“I must think your language too strong in speaking of both,” replied Jane; “and I hope you will be convinced of it, by seeing them happy together. But enough of this. You alluded to something else. You mentioned two instances. I cannot misunderstand you; but I entreat you, dear Lizzy, not to pain me by thinking that person to blame, and saying your opinion of him is sunk. We must not be so ready to fancy ourselves intentionally injured. We must not expect a lively young man to be always so guarded and circumspect. It is very often nothing but our own vanity that deceives us. Women fancy admiration means more than it does.”

“And men take care that they should.”

“If it is designedly done, they cannot be justified; but I have no idea of there being so much design in the world as some persons imagine.”

“I am far from attributing any part of Mr. Bingley’s conduct to design,” said Elizabeth; “but without scheming to do wrong, or to make others unhappy, there may be error, and there may be misery. Thoughtlessness, want of attention to other people’s feelings, and want of resolution, will do the business.”

“And do you impute it to either of those?”

“Yes; to the last. But if I go on, I shall displease you by saying what I think of persons you esteem. Stop me whilst you can.”

“You persist, then, in supposing his sisters influence him.”

“Yes, in conjunction with his friend.”

“I cannot believe it. Why should they try to influence him? They can only wish his happiness; and if he is attached to me, no other woman can secure it.”

“Your first position is false. They may wish many things besides his happiness: they may wish his increase of wealth and consequence; they may wish him to marry a girl who has all the importance of money, great connections, and pride.”

“Beyond a doubt, they do wish him to choose Miss Darcy,” replied Jane; “but this may be from better feelings than you are supposing. They have known her much longer than they have known me; no wonder if they love her better. But, whatever may be their own wishes, it is very unlikely they should have opposed their brother’s. What sister would think herself at liberty to do it, unless there were something very objectionable? If they believed him attached to me, they would not try to part us; if he were so, they could not succeed. By supposing such an affection, you make every body acting unnaturally and wrong, and me most unhappy. Do not distress me by the idea. I am not ashamed of having been mistaken—or, at least, it is slight, it is nothing in comparison of what I should feel in thinking ill of him or his sisters. Let me take it in “the best light, in the light in which it may be understood.”

Elizabeth could not oppose such a wish; and from this time Mr. Bingley’s name was scarcely ever mentioned between them.

Mrs. Bennet still continued to wonder and repine at his returning no more; and though a day seldom passed in which Elizabeth did not account for it clearly, there seemed little chance of her ever considering it with less perplexity. Her daughter endeavoured to convince her of what she did not believe herself, that his attentions to Jane had been merely the effect of a common and transient liking, which ceased when he saw her no more; but though the probability of the statement was admitted at the time, she had the same story to repeat every day. Mrs. Bennet’s best comfort was, that Mr. Bingley must be down again in the summer.

Mr. Bennet treated the matter differently. “So, Lizzy,” said he one day, “your sister is crossed in love, I find. I congratulate her. Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then. It is something to think of, and gives her a sort of distinction among her companions. When is your turn to come? You will hardly bear to be long outdone by Jane. Now is your time. Here are officers enough at Meryton to disappoint all the young ladies in the country. Let Wickham be your man. He is a pleasant fellow, and would jilt you creditably.”

“Thank you, sir, but a less agreeable man would satisfy me. We must not all expect Jane’s good fortune.”

“True,” said Mr. Bennet; “but it is a comfort to think that, whatever of that kind may befall you, you have an affectionate mother who will always make the most of it.”

Mr. Wickham’s society was of material service in dispelling the gloom which the late perverse occurrences had thrown on many of the Longbourn family. They saw him often, and to his other recommendations was now added that of general unreserve. The whole of what Elizabeth had already heard, his claims on Mr. Darcy, and all that he had suffered from him, was now openly acknowledged and publicly canvassed; and every body was pleased to think how much they had always disliked Mr. Darcy before they had known any thing of the matter.

Miss Bennet was the only creature who could suppose there might be any extenuating circumstances in the case unknown to the society of Hertfordshire: her mild and steady candour always pleaded for allowances, and urged the possibility of mistakes; but by every body else Mr. Darcy was condemned as the worst of men.