

The Mysterious Affair at Longbourn

by Felicia Carparelli



Chapter 1

The day I received the cardboard box was the day that I knew I was going to embark upon an adventure, the likes of which I had never known. It started out an ordinary October day. The last warm breezes mingled with the fresh winds of autumn. I had come home from Lady Lucas' early, as I was nursing an end of summer headache. Summer blooms were fading into curling brown leaves and dried petals. The humid air was almost gone and a faint crispness lurked in the air.

The box had been tossed on the carelessly tended Longbourn lawn, the brown paper almost hidden by the browning leaves of a pink phlox. I carefully picked up the box, shook it gently, sniffed it, and looked at the writing on the paper. My name, Elizabeth Bennet, and our home was written in block letters on the box with no return information. If my acquaintance and sometime nemesis, Fitzwilliam Darcy, had been present he would have scoffed at the impropriety of my receiving such a box and then would have encouraged me to call the town magistrate. I am not a woman given to missish vapors, why would I follow such namby-pamby advice?

I opened the carved oak door to our brick home. The gentle breeze fanned the lace curtains out of the lead paned windows. My father's aging spaniel, Ajax, was sleeping peacefully on the cool tile floor. My father I knew was in his library, spending another happy day reading without the gushing interruptions of his four remaining marriageable daughters.

Ajax for once was moved to action. He jumped up, his paws on my white dimity gown and sniffed the box with interest.

“Ajax, down boy,” I said in amazement. I wondered if someone had sent me an almond raisin cake soaked in Port. I placed the box on the Sheraton hall table and went into the sitting room.

I untied the velvet ribbons to my chip straw bonnet adorned with cherries and went to the sideboard to pour myself a glass of wine. Madeira may not be the headache remedy of choice for delicate ladies of good birth, but it worked for me.

The house, mercifully silent for once, seemed stuffy. I opened the French doors to our irregularly tended garden and walked outside, holding my wine. Ajax barked and followed me. My dear father tends to forget Ajax’s canine needs, once he is ensconced in his library and happily reading. The spaniel sniffed, chased a rabbit and did his business. I inspected the waning zinnias, geraniums and the last roses of the near departed summer. I took a sip of wine and thought about the budding romance between my dear sister Jane and the tenant of Netherfield Hall, Charles Bingley.

Ajax barked and looked at me with big melting eyes. What are you waiting for, he seemed to be saying. He nimbly ran back into the house and sat in front of the hall table. We at Longbourn get a small amount of letters, especially from Aunt Gardiner, but packages were always picked up in town.

I shook the box again but nothing happened. No movement, no rattle, no sound. The box was carefully wrapped in brown paper and had been sealed with a most singular shade of red sealing wax placed most precisely at the corners. The postmark was not legible for the ink had smeared but I thought I detected a P and the letter M and immediately to my great chagrin thought of Mr. Darcy’s home at Pemberley. Why couldn’t I keep that odious man out of my thoughts?

I eyed the box belligerently. Ajax eyed me. I should get on with this deed before our housemaid came in and took note of the box to report to dear Mama. Was I afraid to open it? Me, who had danced with Mr. Green the one eyed Vicar’s nephew at the last assembly while he had admired me most prodigiously and sweatily? I was not.

I put the box on the sewing table and found a pair of scissors. I snipped off the wax at the corners of the package with firm, no-nonsense hands. Two layers of perfectly placed brown paper came off revealing a white box. No marks, no writing, no note. The box was packed full of something that seemed squishy but had no smell. I took the scissors and sliced open more red wax that sealed the box. Snip, snip, the box had been carefully sealed. Snip, snip again, I made it around the area of the box. Ajax stared at the box and then at me. Waiting. I know he had lapped up Mr. Collin’s rum punch at Christmas but I couldn’t smell any alcohol.

Well, this was it. I took a deep breath and gingerly lifted off the lid of the box then dropped it on the table. My word! What kind of hellish joke was this? Two perfectly formed human ears lay nestled upon mounds of white table salt. The room rocked for a split second and I grabbed the corner of the table for support. Was this a joke? Or a warning? Was this déjà vu or déjà voodoo?

The ears looked very real and there were traces of blood around the lobes and the outer rims. I was going to touch the flesh to see if it felt human but suddenly I lost my nerve. I felt a roaring in my own ears and suddenly I felt that I was losing contact with the floor.

“Miss Bennet! Miss Bennet!” are you all right? Several voices seemed to be speaking at once, the high pitched voice of our housemaid, the worried muted tones of my father and a voice that seemed both caring and imperious, the voice of the man I would least like to see me sprawled on the floor, my clothes in disarray, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,” I muttered to myself. I opened my eyes and look straight into the unfathomable and incredulous gaze of the man I loved to hate.

“Miss Bennet, can you hear me? Are you all right?” Mr. Darcy’s firm baritone demanded.

“What is she talking about?” I could hear my father saying.

“Oh, sir, should I send for the priest?” Nellie, our housemaid said, wringing her hands and crossing herself, betraying her origins from County Cork.

I was not quite ready for the last rites and wondered what Mr. Collins, our unctuous cousin and country parson would say to that. This thought made me giggle and I could see in Mr. Darcy’s concerned but curious gaze that he thought me quite mad.

“I’m fine, I’m feeling quite all right, please help me up,” I said.

“Are you sure you can stand? Can I send for the physician?” Mr. Darcy said, putting his hands under my elbows.

I felt a momentary lurch of my heart and took a deep breath.

“Never better,” I protested feebly. “No physician, just a little air, please.”

Without warning, Mr. Darcy’s immense strength and iron hands lifted me up off the floor and onto the soles of my kid leather half-boots. I gasped, clutched the sleeves of his superfine tailcoat, and attempted to speak rationally.

“The box! The ears!” I said, “Please, stop the dog!”

Only my dear nemesis would know exactly what I was talking about and would know exactly how to act. He left me holding the hand of Nellie for support while he quickly shooed the wildly snuffling dog away from the box on the floor, picked it up, looked at it swiftly and closed the cover.

My father had brought me a glass of ratafia to steady my nerves, I assumed. I took a small sip of the overly sweet cordial, shuddered, and began to cough.

“Would you like some fresh air, Miss Bennet?” Mr. Darcy asked, raising his dark brows a fraction of an inch in the direction of the garden.

“Why, yes, I believe I would,” I said as demurely as I could.

My father, aware that his parental responsibilities had been satisfactorily usurped by Mr. Darcy, faded away into the direction of his library. Nellie made a faint curtsy in our direction and disappeared into the back of the house. I took the firm hand of Mr. Darcy that was extended to me graciously and a bit preemptively and accompanied him out the French doors into the garden.

We walked a short distance without speaking. When we were far enough away from the house for secrecy he dropped my hand.

“I trust that you are feeling better by now?”

I let out a sigh. “I think so, yes, I am better.”

His mouth formed a whisper of a smile. “Are you sure?” He still held the offending box in one hand and when I glanced at it, he grimaced.

“What was sent to you, Miss Bennet? It looked like a piece of pork.”

“You didn’t see?” I asked faintly.

“No, before I shooed Ajax away that was all I saw. I slammed the box shut because of your father and the servants.”

“Oh, I see,” I said. “I suppose you’d better take a look,” I said stoutly with a bravado I didn’t feel.

He placed the box on top of an empty flower urn and opened the lid.

“Good God! Do you have any idea who sent these to you?”

“I have no idea,” I protested, “none at all. It’s quite horrifying.” I took a deep breath. “Are those real?”

“You mean are they wax like the work of Mme. Tussaud?”

“They could be wax,” I said hopefully, “couldn’t they?”

Darcy manfully lowered his face to the box, sniffed, shook the salt and then took his little finger and prodded the lobe of the first ear and then the other.

I shuddered again and squeezed my eyes closed.

“Are they?”

“I believe you may be right, Miss Bennet. These ears do seem to be made of wax or clay.”

My hands grasped the small gold cross that hung on a fine chain around my neck and I began to pray. What a bizarre joke!

“Miss Bennet, Elizabeth, please open your eyes and look at me,” he commanded in a low voice.

My eyes flew open. I was stunned at his coaxing tone and equally stunned by his use of my Christian name. He had never quite talked to me like this before. Of course, I had never received a pair of ears in the post before.

“Are you sure you’re quite all right?”

“I’m not going to faint again, if that’s what you mean,” I said tartly. “I’m not as weak as all that.”

“I never thought for one moment that you were weak,” he said again with that maddening whisper of a smile. “But this is a shock for a young lady, joke or not.”

I sank down into a rattan garden chair and fanned myself with my one of Kitty’s bonnets, carelessly left outside as usual.

“I am shocked,” I said carefully, “but it is also a bit exciting, isn’t it? Nothing really interesting happens to us around here.”

Soon I would take back all those words with a vengeance.

