Art of Love

by dex webster [archived by yuletide_archivist]

Summary

"You must not fight too often with one enemy, or you will teach him all your art of war." - Napoleon Bonaparte

Notes

Written for Niamh St. George

It is the fate of a rich man in society to endure the attentions of those who are less fortunate in their choice of lineage.

Darcy had known this for many years, and this fact was one of the main inducements of his dislike for society. It is also the curse of a good friend, indeed of a good man, to endure those attentions for the sake of his friend regardless of his own feeling. It was this fact that had brought him out despite his distaste for the company of strangers and, more importantly, their unmarried daughters.

The friend in question beamed at him. "Capital dancing, Darcy. Haven't I told you the society here was so pleasant? And I believe there was almost no better partner to be chosen in the place."

Darcy looked at Bingley archly and made no answer. Elizabeth Bennet was an adept partner to be sure, but that was no new piece of intelligence—he'd watched her at it long before he'd engaged her in it, even from their first acquaintance at Meryton. Pleasant, however, was not the term he would choose to describe their interactions. Even as they danced they were at odds. In order to see the woman smile, he was forced to not talk her, to instead skulk around the ballroom like a petulant
child, watching her with others. No one glance was good enough; it was too like a portrait, a moment in time showing her pretty enough but nothing too special. It showed nothing of her eyes and their light, or the joy in her laugh. No matter what Bingley might say, it was most unpleasant.

The following day, Darcy sat down to write a letter to his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam. He wasted no ink on general points, as Fitzwilliam was already versed in the people to be named. Darcy had written to him before while staying in Hertfordshire, and at his cousin's behest had sketched out all those he'd made the acquaintance of during his time there (though not so early or often as Fitzwilliam would've liked; he often chided Darcy for not keeping up personal correspondence as well as he should). Elizabeth Bennet he'd said was polite, but with a high-spirited temper and more good sense than Darcy often saw in young ladies. He'd noted Jane as sharing her sister's propriety but not her lively disposition; she was sweet and very pretty, but also very reserved.

He wrote at length of his sister, Georgiana, and her progress in her studies and in musicianship, then briefly of recent developments in Hertfordshire, and more particularly of the sycophantic Mr. Collins and his connections to their aunt, Lady Catherine. And then of another mutual acquaintance of theirs.

"Mr. George Wickham," he wrote, abruptly, "has made his home in Meryton and taken a commission in the militia here. As I take it, he has also recently attempted to make a name in these parts as an individual most injured by myself. Though I confess to being ignorant as to the details, Miss Elizabeth Bennet implied as much to me at the ball Bingley held last night, and I can only assume that either Wickham has taken it upon himself to reveal information more intimate than his acquaintances with these people dictate, or that he and Miss Bennet have so quickly formed an acquaintance more intimate than a man of his character should ever achieve with a lady of hers. I only hope that such a lady,"

There was a blot there on the page, where Darcy had unthinkingly left his pen resting when he found himself about to reveal too much, even to one so near to him as his cousin. His concern over Wickham's immorality extended even farther than he might let on, that if Wickham knew of his regrettable fascination with Miss Bennet, he would only pursue her more forcefully in cruelty to Darcy. It would be a malicious caprice of fate to let Wickham succeed in stealing a woman from Darcy's life now when he'd failed so thoroughly in his first attempt. This was the one possibility which tempted Darcy to forfeit his absolute discretion concerning Georgiana and enumerate to Miss Bennet precisely what George Wickham was capable of. It was disconcerting indeed, to realize the depths to which he would go for a woman who was little more than an acquaintance and more adversary than friend. He had made a concerted effort be sure none of his interest was ever found out, for feelings that caused such a lapse in reason were a weakness all too easily exploited.

He continued his letter with some distraction,

"one of her obvious good sense and judgement, will allow discretion as the better part of her valor in defending him, for while it is my desire that the neighborhood should know of Wickham's true character, it is lamentable that I know of no way to reveal him without revealing too much of my own affairs. I would ask your advice in the matter, but as either case will have it, my involvement in the situation may only be called moot, as Bingley left for London today and tomorrow I and the rest of our party will go to join him at Grosvenor Street.

I fear that following my stay in town, you and I will have to put in our time with Lady Catherine. Her missives demanding a visit have grown more persistent of late, and I would prefer to see her sooner rather than after the old kettle boils over.

DARCY"
Despite the pleasure of Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley at being gone from the place, the mood in the carriage the following morning was quiet and bleak. Darcy was content to let it go on as long as it would; the mood matched his own all too well. It would have done if Miss Bingley had not been determined to find out the cause of his melancholy. "Parting from a loved one was always difficult," she said sympathetically, "especially one so lovely as Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Take care, Mr. Darcy. I have no doubt that your heart will soon mend."

Mr. Hurst, sleeping with his head tipped against the wall, snored on, and Mrs. Hurst tittered behind her fan. "I daresay that he'll have forgotten all about her in a few short months."

Knowing full well that their words were intended only to needle him with no thought to their real validity, Darcy did not correct this last, but thusly informed his companions that he was not sad to see his acquaintance with the lady in question end. He assured Miss Bingley that despite her intimations, he had no intentions of pursuing Miss Bennet, least of all in matrimony. The smugness that emanated from Miss Bingley following his pronouncement was an odd comfort. Every one of his words was truth, but misleading of the thoughts behind them. He did not suppose that he should see Miss Bennet again, and that consideration, quite in opposite to Miss Bingley’s supposition, gave him no small measure of relief. Out of sight she would, he hoped, be out of mind, and the less time his thoughts dwelt on her the better. Elizabeth was too much of a danger to him otherwise.

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