

Good Opinion

by Helen Raven

Fitzwilliam Darcy had chosen his college at Cambridge exclusively on academic grounds. Another man might have been swayed in his decision by the desire to avoid George Wickham, who, a year older, was already installed at Jesus, but Darcy would have regarded such considerations as an affront to dignity and to rationality. Naturally, he had no intention voluntarily of noticing Wickham, but if Wickham should show his customary want of discretion, Darcy was confident of being equal to the encounter.

For the first two weeks of the Michaelmas term, he was able to hope that Cambridge had succeeded where every other influence had failed: he and Wickham had been several times within twenty feet of one another, and the other's lack of recognition had been everything that Darcy could have wished. He should have known it could not last. It was a Tuesday afternoon, and he and Erling Taylor were walking back to their rooms. So engrossed were they in continuing the discussion that had started in their tutorial, that Darcy was not at first aware of the tall figure that had caught up with them and fallen into step by his side.

"Darcy! Upon my word."

Darcy stopped, then immediately wished that he had not. "Mister Wickham."

"I trust you are settling in." With his most charming smile: "Pray you will not tell your father that it has taken me this long to make myself known to you. He expressly charged me to give you the benefit of my experience, but it is only now that my studies -"

"I thank you. I believe I have the measure of the town."

"Of course. And your manservant will have preceded you, which must always be an advantage. Is it Campbell or Morgan who was chosen in the end?"

"Morgan."

"Ah, the excellent Morgan. Well, I will not detain you longer." Another smile which this time included Taylor. "You must be recently escaped from an hour of Grahame, and eager to mark your freedom." An exchange of bows, and Wickham was gone. They continued their walk towards Darcy's staircase.

"Your friend is no scholar?" Taylor seemed amused.

Nor no friend, neither. "He is destined for the church. Rote-learning will suffice."

"Darcy! I had thought you more respectful of religion." A teasing reference to their interrupted discussion. "He is a neighbour of yours from Derbyshire, I take it?"

"In a sense. His father is the steward on our estates."

"Indeed? I would have thought him... His manners are very easy. That must assist him in his profession."

Darcy raised an eyebrow, nodded with the appearance of assent, then asked Taylor where they should ride that afternoon.

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Wickham had been struck by the animation that Darcy had displayed in his conversation with Taylor. While to a stranger it would not have seemed remarkable, to Wickham it was most

surprising to see Darcy treat a man as an equal after a mere two weeks of acquaintance. Could Taylor also be in possession of ten thousand a year, or even more? He made inquiries.

No, Taylor had no fortune, or none to speak of. He came from a family of lawyers, would be entering that profession himself, and lived in an area of London that Darcy had surely never visited. He was not even wholly-English: his unusual Christian name compounded the evidence given by his straight, tall build and his too-gold hair as to some Scandinavian ancestry. Wickham's surprise deepened.

Some observations from a distance—and there were many opportunities since it was clear that the two men sought one another's company—led Wickham finally to the conclusion that it was an attraction between similar natures. Taylor was not so grave nor forbidding as Darcy, and produced ten smiles to Darcy's one—but they were slow smiles, like Darcy's, seeming to wait on the cautious approval of the intellect. Calm and clever men, both, and ponderous with self-consequence: having just reached manhood, must they behave already as if some fellow's freedom or fortune depended on their every utterance? It disgusted Wickham.

Still, there was some interest in seeing Darcy with a friend. Wickham had an eye for novelty, and a habit to see how he could turn it to his advantage or amusement.

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After his last lecture, Erling Taylor had gone straight into town to buy wine and paper. Autumn was advancing and it was nearly dusk by the time he completed his purchases and started back to his college.

"Good evening, Mister Taylor. And a fine one, too, is it not?" Taylor had just passed the entrance to Corpus Christi. The greeting was so warm and confident as to disarm any surprise he might have felt at being greeted thus by a stranger.

"Fine indeed." He returned the smile, then continued quickly, "Forgive me. I believe I have experienced more introductions these past three weeks than in all the rest of my life. Would you -"

"Any apology must be on my side, sir. In truth, we have not been introduced. I should have asked it of Darcy when I encountered you in his quad last week, but I feared to detain you further. If I may perform the office myself..." A bow. "George Wickham."

"Mister Wickham. Of course." A bow in return. "Erling Taylor." Smiling in acknowledgement of the other's superior information, "As you know—from Darcy—I see."

They resumed their progress down the road, though more slowly, expanding on this introduction with a fluency that showed some similarity, either of social temperament, or of social training. Taylor paused as they reached Bridge Street, ready to make his farewells to his new acquaintance, but Wickham took the right turn for Jesus College also. "Where are you bound? Do you dine at another college?"

"No, not at all. I am bound for my own college, but by whatever route will give me some measure of exercise before dinner." Now it was Wickham who paused. With a smile of great charm: "However... I believe the taste of a good fino would do as much for my appetite. Could I persuade you to retrace your steps and accept a glass in my rooms? Or has Darcy been expecting you these ten minutes?"

Laughing, Taylor accepted.

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It was on their second glass that Wickham turned the conversation to school: he had gone to Christchurch, Taylor to Westminster. "I confess that in the first few years—especially at the start of term when the beds seemed so hard and the dormitories so cold—I was most energetic in envying Darcy his private education. All the comforts of home, his own tutors, and no other pupils there to give occasion for cruel comparisons." The words were lightly said, and Taylor nodded and smiled in recognition. "But now, seeing Darcy in the world, I am inclined to be thankful that the fates did not heed my supplications and change our places."

Frowning: "How so?"

"Of course, I say this as one friend of Darcy to another, knowing that neither of us would wish him otherwise..."

"Of course."

"But I believe he would find social gatherings less arduous than he does if he had been to a public school. His contact with his peers—though we know there are few who *can* match him—has been very limited until now. And you must admit that his manners, towards those that he does not instantly understand, could never be called easy. I trust these years at university will repair the deficiency, but it pains me to think how he must suffer in these first months." A broad smile. "Or it did before I observed what a friend he had found in you."

Taylor was nodding slowly. "I had not considered him in that light, but there is justice in what you say." A quick smile. "When I have seen him reserved with someone, I had always assumed that his superior judgement had discerned some fault that had escaped my eye."

"Oh, we *must* give credit to his excellent judgement, but he does have other claims on his behaviour."

They continued with general talk of Darcy's private education and of Pemberley. When Wickham sat down after refilling their glasses, he pulled his chair some inches closer to Taylor, and leaned forward. Taylor, recognising that a confidence was imminent, tilted his head and raised his eyebrows to show his readiness.

"I have reason to believe Westminster not so very different from Christchurch in this respect, and I know that you are a man of sense and discretion—and Darcy's well-chosen friend—or I would never..." He lowered his eyes from some seconds and contrived to blush. "Darcy was aware, even at the time, of being deprived in some particular areas of his... social education." Taylor was frowning slightly in concentration. "I know not what he did for... relief during term-time, but when I -" Taylor's eyes had suddenly widened, and Wickham suppressed a smirk with difficulty. "Well, when I was home he was *most* curious to hear of the services that we boys rendered one another." Very interesting, and barely expected: the heightened colour, the avid gaze. "I - He insisted, and I -" An embarrassed, rueful laugh. "I cannot claim it was a hardship. You must acknowledge that he is a well-made figure." When Taylor swallowed jerkily, Wickham let his eyes drop to the man's crotch, confident of what he would find. "Yes, I see you do acknowledge it. Are you shocked by what I say?"

"No." Low and unsteady.

"It was the same at Westminster?"

"It was - I -"

"Oh, forgive me." Wickham put down his glass and dropped to his knees before Taylor's chair. "I had not thought you to be in such need, or I would not - Allow me to..." At the touch of Wickham's hand, Taylor gasped and a shudder passed through his body, and he made no protest. Wickham mapped the outlines of the stiffening member, then reached for the

fastenings of the trousers. Taylor raised his hips at the appropriate stage, but otherwise did not participate, except, near the end, to secure Wickham's head with a restless, clawing hand.

He recovered slowly, lying in a sprawl with his eyes closed. When Wickham reached out to take the tilting glass, the eyes opened. Their immediate expression was one of disbelief, but that changed in response to Wickham's uncomplicated smile.

"But you - What can I -?"

"There is no need. I have... arrangements in town and am well taken care of. But seeing your state, and remembering my own in *my* first term... I hope that will excuse my presumption."

Taylor gave a short laugh, then sat up and began to rearrange himself. Wickham stood and turned to fetch the bottle of sherry, though their glasses were all but untouched. He soon sat down, and their conversation was as if nothing had happened.

Taylor looked down at his watch, then drained his glass. "I fear I must leave. It wants but quarter of an hour to dinner, and I have still to change."

Wickham rose to escort him to the door. He opened the door a few inches, then quickly closed it again. "Mister Taylor. I beg you do not tell Darcy about..." He gestured towards the chair that Taylor had occupied. "You would surely have to inform him of my indiscretion concerning himself, and - We know it was simply a natural need and function, but Darcy is too strict with himself, too scrupulous. He has convinced himself that I complied only because of the difference in our ranks, and is ashamed of *using* that difference—though I remember things quite differently. It would be better..."

"Do not alarm yourself, Mister Wickham." Taylor raised a hand to Wickham's shoulder in reassurance, then, after some moments' scrutiny of Wickham's serious face, drew him closer and touched his cheek in a light kiss. "Thank you."

Wickham stood by the window, watching Taylor's hurried progress across the quad—by now Darcy *would* be waiting for him. When the man had passed through the gates and out of sight, Wickham finally let himself relinquish his role, and it was a good two minutes before he stopped laughing.

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They had fallen into the habit, though not adhered to strictly, of alternating between the two sets of rooms, and that evening (which was the evening after Wickham's indiscretion) it was Darcy's turn as host. The intervening hours had been quite enough time for Taylor to develop a fine apprehension—he would have preferred the safety of home, but could find no excuse that, to himself at least, did not seem to announce all his intentions.

It seemed an age before Darcy dismissed Morgan for the night. And then another age until the moment when Darcy rose to fetch a book from the bookcase, and Taylor decided—by criteria mysterious even to himself—that this was the time. He crossed the room to stand by Darcy's side, and when Darcy turned to face him, he grasped him lightly by the shoulders, and bent his head so that their lips touched. Instantly, Darcy drew away.

"Erling!" For long seconds, he just stared. "What has possessed you?"

Taylor stepped back also. He started to raise a hand in apology, but at the other's alarmed glance, let it drop. "I - Forgive me, Darcy. I thought... You are a well-made man, and surely must have a man's needs and appetites, as I do. I thought we could... Please. Can you forget my mistake?"

Darcy said nothing and continued to stare.

“Please, my friend. Let us sit down and talk of Macbeth, as before. Let this be erased.” He took a step towards his chair, but a hand closing tightly around his upper arm stopped him. Despite his fear, he met Darcy’s eyes, and only had time to feel relief that their expression was not anger, before he was pulled close, to feel again the warmth of Darcy’s lips.

Soon each was holding the other closer still, sighing into the other’s open mouth, moving his hips the better to feel the other’s growing manhood. Taylor dealt one-handed with Darcy’s cravat, then started on the buttons of his shirt.

“Bed. Let us... Let us seek my bed.”

Taylor nodded wordlessly, then allowed Darcy to lead him into the bedroom. He could not remember that any of his schoolboy encounters had felt like this, had been such a succession of pleasures: in the gradual revealing of his partner’s body, in the obvious satisfaction on Darcy’s face at the sight of his own, in the near-trembling awkwardness of the hands which explored him. It was all over far too soon, but they lay afterwards and exchanged kisses that seemed destined to continue until one or the other fell asleep, and it was everything that Taylor had let himself imagine.

“I caused you anxiety before. I wish I had not. I wish my... feelings or my thoughts had been rapid enough to match yours immediately.”

“I was stupidly abrupt. Your thoughts were more rapid than I deserved.”

More kisses, and a move under the covers.

“How I wish I could send Morgan back to Pemberley, claim a sudden enthusiasm for self-sufficiency. From this evening I would value my privacy far above a timely-drawn bath.”

“Well, sudden enthusiasms are almost required of an undergraduate, are they not?”

A slow, smiling shake of the head. “It is not in my character. They all know that I am not easily swayed. I fear you must return to your room before seven. Probably tonight, lest you oversleep.”

A sigh. “You are right.” But he moved only to lodge his thigh more closely in the grasp of Darcy’s fine, strong legs.

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Taylor woke around dawn and lay some time watching Darcy’s sleeping face in the faint light. Even asleep, he seemed far more man than boy. It was hard to imagine that he had ever been truly young, with imperfect self-control. Taylor could scarcely believe his good fortune: to have found such a lover so soon on leaving home, such a congenial companion in sexual relief and satisfaction, and one he both liked and admired. No need to deceive any husband, or demean himself by frequenting low quarters. And, much though he would regret Darcy’s friendship, the practical, cautious side of him recognised it as an advantage in this liaison that, after graduation, they would move in very different circles. He owed George Wickham a debt of gratitude.

Darcy was awake, maybe roused by Taylor’s quickening pulse. “What time is it? Must you go?”

“Soon I must. But... can I persuade you to a round of pleasure? I have been lying here these many minutes, thinking of the delights we gave each other. My manhood is - Ah!” Darcy’s hand had closed on him. “- is as you find it.”

It would have been so easy to drift to sleep again in the circle of Darcy’s arms, but Taylor’s self-control was nearly the equal of his partner’s. He climbed out of the bed into the chilly

October morning, dressed quickly but with care, gathered Darcy's clothes for the benefit of Morgan, and returned for just one brief kiss. "In my rooms this evening?"

"Oh yes."

He stood looking down for some seconds more, then turned abruptly and was gone.

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Wickham had been certain that he would never again see Darcy and Taylor walking in friendship through the streets and quadrangles of Cambridge. He would have bet a hundred pounds (had such a sum been at his disposal) that Taylor would be at a different college by the end of the term. His one regret was that he would never know which variety of rage the too-trusting Taylor had brought down upon himself. It was probably too much to hope that Darcy had been reduced to violence, but the hope was strong enough to cause him to rise at an unusually early hour so that he could safely spy on them as they left Jesus for their first lecture.

The first morning, he saw Darcy only, and could deduce nothing from his demeanour. The next morning, he recognised the lone figure of Taylor at some distance—that head of hair seemed to shine with its own light—and his own eyes gleamed when he noticed how slowly the man was walking. Deep bruising, at the least. Most gratifying.

His sense of triumph was short-lived. Within seconds Darcy had appeared, and it became clear that Taylor's slow pace had been that of a man who knows that his companion is being delayed for only a few moments. Wickham watched, frowning, until they were out of sight.

Was Taylor never going to come to it? Would more *fino* and greater encouragement be necessary? Given his state that evening, one would not have thought so, but these clever men were predictable only to a certain point. Wickham decided to wait and watch for a week, and then contrive another meeting.

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"Mister Wickham!" Wickham felt a moment's anxiety as he produced his response to Taylor's sincere and open pleasure, partly because he knew he was operating near his limits as a performer, and partly because he could not account for such pleasure. Unless Taylor had changed his opinion of Darcy's attractions and decided that George Wickham was more to his taste? He would have to be careful with Taylor. Best to forget his earlier plans for the conversation—just supply the wine and wait for Taylor to make the situation clear.

It seemed that Taylor was eager to talk, judging by the speed with which he invited Wickham to his rooms. Wickham had planned for this since he could not run the risk of meeting Darcy at Jesus, nor even enquire after his whereabouts lest Taylor become suspicious. "Then I must fear my *fino* was not to your standards, for here we are but minutes from Pembroke -" No accident, that. "- and I was hoping..." People wanted to please George Wickham, and to be pleased by him. It had always been so, and he had had some years' practice now in consciously using this gift. "I have some bottles from another source. Some claret, too. Will you not give me another chance as a host?"

Taylor, who had been mirroring Wickham's smile, finally broke into laughter. "To Pembroke, then." They started crossing the road. "But be warned that next time I will insist."

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The blond man was very much at his ease—one would have thought this his twentieth visit, not his second. Wickham, pouring the claret, felt an increase of anxiety, and wished he'd thought to invent some appointment that would set a limit to this meeting. He had no doubt

that the situation—whatever it might be—could be turned to his advantage, but his talent was wary of extended improvisation.

Taylor gave him little time to prepare, speaking before he had even lifted his glass to his lips. “Next time I *will* insist, Mister Wickham. For I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

Wickham’s surprise was genuine, since it had been a trivial service he’d performed. Now why would a healthy young man, by no means impoverished, subsist in such celibacy as to regard any source of relief as almost a ministering angel? These clever men could be such fools.

“Oh, by no means, sir. Surely you cannot have convinced yourself that it was a hardship?” Taylor wanted more, it was obvious now. Wickham smiled to himself, starting to make plans for the immediate evening, and for many to come. A trusting, grateful celibate—a delicious prospect even without the connection to Darcy, and for that connection he still had hopes.

“To your conscience, I know it was. I regret now that I did not seek you out immediately, but it has only recently occurred to me that you might have misgivings about the trust you placed in me.”

Good God, was he so naive and scrupulous? Or was this the lawyer speaking, with a reminder that each had the power to ruin the other? Unlikely, and, besides, Wickham needed no such reminder. “You are Darcy’s friend. That is all the recommendation I need.”

Taylor closed his eyes, smiled as if to himself. Relief? Anticipation? When he opened them again, it was clear that he was very happy. “I can still scarcely believe... Had you not spoken I would never have thought, let alone dared ...” A wondering shake of the head. “I am most content—we are most content—and of course we owe it all to you. For the lessons you shared from Christchurch as well, I suspect. Anything I can do to repay...”

For a while, Wickham was without the power of speech. He took several deep draughts of claret, treatment for his struggling throat, as well as a convenient shield for his face.

“I am most gratified,” he managed eventually, “though not surprised. May I ask when you...?”

A blush, and a wide, reminiscent smile. “The next evening. I confess I needed time to muster my courage.”

So from that second morning on, he had been watching Darcy with his lover. An incredible thought. Did Darcy have other human weaknesses, then? His head was awl with the new possibilities: from simple mischief, to blackmail, to the succession of Pemberley.

“Yes, I saw you together in town on Friday, from a distance, and I suspected then that you had ... made good use of my indiscretion.” They both laughed.

“It has been difficult, at times. I have not Darcy’s self-command. I think *he* has even managed to pay attention in tutorials this past week.” More laughter, and then a period of preoccupied silence. Wickham dispensed more claret then drank most of it while working on yet another set of plans.

Taylor looked up, blinking, to encounter Wickham’s knowing smile. “I know, I know, I am not fit company. You should avoid me for the next month at least.”

“Surely not, when it is all my doing. Maybe you would be better, though, to use your spare time to claim lost sleep. Unless his capacity has suffered shockingly these past years.”

Tight-closed eyes, and an organ suddenly clearly defined between the parted legs. Wickham himself was far from unmoved. “I trust not, Mister Wickham. Else you yourself would still be recovering for your exertions.”

“So.” Wickham’s voice lowered and deepened. “And is he unchanged also in his preferences? And in his hesitance to ask for what he wants most? I swear I envy him still for the degrees of pleasure he obtained from my entry in his rear.”

Taylor’s heart was almost audible, his gaze stunned and unfocused. At first, he seemed unaware that Wickham had risen and had taken his hand. “No, he has not brought himself to ask yet, has he? And neither have you. Come, Erling.” Slowly, but seemingly with no thought of objecting, he followed the urgings towards Wickham’s bed.

“I’d thought to give you some practice, but you’re too close, aren’t you? You’d barely last a second, and that might be worse than no practice at all. So shall I remind you of the pleasure that Darcy will feel?” His fingers were already demonstrating his experience and skill—it was impossible that Taylor would refuse him.

Taylor *was* delicious—and trusting and grateful, if now no celibate. Wickham had decided that these meetings would continue. Of course, it was possible that the newly-primed Taylor would disgust Darcy, but that had, after all, been the original plan, and he would be satisfied with that achievement. And if Darcy was *not* disgusted, then that could only advance the other, more-complex plans.

“Oh, Mister Wickham, I -”

“George.”

“George. Do you now envy me as you envied him? And do you think you should have shown me how high his expectations must be?” Said with a smile, but serious nonetheless.

Wickham touched the back of his hand to the damp face. “He cares for you, and with that advantage alone you could not disappoint him, had you but one tenth of your accomplishments.”

A gleam of delight, quickly suppressed. “But you are his friend too.” Generosity? Or insecurity? Probably both.

A shrug. “We respect one another, of course, but our temperaments and interests are very different. There is no comparison.”

“Oh, George.” He was urged closer for a kiss. “At the rate I am accruing debts to you, you will have a claim on my first-born by the end of the term.”

“I will consider all discharged if you will continue to give me your assurance that Darcy will remain forever ignorant of my indiscretion. And of any future indiscretions I may commit—for I trust your silence more than I trust my own.”

“Of course. Though there was no need to ask, you know.”

This time after Taylor left, Wickham did not trouble to watch his progress across the quad, but immediately went back to bed with his glass and the bottle, and lay thinking and smirking until he fell into a doze.

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Over the next few days and nights, Darcy noticed Taylor’s heightened state of distraction and excitement, and on the Thursday night, passed on it a mild, smiling comment which revealed but little of the full character of his response. It could not be denied that he was receiving benefit from the other’s feelings: a quiet satisfaction in the knowledge of the compliment that they represented, and a more-marked increase in sensual pleasure.

To deprive himself of these benefits would have required a real effort of will, but there was a sense of apprehension, too, that forced him to contemplate the time when he might have to break with Taylor, or insist on a change of terms. He had thought them both prudent men, of the type that some might even call passionless for the degree to which reason governed their choices. Recklessness, a determination on pleasure regardless of the costs—these were qualities he had come to recognise in George Wickham, and had learned to distrust and avoid. Alarming, then, those moments when Taylor's need seemed almost to overpower him. Where was that need leading the two of them? And what might be the cost? If Taylor did not soon improve, then he must himself take the initiative.

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On the Friday, Taylor encountered Wickham in town early in the afternoon, and did not, after all, insist on claiming his turn to play host. On this occasion he was fully aware that they would be bedding one another, and for that purpose Wickham's rooms seemed the more secure. While the possibility that Darcy would some day become aware of his liaison with Mister Wickham did not alarm him, he wished to spare Darcy the embarrassment and indignity of discovering them in the act.

There was little conversation. Taylor had wondered if Wickham would enquire in some way after his activities with Darcy and was grateful that he did not, since he was reluctant to discuss his continuing state of fevered trepidation. However, no conversation was necessary to establish that issues raised at their previous meeting were still prominent in their thoughts. Taylor found the time most beneficial and instructive: his fever had been assuaged, and he now had some notion how to proceed.

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The next night, the two friends went to an undergraduate enactment of a little-known Jacobean revenge tragedy, and afterwards found great accord between their opinions. There had been merit in some of the performances, but the story could only be excused as the product of an earlier, barbarous time, when such a determined, studied malevolence had presumably been accepted as credible.

"We must hope that the society's choice of play will improve with time."

"It could scarcely get worse. Brandy?"

Taylor nodded, then bent to pour the coffee that Morgan had prepared before being dismissed for the night. They talked of their plans for the Christmas holidays, which fast approaching. For Christmas itself, Darcy would be at Pemberley, Taylor in town, but it was intended that Darcy would spend the first and last weeks of the holidays in town, with Taylor as his guest.

Taylor's feelings about these plans were not simple. The prospect of two weeks devoted to his friend's company was most welcome, and he was eager to share his greater knowledge of London—but he was aware that that knowledge was all that he was in a position to give to Darcy. While it *was* possible to live extravagantly at Cambridge, neither of them did so, and until recently he had had little cause to occupy himself with reflections on the difference in their wealth and consequence. Now his reflections centred on the question of whether Darcy would take them into London society. Would Darcy's peers accept him as a gentleman with a gentleman's education and address, or would they imagine absurd social ambitions and seek to warn Darcy against such an unsuitable friendship? He feared that the holidays must produce some moments of awkwardness between them—if not worse.

Of course, these fears would be incomprehensible to Darcy, or maybe distantly amusing. He had spent his life confident of the judgement of others, and of his ability to meet and honour

any obligation. Taylor knew moments of resentment, though they never lasted long. How could they when Darcy's behaviour made his regard and respect quite clear? and when Taylor felt he would have been content with less, as long as he had the privilege of admittance to Darcy's bed?

"Will we have adjoining rooms in your house in town? Will that be possible?"

"I think it will. The room next to mine is not the best of the guest-bedrooms, but since the best is on the floor above, and since you bring no manservant, I do not think our arrangement will excite comment."

"Is there a door connecting the rooms?"

"Alas, no."

"Ah, well. We can look forward to a shorter and warmer walk than here, at least." There was laughter, and then Taylor leaned forward, seized by curiosity, and suddenly serious. "Your room in town, has it - Have you brought many lovers to your room?"

Darcy seemed only amused. "I am flattered. You must think me most precocious. To have amassed such experience in only a few months of independence from my family and tutors."

Taylor blushed, but persisted. "I *know* you to be most passionate. I cannot but wonder how your needs have been met... before." When he had started speaking he had not been thinking of Wickham—whose activities with Darcy he associated with Pemberley, not London—but now he saw how the question must appear to Darcy. Well, if Darcy did confide in him, he must still keep his word to Wickham, and give no hint of his previous knowledge.

"Much as yours have been, I would imagine. With allowance made for the wider acquaintanceship available in town and at public school."

"Do you wish you had gone to public school?"

"No. I would have found the curriculum too rigid and inflexible. While my tutors did not allow me to neglect any area of my education, they also gave me liberty to extend my studies where I felt particular interest."

Taylor considered this response several times over, seeking to extract a secondary meaning, but there was none. To his surprise, he was finding Darcy's reticence more exciting than the explicit discussion he had hoped to provoke. He rose, brandy glass still in hand, and moved to kneel beside the others' chair.

"And what subjects excited such interest?" He was undoing the buttons on Darcy's waistcoat, casual as when he had been pouring the coffee.

"Most recently, aspects of history. What combination of chance or design produces a calm yet responsive society?"

"Of course. Your continuing study." Darcy's cravat was still in place, but his shirt was open to the extent that Taylor could reach and circle his far nipple. "Will you give *this* society the benefit of your findings? Will you record them in a book?"

"That question presupposes that there will be any findings worthy of the name. Besides, I have no taste for public display."

The cravat was now on the floor beside Taylor's knee. Until Darcy should rise and divest himself of his coat, his chest could not be bared further. Taylor turned his attentions to the buttons on the trousers.

“Surely you do not attribute all books to a vulgar desire for public display? And indeed *can* the desire be vulgar when it produces such refined results?”

“The argument you seek to refute is entirely of your own making, my friend. I am willing to believe the motives of other writers entirely pure, and question only my own.”

“A well-deserved reproof.” Taylor placed his glass on the floor, needing two hands to free the last buttons. “But my excess of eagerness was, I think, in proportion to your excess of modesty.”

Darcy’s laugh was not entirely steady. “I have never numbered modesty among my faults.” Briefly, his gaze was lowered, and took in the sight of his manhood exposed and framed by Taylor’s hands. He blushed.

“You said that history was a recent interest. And before that?”

“I - I cannot remember.”

“No?”

They looked at one another, both flushed, though Darcy more so, and both smiling.

“What would you like?” Taylor had whispered the question.

“At this moment? To have this heat soothed by your mouth.”

Taylor chose to take the request literally, and provided soft, saliva-rich caresses, with no more-vigorous stimulation. Above him, Darcy made quiet grunting sounds, which soon became sharper and less quiet.

“You want more?” Taylor ran his tongue between his moist lips.

“Much more.”

“Then come to bed and put this into my rear.”

If it had not been for the pulse under his hands, he would have thought Darcy had not heard him.

“Does the prospect dismay you?”

“No, but I - I had not thought...”

“Never?”

“Only as a theoretical possibility.”

Taylor’s shout of laughter echoed around the quad, but when he next spoke it was in a whisper, very close to Darcy’s lips. “Do you want to?”

“Very much.” Also a whisper, directly into his mouth. They kissed.

* * * * *

”From the fact that you had a jar of salve in the pocket of your coat, I deduce that I have not taken advantage of a passing whim on your part.”

“I have been thinking of little else since... is it a week now? But I could think of no fitting way of letting you know my wishes.”

“The simplest way is frequently the best.”

“Yes. I will remember that next time.”

“The next time you want me in your rear, or the next time you have wishes that you fear will dismay me?”

Taylor was not entirely confident in this as an invitation, and simply chuckled against the damp neck, then lay quiet and content under Darcy’s gentle, drifting hands. The hands kept returning to the source of the lovers’ recent pleasure, and the intimate touches were arousing both men, although Taylor knew his tender flesh should not be tested to the extent of a second entry so soon—Wickham as preparation had not been quite sufficient.

Maybe Darcy sensed his limits, and maybe he had reached his own. He made no attempt to claim more, and they simply moved against one another until they achieved a release that was swiftly followed by sleep.

* * * * *

It seemed their dreams had had a similar theme, for when they woke early on Sunday morning, they were both in a fair way to being aroused.

“Could you not release Morgan for the entirety of Sunday? Could we not have one undisturbed morning of the week?”

“I will suggest the change to him, but I suspect the current arrangement suits him better.”

“You would defer to the wishes of a servant?” Taylor was all astonishment.

“In a matter where my gain would be small, and his loss might be great, I will certainly take them into account, yes.”

Taylor was dimly aware that he should feel slighted, but he was still too surprised. “I hope he knows what a master he has in you.”

“I doubt it. For I am the master who has taken him from his beloved Derbyshire. He tells me he never truly appreciated the Peaks till he encountered the monotony of the Fens.” Darcy’s smile was one of affection, though whether for his native county or for his manservant, Taylor could not tell—whichever, it was an appealing sight.

“Leave him be, then. On further consideration I discover that I would scarce know what to do with a full night’s sleep.”

“Yes, for we ensure that what sleep we do have is exceptionally profound.” Taylor briefly closed his eyes at the sudden deepening of Darcy’s voice, at the weight and warmth of the hand which settled on his hip.

“Can you -” Darcy’s hair was disordered, his cheeks and chin shadowed, and he had never looked more compelling to Taylor. “Can you imagine what I would wish for now? I wager your thorough mind included it among the theoretical possibilities.”

The lowered lashes, the heightened colour, were Darcy’s only reply, but they were eloquent enough.

Taylor touched the back of his fingers to the side of the man’s face, feeling roughness next to smoothness. “Does the prospect dismay you?”

Darcy’s eyes were open again. “Dismay, no—apprehension, yes.”

“Let it not be today, then.” He moved his hand to cover the one on his hip. “Or never, if you prefer. I would not cause you any distress, of mind or body.”

“I know you would not. Which is why I insist that it be today. Delay is no cure for apprehension.”

* * * * *

No one would ever claim it as a dignified activity, but still, Taylor had never imagined the degree of transformation it would effect in Darcy. In the beginning he was all self-control, but the relaxation, when it came, was swift, and thereafter Taylor had to maintain presence-of-mind for both of them, muffling Darcy's cries, and reminding him of the hour and their location.

Afterwards, Darcy lay near-stuporous for many minutes. Taylor lay with him, glowingly pleased with himself and the world, until the advancing clock urged him from bed to fetch water and a cloth.

"Erling. My friend. Thank you."

"It is my pleasure. And a service I hope often to perform."

"And to have returned. Must you go?"

"You know I must."

"Yes." Darcy released his hand, then raised himself on an elbow. "Let us breakfast in town. And then a long ride after church."

"Or as long as either of us can bear the saddle." Darcy mirrored Taylor's lifted eyebrows and quick smile. "What time should I call on you for breakfast?"

When Taylor had left, Darcy allowed himself a few more minutes of rest before he must start restoring the rooms to order for Morgan's benefit. Such intense pleasure. Neither his book-learned theory nor his limited and embarrassed practice had prepared him. Little wonder that Taylor, knowing already what awaited them, had been in some difficulties the past week. All was explained and excused, and he would doubt Taylor's character no more.

* * * * *

While it could not be said that they neglected their studies in the remaining weeks of term—such a lapse would have damaged the self-opinion of both—their level of application was not what it had been at the beginning of the year. They assured one another that the need would abate with time, that other concerns would regain a claim on their attention, but there was as yet no means of judging how long that time might be. In public they were, of course, all that was proper and reserved, but they appeared in public no more than necessary. Taylor would have forgotten Wickham altogether, had the man not sought him out in the library one afternoon and persuaded him—with ease—to interrupt his studies.

* * * * *

He and Darcy had sole use of the house in Mayfair. The first two days they barely left its walls, except for brief walks in the park, but these walks were sufficient to spread the word of Darcy's presence, and the invitations and visitors began to arrive.

To please his mother, Darcy accepted the invitations from the nearer members of her family, although his letters of acceptance explained that he and his friend would not stay above an hour, owing to pre-existing plans involving the theatre.

Taylor found these gatherings difficult, though not for the reasons that had earlier preoccupied him. It seemed that there would be, at most, half a dozen people in the room with whom Darcy could be at ease—which would have been sufficient, but for the disruptive efforts of the hostess and of match-making mothers, and away from the half-dozen, Darcy displayed a daunting formality. After his initial alarm, Taylor quickly determined that his friend felt no cause for particular dislike of these people, and his only complaint was that he had no positive

interest in them. At the next introduction, therefore, Taylor took it upon himself to display interest for them both, but he sensed that Darcy was not pleased.

“You blame me for encouraging them, and for boring you for longer than necessary.”

“Indeed, no.” The denial was not convincing.

“You blame me for something, though. Are you starting to suspect me of excessive social ambitions?” Taylor was smiling.

Darcy was not. “You could not maintain them. You are starting too high. The ladies will already have informed themselves that you appear in no list of worthwhile prospects.”

Taylor gave himself nearly a minute to compose his reply. “I can assure you that my eagerness to practise law has not been affected by the past few days. I can imagine no other future for myself.”

“You mistook my tone, sir. I was not serious.” Taylor’s frown only deepened. Darcy repeated, closer and lower, “I was not serious,” and after a few moments, Taylor nodded and smiled.

Taylor remained inwardly wary, however, since Darcy had certainly been serious about *something*. When they were next approached, he set himself merely to offer a softer variation on Darcy’s manner, and not a counterpoint to it. Let people think them reserved, and drawn to one another because of that. The encounter was shorter than the last, though free from any striking awkwardness, and Darcy had a smile for him at the end of it. For brief moments, over the remainder of the hour, it did occur to Taylor that Darcy might be genuinely reserved—and might have felt his own liveliness and confidence as a criticism. But the notion was too unlikely, and too petty, and he dismissed it each time within seconds.

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The theatre had been no mere excuse—Darcy never lied—and they went every evening of the days after their period of seclusion had been broken. They were drinking a glass of wine during an interval of “Twelfth Night” when Taylor was surprised to hear himself being called by name.

“Taylor. Mister Taylor. I thought it was you. I am most heartily glad to see you again.”

Taylor effected the introductions immediately. “Mister Bingley and I were at Westminster together. I had thought we would not meet since he made the unaccountable decision to go to Oxford.”

“Are you pleased with Oxford, Mister Bingley?”

Bingley was, and talked with the enthusiasm that Taylor had always found infectious, and to which, he soon observed with relief, even Darcy was not immune. Darcy and Bingley discovered for themselves that they lived in neighbouring counties in the north of England, and in neighbouring streets in London, and invitations had been exchanged before the bell sounded for the next act.

The next day, Bingley’s agreeable visit had been over for only a few minutes when Darcy said, “I never before met a sensible man so eager to be friendly. Am I alone in experiencing Mister Bingley’s manner as a flirtation?”

Taylor laughed. “I have no fear of my rival. He employs the same manner with everyone, man or woman, and has done so as long as I can remember. And be assured that I do not speak out of jealousy when I say that I never saw a man so oblivious to the appeal of his own sex. I think he was first in love with a girl when he was twelve and she ten, and since then there can have been no more than twenty days out of his life when he has not been enraptured with

some female or other. You will hear about every one of them if you admit him to your friendship—it is the only penalty.”

“One I think I am prepared to pay. We shall return his call tomorrow, shall we not, and make firmer engagements for the next week I am in town?”

* * * * *

Taylor felt Darcy’s absence exceedingly during the two weeks the latter spent in the north, and not only on account of the enforced abstinence. He had become very used to his friend as a source and test of opinions, and could not read a book or take part in a conversation without wanting to discuss it with him. During the first week he could, at least, conduct these discussions in letters. During the second week he wrote no letters, knowing there was insufficient time for delivery, and he occupied himself with reading and re-reading Darcy’s replies, and finally with some hours of studies each day.

The pleasure each took in the reunion was evident and, as before, they spent the first few days in near-seclusion. It was Bingley who enticed them out, reminding them of a scheme to ride to the heights of Hampstead and beyond, and thereafter devising numerous diversions.

They reserved most of the evenings to themselves, however, and were content with conversation, reading, billiards, and the knowledge of the vast, canopied bed that awaited them upstairs.

Midway through the penultimate evening before they were due to return to Cambridge, when they were sitting with glasses of wine on the chaise longue, Darcy turned to Taylor with a thoughtful expression, and said, “Have you ever been in the position of having to keep a secret from your family?”

“Small secrets, I suppose—one certainly does not tell one’s mother *everything*—but I surmise you do not speak of small secrets. What is troubling you?”

“George Wickham.”

Taylor was startled, and betrayed some part of his reaction, his mind entirely occupied with the secret that *he* had been charged to keep regarding Wickham and Darcy. But Darcy must surely mean something else entirely.

When Taylor did not immediately respond, Darcy continued, “He is the son of my father’s steward. We encountered him once in Cambridge, but there is no reason you should remember.”

“No, I remember. You said he was no scholar and was destined for the church.” Darcy was sighing and shaking his head. “He is not?”

“I fear he is. He should not—by God, he should not!—but he knows he will profit most if his wishes appear to be in exact accord with my father’s.”

“Your father is offering him assistance in his career?”

“My father has assisted him all his life: at school, and now at Cambridge, and intends him to have the best living in his presentation. My father thinks him all that is excellent and charming.”

“And is he not? I thought him very pleasant when we met.”

“He has developed a polished performance, but I know him too well, and it has long ceased to deceive me.”

Taylor was beginning to feel alarmed. “I thought you were friends.”

“Had we been friends, I would have introduced him to you. It has been many years since he lost my good opinion, and now I fear that he will one day cause my father grievous hurt and disappointment. Yet I fear also to take on the task of disillusioning my father. I can only pray that every clergyman currently in our patronage may live as long as Methuselah—since that man should *not* be a clergyman.”

“I understand your difficulty. But perhaps he may reform. The time is approaching when he must support himself, and that may encourage him -”

“He grows ever worse. I called on him near the end of term to discover his plans for travelling at Christmas—as my father had charged me to do—and I found him with a half-clothed, giggling woman. Is this a fit companion for a future clergyman? Yet his reaction was total unconcern, and when he dined with us over Christmas he was talking of the Parsonage at Kympton as if he had already taken orders.”

Taylor swallowed. “No, I confess...”

“I had long suspected him of the lowest, most indulgent tastes in pleasures of the flesh, but it was shocking to witness the confirmation. Although I suppose it might provide a solution to my dilemma if he should soon succumb to some disease.”

At Taylor’s gasp, Darcy observed his friend properly for the first time in some minutes. His colouring took a blush easily, and at this moment he was aflame. As Darcy watched, he crossed and uncrossed his legs, and his gaze, in the few seconds when it met his own, held an unmistakable gleam of fear.

He waited, and now Taylor would not look at him. “What have you done?” His voice was very quiet and controlled.

“I have bedded with him. I - He represented himself to me as your friend, and as... one who had been intimate with you. He was very charming, very plausible.”

“When was this?”

“Shortly after we had encountered him in the quad. He invited me to his rooms and -”

“Surely you did not tell him that *we* were intimate.”

“No. At the time we were not.”

“How much time elapsed, then, between your bedding *him*, and your first bedding *me*?”

Taylor had courage to match his fear, and he made his reply to Darcy’s face. “A day.”

“I see.” Darcy stood and walked quickly away across the room. He stopped briefly by the pianoforte, then altered his path in the direction of the windows, and stood for many minutes looking out through the gap he had made in the curtains. Eventually, though, he turned and came slowly back, his face sad and tired. He sat in a chair some yards distant from the chaise longue.

“I think I can guess his intentions.”

“Yes.”

“I wonder he did not drop some hint to me over Christmas. But perhaps he could not have predicted the extent of his success.”

“Oh.” Taylor closed his eyes and dragged his hands through his hair. “He did not have to predict. He knew. I have met him several times since.”

“And bedded him each time?”

“Yes.”

“And advised him of the progress of our liaison?”

Taylor’s voice was near-breaking with anguish. “He represented himself to me as your friend. He was very plausible.”

“I can imagine it.”

“I am sorry, Darcy. Truly sorry. And truly ashamed.”

After breathing a deep sigh, Darcy said, “Do not berate yourself. You are not his first dupe, and will not be his last.”

“Can you forgive me, then?”

“Easily.”

“Oh, my good friend.” Beaming with relief, Taylor rose and stepped forward for an embrace.

Darcy’s raised hands halted him. “No. Do not. It is over.”

“But I - But I need you. And you have forgiven me.”

“You are forgiven, but not restored. Whatever we might both wish, he has compromised you, and I cannot forget.”

This judgement robbed Taylor temporarily of the power of speech, and he stumbled back to his seat in order to recover.

“You - You will feel differently about this tomorrow. When you have thought about what we have shared, what we can offer each other. What has *he* to do with these things? You are punishing yourself as harshly as you punish me.”

“You are mistaken. I intend no punishment, and my assessment of the case is already complete.”

There was silence between them for many minutes, while the clock ticked, the coals hissed and shifted in the grate, and the January wind rattled the windows.

Darcy was on his feet. “Would you care for more coffee?”

“I thank you, no.”

“Then will you excuse me if I retire? The house is, of course, at your disposal.”

“I will leave tomorrow.”

“There is no need. Our existing plans are perfectly serviceable.”

“But not tolerable. I would rather be a hundred miles from you than be in the same room and forbidden to touch you.”

“As you wish. What explanation would you prefer that I offer Mister Bingley?”

“Oh, will you not tell him the truth, sir? Would you really sully yourself with a lie?”

“I will tell him that you received a communication from your family and were obliged to return home.”

“Admirable.”

“Then good night. In case we do not meet in the morning, I will wish you an easy journey back to Cambridge.”

Taylor was bending to retrieve his glass from the floor, and did not respond.

“Erling.” Darcy was at the door.

“Yes?” Taylor had not turned towards the voice.

“Be assured that I will not let this harm your studies. If my proximity remains intolerable to you, I will apply to transfer to another college.”

“Only to another college? Not to Oxford?”

“That would be excessive. I will await your decision.” The door opened, then closed, and Taylor was alone in the room. He went to bed some two hours later, but he did not sleep, and he quit the house so early the next morning that he found the streetlamps still lit.

The End