

Mr. Darcy's Present: A Pride and Prejudice Holiday Vagary

Chapter One

"It is not her," he murmured in self-chastisement.

Nearly a month had passed since he last looked upon her countenance, and although Elizabeth Bennet had adamantly refused the offer of his hand, every time he turned his head to scan the crowds scampering along the walkways lining Bond Street, Darcy expected to encounter her. It was as if he thought his constant desire for her would manifest itself in her actual appearance. *You remain as foolish as ever.*

With a sigh of resignation he did what was required. Christmastide would arrive within the week, and he held obligations. There were the traditional "gifts" to be arranged for his staff at Pemberley and at Darcy House, as well as for his tenants, and there were the more elaborate presentations expected by his dear family. He despised the necessity of purchasing the expected. Darcy preferred to surprise those for whom he cared with tokens of his affection throughout the year, rather than to break with the religious tone of Christmas Day, but society seized every opportunity to claim another reward to assuage its pride.

"You have the list, Sheffield?" he asked his valet. Because Darcy's secretary had taken ill, Sheffield volunteered to retrieve the items for Darcy's family and the senior servants.

"Yes, Mr. Darcy."

"Although I consider this business all of a piece, have the selections delivered to Darcy House. Make certain the merchants know some items will be returned as inappropriate for the recipient." He had previously viewed all the items on his list, but Darcy had yet to make a decision.

"I understand, sir."

Darcy gripped his cane tighter. Since his last encounter with Miss Elizabeth, he often felt off kilter, as if he expected his familiar world to tilt. "I will call upon Mr. Hess regarding the adjustments to Miss Darcy's dowry and see you again at Darcy House later."

"I shan't be long, sir," the valet assured him.

"Speed is not compulsory," he instructed. "I wish you to conduct business in my name." Glancing toward the bookstore across the busy street, he said in distraction, "Add a book of poetry to the list. Cowper, Scott, Coleridge, Prior, or something in that range and mayhap a simple pin a lady could wear upon a bonnet or to secure a shawl in place. Nothing ostentatious. Just a jewel to mark a gentleman's regard."

He knew Sheffield studied him carefully, but Darcy could not abandon his maudlin. He would never present Elizabeth Bennet with the fairing, but he would place the items away in the drawer with the multiple letters he had written to her, but never posted. "Anything else, sir?" his servant asked in a tone that sounded of concern.

Darcy shook his head in the negative. "That will be all, Sheffield." Still deep in his regrets, he turned to bump into a young buck up to London on holiday. Darcy opened his mouth to extend his apologies, but the young man took instant offense at having his cravat knocked askew. The dandy shoved hard against Darcy's chest, sending him windmilling backwards into the busy street. He noted that Sheffield shoved past the youth to reach for Darcy, but it was too late. A coal cart pulled by a donkey plowed into his side, knocking him to the ground. A loud groan of wood against wood announced the driver's load shifted, and the coal covered him completely.

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Darcy could hear the rumble of voices nearby, but he refused to release the dream, for it was one of his favorites. He had claimed Elizabeth Bennet's hand at the Netherfield Ball. Needless to say, he would have preferred a waltz where he might hold her close, but it was strangely satisfying to grasp her gloved hand in his, even for a few brief seconds when they came together. Surely the lady must understand that their connection was singular. Surely she experienced the same zing of a knot inside her chest that wished to be set free. That wished to know him as much as he wished to know her. That wished to bind them together. Never had Darcy known a woman who made his heart feel lighter.

"It is your turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. I talked about the dance, and you ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room or the number of couples."

He smiled as he circled her. "Whatever you wish me to say will be said."

A familiar playful taunt claimed her tone. No female had ever flirted with him by matching wits. Darcy enjoyed the twist of her lips as she said, "Very well. That reply will do for the present. Perhaps, by and by, I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones, but now we may be silent."

They bantered in a like manner until they claimed the opposing corners in the room. It was then that he made a serious misstep, one worse than claiming her toes. "Do you and your sisters very often walk to Meryton?" he asked to keep the conversation easy between them. He was so consumed by the joy of studying Miss Elizabeth's beauty that he did not realize Mr. Wickham's lies would foul the air surrounding them.

"When you met us there the other day, we had just been forming a new acquaintance."

Despite his best efforts, a deeper shade of hauteur overspread his features, and during a long pause he searched for words that could warn her from his former friend. At length, he responded in a constrained tone, "Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may insure his making friends. Whether he may be equally capable of retaining them is less certain."

The lady replied with emphasis, "He has been so unlucky as to lose your friendship and in a manner which he is likely to suffer from all his life."

Matters between them were worsened by the appearance of Sir William Lucas, who made it clear that the neighborhood expected Bingley to propose to Miss Bennet. Sir William's statement had Darcy rethinking his fascination with Miss Elizabeth. How could he permit Mrs. Bennet's connection to trade to tarnish his family's name? *And a gentleman does not play with a lady's reputation with misplaced flirtations*, he reminded himself.

Her words penetrated his half-hearted responses. "I remember hearing you once say, Mr. Darcy, that you hardly ever forgave—that your resentment, once created, was unappeasable. You are very cautious, I suppose, as to its being created?"

"I am," he replied in a firm voice.

"And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice."

"I hope not."

"It is particularly incumbent on those who never change their opinion to be secure of judging properly at first."

Her words had him second-guessing his opinion of only a few moments earlier.

"May I ask to what these questions tend?" His tone knew suspicion.

"Merely to the illustration of your character."

His character? His roots were impeccable! His was a noble lineage!

"I am attempting to make it out."

Disguising his piqued interest, he asked, "And what is your success?"

She shook her head as if she held her doubts. "I do not get on at all. I hear such different accounts of you as to puzzle me exceedingly."

For a brief second Darcy wondered if he proposed, would she realize his *finer* qualities? "I can readily believe," he replied gravely, "that reports may vary greatly with respect to me, and I could wish, Miss Elizabeth, that you were not to sketch my character at this moment." He was once again from countenance with her. "As there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either."

"But if I do not take your likeness now, I may never have another opportunity."

Did she wish to know him better? A marriage would bring them together on every level. A tolerably powerful need for her remained even when his head declared the emotion insensible. "I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours," he said through husky tones.

"Darcy? Darcy? Can you hear me?" It was Georgiana and she sounded frightened. "Please, William. Open your eyes."

He did not wish to leave Elizabeth's image behind. There was still much he wished to say to her. It was imperative that he convince her to accept his hand, but he held a duty to Georgiana. And so he lifted his heavy lids to welcome the worried features of his sister.

"Oh, William." Her sob of relief had her bottom lip trembling. "I feared we had lost you. I could not bear it."

He wished to take her in his arms to comfort her, but try as he might, Darcy could not lift his arms.

Bingley nudged Georgiana from her place. "You gave us quite a scare, Old Chap," his friend said with a reassuring smile. "Do not worry if you cannot yet move about. Doctor Nott and Mr. Harvon could not agree upon your treatment, but it was decided they would tie your arms to the bed frame. Broke you right wrist and suffered a blow to your head, as well as multiple cuts and bruises. Neither Harvon nor Nott wished you to bolt up unexpectedly and do more injury to yourself."

Darcy made himself form the word "Water." His mouth was excessively dry.

"Miss Darcy, fetch your brother some water," Bingley ordered. His friend remained sitting with one hip on the edge of the bed. At length, Georgiana handed Bingley the glass. Darcy could feel her worried eyes upon him, and so he made the effort to appear alert. "I shan't attempt to brace you. Let us use this spoon." Bingley held up the utensil before spooning the water into Darcy's mouth. "A coal cart toppled over on you," Bingley explained as he tended to Darcy. "You will be quite stiff for a few days, but Harvon says your wrist is the worst of it. Once the laudanum wears away, Harvon will untie your arms. Miss Darcy says the opiate provides you nightmares, and no one wishes you thrashing about in the bed."

Darcy thought of his dream of Elizabeth. It was far from perfect, but certainly not a nightmare. "Thank you," he said as he refused another spoonful of the water. "Sheffield?"

"Your man is fine. He took Lord Joyner's son to task for the youth's lack of forethought. His lordship was less than pleased with Sheffield's tongue lashing of his son until he realized young Mr. Joyner had struck Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy." Bingley winked at him. "Lord Joyner prays you will not withdraw your investment in the canal in which he holds the primary interest."

Darcy pronounced through stiff lips, "Would be foolish."

"My sentiments exactly," Bingley said as he sat the glass of water and the spoon aside. "When you are well enough to consider the situation, the magistrate awaits your decision as to addressing a complaint against the his lordship's heir. But there is no need for you to place your

mind to it at this time. Just rest. It will do young Joyner good to wait a few more days until he learns whether he faces charges of assault. I heard he has known great anguish at considering a charge of murder if you died. The wait will make him appreciate the privileges his father's barony provides him. As to Sheffield, he tended you for the last two days. I sent him to his bed for some much required rest."

"Two days?" Darcy asked weakly.

"The reason for your sister's distress," Bingley replied. "Miss Darcy and I have fended off all those more curious than sincere. You have nothing of which to worry. The Matlocks and I will tend to Miss Darcy. For now, just rest."

Darcy attempted to nod his gratitude, but the movement sent a wincing pain shooting through his head. He squeezed his eyes shut to quell the piercing ache between his eyes. "I am in your debt," he murmured through gritted teeth.

"None of that," Bingley insisted. "No soul can claim a truer friend."

Bingley's words had Darcy wondering if he had betrayed his friend's trust by permitting Miss Bingley to separate Bingley from Miss Bennet. *Was I protecting myself rather than my friend?* he wondered. *If Bingley claimed Miss Bennet, I will lose a friend, for I cannot bear to be in Miss Elizabeth's presence and view her choose another.* With that doubt planted firmly in his mind, he drifted to sleep only to return to the Netherfield ball and the disaster that marked his rejection.

Even though throughout the evening, he had held reservations regarding his own sanity in considering marriage to Elizabeth, as the ball at Netherfield wound down, his unconscious mind again sought Elizabeth. Surprisingly, he discovered her hiding behind a pillar upon the terrace. Although she was not in the first tier of fashion, Elizabeth's exuberance for life had him considering her more than just a handsome face. He looked upon her and could see his future in her eyes. And so, despite the world whispering in his ear for him to be rational, he asked, "Would you walk with me, Miss Elizabeth?"

Her spirits appeared inclined to refuse, but she nodded her agreement and placed her hand upon his proffered arm. He directed their steps first on a circular tour of the terrace and then down the steps to the garden. As foolish as it would be to speak the words aloud, his fate was marked. He held no plans to propose on this evening, but he knew he would do so. As they walked, Darcy attempted to organize the words he wished her to know. "It is a beautiful evening, especially for November," he said in distraction. "If we were in Derbyshire, we would be thinking of snow."

"I understand the southern shires are more temperate," she responded.

At length, he brought her to a halt under a rose arbor that no longer held its blooms. They stood in silence for several minutes before he mustered the nerve to speak his heart. "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

Elizabeth, obviously, had not expected him to speak so soon of his regard for her. After all, they had known each other only some six weeks. But he thought she must understand how often he showed her his preferences above all others in their company. She stared and colored, but remained silent. Such was sufficient encouragement for him. Foolishly, he spoke his avowals of all he felt for her. Even as the scene replayed through his laudanum-induced mind, Darcy knew a certain pride in how well he spoke. It was only when he detailed the qualms he held regarding her connections that things turned sour. In hindsight, he should have omitted his sense of her inferiority, of its being a degradation, and of the family obstacles which judgment had

always opposed to inclination from his recital. If he had known his words would incite her waspish tongue, he would have held his.

He might have taken her unawares, but her response destroyed him. "In such cases as this, it is, I believe, the established mode is to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they may be returned. It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could feel gratitude, I would now thank you. But I cannot. I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly. I am sorry to have occasioned pain to anyone. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and, I hope, will be of short duration. The feelings which you tell me have prevented the acknowledgement of your regard can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation."

He knew he paled with anger for he felt the blood rush from his heart, and the disturbance of his mind had to be obvious to her, and unfortunately, he could not disguise the tight line of his features as he sought control. He struggled for the appearance of composure. He refused to open his mouth until he believed he could speak without the alarm ringing in his head. "And this is all the reply which I am to have the honor of expecting? I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little endeavor at civility, I am thus rejected. But it is of small importance."

"I might as well inquire," replied she, "why with so evident a desire of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I was uncivil? But I have other provocations. You know I have. Had not my own feelings been decided against you, had they been indifferent, or had they even been favorable, do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept a man who would act against the happiness of a most beloved sister?"

His color changed, but the emotion was short lived. He reined in his anger, but before he could respond, she continued, "I have every reason in the world to think ill of you. You speak of the faults and follies of my family as if they are the unwashed. You deny a childhood friend a means to better himself, but the worst of your sins is how you plot with Miss Bingley to divide her brother from Miss Bennet. After our dance, I overheard you speaking to the lady. Miss Bingley spoke of Sir William's assumption of a marriage between Jane and Mr. Bingley."

"I did not encourage Miss Bingley's aspirations," he said in defense.

"Yet you made no move to curtail her derogatory comments," she accused. "In fact, you agreed with Miss Bingley, even going so far as to suggest that she discover a means to keep her brother in London when he departs upon business this week. You have joined forces with Miss Bingley to expose your friend and Jane to the censure of the world for caprice and instability and to the derision for disappointed hopes, involving them both in misery of the acutest kind."

He wished to deny all of her accusations, but how could he? He had listened to Miss Bingley's litany of offenses against the Bennets, and although he never considered either Elizabeth or Miss Bennet inferior, Darcy held his doubts regarding the others in her family, the same doubts he had expressed earlier in his proposal. Moreover, as a guest in Bingley's household and as a gentleman, he could not dissuade Miss Bingley, for the lady served as Netherfield's hostess.

"Can you deny that you have done this?" she demanded.

With assumed tranquility, he replied, "I have no wish of denying that I offered my opinion to Miss Bingley, may she rejoice in her success. Toward Bingley I have been kinder than toward myself." He presented her a curt bow. "I would offer you escort to the house, but I do not wish to hear another refusal from your lips." He looked upon her with dashed hopes. "I perfectly comprehend your feelings and have now only to be ashamed of what my own have been. Forgive

me for having taken up so much of your time. Please accept my best wishes for your health and happiness.”

That was the last time he had seen her. Bingley departed for London on the Monday morning following the ball. He and Miss Bingley had followed two days later, and there was not a second that had passed in the three weeks since that Darcy had not regretted his actions that night, but not because of his profession of love, but because the outcome had not been what he wished.

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It was another two days before his physician permitted him from his bed. His wrist hummed with pain, but Darcy willed it away rather than permit Nott to continue dispensing more laudanum. He would accept the opiate only when he could no longer tolerate the pain and, even then, only in small doses. There had been a variety of nightmares with the dose Nott prescribed—some were full of the fires of Hell, but none of them touched his soul as did reliving Elizabeth Bennet’s refusal of his hand.

“Do you require anything more, Mr. Darcy?” Sheffield said as he placed a lap rug over Darcy’s knees. “Mayhap some tea. Cook has baked a fresh batch of cakes.”

Darcy attempted to disguise the frown claiming his forehead, but Sheffield took note, and so he offered, “Nothing against Cook’s preparations, but I am not in the mood for celebrating the festive days.”

Sheffield claimed the poker and stirred the fire. “It has been difficult for you and Miss Darcy since your father’s passing,” his long-time servant remarked. Some would object to advice from one in service, but Darcy did not. His valet had been with him since Darcy was ten years of age. It was Sheffield who had talked Darcy through the birth of Georgiana and the eventual loss of Lady Anne Darcy. Sheffield was the one who spoke of rejoicing in Miss Darcy’s birth rather than the misery involved in the leave-taking of their mother. And it was his valet who delivered the devastating news of Mr. George Darcy’s passing in his sleep. “I know Mrs. Reynolds would prefer your return to Pemberley for the Twelfth Night celebrations.”

Darcy held up his casted wrist. “Traveling does not appear in my future—certainly not for the number of days and hours required to reach Pemberley.”

Sheffield glanced over his shoulder as he added more coal to the fire. “Considering a one-armed groom taught you how to use the ribbons, I doubt your wrist could keep you from a curricule or from Pemberley, if such was your desire, sir.”

Darcy paused to formulate his response. “I just do not understand why some people put so much stock into a Christmas wish. It is dashed foolishness.”

Sheffield stood to wipe his fingers on a handkerchief. “I recall a fresh-faced lad who set up late into the night, waiting for the appearance of the Christmas star to make his wish.”

Darcy recalled those days, as well. He had wished for a large family, one to fill Pemberley with laughter. He had been an only child at the time, and he felt robbed of the joy of family his school chums experienced. Little did he know, he would lose his mother, and his father would lose the woman he cherished. Often he wondered if his wish had been something less personal if God would have granted it and his family would have known happiness. “And what good did it do that boy?” Darcy argued. “When Lady Anne Darcy passed, life—pure life—disappeared from Pemberley.” He would never admit to anyone he held dreams of Miss Elizabeth restoring those childhood dreams of his estate. He often imagined her sitting upon the floor of the nursery with their children surrounding her. “Just larks in the brain.”

Sheffield's expression said the valet did not believe Darcy's protestations. "Then I suppose you do not care to view the items the shops sent over for your inspection."

"You managed the list, after all?" he asked in surprise.

"I did not wish to disappoint," Sheffield admitted. "Moreover, I assumed you would wish me to execute your charge no matter the unusual situation. It was my duty to see your wishes completed. The items are in the library, but I could have them moved in here, sir."

Darcy sighed in acknowledgment. "The days before the celebration grow short, so it is best I meet my obligations. Even though I care not for the festivities, others will think me a poor nephew or brother or cousin if I do not recognize those who claim me as part of their lives."