

## Chapter 17 ~ A Man of Property



The Bennet family was not exactly what Lord Whitfield had expected. Since meeting Mr. Bennet in London and thinking him a rather harmless sort of gentleman, he was not prepared for the spectacle of what he now found sitting across from him at the man's own dinner table.

Mr. Bennet made sport of his wife far too much for the Viscount's liking and Mrs Bennet seemed to be the unsuspecting victim of her husband's caustic wit. Several times, Lawrence observed, the master of Longbourn asked his wife what appeared to be the most innocent of questions only to have the discussion deteriorate into a squabble minutes later.

"How can you say that, Mrs. Bennet, when you yourself were looking for Kitty this very morning and found her in the kitchen asking about the mince pies?"

"I did not *say* that my daughters did not *know* where the kitchen was, *Mr. Bennet*. I was only *telling* his lordship that they have nothing to do with the kitchen... in general!"

Another set of circumstances also disillusioned the viscount. Jane Bennet's poised manners and pleasing discourse had naturally made him suppose that her sister's would be very much the same. He found out soon enough that they were quite the opposite.

The two youngest, though pleasant enough, lacked the refinement of mind and excellent understanding so obviously present in their two elder sisters. Miss Mary, when asked by his brother some innocuous question on the course of her reading, turned the conversation onto a topic of her choosing, using it as an avenue to make mildly inappropriate suggestions on the moral obligations of others. Miss Catherine hardly made the time to speak with anyone but his brother at all. She was far too occupied with making her open admiration for Jonathan plain for all to see.

"We have so much in common, Colonel, for I am very fond mince pies, too."

Lawrence eyes turned often towards Miss Elizabeth. Elizabeth Bennet's conduct gave him no worries. Her intelligence and spirited behaviour had captivated him from the start. He could easily understand how his cousin became rather besotted with her and, to some extent, why his own brother liked her, too.

Although Miss Elizabeth and Darcy gave the appearance of chatting comfortably and quietly, Lawrence could tell that Darcy seemed to be pressing the lady to make some sort of answer, while the lady herself was on her guard and vigorously attending to things being said around the table.

Mr. Bennet seemed to notice Elizabeth's distraction as well and also detected some slight tension emanating from the opposite end of the table. He felt it best to discover what was going on.

"Mr. Darcy, what do you and Elizabeth find so interesting that you both have occasion to whisper? Come now; let us all hear what young lovers have to say that all may not hear."

Elizabeth would have groaned aloud if she could. She could not believe that her father chose that particular moment to draw all eyes to her. However, before she could deflect his comment onto another topic, Darcy quickly answered.

"We were speaking of the wedding, sir. I have only taken the house in Stoke for two months and I was hoping to fix upon a date no later than the middle of November. Miss Elizabeth believes that matters can not be possibly settled before the end of December."

"Oh yes, Mr. Darcy," exclaimed Mrs Bennet, eager to pull off the county's most anticipated event and make Lady Lucas and Mrs Long wild with jealousy. "I quite agree with you. I don't know what has gotten into Lizzy's head."

Elizabeth smiled weakly, "I was only thinking of you, mama. We haven't even begun to think about wedding clothes. And with Papa and Jane only just returned from London and now my own trip to town must be planned—surely you must see there is so much to do. Then there is the harvest fete and assembly ball--"

At the mention of the ball, just as Elizabeth suspected, Kitty's eyes lit up and she exclaimed loudly, "You will be there, of course, Colonel. Indeed, you must come; there are never enough gentlemen to go round."

The colonel smiled mischievously. "And at this ball of yours, Miss Catherine, there will be dancing, I expect." Kitty's smile instantly contorted into a grimace of mortification at the realization of her blunder. Yet, the colonel, with his good nature could only put the lady at ease. "And when is this ball, Miss Catherine?"

"In two weeks, sir," she said her eyes lowered and feeling terribly embarrassed.

"Well then I shall endeavour to be there. Perhaps this bad leg of mine will be sufficiently healed for me to solicit you for a dance or two."

Kitty glowed and the Colonel, feeling impish turned to his cousin Darcy and winked at him. Lawrence, who was watching the exchange just shook his head and sampled the desert that the servant had just laid before him.

Colonel Fitzwilliam being a man of the world was embarrassed by little, and the Bennets, though unconventional, were, in his opinion, delightful. Pity that they should now be connected to such a scoundrel as George Wickham, but the thought of Jane Bennet's

beautiful face and soothing presence, made him conveniently forget what before he could not abide.

Lost in thoughts of Jane, he deftly managed to mention something trivial about the dance to Miss Catherine causing her to respond, (“I like dancing the bolanger, too”) when he noticed his brother’s countenance.

Although Lawrence, when addressed was everything polite and courteous, Jonathan could see that the placid and unreadable expression Lawrence displayed spoke more about his increasing discomfort. Moreover, his brother had hardly uttered a word all evening. The colonel, therefore felt it his duty to introduce a topic at the table that was certain to bring his brother out of his shell.

“Lawrence, tell everyone here what it is that you do at your estate in Lincolnshire. I am sure the ladies would be vastly interested.”

All eyes turned toward the viscount and he sent his brother a withering glance communicating in one look that he did not appreciate being so singled out.

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, who had noticed the viscount’s silence and wanting to deflect attention away from Kitty’s continued fond looks in the colonel’s direction. “Please do, my lord.”

“Miss Bennet, there is hardly anything very fascinating about me. My brother is the interesting one in our family. Pray excuse me.”

The colonel wasn’t having any of it. “Come now, brother, don’t be shy. *Sometimes* you can be far more interesting than me; more often than not no one cares about a soldier life.” He laughed heartily at his own description of himself.

Kitty’s eyebrows shot up and she would have protested violently had it not been for her father’s sudden clearing of his throat and his stern look in her direction.

“Shall we ask him why?” asked Elizabeth teasingly, making Colonel Fitzwilliam smile knowingly. With eyes ablaze with mischief, she continued. “Why does a man of sense and education call himself uninteresting?” She purposely flashed a flirtatious smile towards Darcy, which she knew would go a long way in soothing the mildly injured feelings she was sure were coursing through his breast,

“You need not apply to him for I can tell you myself: my brother knows that if I were not here to steer him in the right direction, he would only talk of something tedious and have you all think him a frightful bore.” Again the Colonel laughed loudly while Mr. Darcy and the Bennet’s merely chuckled. When he had finished the Colonel added, “Yet, my brother does have one very singular talent which no one who knows him well one can possibly deny; he grows the most beautiful and unusual plants that you have ever seen.”

All the ladies exclaimed and Lawrence, blushing slightly, was forced into speech.

“Yes, I do have the good fortune of growing some very remarkable specimens.”

“There is quite a collection of exotic species growing at Purvis Lodge, as well,” said Mary, who had been thinking ill of the talkative Fitzwilliam brother and trying to find something appealing about the silent one. “Is that what influenced you in leasing Purvis Lodge?”

“Yes, that and also when your uncle told me of the previous owner’s history. Knowing that Mr. Lancaster was the celebrated botanist of note, I could not resist the opportunity to study his own plantings.”

“Have you ever read his essay on English Country Gardening?”

“I have, Miss Mary,” answered the Viscount. “I must admit that that particular paper of his always intrigued me. The variety of specimens in his gardens alone could keep me in study for the next two years... that is, if I had no other obligations.”

Mrs Bennet who had no idea what the conversation was really about, added, “The gardens are in a frightful state, are they not, Mary, and I still say that the attics there are quite dreadful!”

Lord Whitfield asked Mary, “Are you familiar with Mr. Lancaster’s other writings?”

“Yes,” said Mary highly gratified to finally have someone at her mother’s table who could speak with some degree of sense. “He loaned me several of his books and Jane and I both love the gardens there; such a fascinating collection of flowers from his years in the orient. Unfortunately, even though Jane and I took great care of the seedlings he gave us, we have never been able to grow half of them here at Longbourn.”

“I would be happy to advise you and your sister if you like, even though my stay in Hertfordshire is not so long.”

“We would welcome any suggestion that you happen to have, sir.”

Mrs Bennet was witnessing this exchange with curiosity. Mary had hardly shown an interest in any man before and here was one with such a handsome face carrying on a conversation with her for more than a few minutes. Mrs. Bennet knew that perhaps marrying a viscount was a little too high for Mary to aim, but she saw no harm in knowing his circumstances. She called for his attention.

“Lord Whitfield, do you reside much in town?”

Elizabeth saw the scheming look on her mother’s face and sighed quietly.

“No, ma’am. I am hardly ever in town; I keep no house there.”

“But surely you must go up to town sometime. *Your wife* would surely miss visiting all the shops and the warehouses.”

Lawrence swallowed deeply before responding. He always felt a jab in his heart whenever someone talked of his wife. “I am a widower, madam. My wife, Julia, was taken from me three years ago.”

“No wife, you say. I am sorry, very sorry to hear that, Lord Whitfield.”

The Viscount bowed his head slightly to acknowledge Mrs Bennet’s condolence. However, Elizabeth knew that her mother was far from sorry and could almost see the calculations going on in her head. She almost released the breath she had been holding, yet, she decided to wait one moment longer; her mother did not disappoint.

“And children. Do you have any children, sir?”

“Yes, ma’am, two.”

“Two motherless children; how sad. And their names are--?”

“Edward and Delphie.”

“Delphie?” exclaimed Mrs Bennet at the top of your voice, making two of the people at table not used to her screeching, jump. “What an odd sort of name!”

“It is a shortening of the name Philadelphia; she is named after my mother.”

“Well that makes it all right then. A name such as Lady Delphie is not quite the thing, is it? But *Lady Philadelphia*; now that sounds quite elegant, quite elegant indeed. And is Lord Edward away at school at present?”

“I am sorry, who?”

“Your son, Lord Edward?”

“I’m afraid I have no title to hand down to my son. For the present he must be satisfied with being only the Honourable Edward.”

Mrs Bennet shook her head back and forth. “Dear me,” she sighed dramatically, “two children being brought up at home; children quite without a mother’s special sort of love and guidance; they must keep you very, very, busy.”

The colonel nearly laughed at this point; Lawrence barely saw his own children let alone worried after their care. They spent almost their entire year at Matlock as it was.

“I have many resources to rely upon for help, madam.”

“What? Servants? They hardly count, do they? I always say that children need a mother.”

Lawrence had just about reached his breaking point and everyone at the table whether they knew him well or not, could sense that a black mood had begun to settle down upon him. “A woman has been engaged to see their needs.”

“I am certain that you could engage any number of people to do your bidding, your father is an Earl after all and I daresay very rich.”

Seeing Lord Whitfield’s shocked expression and Elizabeth’s heightened colour, Mr. Bennet threw down his napkin and stood. He had heard enough of his wife’s tiresome prying and now sought to put an end to it.

“Mrs Bennet, I am sure our daughters are waiting for their tea.”

“Sorry?”

“Tea, Mrs Bennet, tea! Don’t you usually serve tea in the drawing room *after* dinner?”

Recognizing that they were being dismissed, the young ladies all stood leaving their mother to sit momentarily in utter confusion. Seeing that his wife did not move, Mr. Bennet exclaimed, “If you gentlemen are quite finished with your dessert, you are welcome to join me in my library to sample a very fine single-malt that I have just acquired.”



In the carriage ride back to the inn, Colonel Fitzwilliam discussed the Bennet family with much more spirit than was his usual, owing, his brother expected, to the large quantity of single-malt whiskey he had consumed after the meal.

“I must say, Darcy, I like your Bennet’s very well. Miss Catherine, or Miss Kitty, as she entreated me to call her several times, is everything that is charming in a girl her age. Miss Mary is appropriately reserved for one so enamoured with the teachings of Mr. Fordyce. Mr. Bennet can be quite a witty fellow, even though he eyed my epaulets with something like disdain several times.”

“I notice,” asked Darcy, his mouth set in a grim line while he stared out of the carriage window, “that you failed to mention Mrs. Bennet.”

The colonel smirked at his brother who huffed and turned away. He then tipped his hat forward, scratched the back of his head, and thought for a few moments. “Well, Mrs. Bennet is a very... good sort of woman. I think she will eventually grow on me. I’ve met

much worst in town, I daresay. No, no; I admire Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth far too much to slight the mother in any way. I approve.”

“Your approval is noted,” said Darcy dryly while looking out into the night, lost in his own thoughts and more than a bit unnerved by Elizabeth’s continued peculiar behaviour.



Jane had awakened early. Other than the fact that she was staying in her the Philips’ home, the day was just like any other. She sat at the dressing table and brushed out her hair. She washed and dressed herself in a plain green muslin. She arranged her hair attractively, but simply. She went through all these familiar motions yet something was very different about this morning. She looked around the bedchamber trying to think of what she had forgotten to do, only to shake her head moments later at her silliness. She made her way to her aunt’s room. When she knocked and peeked in, she found only Clara arranging the bedclothes.

“Your aunt has already gone down to breakfast, Miss. She looks so much the better this morning.”

“Oh, that is good news,” said Jane, smiling. “Thank you, Clara.”

Jane hurried off to see her aunt for herself, however when she made it to the landing she suddenly stopped. She had finally realized what she had forgotten to do: she had forgotten her usual morning sulk over Mr. Bingley. She paused there on the top step and thought about him for a moment, remembering their encounter of the previous day.

She now found that she did not feel quite so sad about him or for his disappointment. In fact, she felt herself rather fatigued at the prospect of thinking about him for any length of time. Lizzy’s familiar mantra suddenly popped into her head: *think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure*. The only thing, almost everything pleasurable in the past having to do with Charles Bingley reminded her of all that was now most unpleasant.

“There, enough,” she concluded and moved off down the stairs.

Jane found the Philips’ at breakfast; her uncle eating heartily and her aunt with only a dish of tea.”

“Good morning, Jane!” they chorused together, each very gratified to have a young person in the house again. Though Mrs Philips had always had a partiality for her two youngest nieces, Jane’s assistance over the last two days had been a godsend and had raised her very high in her esteem.

Jane's value had always been known to her uncle and she had always been his favourite. His other nieces were jolly amusing, but Jane's good sense and helpfulness pleased him to no end.

"Did you sleep well, Jane dear," he asked.

"Very well, uncle. And you?"

"Very well, indeed."

She turned to her aunt. "And you aunt, Clara told me that you are feeling much better this morning."

"Much, much better thanks to you and your kind ministrations, Jane. In fact, I think you can return home tomorrow if you like."

"Are you sure aunt? I would be pleased to stay as long as you wish."

"Nonsense, my dear! You have only just returned from London. Young people such as yourself must have many things to see too."

Jane placed a scone and a boiled egg on her plate and sat down as the footman brought her some tea.

"I find that I don't have very much to do these days, replied Jane."

"What about the assembly ball! It is only weeks away and I am certain you could use the time to shop and have a new gown made up especially. In fact, your uncle and I have just been talking of it and we'd like to make your ball gown as a present for helping us these last days."

"Oh Aunt, Uncle how very kind, but I am quite happy to assist you whenever you have need. It is not necessary to give me such gifts. I'm happy to do anything for you."

"Come now Jane," offered her uncle. "No demurring. You deserve a present more than anyone; you are such a good girl. It would give your aunt and me such happiness to see you for once attired as the prettiest girl at the assembly ball."

"Mr. Philips, what can you mean?" cried Mrs Philips, incredulous. "Why Jane is always the prettiest girl at the assembly ball, regardless!"

"I stand corrected," he laughed.

"I must admit" said Jane, "that the thought of balls and parties don't hold much interest for me these days. I doubt that I will even attend the ball this year."

“Not attend the ball? And disappoint all the young men in the county,” added her uncle laughing gaily. “I know for a fact that young Mr. Goulding will be the most disappointed of all not to see you there.”

“And Mr. Bingley,” added her aunt enthusiastically for good measure. From her window the day before she had witnessed that man’s gallantry to her dear little pugs, and for that she was most grateful. At Jane’s sombre expression and lowering of her eyes, Mrs Philips added feebly, “Well, perhaps not.”

As Jane tucked into her breakfast, her uncle arose. “Well, ladies, I’m off. Quite busy today! I’m expecting a very important man to stop by the office this morning. I’ll leave you two ladies to discuss balls and finery and all the handsome young men in the county.



Lord Whitfield being the first of his party up that morning had an abundance of good fortune: two servants to wait upon him instead of one: one to arrange the particulars of his dress and one to actually dress him.

As Mr. Preston applied himself to a pair of boots and Mr. Mattingly worked diligently on the cravat, Whitfield inquired after his cousin Darcy.

“Mr. Darcy left specific instructions to give him an extra hour in bed this morning owing to the... uh... extravagances of last evening, sir.”

“Yes, Mrs Bennet keeps an uncommon fine table; I never ate so much food in my life. And Mr. Bennet! The whiskey that man pours ought to be...”

Lawrence did not finish the sentence; he was far too distracted by his brother’s batman carrying a pair of very familiar looking boots towards him.

“Preston!” the Viscount exclaimed, “what have you done, man?”

“Sir?” asked Preston, halting in confusion.

“My boots, what have you done to my boots?”

The boots had been shined to an excessively brilliant sheen, one much better suited to the militiamen marching through Meryton and not for a gentleman who intended to explore a muddy, overgrown garden.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Preston replied huffily, quite sure that he did. “Your brother always remarked that I shined boots better than any soldier in England.”

“Yes, but I am not a soldier!”

Lawrence had not meant to give offence. Back home in Lincolnshire, he only had old Findley to keep his boots clean and a very poor job he did of it, too. As Findley had aged and gone deaf and toothless the boots had only gotten worse and the Viscount had simply gotten used to it. He now considered Preston's ruffled feelings and tried to be as gentle and placating as possible.

"I did not mean to shout—the boots are—it's just, next time, not so much--. Please, do not give yourself so much trouble on my account."

Preston said nothing more and simply walked away, his head held high in indignation. Unfortunately, Preston was not the only person so easily offended. Mattingly had made his own contributions to his Lordships attire, and now he stepped back to admire his handiwork, gazing up at Lord Whitfield searchingly.

Lawrence slowly turned towards the looking glass and immediately started at what he saw: Mattingly had tied his cravat into such a flamboyant style that he had no words to describe it. It was something much better suited to the dandies of London and not a man simply setting out to explore the wilds of Hertfordshire.

Mattingly steeped his fingertips to his chin, smiled adoringly, and waited patiently. His own master would have never let him get away with something similar and he had been itching to bring a certain level of elegance to the viscount's person ever since he had first laid eyes on him.

Lawrence swallowed deeply before asking, "Don't you think it's a little—?" Whitfield merely gestured with his fingers, eventually committing the ultimate crime of actually touching the cloth around his neck, trying to tuck in as much of the ruffles and embellishments that Mattingly had so carefully arranged.

"I assure you, my lord, Mr. Darcy has never found fault with my work before."

"I am sure my cousin has more—." He stopped himself and decided to take a deep breath before he went on. "I am just a simple man, with simple needs. As you know, Mattingly, I keep no personal servant; I typically dress myself."

Mattingly raised one eyebrow mockingly and looked up and down at Lord Whitfield's plain black coat and dark grey riding breeches, "Yes," he drawled, "I know."

The valet exited the room to look to his own master's things, and was soon followed by Preston who did not help him on with the boots.



Whitfield made his way into the private dining room where one of the inns servants was waiting to serve. Various dishes and platters were laid out before him but Lawrence's

appetite only ever leaned towards porridge, toast, and coffee. He was immediately distracted by the sound of someone stumbling in from behind him. From the various curses and oaths sworn, he instantly knew that it could be no one but his brother.

“Gracious, Lawrence, what in the world did you do to Preston this morning? He’s having an awful sulk in the dressing room.”

Lawrence said nothing and merely lifted a shimmering boot as his reply.

The colonel continued his progress across the room, grasping the furniture along the way before unceremoniously flopping into the vacant chair at the table across from his brother.

Lawrence, recognizing Jonathan’s state and being up to no good, lifted the lid off a steaming tureen of scrambled eggs and sausage, fanning the vapour in his brother’s general direction. “Would you care for breakfast? It’s still quite hot.”

The colonel placed his head in his hands covering his eyes, thinking that eggs had to be the most revolting thing on earth. “In heaven’s name, Lawrence, have it taken away.”

The servant standing off to the side began to clear the table just as the Colonel dragged his body over to the settee. Lying down, he threw his arm over his eyes to block the small sliver of sunlight *pouring* into the room from a slight crack in the draperies.

“I’ll never drink whiskey again.”

“Yes, you always seem to say that and I never believe you.”

“How could I refuse, Bennet kept filling my glass at every opportunity.”

“I did not hear you say no.”

“How could I, it was the best thing I’ve had the pleasure of drinking in a while, well, other than the ninety-nine Delamain.”

Lawrence, about to take a sip from his coffee cup, suddenly set it down. “Where did *you* get a bottle of the Delamain?”

“Where else; from father.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then you should have stayed to dinner the other evening.”

Lawrence lifted his cup and said, “You must have stolen it; the Delamain comes very dear.”

“Stealing it was hardly necessary when father was so willing to share.”

“Father? Share? The only explanation for that is that he wants something.”

“Of course he wants something!” shouted the colonel, lifting his head, only to be overwhelmed by the ache of it and gingerly laying it down again. This time adding more quietly, “I wasn’t born yesterday. He always wants something!”

“Like what.”

“My head on a plate, my neck in a noose, and a wife in my bed.”

“Wife! You?” His lordship issued an unbecoming snort. “Pull the other one.”

“The old man is serious this time, brother; he’s doubled my allowance.”

Lawrence raised his eyebrows thinking that his father must be serious; Jonathan had been after him for an increase to his allowance for years, without much success.

“And do you have a particular lady in mind?”

“I’ve got my eye out,” added the colonel, being appropriately vague. “Hertfordshire has one or two pretty young things that strike my fancy already.”

“Jonathan, stop being ridiculous; you haven’t been in Hertfordshire long enough to—.” Lawrence suddenly stopped and thought of Miss Catherine Bennet, a dark-haired beauty very much to his brother’s taste. “Oh, I see.”

“You see, do you? Exactly what is it that you see?”

“You’ve taken a fancy to one of Mrs Bennet’s daughters have you? How very prompt of you.”

“As you may recall, brother, when we were all at Grimsby, Mother did give strict instructions that I look over *all* of Mrs. Bennet’s unmarried daughters once I made it into Hertfordshire.”

Now it all made sense, thought Lawrence, Jonathan, as usual, was trying to be funny.

“Yes, and as we both know you have always been the thoughtful and obliging son when it comes to pleasing our parents whenever marriage is discussed.”

“No, not this time, I’m serious, brother,” said the colonel sitting straight up. Jonathan very much wanted a confidant in this matter. His admiration for Jane Bennet was growing steadily by the day and if he could but open his heart to someone it would greatly lift the burden he had been carrying with him since meeting the young woman a

week ago. “Darcy’s engagement has got me thinking,” he said, “this marriage business; it might not be so very bad after all.”

Grimacing at the absurdity of his brother, Lawrence stood up from the table, and put on his coat and gloves as he regarded his brother with scepticism. “I am going out, John. Perhaps when I return you will be more of a mind to be serious for once in your misguided life.” Lord Whitfield made for the door.

“I am. I am being perfectly—”

The door slammed shut and Jonathan shuddered.



Stopping once for directions, Lord Whitfield made his way to Mr. Philips place of business. Once there he met with the clerk who had been set to work on the documents that required his signature and like Darcy, he had also taken a two month lease. Purvis Lodge was the perfect place to plan for his journey to South America without the distractions and obligations of London, his parents, his children and without the headaches of running Grimsby Priory.

Now with the papers signed he was free to engage three or four servants to get the house in order. Mr. Philips had just arrived at his office in time to suggest a suitable housekeeper, a Mrs. Warren, known in the area as hard-working and honest. It just so happened to be a bit of providence that her son, Chester, was looking for employment at the same time as well, having recently left the employ of a nearby manor. A cook and perhaps an under-maid were all that was left to engage, but Lord Whitfield, not in the habit of hiring servants, left it to Mr. Philips as that gentleman said that he already had someone in mind.

“Why don’t you come have your lunch with me at my home, if you are inclined? By then I will have spoken to Mrs Warren and worked out something for you.”

“I do not want to put you or your wife to any trouble.”

“Nonsense!” cried Mr. Philips, smilingly. “It will be no trouble at all! My wife is just getting over a cold and may not join us, but my niece, Jane, will certainly be there. Did you, by chance, happen to meet her so recently in London?”

“Yes, indeed. I did had the pleasure of making her acquaintance.”

“Capital! There is nothing like renewing friendships, is there? I will look for you at one o’clock.”

Lawrence, looking forward to seeing Miss Bennet again and so soon, voiced his agreeableness to the plan and Mr. Philips wrote out the direction.

Lawrence now set himself the task of next looking over his leased property. He had only briefly looked inside the dwelling the day before when his cousin had inspected it. As Purvis Lodge was only a short distance from the outskirts of Meryton, Lawrence set out for it on foot.

He walked on stopping and admiring several plants along the way, once even stopping to observe two foxes, following them to their den, and losing track of all time and distance. He found his way back to the path and before long came into contact with a large hole filled with muddy water. He looked round to ascertain if he was alone and, acting the part of naughty schoolboy rather than the future Earl of Matlock he stepped in. His boots were immediately mudded. Mischievousness had never been a trait associated with the viscount, but the temptation of proving a point to Mr. Preston proved far too tempting.

From her perch atop a stile, Miss Elizabeth Bennet stared down at the gentleman. Thinking him an oddity, she observed him for a moment or two before the urge to laugh at him proved far too great.

“Miss Bennet?” cried the mortified viscount upon hearing the laughter and noticing his cousin’s fiancée gazing down upon him. He stood in the hole a moment longer, then, recollecting himself he stepped up and out and bowed.

Elizabeth arched one eyebrow and thought only of teasing. “Enjoying a morning *walk*, my lord?”

Lawrence’s ears turned bright scarlet. “Yes... no! I mean, yes!”

Elizabeth started to make her way down from the stile, when Lawrence, in two long strides was there to offer his hand in assisting her. Elizabeth made her curtsy and looked at Lord Whitfield smilingly.

Embarrassed, Lawrence looked away momentarily, thinking himself the complete fool, but he soon found his courage and asked, “Are you also enjoying a country walk this morning, Miss Bennet.”

“Yes, I am. I generally walk this way everyday before breakfast. The fall colours are particularly lovely, yet, I must admit that I rarely meet with such... *sights* as I have been treated to this morning.”

Uncomfortable, he could do nothing but wonder what she was thinking of his odd behaviour. He suddenly blurted, “I am going to look over the Lodge this morning.”

“This way?” asked Elizabeth smiling in a way that quite discomposed the gentleman. “I’m afraid that if you keep along this path you will find yourself in Longbourn village.”

“Longbourn? Oh,” said Lawrence frowning, and looking all directions to take his bearings. “Then it is fortunate that you discovered me; I’d hate to appear at your father’s door this morning, asking the way to a house not two miles from Meryton and making a fool out of myself.” At Elizabeth’s teasing smirk, he added, “more of a fool than I have made of myself already this morning, I should say.”

Elizabeth, instead of making sport of his lordship chose to put him at ease. “It would make my mother quite happy. She would have asked you into breakfast and you would have found yourself obliged to stay to luncheon, tea, and dinner, as well.”

“I don’t think your mother would appreciate the state I suddenly find myself in,” he said, indicating his boots.

Elizabeth smiled and held out her hand. “Shall I to show you the way, then?”

Lawrence nodded and turned. They walked along in companionable silence for a few moments, each very curious and very anxious to get to know the other better.

For Elizabeth’s part she could not quite make him out; stoic one minute and playful the next. Jane’s description of the gentleman had been positive, yet somewhat mysterious. Notwithstanding the incident in the puddle, Lord Whitfield seemed a solemn sort of gentleman. But having known the folly of coming to hasty conclusions before, she preferred to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Lawrence was no less busy. To him, Miss Elizabeth was a pleasure to talk to and he found her charming. Perhaps she did not quite have her elder sisters striking beauty nor did she carry herself in the manner of the fashionable ladies about town, but what was that, the ladies of London had never held his interest in the slightest. His own wife was a clever, plain spoken woman from the wilds of Scotland who shared a humorous outlook similar to that of Miss Elizabeth’s which he found somewhat comforting; yes he liked his cousin’s choice very much.

Seeing what looked like a letter in his companion’s hands, he nodded towards it. “Forgive me; it seems that I have intruded upon you and your letter.”

“Oh, not at all; I was finished with it,” she said tucking it away in her pocket. “It is a letter from Miss Darcy.”

“And how shall you like your new sister,” he said, looking down at her seriously. He knew he was just being foolish, but he had grown very protective of Georgiana since their recent journey together and he hoped that the young lady before him liked his young cousin genuinely and not merely for the sake of pleasing the brother. His doubt was done away in an instant upon seeing Elizabeth’s eyes brighten.

“Very well. I can not wait to see her. She tells me that she will join her brother here in Hertfordshire very soon.”

“I am glad she will make the journey. I know that Georgiana looks forward to having a sister and now she has gained four. Oh, forgive me, I forget, I should have said five; you also have another sister who I have not met.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, “my youngest sister, Lydia, is lately married.” She did not wish to add anything more, not having the slightest interest in speaking of the Wickham’s.

“Oh, yes, I remember now, she married my uncle’s godson, George Wickham. I remember Darcy mentioning it several weeks ago.”

When she did not say anything more, Lord Whitfield looked down at her and noticed immediately how uncomfortable she seemed. Remembering his own brother’s violent reaction to the same information the week before, he thought it best to quickly change the subject. “I was so disappointed not to meet with Miss Bennet last evening. I am looking forward to the pleasure of speaking to her very soon.” For some reason he did not mention that he would be sharing a meal with her that very afternoon.

Elizabeth’s countenance instantly changed and she was all smiles for the opportunity to speak on the subject of her beloved sister. In fact, if the truth be known, she was quite interested as to what sort of information she could glean from the viscount since Jane had been so closed-mouthed when she last spoke of him.

“Yes, Jane will be so sorry to have missed you last night. I expect I will see her in the course of the day or perhaps tomorrow. She spoke of your family very fondly.”

For the first time since meeting him that morning, he smiled disarmingly but quickly put it away.

“Yes, the entire Matlock family have taken quite a fancy to Miss Bennet. I—we so enjoyed meeting her in town. Both my brother and sister find her delightful; my parents talk of nothing else, and my children, even after so short an acquaintance, simply adore her.”

Elizabeth smiled and said, “Jane is the general favourite when it comes to children. My little Gardiner cousin’s love when she visits them in London.”

“My children, Edward and Delphie, enjoyed the time spent with the Gardiner children. I can never quite remember all their names, I’m afraid. However, I do remember Miss Maria. She is—her conversation is--”

“I believe *plentiful* is the word you are searching for!” exclaimed Elizabeth while looking up at his lordship.

“I was going to say amusing.”

Elizabeth smiled archly. “Not to be telling secrets out of school, but a little bird might have whispered in my ear that my young cousin found your brother, the colonel, quite the charming fellow.”

“My brother seems to collect admirers wherever he goes. My mother has quite despaired for him.”

“Oh?”

“No, I don’t mean in the way you may be thinking. If truth be told, the word most associated with my brother is confirmed bachelor. Mother despaired for us both, I should imagine. She has now pinned all of her matrimonial hopes on her nephew and I am happy to say that she will be most pleased with the end result.”

Elizabeth blushed. “You flatter me, sir.”

“It is not empty flattery, I assure you, Miss Bennet. We Fitzwilliam men do possess an inordinate amount of good fortune when it comes to choosing a partner in life even if at times we can be such a pack of bumbling idiots.”

Elizabeth smiled but made no reply and meeting the gentleman’s eye, he smiled at her and she instantly knew that she had made a friend that day.

“Does Miss Bennet often walk out with you?”

The suddenness of the question startled Elizabeth but she answered him with alacrity. “Not very often; her mornings are usually devoted to assisting our mother.”

“Oh? So Miss Bennet does not have much time for exploring the paths hereabouts?”

“When she gets the chance, she might take Nellie out for a walk.”

“Nellie? Is that another sister I have not met?”

“Oh no,” said Elizabeth, chuckling. “Nellie is Jane’s mare.”

“I have heard that your sister is quite the horsewoman. My late wife loved a good ride every morning—before the children, I should say. I was never much for riding out—I wish I had—I should have spent more time--.” His voice faded and Elizabeth felt more than knew that he was in danger of displaying some part of his carefully guarded emotions.

“And here we are!” she cried suddenly to distract him from his pain. She pointed to a path up a slight rise.

Once they reached the top Elizabeth gestured to a shortcut over a barren field belonging to her father.

“If we had come this way a few days ago we would have been in the way of the harvesters, but they are quite finished now. Just follow the hedgerow until you come to the end and you will soon see your way.”

Lawrence bid his cousin’s fiancée a good day, and walked along the low hedgerow just as Elizabeth had directed, until the rear of the tall brick chimneys of Purvis Lodge came into view.

He walked round the handsome dwelling. From the outside the roof appeared sturdy enough but he knew he would need to investigate owing to Mrs Bennet’s warning that something could possibly be amiss in the attics.

The front of Purvis Lodge boasted an arbour of thick climbing roses, the last of the dark red blooms clinging to life before the fall weather gave way to the frosts of winter. It would need to be cut back and he would do it himself he ruminated. Hard work! It would probably do him some good, for what was life on a ship but hard work and he looked forward to reaping the benefits of the exercise.

He rounded the side of the lodge and he stopped at a sudden realization: he had not heard a sound. Oh, there were the calls of birds and the rustle of the large chestnut trees overhead, yet the absence of another human voice caught his attention like no other. Quiet. How he looked forward to the perfect solitude of this place: days spent studying the garden and sketching, his evenings filled with writing and reading all the academic journals he never had time for. He made up his mind immediately: he would go up to London in a day or two to collect his things and then journey back to Hertfordshire to enjoy its peace and quite.

He was just about to walk back to the front to use his key when he noticed that the back door was slightly ajar. He pushed open the door, stepped in, and was immediately met by an older woman down on her hands and knees going over the floor with a scrub brush. She looked up.

“Mind!” she screeched.

Flabbergasted, all Lawrence could manage was: “Pardon?”

“Your boots, man! You’ll not be coming in here with those!”

He looked down and saw his handiwork: mud tracked in on the floor. “Oh yes, of course.”

Lawrence stepped back outside and the woman, rising to her feet, followed soon after, asking. “And just who might you be sneaking round here frightening a body?”

“Whitfield, Lawrence.”

“Whitfield Lawrence you say? Never heard of you.”

“Actually, my name is Fitzwilliam. Lawrence Fitzwilliam.”

“Well, Whitfield Lawrence Fitzwilliam, since you got nothin’ better to do than scare an old woman half to death, you go and fetch me that bucket of water over by the well.”

“Pardon?”

“By the well, man; by the well! Are you hard of hearing along with having too many names? Bring it to me!” Lawrence could only stand and stare at such an extraordinary request. “Now, if you please!”

“Yes, of course.”

Lawrence ran over to retrieve the bucket for the old woman, bringing it back and sloshing more out of it than was necessary. He entered the kitchen once again with his muddy boots.

“Mind your muddy boots, man! I knowed I told ya afore.” She made a tsk, tsking sound when she noticed the depleted contents of the pail. “Can tell *you* never did a days work in all your life afore. Now off with you, young man, I don’t have time to be fritterin’ away my day talkin’ to the likes of you. The new master be coming this afternoon and I’ll not have you making tracks all through my clean kitchen.”

“Oh, that would be me, I’m the new master. Actually, I’m not exactly the master, but I will be leasing the property for a few months.”

“You be the master? I thought you say’d your name be Whitfield Lawrence Fitzwilliam. Lawyer Philips said the new master be some kind of Lord or sum-mit—some kind’o relation to that gentleman that be marryin’ that sassy, dark-haired daughter of Mr. Bennet across the way.” She gestured in the general direction of Longbourn.

“Yes, that be me, I mean, I am Lord Whitfield.”

“Well why didn’t you say so at first? I be Mrs. Grange. I been cook here ni’ on twenty year. Lawyer Philips told me last night that you be needin’ a cook so I harried on over here first thing in the morning to make it all nice and proper for you and your missus. Now, I don’t usually scrub the floors, that be the undermaid’s job, but I reckon you don’t have an undermaid just yet. Young women willing to do the work mighty scarce these days what with that militia be taken liberties and all. Don’t say that I blame a father for keepin’ his daughter’s safe, but you bein’ a proper lord and soon to be a connection to the Bennet’s, I expects they just might be trustin’ you.”

Lawrence tried to get a word in edgewise to explain his situation, but the woman kept talking and talking.

“Now, I expect your missus will want to see where we keeps all the linen and such. The housekeeper keeps the house and the keys but I can show you that now if you like since you be here pokin’ your nose into things.” She began to lead the way when she was once again distracted by the boots. “Your boots, man!” She folded her arms across her ample person and waited.

“Yes, of course.”

He stepped out of the kitchen door and made use of the adjacent boot-scrape. He looked back at Mrs Grange to gage his success and immediately saw that the woman was none too impressed. She handed him a rag and several minutes later he was allowed to follow her about the house.

“When did you say your missus be coming down?”

Startled by subject of the question, Lawrence answered with a slight lost of composure. “I didn’t. I mean, I don’t have a missus—” he shook his head to clear it of the woman’s sing-song Hertfordshire cadence. “I mean, I don’t have wife.”

Mrs Grange regarded him warily for a moment before saying, “Well that explains why you be traipsing mud all through the house. Next you’ll be telling me you had no mother, as well? That be explainin’ a lot, too.”

“I do have a mother,” said Lawrence rather defensively.

“Well then, she oughta taught you better manners than that—but I expect you bein’ a lord you do what you likes. I expect you bein’ a Lord, that make your father some kind a lord as well and I know a lord’s family be used to having all kinds of maids and under-maids and washerwomen to do their biddin’ but it just be me here and two or three other servants to look after ya so I hopes you keeps that in mind afore you think about bringing your muddy boots in here again!”



He had made his escape! The indefatigable Mrs Grange had talked on and on for another three quarters of an hour. However, having the excuse for the need to pay a call upon Mr. Philips, he had begged off a further inspection of the houses many bedrooms until the following morning when he would take official possession.

As he checked his watch and saw that it was half past eleven, he rounded a bend and stepped directly into Meryton’s main thoroughfare and unfortunately right in the centre of town. Every curious eye suddenly turned to have a look at him. Apparently, the news that

a viscount of some consequence had moved into the neighbourhood was the talk of the entire town.

Never one to enjoy attention, he avoided it by stepping into the shop nearest to hand. The shops bell sounded and the smiling proprietor was instantly there to help.

“Might I be of assistance, sir?”

“Oh, I had not—” Lawrence hastily glanced around to take in his surroundings and saw that he was in the shop of a provisions merchant. Several toys in the shop caught his eye and gave him a ready excuse to have a look around. “I would like to buy my children some gifts. What is this, exactly?” asked the Viscount picking up a square object made of wood.

“That is of German design, sir; a most curious object: a puzzle.”

The shop owner demonstrated the workings of the article by removing one or two of the interlocking pieces that formed the square block and Lawrence wondered if it was the sort of thing that Delphie would like. He had no clue.

The bell on the shops door rang again and the proprietor, bowing respectfully, excused himself. “I won’t be a moment.” The man hurried away to assist his new customer.

A woman’s soft voice said, “Good morning, Mr. Stewart, I hope you are well this morning.”

Hearing the familiar voice, Lord Whitfield spun round in an instant.

“I am very well, indeed, Miss Bennet. How are you today?”

“Very well, sir.”

“And how is your good aunt fairing?”

“Much better, sir, thank you for asking. She was able to join us for breakfast this morning,”

“Well now, that is excellent news, indeed. Now, what may I show you this morning.”

“Do you recall that lovely yellow muslin, the one I admired so yesterday, do you by chance still have it?”

“Yes, I do; I set it aside especially for you. I suspected you might wish to see it again.”

“Oh, how very kind of you. I would like a dress length, please. My Aunt Philips has been so kind as to make a present of it to me.”

“Is it for the assembly ball?”

“Yes it is. I hope to have it made up in time.”

“It is an excellent choice if I maybe permitted to say so. Let me just step to the back to wrap it for you; I won’t be a moment.” Seconds later his voice carried out from the storeroom. “We have some lovely new ribbons in just this morning. I have not had the pleasure of a visit from Miss Catherine today, so if something strikes your fancy, you’ll have first choice.”

This caused Jane to smile knowingly.

Lawrence watched Jane Bennet for a long moment as she looked over the selection of ribbons. For some reason he found that he liked looking at her. Her delicate motions and graceful presence had a calming affect on him that he found that he enjoyed.

Finding two choices that she liked, she held a wide blue ribbon up to the light of the shop window comparing it to a green ribbon in her other hand.

“If I may be permitted to say so, the blue suits you, Miss Bennet.”

Startled at being addressed, Jane glanced over her shoulder. She had seen him just two days previous and was all astonishment at his sudden appearance. “Lord Whitfield, you are here... in Meryton! I had not thought to see you... pray, excuse me, sir.” She curtsied.

He bowed. “Miss Bennet, an unlooked for pleasure.”

Her heart slowly steadied itself back into its normal beating pattern and it was many moments before she could gain her voice. “Did you come down with Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes. Darcy invited me and my brother along on this trip.”

“Oh! The Colonel--he is here as well?”

“Yes, indeed.”

She stared at him for several moments, trying to order the numerous thoughts and comments she wanted to make. Realizing she still held the ribbons in her hands she laid them aside.

When she turned away to return the ribbons to order, Lord Whitfield smiled broadly, thinking to himself just how becoming Jane Bennet seemed when she was flushed with surprise.

She turned back around but was quite unable to lift her eyes. “I did not expect to see you here in Meryton, sir. I understood that naturally Mr. Darcy would come down, but I had

no idea—oh, do forgive me, where are my manners today--your parents, they are well are they not?"

He schooled his features. "They are both perfectly well."

"And the children?" Here she hazarded a glance upwards. "How are Teddy and Delphie?"

"Quiet well, I thank you."

After hearing a good account of the children, Jane finally smiled, but quickly frowned when she recalled that she had not properly thanked him for her gifts on coming away from London.

"Oh, sir, the painting; how can I ever express my gratitude? I must thank you again and again. I did not realize—you said nothing at the exhibition."

"Please, Miss Bennet, do not thank me. Your admiration of it was enough of a thanks, I assure you. I have never actually met a person who admired one of my watercolours before. You have worked wonders upon my vanity."

"Well, if you will not accept my thanks, you must express them to the children."

"I will do that. I was just telling your sister, Miss Elizabeth--"

"Oh, so you have met Lizzy?"

"Yes, I have met the delightful Miss Elizabeth. In fact, she was good enough to postpone part of her morning walk to point me in the direction of Purvis Lodge. Yesterday, when Darcy looked it over I found myself so enamoured with the place that I have leased the Lodge for a few months."

"Forgive me, sir. Did I hear you correctly? You have leased Purvis Lodge? I thought Mr. Darcy would take it."

"I'm afraid not. Darcy has taken the house in Stoke until the wedding and I thought—well, it was pretty impulsive of me—but I found Purvis Lodge to be utterly fascinating."

"Then you will be our closest neighbour."

"Your mother was good enough to invite our party to dine at Longbourn last night. It was quite an enjoyable evening with the exception of one thing."

Concerned and knowing her family's faults very well, Jane's eyes widened. "Oh?"

"You were very much missed, Miss Bennet—by everyone."

Jane smiled slightly and blushed at the compliment. “So, how do you find Meryton?” she added shyly for lack of anything better to say. “It is quite a change from London, I imagine?”

“Yes, indeed, very different from London. I am very pleased with the general peace and quiet surrounding Purvis Lodge. That is, once I get used to the talkative Mrs Grange.”

Jane smiled. “She is such a dear, sweet woman. I have known her all of my life and one can not visit Purvis Lodge without her insisting on feeding you. She bakes such delicious black current scones.”

“Well then, I will be sure to ask for the scones regularly. Hopefully that will please her. I ran afoul of her hospitality this morning when I toured the place.”

“I can’t imagine you doing anything to displease her. She is very obliging.”

“To you perhaps. Apparently I am a frightener of old women. I’m afraid that I startled her with my sudden appearance this morning. She told me that I have too many names for her to remember and that I am a scoundrel for tracking mud into her kitchen. No wonder I wasn’t offered any tea and black current scones.”

Jane noticed what was in his hands and smiling, nodded towards the puzzle. “A present for Edward?”

“No. Actually, I was thinking of getting this for Delphie.”

“For Delphie?” Reaching for another one, Jane bit her lip after examining it, noticing how complicated the puzzle appeared. It would not have been her first choice of gifts for a young girl of Delphie’s age.

Lawrence saw the doubt in her eyes immediately. His brow furrowed and his mouth formed a grim line. “I see that you do not agree,” he said a little more firmly than he realized. Mrs Bennet’s tactless hints of the night before concerning the needs of motherless children had irritated him more than he cared to admit. And now it seemed that her eldest daughter was being just as presumptuous.

“Oh no, my lord, forgive me. I just thought—perhaps Delphie would prefer something else.”

“And what would she prefer?”

Confused by the sudden change in his manner, Jane stuttered. “I-I’m sure I-I don’t know, sir.”

“No, no, Miss Bennet let me hear what you have to suggest.”

Jane felt sure that she had offended him greatly with every word she had uttered. “Please forgive my presumption, sir. You are her father, I am sure you know her preferences better than I.”

Mr. Stewart chose that exact moment to return with the parcel. “Here you are, Miss Bennet. Shall I have it sent on the dressmakers?”

“N-No, Mr. Stewart. I think I would like to show it to my aunt first.”

“Then let me call the boy to carry it round to your aunts for you.”

“Oh no, Mr. Stewart, that is not necessary, I can manage very well. T-Thank you so much.” She scooped up the parcel; she wanted to be off as soon as possible lest she offend the Viscount even more. “Good day, Mr. Stewart, good day, my lord.” Avoiding the viscount’s eye, she curtsied quickly and hastened from the shop.

Lawrence stood still for several long moments thinking over his conversation with Miss Bennet. He soon realized what a complete ar\*e he had been. Sighing heavily and running his large hand down his face he felt heartily ashamed of himself. Miss Bennet was nothing like her mother and he could not believe he had even dared to make such a comparison.

Mr. Stewart come forward to assist him once again but Lawrence forestalled him by moving to the door only to discover that once he made it outside Jane Bennet had disappeared.