. 'It is not a very good joke, and it being made at my expense, I cannot stir myself to improve on it, but there you have it. It was thought to be very clever by my neighbours — plainly, their taste is inferior.'

'I do not doubt it,' said Lady Constance, who had laughed at the appropriate places.

'Indeed.' Lady Darcy was smiling, though Edward thought she might be really offended, and regretted having told it. But it was not, he thought, so terrible a tale. He had taken it badly at the time, but it was rather comical, if one was not so directly involved.

That afternoon, again with Lucas, was at first spent speaking of other things. It was only as they were walking slowly through Holborn that an explanation for the last two encounters occurred to Edward. He hesitated for a moment before speaking about it, but Lucas was an old friend.

'I will perhaps convince you I think too much of myself after hearing this, but I think I have struck on an explanation why I have met Lady Darcy and her cousin twice when walking in St James.'
'Have you?' asked Lucas with some interest. 'But you did not tell me that you had met them twice.'

'I met them again this morning.'

'Do pray tell me — you need not to convince me of any such a thing, you know, I know it already.'

'Very well — I suspect that Lady Darcy must have related that I walk there and the cousin, who is, I think I told you, also a widow, and very amiable, must have prevailed upon her to walk out to meet me.'

'Oh, you made love to her without you both even meeting? Or did Lady Darcy also relate what a fine fellow you are?'

Edward flushed and laughed. 'I did not think about the first time — I doubt Lady Darcy said anything much about me, and in any case it would not have been anything complimentary; it must have indeed been chance. But... No, perhaps you are right and I am making too much of myself.' This once, though, he did not think so. There was, for example, Lady Constance's odd comment, and though she was very clearly teasing, there had been some intention there — some thing she wanted to communicate.

He changed the subject, and Lucas did not raise it again. It was only two days after when Edward convinced himself he had been supposing the truth, as he again encountered both ladies on a morning walk.

He greeted them, and this time they were alone and walking, so he had to offer one arm to each while accompanying them. He wondered at their not bringing Lord Darcy to offer his mother some entertainment, but it was soon explained: he had been felled by a slight cold, and was being cared for by his nurse.

'Though I am tasked,' said Lady Constance, 'with bringing him any interesting insect I find in our path.'

'I do not see you looking at the ground,' said Edward.

'No, indeed — I am in the greatest terror that I will find some strange looking insect and will be compelled to catch it and carry it all the way to my cousin's town house and up to the nursery.'

Edward laughed. 'Then I will help you by not pointing out any of the terribly interesting creeping and crawling beings that may cross my sight.'

At length, they did spot a bizarre enough creature that they were hard pressed to leave it undiscovered by the child, and Edward gallantly gave up on one of his gloves to contain it.

'Well, now you must come with us!' said Lady Constance. 'And present it to the scholar himself. I am sure he will welcome another face in his nursery — and that of the fearless hunter, at that.'

Edward was sceptical — Lord Darcy barely knew him and he had no particular way with children. Specifically, he always had thought it best to give a wide berth to ill and annoyed children. 'Oh, no, I would not intrude — and with Lord Darcy ill, too.'

'Come, we will feed you. My cousin's cook is excellent; and I am sure that, living alone and having taken rooms in Bartlett's buildings, you are not eating at all.'

'I do well enough by myself, and I am invited to dine with my sister and brother at his brother's home often enough; you know how he takes pride in his French cook.' He liked Lady Constance's
company, and would have, in other circumstances, liked Lady Darcy's — but he was not at all sure that his apologies and explanations had been enough, and he did not like the idea of imposing upon her. Already John and Charlotte tended to throw them together too much.

'Indeed — and I see my cousin with her very English cook will not do for you.' Lady Constance looked up at him with good humour. 'Unless you have another appointment — for that, I suppose, we shall have to forgive you.'

'Not at all — I do not want to impose.'

'Please, do join us,' said Lady Darcy. 'You would not be imposing.'

'See? My cousin has spoken.'

He went. He had to confess to himself that in the end he did not go completely unwillingly — Lady Constance was very charming, and her conversation, better informed than many a person he had met, though perhaps not Lady Darcy's, was pleasanter than most.

The elder Lady Darcy was at home when they entered, and though at first he went upstairs to deliver the specimen, and greet Lord Darcy, later it was with this lady that he conversed.

It was baffling, because he had thought that having contrived the meeting, and invited him for tea, Lady Constance would want to occupy that place, but she made no special effort towards it.

Lord Darcy, to be fair to Lady Constance's assertion when she extended the invitation, did visibly brighten at the sight of him; it was clear the child had few male companions, that even someone so unskilled with dealing with children would do.

He was in bed, and his nose was red and somewhat dripping, but even so he managed to avoid being cross — Edward could not help feel some admiration. Having gotten to know the child somewhat, he felt a vague sort of warmth. It was not friendship exactly — could one be a friend to such a young child? — but it was close enough. It kept him upstairs for the better part of half an hour.

'There you are,' said the elder Lady Darcy when he came down from the nursery. 'I was wondering if you had decided to play with Fitzwilliam's soldiers for the rest of your call.'

'I was very tempted, but I will have you know we were not playing with toy soldiers at all — it was a very serious scientific endeavour. Ma'am,' he said, turning to the younger Lady Darcy, 'you will have to procure a book about insects — I am afraid I was no help in determining if it was a known species or not.'

She smiled, and said she would.

The elder Lady Darcy looked him down from her place on the armchair by the fire. 'I would not have said you were a scholar.'

'In the normal run of things, I am not,' said Edward, easily. 'But Lord Darcy finds them so very compelling that I find myself sharing his enthusiasm.'

He encountered Lady Darcy and her cousin on several occasions after that, sometimes with Lord Darcy, who kept his mother's interest somewhat, and more times without. It confirmed Edward's conviction that the meetings were engineered by Lady Constance, though he did not feel at all sure of the ultimate reason.

He could flatter himself, he supposed, and think it was his considerable powers of entertainment or
the fact that he was not unhandsome — after all, he had never in his life deceived himself with an overabundance of modesty — but he could not think that Lady Constance sought marriage. She was in a very similar position to Lady Darcy, and he could not imagine that she would give up her freedom easily again.

There had even been some hints, both in her conversation and in comments made by Charlotte, that her previous husband had not been what one called a kind man — he did not think someone reprieved so young from a disagreeable future would look for another marriage; even if three years had passed.

But she flirted with him, very clearly, and her cousin acted in a somewhat warmer manner, and did not appear overly disgusted with accompanying Lady Constance to meet him every three days.

It was all very strange.

__________________________________________________________

From Lady Darcy to Mr Fitzwilliam

Darcy House, Saturday evening April 5

Dearest George, you are the best of brothers. And of course I love you too, you silly man! If only you would come to London, my happiness would be complete.

Also if Mr Bennet proposed, which, no, he has not. Yet. He is still visiting, and casually meeting me in the Park, and letting Fitzwilliam chatter to him, and being courteous to Lady Darcy, and even admitting to some feelings towards me to Constance, who finds him delightful. Alas, he is still shy and awkward with me. I thought myself to be very patient, and now I discover that I am not! It would be very vexing, if I were not so distracted.

He even demurred to accept my invitation to the dinner party I held yesterday, the provoking man! I daresay he is not sure of my heart as I am of his; he is young, and a mere barrister, and he must feel these things to be an insurmountable impossibility. He came to dinner at last, after I let him know I had invited two judges and a widely admired attorney of whom I thought he might like to make an acquaintance, and also his good friend Mr Lucas. Mr Bennet was a great success, and made my dinner party one, too. I shall never mind the work to plan dinners and balls and country house parties once we are married, if he is to enjoy himself so.

I wish he would speak his mind — all of our acquaintance know, after all. Constance is the best chaperone I could have, as she was when we were young girls, even if she still insists I do not speak enough and threatens to stop giving my young man conversation any day. Charlotte winks at me, and yesterday said I was already a sister to her. John is slightly more effusive than usual, and declared we must spend Christmas together — in Derbyshire, I gather. My great-aunt Darcy has taken to advice me on how to drop my handkerchief so that it will be picked, and on the right times to blush demurely — she reckons that every young miss should be able to blush at will, and that my education on the subject of flirting is woefully lacking. Mr Lucas enquired about my plans to stay in town, and about Northbrook at some length (on his friend's behalf, no doubt, as his eyes were certainly twinkling). And Marie outdoes herself with my hair every time I tell her I will walk in the park. I do not know how she knows, as we usually take Constance's maid and not her, but she does. It might be that I have a tendency to remember Mr Bennet's witticisms while she does my hair. Oh, George, not only I have no patience, it turns out I am transparent too.

Do come to us if you can spare the time. I would be very glad to know your informed opinion on the subject of Mr Bennet, and really do want you to meet him soon.
Yours faithfully,

Philadelphia Darcy
Chapter 11

After a while, Edward had stopped wondering why Lady Darcy was so amiable; she had, for some reason, forgiven him, or at least she did not think it too much of a strain to be pleasant and agreeable to him, and wondering why had no point. Edward supposed she had gotten used to him, and to the idea of his flirting with her cousin; perhaps Lady Darcy did it for her sake, or perhaps it was for Charlotte’s.

If he were honest with himself — and he thought he now often was — what he felt was disappointment. He had behaved dreadfully three years ago, and if he could live that time again he would not act in the same manner, but he missed their conversations. It was strange, because at the time he had thought them merely arguments, and had reduced his enjoyment of them to his pleasure in looking at her (an insult he was glad he had never had occasion to express to her directly) — but they had also been exchanges of ideas. He did not know many people with whom he could discuss matters as diverse as he knew he would be able to discuss with Lady Darcy — if only she were his friend.

Which she was not.

He wondered if she could ever be, but not too much — he had behaved too badly, and she had, he thought, too much pride. They had spoken little but pleasantries since they had met again, and it would not change until Lady Darcy’s birthday.

On the occasion, Charlotte organized a picnic at the Ranelagh Gardens. They were in high spirits, as it befitted the warmth of the weather, and even young Harriet was brought out. They were, all in all, the Bennet party; the Bingleys; one young lady whose name Edward had not cared enough to find out beforehand, with her older sister and brother (Mrs Bingley had not, it seemed, given up on the plan to find a match for Captain Bingley); and the Darcy party, which included Lady Constance and Mr Fitzwilliam, Lady Darcy’s younger brother. The elder Lady Darcy did not feel well enough to come, thought she had sent, according to Lady Constance, a particular greeting for him.

They arrived, and Charlotte took over the preparations, directing servants left and right to set the food just so, and the shade, and arranging where everyone was to sit. He was placed, to his surprise, by Lady Darcy. Anyone would think, thought Edward, that Charlotte was no friend of her!

’Charlotte, you know you are my favourite sister, but I cannot sit and eat just yet. I see Lord Darcy looks longingly at the nice path by that tree — shall he and I go exploring?’
Lord Darcy sat to attention, looking back to his mother with big, pleading eyes.

'Of course,' she said. 'Unless Charlotte has something planned.'

'No, no,' denied that lady. 'You can go. Though you must not blame me if all the oranges have disappeared in your absence.'

Edward was glad — he had been able to gracefully extract himself from the situation; Lady Darcy was now free to seek the company she felt was most amenable.

He walked with Lord Darcy for some minutes, but the child soon found more interesting things to do and left the path to inspect the sides. Edward's task, it seemed, was to accompany him from the safer, open path, stop to wait for him, and walk again when Lord Darcy was ready to move on. He did not mind; he had time to think, and to enjoy the day.

He was glad he had not invited Lady Constance to accompany him, though he had considered it. It seemed to him that he might be making a fool of himself with her, and it was not his intention — that is, it was not his intention to give the impression he had any... hopes, in that regard.

He did not suspect her to be harboring any, or even supposing him to have any, but he knew how easy it was for friends to infer an attachment where there were none, and their circle was too confined for that to be comfortable. He did not want to have to stop frequenting it. He was enjoying this outing, despite his misgivings.

He was enjoying walking out with Lord Darcy, and listening to his chatter about animals and plants and bits of (apparently very interesting) rocks; enjoying expending time with his brother and sister and niece; enjoying, if he was truthful, spending time with Lady Darcy. He was harboring hopes of resuming their conversations, if he was honest with himself, if now on more amiable terms. There was no risk, after all, of that relationship getting misconstrued.

He could even endure Captain Bingley if absolutely necessary (and it seemed it was); though perhaps soon the good man would marry and move to Ireland.

He and Lord Darcy had walked for almost three quarters of an hour when, doubling back through a side path, Edward found Mr Fitzwilliam, his sister on one arm, his cousin on the other.

Edward straightened and smiled. 'You wandered away, too? I hope Charlotte is not too disappointed that no one is eating the oranges.'

'George wanted to find his nephew — they have seen each other but little,' said Lady Constance.

'You should have invited yourself to walk with me, then!' said Edward to the boy, good-naturedly, and gestured to the right. 'I am afraid you will have to venture off the path. Your nephew is extremely entertained; I think he is following an ant — it has spikes on its back, and looks quite like some mythological beast.'

Mr Fitzwilliam blushed, and seemed at a loss of what to say, though Edward did not know what had caused such a confusion. The boy had a pleasing, open countenance, and seemed amiable enough, though Edward had not been able to speak with him yet. 'Thank you, I would not have intruded,' he said then.

'You would have not!' said Edward, somewhat diverted at the idea. 'I must confess I find myself pleasing company, though not an entirely entertaining one; I would have welcomed you. Shall I guide you to your nephew and,' he added looking at Lady Darcy and guessing at what she must wish, 'leave the ladies to their tête-à-tête?'
Mr Fitzwilliam's colour intensified, but it was Lady Constance who spoke. 'Oh, I will not allow it. I was about to ask George all about his exploits at Oxford, and I am sure he cannot want his sister to hear. Will you escort my cousin?'

It was very neatly done, thought Edward, although the excuse was rather thin — Mr Fitzwilliam did not look like someone who would have done any thing that could be described as 'exploits'; in a matter of moments, he found himself pointing Lady Constance and Mr Fitzwilliam in Lord Darcy's direction, offering his arm to Lady Darcy, and walking off with her.

He had scarcely time to think about it before it was done, and he was left wondering why. Had Lady Darcy and her cousin quarreled? But no, they did not look like it. It seemed there was nothing suspicious after all, or that if there was, Edward could not know it — it might be that Lady Constance wanted to talk to her younger cousin without the sister listening for a reason, but Edward had no hope of discovering it.

After walking for some minutes, and exchanging one or two remarks on the weather, Edward said, 'I wonder how you contain your curiosity at Mr Fitzwilliam's exploits — though I daresay you can rest easy that it was nothing too terrible; your cousin, after all, did not take care of avoiding to raise your interest.'

Lady Darcy looked at him, one eyebrow raised. 'Perhaps he has dared to contradict Cicero in front of a don?'

Edward laughed. 'I see you know your brother too well! Or at least, you think you do. I have often wondered how it would be to have an older sister. I daresay there are not many things I would care to hide from John.'

'What would you hide from a sister?'

'If I knew, I would not wonder at it! Though I must confess my life has no dark corners; I cannot think of any thing I could not tell a sister, if I had one.'

'A terrible confession, indeed. I wonder at you making it so unguardedly.'

'Oh, I am sure you can be trusted. Though perhaps I should have hesitated to speak it to you particularly, knowing your opinion on uninteresting people. I could hope to fare far better if I would be a very uninteresting character in a novel.'

'I am not sure; there is little place for uninteresting characters in novels.'

'Surely you exaggerate! Though I must confess I am not good enough to be a creditable Sir Charles Grandison. I daresay I would have duelled the villain.'

'And won, too.'

'I see you laugh! But perhaps I would have — I am a good enough shot, and though I have not practiced on any poor French bodies, as our dear Captain Bingley has since, I used to fell more birds, which are smaller and quicker.'

'Of course. But I see now that you have changed the subject — or perhaps you wanted to imply Sir Charles was uninteresting.'

'Did I? How dreadful of me.'

They smiled at each other, and for one moment Edward thought they were in perfect understanding.
They had reached the picnic while speaking, but it was almost deserted. Charlotte and John, who had eaten early, had gone walking, showing their child every flower and butterfly and talking to her as if she would understand. The only ones to remain were Captain Bingley, Miss Cooper, and, conversing and standing some discreet way off, Mr Bingley, Mrs Bingley, and the young lady's brother and sister.

Edward stopped, turned slightly and leaned towards Lady Darcy. 'I think we better keep walking; I get the impression we might be de trop in this arrangement.'

Lady Darcy looked beyond him at the couple and the group of well meaning chaperones and suppressed a smile. 'You are undoubtedly right, though turning the way we came may seem... rather less than discreet.'

Edward almost laughed. 'Indeed. But look there, I have the greatest interest in observing that part of the gardens, and though I am sure you have seen them before, I doubt you would be so unkind as to deny me your company.'

'You have spent three years in London and not seen them?'

'Well,' Edward said, allowing himself a sly smile, 'I did not say I have not seen them before. But I have not observed them with any care, and I do have a great desire to see them now.'

Lady Darcy's mouth twitched — Edward was sure he had almost made her laugh.

They walked by their party with a nod, accompanied with a smile that Edward made slightly mocking — it was not that he despised Captain Bingley, exactly, but the man was so supercilious and calculating that it was certainly a pleasure to disoblige him. And he was surely doing that. The good Captain had not lost all his hopes in Lady Darcy, even although he should have, and it did not look like a proposal would be soon forthcoming, no matter how prettily the latest young lady presented to him sat, or ate oranges, or how hopefully (and helpfully) the chaperones walked away.

Edward wondered at what Lady Darcy thought of the Captain. It was not clear — on one hand, she smiled a great deal whenever Edward made a comment, but she did not make any herself, and she treated him as... well, as the brother of a very good friend, Edward supposed.

There was, surely, less haughtiness in her manner than there usually was towards people she had not acquaintance with, and less coldness, but she was never very... warm towards him. The thought cheered Edward immensely. It would have been very lowering if someone so usually discerning as her would have liked — treated — the Captain better than him.

'I cannot help wondering,' said Edward when they had lost sight of the group around a bend of the path, 'at the Captain's wish to be married so urgently. He cannot be much older than I.'

'You think him too young to marry?' asked Lady Darcy, looking at him with an indecipherable expression.

'Well, I suppose not too young — but there is surely no need for all this scheming. Mrs Bingley has trotted out — what, three? — three or four young ladies for his inspection while I have been in their company, and there must be more I am not meeting.'

'Perhaps some of those young ladies were intended for you,' she said, with a cocked eyebrow.

'Ha! Thankfully, I doubt it. I do not think Mrs Bennet would care, and I do not think Charlotte would try to matchmake without mentioning the matter to me.'
'Indeed?'

Edward wondered at her tone of voice — he could not tell what it meant. Had he been insulting? Perhaps to the young ladies? He knew he tended towards thoughtlessness. 'But I do not mean that marriage to any of them would be... unthinkable. It is just a matter of... the artifice of it. It is both too sly and not sly enough. It manages to be both awkward and obvious.'

At her silence, he added, 'Perhaps I do not understand it because marriage in itself, to any one, is quite unthinkable for me at the moment.'

She did not respond, and upon reaching the Chinese pavilion, made a comment about the architecture as if they had not been speaking of another subject. Her demeanour seemed odd to Edward, but he could not guess the meaning of it, nor what exactly had prompted the change, though he knew it must be related to what he had spoken. Had she, perhaps, felt insulted by his dismissal of marriage itself?

He cursed himself for raising an issue he had no interest in — his initial comment had been an idle one, prompted, perhaps, (and he knew he should be ashamed for it) by his desire to laugh at the Captain with her. He had spoken not quite knowing what he said; not even caring, at first, to know. The most ridiculous thing was that he had spoken so quickly to justify his first remarks that he was not entirely sure he knew now what the following ones had been, nor how they could have offended her.

But perhaps she was not offended.

He observed her, as discreetly as he could, for the rest of the afternoon, trying to discern if she really was, and the reason for it, but he was left unsatisfied. Lucas, he was sure, would have had a ready answer, but Lucas was not in London to be asked, and in any case, he had odd ideas about Lady Darcy and her opinion of him.

He decided that same evening that he would ask her the next time they ran into each other in the park, but a week went by and she did not appear to be frequenting it any more. When eight mornings had passed, he called on Mr Bingley’s house, and after failing at making the enquiry without seeming to do so, he asked outright about her.

She was no longer in London.

______________________________________________________

From Lady Darcy to Mrs Bennet

Northbrook, Monday April 28

I never meant to worry you by leaving London without telling anyone first. I thought that I would write from home; that you, dear Charlotte, would not notice my distress, and that I would be spared from recounting it. I never thought I was in the least foolish, and now every one of my actions proves to me that I am.

Of course you should realize, and guess the reasons behind my departure! You dare only to hint it, but I will write it down as it is: I love Mr Edward Bennet, and he loves me not.

Do you recall, during your courtship with John, the times I remonstrated you for being so unguarded and ingenuous with him? I told you it made you vulnerable, and that you should not be
so open with your feelings. You, of course, paid me no mind, as you do not know how to be otherwise. I find now that you were right, and I was even more in the wrong than I thought that Christmas.

What happened, in short, is that I was convinced that he was courting me, yet he had not been, and I dare say he had not even thought about it. You were right to think that something happened during the picnic, although it is not what you think. He only said, while we walked together, to be utterly uninterested in courtships and marriages.

At first I thought it was his way to gently let me know that he did not care for me; I had been so sure of there being an understanding that I could not imagine him unaware of my affection. But I now think that it was not so at all; that, had he wanted to disabuse me, he would have done so in his usual straight-forward manner. He truly did not know that I had hopes, and merely spoke his mind as freely and good-spiritedly as he usually does.

I know that love is said to be blind, Charlotte, but I do not know how I could be so mistaken. I knew that he did not like me when we parted ways before your wedding, and, after all, I have not changed. He has grown, and settled, and become more thoughtful, but I still am as I was. Such a personable gentleman as he is cannot feel any admiration for someone who cares not for anyone's good opinion; someone so fine and presumptuous to take for granted such a thing as a man's desire to marry her.

Now, do not think me a heroine in a novel; as I lack all sorts of spontaneity, I will not do anything rash, like drowning in a river like Ophelia or marrying in haste like that silly Emma Courtney in that novel — especially as my only suitor, were I to wed someone out of despair, would have been your brother, and we truly do not suit each other.

In a fortnight I shall not be melancholy anymore, and in three months, I will be content again. My great-aunt Darcy came with me to Northbrook and is most indignant with Mr Bennet (she refers to him as that boy), and Constance writes that she will not speak to him again. You will not hold anything against your brother, will you? Please do not, as he could only be blamed for being unaware of my affection, and I am rather grateful for that small mercy.

I beg you, do not worry about me. George is to arrive tomorrow from Oxford, and I shall be in the best company. My great-aunt and Fitzwilliam send their regards to you and your family.

Ever your affectionate friend,

Philadelphia Darcy
Chapter 12

It was perhaps very fortuitous that none of the present company thought to wonder why he asked about Lady Darcy, as he was so disturbed that any question would have pierced his pretence at indifference. He scarcely heard the rest of the conversation, and though he accepted and held his niece for a full ten minutes, and managed to entertain her with a finger, and then a watch, he could not have, one minute after he delivered her into her father’s arm, said that he had done so.

He walked slowly to his rooms, though he had said he would take a hansom cab, and all the while his mind kept going back to his words in their last meeting, and to her reaction, and finding no credible explanation. Surely, he had said worse things to her three years ago? And nonetheless, she had greeted him after that time had passed with equanimity and even the beginnings of friendship. He could find no answer. Perhaps, then, she had not been offended, and he had mistaken her. Perhaps, if they met now, nothing would be different.

Was he not thinking too much of himself, of his importance in her world, to conclude that because he had thought to perceive her acting oddly one afternoon, she had gone five counties away to escape from his presence?

He surely was.

But it was very provoking. It was not in his character to dwell on unpleasant subjects, nor to think too much about matters he could not arrange to his satisfaction, and nonetheless, at any given moment not spent in actual work or conversation, his thoughts came back to her, and to the possibility that he had offended her again.

It had been three years between his first offence and their meeting again — would he have to wait another three years?

And did he care?

Of course he did. It was — it should have been startling, but he had not fallen into caring as one falls from a horse. It was, perhaps, a very uninteresting, un-novel like way, but he had started slowly but surely on this path since he had met her again, and it was not a surprise to realize the extent of it now. It was all too natural, after his anxiety during the past eight days.

He felt he could now maturely examine his feelings with objective detachment: he found in himself friendship, attraction, and the acutest interest for her welfare, among which feelings the only novel one was perhaps the last.
It was the mixture that perturbed him; the fact that they did not present themselves in ordered, separate compartments, referred to different, safely amiable people. The fact that they combined into a need for her — for her presence, at the very least.

There was no future for such feelings. How could there be?

His family, his situation in life, his age, the way he had treated her in the past all conspired against a happy outcome, even if he had not offended her this time. Even if he had not, even if she were as charitably disposed towards him as she had been those past few months, it was unthinkable. But he knew, he had the certainty that he had offended her.

And to manage to do it, when the words he had said had been so ridiculous, so ill-thought, that he was forced to disclaim them to himself when he thought back on them not a fortnight after having spoken them! He could have had, at least, her friendship.

But then again, perhaps he had not lost that; and could he be happy with it, and no more?

The thought of her considering him forever merely the brother of her friend was horribly unsettling.

He was a fool. He was chagrined, but it was one of the few times he admitted it, even to himself. It would undoubtedly be a learning experience. At some point he would look back and laugh at it, and himself, and be able to think of Lady Darcy only with a certain fondness.

The thought was poor comfort.

He was determined not to mope, not to allow his feelings to be depressed forever. He had work to do, and friends to visit. He could not avoid thinking of Lady Darcy; very well, he would not. He would remember her with pleasure. He would not make himself miserable.

It was a good resolution — he did not fall into a decline. Not that he had truly feared it, but it was, after all, the first time he felt any thing like this. He managed to repress his feelings so well that none of his friends noticed that he was doing so.

He was glad, he told himself, that he managed not to think of her much at all. It was only when he read a new novel that he thought of what she would think of it. Or when he caught a very strange spider and found himself thinking that he should take it to Lord Darcy, and perhaps discover his mother at home. Or when Captain Bingley said something that managed to be both superior and silly, which was, it had to be allowed, very often — or when the Captain promised himself, finally, to Miss Cooper.

He found himself wanting to ask John and Charlotte about her, but not quite willing to subject himself to their well-meaning curiosity just to hear that she was well. Frustratingly, he found himself thinking of things to say to her. How had he got so used to her presence? It had not been two months since they had met again, and even during them, they had not, surely, spent a significant enough time with each other to provoke such an attachment! Was it everyone who felt like this?

Two months after she had gone — and it was not, he told himself, that he was counting, but would she only return to the city for the season? — he encountered Lady Constance in the street. He tipped his hat, and was surprised at realizing he had not seen her for so long — as long as Lady Darcy.

She did not quite smile, but he did not notice at first. He had stopped walking, glad that he had been acknowledged, not because it would give him a chance at flirting with her, he was angry
with himself at noting, but because it would be all too natural to ask after her family if they spoke.

They exchanged the appropriate greetings, and Edward's throat was suddenly very dry, but he managed to ask clearly, 'And your family, they are all well? Mr Fitzwilliam, Lord Darcy and Lady Darcy?'

She frowned slightly, and apprised him for a moment before answering. 'The boys are very well, thank you. But I am surprised you ask about my cousin.'

He was at first so frustrated that she had said nothing about Lady Darcy (though surely, she must be well? If it were otherwise, would she not have said it first?), that he did not catch her meaning until a few moments later. He was then too disconcerted to make an intelligent reply. 'You are?'

'I did say so,' said Lady Constance, though her brow had lost most of its frown. 'I thought — but no matter, I should not have spoken.'

He had, then, offended her. So badly, in fact, that though she had not told his old offense to anyone, she had told her cousin of this. So badly, that her cousin was angry enough to mention it to him. *What* had he said?

He decided in a moment, and chose straightforwardness. 'I offended her, then, during our last meeting? I am sorry for it. I feared it, and hoped I could apologize, but I did not see her again before she left.' He hesitated to add that he did not know quite what he had said; it would count against him, surely, if his offense had been great. 'It was truly not my intention.'

'No, of course it was not,' she said, somewhat briskly. 'And I am sorry for having spoken of it to you — my cousin would not like it.'

Edward wanted to ask — wanted to find a way to understand what had been the matter, but could not. She was, it seemed, determined to tell him goodbye and go. It was just as well — there was no way to enquire. It was, however, he thought, all very odd. Lady Constance seemed to accept he had not meant it, and not hold it against him — she seemed, moreover, genuinely regretful to have spoken. What then, could it have been?

He thought again back to his words while he walked home, and a slight hope reasserted itself. Perhaps, he thought, he was misunderstanding everything, which was understandable given his history with the lady. Perhaps *he had not offended her at all.*

He had disclaimed any interest in marriage; what could she care of his feelings on the matter? Unless she had an interest in *him.*

It was a revelation. Half of it was the possibility in itself — the other half, the elation he felt at considering it. Where his feelings so strong, then? And could be he be sure that he was not, then, deceiving himself?

He had not, of course, been brought up to doubt his own value, or to think himself unworthy of affection, but he had had so acute an understanding of what the lady must think of him from the beginning of their acquaintance, he had never truly considered the possibility. Acute, of course, and *wrong* — or perhaps not, he corrected, wrong at first. But something *had* changed when they renewed their acquaintance.

It was a gratifying theory — so gratifying, in fact, that he could not help but doubt it. He could not act on it until he got some sort of confirmation. (And how, he thought briefly, and then discarded the thought for the present, would he act if it were true? He could not yet think about that.)

There was one other person he could ask, and now, bolstered by new intelligence, and irked at
two months having passed without his preoccupation with her abating, he was finally willing to risk waking her concern.

He called without delay at the Bingleys' home and asked for Charlotte. He did not know, however, how to begin his questioning once she had received him. He had no right, after all, to ask about confidences between his sister and her closest friend.

After they greeted each other, and the child had been passed on to his lap — he had, as the first excuse to occur to him, claimed to be passing by and to want to see his niece — he was at a loss as to how to continue.

They spoke of inanities, and she related to him some of his niece's newer accomplishments, as well as the latest news from Longbourn. Mr Bennet seemed decided to go to Newmarket and Mrs Bennet had rejected an invitation to London.

There was a pause, in which Edward could think of no way to comment; he could not make himself care for any of the things she had mentioned. He smiled ruefully and played with his niece's hand — she was determined, it seemed, to gnaw on one of his fingers. 'Charlotte — I have something to ask you and I do not quite know how. I am afraid you will think me terribly improper.'

She seemed about to speak, but had an odd expression. After a moment, she simply said, 'I am sure I will not.'

'My question, then,' said Edward, drawing some strength from the fact that he did not have to look at Charlotte, but could look, instead, at her child, 'relates to Lady Darcy. It has lately occurred to me that I may have — that she may had harbored some hope. About me.'

Charlotte was silent.

Edward raised his eyes. 'Was I mistaken?' He hesitated, and then said, 'If I am right, you need not fear that you will be betraying your friend's trust to—to someone indifferent. I am not indifferent.'

'I hope, then,' said Charlotte, a slight smile quirking her lips, 'that you will not do so poor a job at telling her so as you did just now.'

Understanding took only a moment, and he felt a violent surge of joy.

He was, he thought as he strode away to his rooms with a letter from Charlotte to her friend, as elated as he had ever felt. Almost as elated as he had been miserable before — and yes, now that there was hope, he could accept that, in his way, he had been miserable. He dared not to examine this hope too closely, lest he be besieged by doubts, but now that it existed, he knew how to act.

She had given him, he thought, a thousand and one signs that he had not been wise enough to perceive. It was somewhat bewildering, in fact, to understand them all and to know he had not done it before. He was characterized by a particular kind of willfulness, he knew, that made him unable to change his opinion even upon perceiving contradicting information.

Nevertheless, he now knew and understood her opinion of him, or at least, her opinion of him as it had been two months before. He had no doubt as to his next step: he ought to go to Derbyshire and call on her.

_____________________________________________________

From Lady Darcy to Lady Constance Tilney
Northbrook, Sunday evening May 25

You must come visit very soon, and see the new blue drawing-room! We have decided it already; it is the most delightful room ever to grace a house. I was not sure at all about the print in the upholstery, but my great-aunt was right, and it looks very fine. Mr Smith thought so, too, and it is generally agreed that he is in possession of the most refined taste in Derbyshire.

Fitzwilliam has asked me to tell you that he is enormously grateful for your birthday gift; I made him write you a proper thank-you note, which is enclosed in the letter. A dog of his own, his to train and pamper! He is charmed indeed, and I feel nearly envious of the love he professes you at the moment. He named her Constance in your honour. And I, dear cousin, am very well pleased too, for he runs after her and takes her for walks every day, and if she is half as sprightly as she has shown herself to be, I will not have to worry about him getting his exercise again!

We attended a ball at the public rooms yesterday; I did not dance much (just the once with Mr Smith and again with my cousin), but I did enjoy myself a great deal. I talked with the sensible matrons, kept my great-aunt company, and made conversation with the gentlemen in the cards-room. We had a very lively discussion on land management that lasted three sets, and was much more interesting than any country dance.

I have finished Rousseau's *Second Discourse* at last; I think I liked his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* better, but I would be hard-pressed to explain why. It was much more fanciful, I daresay, and thus more entertaining. I will start *Éloise* next, as a couple of ladies of the neighbourhood have praised it most fervently. I am not disposed to trust their judgement indiscriminately, but I am willing to try. Oh, and I know you will laugh at me, but I have taken up Greek again. Fitzwilliam is very keen on Aesop, and I have once more fallen prey to the charms of verbal aspect. I cannot bear to learn anything half-ways, and it is very rainy outside anyway.

I did not post this letter yesterday — I forgot about my correspondence entirely. We had callers all afternoon, and a dinner party to attend in the evening. We are very busy, as everyone is home and they had not seen Lady Darcy in years.

Today we went to a picnic organized by Mrs Edwards — amazingly, it did not rain. It was charming, although probably too long. Of course Fitzwilliam did not think so, as there was a game of cricket to play and Mr Smith's youngest son, a cheerful boy named James, to teach him how. They also added a couple of butterflies and beetles to their collections. Mr Smith himself was at his most gentlemanly, and I am sincerely growing quite fond of him. My great-aunt is very excited! I do believe we can expect a proposal very soon. I am prone to be mistaken in such affairs, it is true, but I have no doubt of his regard or his intentions. I am already planning a wedding in June.

I hope to see you soon, and that your namesake will stop teething on my new furniture soon.

I am, &c.,

Philadelphia Darcy
Edward purposefully did not dwell on what he would say to Lady Darcy during his journey to Derbyshire. He found it useless to do so — to practice some words that would, undoubtedly, be rendered obsolete by the conversation. He did not even dwell on his feelings; he knew what he felt, and he knew what he hoped, and there was no point in thinking over much about it.

Of course, he could not be as sanguine as he wished. Two months had passed. He was still very much her inferior; his father was not — had not been, at least, until he married his mother — a gentleman. He had insulted her in the past, and caused her great pain the last time they met, and both times for the same ultimate reason, his thoughtlessness, though it could be said in his favour, perhaps, that the second time had not been out of a desire to cause pain.

It was, all in all, very discouraging, though he was decided he would not allow himself to be discouraged.

He had brought a book and tried to concentrate on reading it, though the heroine's fears could not wholly distract him from his own; his being, if of less dire quality, more real and immediate to him. What did he care about something behind a veil when his future would be decided in the next four and twenty hours? Even if it were — what? A corpse?

It was too late to call on Northbrook, but he could have his book to entertain him during his dinner. However, when the man serving him made a comment about not getting too many folk passing through, he said he was not. It was all too easy, though somewhat late in the year for it, to claim he was visiting for the sights, and ask about the neighbouring estates. Northbrook was immediately mentioned, as were Pemberley and Matlock.

'Is the family at home in Northbrook?' asked Edward with deliberate casualness, taking his glass to his lips.

'They are not. Lady Darcy just married Mr Smith the day before yesterday.'

'She did?' Edward heart jumped in his chest, and he left the glass on the table without having tasted it.

'We were as surprised as you,' said the man. 'No one hereabouts thought she would ever marry again, though they were known to be friendly-like.'
'I see.' He was distantly glad to note his tone was steady.

He pushed the plate away as soon as the man left; he had no appetite. His stomach seized at the mere thought of food or wine; it felt leaden and queasy, as if he may be sick.

He was glad he had come alone — he had briefly considered delaying a few days and asking Lucas to accompany him. But it was good there would be no witness to either his disappointment nor his humiliating reaction to it. To be sick, or have such a strong reaction to something so... trivial. Because it must be trivial. She had not... she had not hoped, or at least not as strongly as he had, or she could not have married someone else a mere two months after.

And if all hope had been on his side, then indeed it was trivial. Less than a dream. He felt worse than he had when he had not yet considered that she may feel the same for him, because now he had considered it, and hoped for it, and even, to some extent, come to expect it. He was certain that no future happiness could ever offset his present distress.

His eyes burned, and he felt all the strength of the feelings he had thought to be experiencing for two months — but those were a pale shadow to his suffering now.

His throat hurt. He thought of her eyes lit with amusement, the curve of her mouth, her neck. He thought of seeing her and knowing she would never be his with an overwhelming distress. He had not imagined he could feel it with such strength that it would all — his friends, his work, the world — pale into insignificance at its side.

He had been convinced — or he had convinced himself — that all attraction, all inclination, all but a slight sympathy would fade. He had been able to show nothing, and to keep on as if nothing had indeed happened. He was sure he could never again hope to do so.

And at a time he knew that certainty was ridiculous. He was, he said to himself, feeling the first brunt of his disappointment. A disappointment more real, perhaps, than that which he had felt before, because when he had thought he could hope for nothing, he now knew that he could not, irrevocably — but, nonetheless, the present feelings would fade to a more endurable kind of pain in time.

Perhaps, he thought, he hoped, in not too much time.

He walked the perimeters of his room for half the night with that hope clear in his mind, and woke up to a reality that was closer to that wish than anything he could have expected the day before. He was not recovered — far from it. But his mind, tired perhaps of running the same circles, could leave thought of her and focus on more pressing concerns: to wit, how he must act.

He was glad he was experiencing such deep feelings now and had not felt them before — he could not vouch for what his reaction could have been three years ago; only his vanity spurned had boosted him into the very heights of folly then. It was poor compensation, but he felt it almost a gift to be able to regard her still with warmth and respect, and to know that would not change.

And, more immediately, he had Charlotte's letter. He must deliver it. Could he, perhaps, send a boy with it, and turn back without having to go up to the house and greet her in person? But there was the chance that she, or someone else, would ask, and then his presence in the neighbourhood would be obvious, and his lack of courtesy, conspicuous. He could not endure the idea of she suspecting his feelings, and then his cowardice.

And, of course, if he did see her, she would know at once. How could she not? He was sure his feelings would be obvious to anyone, but especially to her, who knew him, if only a little. She, who, moreover, would know, from an intimate acquaintance with his family, that he could have
no business here except for her.

But it was still better, he thought, for her to see him, and know that he had not balked at meeting her, despite what he felt.

No, he would go, and deliver the letter personally. He did not want to meet her Mr Smith; he did not want to see her act towards some man he had never heard of as she would never act with him — but there, he knew, he could have no concerns; her pride and delicacy were too great for her feelings to be obvious on a call of five and ten minutes. Part of him still wanted to see her, and the other part, which did not, would not resign itself to appearing a coward.

He would go.

He waited then, listlessly staring into his book, for the hour to be a reasonable one for calling, and, after having ascertained the family was there, asked directions to Mr Smith's estate. It was still fairly early when he set out, but he decided to go walking to better gird himself for the ordeal.

It proved to be a mistake almost immediately. Rather than prepare itself for confronting the truth head on, his mind kept going back to his conversations with her, alternately castigating itself for the stupid things he had said, and dwelling on her character and intelligence. She was, he thought, without doubt the woman who would have best suited him, though their relative positions and ages rather made the existence of playful but merciless gods a real possibility.

When he arrived, he asked for Mrs Smith, but she was not at home. She did not know he would be there, so she could not be avoiding him; that was an unaccountable relief. It was, too, a relief not to have to face her after all, though he felt a definite pang at not being able to see her before he went from the neighbourhood. It had been two months since he had last spoken to her, and he missed her; he missed, even, seeing her face, and her smile, which he now thought he had often misunderstood.

He was about to leave the letter with the butler when it occurred to him to ask if the Dowager Lady Darcy could receive him. She had lived, he believed, with her daughter in law, and so there was then a good chance she would have moved when she had married. He liked her, and he wanted to hear from her how Mrs Smith and Lord Darcy were.

It seemed that she was visiting for a few days, and he sent in word. After some time, the butler came back with a positive answer — she would receive him. He was led into the drawing room, and had taken not two steps into the room when he had to stop, all confusion.

For a moment his prevailing thought was: I am seeing her. She had risen from her chair, and turned towards him.

She was there, and she was smiling.

He smiled, at first, in an involuntary way; a natural response to her expression; it did not take long, however, for that smile to falter and have to be maintained by a concerted effort. She was there; he would have to face her, and to congratulate her, and to see her smile when speaking of her husband. It would have to be borne, after all.

He made himself advance again, extending his hand, until he reached her. 'I am glad to be able to congratulate you, ma'am; for myself, and, I am sure, for my sister and brother. Had they known, they would have certainly written to you about it. As it is, I have a letter from Charlotte that must seem now dreadfully outdated, even if it was only written five days ago.' He almost winced, though he thought his tone was warm enough to have taken any sting from his words; he understood, after all, why she would have disliked writing to Charlotte about it.
She took his hand. He had not been sure that she would, had not thought to prepare himself for it. He was assaulted by the warmth, the softness of her hand; by the need to clasp it to his chest, to kiss it. He felt the loss acutely when he let her go.

She was, however, no longer smiling. He was powerless to change his own grim expression. Hers was undecipherable. Perhaps, he thought, she had realized why he must be in the neighbourhood. Perhaps his struggle was clear on his face.

'Mr Bennet, it is a pleasure. I take it that your family are all well?'

'Yes, indeed, they are.'

She sat, and rang for tea. 'Do sit down. I am afraid I do not know why you are congratulating me.' Her tone was brisk.

'Do you not?' he asked, and sat down. He was at a loss of what to say. He had not believed she would refer openly to his hopes, and while some suicidal part of him wanted to speak the words to her, to hear her answer, most of him had expected a more dignified sort of rejection. 'I did not expect to find you,' he said, at last. 'Your man told me you were away from home, and that I would find Lady Darcy here.'

She frowned. 'You did. I am afraid,' she said, slowly, 'that you must be harbouring a misapprehension. My great-aunt is Mrs Smith now; her man attended you.'

His mind did not understand her last two phrases — it had seized the first one, and puzzled it out. If she remained Lady Darcy, she could not have married. She was not married.

He was suddenly, violently happy, and had to contain himself from springing up from his seat. 'I was indeed!' he said, and he wanted to say more, but did not know how; he was feeling too much to put it into words.

'You mentioned a letter from Charlotte?' she asked after a moment's silence.

He gave it to her, and she received it, rising to put it on a small writing desk. He had stood with her, not knowing what to do; for some reason, his hopes were not restored intact; he had known, of course, of the chasm that separated them, but thinking her married to a more deserving man had made it more noticeable.

She had always been reserved, but, he thought, she was now as serious as she had usually been in Hertfordshire. She made no movement to draw close to the chair again. Had her feelings changed, then? She was unmarried; it did not mean, after all, that she would want to marry him. She must suspect the reason for his coming — he had feared her understanding earlier, but now it was a sort of blessing. She must know, and she was cold and distant: she could not wish him to speak.

Furthermore, now that it was time to declare himself, he knew not what to say. He had decided the night before not to speak of his feelings — to see her, and take to her Charlotte's letter, and ask after Lord Darcy — and though the circumstances had changed, his mind still felt muddled.

'I hope your journey was not too tiring? You are staying at the White Hare?'

'No no, it was not.' He could not have named a single town he had passed on the way there. 'I am; it is very pleasant.' The White Hare was rustic at best, and not a place accustomed to receiving visitors. There was a moment of silence. 'I see,' he said at last, 'that you are confined indoors.'
'It does look like rain,' she agreed.

'You like that novel, then.' He looked at the volume that lay abandoned in the chair.

She seemed puzzled, and for the first time held his gaze. 'I have only just started it. Why?'

'Ah, but I forget you are a fair one. You critique those books you like, and I daresay you would not condemn to mud and water even the dreariedest of sermons.'

She did not quite smile, though for a moment it seemed that she would. They still stood. He did not want to see her, and want her, but she was before him. The pale column of her neck, her generous mouth, the neat, haughty arch of her eyebrows.

He felt almost resentful.

'Well.' He patted his coat for his watch, and hated his hand for trembling. 'I will not keep you from your volume — be it a thrilling novel or sedating collection of sermons.'

Her mouth curved for just a moment. 'I hope — you have just arrived; you will not go immediately from the county?'

'Not immediately, no.' Though he knew not when. He had thought he would go the next day just the night before. And before that, he had hoped...

'Would you do me the honour of calling tomorrow? I am sure Fitzwilliam and my great aunt would want to see you.' Her smile was strained, and her tone was not easy.

'Yes, of course.'

He felt only relief as he took his leave. Their discomfort with each other was, he thought, the ultimate proof that all was not well between them, that her feelings must have changed. He could not bear to have her so near and know her so far.

He was melancholy for the rest of the day. He was not accustomed to feeling so, and his temper grew shorter as he tried to distract himself and failed. His contradictory feelings frustrated him; he felt the draw of seeing her again the next day, and wanting to go home at once and start to live again. He was, he felt, in a sort of limbo, and disliked it intensely.

His mind could not rest. He was constantly wondering: why had she invited him to come back the next day? Why had she been cold? Even if her feelings had changed, would not their memory make her charitable towards his? If she resented him now, would there not have been triumph in her manner? He had not seen triumph. But if she still felt for him, would she not have been warmer?

Finally, he could not understand her behaviour, but he could understand his own. He had acted the coward. His own confusion had defeated him. He had been sure, when deciding to go to her, that it would be an excruciating ordeal because she was married — on finding that it was not so, why then had he not spoken?

The next morning he made his way to the house reminding himself that he must only speak briefly with her; his business today was with Lord Darcy and Mrs Smith. That was why she had invited him; that was why he had agreed to go. But he would, if he could, say what he had come to say.

He would attempt to seize the happiness he had only glimpsed when first understanding her feelings.
Again he was led into the drawing room, and again she was the only person there. She rose to greet him, and said the others would come down shortly — her son wanted them all to step outside, as he wanted to show Edward something.

Edward agreed, and mentioned it had not rained. There was no way to avoid looking at her, and they were both standing awkwardly, waiting for the others to appear. If she would have sat down, he could have gone to a window, or gone to look at the ceramic figures on a side table, but she did not. Their gazes met, and held, and his pulse picked up speed. She looked away first, her colour rising.

The silence was almost unbearable.

There it was, he thought, an opportunity to speak to her. Perhaps the last. If he went without talking to her, it would be years, he was sure, until he could do so again.

'You must be wondering why I am here,' he said at last, and she met his gaze again. 'Here in Derbyshire, of course.' He managed to twist his mouth into a smile. 'I have not, you will be relieved to know, left the Courts for the mail coach.'

Her mouth twitched into an involuntary smile, and she inclined her head, which Edward took as sufficient encouragement to continue. 'I came for y— so that I might see you and speak to you,' He hesitated, and then continued, looking at the wall above her shoulder. 'I do not desire to make you uncomfortable — though I could not blame you if you suspected me of it. I cannot — shall not, however, remain silent, unless you wish me to.'

She made a slight movement, and he looked her way. He searched her face, but he could not understand her expression. She was flushed, but whether her uppermost feelings were of embarrassment or pleasure was unclear.

She did not stop him.

'I wish,' he said after a moment, 'that I were one of those men who arrange their words in advance so they may speak them with as natural an air as possible at the appropriate time.' He could not smile, and he forced himself to meet her gaze.

She said nothing. They stood, he thought, too far for such confidences. Even a man violently in love must quail at speaking the words into the empty, bright air of a drawing room mid-morning. He came to stand two feet from her.

'I daresay you think me a simpleton, but you must know I have no experience in this sort of declaration. I do not think,' it occurred to him with some humour, 'that you would want me to have such an experience in any case.' He stopped, and said, 'But you are silent! Are you wishing me to the farthest ends of the earth and too polite to say so? You could nod now, you know, and we could pretend we were speaking of completely different things. I could find an interesting spider below a chair for Lord Darcy.'

She smiled, and did not nod.

'I should hurry — I do not like the thought of saying what I came to say with Lord Darcy and Mrs Smith as our audience.' He took a deep breath, and smiled again, though he felt his blood draining out of his face. 'I love you. There. I have said it.' He stayed his hand — he had closed the space between them, but would not touch her uninvited, though he had almost taken her hand in his. 'I know your situation in life and mine are such that any alliance would be far-fetched, and I know that I have not shown myself to advantage with you in the past, but I had to come when I realized, when I suspected you might feel the same—' she did not speak, though she was blushing now
more than earlier ’—though I daresay you may not feel the same any longer, if you ever did. It
does not matter, I want you to know: I love you more than anyone and anything. Now you can
laugh at me.’

She did not: she smiled, openly, brilliantly. Her face was glowing, her eyes, bright.

For a moment Edward could only think that she was the most beautiful sight he had ever beheld or
would behold in his remaining life. He was so dazzled he had no time to fear her answer. Her
manner was agitated, but she met his gaze, laid her hand against his cheek, and expressed herself
as eloquently as a woman ardently in love could be expected to do.

From Lady Darcy to Mr Edward Bennet

Northbrook, Friday morning, July 4

It is very unfair of you, dearest man, to write such a lovely letter. Reading it is like hearing you
talk, with the advantage that I can go back to it as many times as I wish. I thought that I would be
melancholy with you gone so briefly after arriving, and that I would despise the Old Bailey until
you were free to come back to me. Alas, I am too happy! I cannot be sad in the least.

Do not think me cold-hearted. I am half-afraid you will, but if you have to think ill of me, think
that I am not used to writing love letters, and not that I do not miss you.

I do miss you, very much; I have a thousand little things to tell you, but none of them fit in this
letter. They are silly little things that come to mind while I design the new parlour, or mid-
conversation with the housekeeper, or as I go through my chores. I then remember that you are in
London, and I become forlorn, but I remind myself that we are going to be married, and I am
cheerful again. It is much easier now that I have six pages crammed with your charming stories.

Speaking of which, I am not very sure I want you to introduce me to that peculiar Miss Collins.
She is very entertaining to read about, and her manner of speech certainly makes me laugh when I
read your quotations, but I do not think that I would know what to say if I had to speak to her. It
would not be too bad if you were with me, but what about after dinner? When we invite her to
Northbrook — yes, we will, because she is your cousin, and your families were estranged, and
after having met her in an inn in such a fortuitous manner, it is just what ought to be done — well,
we will be very informal and you will take your port with us. Please.

I will shield you from my family too, although so far nearly everyone seems pleased for me. Mrs
Smith teases me, George needed five page in his last letter to congratulate me and tell me how
happy he is for us, Fitzwilliam can only think about your promise to teach him fishing, and my
Fitzwilliam cousins have been gossiping about you and me and a possible match for months now,
because Constance tells Violet everything, and Violet tells everything to everyone else. They say
that it was about time, and that autumn weddings are a family tradition.

The one I shall shield you from is my uncle Lord Christopher, who had hoped to see me married
to his son. He wrote me a very angry letter, but you do not have to worry. I received such a one
upon my first marriage, and it took him a mere few months to ask us to Rosings for his yearly visit
again, and he positively demanded to be Fitzwilliam's godfather even before my confinement
began.

I have to confess, I have become very forgetful. I cannot tell where I put things, and I have lost
one of my topaz earrings. My great-aunt Smith had to ask me to bring her her shawl twice, and
yesterday I told Marie to prepare my riding dress, but I never remembered to put it on, much less
go near the stables. I am full of thoughts of you, and there is no room left for such mundane concerns! There is something I particularly cannot help recalling several times a day at the most inappropriate times, and it is the brief embrace behind the Northbrook well—the one that happened while I was trying to show you my orchard and our party was following a cuckoo. It is a most vivid and distracting recollection. I am both wishing that you remember it as often as I, and fearing for your clients if you do.

Fitzwilliam has just wandered in in his nightgown and asked me to tell you that Constance has learned to fetch. I will have to talk to him about his habit of visiting my rooms in the mornings once we are married, as it is something he does every day. He wants to know if you had any dogs as a child, and what were their names, and everything about them. Would you mind writing to him too every once in a while? He could certainly use some calligraphy practice, but he refuses to write just for his governess and me to see. I think he would like writing to you.

I have been thinking about your question, although I am not sure what should I tell you. I deny having found you too impertinent when we met, and it certainly was not the cause of any undue interest. In the course of the first weeks I came to consider you, I will confess this much, one of the finest and most entertaining young people of my acquaintance. A sort of favourite, if you want, more so because it was clear to me that you needed a bit of polishing. It must sound very patronizing to you. But, seeing as you have yourself told me (in the sweetest manner, that is true) that you were sure then that we disliked each other in a particularly amiable manner, I have to enlighten you: you disliked me charmingly, and I found patronizing you very entertaining.

About our quarrel, it is true that I was hurt by your assumptions, but when we met again in London I had long since considered your actions a result of both your youth and her lies. Lately I have also taken my own actions into account for this—it was true that I could have acted in a more amiable manner, not only then, but before and afterwards. I am afraid that I am not very good at making acquaintances, or at small talk, or even at first impressions. I noticed that for the first time when I went to school—but being Miss Fitzwilliam of Pemberley was good enough to get me a few friends without any effort on my side. I did not improve in my first Season; I took pride in never dancing with men I had no interest in, and spent the balls and soirees talking mainly to my cousins, whom I had known all my life. Darcy, when we were married, did not require me to exert myself to entertain either—my great-aunt Smith was happy to do it for all three of us.

I am determined to do better from now on, dearest; I have applied myself very hard since April to be charming to my Derbyshire neighbours, although it is not very hard, as I have long acquaintances with most of them already. Why, I have even held a ball at Northbrook! Though it is true that I only danced four times. You would not want me to dance with too many gentlemen, would you?

I realize I have not answered your question yet, and I have half a mind to send this letter as it is and pretend that I was so distracted with thoughts of dancing with you that it slipped my mind. You will not be satisfied, though, will you? The trouble is that I do not know when I fell in love with you, and it makes me very silly to think about it. I held you in high regard in Hertfordshire, and was vexed that you misunderstood me, but I do not think I loved you then. It must have been when we met again in London and you apologized; you looked very dashing and I was pleasantly surprized, and even gratified at your attentions. I was very surprized to meet you again the very next day, and when you agreed to visit and told me where you usually walked, I assumed that you were as glad as I was. One day I merely wanted to see you again, the other I was scheming to accomplish it, and soon I was set on marrying you. Which of these days do you suppose to be the one in which I started to love you?

I have a request to make, despite not really answering your question. Should you mind setting a date already? I would like to start making preparations for the wedding. May we marry soon, or
perhaps wait until you can arrange matters in London so that you can come to Derbyshire and we might travel? I do not care for travelling if it means we have to wait, and I would not mind staying in London if you have things to do there, but I will leave the date to your discretion. I suppose a London wedding would be a good opportunity for you to make useful connections? I do not mean during the breakfast, but maybe in the following days. I am earnest about helping you become as successful in the law as you might wish, dearest Edward. I cannot do much yet, but I search the papers every morning for news about the Old Bailey, and I am learning a lot from it all.

I hope you do not mind my calling you by your Christian name. I have thought about it a ridiculous amount of time, and I have decided I cannot be always referring to you as the charming Bennet, or the Bennet with the handsomest eyebrows, or even my Bennet. Edward has such a nice ring to it, has it not?

I will end the letter now, as even I can see that it is growing absurdly silly, and both Fitzwilliam and I need to have breakfast, and he has just reminded me that I said we would walk with Constance (the dog) this morning.

I remain, yours always and happy to distraction,

Philadelphia Darcy

End Notes

Based on an original idea by Elizabeth
Plotting and planning by Elizabeth, hele, Tulina
Narrative by hele
Letters by Tulina
Artwork by Marina
Cold reading & first beta by Elizabeth
Fluff tips & betaing above and beyond the call of duty in the face of lifechanging travel by catie
Line beta in the first chapters by Julie

If you are curious about the construction of this AU, we've put up some limited explanations here in hl's journal. Of course, you can also ask questions here or there.

Works inspired by this one
The Domestic Comforts of Roger and Bess. Or, The Engagement of Mr. John Bennet and Miss Charlotte Bingley, as Told By a Rather Partial Observer by catie56 (catharsis)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!