Mr. Darcy has not come to Netherfield alone, Colonel Fitzwilliam is on leave and has come to make sure his cousin is not a recluse. Elizabeth does not meet a sulking Mr. Darcy but instead a man eager to fulfill a promise to his cousin and ready to dance with a new lady.

As the local gossips ran here and there with little tidbits about the new tenant at Netherfield, Elizabeth sat and wondered what follies these new neighbors would bring to the small society. None of the women had actually met Mr. Bingley, but that would not stop the matrons from pronouncing him perfect for this daughter or that niece. Oh, the spectacle had already begun and the poor man had yet to make an appearance! As Elizabeth moved toward her friend Charlotte Lucas, the talking abruptly stopped and into the assembly came a party of six. Two ladies and four gentlemen, Sir William Lucas approached the group and introduced Mr. Bingley to his wife and two daughters. Given his open temperament, Mr. Bingley asked for a dance from both Lucas ladies and then introduced the rest of the group.

“Sir William, let me introduce my brother and eldest sister Mr. and Mrs. Hurst; my dear friend Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire, his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, and my younger sister Miss Caroline Bingley.” Bingley was taking in the room as everyone in his party bowed and continued the introductions when he caught sight of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Sir William noticed where the young man’s gaze was centered and happily offered to perform the necessary introductions. Bingley looked back to Darcy and the Colonel to see if they would join him; though he knew his friend tended to shy away in large groups, especially with people he did not know, the Colonel seemed to have a way of getting Darcy out of his shell. To Bingley’s delight the Colonel and a reluctant Darcy asked to be included in the introductions.

Darcy was in no mood to meet country gentlemen and their matchmaking wives, but Fitzwilliam made it clear before they left Netherfield that if Darcy did not dance at least one set with a new woman he would make life as difficult as possible.
“Darcy, we are attending this assembly. You might well be uncomfortable in new social situations, but by God man you will dance. Please spare me any halfhearted excuses’ mother is expecting you to find a bride this season and to do so you need a lady who is not scared away by your haughty Master of Pemberley glare. If you hope to find a women who is more than an adornment on your arm you must speak and get to know them. So tonight is your first lesson: you will dance at least one dance and make an effort to converse with the lady. With any luck you might not make the entire neighborhood hate you by the end of the night. Come man, we have women to woo. Oh and cousin, if you choose to not heed my advice I will tell mother and have her drag you to every event she deems appropriate.”

And with a wink he was headed back to his dressing room. Knowing his cousin meant every word Darcy agreed to put himself out to market. He hoped that he might find a woman who could hold some conversation, and maybe just maybe he would meet a gentleman or two who enjoyed chess. Since Bingley seemed to have found yet another “angel,” Darcy figured she might have a sister who would be suitable; the sooner he completed his task the sooner he could be back in a safe corner and away from preying eyes.

As the men approached, Mrs. Bennet was fussing over Jane and whispering exactly what she must do to keep any of these gentleman interested. “Dear dear Jane, now likely all these men will ask for a dance with you. Be sure you are quiet, do not talk about ridiculous topics as Lizzy does, and always make sure to show your figure to the best advantage.” She looked her most beautiful daughter over once more and sighed, “Oh, if only your father would get us another ladies’ maid you might be more perfect. Oh well, you are my most lovely daughter and will surely have all these men in love with you. Oh here they come! Smile Jane, smile.”

“Mrs. Bennet, how good to see you. These gentlemen have asked to be acquainted with you and your daughters. May I introduce Mr. Bingley, the new tenant of Netherfield, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire, and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam?” Sir Williams was beaming at the matron.

“Oh Sir William you are too kind, gentlemen it is a pleasure. This is my eldest Jane and my younger two are still dancing. My other daughters appear to be . . .” Mrs. Bennet was cut off when her second and third daughters appeared at her side.

“Hello Mama, I believe you have found your other two daughters” Elizabeth smiled at her sister Jane and saw the unhappy scowl her mother sent her way. If these strangers were to be pushed at Jane she would not let her flounder alone, and who knows? Maybe she and Mary might have a partner for a set or two.

“Yes well, these are my other daughters, Elizabeth and Mary. Neither of them is as beautiful as my dear Jane but Mary is very helpful and I suppose Lizzy is rather studious. Though what man would appreciate that I do not know.” As she overcame her anger at her second daughter she looked back towards her prey. “Are you gentlemen fond of dancing?” The glint in her eye was noticed by both Darcy and the Colonel.

Bingley of course was quick to ask Miss Bennet for the next set and the Colonel, seeing his cousin eye the lovely Miss Elizabeth, gallantly asked Miss Mary for her next set. As he waited for his cousin to find his voice the Colonel resorted to a slight cough. Darcy was mortified as he realized he had been staring at the raven beauty in front of him; not only did she possess a pleasing figure but she had the most enchanting eyes he had ever seen. With his wits about him Darcy coughed and somehow managed to ask Miss Elizabeth for the next set. All the ladies were happy to oblige the newcomers as the ladies outnumbered the men and none looked forward to being on the wall tonight. Even Mary, who was usually happier with a book, was taken aback by the charming Colonel who was paying her attention. Perhaps dancing could be enjoyable, thought the nearly
always forgotten Bennet daughter.

As the men continued the small talk with the Bennet ladies waiting for the set to begin at the other end of the room, a fuming Miss Bingley watched in horror as her Mr. Darcy was being accosted by those country nobodies. “What is he doing over there Louisa? Mr. Darcy never dances outside his party! He must come over here soon so he may secure a dance with me; it is only natural he dance with us. Come, let us go to our brother.”

“Caroline, perhaps we should wait a moment. Surely Mr. Darcy can mean nothing by it and you know how friendly Charles can be. I am positive Mr. Darcy will ask you for a set later in the evening, and you do not want to be a pest dear.” With a quick pat on her sister’s arm, Mrs. Hurst was able to distract Caroline long enough for the set to start and the couples where safe for the next half hour.

Darcy led Miss Elizabeth to the dance line and was surprised how natural it felt. He had known this woman a quarter of an hour and somehow he was comfortable in her company. Maybe the punch was stronger than he thought, but Darcy assumed that during the course of the dance Miss Elizabeth would prove herself to be like every other woman he had met over the last seven years. She surprised him by speaking first.

“Mr. Darcy, are you well sir? You seemed to be focusing on some point on the wall behind me. Perhaps you are fond of the decorations and are wondering how you can procure the same paper for one of your drawing rooms?” She let out a very pleasant laugh and raised an eyebrow at her very distracted dance partner.

Was this woman teasing him, wondered Darcy as he struggled to find his voice “Please forgive me Miss. Elizabeth I was lost in thought and am sorry to not be more attentive. I know that most ladies expect a man to have all sorts of little questions and compliments ready, and you will be disappointed in me no doubt for I am unable to flatter on command and instead prefer to let my judgment come about with the passing of time. How am I to know if you are truly accomplished without many conversations? Can I truly judge your beauty when I have not seen your true self?”

Darcy was shocked at the length of his speech. Though everything he said was true it was a level of openness he was not accustomed to displaying.

“Mr. Darcy I find your honesty incredibly refreshing, and you are correct in saying that most women want flattery and are uninterested in the man paying such compliments. Personally I care not for compliments as I base my opinion of a man on the intricacy of his cravat and pay little mind to conversation.” Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled and she wondered if Mr. Darcy would take the bait she set out for him.

Darcy’s first instinct was to be put off by Miss Elizabeth’s comment, but after looking in her eye and catching sight of a mischievous grin he saw that he was once again being teased. “Miss Elizabeth you are wise beyond your years; not only is a man only as worthy as his cravat but a woman must be judged solely on the amount of lace on her gown. Do not you agree?”

“Come Mr. Darcy, you cannot discount the importance of a ladies’ hair. How are you to know if she is a lady of understanding without noting the number of braids in her hair?” She added after a small laugh, “Alright Mr. Darcy you have found me out. I was teasing you and you challenged me very well. You see we are more alike than you realize, as I cannot judge any person without seeing them in various company and debating numerous topics. To make assumptions on first acquaintances is a disservice to both parties. Perhaps we can start to learn of one another. What are your thoughts on poetry? I have just finished Lord Bryon’s latest collection and am still processing his words.”

Darcy was happy to oblige Elizabeth and for the rest of the set they were in debate over the many
new works that had been published over the last year. For a woman so far from town Darcy was
surprised at how current her reading material was and made a note to visit the local bookstore in
the hopes of finding a few treasures. His sister Georgiana was always happy with the books he
presented to her from his travels, and if he was lucky Darcy might run into Miss Elizabeth.

As the set came to a close, Darcy walked Elizabeth to her friend Miss Lucas and intended to stay
with them for the next set, but as he was about to ask the ladies if they cared for a refreshment he
heard a voice that brought back painful memories he wished to forget. “Miss Elizabeth, I have
finally found you.”

“Oh Mr. Wickham, I was not hiding! I can hardly imagine you have been looking for me very
long.” She laughed at the Lieutenant whose acquaintance she had made a few weeks earlier. He
was a handsome, gentlemanly sort who seemed to enjoy light debate with her, however she never
felt the same intelligence that Mr. Darcy so easily displayed.

“Miss Elizabeth I am wounded that you seemed to have forgotten that you gave me this set last
night at Mrs. Phillips’ house.” Wickham turned on his best smile.

Elizabeth was slightly uncomfortable with the look she saw in Mr. Wickham’s eye and by instinct
looked back to find Mr. Darcy. “Do forgive me Mr. Wickham, I have made many new
acquaintances this evening and our dance did slip my mind. Have you met Mr. Darcy of
Pemberley?”

It took Wickham a second to realize that he was once again face to face with Darcy, but as ever he
threw on a smile and easily shook off any uneasiness. “Why yes, Mr. Darcy nice to see you again.
Miss Elizabeth we should really get to the floor as the next dance is about to begin.”

Noticing the change in Mr. Darcy’s mood, Elizabeth kept her eye on Mr. Darcy as she stood
across from Mr. Wickham. “Are you well acquainted with Mr. Darcy?” she asked, hoping to gain
a little insight on Mr. Darcy’s unhappiness.

“It may surprise you given Mr. Darcy’s lack of manners, but we grew up together. My father was
the steward at Pemberley and old Mr. Darcy was my godfather. Due to our fathers’ friendship
Darcy and I were often together, with the same tutors, playing all the games young boys do, and
we even roomed together at Cambridge. But we had a falling out when old Mr. Darcy passed
away; his son was jealous of our close relationship and took his revenge after his father’s death. I
mentioned to you before that I would have loved to take orders and it was Mr. Darcy who
prevented me from doing so.”

Wickham felt sure that Miss Elizabeth was taking in all his words just as he wanted her to.
Knowing Darcy’s shy tendencies he doubted her first impression of the man was very
complimentary, so he continued. “I am actually a bit shocked to see Mr. Darcy at an assembly
such as this. He has always been a proud disagreeable sort of man. No doubt he was forced here
by his friend, and by gun point I imagine.”

Elizabeth was unsure of the story Mr. Wickham was telling her; to make such claims so publicly
was unnerving, and in the time she had spent with Mr. Darcy he did not appear to be disagreeable,
just a bit shy. It was time to put an end to this conversation. Elizabeth went on to ask Mr.
Wickham his opinion of the weather and other trivial nonsense until the end of the set, and asked
to be escorted to Mr. Darcy.

Both men gave a curt bow; it was clear Mr. Darcy wished to speak but he kept his anger in check
and watched closely as Mr. Wickham walked to another room. Turning his attention back to the
Miss Elizabeth he offered to get refreshments.
Elizabeth was unsure how to feel about the strange interaction she had just witnessed. “Mr. Darcy, I am well enough, just curious as to the true nature of your relationship with Mr. Wickham. I have myself only been acquainted with the gentleman for a few weeks as he arrived with the militia. But it appears that you have a known each other for quite some time and your relationship is in a dire state. Please tell me what has just happened?” Darcy saw concern in her eyes and he was tempted to tell her the entire story in the middle of the assembly.

“Miss Elizabeth I would be happy to explain to you the entire history of my relationship with Mr. Wickham, however this is neither the time nor place. Please know that he is not a man to be trusted. I will happily call on you tomorrow and explain everything to both you and your father, would you allow me to do so.” Darcy had already decided to call on Elizabeth, and now his protective nature had completely taken over so that he must speak to Mr. Bennet and keep Wickham away from Elizabeth.

Elizabeth forced herself to be satisfied with Mr. Darcy’s explanation at present. “Mr. Darcy I would be happy to receive you tomorrow and I will let my father know of your desire to speak with him. I am well-known for my love of walking, and some have seen me walking to Oak Mount on a clear morning just as the sun rises.” A slight flush came to Elizabeth’s face; did she just invite Mr. Darcy to meet her alone in the morning? What must he think of her, what was she thinking? She had never been so forward before. Elizabeth looked up to see an incredibly handsome smile on Mr. Darcy’s face.

“That is wonderful news Miss Elizabeth. I look forward to tomorrow’s sunrise. Unfortunately I must leave you, as I have asked your friend Miss Lucas for this set and here she has found me.” Charlotte came to Elizabeth’s side.

“Mr. Darcy I believe this is our set. I’m sorry to interrupt you but as Lizzy tends to be long winded I decided to save you.” She said with a small smile and Elizabeth couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, yes, Charlotte, please save the poor man. I was about to discuss father’s new sheep. Mr. Darcy was nearly asleep with my rambling,” both women laughed. “Forgive us Mr. Darcy, we are too easy in each other’s company and sometimes get out of hand. I will take my leave of you and allow you both to enjoy your dance.”

Soon after Charlotte and Mr. Darcy headed to the dance floor Elizabeth was joined by the Colonel and Mary, who seemed to be enjoying each other’s company. Elizabeth was slightly taken aback by her sister’s smile; with the Colonel at her side Mary seemed to be more confident, and even more attractive. The trio shared a lively half hour as the Colonel entertained the ladies with stories of his childhood. “Colonel Fitzwilliam the way you describe your childhood you would think Mr. Darcy was always getting you into trouble and you were merely an innocent bystander. Now sir, forgive me, but I find this very hard to believe.” Everyone laughed as Mr. Darcy and Miss Lucas made their way to the group.

“Cousin what falsehoods are you spreading this evening?” Darcy gave Fitzwilliam a slight glare but ended with a smile. “Dear cousin you know I would never lie to such lovely ladies. I was regaling them with the heroics of my youth; a youth spent keeping you out of trouble, if I remember correctly.” The Colonel did not give Darcy a chance to respond. “Miss Lucas I believe this is our set, let us show this assembly what real dancing looks like, shall we?” As they moved away Mr. Darcy offered to get refreshments for everyone, and Mary’s partner for the next set appeared so leaving Darcy and Elizabeth together again.

“Miss Elizabeth I hope my cousin has not turned you against me already? He enjoys making people laugh and may not let the truth get in the way of an entertaining story.”

“Do not worry Mr. Darcy, though the Colonel was very amusing it was clear that his stories held
little truth. That is, unless you really did run away to join the navy at age 7 and he was forced to save you from pirates?” She arched a brow and gave him a wonderfully brilliant smile.

“No Miss Elizabeth I believe the only pirates we ever encountered was the Colonel’s older brother Viscount Lambton and, well, Mr. Wickham.” Darcy’s face was now set in a frown and Elizabeth hoped his mood was only temporary.

“Mr. Darcy we have agreed to delay any conversation in regards to Mr. Wickham until tomorrow. Perhaps you can tell me instead about these missions with your cousin. He did mention a princess you often rescued.” Her playful banter seemed to push back the dark thoughts in Mr. Darcy’s mind.

“Yes Miss Elizabeth, my sister Georgiana was a perfect princess for us; many times we would help her escape from the nursery and have her mucking in the dirt until her nanny would find us and send us all up for baths. Now that she is older and the Colonel and I are her guardians the stakes are much higher and the dangers much more real.”

“That is a great responsibility to have on your shoulders sir, how old is your sister?”

“She is just fifteen, so happily we have a few years before she must be out. I do not look forward to her first season and I imagine Richard even more so.” Darcy was struck with how easy it was to converse with Miss Elizabeth and could not help but stare.

“Fifteen is a very trying age for a young lady; it is a strange time between childhood and womanhood. I remember being quite overwhelmed with the changes and am very thankful for my Aunt Gardiner. She was a wonder.” Elizabeth laughed as she remembered what an emotional being she was at fifteen - no girl enjoys that age.

“Miss Elizabeth, I agree that a young girl needs a woman to help her through this stage. Georgiana is currently living with my cousin’s parents Lord and Lady Matlock. My aunt is a force to be reckoned with and has raised two lovely daughters. I have no doubt that under her watch Georgiana will blossom. My sister and I are both shy in company and though she appears demure and refined, I come off as haughty to some. It is a defect I have been working on recently and am very happy with the results.” He smiled so wide Elizabeth saw his dimples for the first time and was quite taken aback at the sight.

“If what you say is true, I must agree Mr. Darcy for I would never describe you as stand-offish or haughty. Many men of your stature cannot be bothered to socialize outside of the first circles, and your ease in our society is quite remarkable. Though with a cousin as amiable as Colonel Fitzwilliam I doubt you have much choice. He surely would not allow you to sulk in a corner no matter how shy.”

Darcy could not help but laugh. “You are quite correct Miss Elizabeth. In fact, earlier this evening my cousin gave me a lecture and insisted I dance with at least one new lady. If he was not present I worry that I might have been my usual reclusive self and left much to be desired. Luckily for me I was roused into action and have now met the most remarkable woman.” Darcy was focused completely on the slight blush that came to Elizabeth’s checks. Oh to forever be the cause of such blushes, thought Darcy. This woman is truly a wood nymph set to test my strength, and at this rate she will have me under her spell before the next set.

As Darcy daydreamed, Elizabeth was joined by a flushed Charlotte and smiling Colonel. “Your friend is a lovely dancer, Miss Elizabeth. I would ask you for another set Miss Lucas, but I fear I might fall over in the middle of it. It has been too long since I’ve enjoyed a country dance and I am not quite up to the excitement.” Charlotte blushed at the compliment but was soon forced to leave the group as her mother was looking for her rather loudly. The Colonel also made his
excuses and moved to Mary’s side once again, causing yet another woman to have a blush. As Darcy turned to continue his conversation with Elizabeth, her next partner found her and moved her to the floor.

Darcy was not happy to see Elizabeth in the arms of another man. How can I feel possessive over a woman I have only met this night, he thought? She is unlike any woman he’d ever met; kind, intelligent, and uninterested in his wealth. This was the most successful social event Darcy had ever attended and tomorrow he was to walk with Miss Elizabeth Bennet at sunrise.

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