

Chapter 20

A Neighbourhood Full of Rich, Single Gentlemen



After ringing the bell, Mrs. Henry Bennet pulled her dressing gown round her and lay back upon the chaise. It had long been her afternoon custom of removing to her sitting room above stairs to rest herself, take tea, and to complain... to no one.

“No one knows how much I suffer.”

Somewhere in the periphery of her hearing, she could just make out intermittent crying and coughing. It could only be Kitty, she deduced. But why now? Why had Kitty chosen this particular moment to make herself so fretful and disagreeable. She must know, thought Mrs. Bennet, how vexed and agitated it made her mother.

In the next moment, footsteps were heard scurrying up to her chamber door. There was a light knock and upon granting admission, Mrs. Bennet discovered that it was Mrs. Hill. The whinging could now commence in earnest.

“Oh Hill, there you are! What took you so long? I was sure there had been some mishap to keep you away! Oh,” she wailed agitatedly with her handkerchief flailing about, “it is so hot in here. Why is it so hot in this house today?”

Hill eyed the window, looking beyond it to the outdoors and knowing full well that the day was very mild.

“Shall I open the windows, ma’am?”

“Of course I want the windows open!” shouted Mrs. Bennet, angrily. “Did I not say how hot it was?”

With the patience of a saint, Hill proceeded to open all the windows as directed. It was not many moments later when Mrs. Bennet began complaining of the cold.

“Oh, for heaven sake, Hill; not *all* the windows; only one! Can you not feel that wretched draught?”

Hill, not even thinking of batting an eye (for what good was it?) closed all the windows save one.

Another round of whimpering emanated from down the hall.

“And for heavens sake, what is all that wailing about?”

“It is Miss Kitty, ma’am.”

“I know it is Miss Kitty,” she snapped, “what is Kitty going on about, pray?”

“I think she feels quite poorly, ma’am.”

“Poorly? Poorly? What on earth could be making *her* so poorly? I saw her not an hour ago sitting by the window and smiling to herself.”

“She says she has a headache and that it came upon her sudden-like.”

“A headache? More than likely she is only doing it because she sees fit to vex me. She has no compassion for my nerves.”

“Shall I take her a powder, ma’am?”

“No, you may not take her a powder! If anyone needs a powder, it is I who needs the powder. You have better things to do before running about after a feigning invalid!”

The only thing that prevented Mrs. Hill from rolling her eyes at that moment was years of practice.

“Begging Madam’s pardon, but I nearly forgot; the Master sends a message.”

“And, what, pray tell, does Mr. Bennet have to say? Does he not know by now that my nerves can only take so much during the day? He knows very well that this is my time to rest.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am, he knows that most assuredly. He only bid me say that you needn’t come down if you’d rather not.”

“Well, of course I would rather not! The spasms in my side are so much worse today.”

“Very well, ma’am. I’ll just say that the mistress be indisposed. I’m sure they will all understand.”

To Mrs. Bennet, Hill wasn’t making any sense at all. “Hill, all my family knows of my indisposition. There is no need to speak of it to them.”

“Oh no, ma’am, I didn’t mean the family; I meant the visitors below.”

“Visitors? What visitors are these?” Hill opened her mouth to explain, but Mrs. Bennet

cut her off. “It cannot be Lady Lucas for she has gone to Watford. And the Philips should know better than to come; my sister knows how wretched my nerves are this late in the day.” Mrs. Bennet closed her eyes languidly and fanned herself once again.

“No, ma’am, it is not the Philips’.”

There was a long pause. When there seemed to be nothing more forthcoming, Mrs. Bennet opened her eyes and asked impatiently, “Well, Hill, well; who is it, then?”

“It is Lord Whitfield, straight from London, ma’am. Lord Whitfield, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and his lordship’s children; I didn’t catch their names as they came into the hall. Then there is Mr. Goulding and Mr. Bingley.”

Mrs. Bennet bolted straight up at the very thought of four gentlemen—four single gentleman--now in her home!

Hill knew what would happen next.

“Oh, for heavens sake, Hill, why do you stand there gawping? Help me on with my gown!”

Hill bobbed a curtsy and began assisting her mistress to dress. And while Mrs. Bennet claimed that her servant went about her duties much slower than usual, Hill assured her that she was going as fast as she could. For Hill knew how things were with the Master and the young gentlemen down below had enough to contend just then without adding her mistress into the mix.



Mr. Bennet had never been so satisfied at so fortunate a circumstance. How he would laugh later on in his library over the folly of preposterous young men. With barely concealed glee, he glanced around the room, anticipating the amusement he would have in embarrassing the four, though not fully for their obvious admiration for his eldest daughter, moreso for her total obliviousness to it all.

Bingley stood with his back to the mantel. His admiration of his eldest daughter was naturally a given thing, so Henry Bennet felt no need in observing him above a few moments. Yet, he did take note that Bingley’s eyes, when they were not directed at Jane as she poured the tea, were trained on the colonel who had taken a seat upon the settee.

However, Colonel Fitzwilliam, surprisingly, wasn’t looking at Jane at all, but seemed to be sizing up William Goulding who sat at the table next to Lord Whitfield. The colonel, though a well-built man himself, was not quite on the scale of the strapping, broad shouldered Goulding. The colonel surmised that Goulding’s apparent strength and health

were most likely due to fresh country air, wholesome milk, and hearty mutton suppers, while his own exercise of late mainly consisted of taking tea with his mother, escorting his sister about, and wondering when his injuries would heal.

Goulding, on the other hand seemed to sense that he was out of his depth. Upon his introduction to the other two gentlemen in the room and discovering their aristocratic standing in society, he retreated into silence. His large broad face became all the more pronounced due to the bright red patches flushing on his already ruddy cheeks. He stared at the floor or stared at his lap and did not once think to drink his tea.

To Bennet, Lord Whitfield was the more composed of the four characters. This, he felt, was likely due to that gentleman's age and previous experience as a married man. Never once did the Viscount give himself away by letting his eyes stray unnecessarily in Jane's direction. As Mary handed him his cup and Elizabeth his plate, Whitfield allowed himself one look in Jane's direction and he glanced at her with so much marked disinterest that to Henry Bennet's way of thinking, it could only prove that interest.

Mr. Bennet now clapped his eyes onto the fifth and sixth players in this little home theatrical: the two children. Delphie, though plastered to the side of her father's chair out of shyness of so many strangers, trained her eyes on Jane and only Jane. Clearly she was fascinated about something and would not take her eyes away for every slight movement his daughter made, Delphie made certain to watch attentively. Edward Fitzwilliam, on the other hand, had chosen to place himself as near to Jane as possible. He had insinuated himself in her company as soon as they all entered the house. Even now he kept near by passing the empty teacups to her while she poured.

And Jane? Mr. Bennet turned his eyes to watch his eldest as she blissfully went about her business as if nothing out of the ordinary whatsoever was taking place. How Jane could be totally unconscious to the four men and their apparent purpose was beyond him.

When Elizabeth passed by to sit down in her mother's chair, he smiled up at his second daughter so mischievously that Elizabeth could only look heavenward for strength and silently pray that he would not start any sort of foolishness.

Now finished with the tea, Jane left the table, walked across the room, and sat down in one of the last available seats in the room, the seat next to the colonel. Trailing closely behind was Edward, who, after seating himself, became solely interested in monopolising all of Jane's attention.

"Jane, might I walk over and visit you some time?"

Jane naturally smiled. "Of course you may, Teddy."

"May I come tomorrow?"

"Come as often as you wish; so long as your father can spare you."

“Me, me!” said Delphie, leaving her father’s side and dashing across the room with her plate of shortbread to squeeze in between her uncle and Jane.

“And yes, you may come too, Delphie,” said Jane as she cupped the child’s chin. “Just be sure you ask your father first if your nurse may escort you over.”

Jane looked to Lord Whitfield, seeking his approbation of the scheme. He acknowledged her with a small bow of his head and returned his attention immediately to the stirring of his tea.

Even though there was no smile on his face, Mr. Bennet thought he detected a certain light in that gentleman’s eyes. Bennet decided that the next day he would watch from his library window for the first signs of this nurse... who, he was certain would never come and that his lordship was the most likely candidate in the escorting of his children.

“Do you like dogs, Jane?” asked Edward suddenly, drawing Jane’s eyes away from his father and back down towards himself.

“Yes, I do like dogs.”

“When my dog, Apollo, comes, I will bring him over to meet you! Apollo is an excellent hunter. He fetches sticks and bones and once he even brought me a dead vole, but Nanny screamed and screamed when she found it under my bed, so father said I couldn’t keep it.”

“Oh dear,” said Jane, her hand coming up to her chest in dismay.

At Jane’s doubtful look, Edward rushed to clarify his answer. “But Apollo wouldn’t bring *you* any dead things; I would train him not to.”

Delphie suddenly cried out. “Polo is a bad dog!”

“No, he is not, Delphie! You are just afraid of him!”

“I not!”

“Yes, you are!”

“Edward,” warned his father using his most serious tone.

Edward’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment at being corrected in front of Jane.

Elizabeth, observing the boy’s discomfiture and with the idea of been kind, smiled and asked, “What kind of dog is Apollo, Edward?”

Edward brightened a bit. “A beagle! My uncle gave him to me for my birthday last year. He has quite a lot of beagles!”

At Elizabeth’s curious glance and raised eyebrows in the colonel’s direction, the colonel smiled and shook his head. “Oh no, not I, Miss Elizabeth; Edward has two other more generous uncles.”

“Uncle John doesn’t have dogs anymore,” said Edward continuing to speak to Elizabeth, “nor does my other uncle, my uncle Edmond. He is my mother’s brother. No, I mean my other uncle, Uncle Darcy, who is actually my cousin; though father says I *ought* to call him uncle because he is old. Jane knows my Uncle Darcy very well; do you know him, too?”

Elizabeth laughed merrily at this. “Yes, I do know your uncle Darcy, *very* well.”

Jane explained. “Edward, this is my sister, Elizabeth, who will very soon be your aunt; she is engaged to marry Mr. Darcy.”

Edward studied her closely. He didn’t quite know what to make of her just yet, but he thought she had very nice eyes, though, in his opinion, she was not nearly as pretty as Jane.

“Then I suppose that I should call you Aunt Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth leaned closer to the boy and replied conspiratorially, “I should like it even better if you call me Aunt Lizzy.”

“May I? I should like that.”

“More than beagles?”

Edward wasn’t sure quite how to answer her; her teasing manner was a puzzle to his less than mature mind. He did, however favour her with a small smile. In the very next moment he suddenly blurted, “I’m sure if you asked, my Uncle Darcy will give you a beagle for your birthday, as well.”

Jane shared a happy, significant look with her sister, Elizabeth, as if to say “*do you now see how charming he is?*”

Elizabeth marvelled at the way Edward spoke for he was so confident and forthright in manner. This, she assumed, was a result of his aristocratic breeding; he was, after all, being brought up to be the future Earl of Matlock.

Delphie was having a little trouble maintaining the balance of her plate, so, Jane pulled her up on her lap and held the plate for her. As the girl nibbled on her shortbread, Jane placed a kiss on top of her head. Lord Whitfield sat surreptitiously watching it all over

the rim of his teacup as he slowly sipped the brew, his heart beating rapidly in his chest.

His admiration for Jane had come upon him quite unawares. One moment he stood in the middle of a Meryton shop disagreeing with her assessment of his children's likes and dislikes, the very next moment he was wondering how he could make her a permanent fixture in his children's lives. She obviously cared for Edward and Delphie a great deal and, God knows she had more patience with them than he ever did. He wasn't quite sure at the moment if he could admit to himself that what he felt for her was love exactly, but he knew enough of himself and his heart to be assured that it was a powerful feeling for her none the less, The only question remained was to see where Miss Bennet's affections lay.

He would have to be a fool not to have noticed the two other gentlemen in the room come to visit Jane. Mr. Bingley, though only known to him in passing conversation, seemed a great deal too uncommunicative and pensive since coming into the room. Jane, he thought, would never attach herself to someone so dour. Mr. Goulding he had only just met, but he to seemed an unlikely candidate. He appeared awkward and somewhat tongue-tied and shy and gave the impression of overgrown boy more than he did as a fully grown man. And his own brother—well, there he could relax, for John only ever had inclinations for mild flirtations—which had of late been directed only towards the equally flirtatious Miss Catherine.

In his short acquaintance with Miss Bennet she had never once mentioned any gentleman in particular, nor had she struck him as having any romantic leanings. She looked upon him in the same serene and composed way that she looked upon Darcy: with kindness, with friendliness and without love. Marriage had taught him what it was like to see love in a woman's eyes, and Jane had never once looked upon him in such a way.

Whitfield's thought's soon drifted to the days he had spent in London seeing to his sister's and cousin's removal. What a trial that had been: His sister's sudden and excessive need to visit every dressmaker in London and his father's constant questioning as to his reasons for taking a house in Hertfordshire and asking how his brother, Jonathan, was faring.

Even his mother had proved somewhat trying. If she was not issuing bold hints as to Grimsby's need of redecorating, she was making witticisms about the pleasantness to be had in visiting (*pretty*) country acquaintances.

Lord Whitfield's ruminations were interrupted when Mr. Bennet cried out, in a loud voice startling everyone in the room.

"Mr. Bingley! How very long you have stayed away!"

Bingley had just raised his tea to his mouth and winced as he burned his top lip. "I have been much... occupied of late, sir."

“Entertaining, I suppose,” asked Henry. “Have many of your fancy London friends come down for the shooting?”

“No sir; no company at all,” he then cast his eyes to the floor, adding, “save my brother, Hurst.” At the mention of Mr. Hurst, both Jane and Elizabeth turned to look at him. A slight blushing suffused Jane’s cheeks that Bingley immediately noticed which compelled him to clarify his answer. “My sisters remain in London.”

Jane, although she knew it to be correct and polite, could not bring herself to ask after them, but Mary, well aware of Jane’s loss of equanimity asked in her stead.

“Are your sisters well, Mr. Bingley?”

Bingley turned to Mary and said dryly, “I believe they are well.”

Mr. Bennet’s eyes glowed, for Bingley had just given him the perfect opportunity to poke a bit of fun.

“You only *believe* they are well?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But you don’t know for certain?”

“No, sir.”

“Did not your brother, Mr. Hurst, bring news of them?”

Bingley could not remember if Hurst had brought news of them or not, for he did care. He paused before opening his mouth as he struggled to come up with a plausible answer.

Before her father could spring whatever trap he was leading Mr. Bingley unknowingly into, Jane, having now found her voice, thought only to come to his rescue.

“Mr. Bingley,” she said rather loudly, “Allow me to put your mind at ease. I saw both Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley in St. James Park in London very recently. They both appeared very well.”

Bingley was taken aback. “You saw them? *You* spoke to them?”

“I-I had not the opportunity, sir. They were both at such a distance away that we had no occasion to speak. But they did kindly nod to me in greeting.”

Bingley only had the opportunity to ponder this strange response for a moment when Jane suddenly added, “Colonel Fitzwilliam was there, as well; perhaps he can assure you.”

Bingley now turned an exasperated and decidedly unfriendly look in the direction of the colonel which that gentleman failed to see. However, both Elizabeth and her father saw it and shared a quick, uncomfortable glance.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam,” said Jane.

The colonel, when not listening to a scrap of conversation here and there, had been sitting back quietly, putting two and two together. He thought over the odd conversation he had had with Darcy that very morning concerning Bingley. This led him to remember all he had said to Elizabeth Bennet in Kent on the same subject. He started upon hearing his name spoken.

“Oh, I do beg your pardon, Miss Bennet, I was not attending.”

“I was telling Mr. Bingley that I saw his sisters last week in park and that they appeared in health. Perhaps you saw them as well and can add your assurances to mine?”

He let the question purposely hang in the air for several long seconds. He was busily formulating a plan. He wanted to see if adding two and two together would add up to four, all the while desperately hoping that it added up to three.

“No,” he said slowly, turning his full attention towards Miss Bennet, “I’m afraid I cannot say that I did. As you might remember, my thoughts and actions were directed,” he then turned his full attention onto Bingley, “rather *particularly* on someone else at that moment.”

Bingley’s jaw tightened noticeably. Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth shared another meaningful look, each remembering the idle gossip of that encounter in the London newspaper, both wondering if Bingley had read it himself. Henry Bennet, however, took far more pleasure in the comment than did his second daughter; for while Elizabeth chose only to flinch, he chose to smile.

Bingley, from his advantageous vantage point, did not miss any of the exchange between Miss Elizabeth and her father, nor did he miss the somewhat challenging manner that the colonel spoke to him. But before anything else could be said, Delphie had leaned in and whispered something into Jane’s ear. Jane quietly nodded in understanding with the child’s request, and stood.

Four gentlemen simultaneously leapt to their feet; the fifth chose to remain seated and to smirk.

“If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I won’t be a moment.”

Jane grasped Delphie’s tiny hand to lead her away causing Lord Whitfield to step forward. However, Jane, ever tactful and not wanting to embarrass the child or her father, said, “I hope you don’t mind, sir, I need to summon the maid for something and this little

one may come with me.”

There was something in her look that held his lordship’s tongue; he simply nodded and backed away. When they had gone from the room and his father had sat back down, Edward, realizing that his father had no idea why Delphie needed to leave so suddenly, turned to him and silently mouth, “Chamber pot.” Lord Whitfield blushed at not having realized his near blunder sooner.

Silence now reigned as one gentleman after another looked around the room. Lord Whitfield studied the paintings on the walls. William Goulding stared at the drawing room door, then out the window, then back at the door again, then at the uneaten cake in one hand and the teacup in the other. Only two men in the room looked at each other, each sensing that certain things needed to be said and that certain things needed to be understood.

“Fancy meeting you here, Fitzwilliam,” said Bingley in not the friendliest of ways. “The last time I saw you was at a ball in town. How is Lady Alice Morton, by the way? You always seemed to favour her company.”

Bingley had unknowingly picked the very worse topic he could have possibly chosen; Colonel Fitzwilliam was ready for him.

“How kind of you to ask after my cousin; and yes, I agree, she has always been a favourite of mine due to her status as my mother’s favourite niece. She and her husband were quite well when I saw them, ere I went *to war*.” He took a long, slow, deliberate sip from his teacup savouring the next morsel he would throw. “Last I heard of you, Bingley, you had been persuaded to desert certain... obligations that you were involved in. I speak feeling, you know, an officer of the Army has little patience for deserters.”

The tension between the two was very palpable to Elizabeth for she alone knew what the colonel was referring to. She struggled to find something, anything innocuous to say to diffuse the moment. She looked to Mary for aid, but Mary sat there smirking to herself and to Elizabeth’s mind, it appeared as if Mary, just like her father, was quite pleased with the horrid circumstance.

Mary was indeed pleased; well pleased. She had been patiently waiting for the opportunity to see the Charles Bingley set down. She had hoped it would have been Lord Whitfield inflicting the pain, but she was gratified that his brother felt no such compunction to be gentlemanlike in the face of Bingley’s capriciousness. The Colonel had thrown himself into the *mêlée* and as long as he kept certain notions out of his head concerning Jane, far be it from her to help diffuse the tense situation. To Mary, all she could see was that Mr. Bingley had made Jane sad and nothing in Mary’s opinion was worse than making Jane, God’s most gentle and loving creature, unhappy.

The butler by then had entered the room and bowed to Mr. Bennet several times to get his attention.

“Yes, Hill, yes, I see you! What is it that you require?”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but you are wanted.”

“Wanted? Wanted! Where am I wanted?”

“At the door, sir.”

Three of the gentlemen looked up with keen interest; the fourth simply continued to sip his tea.

“Well, bid this person enter, for I am quite at leisure. The parlor is rather small, but I daresay we can fit one more gentleman in around the table. I say, Goulding, bunch up there, bunch up!”

Mary snickered quietly as she watched the oafish Goulding, indeed, bunch up. Elizabeth cringed inwardly, hoping that Jane did not in fact have a *fifth* admirer. She could not imagine who else could possibly turn up and make such a ridiculous situation even more ridiculous than it already was.

“No, sir,” replied Hill, quite used to his master’s cheekiness. “It’s young Willie Heaton from the farm. He is at the *kitchen* door and says that the matter is most urgent sir.”

Never one who liked to be disturbed when he was in the middle of something comical, Mr. Bennet grumbled and excused himself.

As the eldest Bennet in the room, Elizabeth now took over hosting duties. She turned to Lord Whitfield, as he was the only person in the room who was least likely to cause any trouble.

“My lord, I believe Edward mentioned before that your sister and Miss Darcy made the journey to Meryton with you.”

“Yes,” he said, smiled slightly. “They are both at Purvis Lodge at the moment taking their ease after the journey.”

Smiling broadly, she replied, “As you can well imagine, I long to see Georgiana. It has been several weeks since I was at Pemberley and had the pleasure of her delightful company.”

Whitfield let his smile grow a little bigger at the tacit compliment to his young cousin. “Believe me, Miss Elizabeth, Georgiana spoke of little else on the journey here and she is quite anxious to visit you as well.”

“I cannot imagine where Mr. Darcy has gotten to. I suspect he does not, as yet, know his

sister has arrived.”

Lord Whitfield opened his mouth to answer, but his own brother’s voice filled the room.

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth, I was just beginning to wonder the very same thing. For Darcy said he had a call to make this morning... to a friend.” The colonel eyes slowly turned to Bingley. “Bingley, do you have any notion as to what has become of my cousin?”

Bingley, who had slipped out of the back of the Netherfield Park in order to avoid meeting Mr. Darcy, could not think of what to say, so he once again applied himself to his tea. Fortunately, it was Mr. Bennet’s entrance that saved him from the necessity of making an answer.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen, there seems to be a spot of bother on the farm. I will have to take my leave. I am *very* sure that my wife will be down shortly to entertain you all.”

Charles Bingley, who had been desperately looking for a way out of his predicament, was the first to enquire.

“Nothing too serious, I hope?”

The end of his sentence faded into nothing at the vision of Jane Bennet reentering the room hand in hand with the skipping little girl. Jane had changed out of her riding habit and into a pretty spotted frock and had quite distracted him.

“No, it is nothing too serious,” continued Bennet, “something my young farm hand cannot accomplish without my guidance. A few of the lambs wandered off and got into a spot of trouble.”

Delphie’s eyes widened in delight at the mention of lambs. “Baby lambs?” she asked, for Delphie loved baby animals of any kind.

“Yes, my dear, baby lambs,” said Mr. Bennet bending down and tweaking the girl on the nose in the way of an affectionate grandfather, causing Delphie to giggle. “Although they are a bit bigger now than they were in the spring.”

“Can I see them?” asked Delphie. At Mr. Bennet’s doubtful look, she said, very angelically, “Please!”

Mr. Bennet smiled knowingly, for as a father of five girls he knew, very well, how charming they could be. “You will have to ask your father, my dear, for it is a bit of a walk to the south pasture, but I have no objection to your coming along.”

Delphie turned her large blue, pleading eyes onto her father knowing full well that he would let her go along.

At Lord Whitfield's nod, Jane said, "I will come along to look after her, papa, just let me get my things."

She hurried out into the hall to retrieve her outerwear and Delphie's coat and bonnet.

Edward was out of his seat like a shot. "I wish to go, as well." He ran after Jane to retrieve his own coat.

Not to be out done by a child, William Goulding was the next to stand and pronounced it a good idea and hurried out the drawing room door as well, nearly colliding with Mr. Bennet.

One by one the remaining occupants, save Mary, who recollected other more important matters she needed to attend to, filed out of the drawing room. Here Elizabeth was conflicted. She wanted to stay behind to wait for Mr. Darcy for surely he would happen by at anytime, yet, she knew she needed to go along with the group to keep the situation from escalating any further and to be there for Jane's sake.

As Jane saw to the children, the gentlemen quickly attired themselves for the outdoors and lined up at the Longbourn entryway, each hoping to offer their arm to Jane. However, it was Mr. Bennet who had forestalled them all by exiting the house with his eldest on his arm. Upon seeing the deflated faces, Henry Bennet glanced back at the door as Elizabeth exited and threw her a bemused and satisfied smile.

So it was a sad state of affairs for Mrs. Hill when several minutes later, Mrs. Bennet, having primped and preened herself to full advantage, breezed into the empty drawing room having no idea that it was, in fact, now empty.

"Oh gentleman, pray excuse me for not greeting—" She stopped mid sentence and glanced unhappily around room, looking for someone to blame.

"Hill!"



The large party followed Mr. Bennet, Jane and the two children, down the lane for a quarter of a mile. Then it was over a stile, through the apple orchard, round the hedgerow, and into the south pasture. There they found a great quagmire of mud in the middle of a newly cleared field. Stranded right of the middle of this mess and muck were several lambs bahing and bleating loudly in obvious distress.

"Oh, bother!" cried Mr. Bennet. "Sheep have to be the stupidest, *the* most—" He knew he would now have to call the other men away from their duties in one of the other pastures to see to this trouble.

Jane and Delphie, both tender-hearted, looked on in alarm and distress. The both of them were nearly overcome just seeing these precious little animals' struggles and loud, anxious bleating in the deep mud. Delphie sniffed loudly and began to sob. "Jane, are they crying?"

Jane turned Delphie away and hugged her, knowing immediately that it was a mistake to bring the child. Looking to her father, Jane pleaded, "Oh, papa, the poor little dears, we must help them."

"Willie," called Mr. Bennet, "run along to the west pasture and bring your father and the other men back as quickly as you can."

However, before the boy could move, Charles Bingley had seen Jane and Delphie's obvious distress, and was in the process of removing his coat and hat and tossing them aside. As he waded into the mud, Mr. Bennet started to call out to stop him by raising his walking stick. However, instantly recognizing this for what it really was: a show of gallantry on Jane's behalf, he lowered his cane and prevented Willie from running off.

The mud came up to the very top of his riding boots as Bingley, his arms held out at his sides to give him balance, trudged through the mire. Slowly, but steadily, he made his way over to the nearest lamb. Reaching down with both arms, he hoisted the wriggling, muddy animal up and out of the mud staining his white shirt and waistcoat in the process. He then turned and slowly and very carefully trudged back to the edge of the mire and set the animal down, smacking its rear to send it on its way.

While breathing hard from his exertions, he slowly glanced over to Jane to see if his actions met with her approbation. He could not believe his eyes, for there Jane stood, beaming at him proudly with a softness about her eyes that he had not seen directed at him in many, many months. How his heart now swelled; if it were actually possible, he loved her more than ever before.

Goulding, seeing Jane's reaction to Bingley, and wanting something very similar in return, quickly stripped off his coat and hat and waded in as well. Bingley, though a tall fellow and equal to him in height, was not quite his equal in brawn, and Goulding made quick work of it by seizing *two* of the largest lambs, tucking one under each arm.

Jane, suddenly realizing how she must appear, turned away from Charles Bingley and now favoured Mr. Goulding with a grateful smile.

Delphie, tears still streaming down her face as she peaked out from the folds of Jane's skirts, looked at the remaining lambs flopping in the mud. She called out to her father, her voice full of sadness, "Papa, look! Help them, help them, please!" She pointed to the two remaining lambs at the farthest end of mire.

The brothers Fitzwilliam looked at each other, silently communicating that they could not very well prove themselves as a couple of London dandies in front of the Bennets. They

divested themselves of their outer garments and were carefully wading through the mud to each retrieve a lamb of their own; Lawrence knowing how his cook hated muddy boots on her kitchen floor and Jonathan thinking of his batman's likely reaction.

Edward, seeing his father and uncle go in, was very eager to follow, but Elizabeth was right there to prevent him by gasping his shoulders.

“Oh, please, Aunt Lizzy,” he pouted, “let me help!”

“Not this time, Edward, stay here safely with me.”

Edward sighed and turned away in disappointment just in time to see a horse and rider approaching.

“Look, Aunt Lizzy, look!”

As Darcy cantered forward, Charles Bingley, who was busy scraping mud from his boots with a stick, eyed him warily. Darcy was no less busy. He watched his friend watching him, but said nothing, knowing that now and in front of all these people was not the time to confront him for his behaviour.

William Goulding, having completed his task was now lifting himself out of the mud with very little effort even with two large lambs under each arm. Lawrence had got hold of his lamb and was making his way back to the shore; but Colonel Fitzwilliam, with his bad arm and leg, found himself struggling with his lamb. He tugged and tugged, only to tumble backwards a moment later, falling into the mud.

Darcy watched all this and could not contain himself; how he laughed at both his cousin's expense. He dismounted, handed the reins to Willie, and walked over to Elizabeth.

“It would seem that I have missed all the fun,” he said, smiling down at her while he tousled Edward's hair in greeting.

“You have no idea,” said Elizabeth tightly while rolling her eyes, only she was not referring to the incident with the lambs. “How did you know where to find us,” she asked quietly.

“At first I happened upon your mother, but she seemed... distracted about something, so your butler told me.” He eyed Elizabeth troubled face. “What is it, Elizabeth?”

“Later,” she whispered as she eyed Edward, and then turned her attention back to the goings on in the pool of mud.”

Darcy now looked around with new eyes seeking out what it was that worried Elizabeth about this scene. His eyes travelled to Delphie who was smiling happily, although she was having her tear streaked face wiped by Jane. Mr. Bennet had walked over to Bingley

and took his hand to thank him. Goulding was the next one to receive his thanks and a hearty slap on the back to boot. Lawrence was now stepping up out of the mud, and the colonel was having a hard time as he made his way back. Darcy could not see anything in anyone's behaviour to put him on his guard.

Mr. Bennet then noticed Darcy standing with Elizabeth and approached.

"Ah, Darcy, come to lend a hand, eh? Well, you find yourself a little late to the party, for these good gentlemen have done me a great service! You must agree that they are very skilled in the carrying of sheep," he then lowered his voice, "it only remains to be seen how good they can be in carrying off young women!"

Darcy noticed how Elizabeth's cheeks burned while her father cast a significant look to the four gentleman and then to Jane, who, it appeared, had not heard her father for she was still attending to the child.

Edward had now made his way over to Jane to bring her over to his father just as he was exiting. Jane let herself be led for she was very eager to thank him.

"Thank you so much, my lord, for helping my father. I am sorry that it required you to ruin your clothes."

"Tis nothing, Miss Bennet, I was happy to be of help."

He bowed and when he stood upright again he carefully looked into Jane's eyes as she smiled up at him. He again saw no particular look of love there and was disappointed.

Jane soon remembered her obligation to the other gentlemen and left his side to thank Mr. Goulding. Goulding excitedly received her warm smile with delighted pleasure. Having received this small token of esteem from Jane Bennet now filled him with so much benevolence at that moment, that when he spied the colonel struggling to exit the mud, he hurried off to assist him by grabbing the back of his collar and pulling him up and out in one swift, easy motion.

Jane next approached Mr. Bingley. After Darcy had joined them, Bingley had removed himself a little ways off to be out of his way. His back was to her as she approached.

"Mr. Bingley," she said shyly. Hearing her, he straightened and slowly turned round. "I wish to thank you, too, sir, for your kind assistance to my father."

"Think no more about it, Miss Bennet, it was nothing."

"Oh no, sir, it was not nothing. I shudder to think what would have happened to the poor creatures if they had not been discovered in time and you had not been here to help us."

"Well, it has all turned out well; I only did what any rational man would have done given

the circumstances.”

Her look was so kind and so grateful that Charles Bingley could do nothing but stare into her eyes, hoping that she could see the he wanted her to forgive him for all of his mistakes and to love him once more.

Jane stared back, her full lips parting as she took a long, slow, deep breath while she studied the unmistakable look of hope in his eyes. However, before either could utter another word, it was her sister exclamation that broke them both out of their trance.

“Oh, Colonel Fitzwilliam,” she exclaimed, knowing that he must be in great pain. “How I wish that you did not go in; my father and his men would have managed, but we are grateful none the less.”

Darcy could only laugh. “How I wish Aunt Philadelphia was here to see this!”

As good natured as the colonel was, he could not let Darcy’s quip pass. “Yes, keep laughing, Darcy, and you just might find yourself obliged to take a dip in the mud yourself!”

Jane was now torn. She wanted very much to say something appropriate to Mr. Bingley at that moment, even if she did not quite know what to say. She also wished to offer the Colonel what little help and small service that she could. She rapidly made up her mind and with one last lingering look at Charles Bingley, she curtsied, and turned to re-join the other party.

She could see that Colonel Fitzwilliam’s clothing was almost entirely covered in mud. Even his face did not escape, for he wore several streaks of mud across it. Jane, knowing what it must have cost him in pain due to his war injuries, reached into her pocket for the handkerchief she had just used on Delphie, and in her kindness, stepped forward without thinking and started to remove the mud from his cheeks.

For several seconds he stood there in disbelief. Was Jane Bennet actually seeing to his needs? His eyes widened, and then his grin broadened, and soon he was quite content. He smiled just like a school boy being lovingly fussed over by his mother after a long absence. Jane was so busy seeing to the mud that she did not notice how broadly he smiled, nor did she see how lovingly he looked upon her beautiful face. But Charles Bingley did... and so did Elizabeth.

Everyone else was occupied with sheep, boots, or hats. Yet, it was Elizabeth who cast a troubled and concerned look towards her sister knowing that Jane’s innocence and unsuspecting nature prevented her from seeing what she was not looking for.

“Papa,” she called out to her father after Jane had finished with the colonel’s face, “surely we must get these kind gentlemen back to Longbourn and allow them to warm themselves and clean up a bit.”

“Yes, of course, Lizzy, you are right. You must all come, good sirs; allow us to repay you for your kindness with a warm drink and a good dinner.”

Lawrence was the first to reply, and in doing so, set the tone for everyone else’s answer.

“No indeed, sir, I would not dream of imposing upon Mrs. Bennet in my current state.” Everyone else concurred, though some were not happy about it. “I think it best that I get my children home. I am sure my sister and cousin await our return.”

Darcy on hearing this, smiled. “My sister is here? Excellent!”

The entire group separated into smaller groups and turned to make their way back to Longbourn. Colonel Fitzwilliam and William Goulding, now having bonded over their shared trials in the mud, were claimed by Mr. Bennet who asked them to come to Longbourn to shoot together very soon. Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm and followed after the three men.

It was Jane alone who noticed that Charles Bingley was not part of any of the groups. She stayed behind turning every which way to see where he had got himself to.

However, it was the entire Whitfield family who were the first to notice that Jane had not followed them. Edward, thinking that Jane rightly belonged with their group, ran back to her to take her right hand and Delphie, imitating her brother, also ran towards Jane and secured the left. And both children brought her directly to their father as if it was the most natural thing in the world.



As Jane, Lawrence and the children walked past, Mr. Darcy slowed his steps to put a bit more distance between the others.

“Elizabeth, will you now tell me what it is that troubles you. Charles did not distress Miss Bennet, did he? I would hate to see her made unhappy by his actions.”

“He—” She bit her lip and turned her head away, suddenly unsure of all she must now relay. She wondered how she would inform him that along with Mr. Bingley, she now suspected that his two cousins might actually admire Jane as well. How would she go about telling him? And even more pressing, how would he react.

“Elizabeth?”

She sighed. “He did not distress Jane at all; if anything he put her mind at ease by helping with the lambs.”

“Then what is that has you so concerned.”

“I will tell all, but first, I think I must tell you that it concerns certain members of your family.”

Puzzled, he looked down at her. “Has one of my cousin’s said something to distress you?”

“No, Fitzwilliam, not at all. But I do have a concern.” She swallowed. “My sister--.

Here Darcy felt he should broach that matter instead of her. He had already spoken to the colonel to let him know that his behaviour might incite a regard from the youngest Miss Bennet.

“Yes, that,” replied Darcy, grimly. “There is no need for you to say more. I foresaw that this would happen.”

She sighed, relief showing on every feature. “So, you knew?”

“Well, it was hard to miss. I have observed the situation over that last few days. I did not want to leap to any conclusions given the mistakes I have made in the past. Even now, I hesitate to discuss that matter, but I could not in good conscience let the matter rest knowing that a young lady’s delicate feelings were involved.”

“When you say that you could not let the matter rest—”

“I made a point of speaking to the colonel this morning about your sister. I pointed out that his more... *worldly*, London ways might be construed in some other manner and lead him down a path where he would find himself in an entanglement, honour bound, and unable to extract himself. I am sure you have seen how Fitzwilliam goes out of his way to make himself extremely agreeable to ladies... even though his marked intentions are never quite so serious.”

Elizabeth halted on the path, and stared at Darcy incredulously. Could she really have heard what she thought she heard? Was the colonel, who she had always thought a gentleman in the highest sense of the word, capable of leading Jane on only to move on to his next bit of amusement in the name of appearing agreeable to ladies. She was now utterly bewildered and, in truth, somewhat angry.