

A photograph of a dark wood desk with a fountain pen, a glass of whiskey, and a handwritten letter. The desk is ornate with carvings. In the background, there is a silver trophy cup and a small decorative object. The lighting is warm and focused on the desk.

A
Valentine
for Elizabeth

Amelia Westerly

A Valentine for Elizabeth

February, 1812 – after Mr Darcy left Elizabeth behind in Hertfordshire, and before meeting her again in Kent. Yet despite his best intentions, he has been unable to forget her...

When the first rays of light stole into the study of Darcy's London townhouse on the morning of 9 February, 1812, they illuminated a scene of shocking disorder — at least by the standards of that rather careful and methodical gentleman.

Darcy sat up and groaned. “I ought to know better than to listen to Fitzwilliam,” he remarked to no one. “Particularly where French brandy is concerned.”

The results of that lapse in judgement could be seen all around him. There was his presence in the study itself, having slept at his desk, head pillowed on his arms. There were the stained glasses from the night before, and worse still, the emptied bottles of strong drink – bottles not in the singular, but in the plural. There was his aching head, ample reminder of why he did not typically choose to indulge to such an extent, and worst of all, there was the dawning sense that he had done something very foolish indeed.

Muzzily, Darcy tried to make out the sense of foreboding that hung over him. Unduly exalted by strong drink, he had certainly spoken much too freely. Fitzwilliam had urged him to confide in him, and at last, he had told his cousin a little of what troubled him.

The memories began to return. Praised be, he had not named her. Even as he confessed to his cousin that he remained unable to forget the unsuitable woman who had captured all his admiration, he had at least retained the discretion not to speak her name. Fitzwilliam had asked it any number of times, but even in his cups, Darcy had resisted. Her reputation was safe — and he was safe from his cousin's well-intended interference.

But there was something more. He had said too much for discretion, yet not so much that he need really regret it. Something else weighed just on the edge of memory. Something that he did not wish to remember, but knew he must.

The letter!

Had he been peering into a looking-glass at the time, Darcy would have seen his face grow as white as milk. He had remembered how he had spent the remainder of the evening, after Fitzwilliam had at last given up and gone home.

They had been speaking of Valentine's Day — that had been the trouble, though it was all in jest. Fitzwilliam had gone, and he had thought more and more of Elizabeth, of her fine eyes and still finer spirit, her sparkling wit and quick intelligence, how he longed to tell her of his admiration, longed to kiss her...

He was very much afraid he had gone quite mad with desire, and ended by writing her a Valentine. There was his quill, lying abandoned off to one side, and there was the ink-pot still left out on the desk. Darcy could half-remember some of the phrases he had used, though he blushed to do so. To read them over would be a humiliating thing, and Darcy resolved that when he had found the letter, he would burn it unread.

Find it he must, and without delay. A quick search showed the surface of his desk to be quite innocent of any such letter, as were the drawers of the desk and the pockets of his waistcoat. When he had exhausted all the locations that occurred to him, he sat down, frowning as much from confusion as from head-ache. Quite simply, Elizabeth's Valentine was nowhere to be seen.

Had he already burned it? The fire was banked low, and it would have been the easiest thing in the world to toss a letter into the hearth. He thought for a long moment, then gave a decisive nod. Yes, it was the only logical thing. Even in his impaired state, he

must have known it was the only thing to do. He could rest secure in the knowledge that his foolishness would never be seen by mortal eyes.

With a small sigh of relief, Darcy resolved to forget it. He would take from the incident the useful knowledge that his temptation was stronger than he knew, and he must be careful — not to mention the knowledge that it was utter folly to match his cousin drink-for-drink. Yes, he had learned from his mistake, and all was well.

Darcy left the study to go about his day, and never saw the small, blotted letter tucked into the pile for his valet Richardson to retrieve. Upon retrieving them some hours later, Richardson was surprised to find a letter addressed to an E. Bennet of Longbourn, a correspondent totally unknown to him. It was not like Mr Darcy to write so haphazardly. Stranger still, he had completely omitted the return address.

Still, it was not his place to question his employer. Being a discrete and respectful servant, he posted it with the others, and never mentioned it to his master.

In Hertfordshire that year, Valentine's Day was unseasonably

sunny, though rather chilly. Elizabeth thought hopefully that she might go for a walk that afternoon. A succession of rainy days, not unusual for February, had kept her inside, and she longed to see something other than the familiar walls of Longbourn. Despite her eagerness for the plan, the arrival of the early post soon captured all her attention.

“Quite a crop of letters today, girls,” Mrs Bennet cheerfully told her daughters. “Here is one from Jane for you, Lizzy, and another for myself. Mrs Gardiner has written to you, Kitty, and here is a letter from my dear old friend Emma Williams! How admired she was, and then she went and threw herself away on a mere sailor without two shillings. But I am happy to say it all worked out well in the end. And here is another for you, Lizzy, from London. It does not say who has sent it. Who would write to you there, other than your family?”

“I hardly know, ma’am,” Elizabeth replied. “My aunt and uncle have introduced me to some very pleasant people over the course of my visits, but I should not have thought any of them likely to send me a letter.” Elizabeth took her letters from her mother with anticipation, for she was eager to hear from her sister, and quite curious as to what might be in the other. Before opening them, she excused herself to her room, for it seemed more likely than not that

Jane might have written things which she would not care for their mother to read.

Jane's letter was much as Elizabeth had guessed and feared. Mr Bingley had not made an appearance, and now Jane had ceased almost to hope. With a sigh for her sister's unhappiness, she took up the second letter and opened it.

Upon reading the first few lines, Elizabeth stopped short. It was so — she hardly knew — perhaps she ought not to read such a letter, and yet as soon as the thought occurred to her, she knew she could not stop.

On the occasion of Valentine's Day, 1812

To Miss Elizabeth Bennet,

You are the most perfect creature I have ever beheld. Upon first meeting you, I did not understand how truly wonderful you are. It is only in knowing you more deeply — in seeing that your care for others is equal to your playful wit, that your intelligence shines as brightly as your sparkling eyes, that I have come to believe you are the one woman I could ever marry.

Please forgive my impertinence in speaking so freely to you. It is a kind of madness that has seized me in writing to you when I

have not been given permission to do so, when I could not be given such permission. If I am a fool, I am a fool in love with you. I shall speak to you honourably at the first opportunity. I do not think I could keep myself from doing so. I beg you to do me the honour of listening — of giving me a chance to win your heart.

Your Valentine, Now and Always

Elizabeth read the letter through, breathless and half-trembling with astonishment. She had not anticipated receiving such a letter — indeed, she could not have imagined it. She would have thought it a prank if every word had not breathed such sincerity. The writer must love her, if ever a man loved a woman, and yet she could not think of anyone who would have written such a thing.

The handwriting might provide a clue. It had struck a chord of familiarity in her mind, and after a little thought, Elizabeth identified it as resembling what she had seen of Mr Darcy's letter at Netherfield, though in a much less even hand, and rather badly blotted. Could it have been from someone who attended the same school as Mr Darcy? That would explain the similarity of style, and yet how anyone from his circles could have become familiar with

her, Elizabeth could not imagine. Mr Darcy certainly could not have spoken favourably of her. Perhaps Mr Bingley had spoken of her to some acquaintance, someone she had met in London previously? There were one or two gentlemen, acquaintances of Mr Gardiner, who had seemed to enjoy her company on previous visits. Yet Elizabeth could neither imagine them conceiving such a passion for her, nor writing such a letter.

She ought to burn it at once. That much was clear, for the letter should never have been written. Whoever the writer was, it was inexcusable for a man of no relation to write to her when they were not engaged. Indeed, she did not even know his name! Yes, prudence demanded that she burn it without delay.

And yet...Elizabeth hardly knew why, but she could not bring herself to do it. She read the letter over again, then a third time. Elizabeth had never imagined reading such a thing. She half-felt as though the words ought to burn the page on which they were written. And the man capable of writing such sentiments had been moved to do so by love of her! It was a compliment that she could not help but feel deeply. Whatever prudence demanded, she did not think she could bring herself to destroy them.

With sudden decision, Elizabeth folded up the letter and hid it at the very bottom of the box in which she kept correspondence she

did not wish to discard. It could slumber safely there, tucked beneath a particularly amusing note from Charlotte and a letter of very high praise from her aunt, until the day she was ready to throw it out. She would attempt to forget it, for there was simply nothing else to be done.

Elizabeth did not really believe she could succeed. She could not imagine forgetting such a Valentine. As matters fell, however, she was destined to surprise herself. The coming months would hold a number of shocks for her, one following another. In all the confusion of an insulting proposal from Mr Darcy, the revelation of Mr Wickham's true character, her changing feelings for Mr Darcy, Lydia's brush with utter disaster, Mr Darcy's heroism, and the bliss of their engagement and the first days of their marriage, she quite forgot the mysterious letter.

Valentine's Day, 1813

“There is something I should like to give you,” Darcy said to Elizabeth. Leading her over to a seat for two in the vast library of Pemberley, he retrieved a folded note and a little bouquet of orange-blossoms which he had instructed the head gardener to prepare in the hothouse.

“They are lovely,” Elizabeth breathed eagerly, taking the bouquet to her nose and inhaling their sweet scent. “How delightful to have a reminder of sun and warmth, when everything about us is so grey!” Indeed, Derbyshire did not present a very pleasant aspect in February. One dull and misty day followed another, and even in all the comfort of Pemberley, one could not help longing for a little fine weather.

Her husband took up her free hand and brought it to his lips, gently kissing it. “You bring sunshine into my life every day, Elizabeth.”

She laughed and kissed his cheek. “If anyone had told me before our marriage how poetic you can be, I do not think I would have believed them.”

“You inspire it in me,” Darcy replied. “I hope you will not expect too much of the Valentine, for I am afraid that even the muse of my love for you cannot give me the ability to write of it so well as I would like to.”

“It does not signify,” Elizabeth reassured him laughingly. “As I have never received a Valentine before, it will be the finest Valentine ever given me.”

Darcy laughed along with his wife, but in the next moment, she had stopped short. He could call the look on her face nothing so easily as shock, or perhaps even horror.

“My dear! Elizabeth, you must tell me what is the matter. I am dreadfully frightened at seeing you look so.”

“No, you need not be alarmed,” she said, shaking her head and then taking a deep breath, as though to strengthen her resolve. “It is only that I have just this moment realised that I have acted wrongly and — though not wilfully — committed a slight against you and against our marriage. I am afraid that I did receive a Valentine once before, last year. Worse still, I must confess that I did not destroy it then, for I found something about it strangely fascinating, and it is in my possession even now. In all the excitement of the past months, I had completely forgotten its existence. I am very sorry, Fitzwilliam. I shall destroy it without delay. Indeed, if you do not object, I shall go and fetch it in now, and we shall throw it into the fire together.”

Rather to her surprise, he did not look much upset. “Elizabeth — who sent the letter?”

“That is the strangest part,” she said. “It was signed only as ‘your Valentine’, and I had not the slightest idea who could have

written it. I should very much like to know — but no. On second thought, it is better that I do not. After this, I shall let it be entirely forgotten, and I am very sorry that it should have happened at all.”

“You need not apologise,” Darcy told her, smiling at the pleasant shock that was his to give. “You have done no wrong. But if you would not object, I should very much like to look at this Valentine. Shall we go and see it?”

Elizabeth looked rather puzzled, but agreed with a good will. “Certainly, if you like, but I hope you will not be hurt by it. I promise you that I did not do anything to encourage the rather strong language with which the writer expresses himself.”

“I have not the slightest doubt of it,” Darcy reassured her.

It was the work of only a few minutes to walk to Elizabeth’s bedchamber and receive her little box of letters. No wonder that Elizabeth had forgotten the strange Valentine, for it was hidden quite beneath the others, where it would not have been seen for months.

Darcy did not need a second glance to recognise it. “It is just as I thought. Elizabeth, I am the man who wrote this letter.”

“You, Fitzwilliam!” Elizabeth exclaimed. She fell silent a moment. “Why — of course. I ought to have realised it sooner. Who

else would have thought of me so? Indeed, the writing even reminded me of yours – only it is not so neat as the letter I saw you write at Netherfield.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “There is an explanation for that. I am sorry to say, my love, that I wrote that letter when my heart was made vulnerable and my hand shaking with love for you – and also by a great deal too much imported French brandy.”

Elizabeth laughed, as he had hoped she would. “I can hardly imagine it. Why on Earth did you send it? And why did you send it anonymously? It is not much like you, Fitzwilliam.”

“No, indeed,” he agreed. “I did not intend to send it. In fact, I thought I had burned it.”

“Burned it! This becomes stranger and stranger.”

“Perhaps I ought to share the story with you,” Darcy replied. “I was dreadfully ashamed of it, once, but now that matters between us have been so well resolved, I need no longer dread it, and I believe you will find it quite amusing.”

“I beg you will tell me, for after such a beginning, I am eager to hear it.”

“Very well, I shall, and you may laugh if you wish. It took place just over a year ago. I am sorry to say that the Colonel and I drank

rather more than we ought to one evening. He wondered what was on my mind, and I am afraid that the answer was entirely you. You, your loveliness, my own doubts, the impossibility of forgetting you. I had only just enough discretion to avoid naming you to him, but when my cousin at last went home, you were so very much on my mind that I actually wrote you a Valentine confessing all my love. I thought I destroyed it, of course, even so, what madness! To have written such a letter to a woman who had not the slightest idea that I was burning with love for her!”

“No, I certainly did not,” Elizabeth said softly. “Not then. At the time, I could not have dreamed of it. It would have astonished me.”

Very gently, he drew her into the circle of his arms. “And now, love?”

“Now I am astonished every day by how much I love you,” she replied, and turned up her face to receive his loving kiss. It was some time before either would remember the Valentine that had accompanied the orange blossoms.

On the occasion of Valentine's Day, 1813

Elizabeth, my beloved wife

Darling Elizabeth, how inadequate are all my words compared to the joy of loving you? My dearest girl, I can imagine no better life than to see your beautiful face each morning, to be the man privileged to walk by your side, to hold your hand. I never regretted my lack of a way with words until I faced the impossibility of telling you how much I love you.

The world is suffused with joy, and all mankind is full of good heart. There is delight to be found everywhere one looks, and great good fortune in each day. I understood none of these things until I found them in the sparkle of your eyes and the beauty of your heart. Your love has worked on me as the sun works on the earth – illuminating everything.

Happy Valentine's Day, my darling.

*With all my heart,
Fitzwilliam Darcy*

The End