

One Darcy Too Many

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

Summer Hanford

CHAPTER ONE

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam slumped on a stool before the counter at one of London's public houses, nursing an ale over a lunch of what the proprietor assured him was steak pie. The establishment in which he sat was not fine. Nor was it disreputable. Mostly, the low ceilinged, heavily beamed room was middling. As was Richard's garb, and the accent he employed this evening. For, in service of King and Country, he was not away across the sea fighting in the regulars as everyone believed, but rather serving in a more clandestine manner. One he quite enjoyed.

This particular evening, he awaited an opportunity to stage a 'chance meeting' with a particular warehouse manager who worked for B.B.B. Shipping & Co. With a little time and prompting, the man would bring Richard nearer to his goal. Someone within B.B.B. Shipping & Co. was not simply smuggling in French goods, but smuggling out English secrets. Richard was tasked with learning who, and which members of B.B.B. Shipping & Co. were culpable.

As he pushed back his plate, a young man took the stool beside him. Richard sighed. The man's middling coat, not flashy or fine but sturdy and well made, the simple knot in his cravat, which implied he had no valet to tie it for him but still wished to appear a gentleman, even his shoes, worn but shined, all echoed the tactics Richard employed to appear quite average.

Shifting to regard the man, Richard asked, "What does Prachet want?" He kept his voice soft, knowing that the general din of the public house would swallow up his words.

The fellow, perhaps a decade Richard's junior, blinked in surprise. "How did you know Gen—" He broke off with a grimace. "That is, that Prachet sent me?"

"For one thing, your shoes are too worn."

"I was told to wear worn out shoes." Pique colored the young man's voice. "Our instructor said new shoes do not fit the role of a moderately successful London merchant, so I bought these off an older fellow with feet about my size."

"I imagine you did." Richard tried not to let his amusement show. He'd been new to this game once too. He also didn't further embarrass the other man by reminding him to speak more softly. By Richard's assessment, no one was paying them any heed. "Which is why those shoes look nearly as old as your, what, twenty years? You must have had quite the nickname, with feet that size when you were barely out of strings."

The fellow frowned down at his shoes.

"What message do you have for me?" Richard prodded.

"Only that Gener—Err, that is, Prachet wants to see you."

"Now?" Worry stirred in Richard. Prachet knew he was close to cracking this case. He wouldn't call Richard in without a good reason.

"He said, ah, yesterday?"

"Is that a question or a statement?"

"It is what he said, sir, and he sounded angry when he said it."

Nodding, Richard stood. "Seeing as I am already late, I had best be off." After a moment's thought, he knocked back the remainder of his ale. For a middling sort of place, they served good drink, and Richard might need the fortification if General Prachet were in one of his moods.

"Do you want me to take over for you, sir?"

Richard stifled his inclination to decline. No one of interest drank or dined around them, and the youth could obviously use some experience. "I want a description of the garb of everyone in this place, right down to their shoes, on my desk by tomorrow morning. Do I make myself clear?"

Wide eyed, the man nodded.

"And do not call me sir in a place like this," Richard added, not quite able to hide his annoyance. What were they teaching new recruits these days?

"Yes, ah... That is..." The still seated youth floundered.

Richard sighed. "A simple yes will suffice."

"Yes, sir."

With a shake of his head, Richard scooped his hat up off the counter and left, making certain not to walk with any hurry. No one, fortunately, had been near enough to listen in on them, not over the din of the room, but he never knew who might be watching. He'd long ago learned to mitigate the purposeful stride of an officer.

Stepping out of the pub, he donned his hat, smiling. He wondered how long it would take the lad to realize that not only hadn't Richard asked for his name, he didn't have a desk. He worked in the field, not in General Prachet's secret office.

Richard strode through London's streets, occasionally whistling. He made a show of going through the market, as if looking for something, all the while checking about him. No one appeared to have followed him. No one showed him any undue interest. Whatever had Prachet worked up enough to send that novice out to find him didn't appear to have anything to do with Richard.

Nearly an hour later, he entered the firm of Watson, Goodwin, and Hastings, both a functional establishment and a front for Prachet's work. The clerk there looked up, his expression blank, as if he did not recognize either the middling level merchant Richard played, or Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, second son to the Duke of Matlock.

"Herald," Richard greeted. "I have been summoned."

"Third door on the left, Colonel."

Richard nodded, familiar. "He is alone?"

"He is."

Richard drew in a fortifying breath. "Very well, then." Few were the people in Richard's life who possessed the right to dress him down, and Prachet was one of them. Why Richard required such treatment, he had no idea, but the tone of his summons suggested he did.

He went down the hallway on quiet feet, then knocked softly. There was no need for more. Prachet had the hearing of a bat.

"Enter."

Trying not to feel like an errant schoolboy called into the headmaster's office, Richard went in.

Prachet looked up from the papers scattered about his large desk. "Fitzwilliam. Sit."

Richard closed the door and crossed to the upholstered chair before the general's desk.

"It is good to see that you were where you reported you would be, for once," Prachet added.

Richard paused in the act of sitting then, with a frown, resumed his descent into the plush chair. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I assume you were at the Cross and Beam, as your last report said you would be, or young Edwards would not have been able to locate you."

"I was." Richard studied the compact, painfully tidy man across the desk from him. "But why the, 'for once?'"

Prachet tapped a closed file. "Did it not occur to you that Mrs. Younge would include your doings in her weekly reports? I do not know which disappoints me more, your neglect of your duty or your lack of subtlety in executing that neglect."

Richard shook his head, confused. "I honestly have no notion of what you speak, sir." A quick search through his brain and he added, "I believe Mrs. Younge is my cousin Georgiana's chaperone?"

"She is." Prachet watched him through narrowed eyes. "She is also one of ours. You are aware that we do not like to leave the members of England's most elite houses unprotected?"

"I am perfectly aware, but I still have no notion what Mrs. Younge has to do with me improperly executing my duty." Did the woman have something to do with the French spy ring? But how? "Is Georgiana not in Ramsgate?"

"You know very well that she is." Prachet tapped his folder again. "Mrs. Younge has dutifully reported your presence there these past four weeks. One, or even two, trips to Ramsgate would not trouble me. Your mission does not require you to be constantly in London and the man you pretend to be may be expected to travel, but you have featured in nearly every day of Mrs. Younge's weekly reports on Miss Darcy's wellbeing. That is unacceptable, Fitzwilliam."

"I agree, it would be, except that I have not left London in months."

Prachet stared at him.

Richard stared back.

Prachet's eyes narrowed further, into dire slits of anger. "Do you expect me to believe that Mrs. Younge, Mr. Darcy, and Miss Darcy have all been fooled by someone pretending to be you? I find that quite impossible to accept."

Richard did as well. "I have not met Mrs. Younge," he said, his mind whirling through possibilities. "And I do not believe Darcy has yet gone to Ramsgate. Georgiana is there on her own." With Mrs. Younge.

Prachet plucked a bell from his desk and rang it. Almost immediately, the door opened to a serious looking young man. "Bring me the last four weeks of reports on Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy."

"Yes, sir," the man said, pulling the door closed.

Prachet turned back to Richard. "That still leaves Miss Darcy. Do you feel someone could portray you in a convincing enough manner to fool your cousin?"

Richard shook his head. "I cannot see how." He only saw his young cousin, over whom he was a co-guardian with Darcy, perhaps once every six months, but she'd known him for the entirety of her fifteen years.

A knock sounded and the man who'd stuck his head into the room strode in. He handed Prachet a file, saluted, and left. He didn't even glance at Richard.

Opening the file, Prachet began to skim, rapidly flipping pages. Richard tried not to fidget. If Prachet truly thought Richard had been in Ramsgate, because Mrs. Younge believed as much, something was terribly wrong. Either someone was convincingly portraying him, or Mrs. Younge was lying. Richard wasn't certain which would be worse.

"You are correct." Prachet snapped the file closed. "Mr. Darcy has not been to Ramsgate yet this summer. As well, a quick analysis of summaries of his correspondence with his sister indicates no mention by Miss Darcy of your presence there."

Dread settled over Richard. "Mrs. Younge might be lying." But why would she?

Prachet regarded him without expression. "You know there is a second possibility. Miss Darcy may be lying to Mrs. Younge about the identity of this gentleman with whom she is associating."

"Yes," Richard admitted. Glumly, he continued, "As Mrs. Younge has never met me, Georgiana may be perpetuating a lie." And Richard could only think of one man who could both charm his young cousin into doing so, and who was familiar enough with both the Darcys and Fitzwilliams to convincingly play a member of the family. "I suspect that Mr. George Wickham is in Ramsgate."

Prachet's expression went blank, which meant he had not been expecting that. "The son of the late Mr. Darcy's steward? Why him?"

"I can think of no one else who could entice Georgiana into such bad behavior."

Prachet shrugged. "She is what, fifteen? Any skilled rake could be the culprit. Thirty thousand pounds is a significant enticement. Or the rogue, whoever he is, may have more nefarious intentions. We cannot afford for Mr. Darcy to be subject to blackmail, or any other form of coercion. The Darcy name is too important, and too closely linked to Matlock."

"I concede that it could be any ne'er-do-well, but it will not be." Certainty lodged in Richard. "It is Wickham. Despite your uncharitable view on fifteen-year-olds, Georgiana is too well behaved for it to be anyone else." Richard pushed up from the chair. "I will go to Ramsgate and put this right."

"Sit down." Prachet's order and, though he'd spoken quietly, Richard dropped back to the chair. "You will do no such thing. Mrs. Younge will be informed, and Mr. Darcy will visit his sister. This is unlikely to be a matter of national interest, but rather a young woman behaving badly. That is well within Mr. Darcy's province. He is her brother."

“You cannot simply order Darcy to Ramsgate,” Richard protested. His whole being shouted that he must go to Ramsgate, now, and stop Wickham.

“No, but we have people in his household.” Prachet shrugged. “A few subtle prods and Mr. Darcy will think going to see his sister to be his notion.”

Richard frowned. He didn’t like the idea. Manipulating outcomes was General Prachet’s job, but that was in the interest of keeping their nation secure. Manipulating Richard’s cousin had nothing to do with Britain’s security. “I should go.”

“Are you close to unveiling who is smuggling information to the French?”

“Yes,” Richard admitted. “I have narrowed it down to someone in B.B.B. Shipping & Co.” Though he hoped he would not discover the traitor to be the owner, for he knew the owner of B.B.B. Shipping & Co., as did Darcy.

“Then you will remain at your post.”

“But—”

“There is no ‘but,’ Colonel. That is an order. You are dismissed.”

Richard came to his feet. When Prachet used that tone, nothing would sway him. “Yes, sir.”

The general looked up with sympathetic eyes. “Do not fear. A missive will be on the way to Mrs. Younge this within the hour.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

With a final nod, Prachet reached for another folder, his attention no longer on Richard.

Richard left the general’s office, but did not immediately depart Watson, Goodwin, and Hastings. Instead, he made his way to the office of one of the clerks, Ronalds. If Darcy did go to Ramsgate, and Richard knew he would because Prachet was not one to be overconfident, he would pass through London. When he did, even though Darcy believed him to be on the Continent, Richard had very specific papers he wished drawn up for his cousin to sign. Papers that would go a long way to easing Richard’s worry for Georgiana.

Papers that would, should the worst happen, at least keep Wickham from getting his hands on Georgie’s dowry.