

# Menace At Pemberley: Darcy & Lizzy's First Christmas

by

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It is nearly Christmas of 1798. Darcy and Lizzy have been married nearly two months and are living at Pemberley in love and harmony. Lizzy is finding marriage to Darcy to be all that she could have hoped for and is becoming accustomed to her position as the wife of one of the most eligible men in Derbyshire. Her pet name for him in private is Fitz.

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 and a paperback and under the Kindle Unlimited program. This extract is best read in landscape orientation on your device.

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By the time of this extract from *Menace At Pemberley*, the menace of the title has started to be visited on Pemberley. Lizzy has received a warning by letter from her friend Mr Wilde, the former rector of Longbourn that a resident of Longbourn, Helen St Clair, has hinted to him at harm befalling Lizzy and her family. He says that Miss St Clair now goes by the name of Isabella Scargill. It is difficult to know how seriously to view this intelligence, but when one of the old wolfhounds, Lady, is found dead, apparently poisoned, Darcy and Lizzy must take heed of the possible danger. The two wolfhounds were Darcy's deceased mother's dogs and the death of one of them is very distressing to him.

In this extract, Lizzy is awaked in the night when her name is called. Still in a dreamlike state, she is imagining the baths at Buxton where the Bennet family took a holiday in the summer of 1797 in *Intrigue At Longbourn*, the first novel in the Elizabeth Bennet Series.

## Chapter 16

THE SCENE before her was familiar, but lacked authenticity somehow. She had been here in this bathhouse before, over a year ago, the steam rising from the surface of the water, the architecture having a Grecian quality, the stone pillars with their carved Corinthian capitals of curling acanthus leaves, the ripples of the water reflecting off the walls and ceiling in the yellowish light, the ladies in their slips languishing in the shallows and on the steps.

The ambience was relaxing, calming. Yet as she walked away along the stone corridor to the ladies' dressing room, screams rent the air. It was Lydia's voice relating something to do with Aunt Philips. Had she slipped on a stone step worn smooth by the passage of feet over the few years since the baths had been opened? Not very likely. Or had slime built up rendering the steps hazardous?

"Lizzy," the voice called, "come quickly."

Abruptly, Elizabeth's mind foggily registered instead her own bedroom at Pemberley as

her eyes opened, with Fitz beside her, holding onto her, not wanting her to leave the warm bed. But Lydia's voice continued to call insistently.

"Lizzy."

The yellow light had disappeared and the room was almost completely black, the only illumination coming from the remaining embers of the fire in the grate. Maids crept stealthily into most of the dark bedrooms before dawn and lit new fires for the comfort of the occupiers, but Fitz had ordered that his and Elizabeth's room should always be left for later. He made up the fire before they retired and usually their room remained tolerably warm until they were awake and he would throw more coal into the grate and return to Elizabeth under the coverlet.

How could Lydia be here? It would never be countenanced. And she and Wickham were in the North of England. They could not have travelled here and somehow gained entry into the house.

The cries, which had sounded so like Lydia, eventually resolved into those of her mother, Mrs Bennet's and Lydia's voices being so similar.

There was a muffled curse from Darcy and a "What now?"

He had no doubt recognised her mother's voice before she had!

Elizabeth rapidly dressed herself in her nightgown and overthrew her dressing gown. Darcy similarly and quickly attired himself in his equivalent, though seldom used, nightwear and made up the fire. Taking up and lighting a candlestick, he grasped Elizabeth's hand and led her through the sitting room in which the fire *had* been lit and onto the landing where the shrill tones were louder, leaving them in no doubt in which direction to go. Candles in sconces assisted the going though most were by now spent or nearly so.

"Which is my Aunt Philips's room, Fitz?"

"Not much farther." He pulled her along gently and they reached the source of the sound.

Mr and Mrs Bennet's and Mr and Mrs Philips's rooms were adjacent to one another. The entreaties seemed to be coming from the rooms occupied by the Philipses. More than that, a low moaning, as of a girl in pain, reached them through the open door.

Darcy looked at Elizabeth and together they entered the Philips's bedchamber. The first person they saw was Mrs Bennet standing not far into the room.

"Oh, Lizzy. You are come. Thank heavens. And William. Your Aunt Philips is unable to talk through fear. I heard a crash and came in and found this."

She pointed dramatically to a maidservant collapsed on the floor.

"She must have tripped over that—thing, there. I ran back out onto the landing to call you Lizzy."

The thing alluded to was a large, furry, motionless shape.

"Oh, my God," said Darcy. "It is Caesar."

He loosed his hand from Elizabeth's and put it over his mouth in horror. Then he went over to the inert form and touched it, holding the candle over it for it was still dark in this room. The fire hadn't yet been lit. The maid's candle must have been snuffed out when she fell.

"He's dead," said Darcy, "stiff, though not quite cold yet."

Recollecting himself, he went to the maid and spoke to her.

"What...are you in pain? Where does it hurt and how painful is it? If you would say, we can decide whether to summon a doctor."

The girl groaned and sat up.

"Can you stand?" asked Darcy.

She looked up at the master in awe.

"I think so. I came in quietly to light the fire."

Darcy nodded. Elizabeth went over to the window and pulled one of the curtains aside an

inch or two. It was still pitch black outside.

“Then I fell over...the dog. I am sorry, sir. I never expected it to be there.”

“No. Of course not.”

Mr Philips wasn't in evidence, presumably in the dressing room next door, probably still fast asleep. Mrs Philips must have recovered sufficiently to cry out:

“Upon my word! It might have been me who fell, if I needed...to get out of bed in the night.”

“Indeed it might,” said Darcy.

And, thought Elizabeth, that could well have been the intention. It must have been a strong person to have carried the dead weight of the dog up here and placed it on the floor of this room. It was highly unlikely that the dog would have found its own way up here and collapsed; also unlikely that Caesar had taken poison at the same time as Lady but that there had been a delayed effect in the case of the male dog. Caesar had seemed well enough when the household had retired to bed at about one o' clock. The mischief must have been done in the three hours since then.

Her train of thought was arrested by her father entering.

“What on earth is going on?” he said.

“We are not sure, Papa, other than that the other wolfhound is in here, dead, and that the maid fell over him in the dark.”

Mr Bennet shook his head in evident dismay.

“I had better summon help,” Darcy said. His expression was grim as he walked over to the bell-pull. “Would you step outside with me, Lizzy, Mr Bennet?”

“Mama, will you be all right? We will be immediately outside the door.” Elizabeth asked her mother. Mrs Bennet responded with a faint nod, not prepared, obviously, to go against Darcy.

They were half a dozen paces from the door before any of them spoke.

“Once again,” Darcy's voice was low, “this is an episode which may or may not be the work of an intruder. If it is, perhaps that is the object. To disconcert us, but not physically harm any person. It makes it more difficult for us to summon a constable. Two dogs have died. It would not be taken seriously.”

“I tend to agree with you, Darcy,” said Mr Bennet.

Elizabeth addressed herself principally to her husband. “Surely a woman could not have carried that dog all the way up here, Fitz. She would have needed help.”

Her father raised an eyebrow at the sobriquet but did not remark upon it.

“I agree,” said Darcy. “But the dogs were both very tame and trusting. It is quite possible that someone could have lured Caesar up here with some treat and fed it to him in the bedroom,” said Darcy. “We must try to think of everything, but again, as I said earlier before lunch, not necessarily assume the worst.”

“Ah, here come two footmen. They can remove Caesar and take the maid to her room. Mrs Reynolds will have a look at her ankle tomorrow morning. It may only need binding up and rest. I suggest we go back to the ladies and that I reassure them by apologising and telling them that Caesar was elderly and sometimes wandered about and got lost. That he probably suffered an apoplexy or something of the sort. Sadly, too much excitement in the last few days.”

ELIZABETH went back to bed but of course was unable to sleep. Darcy dressed quickly and roughly and went off downstairs. He returned after a time with the news that Patterson was already up and had settled a point which had been preying on Darcy's mind.

“As I told you before, my steward, Campbell, who managed the house and the servants, left just before I returned to Pemberley with you. I wrote to him, telling him of my

forthcoming marriage and my intended return to Pemberley. He replied with a letter giving me notice. He said that his father was very ill and he wanted to leave immediately to go to him. He asked to be excused his full period of notice which was six months and then, according to Patterson, he just left at the beginning of November without waiting for my answer. I was going to discuss it with him as soon as we arrived. My letter to him is still here in Campbell's office.

"And at the moment, we don't know where he is. He left no address. No information about future employers. The only address we have for him is that of his former employer before he came here, but that was seven or eight years ago. I was meaning to write to them at some time to ask whether they have a family address for him, but it did not seem urgent until now."

"Are you planning to replace him?"

"Probably not. I have been away previously for lengthy periods and Campbell was invaluable in my absence. Now I don't propose to be much absent. I suppose I rather half-suspected that my marriage was also part of the reason for him wishing to leave. That he might have thought that it would change things."

"What makes you think it is more urgent now? To contact Campbell?"

"I asked Patterson outright whether he thought Campbell's story of an ailing father was genuine and he thinks not. He was not aware of Campbell having living parents, and neither was I. He thought rather that Campbell was having some trouble with a woman but he couldn't be more specific than that."

"But he must have had reasons to suspect there was a woman."

"Oh, things such as staying away overnight, letters to Campbell delivered here which smelled of scent. He thought that Campbell was upset and worried about something and he appeared short of money."

"Was Campbell unmarried?"

"Yes. As far as I knew. He was always so reliable, or seemed so. Now I don't know. He was employed originally by my father when he became unwell."

"Are the letters from a lady still in his office?"

"No."

"So you're thinking that the lady in question might have been Isabella Scargill?"

Darcy shrugged. The whole thing was so nebulous, built on vague suspicions and very little else.

"Surely Campbell will need a reference at some point to obtain fresh employment."

"One would assume so. The fact that he has not asked me for a reference makes me further suspicious that his life is in some disarray, maybe because of a woman as Patterson said."

This seemed logical. Elizabeth sighed.

"I am sorry to cast question after question at you, Fitz, but do you really think Caesar was poisoned?"

"I would guess that he was, as I believe was Lady."

He paused.

"Oh, and I have given orders for menservants to be positioned around the house as they were in former times before the bell-pull system was installed. We will have to say that the bell-pulls are not working properly. I am not comfortable about continually lying to people, but there seems to be no alternative for now. It is pointless alarming people when there is possibly no threat at all."

"No," replied Elizabeth lamely. "Will you come back to bed, Fitz?"

"I think not, Lizzy. I find it difficult to settle after what has happened and the uncertainty. It will be light soon and snow is no longer falling. The men are already out clearing the paths and roads. I think I will join them. I feel the need for activity and to be out in the air."

FOR FITZ to have joined men working on the estate in a manual task was a surprise indeed. It was dawning on Elizabeth that somehow his passion for her and their marriage were changing him, both his behaviour and his values. There was his allusion to his upbringing and wishing to have their children around them in due course; his mention of a mill on the estate and his visit to Matlock, about which she had yet to find the time to discuss with him; his friendly, open acceptance of her family, including her uncle in trade.

Left to herself for a couple of hours, Elizabeth relaxed in the warm, comfortable bed and allowed herself to contemplate, as often, the remarkable events of the last nine months and the huge good fortune which had brought them together.

However inept had been Fitz's first proposal of marriage at Hunsford at Easter, it was probably inevitable that it would make a not altogether negative impression upon her, and would have done so even apart from his letter pushed into her hand the following day apprising her of Wickham's shortcomings. It was not possible for a handsome man to look into a woman's eyes and inform her how ardently he admired and loved her without such an event having at least some favourable effect, even if barely perceived at first.

Thereafter, she could not help but dwell, not for the first time, upon marriage and what it essentially entailed. The marriage bed and what pleasures or pains it might hold; the physical closeness of another person; that he, Darcy, had wanted to share the rest of his life with her for better or for worse. His face, his intense expression and the words spoken frequently floated before her, softening over the months her dislike of him. The impact of his action in separating Bingley from her sister and the reasons for it became, if not forgivable, then more understandable.

And Darcy's visual appeal could not fail to touch and affect the areas of her mind and body which, over the previous year or so, had become increasingly more desirous of intimacy with a man. Before the proposal, there were only two other men whom she had liked, about whom she was able to compare her feelings for Darcy; they were the Reverend Wilde and George Wickham, both good-looking, outwardly charming men.

Mr Wilde had no imperfections that Elizabeth could divine. He was kindness and generosity all through. He had never deceived her or led her on. His resoluteness was such that he had adhered strictly to his ambitions, regardless of his own feelings.

Wickham, of course, had turned out to be a flawed character and she was surprised that she had not apprehended this at the time when he first came to Meryton and had immediately emphasised his hardships and blackened Darcy's name. It was obvious to her now that neither assertion was a noble or gracious stance for Wickham to have adopted which should have warned her immediately of the weakness of his nature.

By contrast, save that he had, during a dance with Elizabeth at Netherfield, thrown doubt on Wickham's ability to retain friends once made, Darcy had kept his criticisms of Wickham to himself. That was until forced by Elizabeth to defend himself and tell her the truth about Wickham. This he did in his letter to her, trusting her to the extent of revealing his beloved sister's near elopement with Wickham.

Neither had he trumpeted his saving of Lydia's reputation and, thus, that of the whole Bennet family in the form of providing a substantial financial incentive to Wickham to marry Lydia. He had instead involved the Gardiners alone and it was only because Lydia had let slip that Darcy was at her wedding as well as the Gardiners, that Elizabeth had appealed to her Aunt Gardiner for an explanation. Still, he had not told Elizabeth of his part in Lydia's redemption. He had put her under no pressure to agree to marry him as such a benefactor might have done. It had been *she* who had spoken of it to *him* to thank him on behalf of her unsuspecting family.

"I believe I thought only of *you*," he had responded.

Neither Wickham nor Wilde could have touched her mind in the way that Darcy did. With

his mingled vulnerabilities and strengths, she began to feel an empathy with him, a certainty that he would not ultimately disappoint. And indeed he had not. He had remained steadfast in his devotion to her, ill-expressed at first to be sure, but evident in his demeanour towards her since her accidental and, to her, excruciatingly embarrassing meeting with him at Pemberley. Those perceived qualities of his had played on her mind until she had hoped, she thought probably in vain, for a renewal of his addresses to her. Her desire for him must have shone through her diffidence and modesty for they had become betrothed against, probably, all the odds.

And might not have become so had it not been for the Easter 1798 proposal and the effect it had upon her.

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The attached image is part of the 1785 painting 'Lady Hamilton as a Bacchante' by George Romney