

Menace At Pemberley: Darcy & Lizzy's First Christmas

by

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It is late autumn of 1798 and Darcy and Elizabeth are married at last and living at Pemberley in love and harmony. And Lizzy even has a pet name for Darcy; she calls him Fitz in private.

All the impediments to their match have been swept aside; their unpromising first impressions, Darcy's machinations in that he tried to prevent a match between Jane and his friend Bingley, Lady Catherine's violent objections to a match between Darcy and Elizabeth, Darcy's own stiffness and reserve even after he had supported Bingley's suit for Jane's hand following their return to Netherfield, the disbelief of Elizabeth's family that she could ever like such a man...

These and all other objections have evaporated like the morning mist. And Lizzy's whole family are visiting Pemberley for Christmas.

This sequel to Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* is the second novel in the Elizabeth Bennet Series and is available on Amazon as an ebook, a paperback and under the Kindle Unlimited program.

Note: This extract is best read on your device in landscape.

This extract from *Menace At Pemberley* is set soon after Elizabeth's arrival at Pemberley. She is finding marriage to Darcy to be all that she could have hoped for. Pemberley is yet to be visited by the menace of the title and Elizabeth is getting used to her position as the wife of formerly one of the most eligible men in Derbyshire. Then, most unexpectedly, Elizabeth receives a letter from the Reverend Wilde, former rector of Longbourn parish, warning of harm to her and her family at the hands of a former resident of Longbourn.

How will Darcy react to the news of this letter when Elizabeth tells him, as she must. She has done nothing wrong, but that might not matter. She would have been the medium by which unpleasantness reached Pemberley, even if the threats alluded to or any other difficulties potentially arising failed to come about in practice, and she felt instinctively that Darcy would not appreciate it. He may be forced to alert some of the servants to the possible danger which would no doubt anger him, or was this placing too much importance on the ravings of a damaged person?

Chapter 5 begins during dinner, before Elizabeth has told Darcy about the letter.

Chapter 5

THROUGHOUT the evening meal, Elizabeth felt Darcy casting speculative glances at her. She was of course usually more talkative and she tried to hide her anxiety by asking Georgiana questions about her day. She had little to relate herself than a solitary ramble.

“Oh, Elizabeth, I wish I had known. I am grown stale with so much time indoors practising at the pianoforte and writing lists for Christmas. I would have gladly accompanied you.”

“I am sorry indeed, Georgiana. My mind was elsewhere. I received letters today from my mother, sister and aunt, and from my friend Charlotte Collins which I took out with me on my walk.”

Darcy fixed her with a searching eye.

“Did Mrs Collins have anything to relate regarding my aunt, Elizabeth?”

“I...er, no, not that I can recall. Of course, Charlotte and Mr Collins are sensible of Lady Catherine’s disapprobation of our marriage and doubtless have had repeated to them all the unflattering sentiments which she expressed in her letter to you, William. Hence, Charlotte’s letter to me tactfully steered well clear of any mention of your aunt.”

Georgiana looked on but said nothing. Despite Darcy’s protective nature towards her, not all unpleasantness could be kept from her and she was well aware of the family rift.

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Darcy.

“Charlotte did say that the baby William is well.”

This much detail at least Elizabeth had retained. Charlotte had been delivered of a son within a week of Elizabeth’s marriage, so Mrs Bennet had written to tell her, and the irksome notion could not be avoided that the very baby William spoken of would one day inherit the Longbourn estate. She brushed the thought aside.

Evidently from Mr Wilde’s letter, it struck Elizabeth, the rector and his wife had no children as yet or he would surely have made reference to the occasion. But they had been married only a matter of fourteen months or thereabouts. Not a huge amount of time for the event to have occurred. Would she, Elizabeth, be discomposed if she had not produced an heir inside a twelvemonth, or at least be carrying within her the next Darcy to enter the world? Darcy’s voice cut abruptly into her musings.

“And your family? Are they all quite well?”

“Yes, quite well, William.”

“Did they say on what date they hope to arrive here?”

“I don't think they said exactly.”

Elizabeth tried to concentrate.

“I rather felt that they will be leaving at the beginning of next week, which should see them arrive here on the twentieth or twenty-first of the month. I have informed Mrs Reynolds.”

“Good.”

The watchful air remained about him.

“And my Aunt Gardiner,” Elizabeth faltered on, “informs me that it is definite that their four children are to accompany them. They will probably set off soon with a view to arriving early next week. Again I have told Mrs Reynolds.”

“Children in the house at Christmas! Oh, how wonderful,” exclaimed Georgiana. “I will take Jake and Alfred up to the attics to look out all the old toys. You remember, Fitzwilliam, we have a hobbyhorse. They will take great delight in that and all the dolls and the doll’s house. If we have snow, they will build a snowman and we can use the sledge to take them about.”

“Yes.” Elizabeth started to be infected by her sister’s excitement. “We have always had wonderful times with the children at Christmas.” She smiled at Darcy who nodded.

“Oh, and my other Aunt and Uncle Philips are to come here as well.”

Darcy visibly wilted at that. Georgiana smiled, and Elizabeth would ordinarily have laughed, but tonight she had such a burden to bear. She must talk to Fitz later about Mr Wilde’s letter.

“If you will excuse me,” Georgiana dabbed at her mouth with her napkin and rose, “I must leave you. I am still choosing a gown for the ball on Saturday, despite your help yesterday, Elizabeth. I am so looking forward to it.”

It would be Georgiana’s first ball, which she was able to attend specifically because Elizabeth would be there. Not having a mother alive nor any other close female relative had rather limited Georgiana’s social opportunities. Such assistance as Lady Catherine might have provided in that direction was closed off for the time being. Elizabeth was intending to attempt to rectify this void and further Georgiana’s going more into company in the coming months, although the task would not be aided by her own unfamiliarity with Derbyshire society, added to which many of her new friends thus far were more worldly than would be suitable for Georgiana to keep company with.

“Yes, indeed,” said Elizabeth.

Elizabeth hoped that, before her sister turned to leave, her own face did not betray her alarm at the sudden mention of the ball at Ashwick Hall in a few days’ time. It was the seat of the Duke of Rotherham. She already had mixed feelings when contemplating her first public appearance with Fitz, but now that he might be displeased with her, the prospect of a long night navigating the complexities of the highest society of the country filled her with trepidation. She could only hope that some of her new friends would come to her assistance if necessary.

At least Pemberley’s own ball was to be in June, happily some good time away. It had been an annual event until Darcy’s mother died and now that Pemberley had a mistress again, it was to be revived. Then she, as the mistress of the house, would have to supervise all the arrangements. For the time being, she dismissed it from her mind.

She already had her own gown for Saturday’s ball. Two new gowns had been made for her, her own dresses brought from Longbourn adjudged to be insufficiently grand. Peggy had been a huge help with the measuring and choice of materials and trim. A head-dress had been necessary as well, such as those worn by Caroline Bingley and Mrs Hurst which the Hertfordshire community had found to be the height of elegance.

And Peggy had been ecstatic when Elizabeth had given her a couple of her own old day dresses, as they were of a similar height and figure. She had hesitated to do so in case Peggy might be offended but her reaction had been quite the reverse. Elizabeth had noticed her eyeing the dresses when they were sorting out Elizabeth’s clothes together and had made the offer lightly which Peggy had immediately accepted.

“Elizabeth.” Darcy called her attention to him once his sister had quit the room.

He moved his chair to be closer to hers and took her hand in both of his, massaging hers gently and at one point bringing it to his lips. She examined the disarray of the table as he did so.

“Lizzy, my love, I know that five letters were brought to you today, yet you told us only of four.”

Elizabeth raised her head sharply. So this was what occurred in a fine house. The actions of the wife of the master of the house were spied upon.

“Lizzy, do not be discomposed. I merely enquired after you when I arrived home. You’re my wife. I care about you. And Patterson told me in passing that you had received a number of letters, he thought five. Please believe that there was no side to it. And there is none now.”

Elizabeth, although she hoped this was how it was, was not wholly convinced.

"I see," she said.

Darcy sighed and looked about him, as though searching for an example.

Turning to her, he said, "I assume that when letters arrived at Longbourn House, everyone was interested. It is quite natural that they should be."

This was true, of course. Letters received at Longbourn were pounced upon and talked about. Nothing could be kept secret for very long at Longbourn.

She smiled at last. "All right."

"But, Lizzy, I know that something has distressed you. It is quite clear to me. And I cannot help thinking that this is due to the fifth letter."

Elizabeth turned her head away again, building up the courage to raise the exact content of the fifth letter and who had sent it. Darcy was evidently expecting her to tell him now, assuming he had settled any disquiet regarding the source of his intelligence, and largely he had.

"Do you have the letter with you, Lizzy?"

"I do. I hoped to tell you, to show it to you this evening when we could be alone. And I may as well let you read it now, rather than tell you what it says."

She pulled the letter from her sleeve and handed it over. Darcy unfolded it and his eye went straight to the end.

"Oh," he said. "The very handsome, the most charming Mr Wilde."

His tone was ironic.

Elizabeth rallied. "I told you about him, Fitz, how he had helped me find out what happened to our kitchen maid's child and how the boy now resides at Longbourn House with the groom and his wife." Somewhat defensively she added: "His charms and appearance were of no consequence."

"Were they not, indeed! At one time, on our arrival in Meryton, I could not move two feet but to be told of recollections of the rector's pleasing countenance. Bingley's sisters were the main channels of this intelligence."

Elizabeth was surprised. She had not known of this.

Darcy looked resigned. "Whatever is the case, I had better read the letter."

There was silence for five minutes at least. Elizabeth could not determine what he thought of the contents, whether he was disturbed by what he read. At length he said:

"Just remind me why you met Mr Wilde in secret as this letter implies."

"I think I told you before that it was because I thought that my parents would not have approved of my having any interest in the kitchen maid. It was they who had thrown Alice out, or allowed that to happen. I assumed they would have had no patience with my wish to ascertain her fate."

"Hmm," he nodded. Then he held the letter out loosely with one hand and, with the back of the other, flicked at a section of the letter a few paragraphs from the end. The gesture had about it a certain air of distaste.

"What," he said, "do you think he meant by this, about your father and what he may or may not have told you regarding..." he peered down "...the period during which I was endeavouring to ascertain the whereabouts of Alice Carpenter and her child.?"

"I wondered the same thing, Fitz. I have no idea. My father told me that Mr Wilde intended to quit the parish and marry. Soon after that, the boy Peter came to Longbourn House and was placed with the groom and his wife and we left for Buxton. Mr Wilde must have first told Papa about Peter, for I did not."

"Well, you'll be able to ask your father soon. Do you really think this Helen or Isabella or whatever she's called could seriously cause any harm?"

"You never met the St Clair sisters, Fitz. They left Longbourn before you arrived in

Hertfordshire. I am a poor judge of those with troubled minds, Fitz, who would do harm to others, but when I accepted an unexpected invitation to call on Helen shortly before Jane and I visited our Aunt and Uncle Gardiner in London, she rather frightened me. She pressed me to become one of the parish ladies who assisted Mr Wilde. It may sound innocuous enough, but her air of intensity was most disquieting. It was clear to me that she was in love with Mr Wilde. Although, so were half the ladies of Meryton and Longbourn.”

“So it would seem,” he said dryly.

“But, Fitz, I did ask Mrs Reynolds about visitors to Pemberley, about groups seeking access to see the house and she told me of a party of ladies from Nethermill a few weeks ago who were interested in Pemberley’s history and that of the family. They also wanted to know if you had any heir.”

“Did they, by God!” His brow creased and he seemed to take the matter seriously for the first time. “Were any of these ladies of the name of Scargill?”

“I do not know. I did not wish to ask Mrs Reynolds outright. I had asked her if the name Scargill was prevalent hereabouts and I suppose I thought she would say if she recalled a Mrs Scargill in the party. She alluded to the visitors’ book when I inquired after any record kept of those visiting, but I have not looked at it yet.”

“Well then, my love, come, shall we go and do so now?”

“Yes, indeed. Thank you, Fitz.”

He thrust the letter into his pocket and took a candlestick from the table from which he lit a lamp on the mantel. Holding her hand, he led her out of the small family dining parlour. The visitors’ book was kept on a table in the grand reception hall. The chandeliers were not lit at this time and, despite the candles in sconces, the table was still dimly lit. Darcy held up the lamp while Elizabeth opened the book and turned the pages. Together they scrutinised the last few entries assuming that any by the Nethermill party would be amongst them.

It took but a short time to find a number of signatures in an entry dated 29th November 1798. Some of the signatories gave their addresses as Nethermill. A few did not.

“These,” pointed out Darcy, “are villages near Nethermill.”

One of the signatures looked like Isabella Scargill, said to be of Nethermill.

“Well,” said Darcy, his voice even but she detected some steeliness in his tones, “we will have to see what to do about this. First, I will get the attorney, Waring, of Lambton on to it. He will find out anything there is to find.”

THAT night Darcy came to her bedroom with her, the room she had come to regard as *their* bedroom, but did not remain after their congress, throwing on his dressing gown and leaving her with a light kiss, saying that he would spend the night in his own room, not even in the adjoining dressing room. Elizabeth was so shocked that she failed to question this at first and in an instant he was gone. And he had taken the letter with him.

Despite Darcy having dismissed any notion that the servants would spy on her for their master, Elizabeth could not herself entirely banish the idea that this would happen, perhaps not as a deliberate practice, but at least in the normal course of things. Very likely, for a house the size of Pemberley, it would be entirely customary for the head of the house to be made aware of all that went on. Patterson would simply tell Darcy everything. He might fear for his job if he did not.

As she had thought of Mrs Reynolds, these servants wished to please in every respect and avoid to displease at every turn. If this was the case, then Elizabeth did understand, but it was not an easy knowledge to bear, that everything that happened to her was likely to be reported to her husband, even minor events. She almost wished she had made Fitz aware of the letter earlier, so that she would have remained ignorant, for now, of the implications of Patterson having told Darcy.

Knowing how cold and distant Darcy could be from his first few months at Netherfield, indeed until his manners seemed to have improved so astonishingly by the time of her tour of Derbyshire with her uncle and aunt that summer, she cried herself to sleep.

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