

Episode 9

Darcy wished the two women would cease berating Miss Elizabeth and cursed his inability to fashion a quick defense. Before he could formulate two rational arguments, Mrs. Hurst was at it again.

“I have an excessive regard for Jane Bennet,—she is really a very sweet girl,—and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it.”

These words went straight to Darcy’s heart for he could not deny the verity of them. It was, in fact, the very thing that prevented him from making any formal declaration to Miss Elizabeth.

Miss Bingley smirked. “I think I have heard you say that their uncle is an attorney in Meryton?”

Mrs. Hurst pursed her lips with a wicked glint in her aristocratic eye. “Yes; and they have another, who lives somewhere near *Cheapside*.”

These were facts unknown to Darcy and his hopes fell further.

“That is capital,” added her sister; and they both laughed heartily.

Bingley had more courage than Darcy, and he felt ashamed when his friend declared, “If they had uncles enough to fill *all* Cheapside it would not make them one jot less agreeable.”

What Bingley said was true, but it brought up another matter.

“But it must very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world,” replied Darcy, of which he himself was one. The thought was depressing.

Bingley’s lips flattened into a straight line for he could not contradict the statement.

“Well said!” cried Miss Bingley.

“Here, here!” cheered Mrs. Hurst.

“Can you imagine how Mrs. Bennett would embarrass herself in the presence of an earl or baronet!” clamored the former as the sisters indulged their mirth at the expense of their dear friend’s vulgar relations.

The whole conversation had left Darcy’s in a state of miserable confusion and he was relieved when the two sisters ascended to Miss Bennett’s bedchamber.

“Can’t you control your sisters,” he asked Bingley.

“Would that I could!” he retorted in a tight whisper lest Mr. Hurst should hear. “Those girls are utter reprobates when it comes to treating others with kindness. I am thoroughly ashamed of them. How am I to be accepted into the neighborhood when they are constantly making cutting remarks about our neighbors?”

“Indeed,” agreed Darcy.

Bingley's sisters reappeared for coffee after which Miss Bingley suggested a game of *lanterloo*. Darcy was nonplussed but even Mr. Hurst reluctantly agreed to play. Caroline positioned all the players, situating herself directly next to Darcy. He bristled.

Within a very short time the pool had grown to quite a sum but the game had little interest for him until the door to the drawing room opened to reveal Miss Elizabeth Bennett.

"Come join us, Miss Elizabeth," demanded Caroline with a sharp look at her sister. "We are playing 'loo and could use another player."

A cloud passed over Miss Elizabeth's face and Darcy supposed that given the game's reputation for astronomic amounts of money in the pool, she was concerned that she might lose funds she could ill afford to.

"I am fatigued from sitting with my sister for so long and would make a tiresome player. I shall content myself with reading before going to bed."

Mr. Hurst looked at her with astonishment.

"Do you prefer reading to cards?" said he; "that is rather singular."

"Miss Eliza Bennet," said Miss Bingley, her pointed nose in the air, "despises cards. She is a great reader, and has no pleasure in anything else."

Darcy jerked his gaze to see the effect Miss Bingley's bold presumptions had on their subject.

"I deserve neither such praise nor such censure," cried Elizabeth; "I am *not* a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things."

Darcy's spirits lifted at her ability to spar so readily with an opponent.

"In nursing your sister I am sure you have pleasure," said Bingley in his gentle manner; "and I hope it will soon be increased by seeing her quite well."

His words were as balm on a physical wound. The color Miss Bingley's words had ignited in Miss Elizabeth's complexion drained away, and with a sweet smile she responded, "I thank you for your observations, Mr. Bingley. My sister Jane and I are extremely close and I ache to see her in pain of any kind. I could not rest knowing her to be far from home and ill. Now, I need nothing more than a little relaxation in reading."

She walked towards the table where a few books were lying.

Headless of the card game in progress, Bingley jumped from his seat. "Let me bring you more books to choose from. Indeed, I would bring my whole library if it would give you pleasure."

"There is no need, I assure you." Her melodic voice worked its way into Darcy's soul and he wished that he had thought to offer her a greater variety of books.

"I wish my collection were larger for your benefit and my own credit; but I am an idle fellow; and though I have not many, I have more than I ever looked into."

Elizabeth assured him that she could suit herself perfectly with those in the room and Darcy was impressed with her easy manner and peaceable nature.

"I am astonished," said Miss Bingley, "that my father should have left so small a collection of books." The comment revealed that Miss Bingley herself was no great reader, else she would have been fully aware of the state of their library.

"What a delightful library you have at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy!"

Her flattering words jarred, clashing like cymbals in the wrong part of a symphony. He had never seen Miss Bingley step foot in his library.

"It ought to be good," Darcy replied: "it has been the work of many generations."

"And then you have added so much to it yourself—you are always buying books."

This statement really crept under his skin. She was presuming to know his habits, like a *wife* might do. It hinted at possession of his affections which could not be further from the truth.

He bit back his first defensive response and instead said through gritted teeth, "I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these." He hoped his words might induce Miss Elizabeth to make a comment since she was clearly an avid reader.

However, before she could speak, Miss Bingley cried, "Neglect! I am sure you neglect nothing that can add to the beauties of that noble place. Charles, when you build *your* house, I wish it may be half as delightful as Pemberley."

Charles had not been paying attention and Darcy suspected his thoughts were upstairs with Miss Bennett. "I wish it may," he said, vaguely.

Miss Bingley was not to be stopped. "But I would really advise you to make your purchase in *that* neighbourhood, and take Pemberley for a kind of model. There is not a finer county in England than Derbyshire."

Darcy's glance went to Miss Elizabeth to see how she would respond to the careless slight thrown at her own neighborhood. A minor narrowing of the eyes was all the indication he could see of any perceived offense.

"With all my heart: I will buy Pemberley itself, if Darcy will sell it," replied Charles.

At his name, Darcy snapped his head in his friend's direction.

"I am talking of possibilities, Charles," scolded Miss Bingley.

"Upon my word, Caroline, I should think it more possible to get Pemberley by purchase than by imitation."

From the corner of his eye, Darcy saw Miss Elizabeth turn the book over, place it beside her on the couch and walk over to the card table to observe. It took all his willpower not to stare.

"Is Miss Darcy much grown since the spring?" said Miss Bingley, demanding his attention. "Will she be as tall as I am?"

He despaired at her thinly veiled flirting but dropping his eyes to his cards he finally thought of just the right thing to say.

“I think she will. She is now about Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s height, or rather taller.”

He dared not look up to see her reaction to his comment.