Less Proud and More Persuasive

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Summary

What if Lady Catherine was just a little more rude, prompting Mr. Darcy to make a more Persuasion-esque proposal?

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Chapter 1

If Lady Catherine were on better terms with her neighbours, they would have no need for this.

That the man who holds her living and his guests come over to dine so frequently should be embarrassing to his aunt. But although Lady Catherine could ensure by force of will that her neighbours of higher station were here to dine tonight, she will not, and this neighbourhood is not of the sort of society that comes together amicably, without some degree of effort. Lady Catherine prefers company she may look down on, company that will follow her word, look up to her, and so the Collinse and their guests are the only additions to the table this evening.

If Lady Catherine were on better terms with her neighbours, Fitzwilliam Darcy might not be so troubled.

He cannot be ordered around. Neither, usually, can Colonel Fitzwilliam, although Darcy's cousin often acquiesces to their aunt's demands rather more quickly than can be desired. But it is dinner; Darcy must attend – there is no escaping dinner – and therefore he must once again be in company with Elizabeth Bennet.

Elizabeth Bennet is not the most troubling thing to face him in what has been a troubling year, but she is easily the most vexing. Every time he wishes to forget her, she returns to his notice; every
time he discounts her fortune, her family, she produces some wealth of wit that reminds him that the value of a lady – the value of a wife – goes beyond dowry and connexions.

She teases him that he must practice his conversation; he calls on the parsonage to find her unexpectedly, shockingly alone, and all that he had thought to say by way of suggested practice is displaced by an awkwardness brought on by his unexpected blankness of mind and the fact that propriety dictates this to be an impossibility. He is not the one used to initiating conversation; he is used to the ladies who are introduced to him, with their twenty- and thirty- and fifty-thousand portions, asking him question after wearying question, seeking to glean every little detail of how he lives in town, of how grand Pemberley and its lands are. He is used to being distracted by thoughts of how poorly his sister does, while these ladies are talking with him.

When Elizabeth again matches wit for wit against his aunt during dinner, when they have all made their way back to the drawing room for some manner of conversation that must be had amongst such a group, he cannot stand it anymore, and with his overheated thoughts, makes his way to a little secretary at the side of the room, and avails himself of the writing things there. He may write Georgiana; that is a simple thing, one he has done in company many times before, one that is necessary and will not be questioned, and if Lady Catherine once again makes Elizabeth Bennet take up the pianoforte, he will pay it no mind.

Her presence does not trouble him in the same way it used to. He has resolved to offer her marriage, despite all of his qualms. The difficulty is in figuring out how to go about it. As she is staying under Mr. Collins's roof, and nominally under his protection, the proper thing to do would be to call on the parsonage and request a private audience with her. But the thought of asking that ridiculous man for such a thing is so abhorrent he does not think he can bring himself to do it. No, he must find some way to speak with her alone, without the others knowing about it. If he had been sufficiently determined during his last call, when she was alone, he would have made his offer then, and he regrets not seizing the opportunity now that he has made up his mind, but there is nothing to be done about it. Perhaps, though, he will be so fortunate again, or will encounter her on the grounds at Rosings. He plans to walk the grounds extensively tomorrow, and then call on the parsonage, and hope one or the other of these locations is successful.

Until such a time, he must endure more time with her in company, knowing what he wishes to do, and yet unable to do it, and this is torture of a new sort from that he is used to – of falling in love with Elizabeth Bennet despite the perceived impossibility of marrying her. The old torture he has managed to almost entirely talk himself out of. She is a gentleman's daughter; his fortune is not dependent on anyone else. Of his current family, he knows the Fitzwilliams will be disappointed he has not made a better alliance, but they will bear it, and over time he believes Elizabeth will win them over. Lady Catherine will be livid, but there would be worse things in the world than being shunned by Lady Catherine. Georgiana gave him the most pause, in his consideration – the thought that his marriage might hurt her own prospects was something he thought on most carefully. Ultimately, though, he determined that any loss Georgiana experienced in that quarter would most certainly be outweighed by the benefits of gaining a sister such as Elizabeth, particularly after last summer's grave disappointment.

The lady’s family was necessarily the greater barrier. That they had no connexions could be easily enough survived. That the mother and younger sisters showed some of the most blatant disregard for propriety he has ever experienced in society was the real concern. Even the father occasionally showed his manners to be improper, although only in situations when his silly daughters or silly wife had prompted it. To ally himself with such a family, when he would not allow his particular friend to do the same!

He has not been keeping a ledger sheet of the pros and cons of offering marriage to Elizabeth Bennet. But if he had done such a thing, he knows he would have felt the cons to be winning,
away from her company, and that they seem wholly surmountable as soon as he is near her again. Her presence in Kent has been his final undoing, and now he knows he cannot leave here without being betrothed to her and have any semblance of peace in his soul.

Lady Catherine has not yet suggested they make up a card table, although he knows she will. She is speaking of more improvements that must be made to the parsonage, more things that Mrs. Collins must do, and it is all so ordinary that he ignores the whole of the conversation to focus on his letter.

"Miss Bennet," Lady Catherine says, eventually, and this, for all his efforts, immediately draws Darcy’s attention. "Mr. Collins tells me you have a portion of only one thousand pounds, paid on the death of your mother."

Good God, can she truly be opening such a topic? Dread fills him, but he is unable to speak.

"And yet," Lady Catherine says, "your father's estate brings in two thousand a year. To manage such a paltry dowry on two thousand a year – how very strange."

"Perhaps now you better understand why all of my sisters are out in society, Lady Catherine," Miss Bennet says, with all of her usual strength, but sounding a little shocked at his aunt's ill-bred comments.

"Your father should have put aside a sum every year for your portions. If I had known him I would have urged him most strenuously to do so," Lady Catherine says. "And I would have encouraged you to have a much less cavalier attitude regarding your own accomplishments. How you ever expect to be married with a thousand pounds, merely playing the pianoforte as you do, is beyond me."

Darcy has heard more than his share of improper comments from his aunt, but either these are her most egregious yet, or he is particularly disturbed by them because they are aimed at the woman he holds every affection for. His hands rest heavy on the mahogany before him; he resolves to turn around from the secretary and speak to intervene, but Miss Bennet does so first:

"I hardly think that my lack of ability to draw or paint a table shall dissuade the sort of man I would wish to marry." Miss Bennet says. "Unless he wishes to fill his house with painted tables, although generally I find gentlemen have little true care for those sorts of things."

He cannot help but smile, for she is right; no gentleman of his acquaintance cares at all for a painted table, although they will never be short of praise for a table painted by a female relation, or particular lady they have a fancy for. Neither can he help but wonder if her comment is directed at him, when she speaks of the sort of man she would wish to marry. Has she guessed his intentions? He renews his resolve to speak, in further defense of her, and to attempt to divert the conversation.

"Miss Bennet makes an excellent point," he says. "I am sure the painting of tables is an enjoyable pastime for a lady, but it is far more important for the lady to be well-read, and able to make significant contributions, in conversation."

"Yes, of course, my nephew is right," Lady Catherine says, which quite surprises him. "My dear Anne has not been able to pursue many of the accomplishments other ladies of her age do, owing to her health. But she reads avidly – I daresay she is one of the most well-read young ladies in the country."

This is not quite the diversion in the conversation he hoped for – he knows very well what Lady Catherine is at – but any diversion is a relief. Lady Catherine begins detailing the course of reading she set out for young Anne when she was only six years of age, and Darcy feels the
conversation has returned to a safer course.

He cannot return to his letter to Georgiana, though, for he is seized with the need to apologise for his aunt's behaviour, to speak immediately to Elizabeth of all the things he wishes to speak to her of, and before he can think fully about what he is doing, he has pushed his current letter aside, and picked up fresh sheet. Writing, thoughtfully, carefully, and so firmly that his fingers become spattered with little droplets of ink:

I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.

Now that I have said thus, I must explain to why I have not made my feelings and intentions known to you before now. You must know that the expectations of my family, of society, are that I should wed someone far above your station. To marry a woman of little fortune and such family connexions as yours seemed an impossibility, regardless of how much I esteemed your intellect and beauty. Given these scruples, I attempted to forget you, but my feelings would not be repressed.

Now that I listen to my aunt, I recognise that she has equalled – nay, surpassed – the want of propriety so frequently betrayed by your mother, by your three younger sisters, and occasionally even by your father. I wish you would know that I find Lady Catherine's behaviour tonight abhorrent, that it is inexcusable for a woman of her station, and that it has caused me to recognise that I also bring a most undesirable connexion to any potential match between the two of us. If your family's behaviour has been silly, my aunt's has been cruel, and this is far worse, in my opinion. I apologise for her as much as I may, although I deeply wish the apology could be given by the lady herself.

Pemberley already has more than enough painted tables. What I should wish it to contain is a mistress who may entertain our guests with her wit, a kind and caring sister to Georgiana, and a wife who would challenge myself daily with her intelligence. You are the first woman of my acquaintance whom I have seen as being capable of all of these things. For these and so many other reasons, you have been impossible to put out of my mind, and my attachment is too strong for me to follow any other course of action, than to ask you to be my wife.

Will you marry me? There is a small, quiet grove of trees on the east side of Rosings Park, just beyond the stream – I believe an accomplished walker such as yourself must know it already. I will wait there tomorrow morning for your response, and remain yours,

FITZWILLIAM DARCY

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