



SECOND IMPRESSIONS

JACK CALDWELL

Second Impressions

JACK CALDWELL

<http://austenvariations.com/>



Blurb: What if Mr. Darcy literally got off his high horse and confronted Mr. Wickham on the street in Meryton instead of riding away? How would that have changed things?
A P&P short story.

LYDIA'S INTENTION OF WALKING to Meryton was not forgotten; every sister . . . agreed to go with her; and Mr. Collins was to attend them, at the request of Mr. Bennet, who was most anxious to get rid of him, and have his library to himself; for thither Mr. Collins had followed him after breakfast, and there he would continue, nominally engaged with one of the largest folios in the collection, but really talking to Mr. Bennet, with little cessation, of his house and garden at Hunsford. Such doings discomposed Mr. Bennet exceedingly. In his library he had been always sure of leisure and tranquility; and though prepared, as he told Elizabeth, to meet with folly and conceit in every other room in the house, he was used to be free from them there; his civility, therefore, was most prompt in inviting Mr. Collins to join his daughters in their walk; and Mr. Collins, being in fact much better fitted for a walker than a reader, was extremely well pleased to close his large book, and go.

— Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*, Chapter 15



Part 1

THE BENNET SISTERS—JANE, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia—set out for Meryton, accompanied by their cousin, the Reverend Mr. Collins. No one would mistake the daughters of Fanny Bennet for a quiet and reserved group of young ladies, for they owned too much *joie de vivre* not to talk and laugh and sing. True, the eldest were more proper in their manners than the younger, but at least they were not bores. If the universe had set itself to create a fool, William Collins was a perfect example. And like most fools, he could not keep his mouth shut.

In pompous nothings on Mr. Collins' side and civil assents on that of his cousins, the party's time passed till they entered Meryton. The attention of Kitty and Lydia was then no longer to be gained by him. Their eyes were immediately wandering up the street in quest of officers, and nothing less than a smart bonnet or new muslin in a shop window could recall them.

However, the attention of every lady was soon caught by a young man of most gentlemanlike appearance whom they had never seen before walking on the other side of the way with an officer of their acquaintance, a Mr. Denny by name. The civilian's appearance was greatly in his favor. He had all the best part of beauty—a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address. All wondered who he could be, and an introduction was soon entreated. The gentleman was a Mr. Wickham, a native of Derbyshire, lately from London, who had accepted a commission in the militia that very week.

The whole party was still standing and talking together very agreeably when the sound of horses drew their notice, and Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were seen riding down the street. On distinguishing the ladies of the group, the two gentlemen came directly towards them and began the usual civilities. Mr. Bingley was the principal spokesman, and Miss Bennet the principal object of address. He was then, he said, on his way to Longbourn on purpose to inquire after her.

Mr. Darcy corroborated the account with a bow and had just fixed his eyes on Elizabeth, when he was suddenly distracted by the sight of the stranger. Both changed color—one looked white, the other red. Mr. Wickham, after a few moments, touched his hat, a salutation which Mr. Darcy did not deign to return. That gentleman's visage only grew more severe.

Elizabeth happened to see the reaction of both as they looked at each other and was all astonishment at the effect of the meeting. What could be the meaning of it? It was impossible to imagine; it was impossible not to long to know.

In that instant, Mr. Darcy threw the reins of his horse to a stable boy, who had approached the party to offer just that service, and practically leapt from the saddle. Mr. Wickham paled anew and took a step back, but Mr. Darcy said nothing. He did not need to; his expression was thunderous. Deliberately the gentleman moved until he was standing next to Elizabeth, almost shielding her from Mr. Wickham.

By then, Mr. Bingley had joined his friend, a confused and serious look on his normally pleasant face. Unlike his friend, he remembered his manners and asked to be introduced to the tall vicar standing by.

"This is our cousin, Mr. Collins, lately from Hunsford in Kent," said Jane. "Mr. Collins, this is Mr. Bingley of Netherfield Hall, and his guest, Mr. Darcy."

Upon hearing the august name of Darcy, Mr. Collins could not restrain himself. "Mr. Darcy—the nephew of my very great patroness, the esteemed Lady Catherine de Bourgh!" The gentleman took off his hat, placed his free hand over his heart, and executed a full bow from the waist. "What an honor for me! Forgive me not knowing you on sight. Such a noble visage can only belong to the family Fitzwilliam. You see, Lady Catherine has kindly acquainted me with her splendid heritage. I can assure you, sir, of Lady Catherine's good health and that of Miss Anne de Bourgh, too. Your intended is surely the finest flower in Kent—nay, all England! It will be a great day in Hunsford when you take her away from us."

The statement aroused everyone's attention, especially Mr. Darcy's. His angry stare now pierced Mr. Collins, who blanched and began uttering apologies.

"Mr. Collins," said Mr. Darcy in a frosty voice, "I shall speak to you in a moment." With that he turned back to the other two gentlemen.

"This is Mr. Denny of the ---- militia," continued Jane, who was confused and concerned. "We have just made the acquaintance of this gentleman, Mr. Wickham."

Mr. Denny and Mr. Wickham bowed, something Mr. Darcy refused to do. Instead, he said, "I am acquainted with Mr. Wickham." With a glare he addressed the man. "I am surprised to see you here. Are you planning a short stay?"

Mr. Wickham managed a small smile. "Actually, Darcy, I am to join the corps stationed here."

"You—in the militia?" Mr. Darcy's voice dripped with scorn. "Perhaps *they* can make a gentleman out of you. University certainly did not."

Elizabeth gasped at the open rudeness of Mr. Darcy's statement.

"Here now, Darcy," cried Mr. Wickham, "there is no need for that."

If anything, Mr. Darcy's voice dropped lower and became harsher. "How *dare* you say that, after our last meeting? I warned you then that I would no longer stand idly by while you engaged in your usual behavior. I have learned to protect my friends." He took a step closer to the other man. "Know that I will be writing to Colonel Fitzwilliam, informing him of your location and plans. You know how *interested* he is with you."

Mr. Wickham blanched.

"This is my last advice to you, Wickham. Take this chance to reform your character, leave my friends in peace, and never speak to me again. Or better yet, leave Hertfordshire."

Mr. Bingley stepped up and touched Mr. Darcy on the shoulder. "Here, Darcy, let us not make a scene." To Mr. Wickham, he said, "You heard my friend. We have nothing more to say. Good day to you, Mr. Denny."

Wickham bowed and turned away. Mr. Denny, offended and confused, did likewise. All could see the two engaged in a conversation as they went away.

Elizabeth was incensed at Mr. Darcy's infamous treatment of Mr. Wickham, but Lydia voiced her complaints before Lizzy could respond.

“Mr. Denny, come back! Mr. Darcy, how could you be so mean and cruel! Those were... were... *officers!*”

“Come, Lydia,” offered Kitty. “Let us hurry and apologize to them before they go too far!”

Kitty’s outrageous suggestion caused Elizabeth to stop her sisters. “Catherine Bennet, you forget yourself! You will NOT chase after those gentlemen!”

Lydia did not heed her sister’s words and took Kitty’s hand to dash down the street when Mr. Darcy stepped in front of them. “I believe it is time you returned home,” he said severely. “Mr. Bingley and I will accompany you. I have business with Mr. Bennet that cannot wait.”

To Elizabeth’s surprise, Mr. Darcy actually cowed her younger sisters. They continued to protest, but Jane was able to herd them back on the road to Longbourn. Meanwhile, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy recovered their horses and walked with them, reins in hand.

Part 2

THE PARTY QUICKLY FELL into three groups. Elizabeth walked with Mr. Bingley and Jane, while Lydia and Kitty trailed behind, Mary keeping an eye on them. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins led the way, the two in an earnest, low, one-sided conversation. Unexpectedly, it was Mr. Darcy who was doing most of the talking.

Mr. Bingley, whose countenance had returned to its normal, placid manner, sighed. “I am sorry you had to witness that, my dear ladies, but there was nothing for it. I hope you are not too distressed.”

“I am unharmed, Mr. Bingley,” Jane assured him. “I take it you know Mr. Wickham?”

“Actually, I have never laid eyes on him before today. But I know of him. Apparently, we attended Cambridge at the same time, but he left university before I met Darcy. Darcy knows him well.” He frowned. “He is *not* a gentleman, I am sorry to say.”

“Gracious!” cried Jane.

“That is a strong statement against his character,” said Elizabeth.

“Yes,” Jane exclaimed. “Are you certain there is no misunderstanding? Mr. Wickham has such an expression of goodness in his countenance!”

“My dear Miss Bennet, the world has taught me some gentlemen have all the appearance of goodness but own it not.”

Lizzy spoke again. “You speak as if he has done you great harm, Mr. Bingley.”

“Me? Oh no, Miss Elizabeth! His detestable behavior at Cambridge was common knowledge, and that is sufficient cause not to associate with the man.” He glanced at Mr. Darcy. “But from what I have been told, he has badly misused my friend on more than one occasion, and even if I did not know of Wickham’s reputation, that would be enough for me.”

Mr. Bingley’s words struck Elizabeth in an unexpected manner. She had always thought of Mr. Darcy—proud, rude, arrogant Mr. Darcy—as somehow invulnerable, more given to causing offence than receiving it. That Mr. Darcy had been a victim of what sounded a bit like betrayal was an unsettling thought to Lizzy. She prided herself on being an unerring judge of character. If Mr. Bingley spoke true, and there was absolutely no reason to think that he did not, then Lizzy had made a mistake about Mr. Darcy. He was human, after all.

Mr. Bingley’s words had been overheard by her younger sisters, and they rushed forward to join them. “What did Mr. Wickham do to Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley?” demanded Lydia.

“It sounds horrible!” cried Mary.

“Was there a duel?” Kitty asked.

“Girls, girls, stop this nonsense right away,” said Jane.

“We just want to know,” Lydia protested. “Mr. Darcy looked like he wanted to strike Wickham down!”

Elizabeth belatedly realized that Lydia was absolutely correct for once in her life. *Goodness, what had Mr. Wickham done?*

Either the conversation was done, or Mr. Darcy had overheard Lydia's speculations. Whatever the cause, Mr. Darcy looked back and gestured to Mr. Bingley. Within moments, Mr. Bingley was now conversing with Mr. Collins while Mr. Darcy had taken Mr. Bingley's place beside Elizabeth.

The two walked alone, for Jane decided to join Mr. Bingley in keeping Mr. Collins company. As for the other girls, they were much too intimidated to walk with the formidable Mr. Darcy, and they fell back. Lizzy and Mr. Darcy walked on in silence, the man's horse obediently trailing behind.

At first, Elizabeth was uncomfortable. She disliked Mr. Darcy, and she was sure the feeling was mutual. Yet, the man seemed content to stroll in silence, and Lizzy was not unwilling to remain quiet. She had much to ponder.

Her companion finally broke the quiet. "Miss Elizabeth, I must beg your pardon for my behavior in Meryton today. It is not my usual manner to be so demonstrative in public. I am sorry you had to witness it. I hope you were not harmed." His eyes never left the road before them.

Mr. Darcy's haughty tone reignited Elizabeth's ire, causing her to disregard the fact that the gentleman was apparently concerned for her feelings. "So you apologize for *how* you spoke to Mr. Wickham, but not for *what* you said. Extraordinary."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mr. Darcy turn to her. "What I said, madam, was said for the best, and I feel not a bit sorry for it. I have nothing more to say about the matter."

"You feel your station in life gives you leave to accost people in public?"

Mr. Darcy breathed through his teeth. "You take an eager interest in that gentleman!"

"I know nothing at all about Mr. Wickham, save that you do not like him and that Mr. Bingley indicated you have had a falling out with him. I have no idea who was the innocent in that matter."

Mr. Darcy stopped in the middle of the road, causing Elizabeth to do the same. "Miss Elizabeth, you do not know of what you speak. Wickham is a scoundrel of the first order! I advise you to have nothing to do with him!"

By now, Jane and Bingley had noticed that their friends were engaged in an argument. Ever the peacemaker, Jane insisted that her sisters come away from the two combatants and walk further up the path. Jane's determination, aided by Mary's disapproval of the unpleasant behavior of Lizzy and Mr. Darcy, was enough to convince Kitty and Lydia to do as they were bade. It fell to Mr. Bingley to "encourage" Mr. Collins to do the same, and he was as successful in his task as his angel. The party stopped at a distance that kept Lizzy and Mr. Darcy in sight, but beyond hearing any of the heated discussion. Elizabeth and Darcy, locked in their verbal battle, paid them no mind.

Elizabeth was almost toe-to-toe with Mr. Darcy. "Who are you to tell me with whom I may or may not associate?"

"I would do the same for any of my friends!"

"Friends?" laughed Elizabeth. "Oh, Mr. Darcy, you will have to produce a better reason than that! Our mutual dislike is known to everyone in the county!"

To Elizabeth's surprise, Mr. Darcy was clearly taken aback. "Mutual dislike? Of what are you speaking? I certainly do not dislike you, and you—what of your behavior at Netherfield? What joke are you playing?"

"My behavior at Netherfield?"

"Yes! Your jokes, your teasing, your impertinent, ridiculous statements! Forgive me, madam, but there were times you were positively flirting with me!"

Elizabeth was astonished! "Mr. Darcy, I am certainly not a lady that flirts with *any* gentleman, much less with a person of unpleasant manners!"

“What was unpleasant about my manners? I treated you with great respect!”

“Is it respectful to stare at someone, looking for faults to mock? I saw what you were about, sir!”

Darcy reddened. “Fault? You thought I was looking at you to find *fault*?” He turned away for a moment, then in a lower, earnest voice, he continued. “Miss Elizabeth, I apologize if I made you uncomfortable. It was certainly not my intention. I had no idea that you were even aware of it. But if you think I was gazing at you with disfavor, you are wrong. *Very* wrong.”

Elizabeth blinked. Surely he was not saying what he indicated! “Forgive me, but I find that hard to believe. I have known your poor opinion of me for many weeks—even from the first moments of our acquaintance.”

“That is impossible. I do not have a poor opinion of you *and never have.*”

“Mr. Darcy, please! This is ill done of you! I KNOW what you think of me!”

“I must beg that you explain it to me.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Very well, I will expose you. I refer to your comment at the Meryton Assembly.”

Darcy went blank for a moment, obviously thinking. He then started. “My God, you overheard that comment I made to Bingley?”

Elizabeth tightened her lips. “I did, sir—every word.”

Gone now was Darcy’s haughtiness, replaced by an earnestness that could not be contrived. “Miss Elizabeth, I must beg your pardon! I am very sorry you heard that, for it was not directed at you!” Elizabeth made to respond, but Darcy overrode her. “Believe me, it would not have mattered if you had been the Princess Royal, I would have said the same thing to Bingley. I was not in a mind to dance with anyone outside of my own party that night.”

“Then why in the world did you attend an assembly if you had not intended to dance?”

Darcy blinked and seemed to struggle with his thoughts. “I had just arrived in Hertfordshire, planning to distract myself, but my mind was still occupied by . . . important family business. I own I was a bit distressed that night and was poor company. I should not have gone, but Bingley was insistent.”

Elizabeth had to own that such a reasonable explanation had never occurred to her. Suddenly, she remembered that Jane had said something of the matter, but she had disregarded her. Oh! Had her own injured pride made her blind?

Darcy looked at her like a repentant schoolboy. “You must remember that I offered to dance with you when we were properly introduced at the Lucases’ ball and later at Netherfield.”

“Oh! But you were not serious!”

“Indeed, I was.” His lip twitched upward as if he was suppressing a smile. “I may not name dancing as a favorite occupation of mine, but when I do dance, I am entirely serious about it.”

Oh, my goodness! Mr. Darcy is flirting with me! That shocking thought was reinforced by a return of the same intense look she had seen so often at Netherfield. If it was not to find fault, then it must mean—*Oh, my goodness!*

“Mr. Darcy,” she shakily responded, “it now falls to me to apologize for my behavior towards you during the last few weeks. It was bordering on the uncivil, and I am now heartily ashamed of myself.”

“I would not have you ashamed, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy said gently, “but . . . you were not playfully bantering with me at Netherfield? You truly disliked me at the time?”

Now Elizabeth was distressed. “I do not wish to give you pain, sir, but I must be truthful.”

“I see.” The man withdrew. He frowned and looked at the ground, lost in thought.

The silence was oppressive, and to Elizabeth’s nature, painful. How wrong she had been! How cruel! She had intentionally set out to mock and disparage a gentleman of means simply because he had initially refused

to dance with her. When had she become so vain? So shallow? She knew no actual ill of him, except what she had created in her own mind.

Elizabeth was mortified. She was no better than Miss Bingley, whose snide remarks were meant to prove her superiority over her company. At least that lady was transparent. Lizzy had been sly, subtle, and slanderous.

Until this moment, Elizabeth had not known herself.

Mr. Darcy turned his attention back to her, coldly correct. "Then, with your permission, we must begin again." For the first time, he acknowledged the others and called out, "Bingley, will you introduce me to this lady?"

Elizabeth gasped. He was joking with her?

Bingley stared at his friend as if he had gone mad, but encouraged by Jane, he came down the path and did the honors. Darcy bowed deeply. Elizabeth curtsied, beginning to find amusement in their situation. She began to see that Mr. Darcy was a gentleman of great depth and, she had to admit, infinite compassion. She suspected *she* would not have been so forgiving had the tables been turned.

Just who was Mr. Darcy? She decided it would be interesting and rewarding to learn.

"Miss Elizabeth," Darcy said, "it is my understanding that my friend, Bingley, is hosting a ball at Netherfield."

"That is my understanding as well." Somehow, Elizabeth did not giggle. "We look forward to it."

"If you are not otherwise engaged, may I request the first set?"

The others had drawn closer, and Mr. Collins began to protest, but Elizabeth quickly said, "You may, sir."

"And the supper dance, as well?"

Elizabeth lost all good cheer over their silliness. This had gone too far! "Mr. Darcy, that is quite enough! You must not tease me."

"What do you mean? I am in earnest."

She looked at him in wonder. Surely he understood what the neighborhood would think if she and Mr. Darcy danced a second time. It would be as good as a declaration of an engagement! "Mr. Darcy—"

"I am aware of the implications, Miss Elizabeth. True, we are in the country, but I am sure that expectations could be raised. I am a gentleman and know my responsibilities. My intentions are honorable."

"Mr. Darcy!" cried Mr. Collins. "But what of your fair intended?"

Darcy shot back. "Did we not just have a serious conversation about spreading rumors? There are laws against slander in this country!"

"But... but, Lady Catherine—"

"Speaks of *her* desires, not *mine*." Darcy turned to Elizabeth. "I am not engaged, Miss Elizabeth."

Elizabeth nodded. "Nevertheless, a second dance is a serious business." Why, she thought to herself, did she not simply turn him down? What was stopping her? Surely it was not his handsome features and dark eyes!

"Indeed it is." Darcy smiled. "I do not intend to put you in an uncomfortable situation, but I cannot think of a pleasanter way to spend an hour than dancing and speaking with you. Believe me, I would consider the supper dance an unreasonable encumbrance, if I could not look forward to debating some point of literature with you."

"Do you debate while dining as a rule?"

"Only with you."

Elizabeth grinned. Mr. Darcy had proven to be entertaining, and she found that she would like to share that meal with him. "Under one condition, sir."

Darcy smiled in return. "And that is?"

Her eyes danced with mischief. "You must dance with all my sisters as well."

Darcy glanced up at the flabbergasted ladies assembled. "With their permission, I agree."

Jane smiled, but Mary had other ideas. "I have no intention of dancing!"

"Miss Mary, we must not disappoint your sister," said Darcy. "I insist upon it. The second set, if you please."

To Elizabeth's amusement, Mary bit her lip and nodded. It was very agreeable to learn that Mr. Darcy had a sense of humor after all!

"But I had planned to dance only with the officers!" declared Lydia. For once, Kitty did not immediately chime in as her parrot—she was wide-eyed in amazement.

"Hmm, that does seem an obstacle. I do not have a red coat, Miss Lydia. For your sister's sake, can I not change your mind?"

Lydia shrugged. "Oh, very well—for Lizzy's sake."

At Mr. Darcy's glance, Kitty only nodded. He then turned to a clearly diverted Elizabeth. "There, I have met your requirement. May I assume we have settled matters?"

"I see you are very persistent!"

"Yes—yes, I am."

The low tone in Darcy's voice sent shivers through Elizabeth. It was madness to encourage him . . . "Very well, you may have the supper dance if you wish."

Darcy bowed and held out his arm. "You do me great honor. But we must be away to Longbourn. I must speak to your father."

Elizabeth stumbled. "Speak to my father?"

"Yes, I must warn him about Wickham."

Relieved, Lizzy fell into step with him and the party continued on its way. Elizabeth ignored the panicked looks she received from Mr. Collins. "Is Mr. Wickham so very bad, then?"

A concerned Darcy glanced at her. "Do you still doubt me?"

"No!" Elizabeth realized that she now trusted the man from Derbyshire. "I am simply curious as to how much we have to fear from him."

Darcy sighed. "I can tell you a little, but not all. There are innocents involved." He frowned at Lydia, Mary, and Kitty, already pulling closer to hear. "It will not be pleasant."

"Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth assured him, "if we are to be friends, we will bear this burden with you."

"Very well. Mr. Wickham is the son of a very respectable man, who for many years was the steward of all the Pemberley estates . . ."

Part 3

ELIZABETH COULD NOT HELP herself and prepared for the Netherfield ball with extra care. She still was of two minds about Mr. Darcy, but she wanted to show herself to best advantage. Fortunately for her, Mrs. Bennet was still unaware of the full extent of the extraordinary exchange on the road to Meryton. Her mother now knew that perhaps Mr. Darcy was not so ill-tempered as he had been before, and she was very happy to learn that he meant to dance with all her daughters, but the idea that this rich gentleman might have fixed his intentions upon her second daughter had yet to take root in her calculating mind.

The ball changed all that.

Mr. Darcy met the Bennet party at the door, mere steps behind the love-stricken Mr. Bingley. He was all politeness and attention and even paid some pretty compliments to Mrs. Bennet. That fine lady was confused over the camaraderie between her husband and the rich gentleman, for her spouse had not shared how the two had spent an agreeable time discussing libraries once Mr. Darcy's unpleasant mission of warning had been completed.

The room was all abuzz as Mr. Darcy led Elizabeth to the floor for the first dance, right behind his host with Jane. But the speculation was as nothing compared to the noise that arose when they partnered a second time. The astonished Mrs. Bennet soon recovered and spent the remainder of the ball crowing to the ladies of Meryton how her clever Lizzy had captured the richest man in England.

Elizabeth was barely aware of it. She enjoyed immensely her two sets with Mr. Darcy. He had learned well from his dance master, she judged, and she reveled in his undisguised admiration. The care she had taken in her appearance was not for naught as Mr. Darcy was clearly enchanted. For her part, she was enchanted over supper. To her joy, she found Mr. Darcy as droll and dry an observer of humanity as herself, and he was exceedingly well read. Better yet, he spoke to her as an equal, enjoying their similarities of opinion and debating their few differences with respect. It was the most delightful dinner in Lizzy's life, and she so lost herself in conversation that she nearly missed her dance with John Lucas.

Later, back in her bed at Longbourn, Elizabeth could take the time to reminisce over the events of the evening. Most of the ball was delightful. She remembered Mr. Darcy's dances with her sisters—Mary's self-consciousness, Kitty's giggling nervousness, and Lydia's growing respect. Jane was as happy as she had ever seen, and even Mr. Darcy had remarked on it. Lizzy could not help herself and confessed to him Jane's partiality towards his friend. She was glad she did, however, as Mr. Darcy's serious expression suddenly cleared and he declared that he was happy to hear Lizzy's assurances. Apparently, Lizzy reflected, Mr. Bingley depended more on Mr. Darcy's judgment than his own, and it was good to have an advocate for her sister at Netherfield Hall. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were clearly furious.

Mary's dance with Mr. Darcy encouraged others to approach her sister, and in her occupation on the dance floor left no time to perform the pompous concerto she had planned. Lydia and Kitty had been exceedingly silly—it was impossible that they should not—and Lizzy was mortified when Lydia seized Mr. Chamberlayne's sabre and began dancing with it. Her horror increased when it was not her father but Mr. Darcy who put an end to it, coolly demanding the weapon and returning it to its red-faced owner with a sharp word about minding one's equipment. Yet, Mr. Darcy was unfazed by the incident and continued to speak cordially with her father.

Yes, Elizabeth reflected, there were signs that Mr. Darcy was still proud and stand-offish. He stood next to poor Mrs. Long for a half-hour without so much as saying a word! But when Lizzy gently reproached her friend, he had the good grace to color.

"You must notice I am not at my best in a ballroom," he admitted to her amazement. "I am uncomfortable with those I do not know well. I certainly have not the talent, which some people possess, of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation or appear interested in their concerns," he paused and smiled, "as you seem to do."

Such a compliment could not but turn her head.

The evening was not perfect. Mr. Collins had been obnoxious, and her mother had been a trial at the end, encouraging Lizzy to be more forward with Mr. Darcy. Lizzy hoped he was not too insulted.

How was it, Elizabeth thought, that a short conversation could so change things that Mr. Darcy's good opinion was now paramount with her? It was foolish for her to care, she knew, for Mr. Darcy was to leave Hertfordshire in a few days to return to his sister in London. Lizzy would miss him and in a way, was sorry she had agreed to the second dance. She had allowed Mr. Darcy a little into her heart, and she knew nothing would come of it. She was the daughter of a country squire of no name, and he was the son of an illustrious family. Even if Jane married Mr. Bingley—and it appeared to be a settled business—they would meet infrequently as common and indifferent friends.

Elizabeth would not think that Mr. Darcy was the ideal man to suit her in manners and behavior. She would not! She would not allow herself to fall in love with him!

It was with a small tear that Lizzy fell asleep.

Part 4

THE DAY OF LEAVING was upon them. Elizabeth came downstairs to enjoy breakfast before the Netherfield party arrived to take their leave. Mr. Collins was not expected; he had been invited to spend the day at the Lucases. Lizzy suspected that her cousin had turned his eyes toward her friend, Miss Lucas, and she wondered if a desperate Charlotte would accept him.

Lizzy had just sat down when she learned that Mr. Darcy was already at Longbourn, closed up with her father in his book-room. She had no idea why Mr. Darcy had come so early unless it had something to do with Mr. Wickham. She grew alarmed as nothing had been heard about him since the confrontation in Meryton. She did not know if he had even joined the militia.

The book-room door then opened, and Mr. Darcy appeared in company with Mr. Bennet. They shook hands and glanced in Elizabeth's direction. Mr. Darcy smiled, and Mr. Bennet clapped him on the back. Elizabeth had no clue as to the meaning of the interaction. She, of course, rose to greet them and invited Mr. Darcy to fill a plate. The worthy gentleman thanked her but claimed he had already had breakfast at Netherfield. However, he accepted a cup of coffee and took a seat across the table from Elizabeth. Her father sat down in his usual seat on the far end.

Elizabeth was in a quandary. She longed to know what had been Mr. Darcy's business with Mr. Bennet, but it was impossible to inquire directly. So engrossed was she in trying to devise an innocent method of raising the subject she was unaware that her companion had her under intense scrutiny.

"Miss Bennet," said he in a grave manner, "are you unwell?"

"Oh, I am perfectly well, sir!"

"I am glad to hear it." He sipped his coffee in a distracted way. "I understand you are to remove to London soon."

Elizabeth was surprised that he knew her plans. "Yes, I am to visit relations after Christmas—my Uncle Gardiner."

"What happy fortune! My sister and I intend to be in Town until the Season." He attended his coffee again. "Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance during your stay in London?"

"Miss Darcy?" He wanted to have her meet his sister? "I would be pleased to meet her."

"And . . . perhaps I may call while you are at your relations?" At her astonished look, he quickly added, "I have received your father's permission."

Her eyes flew to Mr. Bennet, but he was safely established behind his newspaper. So that was why Mr. Darcy was so early to Longbourn! "I . . . I thought you here with news of some new mischief from Mr. Wickham."

"Wickham? Then you have not heard? It seems he has thought better of joining the corps and abandoned Hertfordshire, leaving numerous debts behind. It is believed he has fled to the Continent."

"The Continent? Whatever for?"

Darcy grinned. "He has long believed that ladies of fortune in foreign lands are eager to make the acquaintance of a gentleman well versed in proper English manners, dress, and carriage."

Elizabeth saw the twinkle in his eye. "Far be it from me to disparage the reputations of our fine English gentlemen, but do you disagree with Mr. Wickham's convictions?"

"Unlike Wickham, I have been to Europe during my abbreviated tour. I can assure you that, while I was welcomed in many homes in many places, love of Britain and things British was not universal. And, on the Continent, gentlemen and tradesmen alike are very protective of their ladies and daughters and consider themselves unrestrained by laws prohibiting duels."

“Oh, my! It seems Mr. Wickham is due for a surprise.”

“Indeed. But you have not answered my question.” Once again, he graced her with his trademark stare, one she now knew was filled with admiration. How could she think when he looked at her that way?

“Mr. Darcy, I would be happy to receive your calls, but I am not sure . . .” She raised her chin in defiance. “Mr. Gardiner lives on Gracechurch Street, near Cheapside.”

Darcy glanced at Mr. Bennet. Obviously, her father had concealed this information. Still, the gentleman seemed to withstand this blow with fortitude. “I hope my visits will not inconvenience you or your relations.”

Goodness! He planned on more than one visit? Heavens! “No, I can honestly say it will not. My uncle is most gentlemanlike and well read, and my aunt enjoys company very much.” Oh, she so wanted her new friend to like the Gardiners! He would know that she had some relations of which she would never be ashamed!

“Excellent! I look forward to making their acquaintance.” He seemed to want to say more, but at that time, the rest of the Bennet family entered the room, and all such discourse between them came to an end.

The rest of breakfast passed without incident, save Mrs. Bennet’s extravagant compliments to Mr. Darcy. *She* had recognized the honor that rich man had paid to her daughter at the ball, and she made it plain that it was her firm opinion that Mr. Darcy was the most discerning and handsomest of men, thinking she was easing Lizzy’s way for her. Lizzy’s mortification over her mother’s performance was only relieved by the arrival of the Netherfield party and the departure of their august guest.

Mr. Darcy’s farewell was all correctness. He bowed over her hand but said only for her ears, “I look forward to London.” A quick flash of a smile, and the gentleman was upon his horse, and moments later the Bennet family was waving the party good-bye, Elizabeth waving as hard as her mother.

Part 5

THE REST OF THIS story can be relayed succinctly. Mr. Bingley returned to Longbourn within a week and promptly proposed to his angel. This set the household into a flurry of wedding preparations, and thus passed the month of December.

Elizabeth traveled to Gracechurch Street as planned in January, but not alone. She was accompanied by Jane so that her sister might shop for her *trousseau*. Mr. Darcy was as good as his word and was on Mr. Gardiner’s doorstep within a day of Elizabeth’s arrival in Town. With him was Miss Darcy, a lady of fifteen who owned a woman’s figure and a young girl’s shyness. By the time tea was done, the two ladies were well on their way to becoming fast friends, a turn of events obviously pleasing to Mr. Darcy. When not attending Jane, Elizabeth spent the majority of her time in the company of that gentleman and not always accompanied by Miss Darcy. Elizabeth was no fool; it was apparent that she had captured Mr. Darcy’s admiration, and she was not such a hypocrite to pretend she did not enjoy his attentions.

She recalled her conversation with Mr. Bennet soon after Mr. Darcy’s removal from Hertfordshire in November. He admitted that he was surprised at Mr. Darcy’s request, but that did not stop him from granting the gentleman’s permission to court Elizabeth. “Indeed,” her father had said, “Mr. Darcy is the kind of man I should deny nothing, should he but ask for it.” He did caution Elizabeth about encouraging such a serious and stern man. He held that, while Mr. Darcy was honorable, he was also used to getting his own way, and he was afraid his Lizzy might be injured by the man’s pride and arrogance.

“You can only be happy,” he advised, “if you truly esteem your chosen partner in life—that you see him as your superior. Do not, for civility or gain, tolerate a gentleman you cannot respect. You know not the pain it will bring you.”

Elizabeth remembered well this warning, but any fears it might have raised were soon put to rest. Yes, Mr. Darcy could be overbearing and presumptuous at times, and he owned a stubborn streak, but he was also remarkably attentive to her mild reproaches. Elizabeth was astonished at the gentleman’s desire to please her, even at the cost to his own pride. He was undoubtedly kind, polite, and attentive and, when in the company of people he knew well, was affable and even amusing. The Gardiners soon fell into that category, as her relations’ clear intelligence and excellent manners won over Lizzy’s admirer.

By the time Elizabeth and Jane returned to Longbourn, Lizzy knew she wished to marry Mr. Darcy. She was overjoyed when the date of Jane's wedding arrived, for so did Mr. Darcy. The gentleman wasted no time, and four and twenty hours after Mr. Bingley took Jane away from Longbourn forever, Mr. Darcy was back in Mr. Bennet's book-room, this time requesting the hand of Elizabeth.

Happy was Mrs. Bennet on the day her second daughter became Mrs. Darcy. Not even an exceedingly rude visit from one Lady Catherine de Bourgh the week before—who imperiously demanded that Elizabeth give up Mr. Darcy—could dampen Mrs. Bennet's delight as she shared her joy *ad nauseam* with the ladies of Meryton. Mr. Bennet's joy was more restrained; he was happy for his Lizzy, for he now knew that Darcy was the best of men, yet he disliked having his favorite so far away in Derbyshire. He consoled himself by traveling to Mr. Darcy's Pemberley estate as often as he liked, frequently when least expected.

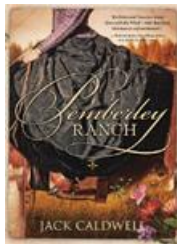
Elizabeth Rose Darcy loved her husband Fitzwilliam with all her heart and soul, but if the reader thinks that their life together was milk and honey, they would be mistaken. All newlywed couples must have their period of domestication, and for two people of such decided views as Elizabeth and Darcy, theirs was legendary. Epic at times were their quarrels that first year, and to Elizabeth's surprise, she lost more than a few. Still, by Darcy's determination that he would make his wife happy, Elizabeth's loving correction of her husband's weaker characteristics, her longing to be a source of comfort to her dear husband, and a mutual desire never to go to bed angry, the two did indeed become the happiest of couples, and woe to anyone who tried to come between them!

In later years, Fitzwilliam Darcy would insist that Elizabeth was the making of him. And it became Elizabeth Darcy's firm opinion that nothing was more important to a lady's future happiness than a good second impression.

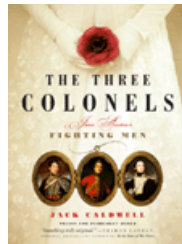
The End



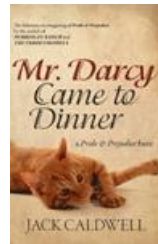
Jack Caldwell is the author of four novels, all available from your favorite bookseller:



PEMBERLEY RANCH



THE THREE COLONELS
Jane Austen's Fighting Men



MR. DARCY CAME TO DINNER



THE COMPANION OF HIS FUTURE LIFE