

While Mr. Bennet was visiting Colonel Forster to impart the additional knowledge regarding Mr. Wickham, a note came to Longbourn for Jane from Miss Bingley saying that the entire Netherfield party had departed for London and did not intend to return. Caroline further implied that her brother wished to further his acquaintance with Miss Darcy and expressed her hopes for a match in that quarter. Observing Jane's fallen face and concluding that disappointment was the cause, Mrs. Bennet cheerfully suggested that perhaps the Bingleys wished to be in Town for the end of the Little Season and Christmas, and that Miss Bingley's conjectures were just that—her own hopes and not facts.

That evening, Mrs. Bennet told her husband about Miss Bingley's communication.

"I am surprised that Mr. Bingley left without calling to bid us farewell or to thank our girls for their company at his ball," she said.

"I admit that I am just as astonished as you are."

"I am very concerned about Jane's response to this news. I was certain she and Mr. Bingley were close to an understanding."

"I had no doubt of it," Mr. Bennet replied. "He singled her out at every opportunity these last weeks. I expected any day for him to request my consent."

"Miss Bingley wrote as if their departure was planned, but we heard nothing of it until this letter."

"Darcy mentioned it to me last evening, but he seemed to think that only he and Bingley were going to Town while the rest of the party remained at Netherfield, and Bingley was to return in a few days. But that does not explain the others departing so quickly without mention."

"Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst singled out Jane with their invitation to Netherfield for dinner, and Miss Bingley treated Jane as a favourite. I wonder that they would not have given her some idea of their travel plans, unless there was a will to deceive."

Mr. Bennet looked at his wife with an inquisitive expression, and she obliged him by explaining her suspicion of ill intentions in the affair.

"I am sure that Jane interpreted Miss Bingley's expression of particular friendship as being in favour of the match, but Miss Bingley's tone and carriage often seemed to reflect a sort of falseness in her words, and thus, I have been wary of her sincerity."

Mr. Bennet replied, "My Jane is an intelligent girl and usually able to temper her tendency for making arguments designed to minimize the questionable motives of others."

“But in this case, her perspective is altered. I am convinced that she is striving to show a neutral disposition despite feeling betrayed.” Mrs. Bennet paused and considered the letter before continuing, “Miss Bingley also spoke of Miss Darcy as a future sister, but Miss Darcy is much too young for such an arrangement to be made. She is Lydia’s age, is she not?”

“That is what I recall from my discussions with Darcy, and I am sure he would not have serious plans for her until after her coming out. He seemed to agree with me that young ladies should not come out too early.”

“Perhaps Miss Bingley’s own designs are behind her wish to have Miss Darcy for a sister. Miss Bingley has always shown a predilection towards Mr. Darcy, and perhaps her speculation is just wishful thinking with no basis.”

“Darcy showed no partiality for her. Although he was quite guarded about it, I thought he might have a *tendre* for our Lizzy. I know what you are thinking, Fanny, that they argued a lot, but I think he was drawn to her spirit and enjoyed matching wits with her, and likewise for Lizzy.”

“You may be surprised that I agree with you.”

“Had Lizzy shown him any clear preference, I would have encouraged the match.”

“Would you have told him about Lizzy’s circumstances?” asked Mrs. Bennet.

“The will is very clear that we not disclose any details until all the conditions are met,” Mr. Bennet replied. “I hinted about it to Darcy, but his pride forbids him from contemplating marriage below his station, and we have not exactly forwarded ourselves in a way to gain entrance into the first circles. If Darcy has reservations, I have reservations, and I told him as much at the ball. I have my suspicions that Bingley will make his declaration as soon as he returns. But he needs to prove that he wants to marry Jane in spite of the obvious obstacles. I want the girls to be desired for love and not for money.”

“But surely Mr. Darcy has enough money and connections of his own?” Mrs. Bennet was more disgruntled than she was curious.

“It is for him to decide, Fan. Until he does, and pays her proper court, we can only watch.”

“He is a good friend to you, is he not?”

“Good enough that I can be frank with him. I warned him off paying Lizzy excessive attention unless he intended to further a match.”

“I never expected that marrying our girls would be so complicated!” Fanny cried.

“I do not feel they must be married so soon, certainly not Lizzy or Mary. They are still young enough to enjoy another Season or two before I give them away!”