

Elizabeth Bennet's Excellent Adventure: A Pride and Prejudice Vagary
Excerpt from Chapter 2:

THE MOMENT ELIZABETH OPENED THE DOOR to the room and spotted the pale countenance of Maria Lucas, she knew her world tilted upon its points. Maria held Mr. Darcy's letter in her hands.

"What are you about?" she demanded as she attempted to conjure up an appropriate excuse for the letter's presence in her belongings.

Maria jumped in surprise. A flush of color spread across the girl's cheeks.

"Oh, Lizzy, I am so sorry. I searched for the green ribbon you borrowed two nights prior."

The letter fluttered in the air as Maria gestured to the dresser they shared. As foolish as it would sound to others, Elizabeth prayed Maria's handling of the letter did not damage it.

"I did not mean to intrude," the girl pleaded.

Elizabeth closed the door behind her.

"Yet, you did intrude on my privacy."
Maria glanced to the still open drawer containing Elizabeth's intimate wear.

"This letter," the girl whispered through her bewilderment. "It is from Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth fought the urge to groan.

"It is," she said simply.

Maria lifted the pages as if to read from them.

"Who would think stuffy old Mr. Darcy could write such a letter?" Maria declared in awe.

Elizabeth crossed the short space to snatch the pages from the girl's fingers.

"Still waters carve a deep path to reach the river," she snapped.

Elizabeth had no idea why she defended the man, but she strongly disliked the idea of anyone calling Mr. Darcy "stuffy," but her.

"Mr. Darcy is in love," Maria continued as if Elizabeth offered no response.

"Perhaps," she said enigmatically as she unconsciously smoothed the pages to refold them.

"No perhaps," Maria protested. "Mr. Darcy is violently in love with..."

Maria gasped for air, and Elizabeth braced her shoulders against the accusation. She had not had time enough to analyze Mr. Darcy's professions of affections.

"In love with...Miss Bennet. With your sister Jane. Did Mr. Darcy ask you to serve as courier? Is that the reason you always disclaim the gentleman's worth?"

The girl's words stunned Elizabeth, and it took several elongated seconds before she drew her wits about her.

"I assure you, Maria, that Mr. Darcy does not speak of Jane," she said evenly.

"But the letter is addressed to Miss Bennet, and it speaks of another man not your sister's equal. Surely Mr. Darcy speaks of Mr. Bingley's connections to trade," Maria reasoned. "I never thought of Mr. Bingley's wealth being a detriment to his attentions to Miss Bennet, but now I understand the gentleman's quick withdrawal from Netherfield after the ball he hosted."

Elizabeth shook her head in the negative before sighing heavily in resignation.

"While in Kent, I am Miss Bennet to Lady Catherine and her household," Elizabeth argued. "Without doubt, you heard Her Ladyship address me as such."

Maria's gaze ran over Elizabeth's dowdy appearance. "Why would Mr. Darcy write such a passionate letter to you?"

"Ask your sister," Elizabeth said testily. "Charlotte remarked more than once of late upon the gentleman's growing regard for me."

"Which you denied," Maria said suspiciously.

"I did not recognize Mr. Darcy's regard," Elizabeth said honestly.

"What will you do about Mr. Darcy's ardor?" Maria demanded. "Unless you mean to marry him—unless there is an understanding, Mr. Darcy should not speak to you with so much familiarity."

Elizabeth replaced the letter in the drawer and closed it. She cursed herself for being so lackadaisical in regards to the letter's security.

"Is there any hope you could forget you saw the letter?" she asked cautiously.

Maria's frown lines deepened.

"It is not proper, Lizzy. A gentleman should not take such liberties. You are a gentleman's daughter, not a woman the man means to make his mistress."

Elizabeth sat on the edge of the bed.

"Would you permit me to speak to Charlotte before anyone learns of this letter, especially my cousin? Mr. Collins would take umbrage with my drawing Mr. Darcy's regard from Miss De Bourgh. This situation must be treated with discretion."

"Mr. Darcy must be made to speak an honest proposal, Lizzy," the girl asserted.

Elizabeth thought of last evening's confrontation with the gentleman.

"Trust me, Maria. Mr. Darcy did exactly that."

Two days later, over Lady Catherine's objections that a proper young lady would not act so foolishly, Elizabeth took the public coach to London. Her Uncle Gardiner would have sent his carriage for her, but there was no time for the luxury of a private coach. Charlotte agreed that Elizabeth must speak to Mr. Darcy as quickly as possible, and so Elizabeth and her long time friend constructed a tale of Mrs. Gardiner taking ill and requiring Elizabeth's assistance.

Thankfully, Mr. Collins did not recall that Jane remained at Gracechurch Street, and Elizabeth could be spared if there were a true need for a caretaker.

"I shall write to Mama to say I mean to keep Maria with me an extra sennight," Charlotte assured. "That should provide you time to convince Mr. Darcy to renew his affections."

Elizabeth was not so certain. She provided Charlotte an abbreviated version of the gentleman's proposal, but at much as Elizabeth wished for a second opportunity to know Mr. Darcy better, she doubted the gentleman would be so inclined. Who would believe that the always-practical Elizabeth Bennet would succumb to Mr. Darcy's pretty words of devotion?

Her family welcomed her with surprised exclamations, but they readily accepted her excuse of Sir William's upcoming return to Kent as the reason for Elizabeth's early departure.

"I could not subject Charlotte to another banishment to Mr. Collins' quarters," she said with a mischievous shutter. "This way, Maria can move in with Charlotte, and Sir William may have the smaller bedroom."

"You should have sent word," her Uncle Gardiner chastised.

"I did, but we received word of a seat available on the mail coach, and I took advantage of it."

If all went as planned, her uncle would receive the hastily written post later that very day.

Jane hugged Elizabeth affectionately.

“You are always so adventurous; I wish I possessed your mettle.”

Elizabeth did not feel adventurous; the possibility of another confrontation with Mr. Darcy frightened her. Yet, she knew it would be only a matter of time before Maria Lucas carried the tale of a ‘lascivious’ letter to the Meryton neighborhood.

Elizabeth’s keeping the letter announced her complete ruin. Even so, she could not think upon the man’s words without a now more familiar warmth claiming her cheeks. She knew she should curse the fates that prevented her from burying Mr. Darcy’s letter before returning to Hunsford Cottage, but Elizabeth’s pride at engendering such a passion in a man of Mr. Darcy’s stature had her acting without reason—acting very much of the nature of her two youngest sisters.

Over supper, she laid the plan.

“I did not tell you, Jane,” Elizabeth said with casual practice, “that Mr. Darcy and his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, joined Lady Catherine’s household perhaps a fortnight prior. The gentlemen attend to Her Ladyship’s affairs at the quarter day.”

“Were you much in Mr. Darcy’s company?” her aunt asked more in an afterthought, rather than a question requiring a response. “I wonder if he resembles his late father.”

Elizabeth’s Aunt Margaret came from Lambton, a village near the Pemberley estate. Mrs. Gardiner knew something of the Darcy family.

“Her Ladyship invited Mr. Collins’ household to tea quite often and to cards upon occasion,” Elizabeth confided. “Periodically our paths crossed when walking the parkland.”

She offered no more information as her aunt appeared content to speak at length upon the Darcys and the family’s connections to the Fitzwilliam family of Matlock.

Only once did Elizabeth experience regret at her manipulations. It was when Jane made a private inquiry of Mr. Bingley. Her sister’s crestfallen countenance had Elizabeth modifying her plan to contact Mr. Darcy. She would use the opportunity to foster a reunion between Jane and Mr. Bingley.

“A letter, Sir.”

Darcy glanced up from his ledger to meet his butler’s scowling expression.

“Did not the post arrive earlier?” Darcy inquired.

A shiver of anticipation ran up Darcy’s spine. He returned to London four days prior, but the ghost of Elizabeth Bennet still haunted his days and his nights.

“This one came from a young servant at a house in Cheapside,” Mr. Thacker said in distaste.

“Thank you, Thacker,” Darcy murmured as he examined the flourish of his name upon the paper. It was a feminine hand that wrote his directions upon the folded over page. The realization had Darcy swallowing hard. Did his letter change the lady’s mind? Did Miss Elizabeth forgive him?

Darcy wished it were not so early. If so, he would pour himself a stiff drink to bolster his resolve before he broke the wax seal.

“Fool,” he grumbled. “The woman is a devious chit. Miss Elizabeth likely means to insult your pride again, saying all the things of which she wishes to accuse me.”

Darcy used a penknife to cut away the wax and unfolded the single page. His eyes scanned it to know its purpose.

*Mr. Darcy,
As you are likely to recognize, I rejoined my family in London yesterday. As such, it would please me to accept your call at Gracechurch Street during the customary receiving hours. My sister Jane remains in London with our aunt and uncle. If Mr. Bingley resides at his London address, I am certain Miss Bennet would thrive under the gentleman’s attentions.*

E. B.

“That is all,” Darcy grumbled.

He turned the page over thinking something must certainly be amiss.

“Why in bloody hell did Miss Elizabeth return to London so soon after my departure from Kent? Does she place Mr. Bingley’s return to Miss Bennet’s side as a contingency to our future connection? Why is Miss Elizabeth suddenly ‘pleased to accept my call’? What demme foolishness does the woman practice?”

Darcy thought to ignore her summons, but when he returned to his ledger, the paper teased him from where he tossed it upon his desk. Taunted him. Coaxed him.

“I can never refuse an intriguing puzzle,” he grumbled as he took up the letter again. “I must be a glutton for misery to permit the woman’s manipulations.”

With a sigh of resignation, Darcy rose to summon his man. He must call at the house Bingley let in Town. Darcy prayed Miss Bingley remained in the country with her older sister. It would take all of Darcy’s persuasion and likely a well overdue confession to convince Bingley to take up his pursuit of the eldest Bennet daughter, but Darcy would risk losing Bingley’s acquaintance if it meant he might maintain a hope of claiming Elizabeth Bennet to wife.

He did not provide Bingley a full confession for Darcy considered the possibility his friend would not accompany him to Gracechurch Street, and Darcy suspected Bingley’s appearance would please both Bennet sisters. He did explain to Bingley that he and Miss Elizabeth argued over whether Bingley meant to break Miss Bennet’s heart by withdrawing from Netherfield when Darcy and Elizabeth connected in Kent.

“I would never act so cruelly,” Bingley protested.

“If you wish to reclaim your acquaintance, I have it on reliable information that Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth temporarily reside with Mrs. Bennet’s brother in Cheapside. Miss Elizabeth explained as such before I departed Rosings Park,” Darcy said with false calmness.

“Then we must make our addresses,” Bingley said with an energy long absent from his friend’s demeanor.

Likely when Miss Bennet told Bingley of Caroline’s snub when Miss Bennet called upon Miss Bingley, Darcy’s friend would hold second thoughts regarding their association, but Darcy would face that dilemma when it occurred.

At length, Mrs. Gardiner's servant showed them into the parlor, and Darcy bowed before Elizabeth's aunt. Surprisingly, it was a flush of color upon Elizabeth's cheeks and the smile turning up the corners of her lips, which caught at Darcy's heart.

"Mr. Darcy. Mr. Bingley," Elizabeth said with what sounded of perfect calm, but she was anything but calm. "Please permit me to give you the acquaintance of my aunt Mrs. Gardiner. Aunt, may I present a gentleman from Derbyshire, Mr. Darcy, and Mr. Bennet's nearest neighbor in Hertfordshire, Mr. Bingley."

"Gentlemen," her aunt said graciously. "How kind of you to call upon our household. Permit me to send for refreshments."

"It is you who are kind to receive us without notice, Ma'am," Bingley said with his typical amiability. "When I learned from Darcy of Mr. Bennet's daughters being guests in your house, I insisted we renew our acquaintance. I pray you will not think us too presumptuous."

"Never so," Elizabeth added quickly. "You are most welcomed."

"Please be seated," Aunt Gardiner gestured to a grouping of chairs. It did Elizabeth well to observe how Mr. Bingley claimed the seat closest to Jane. Perhaps things would progress in that matter.

As to the other gentleman, Mr. Darcy came as she knew he would, but how was she to explain to the man that he must save her honor with another proposal.

"I would recognize you anywhere, Mr. Darcy. You have the look of your late father," her aunt remarked as Elizabeth rang for tea to be brought in.

Mr. Darcy's response spoke of the gentleman's surprise. "You were familiar with my father, Ma'am?"

"My aunt fares from Lambton, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth explained.

"My father was Mr. Montgomery, the surgeon," Aunt Gardiner added.

Mr. Darcy nodded his understanding.

“I am familiar with your family, Ma’am. You lost Mr. Montgomery some years past.”

“Nearly five years,” Aunt Gardiner replied sadly. “Along with my eldest brother. They attempted to save a family caught in the river’s rising waters after a terrible storm and lost their lives.” “God moves in unexplained way, Mrs. Gardiner,”

Mr. Darcy said with what sounded of genuine sympathy. “I am sorry for your loss, Ma’am. Our loved ones always leave us too soon.”

Elizabeth wondered for the first time of his parents’ passings. How old was he when the late Mrs. Darcy left the world? And what of Mr. Darcy’s father? How long had the current Mr. Darcy known the responsibility for his family?

Her aunt bowed her head graciously before saying, “Let us speak of more pleasant things. Elizabeth tells me you were recently in Kent, Mr. Darcy.”

And so the next half hour passed in harmonious conversation. It pleased Elizabeth to observe Mr. Bingley’s tender gestures toward Jane and Mr. Darcy’s genuine care of Aunt Gardiner’s reminiscences. But such was not the reason Elizabeth asked the gentleman to call upon her.

“Mr. Bingley,” she addressed Darcy’s friend rather than the man himself. “Perhaps Jane and I might show you and Mr. Darcy Aunt Gardiner’s prize roses. It is a pleasant day.”

“I would enjoy the opportunity to praise Mrs. Gardiner’s gardening skills,” Mr. Bingley replied with a wide smile. “What of you, Darcy?”

Elizabeth was glad to hear the gentleman acquiesce.

Out in the spring sunshine, Elizabeth walked in silence beside Mr. Darcy. It did not surprise her when Mr. Bingley directed Jane’s steps toward the rose arbor.

Mr. Darcy nodded in the direction of his friend.

“If your sister still wishes the match, it is hers to claim.”

“Did you explain your perfidy in Mr. Bingley’s unexpected withdrawal from Netherfield?” Elizabeth asked with more sharpness than she intended.

Mr. Darcy shrugged his response.

“Not completely, but I will. Today I feared appearing on your doorstep without Mr. Bingley in tow would earn me no favor.”

“And you wished my favor, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth asked with an arched eyebrow.

“I wished to learn of the urgency your note implied,” he corrected.

Elizabeth gestured to a nearby bench. Once seated, she swallowed a deep steady breath. She kept her eyes on her hands rather than to look upon Mr. Darcy’s countenance.

“Needless to say, your letter brought me moments of unrest,” she began softly.

“Unrest was not my objective,” Mr. Darcy assured. “I simply wished to clarify my actions, especially as to my conduct with Mr. Wickham.”

“Mr. Wickham?”

Elizabeth looked up in confusion.

“There is little in the letter that speaks of Mr. Wickham, and nothing where your former friend is specifically named.”

“You must be mistaken,” the gentleman insisted. “I disclosed the secret of Mr. Wickham’s attempted seduction of a member of my family and the shame he delivered to her door. I pleaded for your discretion, but I thought it important for you to know the truth.”

Elizabeth’s irritation grew by leaps and bounds.

“Mr. Darcy, if you offered my such confidences, you can be assured that I would never abuse them; however, there is a mistake, but not on my end. I reread the letter only this morning. It is as if we speak of two different missives.”

The gentleman frowned in deep disapproval.

“Would you please describe the letter you received?” he asked in what sounded of dread.

Elizabeth could not keep the blush from claiming her neck and cheeks.

“A lady cannot repeat such promises to a gentleman,” she said with a squeak in her voice.

“Please, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy pleaded.

Elizabeth looked away in embarrassment. She could not understand why Mr. Darcy meant to torment her. She shook her head in the negative as another flush of color sped across her skin.

Mr. Darcy spoke with sympathy.

“Did the letter address my desire to cherish, adore, and protect you?”

Elizabeth nodded in the affirmative this time, but she kept her eyes diverted from Mr. Darcy’s.

The gentleman cleared his throat.

“I must apologize, Miss Elizabeth. I wrote more than one letter during the slow hours of the night. The first one, I burned because I spoke of Mr. Wickham in very unflattering terms. I fear my anger controlled my response. Upon second thought, I realized that particular letter was not fit for your eyes.”

Mr. Darcy paused as if considering what to say next, and Elizabeth permitted herself several quick glances at his expression, but his features were unreadable.

“I must confess,” he continued, “my emotions ruled my response to your refusal of my hand. I suspect the letter I presented you was my reasoning out what occurred at Hunsford Cottage. Again, the letter was never meant for anyone’s eyes but mine.”

Elizabeth admitted, “Many write of their anger. Mr. Bennet does so. I have witnessed my father scratching out a rant only to toss his efforts into the nearest grate.”

“The letter where I offered what I hoped was a logical explanation for my involvement in Bingley’s affairs and a recitation of my connection to Mr. Wickham and my turning from my former associate remains in my travel case. It grieves me that my lack of forethought exposed you to my baser side. Please forgive me.”

Elizabeth looked upon him for Mr. Darcy spoke of his earnest contrition.

“I am not a wilting flower, Sir,” she declared. “And although I knew shock at the familiarity with which you spoke, your words provided me a mirror to your person.”

Mr. Darcy grimaced in remorse.

“Pray say the letter softened your heart on my behalf, rather than making you detest me further,” he whispered.

Elizabeth was not certain she could admit the emotional turmoil his letter elicited.

“I remain uncertain, Sir. I would appreciate a more thorough explanation in the near future of our sticking points. More importantly, a giving of my heart is not the reason I summoned you to Gracechurch Street.”

“Then pray tell what did,” Mr. Darcy said testily.

“Whether my heart is engaged or not is irrelevant,” Elizabeth declared.

She wished her words held the truth, but she suspected Mr. Darcy’s passion invaded her soul.

“Miss Lucas discovered the letter where I secreted it away when I returned to Hunsford Cottage. Mrs. Collins’ sister read part of the letter.”

Mr. Darcy groaned in disapproval.

“Miss Lucas assumed you meant the letter for Jane and the unworthy gentleman of which you spoke was Mr. Bingley. I immediately claimed the letter as mine. I could not...”

Elizabeth broke off, but Mr. Darcy finished her thought.

“You could not bear to see your sister forced into a marriage with an ogre such as I,” he said in sadness.

Elizabeth protested, “Jane could not thrive with a man of your disposition. That fact is more than obvious. My dearest Jane accepts the foibles of others more kindly than I.”

Since accepting Mr. Darcy’s devotion as a reality, Elizabeth did not think she could bear to observe another at the gentleman’s side, but she could not give voice to those feelings. They would make her too vulnerable, and they were too new.

His lips twisted in irony.

“Yours is an understatement of the extreme.”

“My temperament is not to your liking, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth taunted.

“Not so much your temperament, but I do not find your shrewish tongue brings me much pleasure,” he admitted.

“No, I suppose not,” Elizabeth agreed.

Mr. Darcy replied with a silent shrug, which left Elizabeth feeling a bit off kilter. She would prefer the gentleman would counter her assertions with words of praise. The Mr. Darcy of the letter and the one sitting beside her on the garden bench were quite in opposition.

“I am assuming,” he said cautiously, “that Miss Lucas will spread news of our lack of propriety to your Longbourn neighbors.”

Elizabeth surrendered to the pressing demand for a response, a response she considered for the last four days, but now that it became her time to agree, she held second thoughts.

Even so, Elizabeth kept her unwavering focus on Mr. Darcy: He was truly a handsome man in the classical sense of the word. She could imagine him as a centurion of the Roman army. Swallowing hard against the panic claiming her voice, Elizabeth inclined her head in affirmation.

“I thought...I thought since you previously proposed...”

She could not say the words. What if Mr. Darcy changed his mind? What if the gentleman refused to see the necessity in their joining? Mayhap it would be better for Uncle Gardiner to speak to Mr. Darcy’s honor. Elizabeth did not tell her aunt and uncle of her dilemma for fear they would demand to read the letter and then think poorly of her.

“You thought since I previously proposed,” Mr. Darcy said in kinder tones than Elizabeth expected, “that I would agree to save your reputation with a second offering of my hand.”

“It sounds so sorted when said as such,” Elizabeth insisted.

“A marriage of convenience is often sorted,” the gentleman observed.

“Of convenience?” Elizabeth whispered.

Shrouded in what felt of despair, her eyes looked up into Mr. Darcy’s expressionless countenance.

“You do not affect me,” Mr. Darcy said baldly.

“No,” she murmured. “But perhaps.”

His frown deepened, not that Elizabeth could blame him.

Cynicism colored his response.

“I hoped for more than convenience,” he explained, “but I will not desert you, Elizabeth, if you will agree to accept my hand in marriage.”

Shockingly, Elizabeth wished to hear him repeat the sentiments his letter held, but she supposed her earlier refusal hardened Mr. Darcy’s ardor.

Noting Bingley’s return, Mr. Darcy whispered in rushed tones, “If you will permit me to escort you tomorrow, we will settled things between us then. Until that time, let us keep our counsels private.

Claiming a prior engagement with is man of business, Darcy departed before Bingley. It stung Darcy’s pride to recognize the quick return of Miss Bennet’s regard for Bingley. Certainly he held culpability in Bingley’s withdrawal from the eldest Bennet daughter; yet, Darcy ached with the irony of the situation: He never deserted Elizabeth Bennet. Nothing or no one could convince him to do so, but although both he and Bingley would claim the women they adored, only Bingley would know his lady’s affections.

“Unfair,” he grumbled as he dismounted before Darcy House. Darcy tossed the reins to a waiting groom and glanced up to his Town residence.

Could he make Elizabeth Bennet the mistress of this property and of Pemberley? Could he spend a lifetime with the woman at his side and never know the perfection of her heart? Could he enjoy the lilt of Elizabeth’s laugh, the sharpness of her wit, and the pleasure of her body beneath his without the love he coveted?

“Better than the alternative of taking another to wife,” Darcy told his foolish heart. “Even a marriage of convenience to Elizabeth Bennet is infinitely preferable to a lifetime of wondering if she is well and happy with another. You will not possess all for which you wish, but a bit of heaven trumps the hell out of a lonely heart.”