

Mr. Darcy's Night  
Before Christmas  
*A Pride & Prejudice Inspired Vignette*

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Oakham Press

California

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Published by **Oakham Press**  
an imprint of Renée Beyea  
[www.reneebeeya.com](http://www.reneebeeya.com)  
Santa Barbara, California

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Mr. Darcy's Night Before Christmas/ Renée Beyea. — 1st ed.

Version: 151224E

*“Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends,  
to which, if persevered in, they must lead,”  
said Scrooge.*

*“But if the courses be departed from,  
the ends will change.”*

—CHARLES DICKENS,  
A CHRISTMAS CAROL



On the Christmas Eve following his stay in Hertfordshire, Mr. Darcy has a mysterious experience that causes him to reconsider Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

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## MR. DARCY'S NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Contented. Yes, that was it. How he used to feel in the evening after dinner when it was only the two of them. Or three, if Mrs. Annesley, his sister's genteel, matronly companion, were sitting with them, though tonight she was gone to keep Christmas with her family. Georgiana might play or take up her embroidery. He might read aloud. They had a quiet, comfortable existence.

But no longer.

Fitzwilliam Darcy raised his glass as if in toast, a sea of sparkling rubies through the facets. With gratitude to one Miss Elizabeth Bennet. A mocking snort and a swallow in the same moment ended in a strangled cough.

Georgiana whirled, her brows pinched in concern.

Moisture squeezed from Darcy's burning eyes. He struggled manfully not to sputter. "I'm well, I'm well," he rasped.

"Are you certain? Your face," she colored at the mere mention, "is rather red."

By then he had caught his breath. "What comes of inhaling port. Let it be a lesson to you, young lady."

She smiled a little and returned to her task.

After a pleasant but exhausting day directing the servants in the greening of Darcy House, fragrant now with bay and rosemary, Georgiana was occupied in arranging the crèche. She delicately unrolled each figure from its wrapper, though whether the fabric reminded him more of swaddling or shrouding, he would be pressed to say. The set had a long and venerable history, dating to the pre-Reformation D'Arcys, one brave soul of whom had brought it from the Holy Land—but such was a tale unto itself.

That it was traditionally displayed in the master's study, rather than one of the more public rooms, bore testimony to the collection having survived the puritanical iconoclasm some generations back. A few limbs were missing, but the olive wood shone with the soft patina of countless Darcy hands lovingly arranging the scene.

When Georgiana had been too small to attempt it alone, his hands had guided her, and before that, his mother's had guided his. The connection grew increasingly tenuous though no less precious with the passing

years, but it was a connection nonetheless. A connection to the parents they both missed, especially during Christmastide, and to the roots of an extended family neither had known.

Which brought him back to the Bennets. If it hadn't been for the blasted Bennets, he would have sent for Georgiana and they would be together in Hertfordshire, at Netherfield enjoying Christmas in the country, just as he had originally anticipated.

But, no, Bingley must fall in love with Miss Jane Bennet and all other plans must yield to the necessity of removing him. Darcy hated to do it, persuading his friend that Miss Bennet did not care for him as she ought, that he could not trust her to act with unalloyed purpose, but it was done and for the best.

If only he could sever himself from memories of her younger sister as easily as his friend was separated from his erstwhile lover. But Elizabeth would intrude, with her fine, dark eyes and her merry smile and her sparkling wit, making it impossible to recapture the peace he ought to know in his own home. Her charming impertinence invaded even this sanctuary. Darcy slapped the flat of his palm against the arm of his chair with an inarticulate grunt.

Georgiana spun round again, one eyebrow arched. "Are you quite certain you are well, brother?"

"Yes, quite."

She studied him for a moment. "In any case, I am finished. Does the nativity meet with your approval?" She

moved aside and swept her hand toward the small stable in an elegant gesture.

“As always, beautifully done. You certainly have the eye for it, just like Mother.” And she did, a critical, artistic eye that, if she could overcome her timidity, might benefit the furniture, which was due for updating. “Thank you, Georgianna.”

She dipped her head, blushing slightly with his praise.

“Have you any preference on how we conclude our evening? Shall we continue our discussion of Donne? *La Corona* might be apropos and not too lengthy for the hour,” he said.

“That sounds lovely,” she seemed to persevere for a moment, “but I’m rather fatigued. Would you mind terribly if I retired? I should like to be refreshed the better to host the Bingleys and the Hursts on the morrow.”

“Of course.” He glanced at the mantel clock. “But you needn’t fret over our guests. After all, we are well-acquainted and there are none among that party to impress.”

“Not even Miss Bingley?” She didn’t smile, but humor glimmered faintly in her eyes. It gave him hope that perhaps she was finally recovering from the trauma of her near-elopement the summer previous.

“Especially not Miss Bingley,” Darcy asserted. No matter how that pretentious and self-deluded young woman might try to ensnare him. Nor did he any longer contemplate a match between his sister and his friend.



With Bingley mourning like a newly weaned colt, he had dismissed such a possibility.

Georgiana rose, crossed the room and paused near his chair. "In that case, I shall sleep easier."

"Brava." He couldn't resist chuckling quietly.

"Did I speak aloud?" She flushed crimson. "I really oughtn't say such a thing. Miss Bingley—"

His fingers around her wrist interrupted her apology. "In that regard, we are of one mind. Do not waste another breath on it."

She bent and kissed him on the forehead. "Do you wish me to extinguish the candles?"

"If it's not an imposition..." He smiled up at her thoughtfulness.

She had already located the snuffer and was gliding about the room. "Though why you like to sit in the gloom—"

"It's not gloomy. The firelight—"

"—is conducive to your ruminations. I know." She pushed the door ajar and stopped beneath the lintel, the candle in her hand casting strange upward shadows on her face. She looked as if she wished to say something but couldn't quite find the words. He was in no mood to draw her out, not tonight.

Darcy dismissed her with felicitations for a good night's rest, which she reciprocated, and the latch clicked quietly behind her.

He returned his attention to the fire, now the only light in the room. Without the propriety required by his

sister's presence, he loosened his cravat, positioned embroidered cushions behind his lower back and neck, and stretched his long legs on the footstool. A decided improvement.

This was his favorite time of evening, when he could reflect on the day, on those conversations or events he had not had time to consider in the moment, a time when he might prepare himself for sleep, the better to meet whatever prospects the morrow held. At least, that had been his habit.

But since returning from his extended visit into Hertfordshire, Elizabeth haunted his solitude. He imagined her sitting across from him or beside him or—no, he would not even think it. What interesting conversation they might exchange. How they might spend their evenings together reflecting and then...

He straightened and flung one of the cushions across the room. It rebounded harmlessly from a lower bookshelf.

This would never do. No matter how well-suited she might be in all those personal attributes he found particularly attractive. No matter how sharp her mind or how compassionate her heart. No matter how light or pleasing her figure, he could not, must not, consider her.

To align his ancient and distinguished lineage with her family, with a family whose conduct was even more reprehensible than its connections? It was not even to be entertained. Had he gone daft to have fallen so thoroughly under her spell?

Darcy gazed at the hearth, as if its flame might burn her image from his mind, and then traced the light and shadows pirouetting about the room. The crèche caught his eye, and he studied Mary and Joseph bent in mirrored tenderness over the tiny replica of a manger. The wood grain arced in a swirl of dark veins among light, curving to follow the circle of their bowed heads, as if the tree itself had grown to this very purpose.

There. There was where he had gone wrong: to think that possessing her might bring him peace, when Peace rested in the crux of a lowly hay trough. Darcy's mouth curved in quiet contentment. Light dappled the Holy Family, dancing around them, caressing them, cloaking them in gold...

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Dappled light skipped about him. Darcy extended his hands palm down, fascinated by the play of light and shadow on his skin.

He furrowed his brow. Why was it so bright?

Looking up, he was compelled to squint into the mid-day sun, moderated though it was through the dense foliage. He reached for a branch and rubbed a leaf, narrow and not quite the length of his smallest finger, dark green on one side and silvery on the reverse, which was why the tree seemed to shimmer in the hot, dry breeze. The low, spreading limbs sprang from a trunk gnarled and twisted with age. And there, yes, fruit. He examined the

small oval shape and leathery skin: an olive. When he released the branch, it sprang back above his head.

Voices drifted from the far side of the knotted trunk, the same voices that had been speaking in low, urgent tones since he opened his eyes. Not wanting to alarm them, he cleared his throat as he stepped around the tree, but the couple did not seem to perceive him.

“Ahem.” Darcy tried again. “Pardon me.”

They continued in earnest dialogue, a young man and a girl on the brink of womanhood, perhaps the age of his sister or slightly younger, though it was difficult to tell, what with his beard and her veil.

The man tossed a quick, sharp glance over his shoulder. Darcy knew that surreptitious look and inferred they ought not to be unchaperoned.

He waved in their direction, but his movement did not attract their notice. Though he abhorred the rudeness, if he listened to their conversation, he might learn in what odd place he found himself.

The man cast up his hands. “You judge me a simpleton? You think I do not know how children are begot? What am I to believe, when you’ve been away visiting your cousin these three months? I certainly am not the father of your child.”

“I have never lied, not once,” the young woman said, “and I am not lying now.”

Darcy’s eyebrows climbed at her bold claim. He knew not one who could say the same.

She continued with remarkable calm, considering the circumstances, though he could discern a hint of desperation. "I speak the truth. I have not betrayed your trust."

"And yet you have violated our betrothal. Surely you understand why I cannot marry you." He sighed heavily. "I had thought—"

"Please." Pleading was foremost in her voice now, her wide, dark eyes conveying more than the wringing of her hands.

The young man swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing behind the black length of his beard. "I counted myself blessed to be matched with such a maid, with a servant who loves Adonai with all her heart, soul, mind and strength, from whom the songs of our forefathers continually rise in praise, who is," he nearly choked on the words, "who was blameless and righteous."

The anguish of his features moved Darcy, and he could not help but feel for the man, cuckolded by a fiancée who clearly had earned his respect and esteem. The couple stared at each other in quiet intensity for several long moments.

The girl broke the silence first, folding anxious hands below her chin. "I have told you all. There is nothing more that I can say. If you will not believe me, then I cast myself upon your mercy."

The gentle, trusting innocence of her voice, of her round, youthful face, of her impossibly thick lashes lifted in petition aroused all of Darcy's brotherly warmth—his heart conflicted in sympathy for them both.

“I give you my word that I will be merciful. Do you think I wish you exposed to public disgrace or, heaven forbid, to stoning? A quiet divorce will suffice.” The man reached toward her hesitantly, as if he would caress her cheek, but stopped short of touching her. His voice cracked into one last broken whisper, rife with longing and despair, “Mary...”

Darcy jolted at the mention of her name.

With that the man turned on his heel and vanished into the glare beyond the tree’s canopy.

Movement at the edge of his vision redirected Darcy’s head in time to see the young woman sink to her knees, the dust puffing in a small cloud around her.

She rocked back and forth, her face shielded in both hands, keening one word over and over. “Joseph, Joseph.”

Darcy remained frozen in horrified irony at the drama that had unfolded before him. He was torn between chasing after Joseph, grasping him by the shoulders and shaking sense into his blind, stubborn head, convincing him that he was making the greatest mistake of his life. Torn between that and comforting Mary, assuring her that all would be well, that it would come right in the end.

And yet, even could she hear him, how could he presume to explain, knowing as he did the history and the future of the Child she carried? There was nothing he could do. He despised his impotence.

Even as he watched, Mary stilled, quieted. She lifted her head, tears snaking their dirty course down her cheeks. She looked to heaven, and an otherworldly peace settled over her features. She raised both arms, opened her mouth and sang in the clearest, sweetest tone he had ever heard.

Like bells tinkling, ringing, chiming the hour.

Darcy's eyes opened slowly to his cold, dark study, lit only by the dying embers in the grate and still echoing with the last toll of midnight. Christmas had come.

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Though he knew the action to be futile, if the repetition of the last few hours were any indication, Darcy rolled over and rearranged the pillow beneath his head. After the disturbing dream in his study, sleep was proving unattainable.

A distant clock, magnified in the slumbering house, chimed the passing of another quarter hour.

He cast the covers aside and stalked to the window, throwing the draperies wide. Moonbeams flooded his bedroom, and he peered through the clear center of a frosted pane.

Milky light bathed the rear garden, reflecting opaquely from the ornamental pond's icy pall and luminously from the hoarfrost mantling the barren branches and evergreen shrubbery. Nature sleeping soundly beneath silver linens. If he could but rest as peacefully.

It was only a dream and easily interpreted. The Holy Family carved from olive wood was the scene upon which his eyes had closed in sleep. That accounted for Mary and Joseph sheltered beneath an olive tree. And he had been lecturing himself about why he must not seriously consider Miss Elizabeth, which explained the relevance of their conversation.

But the dream did not signify, had no further bearing on his situation, none whatsoever. If his waking mind persisted in revolving the problem of her, it was only natural that his unconscious should do the same.

Darcy roundly chastised his foolishness, regained his mattress, and commanded himself to sleep.

Fierce sunlight woke him, and he shut his eyes against the brilliance. He'd forgotten to pull the curtains. Darcy stumbled from the bed, staggered toward the window and halted in confusion.

The sun was not coming through his window; it was in his room, right there, in the corner where his writing table ought to be. Even though he shaded his eyes, he could not bear to open them further than the narrowest slits. Was he delusional or did the sun appear to have a face?

The light was streaming toward him in visible waves, oscillating in a multitude of colors with a dazzling radiance that he found almost unendurable, and yet he felt no heat. He withdrew a step, panic nipping at his heels, and studied the phenomenon again.



The waves focused, held steady and resolved into a figure, a broad-shouldered man in a painfully white tunic, if pure light could be termed white, and with features that were achingly beautiful and at the same time acutely masculine. What was this being?

Trepidation clenched his heart. Darcy withdrew as far as he could, until the bedframe bit into the back of his legs.

The being spoke and if Darcy had not known fear before, he did then, with that sonorous voice vibrating in his very bones.

He could not tell if he heard with his ears or with some other sense. The thought arose that this angel—and he knew suddenly that it must be an angel—could choose as easily to speak to him alone as he could to the entire globe, the entire cosmos, at once.

Terror seized him and he broke into an instant sweat. His life had never seemed as small, as finite, a mere vapor, a blade of grass withered by evening. No wonder angels always prefaced their messages with “Fear not.”

Though he felt an intolerable weight on his chest and his breath coming in shallow gasps, Darcy rallied himself to attend.

“Joseph, thou son of David,” the angel was saying, the profundity of his address rattling the very teeth in Darcy’s head, “fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his

name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.”

Darcy wanted to cry out that he had come to the wrong man, to the wrong millennium, but the words tangled hopelessly between his mind and throat. He was transfixed in an awful, shuddering silence.

There was a flash, as of lightning without thunder, and for the second time that Christmas, his eyes opened to a disorienting reality.

Darcy was wound in his bed linens, his chest heaving wildly. Perspiration slicked his brow. The morning sun, blazing through the glass, was already melting the elaborate tracery with which the frost had etched the panes. And yet, its rays were somehow dim in comparison to the transcendent radiance that had so lately filled his chamber.

He exhaled a long, wavering breath, already the pounding of his heart slowing to its normal rhythm.

The vision was forever seared into his soul—a soul that in the gleam of that pure light seemed suddenly neither so good nor so noble as he had always thought.

Yes, one did not encounter an angel, even in one’s dreams, and leave the experience unaltered. Darcy had not words for how he had changed, but he felt it in the depths of his being.

Now, he knew precisely what he must do.

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"Must you talk politics all evening?" Hurst stood at the side table pouring himself yet another generous snifter of Darcy's best. "It's Christmas, for heaven's sake."

"The man has a point..." Bingley nodded toward his brother-in-law, but directed his words to his friend.

Horses, cards, clubs, and food, of course, all these would satisfy Hurst's not-so-particular and decidedly indolent tastes, but Darcy recognized his chance for what it was.

"As you wish." Darcy swirled his own brandy—his first. There was no point in racing through fine liquor. "Have you given any thought to your plans following Twelfth Night?"

"I suppose we'll remain in town. Caroline, at least, is content with her friends here for the winter." Bingley shrugged with the same lack of animation that had characterized him since their removal to London. "Unless, of course, something better offers. Why? Have you an idea in mind?"

"Well..." Darcy began. He sipped his glass, to fortify himself—or delay broaching the subject, if he were honest—and said, "Have you considered returning into Hertfordshire?"

Shock overspread Bingley's face.

"Wha—" Hurst burst out, spewing a mouthful into the snowy folds of his cravat. "That uncivilized backwater? Why ever would you—" He brushed at his soiled neck cloth, the end of his question trailing into muttered curses about spoiling a perfectly good knot.

Darcy moved to open the door and address the man without. “Jones, be so good as to escort Mr. Hurst to one of the guest chambers and see that he is provisioned with a clean cravat.”

The servant bowed and as Hurst passed, Darcy added, “By the time you are refreshed, Bingley and I shall be ready to join the ladies. I’m sure they would not be averse to a game of cards.”

Hurst merely scowled over his shoulder and followed Jones up the stairs.

Darcy chuckled and called behind him. “Or charades, if you prefer?” There was no answer.

He closed the door and looked back at his friend. Bingley balanced on the edge of his seat as if he would at any moment spring from the chair and into a footrace.

“Did you mean it?” Bingley said.

“About going into Hertfordshire?” Darcy smiled at his skepticism. “Yes.”

“But... That is...” the younger man stammered, “what would, that is, how shall I explain—”

“You needn’t explain yourself. The house is yours. No one shall be surprised if you return to it. In fact, they will likely hail your coming with all manner of rejoicing, and I warrant Netherfield is worthy of a second look.”

“Not the house.” Bingley almost glared.

Darcy frowned, unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of such an expression.

“I meant Miss Bennet. How shall I explain to her?”

Darcy motioned nonchalantly. "Perhaps she requires a second look as well."

"Now, see here," Bingley leapt to his feet, though his attempt to appear threatening was more humorous than intimidating, "I'll not have you—"

"I intended no disrespect," Darcy said. "If you are as besotted as you seem, then perhaps you would be wise to determine if she is truly worthy of your affections." He added as an afterthought, "And if she is able to return them."

Bingley blinked. "You are being serious."

"I am." Was he not always serious? He was not given to jesting, not like a particular young lady whose penchant for making sport in conversation he found especially engaging. Darcy strode the length of the room, returned, and stopped before his friend. "Do you really find it incredulous that I should change my mind?"

"If I do, it is only for the rarity of the occurrence." He snorted. "I dare say you pride yourself, correctly to be sure, on being accurate in your initial assessments."

Darcy bristled slightly. "All men err upon occasion, though I certainly endeavor to be circumspect in my judgments." This was not quite how he envisioned the conversation proceeding. How had it devolved into a slur on his character and from the sanguine Bingley, no less?

“May I ask,” Bingley dropped back into his chair heavily, “what induced such an about-face in your opinion?”

Folding his hands behind his back, Darcy resumed his pacing. He had planned for this, knew he must inevitably face the question, but it would never do to confess it was the transformation of a single night, of the dreams that had eclipsed his sleep. He had awakened, every objection swept aside by the certainty that he must marry Elizabeth, that in her, by some divine, inexplicable logic, lay his destiny.

Not long after, his conscience succumbed fully to guilt for having intervened in Bingley’s affairs. Not only that, he was forced to acknowledge his motivation in doing so had not been entirely unselfish—although, he was not yet prepared to admit as much.

“You have not been yourself these last weeks, Bingley. You cannot deny it.”

“You are weary of my low moods, is that it, then?” There was an undercurrent of bitterness in his normally cheery tone.

“I do not like to see you in the doldrums, no, and while I would not venture to assert whether or not Miss Bennet will make you happy, you ought at least to choose without my interference. I am persuaded...” Darcy paused to stare into the fire. Confession was proving more uncomfortable than he expected. “I am persuaded that it was presumptuous of me to guide you in matters of the heart and that I may have done you a disservice.”

"You think she may prefer me after all?" His voice quavered with hope.

"I said no such thing," Darcy spun, meeting his friend's suddenly eager eyes, "that, you shall have to discern for yourself. I will only advise you to take care and not hastily commit yourself to a decision you may later regret."

"What of her family's improprieties, her low connections, all the objections you so articulately marshaled against her?" Enthusiasm reanimated Bingley's tongue. "Are they now of no consequence?"

"By all means, do not return, if you are convinced she is unsuitable." To humble himself and have it flung back in his face! Darcy could not keep the sarcasm from his voice any more than he could keep his feet immobile.

"No, no. I am for Netherfield in a fortnight, but I am still all amazement at your reversal," Bingley shook his head, undeterred, "although the manner in which you are patrolling the room leads me to question if you are entirely at ease with it yourself."

Darcy ceased his march, this time before the window, and grimaced. "I can assure you, if I were to meet and fall in love with a gentlewoman, with she whom I know to be my match and a fit wife, I would not allow her family situation—no matter how wanting her connections or how vulgar her relations—to separate us." It was as close to a personal admission as he would come.

"I, for one, should like to see that day, to meet such a lady as would gain your approval, nay, even your heart."

Bingley laughed lightly, much like his old self, and clapped his hands to his thighs. “At any rate, you are more than welcome to join me. Bring your sister, if mine decide to come. I dare say she will find more to amuse her in the country, as town is rather drear this time of year.”

The suggestion was not without merit. Darcy could observe how his sister and Elizabeth would get on. Subjecting shy Georgiana to the undisciplined younger Bennets warranted concern, but she was too prudent to be adversely affected and might even benefit, if the exposure would serve to draw her from her natural reticence. Besides, if they were to become near relations—as he was confident they would—the association would be inevitable.

Of course, George Wickham’s continued presence in Hertfordshire presented an altogether different problem. There was nothing for it but to speak with Georgiana directly. A conversation past due.

Darcy sighed and straightened. “A worthy invitation, Bingley. I shall be grateful to accept.”

“Excellent, excellent,” he rubbed his hands in anticipation. “Perhaps you fancy more badinage with the lively Miss Elizabeth?”

“I would not object.” If only Bingley knew how much that very prospect enticed him. Darcy stared out into the black night, into an obscure future, despite his recent epiphany. After all, Elizabeth was yet to be won, not that he envisaged any obstacles. The firelight flick-



ered in reflection, as did his satirical smile. “Indeed, we may even find the Bennets to improve upon closer acquaintance.”

“Indeed!” Bingley’s good-natured laughter floated from behind. “And, my friend, may I express my gratitude for a truly merry Christmas.”

THE END

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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