

Chapter 12 ~ One Gentleman's Proposal



“Georgiana, my dear, you work yourself up into this state for nothing,” said the girl’s companion, Mrs Gloria Annesley. Taking her charges hand and squeezing it to offer comfort, she added, “You will be amongst friends and relations; people who wish you nothing but success.”

Georgiana brought her free hand to her temple, rubbing nervously at the dull headache she was trying to keep at bay. “I just feel as if something is wrong.” Her eyes roamed wildly over the top of the dining room table. “Perhaps Miss Bennet would prefer to sit near her uncle—” Georgiana raced around to the far side of the large table and took up Jane Bennet’s place card, looking to see who she would have to switch her place out with, instantly seeing that if she put Miss Bennet near Mr. Gardiner it would throw the seating off on the opposite side of the table. “Then that would mean sitting her next to John and I am not quite certain how he would like that,” she whispered mostly to herself, remembering how upset her cousin had become just knowing that Mr. Wickham was the young lady’s brother.

“No, my dear,” offered Mrs Annesley, “your first instinct was correct. I believe your brother will enjoy speaking to Miss Bennet, especially in light of the absence of his intended. But, dear Georgiana, if I am permitted to make one final suggestion—”

“You think I should move my Aunt’s seat, do you not? Perhaps I should place her on the opposite side?”

“No, my dear, my suggestion is for you to take a deep breath and calm yourself.”

Georgiana brought her hands up and placed them on each side of her face, shaking her head back and forth as if to clear it. This was how the Fitzwilliam brothers found her when seeking out their cousins after having arrived back at the Darcy residence.

Lawrence, instantly guessing Georgiana’s demeanour by the look of anxiety on her face, mumbled his apologies, bowed to both ladies, and immediately turned round to make for the stairs, hoping to get some work done before it was time to dress for dinner.

Jonathan, always looking for an opportunity to tease and provoke his relations, remained where he was. He crossed his arms, chuckled, and leaned against the door, watching as Georgiana continually circled the table, picking up place cards to rearrange them, only to second-guess herself, and put them back down again.

“Georgiana,” said John, not even trying to hide the sarcastic quality of his comment, “you are not organizing the treaty dinner between Bonaparte and the King; I really don’t see what could possibly cause all this difficulty.”

“John, please, I’m thinking!” she pleaded. “I can’t very well do anything with you standing there laughing at me.” She picked up one last card and placed it next to Jane Bennet’s card on the table. “There, I’ve done it!” she said proudly, only to lose courage by saying, “I think?” She looked to Mrs Annesley expectantly. The lady walked slowly around the table, nodding her approval.

“Yes, Georgiana, this will do very nicely—exactly like it did only minutes ago.”

The Colonel, curious, walked slowly around the table himself. Starting with Georgiana’s seat at the bottom and moving to his left, he read the names to himself: *Mrs Edward Gardiner, Lord Matlock, Lady Adele, Lord Whitfield, Miss Jane Bennet*. He paused and bit his lip, wondering if the card his cousin had just replaced by Miss Bennet had been his. Now at the top of the table where his cousin Darcy was to sit he saw that sitting to his cousin’s left would be his mother, Lady Matlock, followed by *Mr. Henry Bennet, Mrs Gloria Annesley, Mr. Edward Gardiner*, and lastly, he came to his own name and gripped the back of the chair.

Georgiana’s eyes were questioning him as if asking for silent approval, so he obliged her. “I guess it was too much to ask you to give *me* a charming dinner companion of the female variety to converse with during dinner.”

She came round to the back of his seat to stand beside him. “What *are* you talking about, John; I’ve seated you next to me, silly!”

“I mean someone who will actually *laugh* at all of my jokes,” said the colonel, acerbically.

“Oh, Jonathan!” replied Georgiana brightly, coming to her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. She then turned and hurried off with Mrs Annesley for their final conference with the housekeeper.

Jonathan pulled out the chair that would be his that evening, sat down with an unhappy thud, and sighed heavily, staring down at the impenetrable gulf that now stood between him and Jane Bennet. “Well, isn’t *this* just perfect?”



Mrs. Gardiner went to Jane’s room to check on her progress in dressing for dinner. After she had knocked and been granted entrance by Daisy, she found her niece nearly ready, with her own eldest daughter, Maria, doing the honours of placing small pink flowers in Jane’s hair.

“Wonderful! I see that you are in good time, Jane; you are the only one it seems; your father and uncle are a bit behind. I found them in the library playing chess just now; can you believe it?”

“Oh dear,” said Jane turning around in her chair, only to have Maria scold her, forcing her to turn back. “You look very lovely, Aunt.”

“Thank you, my dear,” replied Mrs Gardiner. “So do you.”

“Oh no, not lovely, Mamma, Jane looks very beautiful,” gushed Maria.

“Yes, very beautiful; but dearest Jane always looks beautiful.” Jane naturally blushed at such a compliment. “The colour of your gown suits you perfectly, my dear,” added Mrs Gardiner.

“I picked it out, Mamma,” exclaimed Maria, proudly, taking more of the little flowers from Daisy’s hands and arranging them in Jane’s hair. “You won’t believe it when I tell you, but she had this charming gown hidden away in the bottom of her trunk!”

Jane, suddenly uncomfortable, looked away and said, “Lizzie packed it for me. I have not worn it so very much—not since—” Her bottom lip trembled and she stopped as she felt herself on the verge of tears at the remembrance of the last time she’d worn that particular gown: at the Netherfield Ball. Jane then silently scolded herself. She had done so well over the last week, only thinking of *him* once or twice. Fortunately for her, no one seemed to notice her distress because at that moment her young cousin prattled on.

“All the gentlemen this evening will be mad in love with you,” exclaimed Maria, who at thirteen fancied herself a romantic and whose head was full of nothing but one gentleman in particular.

Jane forced herself to laugh at Maria’s silly statement. “Oh, Maria; surely not all the gentlemen.”

Maria blushed, looked down contritely, and said to herself at a near whisper, “Well, hopefully *not* Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“Maria!” exclaimed Mrs Gardiner, hearing her daughter’s comment. “What on earth could possess you to say such a thing?”

“Oh no, Mamma, I mean no offence to Jane; I only wish him to remain unmarried—and wait for me!”

As Daisy placed the last of the blossoms in Jane’s hair, Jane shared a bemused glance with the maid by way of the mirror while Mrs Gardiner looked heavenward as if asking for guidance.

“Maria, my dear, that gentleman is old enough to be your father.”

“Oh no, he is not, Mamma, for I asked Lady Adele, and she said that he was two and thirty; papa is nearly four and forty!”

“Oh dear!”

“And when I asked her if he was attached—”

“Oh Maria, say you didn’t ask such a thing—”

“--Lady Adele said that he was not—well, not to anyone who would have him—but she did say that I was free to think of him as I pleased, even though I heard her say that I could do better.

Since Lizzy is now to marry Mr. Darcy, it would be quiet natural for his own cousin to fall in love with me—that is if he doesn't fall in love with Jane tonight--but I do think the colonel the most handsome man of my acquaintance. How did you like him, Jane?"

Maria reminded Jane a little of Lydia, except Maria had been brought very differently: an upbringing that assured her that her little cousin would not elope with some redcoat at sixteen. "He seems a pleasant, gentlemanlike man; a rather reserved sort, I find."

"Colonel Fitzwilliam? Reserved? Oh no! He's awfully jolly! He tells the most amusing stories and I nearly fell over from laughing so much when we played games with him this afternoon. And when I came away, guess what he did Mamma; he kissed my hand!" Maria then twirled about, holding her right hand up in the air and staring at the back of it. However, she stopped suddenly at a recollection. "He also called me a funny face," she said with a look of dissatisfaction. "Why do you think he called me that? That sounds like something one would call a child." She began to flutter about again, "I didn't really care because he looked so very becoming in his red coat." Maria smiled coyly and said breathily, "Maria Fitzwilliam; it does have a certain ring to it, does it not?"

Something eerily familiar about that speech did not set well with Mrs. Gardiner. She had heard enough and her daughter was shooed from the room. "All right, Maria, you have had a very exciting day, now it is time that you were off to bed."

"Bed? But Mamma—"

"You heard me, young lady."

With a nod of the head from her mistress, Daisy ushered Maria out of the room, only for Maria to quickly double back.

"Jane, she said hurriedly, "you will tell me everything that happens tonight, won't you? I simply must know what Miss Darcy serves, and how many forks you had to use, and what she served for dessert. And you simply must tell me if Colonel Fitzwilliam wears his redcoat, and how many courses you had to sit through, and the colour of Lady Adele's gown and the colour of Miss Darcy's gown and the colour of Lady Matlock's gown and--"



The various colours of the ladies gowns were of absolutely no interest to Mr. Henry Bennet. It was the enormity of the front hall that first came to that gentleman's notice when he walked through the Darcy's front door.

Mr. Darcy and his sister greeted those of his party warmly, making them all feel very welcome and immediately putting them at ease. When they were relieved of their outer garments, Georgiana, after shyly complimenting both of the ladies on their gowns, led the Gardiners into a brightly lit drawing room with Mr. Darcy bringing up the rear with Mr. Bennet and Jane.

There were several people already gathered in the room and while Georgiana led the Gardiners towards her cousins and companion, Mr. Darcy made haste to introduce Mr. Bennet to the head of his family. "Aunt Philadelphia, Uncle James, I am very honoured to present Mr. Henry Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire, soon to be my father-in-law. Mr. Bennet, this is my aunt and uncle, Lord and Lady Matlock."

The Earl said nothing and brought a monocle up to his eye to have a better look at them. This caused his wife to immediately swat his arm away "A great pleasure, I am sure," replied her ladyship, extending her hand.

"An honour," said Mr. Bennet simply, while bowing over it. He then brought his daughter forward to be noticed. "I believe you are already acquainted with my eldest daughter, Jane."

"Yes, of course. Jane, dearest," cooed Lady Matlock, using the young ladies Christian name easily while coming forward to press Jane's hand, kiss her on both cheeks, and claim her as an intimate friend. "How lovely you look and in such a pretty little frock; doesn't she look lovely, James?"

"Quite," said the Earl succinctly, raising his monocle once again.

Darcy, eager to get the two gentlemen off on the right foot, introduced a topic in which they both shared an interest. "Uncle, Mr. Bennet has a very fine Baker rifle in his collection at Longbourn."

"Does he now? Does he indeed? Extraordinary," exclaimed the Earl, excitedly, as the three gentlemen began to discuss their various collections of firearms.

The Countess, who was very keen to relay some news to her new friend, led Jane off a little ways to have her to herself. "Edward and Delphie have spoken of nothing else since you went away this afternoon, isn't that right, Lawrence? Lawrence!" Thinking that her son had been behind her, Lady Matlock spun around to find him, only to see him standing off to the side speaking quietly with the Gardiners and Georgiana. She called him again, motioning wildly. "Lawrence, come here, dearest!"

Lawrence bowed to the little group and crossed the floor. "Yes, Mother?"

"I was speaking of Edward and Delphie! Tell Miss Bennet, tell her all about the impression she has made with them!"

Lawrence was taken aback with his mother's enthusiastic behaviour. "Yes, my mother is correct," he replied a little sheepishly. "In fact, Miss Bennet, I have a message for you from Delphie. Just as I supposed, my daughter would like to know if she could come for a visit. I tried to explain that you must soon go away and that a visit was impossible; I do not think she quite understands."

Jane's continence fell, "Oh dear. How very disappointing. I would like very much to visit with her, as well." Jane became thoughtful for a moment, before saying, "Perhaps, if it is convenient with my aunt, we could arrange a short visit between all the children for tomorrow morning."

Lord Whitfield, not wanting to impose, replied, "No, please, you are far too kind, Miss Bennet. You have already had to endure my children most of today; I do not wish to trouble you with them again so soon. And surely you need tomorrow morning for packing and last minute shopping before you return to Hertfordshire."

"Yes! Shopping," interrupted Lady Matlock, eager to make up some sort of excuse to spend a day with the young lady herself, "I was just going to ask you, Miss Bennet, if you would like to come shopping with me tomorrow morning. I know it is all awfully last minute, but would that be agreeable to you, Jane, dear? Adele?" And turning around, Lady Matlock gestured to her daughter to join them. "Tell her, Adele; tell Miss Bennet what we have *planned* for her tomorrow!"

"Well," said Adele, not quite sure what her mother was about, "I was merely going to drop in at Madame Dumont's and then—"

"Yes," exclaimed the Countess, "My dear, Miss Bennet, Madame Dumont's is the very thing! It is the best shop of that sort in all of London and I would very much like to have you known to the proprietess."

Jane struggled to get a word in edgewise, bombarded as she was from the Countess, getting a word in proved difficult.

"Your ladyship is very kind, however—"

"--and then on to Lancaster's to look over all the new hats. Wouldn't that be lovely? I am told that they have some very pretty things just done up and you know, you really ought to come to see them before all of London makes off with the best choices. I fancy that you would look extremely well in something blue, do you not think so, Lawrence?"

"As I said," replied Jane, "you are very kind, but I do not believe I—"

Sensing that Jane was about to decline her offer, she pressed a little harder and added her granddaughter into the bargain. "And you know we could easily bring Delphie along; kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. Please say you will spend the day with me, oh, please."

Jane was a little overwhelmed with the Countess's kindly bestowed solitude. Not being in the habit of frequenting such exclusive shops, but hating the idea of disappointing anyone, she was just about to agree, when her father took her arm quite suddenly.

"It is very good of you to offer, Lady Matlock, but I am sorry to say that I must claim all of my daughter's time tomorrow. I was hoping to spend our last day in London together. Perhaps she will be able to take up your kind offer when we are next in town."

Mr. Bennet had seen that it was just as his sister-in-law had said. He could see that his daughter seemed somewhat beleaguered and knowing Jane as he did, his only choice was to step in and put a stop to it.

For the briefest of moments, Lady Matlock grimaced unhappily. She was so used to getting her way in all things that this minor setback proved irritating and she felt somewhat unkindly towards the gentleman. Recovering, she regained her amiability and flashed Mr. Bennet a smile, saying, "How very disappointing, but I am sure there will be many more opportunities for Jane and myself to get together in future; we are *almost family*, after all."

Mr. Bennet stared at her ladyship for a long moment; there was something about her "almost family" comment, which he would have sworn had nothing to do with the impending union between the lady's nephew and his other daughter.

"Besides," added Lady Matlock quite innocently, "I don't know what I could possibly be thinking of. Jane may not have recovered from her exertions of the day." And turning towards Mrs Gardiner, the Countess called out, loud enough for all to hear, "Mrs Gardiner, I hope you bid Miss Bennet to lie down directly as soon as you got her home; I did not like her colour at all this afternoon when she went away. If I had had my way, I would have kept her at my house and called the doctor."

Jane's cheeks flamed in embarrassment. She had not mentioned her earlier distress to any of her family.

Alarmed, both of the Gardiners broke away from their little group and came to their niece's side. "What is this, Jane?" asked her aunt, "What does Lady Matlock mean? Are you unwell? Have you been ill?"

"A moment's indisposition, aunt; it was the merest complaint; it was nothing whatsoever to worry you with. The heat—the people--"

"But Lady Matlock says she wanted to call a doctor," said Mr. Gardiner.

"Why did you not say anything, Jane?" asked her father, taking her hand.

Jane did not know which way to look. She disliked being the cause of so much undeserved attention.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had been standing off on his own, had heard enough. Between his mother's continuous chatter and the overbearing concern on the part of the lady's relations, he immediately decided to come to Jane's rescue.

"Mr. Bennet, Mr. and Mrs Gardiner," he said, as calmly as he could, "please do not worry. I was in the park today myself, and it was just as Miss Bennet says. The crush of people was horrendous; even I felt a bit overheated. But between the servant and myself, we got her into the

carriage and all was well.” He cut his eyes to Jane briefly and saw to his astonishment the look of grateful relief overtaking her features.

He went on, hoping to distract Miss Bennet’s family with other topics. “I must say, Mrs Gardiner, I truly enjoyed meeting your children today. Now let me see if I can remember them all correctly. There was the charming Maria, who told me she likes the colour pink; Thomas who likes reading--now there’s a chap after my own heart; young Philip told me that he was for the Navy—and quite putting my nose out of joint; and lastly, little Henrietta says that she likes to eat cake.”

Mr. Gardiner replied smilingly, “You seem to know my children better than I do, sir.”

"They were great fun; I look forward to knowing them better."

Jane stood amazed. She had not thought the man particularly vocal, but her heart leapt at the thought of his kindness. She bestowed him with an appreciative smile, which the Colonel, struck momentarily paralysed, could only nod to.

The butler stepped in at that moment to announce the readiness of dinner. Georgiana's eyes widened as she thought of the next duty required of her: the pairing up of gentlemen to escort the ladies into the dining room.

Lady Matlock, having attended hundreds of evening occasions and knowing that there was rarely a dinner where she did not lead the way, saved her niece the trouble and immediately stepped over to her nephew and host and entered the dining room on his arm.

"Uncle," said Georgiana, "Would you be so kind as to escort Mrs. Gardiner into dinner?"

"A pleasure," replied the Earl, bowing and extending his arm towards Mrs. Gardiner who was delighted to be so singled out by having an Earl lead her to dinner.

"Mr. Bennet, would you please escort my cousin, Lady Adele?"

Mr. Bennet bowed regally to the young lady and led her away.

"And Mr. Gardiner, would you take in Mrs. Annesley."

"I would be delighted," he said, smiling happily, while stepping towards the lady to take her arm.

This naturally left Jane and herself. Colonel Fitzwilliam was positively pink with pleasure as he held out his arm for Miss Bennet to take. Jane smiled up at the officer charmingly, causing his mind to go blank. She was just about to reach for his arm when Georgiana intervened.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind, cousin John, but I was just going to ask Lawrence to take Miss Bennet in as they are sitting so near each other."

All of the Colonel's goodwill towards his young cousin was gone. It was one thing to seat the lady as far away from him as possible at the dinner table, but to now deny him the pleasure of walking in to dinner with her was more than he could bear.

"Georgiana, I am sure Lawrence does not mind if I take Miss Bennet in, do you brother?"

"Of course I mind," said Lord Whitfield, seriously, while extending his elbow. "Miss Bennet, an honour." He bowed and then escorted her into the dining room.

As Jane was led away, she looked back over her shoulder. Having been brought up with nothing but sisters, she did not know how it was between brothers. Were Lord Whitfield's words meant to slight the Colonel or were they merely a jest? Either way, she hoped that Colonel Fitzwilliam was not too offended.

For the colonel, he hardly paid his brother one wit of attention; he was far too busy studying that look of hers, instantly knowing that it was not going to be enough to hold him throughout the entire meal.



Miss Darcy's dinner was a great success (especially after Lady Matlock made it easy on her niece by discreetly signalling to her when it was time for a course to be changed or a particular wine to be served). Mrs Gardiner, by the advantage of her chair, had the enjoyment of seeing the young lady being so easily led by something as simple as the nod of the head or the flutter of a little finger.

After the dessert plates had been laid, Mrs Gardiner leaned forward slightly to look down at the far end of the table. Her niece was deep in conversation with Mr. Darcy and some once or twice Mrs Gardiner imagined she saw the gentleman trying to trace some resemblance of Elizabeth in Jane's face by the way he examined her closely.

The Earl, noticing where Mrs Gardiner's eyes were focussed, directed his own eyes down to the end of the table to have a look at Miss Bennet for himself. To him she was a fine girl and he fancied himself as somewhat taken with her. As he leaned back in his chair, he happened to glance across the table at that moment. Jonathan was staring at Miss Bennet, as well, and his son's face glowed with so much admiration for the young lady that he wondered why he had not noticed it before.

The Earl looked back and forth between his son and Miss Bennet several times before it hit him: Miss Jane Bennet as the wife of this favourite son was something he would heartily approve of and he decided then and there that he would do everything in his power to bring it about. A little matchmaking never hurt anybody, he surmised, and since his dining companion for the evening was Mrs Gardiner, he could go about finding out things about the young woman with carefully selected questions.

“Mrs Gardiner, tell me, for I must know these things of all the newest members of my family; does Miss Bennet ride?”

Thinking that the newest member to the Fitzwilliam family was her absent niece, she replied, “Elizabeth? I’m afraid not.”

“No, no, the other one,” he said impatiently, dipping his head in the direction of Jane Bennet at the other end of the table.

“Jane? Oh, yes, she is a very exceptional horsewoman.”

“Is she now; is she indeed?”

The Earl’s admiration instantly increased and he called for his wife’s attention. The Countess, who was engrossed in some tale of Mr. Bennet’s looked up. “What is it my dear?”

“I have just had a very good thought! After the wedding, I fancy that I’d like to have Miss Bennet up to stay with us at Matlock for a time so we can all get to know one another. What say you to that?”

“And what does our nephew Fitzwilliam have to say on the matter? You can not carry off his new wife on some whim.”

Jane and Mr. Darcy both looked up at the mention of his name.

“No, no!” added the Earl, “I mean Miss Jane, there. Invite Miss Jane up to Matlock; Mrs. Gardiner here tells me that she rides very well. Is not that true, Miss Jane?”

Jane smiled prettily, saying softly, “I ride, my lord, whether or not it is good or bad, I hardly can tell, but you are very kind to think of me, sir.”

“Oh yes, my dear,” replied the Countess, “You must come up to Matlock and stay as long as you please; I promise to keep you entertained; I fancy I might even give a ball in your honour while you are there...” and she added as an afterthought, “and in Fitzwilliam’s and your sister’s honour, too.”

Jane blushed slightly at yet another compliment from the Earl and his family. “You are both very kind,” she replied, smiling to herself, knowing that her sister, Elizabeth, would be in such thoughtful, considerate hands.

“And you know,” exclaimed the Earl, caught up in his own fervour, “I have just the horse in mind; what do you say to Achilles, Philadelphia; one of my best hunters; just the type of spirited animal for such a lovely girl.”

“No, my dear, no” countered the Countess to the Earl’s ridiculous scheme for her protégée, “I’ll not have Miss Bennet’s neck broken on her first visit to us. Molly will be her mount, such a nice, gentle mare.”

“Molly!” cried the Earl, incredulously, “Even Delphie can ride that pudding head.”

Mr. Bennet simply observed the entire scene. Although he was hardly surprised at anybody liking Jane, the level of enthusiasm of these Matlock’s over his eldest daughter was something amazing to watch.

While her mother and father debated the relative merits of hunters and mares, Adele, having no one to talk to other than her brother Lawrence--who was never very interesting--busied herself by observing the various interactions around the table. Mrs Annesley and Mr. Gardiner were deep into a conversation discussing the very best atlases for instruction.

Mr. Bennet appeared to be doing exactly as she was: observing everyone quietly. When their eyes met, she sensed a kindred spirit, smiled slightly, and continued with her own observations. Mrs Gardiner was still attending to the discussion between her mother and father and her brother Lawrence’s face, as usual, was a blank slate; his thoughts probably a million miles away.

Darcy and Jane Bennet had resumed their quiet conversation and she could just make out that they were discussing something concerning the colour preferences of Miss Elizabeth. Adele’s eyes finally came to rest on her brother and her cousin, Georgiana. Her young cousin seemed to be speaking to John, but her brother was paying absolutely no attention.

Georgiana had taken notice of her cousin Jonathan’s plate. He had only picked at his dinner and now he had not touched his dessert, which she knew was one of his favourites.

“Is everything all right, cousin?” she asked quietly. “Are you well, John? You’ve hardly touched your meal all evening. If the chocolate mousse is not to your liking, I can have something else brought up from the kitchen--some fruit perhaps. Really, it is no trouble at all.”

The Colonel made no answer; he silently removed his left hand from his lap, placed it over Georgiana’s right hand, and patted it gently to silence her as he continued to stare down at the opposite end of the table.

Georgiana followed his line of sight. His eyes had settled upon Miss Bennet and when she glanced at him once more she saw the intensity of her cousin’s gaze. She then looked back at Jane. That lady talked on with her brother as before, yet in the next instance, Jane glanced up from her conversation and turned her head to look at the colonel.

Georgiana saw their eyes lock for only a moment, and to her, even with her limited knowledge on the subject of fondness between people, even she could see that there was clearly some strong emotion there. The two of them shared a sort of knowing smile and as soon as they both seemed satisfied with what they saw, they each turned away: Jane Bennet back to her conversation with her brother and her cousin John back to herself.

“I must compliment you, Georgiana,” said the Colonel, suddenly very attentive and solicitous, “this has been a most enjoyable dinner. You have outdone yourself. The pheasant was especially good.”

“It was venison,” she replied stoically.

“Was it? Are you sure? I could have sworn... well never mind,” he said laughingly as if he suddenly hadn’t a care in the world. “But I must say, this chocolate mousse looks excellent, you know it is one of my favourites.” He jabbed his spoon into the very middle of it and took out a large bite.

Georgiana did not reply for at that very moment all she could think of was how very sad she felt for Charles Bingley.



When the ladies went away to their tea in the music room, the six gentlemen gathered around the dining table to sample Darcy’s port.

“Now gentleman,” said Darcy while he filled the glasses, “if you would be so good to tell me your opinion, this is an fine port Colonel Fitzwilliam found so recently in Lisbon. John was good enough to send me a case or two.”

When the glasses were handed round, each of the gentlemen sipped and remarked at the excellence of the libation.

“Oddly enough,” said Lord Matlock, eyeing his second son uncharitably, “I don’t recall receiving my case...or two.”

“Now father,” said the Colonel, “you know I was on the look out for some Brandy for you in France, but you can see how well that turned out,” he said, gesturing to his leg.

“I would have liked some Madeira,” added Lord Whitfield, seriously.

“Oh yes, nothing can compare to the richness of a good Madeira,” agreed Mr. Gardiner.

Mr. Bennet left the gentlemen to their debate and tipped his head to one side to indicate to Darcy that he would like to have a quite word. They both went off into a corner and Mr. Bennet began.

“You will remember, the other day, when you visited my brother Gardiner’s home, I said that I had come up to London on business.”

“Yes, sir, so you did. I hope it has gone well.”

“Actually my business has to do with you, sir, if you must know.”

“Me? How so?”

“As you are so soon to become connected to me by marriage, I felt it my utmost duty to meddle in your affairs.” Henry Bennet smiled and Darcy looked at him warily. “I hope that this does not offend you. However, you must know by now that I can not deny any request of my second daughter, whatever it may be.”

Intrigued, Darcy merely raised his eyebrows and indicated to the gentleman that he should continue.

“My Elizabeth has seen fit to tell me a little of your... *predicament* when it comes to lodgings in the Hertfordshire neighbourhood.”

Darcy, realizing that Mr. Bennet was hinting around the subject of Bingley, felt the need to say something in hopes that Mr. Bennet would not look unkindly on Charles for denying him shelter at Netherfield.

“At present, Mr. Bingley and I are not quite--”

Mr. Bennet hurried to stop him. “Please, none of that; I did not ask Lizzy for the particulars, and you can rest assured that she has not told me the nature of it. I will assure you I have been discreet and I set my brother Philips--a solicitor in good standing in Hertfordshire--to work on the matter himself. I am in the happy position to inform you that my brother has made several inquiries as to the houses in the neighbourhood for let and he has informed me that there are some two or three available. I have taken the liberty of writing them down.” Henry Bennet then produced a sheet of folded notepaper from his inside pocket and handed it to Darcy. “The very last one on the list should be of particular interest--for it sits not four miles from Meryton.”

Darcy was anything but offended. To know that Mr. Bennet would go to so much trouble on his behalf touched him greatly. “You have been most kind, sir. I am honoured that you would take so much upon yourself.” He looked down at the list.

“The Great House at Stoke is the very one,” said Mr. Bennet. “I believe that one would suit you particularly well. The family are away in Ireland at present and will not be in residence again for some time. Moreover, as my brother is the agent for the gentleman involved, he knows that the lease price would be extremely reasonable. There will be but little trouble on your part. The house, as my wife is forever telling anyone, is handsomely furnished, but she fancies the drawing room as rather small. But as a rational person, I expect you would be happy just to have lodging for your visits to area and for any of your family who will come down for the wedding.”

The Earl, having grown tired of his debate with his two sons and hearing something that caught his interest, stepped over. “What is this that Mr. Bennet is telling you, Nephew? What is this about lodgings in Hertfordshire?”

Everyone else turned to attend to the conversation as Darcy answered. "Mr. Bennet has been so kind as to find me lodgings in the neighbourhood of Hertfordshire until the wedding. He has presented me with a list of several houses that I may look over."

Colonel Fitzwilliam wondered what Darcy could be about. He knew full well that Charles Bingley lived in Hertfordshire, but wisely sensed that he should keep his thoughts to himself.

"That sounds excellent," said the Earl. "When do you think of going down to have a look?"

"As soon as possible! Tomorrow!" his eyes lit up with thoughts of seeing Elizabeth so soon. "No, no," he immediately reasoned, remembering that he had visitors, "I can not go tomorrow; I do have guests!"

Colonel Fitzwilliam simply smiled, seized as he was with sudden designs of his own. "This is all nonsense, Darcy. Do not think of us for a moment. In fact, if I might be so bold, I believe I can even spare the time to travel up to Hertfordshire with you."

Darcy stepped over to his cousin and placed a hand on his shoulder as a way of thanking him. He then turned to Lawrence. "What say you, cousin?"

"Darcy," said Lawrence incredulously, "I do not know why you trouble yourself on my account. Go into Hertfordshire as it pleases you; think no more upon me; I can find one or two things to keep me happily occupied in town until your return."

Darcy threw back his head to laugh. "No cousin, you misunderstand me; I mean for you to come along to Hertfordshire, as well."

"Me? In Hertfordshire? I don't believe--"

"Now cousin, please say that you are not going to refuse; I will not accept it; a day or two in the country would do us all some good."

"Well I..."

"Excellent!" said Darcy, turning back to Mr. Bennet, to add, "Since you and Miss Bennet are returning to Longbourn in two days time, would you be so kind as to inform my fiancée that I will be hard upon your heels."

Henry Bennet saw the look of pure bliss on Darcy's face and he bowed to cover up the fact that his eyes were beginning to mist over with the knowledge that he was actually helping this person carry off his most beloved child.

Fitzwilliam Darcy made haste to refill everyone's glasses. "May I propose a toast, gentlemen? To Mr. Henry Bennet, for all the kindness he has seen fit to bestow."

"Mr. Henry Bennet," they all said in unison.

“And, to Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” added Darcy, “for making me the happiest of men.”

“To Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” everyone repeated.

And, when all the gentlemen went away to join the ladies in the music room, Colonel Fitzwilliam remained behind for a moment to pour himself another glass of port. He then raised his glass into the air and gave his own silent toast.

“To Miss Jane Bennet, the fairest of them all.”