

Chapter 18 – A Man without Fault



After a fair number of gentle hints and bold suggestions, the odious woman still would not go away. She was firmly entrenched and Louisa Hurst was stuck entertaining both the wife and the awkward, colourless daughter of one her husband's all too numerous relations.

“And how is dear, dear, Charles,” asked Fredericka Hurst. “Constance was in hopes of meeting him again, were you not, Constance?”

The silent Constance sat up straighter at the mention of Charles Bingley. She had set her cap for him long ago and would put up with just about anything to get a glimpse.

Louisa's neck and cheeks flushed (which everyone in the family knew meant she was about to tell a falsehood). She could have simply said that he was in the country, but Louisa had never been very wise and thought it best to *create* a story rather than to have the humiliating truth of the matter come out.

And Fredericka, being what she was, would have asked all manner of impertinent questions about her brother's plans to come up to town and what he was doing with himself in the country these days. And talk of her brother would always lead to a discussion on how Mr. Darcy fared and when Miss Darcy would be coming out and whether the Darcys had invited them to Pemberley for Christmas--all questions for which Louisa was ill-prepared to answer.

“Oh Charles—he's about—somewhere. I hardly know these days; always full of engagements, our Charles; friends to see, business to tend to. And you know how he is; underfoot one moment, impulsive the next. Why, I quite expect him to walk through that door at any moment—or not.”

Constance eyed the door expectantly. She never liked visiting her cousin's wife, but if there was even the slightest opportunity of seeing Louisa's charming and amiable brother, she would happily follow her mother into hell.

“Dear Louisa,” said Fredericka Hurst, her plump and rouged cheeks dimpling, “I nearly forgot to ask what you know of that titbit in the newspaper from the other morning. Everyone is just wild to know who this beautiful young lady is.”

Louisa's neck and cheeks flushed anew and she answer in a strangled voice somewhere between hysterics and nervous giggling. “Which young lady is that, pray?”

“Now, Louisa!” cried Fredericka, narrowing her beady little eyes. “It’s me, Freddy, your husband’s favourite cousin’s wife. There is no need to be coy! All of London is talking of it and everyone has been plaguing me to death for answers. It is widely known that you are an intimate with several members of *that* family.”

Panicked, Louisa glanced at the ill-tempered Caroline, wishing her sister would make some sort of effort to come to her rescue. Caroline, sitting sulkily in the far corner of the room and refusing to be of use, would not look at her. Her attentions were solely focused on being tight-lipped and disagreeable. Louisa had no choice but to forge on alone. Affecting a simpering smile she replied, “Fredericka, dear, as you well know, I am an intimate within several of the better families, but in this instance I fear I have no idea what you can be speaking of.” The incident in the park was, of course, was still very fresh. To be cut by Jane Bennet and Lady Adele Fitzwilliam was the most mortifying thing she had ever been a party to. She thought it best to steer clear of that subject altogether and move onto another and gossip about people she did not know was always preferable to those she did. “Now, as for the better families, I am certain you have heard all about the Rushworth divorce. Shocking, is it not!” She laughed nervously.

Fredericka was not of a mind to play Louisa’s game no matter how much she desperately wanted to know the juicy details in *that* quarter.

“Come now, Louisa, the Rushworths; old news, my dear, old news. You know I want to speak of the Fitzwilliam family. And with dear, dear Charles” (Constance’s eyes flew to the door) “as Mr. Darcy’s most intimate friend, I can only assume that *you* would be privy to anything and everything having to do with the Earl’s family.”

“If I did, Fredericka, as a friend to the Darcy family I could hardly speak of it. Besides, I haven’t any notion of what it is that the Matlock’s do. I have only been in their company once or twice.”

Fredericka twitched her lips in dissatisfaction and said peevishly, “Well, if you *really* know nothing then I must take your word for it.”

Fredericka, for the present was finished with Louisa and now turned her attention to Miss Bingley who had said not a word since her arrival. You would have to have been blind not to notice Caroline’s heightened colour and sullen expression at the mention of Mr. Darcy, so Fredericka merely switched the method of her frontal attack.

“Speaking of Mr. Darcy, how delighted you must be with the news of his engagement, Caroline. Every mother in London had such hopes! I even recall one or two ladies of my close acquaintance being rather partial to that gentleman at one time or another. But then, it all came to naught, did it not? Well, I hope that Mr. Darcy is happy with his choice. I know she can only be the most worthy of young ladies to catch such a prize.”

Caroline said nothing and merely shifted in her chair and took a deep calming breathe. Fredericka, who had never liked Miss Bingley, smiled triumphantly and turned back to her cousin's wife.

“However, you must admit that the most eligible bachelors in the country are dropping like flies. First *Mr. Darcy* becomes engaged to someone no one knows or has never seen and now his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, who everybody knows never had the slightest leanings towards matrimony before, is seen all over town with a beautiful lady on his arm.”

Louisa was incredulous here. “All over town... I hardly think it was all over—” She stopped herself; it would not do to be caught in a lie.

Nothing got past Fredericka and she smiled at Louisa's near faux pas. “Why just yesterday Miss Pennyworth called on my Constance here to say that she saw the Colonel's elder brother, who nobody has seen in town in an age, at Spring Gardens with a beautiful young woman on *his* arm. There is definitely something going on. My advice to any single ladies of my acquaintance,” said Fredericka with a brief smirk at Caroline, “is that they had better hurry and snatch someone up before they end an old maid.”

Fredericka could barely conceal her victorious smile.

Caroline, not caring for appearances and wanting nothing more than to be out of sight, arose suddenly and stormed from the room, nearly knocking down her brother-in-law in the process.

“Oh lord!” mumbled Chetwyn Hurst as he entered the drawing room. “Oh lord,” he mumbled again when he saw who was inside. He tried to turn round to make his escape.

Fredericka, seeing him, called out energetically. “Chetwyn, darling! We haven't seen you for an age. Come give your cousins a kiss!”

“Oh lord,” he whispered before bending down to give a quick peck on the plump pink cheek of Fredericka and the sallow, drawn cheek of Constance. He surreptitiously wiped the rouge away by bringing his hand up to cover his mouth while pretending to clear his throat. “What brings you here today, Freddy.”

“I came here to invite you all to dinner for the day after tomorrow. Aunt Temple-Hurst will be there along with Cousin Stuart and Cousin Frank. Frank has just come up from the farm in Sussex, you know, doing something very interesting down there with pigs, I understand.”

An evening of *pig talk* from uncouth, rural relatives (who were best left unmentioned in certain circles) was not Chetwyn Hurst's idea of an entertaining evening. Besides, he had other plans.

“Naturally Louisa will be there; she never misses one of your dinners. Unfortunately, you will have to do without me.”

Louisa’s hackles arose and she could only think to argue. “What in heavens name are you talking of, Mr. Hurst? What could *you* possibly have to do?”

Fredericka and Constance both sat back further in their seats to get more comfortable; they took great pleasure in anticipating the ugly scene to come.

“Going up to the country... bit of shooting, what.”

“Shooting? Shooting!” yelled Louisa, quite forgetting herself and in whose presence she was in.

“Yes, shooting; I am for Netherfield; can not disappoint old Charles, now can I?” Charles had never actually *invited* him to Netherfield, Chetwyn had simply sent off a letter, inviting himself... the general mood in the house being what it was. “I’m leaving first thing in the morning.”

Louisa’s pitch rose with every utterance. “So you are leaving me here, alone, with Caroline, in London, just like that, without informing me, with no discussion, no explanation?”

“It is a shooting party, Louisa. Ladies are not generally invited to shooting parties.” Chetwyn’s tone now changed from one of boredom to sarcasm. “Besides, I may go to up Netherfield as often as I choose; I’m not the one Charles has barred from its doors.”

Fredericka was on to him in a flash. “Forgive me, Chetwyn, dear, but am I to understand that you and dear Charles will be leaving London in the morning?”

“Charles? Leaving London?” He snorted unbecomingly. “Charles hasn’t been in London for weeks and weeks.” (Constance frowned) “He’s been off chasing after some bit of skirt in Hertfordshire,” (Constance slumped) “and making a very bad business out of it from what I gather.” (Constance perked up straight away) Chetwyn now flopped down and sprawled out inelegantly on a nearby settee, adding, “Ask Louisa, she knows what her brother is about more than I do.”

“Does she now? Does she indeed?” asked Fredericka smilingly, thinking how amusing it was to see Louisa actually squirm.



He had meant to refresh himself before his lunch appointment: a change of shirt and cravat—have his boots polished—but he could only sit and stare at nothing in particular.

Seconds later he was on his feet again to pace back and forth and to reproach himself for his abominable behaviour towards Miss Bennet.

The heavy foot falls on the parlour floor and the mutterings from within it were enough to summon another. His brother entered wearing no more than his britches, shirt-sleeves, and a smile. Never one to suffer the ill effects of drink for too long, he was much recovered from the excesses of the evening before and he was in high spirits for what he hoped was to come: some intelligence on Jane Bennet's arrival at home or, even better, going to Longbourn and finding her there himself.

"Oh, it is only you," said Colonel Fitzwilliam, tying his own cravat and making a mess out of it. "I thought it was Darcy in here pacing, impatient to be off." When his brother didn't respond he went on. "As you can probably surmise, we are for Longbourn--almost at this moment--if Mister *cannot-stay-away-from-his-fiancée-for-ten-minutes* has his way." The colonel immediately recognized Lawrence's pacing as the start of one of his brother's usual black moods. "I shan't ask you to accompany us; I can see by your countenance that you are disinclined for *certain* company." Far too consumed with fussing with his cravat to notice that what he'd assumed was a frown was actually a look of remorse. The colonel turned away and shouted for aid. "Preston, Preston! Come here at once!"

The ever faithful batman scurried in holding out a selection of frock coats. "I'm coming sir, I coming!" he said panting and puffing. "Which one shall it be, Colonel; the blue or the brown?"

"Never mind that now; do something with the infernal neck cloth; it's tied all wrong!"

Preston spied the problem immediately. "Not tied wrong, sir; just twisted, is all. I'll soon have you sorted."

The two coats were carefully laid aside. Preston was quick about his business, yet the colonel, having now seen his reflection in the parlour mirror, wasn't satisfied for he now fancied the cravat as wrinkled.

"No, no, no, this will never do, we must begin again. Fetch me another at once." Jonathan returned to the mirror, now imagining his hair out of order.

As Preston hurried away, Lawrence sat down. His earlier conversation with Jane Bennet kept gnawing at his insides. He had never meant to be so abrupt with such a gentle creature. He could only rebuke himself and worry over his conduct. He and Jonathan had never been close enough to discuss personal feelings before, but Lawrence felt himself at a loss and only had his brother to turn to for answers.

"Brother," said Lawrence, lifting his eyes upwards, "answer me truthfully, what sort of person am I?"

Jonathan, surprised by the nature of the question, looked round and cocked one eyebrow. “What sort of person are you? What kind of question is that?”

Wounded by Jonathan’s tone, Lawrence nevertheless, pressed him once more. “Humour me just this once and tell me the truth.”

“You are the ever tedious and boring Lawrence Fitzwilliam and you have been both tedious and boring for nearly thirty-six years.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Incredulous, Jonathan replied, “Well, tell me what it is that you want to hear and I will be *happy* to oblige.”

“Would you consider me as somewhat amiable?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam stopped fussing with his hair, turned back to face his brother, and laughed loudly. “Amiable? My dear brother, if *amiable* were a safe anchorage, you would be the frigate farthest from.”

“So, I am—?”

“Moody, temperamental, morose; yes.”

“With people in the family?”

“With everyone!”

“Surely not everyone.”

“The staff at Matlock, the staff at Grimsby, with me, with Adele, Father, and before you two kissed and made up, Darcy. I even suspect the Bennet family as a whole will soon join us all on that list. The only people I have ever seen you treat with any amount of kindness are mother and Georgiana, but I expect you will have a row with Georgiana one day or another over something as trivial as a cold cup of tea.”

Darcy, impeccably dressed, walked in, glanced back and forth between the two brothers and asked, “Who is having a row with Georgiana?”

The colonel smirked at his overprotective cousin and replied, “No one, Darcy, no one.”

Satisfied with that answer, Darcy looked the colonel up and down. “You are not even finished dressing!”

“All in good time, cousin, all in good time,” replied the Colonel, winking saucily as Mr. Preston re-entered with a fresh cravat and set to work. “I have always found that ladies appreciate any extra effort a gentleman can make to look his best.”

Darcy, clearly exasperated with one cousin, turned to the other and nodding towards his muddy boots, asked, “Are you not coming, Lawrence? Mattingly can have your boots polished in no time.”

Preston made an impertinent sort of scoffing noise that only the viscount heard.

“Please make my apologies to Mrs Bennet,” said Lawrence. “I have a prior luncheon engagement.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. This was only their second day in Meryton and he was very curious as to who his eldest cousin had befriended in so short a time. “Oh?”

“I have been invited to dine this afternoon with Mr. Philips and his niece.”

The colonel, who had only seconds before urged Mr. Preston to tighten his cravat, swung his head around abruptly nearly choking himself.

“What? With Miss Jane Bennet? How on earth did you manage that?” With such a loud outburst, both Darcy and Lawrence turned simultaneously towards the colonel. Jonathan, struggling to find his breath and to appear as nonchalant as possible under such watchful eyes, added, “I understand that Mrs. Philips is unwell.”

“She is well enough, I believe,” said Lawrence.

“Please send them all my regards,” said Darcy, who began putting on his greatcoat.

“I will.” Lawrence looked at the clock and saw that he needed to be off within the next twenty minutes to be in good time for his appointment. He then eyed Mr. Preston warily as he finished with his brother’s cravat and moved to the settee and held up the two coats.

His heart no longer into going to Longbourn, Jonathan nodded blandly towards the blue coat on the left. Still somewhat cross, he added, “You might have said before that you were meeting with Miss Bennet... and Mr. Philips today. I *might* have liked to have gone along and paid my respects as well.”

“It was all very sudden and spur of the moment, brother. I, myself, was only just invited this morning.”

“You will, of course, send Miss Bennet... and Mr. and Mrs Philips my regards, as well,” replied the colonel.

Preston began brushing the back of the colonel's coat. The sergeant could feel the tension that had settled there and began to wonder if the colonel had developed a serious attachment to this Miss Bennet; he had never done so before over any lady. Preston even wondered for a moment if his lordship had a liking for the same young woman. It was quickly dismissed it though; everyone having anything to do with the Matlock family knew very well the continued attachment the viscount had for his departed wife.

“Are you coming, Fitzwilliam?” said Darcy testily, impatient to go.

Jonathan held back, having more to say. “And tell Miss Bennet--tell her—tell her that I look forward to meeting her again very soon.”

“Fitzwilliam!” shouted Darcy from somewhere along the corridor.

“I'm coming; keep your shirt on!” The colonel, grabbing his cloak, went to the door, paused, and looked back at his brother once again. “You won't forget to tell her, will you Lawrence?”

Caught up in his own worries, Lawrence replied, “Sorry—oh, yes—of course.” He turned back round and promptly forgot all he was to say. With his brother and cousin now gone, Lawrence smiled weakly at Mr. Preston.

“Ah, Preston, good fellow, it would seem that I am in need of your expertise with these boots once again.”

Triumphant, Preston simply smiled and bowed; it was nice to see the gentleman finally coming to reason.



Elizabeth sat quietly on the settee pretending to listen to what Mary was saying to the colonel. Every now and then she would glance up in the direction of Mr. Darcy, notice the grim set to his features, and feel guilty and miserable all over again. She knew all along that she was being extremely silly to let some girlhood fancy interfere in the happiness that should be hers, but she also knew she had put the gentleman off long enough and sensed that today would be her day of reckoning.

“I find that can not agree with you there, Colonel Fitzwilliam. The newspapers all agreed that he should have had more control over his German troops.”

Mary Bennet was having an intense discussion with Colonel Fitzwilliam (odious man *and* a soldier to boot). She did not know what her father was thinking by letting him into the house, let alone allowing him to walk through the village.

The colonel smiled good-naturedly. The conversation was all that was provoking, but he would put up with it for now in the hopes that at some time during the visit the subject of Miss Bennet's return would be introduced.

"Even you must admit, Miss Mary, that I have a much more intimate understanding of the situation. After all, I took part in the battle myself, which, I might remind you, was a victory!"

"But did you agree with Wellington's tactics?"

"As a soldier it is not my place to agree or disagree; I am the King's man and therefore obliged to follow orders by mounting my horse and I pointing my sword."

"I once read somewhere that Wellington disliked his cavalry commanders. I believe the quote was something like they were unable to maneuver... except on Wimbledon Common." She tittered, an action, when she reflected was quite unlike herself; but how could she not, the look of contempt upon the gentleman's face was priceless.

Happy to set her right, he smiled tightly. "I am not in the cavalry, Miss Mary; I command a regiment of Dragoons."

"But isn't that basically the same thing?"

The colonel's eyes flashed. "No, it most certainly is not!" (even though it was)

Mr. Bennet could not remember the last time he had enjoyed such a passionate discussion in his life. With the colonel's forced politeness and Mary's obvious dislike, it was all too humorous a circumstance to miss. Mrs Bennet had been fortunately called away by Mrs Hill and he knew he must enjoy himself in the brief interlude while he could, for Mary's attempts at stimulating conversation would be, upon his wife's return, most certainly thwarted.

His Lizzy had once been the very person to bring liveliness and volatility into just such a debate, but with the presence of her intended in the room, she was, of late, all that was dreary and dull. Mary, he thought, just might do as a replacement for intelligent discourse after her sister moved away; too bad she lacked his Lizzy's witty playfulness and perfect turn of phrase.

Mary refused to be gainsaid. "Dragoons, I understand, are a mounted regiment. What is the cavalry, then but another version of mounted troops?"

Colonel Fitzwilliam would have been happy to explain the difference, but Mr. Bennet spoke first.

"Come now, Mary," he laughed, "leave the poor gentleman alone."

Mary, though still a little intimidated by Mr. Darcy, felt that Colonel Fitzwilliam was hardly worth caring about. She could tell from his flirtatious manners and tendencies towards levity that he was not a serious person and never would be. Of course, she would never share these thoughts with another person, believing it beneath her to pronounce an adverse judgement against anyone.

The colonel just stared at her. To question his knowledge of music (his belief of the superiority of Beethoven over the frivolity of Mozart) was one thing, however questioning his knowledge of the Battle of Salamanca was quite another.

Kitty was now fretful and anxious; Mary was ruining everything. Kitty knew that if Mary continued on this course she would never catch the colonel's eye as he must now surely think all the Bennet sisters absolutely absurd. She stood up abruptly.

"Let us all walk to Oakham Mount to see the view."

Hearing this, Darcy also stood, never so grateful to someone in his life. "Yes, Miss Catherine, a walk to Oakham Mount would be most welcome." He turned to Elizabeth. "Miss Elizabeth?"

She came out of her silent contemplations. "Yes?"

"Oakham Mount," he said.

"Pardon?"

"Do you wish to see the view?"

"I've seen it!" At the sudden chuckle from her father she came to her senses. "Yes, the view from Oakham Mount would be lovely. Let us all walk out together."

Kitty, wishing to be off as soon as possible lest Mary and the Colonel actually come to blows, gave her elder sister a withering glance. "That is what I have just suggested, Lizzy."

"Oh yes, of course," said Elizabeth, blushing. However, suddenly recollecting the colonel and his injured leg, she turned towards him. The words were on her lips but the Colonel stopped her.

"The fresh air and exercise will do my leg a world of good; think nothing of it Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth smiled and turned once more to her father. "Father, do you have any objection to us all walking out together?"

“Oh no, not at all; even though I had just started to enjoy act one, but I believe I can wait for act two upon your return.”

“Pardon?”

He sighed heavily when Elizabeth did not recognize his joke. “Off with you, Lizzy. You could do with a good deal of fresh air just now yourself; it will help clear the fog in your head.”

Mary had no intention of going and moved into the next room to her instrument, sitting down and loudly playing the introduction to a Mozart piano concerto that she knew would grate upon the Colonel’s nerves. Mr. Bennet simply shook open his newspaper and laughed heartily behind it.

When they had all gone away, the oblivious Mrs Bennet breezed back into the drawing room. “You must forgive me, gentlemen, I seem to have—” She stopped when she noticed only her husband in the room. “Mr. Bennet, where has everybody gone?”

He did not look up from his reading and simply stated, “Exit, stage left.”



Jane entered the drawing room and came to an abrupt halt when she saw a gentleman standing near the mantle. His dark hair, broad shoulders, and tall stature announced who he was even before he faced her.

Lawrence, who had been studying a landscape painting over the mantle turned round upon hearing the approach and the two stared at each other for several moments. His countenance was all supplication, hers spoke mostly of awkwardness.

Jane was the first to recall the niceties that must be displayed.

“Lord Whitfield.” It was said with a tone of the strictest formality accompanying the deepest of curtsies and the lowering of her eyes as demurely as possible.

Instinctively, Lord Whitfield took a step forward and reached out his hand as if to give her aid to stand, only to quickly return it to his side daring not to touch her. “Miss Bennet...” He bowed deeply.

Jane had the idea that she had offended the gentleman greatly and wanted nothing more than to apologise for her earlier presumptuous comment. Lord Whitfield’s opinion of her mattered greatly, but as yet, she had not quite discover why that was so.

“Lord Whitfield, I...”

The two pugs ran through the open door to make nuisances out of themselves by barking, bristling, and snapping. Lawrence knelt down slowly and held out his hand to be sniffed. He then carefully reached out to scratch the first pug behind the ears. Seeing this, the second dog immediately laid down, sprawled across the hearth rug, and rolled over on its back exposing its belly. Lawrence was scratching one dog and began rubbing the other. He looked up just at that moment and favoured Jane with a shy smile when Mr. Philips arrived.

“Lord Whitfield, you are very welcome, sir!” Lawrence stood up and the two men shook hands.

Mr. Philips liked nothing better than chatting with gentlemen of his acquaintance. And since the militia were no longer an object of interest to him he was especially keen to befriend such an esteemed and educated personage as the viscount. What he did not like were the two pugs. With his foot, the dogs were instantly shooed into the direction of the awaiting footman to be carried away.

He saw his niece quietly standing off to the side and he excitedly exclaimed, “Ah, there you are Jane! I will wager that I have surprised you today with our guest. Look who has come to share my dinner with me, Lord Whitfield!”

Lord Whitfield nodded stiffly while Jane made a sort of half smile, lowered her eyes, and curtsied again. Her uncle continued, oblivious to the uneasiness between the two.

“He was that important gentleman I had the appointment with this morning. I’ll wager you are pleased to renew your acquaintance with him. And try to guess his news. You never will, so I will tell you! He has taken the lease on Purvis Lodge. For a few months only, just until our Lizzy’s wedding, is that not correct, sir?” Not letting him answer, Mr. Philips continued. “Mr. Darcy tells me that all manner of family and friends will be coming down for the ceremony and they will all need a place to stay. Mr. Darcy has taken the Kimble’s place in Stoke. That house has a few good-sized bed chambers and Purvis Lodge has nearly twice as many. Their family will be quite comfortable; do you not think so Jane?”

As her uncle paused to take a breath, she opened her mouth to answer but was prevented again; her uncle would go on. “Our dinner will be a few minutes yet. I shall ring for some tea to be served, shall I?” Jane, the nearest to the bell, turned and rang it herself and took a seat.

“Then again,” her uncle continued, once again bring up the subject of lodging, “if they do run out of room, I am certain that Longbourn could accommodate a few. I would even be willing to put up some of your family here. Do you like roast chicken and boiled potatoes, sir? I hope you do, my lord, for I like it above all things, excepting maybe roast goose. And here is Christmas hard upon our heels and I am certain there will be goose a plenty.”

Lord Whitfield's eyes were in constant motion during the entirety of the speech. Miss Bennet appeared composed but would not meet his eye. He had no alternative but to feign interest in all that Mr. Philips had to say; nodding and smiling at all the appropriate times or raising an eyebrow here and there to indicate interest at a particular remark. He had had excellent practice after all; he had dealt with his own father for many years.

"Or is it roast duck we are having? I say, Jane, be a dear and run along and ask Clara what cook has prepared for us today."

Jane obeyed by arising quickly and exiting the room. Sliding the door closed, she paused briefly to collect herself.

"Jane! Jane!" called Mrs Philips in a loud whisper from the upstairs landing. "Jane, come here, I want you." Jane ran up the stairs and found her aunt there peering down between the banisters.

"Yes, Aunt; what do you require? Do you need anything?"

"I thought I heard the door. Who is that downstairs with your uncle?"

"My uncle has invited a guest to join him for luncheon; a business associate."

"Not Mr. Nelson, I hope," replied her aunt, frowning. "That man plagues your uncle night and day with his petty concerns as it is."

"No, Aunt, it is not Mr. Nelson."

"Squire Vincent then; he gives your uncle no rest neither night or day."

"It is not Squire Vincent, either."

"I can not image who it might be, then?"

"It is the new tenant of Purvis Lodge; a kinsman of Mr. Darcy."

"A kinsman of Mr. Darcy, you say? And taking Purvis Lodge; how extraordinary. What manner of man is he, Jane?"

Jane would have given anything to be swallowed up by the floor at that exact moment rather than give her aunt fodder for gossip.

"His name is Lord Whitfield. He is the eldest son of Mr. Darcy's uncle."

"Bless me; he must be the son of the Earl! An Earl's son! Here? In my house?" Nervous fidgeting followed and her aunt began to straighten her cap and adjust her gown. "Oh

Jane, do you think your uncle wants me, I am certain I can be ready in a moment; you must come and help me put on my new gown.”

“Oh no, Aunt!” exclaimed Jane, hastily. “I would advise against it; you are only just over your illness. Besides, I am certain they will both be talking of nothing but leases or assizes; I am sure you will find nothing of interest in that conversation.” Jane sent up a silent prayer. If this had been her mother nothing would have been able to keep her out of the drawing room. Fortunately, her Aunt Philips had always been the more persuadable of the two sisters.

Mrs Philips thought over all Jane had said and found it sound. Her husband *did* tend to rattle away on the subject of laws and such and the idea of being trapped at the dining table for an hour or two listening to that did not appeal. “Yes, yes, it does seem a tedious business. I’ll just have my luncheon on a tray. Run and tell cook, if you please and, of course you must come up and take your meal with me.”

Jane was actually quite grateful to have an excuse not to sit with the gentlemen. She went away as she was bid and came upon Clara pushing the tea cart in the direction of the drawing room.

“Clara, do you know what cook has prepared for my uncle today.”

“Roast duck and parsnips, Miss, and baked apples for his pudding.”

“Very good. Please tell cook that my aunt and I will take our meal in her sitting above stairs since my uncle is entertaining Lord Whitfield. I will take the tea things in for you.”

Clara bobbed a curtsey and went away to reset the dining room table for only two. Jane took a deep cleansing breathe and slid the doors to the drawing room aside once again.

“...good hunting about the lodge, plenty of pheasant; not that I ever have time to take a gun out myself.”

Lawrence, noticing Jane Bennet’s entrance quickly came to his feet and rushed over to assist Jane with the door and the cart. Her uncle, startled by the rapidity of his guest’s sudden movement, stood up awkwardly to see what he was about.

“Ah, Jane, there you are. I was just telling our guest about the hunting in the area. He says he has no skill with a gun, but I have chosen not to believe him; hardly seems possible that a cousin of Mr. Darcy would not hunt. Your cousin, Mr. Darcy, and his friend, Mr. Bingley, spent many a day at the sport when they were last in Hertfordshire together, is that not right, Jane? Now Bingley, there’s a good shot if ever I saw one. Sir William Lucas says Mr. Bingley bagged ever so many birds when they were all out together last year.” The bright pink spots appearing on his niece’s cheeks at the mention of Mr. Bingley’s name had the effect of silencing Mr. Philips for a moment. He could not

believe how careless he had let his tongue become in Jane's presence. He immediately changed the subject. "Well Jane, what intelligence do you bring from the kitchens?"

"Roast duck and parsnips, uncle."

"Capital, capital! I like nothing better than roast duck! Do you like roast duck, Lord Whitfield?"

Lawrence detested duck. "Yes," he said, returning to his seat.

"How do you take your tea, sir?" asked Jane.

"Only milk."

Lawrence watched as Jane Bennet proceeded to pour the milk into the cup. Her uncle continued to talk on and on... "*...nary a pheasant to be had... sometimes that double barrel jams... the dove cotes were...*" but he heard not one word in twenty; he stared as if mesmerized. Miss Bennet's graceful hand movements made the simple task of making tea into a kind of art. He wondered what it would be like to capture those hands on canvas--the fingers, the slim wrist, the curve of the--he started when she spoke.

"Sorry?"

"Your tea, sir."

Taking the teacup, he nodded. He felt completely embarrassed for having been caught staring, almost as if he had been seen catching a glimpse of something he ought not. Fortunately, after taking a few deep sips, he was saved from further humiliating himself by the entrance of the servant to summon the two gentlemen into the dining room. Her uncle noticed Jane's hesitancy in leading the way.

"Are you not joining us, Jane?"

"You must excuse me, uncle, but I shall go to my aunt if I may. I hope you don't mind."

Mr. Philips looked seriously at his niece for a moment and wondered at Jane's reticence. If his lordship had been one of the officers of the militia and Kitty or Lydia were there that day, nothing could keep them from joining them. But this was Jane and she would never put herself forward in such a way.

"As you wish, my dear." He suddenly laughed jovially, adding, "I gather our conversation will not be of much interest to you. It will give us a chance to finish our discussion on the sport to be had in the area. Do you care for fishing, my lord?" He held out his hand to lead the way.

Lawrence had no choice but to follow, supposing Miss Bennet had no desire to be near him. And why should she wish to, he thought; his behaviour of late was not what it should have been. As he passed from the drawing room and out into the hall he hazarded a glance back just in time to see Jane Bennet avert her eyes away from his gaze.



Kitty had attached herself securely to the colonel's arm. Elizabeth looked on in embarrassment that her younger sister would be so familiar with a man she barely knew. The colonel, if he was surprised at the young lady's forwardness, showed no signs of it and spent the majority of his time during their slow and steady walk laughing and telling the lady amusing little anecdotes.

Every time Kitty threw back her head in laughter Elizabeth sighed deeply. Darcy noticed Elizabeth's distraction as she stared ahead of her with intensity.

"You must know by now that my cousin makes it his business to be agreeable to every lady that he meets. I doubt very much if he means to engage her heart."

Elizabeth started at his address and quickly turned to reassure Darcy.

"Oh no, I already know that the colonel's heart is not so easily touched. No, I was just wishing that my younger sisters were not always so eager to have their heads turned by every officer they happen to meet." Elizabeth dropped her fiancé's arm to stop to pick a wildflower.

Stopping as well, he said, "It is the newness of a thing, perhaps. Once she gets used to seeing him with some frequency, her admiration will soon fade away. It is the way with many young women I have observed." He stared off into the distance, watching his cousin and Miss Catherine disappear at the bend in the lane.

At his slightly dejected sounding tone, Elizabeth could only think to tease. "Oh dear, I hope you don't believe that is the situation in all such cases; I doubt that my admiration for you would fade away very soon." She took her wildflower and brushed it playfully over the tip of his nose.

Darcy exhaled forcefully, he had been holding so much in and now had much to get off his chest and this was their first opportunity to have a few moments alone. "That is good to know because quite frankly, Elizabeth, I was beginning to wonder at your behaviour."

Elizabeth was stung by his forceful reply. Darcy had raised his voice to her and it could only serve to make her remember that last time he had done such a thing. "In such cases as these, I believe the established mode is to ask you what you mean; but I fear I have some inkling of what it is." She looked away.

At her gentle hint as to his dreadful behaviour at Hunsford parsonage, he calmed himself. Reaching out to stroke her chin he said, "Forgive me, forgive me. I did not mean to speak to you in such a way. My only excuse must be my anxiousness to hear your explanations. Will you tell tell?"

"You are very angry at me at present because I have been putting off a certain discussion which is very important to you."

Now he was stung. "Important only me?" he asked incredulously.

"To us, of course, Fitzwilliam; I mean to us!"

His voice was almost pleading. "Then why... why is it that every time the issue of a wedding date is brought up, you change the subject. I am beginning to think that you never wish to marry me." He swallowed. He knew he was being ridiculous but a sensation of fear crept though his chest.

"Not marry you? What can you possibly mean? Put that foolish notion out of your head this instant, Mr. Darcy!"

"Then why do you delay? If I didn't know any better I would believe you are having second thoughts over your choice."

She smiled sadly. "Oh, Fitzwilliam, what a ninny you can be sometimes." She moved closer to him, placed both hand upon his arms, and laid her head upon his chest. "Never doubt my love for you."

Choked with emotion he replied, "Then please, help me; help me to understand."

Elizabeth breathed deeply and waited a few moments before answering. "I told you before that I am a selfish creature and only seem interested in thinking of myself. It's just—I had always believed--."

Darcy grasped her shoulders slightly, to encourage her to speak her mind. "Yes?"

"It is because of Jane that I delay."

He started and drew back to look at her. "What has Jane to do with it?"

"Everything!" she cried, her face showing every emotion, "—and nothing—I got this notion into my—oh, it's silly really—I was hoping—I thought somehow that if Jane and Mr. Bingley would have mended their differences enough by now to—oh, would it not have been wonderful to share our day with the two people who mean so much to both of us?"

"Do you still mean for her to accept Charles?" he asked in amazement.

“Would you think me silly if I still do? Jane has told me herself how set against him she is and I admit that for a time I quite disliked him myself for his rude treatment of you. Yet, upon reflection, I can only remember how much Jane loved him before. I have never seen a person more suited to my sister. It is as if fate meant for them to be together. They have both had to put up with so much.”

“And you still blame me, I see.”

“Of course I do not blame you,” she said embracing him again tightly to reassure him. “It’s just you have not been here, you have not heard the talk. Mary came across him in Meryton last week: she says he looks a fright. Lady Lucas called just the other day to say that he has refused every invitation to dine in the neighbourhood. Mr. Bingley, once so happy and so amiable and so obliging, now so hurt and dejected. And here I am deliriously happy to have you, Fitzwilliam, and yet the two people we love so much are still suffering.”

Tears now streamed down her face and Darcy took out his handkerchief to wipe them away.

“I myself saw him only yesterday,” said Darcy. “As much as I would like to help him, I must tell you that Charles does not wish to speak to me. He is such an altered creature, nothing like my old friend at all.” Caressing her cheek, he continued, “Elizabeth, I made a promise to you that I would see your sister happy, but you must prepare yourself. Jane’s future happiness might never again depend upon Charles Bingley.”

“Yes, I see that now and know that I will have to accept that conclusion one day. I feel it so because I will be moving far away to start my new life with you, while Jane will remain here at Longbourn,” she dropped her voice dramatically, “with Mama. On the one hand, every impulse of feeling tells me that I need to make my sister happy before I can allow myself the same. And on the other hand there is my promise to you. I love you both so much but my loyalty pulls me in two different directions.”

“Elizabeth,” said Darcy, looking her in the eye, “believe me, I know a little of what you feel. If I was ever presented with a situation where I had to put your happiness over Georgiana’s I would fail miserably. But I console myself with this one thought: Georgiana would never ask me to make such a sacrifice and I am quite certain that Miss Bennet would never ask you to make any such sacrifices on her account.”

“Yes, Jane and Georgiana are both too good. What wonderful sister’s we’ve both been blessed with.”

He pulled her to his chest to embrace her. They stood this way for several minutes in silence thinking over all that they had said to each other. Kissing her on top of her head he asked, “Elizabeth, will you please just marry me.”

She laughed lightly, looked up, and replied cheekily, “Oh all right, if I must!”

Happy to have his teasing Elizabeth back, he boldly replied, “The first week in November it is, then.” He kissed her forehead.

“That only gives me six weeks to prepare! No, I couldn’t possibly. The second week in December is the best I can do,” she said this very decidedly as she came to her tip-toes and kissed his chin.

He bent down to kiss the bridge of her nose, whispering, “The *second* week of November.”

She pursed her lips as if to appear deep in thought. “The *first* week in December.”

Darcy quickly looked around to ensure that they were still quite alone. He took his fingers, lifted her chin and stared at the lips he had been longing to kiss. He then lowered his head and kissed Elizabeth very lightly. He pulled back and waited for her to open her eyes. When she did he cocked his head to one side as if posing a silent question.

“Not a day past the first day of November!” Elizabeth said breathlessly.

He took her into his arms fully, applying himself to her lips again, and letting her know just how happy she had made him. As he felt her hands move to his neck, the kiss could only deepen. His hand next moved up to her chin where he found the ribbons to her bonnet in the way. It was quickly untied and dropped to the ground, and quite forgetting himself his lips travelled to soft flesh beneath her ear.

Elizabeth gasped at this new sensation and she leaned back to fully expose her neck to him. He could have held her and kissed her forever if it had not been for the very sudden, the very loud, and the very forceful outburst from Miss Catherine Bennet.

“LIZZY!”

They broke apart, both having the decency to at least appear ashamed at having been caught at such a time and engaged in such an activity.

Catherine was mortified at the intimate scene she had just witnessed, only to immediately realize that her sister had every right to steal a kiss from her intended (even though this was no mere kiss). What a silly goose she must now seem to the colonel. Kitty blushed a violent shade of red, covered her eyes, and turned away.

The Colonel smirked roguishly and crossed his arms across his chest, thinking of all the ways he would torture his cousin over the next few days.

“My leg has had enough exercise. I think we should *all* return to Longbourn. Shall we, Miss Catherine?” He held out his arm.

Darcy bent down to retrieve Elizabeth's bonnet. Stuttering, he replied, "Y-Yes, of course. S- Shall we, then?"

He and Elizabeth followed a few paces behind, both with lowered heads and very guilty expressions.



When Clara came into Mrs Philips' sitting room to clear the trays, she was immediately bombarded with questions.

"Have my husband and his guest finished their meal?"

"Oh yes, Ma'am; not ten minutes ago. They are both having port in the master's study."

"I am so sorry I did not have a chance to see him. I wonder what he looks like."

"Oh, he is a vastly handsome, Ma'am."

"Is he? Is he really?"

Jane blushed to see and hear her aunt gossiping with a servant. At Jane's disproving look, Clara made fast work of her task and hurried from the room.

"I still can not believe," said her aunt, "that anyone, especially a lord, and most likely a very rich one, would want a dreary place such as Purvis Lodge.

"The gentleman told me himself that he finds the grounds pleasing."

"The grounds? What can so fascinate him about the grounds? I am sure that they are positively wild and overgrown."

"He makes a study of plants, Aunt. He is a botanist and a naturalist."

"A naturalist," said Mrs Philips. "What on earth is a naturalist?"

"It is a gentleman who makes a study of all living things."

"And his wife," probed her aunt, "the Viscountess, did you meet her and see any children in London?"

By the calculating look on her aunt's face, Jane cringed. She would not give her aunt the satisfaction of discovering that the gentleman was a widower; she spoke only of the children.

“Yes, Lord Whitfield has two young children: a boy and a girl, Edward and Philadelphia Fitzwilliam. While I was in London, they made friends of my Uncle Gardiner’s children.”

“Oooo. How very handsome of these Fitzwilliam’s, to be sure. I always fancied that these Lords and Ladies preferred their children to have better friends... those among their own sort and all.”

“The Fitzwilliam family were very welcoming and friendly. I was never looked down upon once the entire time I was in their company. I found them charming and feel that Lizzy could not be in more loving hands.”

“Yes, Lizzy has made a brilliant match, to be sure. You girls will now only meet the most eligible young men. Yet, in hindsight, you must agree that Lydia has made a very poor match indeed. I would never say so to my sister, of course. But, we must only look to the future; I wonder if his lordship has any brothers?”

Having grown fatigued with the subject of the conversation in so short a time, Jane suddenly stood. “Excuse me, Aunt, but I feel I must go down to bid his lordship goodbye. I wouldn’t wish your guest to think me rude.”

“No, no, of course not; do run along, my dear. And be sure to ask him if he enjoyed the duck. Cook does make a wonderful roast duck, does she not? And tell his lordship that he is welcome here at any time.”

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, it was just in time to see the two gentlemen standing in the open doorway taking their leave from each other. She stood where she was not wishing to intrude.

“I enjoyed myself very much today, sir. Thank you for having me.”

Jane hoped rather than believed him to be sincere; there was a certain wildness about the viscount’s eyes that seemed to say that he wanted nothing more than to be away as quickly as possible.

“I am glad you came, sir. We must do it again sometime.”

The viscount bowed and when he stood straight again he saw Miss Bennet standing behind her uncle. He bowed deeply to her.

Seeing this, Mr. Philips turned to his niece, “Ah, Jane, there you are. Lord Whitfield was just leaving. Come and say goodbye.”

Jane came forward and held out her hand. “Good day, my lord.”

Lawrence walked up the two steps that separated them to take her hand. He wanted very much to say something, anything to her that would communicate his sincere regret and to

express his remorse over his ill chosen words in the shop. In fact, all throughout the meal he was in hopes that he could somehow have one more chance to speak with her alone before he left the house. Unfortunately, her uncle stood there right beside her watching his every move.

“Good day, Miss Bennet. I regret... that is, I hope to see you both again very soon. You will, of course, convey my compliments to Mrs. Philips on the excellence of the meal?” He wanted so much to say more, but for now he could only press her hand and hoped she somehow understood him.

Jane nodded, curtsied, and hurried away.

Mr. Philips had no explanation for Jane’s sudden and very odd departure. He turned around lamely and watched her go.

Lawrence could only think that she wanted very much to be out of his sight. She obviously had taken his bad behaviour from that morning to heart. He looked to the ground and wondered what he could do to make things right with her again. It came to him in an instant. Seized with this sudden and very impulsive thought, he looked up and asked Mr. Philips eagerly, “Where in Meryton might I hire a carriage?”



When the two cousins returned to the inn to change for dinner, they were stunned to find, not the viscount but Preston waiting anxiously with a note. The Colonel snatched it from his batman’s hand, read it quickly, and handed it to Darcy.

It simply stated:

Gone to London.

Will return shortly.

Will not be returning alone.

~~Whitfield

