

Kitty Bennet in Love

Note:

I wrote this short story with reference to my Jane Austen sequel, *Mr Darcy's Secret*. This is a stand-alone story so you do not need to read the novel but all the characters, Jane's and my own, can be found in that book, which tells the story of the newly married Darcys and Georgiana's very own romantic tale. In this story, Kitty Bennet has come to visit her sister, Elizabeth, at Pemberley House in Derbyshire. She's very excited at the thought of seeing the rector, Mr Lloyd, especially after their introduction the Christmas before when they danced together at the annual ball ...

Miss Kitty Bennet of Longbourn House in the county of Hertfordshire considered she must be the most fortunate girl in the world. Such excitement at the end of October was most unexpected, but as the fading sun burnished the leaves to gild them with gold, an invitation to visit her sister Elizabeth at Pemberley arrived. It was enough to send her into a spin of excitement, and although her mother's ecstatic effusions on the subject of Mr Lloyd's being behind the urgency of the matter gave her a moment of pleasure, she quickly dismissed such an unlikely event. Mr Lloyd was the rector of the parish at Pemberley, and Kitty had been introduced to him during the previous Christmas season.

'But, Mama, I only danced with him once,' said Kitty, trying very hard to sound calm. She did not want to betray the very real warmth of her feelings towards her favourite clergyman, whom she considered was not only a good-looking young man, but also a perfect dancer.

'My dear girl, in my day, one dance meant you were practically engaged!' said Mrs Bennet sucking in her cheeks, and pursing her lips as if she need say no more on the subject.

But Kitty knew her mother would not be silent for long.

'Now remember, Catherine, do not hold back this time or Eleanor Bradshaw will win the day as she did once before. I do not wish to scold you like other mothers do, and I wouldn't dream of telling you the best way to catch husbands, as some people who call themselves my friends are apt to instruct. However, I will say this. Young men will not dally unless they are encouraged.'

'Mama, how can you say such a thing?' Kitty was incensed by her mother's advice.

'Oh, poof and nonsense! If you idle by, and take your eye off the prize, you will be disappointed. Eleanor Bradshaw will be ensconced in Pemberley Rectory before Mr Lloyd has written his Christmas sermon, mark my words! How do you think your sisters got their husbands? Not by studying their feet, and the chalk lines on the floor, I can tell you.'

Kitty could hear the droning of her mother's voice, but had long practised the art of not listening to the actual words she was saying. She kept her silence as she looked out of the window, and only knew that despite the tirade, she was looking forward to leaving for

Derbyshire the very next day.

Autumn had arrived at Pemberley heralding clear, cool skies, with apple boughs drooping under the weight of crisp, red fruit tumbling into the mellow, decaying leaves, which lay in drifts of lemon, amber, and nut brown at the foot of the trees scattered in the orchard. Kitty gazed out of the carriage window at the parkland, and found she was craning her neck to watch for any signs of life as they neared the rectory next to the church on the side of the estate. The imposing house looked quiet and she'd quite given up hope when she saw him as they bowed past the garden walls. Dressed as he was for the outdoors, she almost didn't recognise him. A glimpse of Mr Lloyd between the flowerbeds revealed a young man toiling beside his gardener as if he did it every day! To her great astonishment Kitty saw him straighten and before she could prepare herself he was returning her gaze with a smile and a wave. Caught like a moment in a painting, the image stayed with her as they drove along. Dark brown hair swept back by the breeze from his smiling face, white shirt sleeves rolled up to display strong arms, and black breeches tucked into boots soiled from his labours, were combined in a picture making Kitty grin with pleasure, at least, before she scolded herself.

Kitty had been bent on a course of self-improvement ever since her last visit to Pemberley. Determined to shake off her reputation as silly and flighty, more than anything she was hoping to astound the inhabitants at the great house with what she considered were her improved new manners, and her sensible demeanour. Above everything else, she hoped to make a good impression on Mr Lloyd who had made an enormous impression on her.

This gentleman was soon forgotten, however, on seeing her sister Elizabeth and the new baby who'd arrived the month before. Swathed in ivory linen, his sweet face rosy with contentment, Kitty was soon begging to hold young Fitzwilliam in her arms. The gurgling baby was cooing delightfully when Mr Darcy came into the room to greet her warmly.

'Kitty, what a pleasure to see you again. How do you like your young nephew?'

'He is utterly adorable,' she replied, kissing the top of his head as the baby gripped her finger tightly.

'And he looks as if he's thinking quite the same about you,' said Mr. Darcy. 'It's clearly love at first sight. But, we know all about such matters at Pemberley; love is in the very structure of the building, and the very air we breathe!'

Kitty watched her brother-in-law as he gazed into the eyes of his wife with the expression of love she'd witnessed many times before. He turned towards her again. 'And now with my sister Georgiana happily engaged to Mr Butler, we have much to celebrate. The very air is redolent with romance.'

The smirk that played around his mouth convinced Kitty that he was teasing her, and she

wondered what on earth he meant by it or what he might say next. She was surprised for Mr Darcy was inclined to be serious, and she also knew that he had not at first been entirely happy with Georgiana's choice of partner.

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. 'Dare we ask what has brought on such effusions, Kitty? Mr Darcy has never spoken so eloquently on the subject of amour in his life before.'

Kitty giggled then, her resolve not to do so temporarily forgotten. It was very hard trying not to laugh out loud when she'd never before heard Mr Darcy being so amusing, and was sure he had no idea that he was actually being very funny. However, when he next spoke, she was soon brought back down to earth.

'I hope you do not mind, Kitty,' he continued, 'but apart from ourselves, Georgiana and Mr Butler, I have invited another guest to dine with us this evening. He is a young man you have met before; I believe you danced together at the Christmas ball. He has told me as such on more than one occasion. Indeed, I think he's mentioned the fact every time I see him.'

Kitty held her breath, and felt her face flush, which she knew had not escaped the attention of her sister and brother-in-law as they exchanged glances. Before Mr Darcy or her sister could speak again, the door opened. In flew Georgiana, her eyes bright, and her arms outstretched. Kitty thought what a contrast she now made compared to the shy girl she had been in the past. Finding Mr Butler and falling in love with him had clearly had a wonderful effect on her character and constitution. Kitty also knew what a difference it had made for Georgiana being back at Pemberley with her brother and with Elizabeth who had done much to bring her out of herself, as well as improve her confidence.

'I've been longing for you to return once more, Miss Bennet,' Georgiana cried. 'Has Fitzwilliam told you about our guest this evening?'

'Mr. Darcy was just telling me that someone was coming for dinner,' said Kitty, who couldn't decide how she felt about the prospect of Mr Lloyd arriving, and being seated near him at the dinner table. That the invitation had been issued to anyone else, she did not even consider.

'We are all looking forward to seeing him again,' said Georgiana, sitting down upon a velvet sofa. 'Do you remember Mr Bradshaw, Kitty?'

Eleanor Bradshaw's brother, thought Kitty. She did recall dancing with him. A pleasant gentleman with handsome, good looks was all she could remember. There had been no spark, no animation between them. Kitty did her best to arrange her face so as not to look disappointed. Had she given the impression that she liked William Bradshaw, she wondered.

'He is not our only guest ...' said Mr Darcy, pausing to look out of the window.

Kitty's heart leapt with anticipation at the idea that the other guest might possibly be the one she dreamed of, but her hopes were soon dashed.

'... His sister is also accompanying him.' Kitty instantly realised that Eleanor was bound to be coming with him.

And then Elizabeth spoke. 'You've forgotten Mr Lloyd.'

Kitty turned to regard her sister who, in turn, was looking at her husband in dismay.

'At least, I hope you haven't forgotten him, Fitzwilliam. Miss Bradshaw will be most distressed if you have.'

Her husband smiled. 'No, I've not forgotten, especially after recalling what happened at the assembly rooms ball in Lambton last month. Mr Lloyd and Miss Bradshaw both seemed very taken with one another. You think I do not observe such things, Elizabeth, but I did notice how particular he was in securing a dance or two. It would be a good match for her, I know. And her brother William is to inherit a sizeable estate of his own, Kitty. Do you remember Miss Bradshaw? She is a similar age to yourself, and a lively girl who loves to dance as you do. I'm certain you shall be firm friends.'

As Kitty smiled and nodded in the hope of convincing her brother-in-law that she was sincere, she was aware of the ache in her heart. So that was how things were settled. Miss Bradshaw and Mr Lloyd were virtually engaged and William Bradshaw was being drafted in to soften the blow. Not that anyone knew her true feelings for Mr Lloyd, though Kitty did wonder if Elizabeth had suspected her partiality for the rector. But, that couldn't be the case. After all, they had only danced together once, and exchanged glances across the church, and even then Kitty was now certain she'd read far too much into the way Mr Lloyd had held her hand and looked into her eyes. She put on her bravest smile.

'I'm sure I shall be great friends with the Bradshaws. How thoughtful to arrange such a lovely surprise on my arrival.'

Mr Darcy looked particularly pleased before he left saying he had to attend to some estate business, but was looking forward to seeing them all again in the evening. Elizabeth ordered tea, and the baby was taken for its afternoon nap. Kitty did her best to join in the conversation, answering all her sister's enquiries about the family, punctuated with news from Longbourn, trying not to feel a stab of envy as Georgiana chatted about plans for her wedding at Christmas. Soon the little party broke up with Elizabeth hurrying away to see Mrs Reynolds about the dinner, and Georgiana seeing to the matter of sending a carriage to Lambton to pick up Thomas Butler later on.

There were two whole hours before she needed to dress for dinner. Feeling a desperate need to get out into fresh air and sunshine, Kitty donned her sturdiest boots, and her warm pelisse before heading off. Crossing the formal garden, the wild landscape beyond seemed to call her to the woods and rocks high on the horizon, and the summit of Darcy's

Hall, the folly Elizabeth had commissioned Mr Butler to design for her husband on the Darcys' marriage. She'd only been up there once before, but remembered the spectacular walk, and the rewarding view from the top of the building. Following the ancient wall, jewelled with lichen, she could see the larch wood in the distance and the patchwork of fields sloping down to the chasms of the valley and the river below. Who could feel miserable in such surroundings? The exercise she loved and all her despondent thoughts seemed to magically disappear as she marched across the landscape and jumped over stiles. The tower of the stone folly stood like a fortress guarding Pemberley itself, and as she pushed open the heavy wooden door at the entrance, Kitty's heart began to race. Suddenly, she felt very alone as she mounted the spiral steps in darkness. After what felt like an age she reached the top, and sat down upon the bench placed specifically to take in the view across the blue hills ahead on the horizon.

Such beauty had to be drunk in slowly. Kitty watched the shadows made by the clouds sweep over silver grasses waving in the breeze, and admired the circle of beech trees on the crest of the hill from whence the wind came ruffling the coats of the sheep as they nibbled their way down the incline. Nestled in the valley close to the curving river, the golden stone houses of Lambton basked in the mellow, afternoon light. It was like finding earthly paradise, she thought, as feelings of pure happiness overwhelmed her.

Kitty remembered her sister saying, "What are men to rocks and mountains?" once upon a time, and she chuckled at the recollection. How could anything matter when surrounded by such sublime splendour? And she decided there and then, that even if she had to spend a whole evening in Mr Lloyd's company knowing he was in love with Eleanor Bradshaw, she would take it in her stride. After all, Elizabeth had at one time believed herself in love with someone else, and she'd married an entirely different gentleman. Could it be there was a fate waiting for her that as yet she knew nothing about?

Kitty was impressed with her stoical philosophy, even if she was aware that her brave thoughts didn't quite match her fluctuating feelings, and could only hope that she'd be able to convince her very soul by the time Mr Lloyd arrived. For it was one thing to instruct yourself not to blush in the presence of a man who induced the most alarming effects on one's complexion, but it was quite another when it came to the actual event. Oh, the treachery of one's bodily functions! She closed her eyes, and felt the sun on her face. Lady Catherine and her mother would scold her for not bringing a parasol, she knew, but they were not here to spoil her fun. As she felt the autumnal sun brightening her cheeks, she tried to banish the image of Mr Lloyd as he popped without warning into her head. But it was impossible to forget the expression on his face as he'd waved. He'd looked genuinely happy to see her, his dark eyes twinkling with creases in the corners made by that wide smile. She tried very hard to be sensible, dismissing all thoughts of his billowing white shirt, which like a carving by Michaelangelo had delineated every contour of his muscular torso. And, she told herself very firmly not to think about his shiny black boots or the long legs encased in breeches, which emerged as if growing from the leather sheaves leaving nothing to the imagination. No, Kitty was sure she could think of something or someone else, or at least, she could if she put her mind to it.

Lost in reverie, she came to when startled by a noise below. She sat up; her eyes open wide. Had she heard the scrape of the door? Straining, she became increasingly alarmed as the clip of footsteps were heard on the stone staircase. Kitty was frozen, unable to move. All at once, the very worst of thoughts came into her head. She'd heard Mr Darcy talk of poachers who stole onto his land looking for hares, pheasants, and all manner of animals they could kill to feed hungry mouths. He'd always seemed to have quite a relaxed attitude about them, never prosecuting those who trespassed, for he had a kind heart, and turned a blind eye in the hard days as winter approached. But to Kitty whose imagination knew no bounds, a brigand climbed ever higher, she was sure, with a knife between his teeth. The oncoming footfall was deafening to her ears, each step louder than the last. As Kitty opened her mouth to scream, she was shocked to see the curly head of one she knew very well emerge from the stairwell.

'Mr Lloyd!' she gasped with a shriek. Aware that she'd made an almost inhuman noise, she then proceeded to stand up before she sat down again, and knowing that her face was scarlet, all she could do was turn away in the hope that he would not notice.

'Miss Bennet, I heartily apologise,' the rector called, rushing to her side, and sitting next to her on the bench. 'It is my usual habit to call out as I approach, but I confess I did not see you, and was quite sure I must be alone. I do hope I did not alarm you.'

Kitty summoned up all her courage to turn. It was so very hard to look into his eyes, which fringed in dark lashes seemed to pierce a part of her soul she had never realised existed before. 'I was surprised ... I did not expect to see you.'

Stammering, she scolded herself for her stupidity before trying again. 'I didn't dream that anyone else would come up here this afternoon. I wanted a walk, and my feet seemed to direct my way. It is very beautiful up here.'

'It is indeed, and I understand you completely. I found myself at a loose end, and unable to have any influence over making the arrival of the dinner hour come sooner than it will, I decided my restlessness might be cured with a walk. My feet led me here also.'

Kitty laughed before she remembered that it was clearly Miss Bradshaw that Mr Lloyd could not wait to see. She spoke out before she realised what she'd said. 'I confess I was not wishing for time to pass any faster.'

'My admission has not pleased you, I can see, and yet, I hoped it would. It is a pleasure to see you again, Miss Bennet.'

Kitty looked in surprise and wondered if she'd heard him correctly, but of course, he was only being polite. She must not read any more into the warmth of his voice, its tone and expression. Knowing she must excuse her folly in speaking her thoughts aloud, she immediately spoke again. 'I am delighted to see you, Mr Lloyd, and it is wonderful to be at Pemberley with my sister and Mr Darcy. It is pure pleasure to see Miss Georgiana

again, and of course, I must not forget my delightful baby nephew who has stolen my heart forever.'

'I am sorry to hear that, Miss Bennet.'

Kitty didn't quite know what to make of her companion. 'I'm sorry, Mr Lloyd, forgive me, but I do not understand you.'

'I was rather hoping that your heart was intact, or at least, not wholly given over to another.'

Turning her head to look once more at his face, Kitty was startled by the earnestness of his expression, but deciding she must have misheard him knew she must change the subject if she were to stop imagining that Mr Lloyd seemed to be almost flirting with her. Besides, she'd been told he was courting Eleanor Bradshaw, blatantly making it plain to everyone that she was his heart's desire.

'It will be very pleasant to meet Miss Bradshaw again,' she said, waiting to see how he would answer.

'Yes, she is one of the sweetest girls I know. I imagine you and Miss Bradshaw would be the best of friends if you could spend more time with one another.'

Kitty did not think that would now ever be possible admitting to herself and her heart the very place Mr Lloyd occupied. He looked even more handsome than she remembered with the breeze stirring his curly hair. His evening clothes were formal but his dark coat seemed to make his eyes look blacker than ever.

'And when she is married,' he added, 'nothing would please me better than to know she has a friend in you.'

Trying to smile, Kitty acknowledged again the ferocity of the feelings that arose from the depths of her being. Never more would she come to Pemberley after they were married. That would be too much to bear even if she told herself not to be ridiculous for thinking she could ever have had a chance with Mr Lloyd. He clearly had been in love with Eleanor all along.

'There will be a wedding in the spring.'

Kitty's eyes spontaneously filled with tears. So it was true. To the last second she'd hoped there was a mistake. Willing herself to stop being so emotional, she blinked rapidly, but felt a solitary tear roll down her cheek. Thankfully, Mr Lloyd was looking into the distance, and she brushed away the moisture as if she'd been bothered by a flying insect passing by.

'It is wonderful when life turns out as it should, and when the secrets of our hearts reveal

themselves,' he went on. 'I think I always knew it would turn out this way, and I'm so happy.'

Unable to bear it a second longer, Kitty stood up to leave. Putting out her hand, she said, 'I do hope you and Miss Bradshaw will be very happy, Mr Lloyd. Please forgive me, but I must be going now if I am to be ready in time for dinner.'

How she was going to cope with seeing them together in the evening, she couldn't contemplate.

Mr Lloyd was on his feet in a second, putting out his arm to stop her. She couldn't believe he was laughing. 'Dear Miss Bennet, please forgive me. I have not explained myself. Please sit for a moment longer.'

Kitty returned to her seat reluctantly. Was it her imagination or did Mr Lloyd sit even closer? 'When I said there was to be a wedding in the spring, I did not mean I was to marry her myself. I hope to marry her to Mr Calladine.'

Kitty looked on askance. 'Miss Bradshaw is to marry Mr Calladine?'

Mr Lloyd nodded. 'They have declared their love for one another, and despite the fact that he did once believe himself to be in love with another, he's now recognised that Eleanor has only ever been his one true love. Miss Bradshaw may have no fortune, but he's finally realised at last that money is not everything.'

'But, I thought you were in love with Miss Bradshaw,' Kitty said before deciding whether it was wise to speak. 'Mr Darcy seemed to think you were courting her.'

'I have danced with Miss Bradshaw at the local assemblies, it is true, and only did so at the couple's request. They knew there would be much gossip after what had happened before, and a little diversion of the truth was only meant to protect the young lady who knew what others would make of the news. Mr Calladine is very sorry that he behaved so badly in the past, and I am assured that his character is transformed for the better.'

'I cannot think what they will all have to say at Pemberley,' said Kitty, hardly daring to recognise the thoughts that were surfacing. 'This news will be so unexpected.'

'And yet, I think they will recognise the truth that love holds the key, and we must follow our hearts. Do you not agree with me? Shouldn't we always believe in our feelings?'

'I agree wholeheartedly, Mr Lloyd,' Kitty murmured, knowing that she spoke from her heart. 'Our feelings tell us everything we need to know about the truth of love.'

Mr Lloyd took her hand and Kitty's heart skipped a beat. 'Miss Bennet, do you think Mr Darcy will be very shocked to hear the truth about you and me?'

Kitty hardly dared look up, and when she did found she couldn't answer. Mr Lloyd raised

her hand to his lips, and planted a kiss. 'There is truth in your looks; I see love in your expression. I sincerely hope I am not mistaken, but in any case, I can only declare my own thoughts and my sincerest love for you. In short, Miss Bennet, do you think you could ever love me enough to marry me?'

Darcy's Hall had witnessed one or two lovers' meetings before, and one might be forgiven for thinking it had been built for this purpose alone, but none seemed quite as sweet as the scene, which took place now. Kitty answered the question she'd always hoped might be asked with love in her heart, and as the pair strolled leisurely back towards Pemberley House, they looked forward to an evening which held the promise of joy, not to mention a few diverting moments, and a future filled with everlasting happiness.

Jane Odiwe

Mr Darcy's Secret

One dark secret can completely ruin a bright future...

After capturing the heart of the most eligible bachelor in England, Elizabeth Bennet believes her happiness is complete-until the day she unearths a stash of anonymous, passionate love letters that may be Darcy's, and she realizes just how little she knows about the guarded, mysterious man she married ...