

*The
Deception at Lyme*

OR, THE PERIL OF PERSUASION



A Mr. & Mrs. Darcy Mystery

Carrie Bebris



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

The report of the accident had spread among the workmen and boatmen about the Cobb, and many were collected near them, to be useful if wanted, at any rate, to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report.

—*Persuasion*



“We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days.”

—Mrs. Croft, *Persuasion*

Prologue

*The Cobb itself, its old wonders and new improvements
... are what the stranger's eye will seek.*

—Persuasion

On the southern coast of England, near the town of Lyme Regis, an ancient seawall rises from the water.

Like a great openmouthed serpent, its head reaches into the sea, its jaw acts as a quay, its body curves round to form a harbor, its tail stretches to the shore. Known as “the Cobb” for reasons lost to time, this man-made barrier more than half a millennium old is but a youthful newcomer to a wild, unstable coast where prehistoric creatures once dwelled.

Were it not for the Cobb, there would be no harbor, and were it not for the harbor, there would be no Lyme, for the rugged shoreline the seawall faces offers no natural protected anchorage. The construction of the wall proved the making of the town, their fates and fortunes entwined. From simple medieval beginnings, the Cobb, the harbor, and the village together evolved into a thriving port worthy of royal notice.

In this haven, ships were built and launched, trading vessels unloaded exotic wares, sailors returning from distant lands found welcome, and visitors invested hope and fortunes in the alleged restorative

powers of seabathing—all sheltered by a mighty stone guardian from the caprice of the sea and the violence of Mother Nature.

In the summer of 1815, however, even the Cobb could not safeguard Lyme from the tempests of human nature.

One

After securing accommodations, and ordering a dinner at one of the inns, the next thing to be done was unquestionably to walk directly down to the sea.

—Persuasion

Elizabeth Bennet Darcy had yet to glimpse the Cobb as she negotiated one of the steep cobblestone streets that wended through Lyme's cliffside dwellings and shops. The close buildings obscured her view of the renowned seawall and harbor some half-mile distant from the town itself. Yet even had the breakwater been within sight, her gaze coveted a still more remarkable spectacle: the sea itself. In all her three-and-twenty years, she had never before laid eyes upon the sea, and the narrow glimpses she managed to catch between buildings as her small party walked down to the shoreline only whetted her impatience to behold it unobstructed.

At last they reached the end of Broad Street, where a promontory opened up a commanding prospect, and she stopped to absorb the sight. She could see not only the harbor, but also miles beyond. The sun traced its descent toward the horizon, its rays diffused by clouds into muted green and yellow light that slid across the dark water rolling toward the beach.

"Is it as you imagined?"

Had her husband not stood directly beside her, his question

might have gone unheard. The wind blowing across Lyme Bay tugged insistently at her bonnet, the ribbons beneath her chin straining to prevent its taking flight.

“I could not possibly have imagined this.” Though she had seen depictions of the sea, no canvas could capture its magnitude, nor the latent power she could feel even from their elevated vantage point. Tall-masted ships moored in the harbor, their mighty hulls dwarfing the smaller fishing boats bobbing round them with the incoming tide. Still more great vessels anchored beyond the seawall, majestic silhouettes against the horizon.

She turned to Darcy. “Thank you for indulging my eagerness to walk down to the sea tonight. You and your sister have visited the coast on enough previous occasions that it cannot hold for you the novelty it does for me.”

“I have never visited this part of the coast before. And I believe my appreciation of the sea is the greater for viewing it this time with you.”

“Despite my having drawn you and Georgiana out of our lodgings nearly the moment we arrived in Lyme?”

“The more so, because you did.” Darcy smiled. “I believe you are even more keen to experience the sea than is Lily-Anne.”

Elizabeth had felt a touch of guilt upon leaving their young daughter with her nurse while the adults walked to the shore. Their family had been speaking with such anticipation about this holiday that although Lily-Anne’s vocabulary was limited, “sea” had been among her most-used words for the past fortnight. The journey to Lyme, however, had tested the eighteen-month-old’s temper beyond endurance. She would enjoy her first sight of the sea in the morning, after the proper night’s rest for which her nurse was now settling her down.

Georgiana clamped a hand upon her hat. “Lily-Anne would have been carried off by one of these gusts of wind. Do you think it will rain?”

Darcy glanced at the sky. “Not tonight. However, more clouds are forming, and sunset is not long off. We should continue to the beach so that we can see it and return to our lodgings before full dark.”

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As they descended steps down to the square, another gust swept the cliff, catching hold of Elizabeth's wide-brimmed straw bonnet. "If I do not adjust my hat, the wind will carry *me* off," she said.

An inn, the Lion, stood not far up the street, with a narrow passage between it and its neighbor that would provide shelter from the wind. They walked to the building, and Elizabeth entered the alley while Darcy and Georgiana waited at its entrance.

She removed her gloves and tried to untie the bonnet. The wind, unfortunately, had strained the ribbons so taut against her jaw that now, though the ties had slackened in the sheltered space, they formed a knot so tight that she struggled to work it free. She glanced at Darcy and Georgiana, thinking to summon one of them for assistance. They, however, had become engaged in conversation with a couple she did not recognize. The lady appeared of an age similar to Georgiana's; the gentleman, about a decade older. The animated manner with which Darcy's sister spoke with the lady suggested the familiarity of previous acquaintance.

Electing not to interrupt, Elizabeth continued her solitary struggle. As she tried to coax the knot, she became aware that Darcy and Georgiana's conversation was not the only one taking place near her. Voices drifted through an open window of the inn.

"Do not deny it—I saw you leave the Sheet Anchor with one of them, and later walking on the Cobb with the other." The voice was a woman's: sharp, high-pitched. "You told me you had done with them."

"I have not seen either of them in I know not how long." This voice was male. Cultured. Condescending. "I was not aware they were in Lyme until we happened to meet today."

"Do not insult me with your lies; I know you better than anyone. And were that not enough, I have talked to each of them myself. You never stopped. All this time, I thought the business had ended. But you have been carrying on behind my back."

Elizabeth tugged harder at the ribbons. Uncomfortable with the accidental eavesdropping, she wanted to secure her hat and move along as quickly as possible.

"My affairs are none of your concern."

"*Your* affairs? Those affairs never would have begun had I not

been so foolish as to introduce you. We came here to meet them, did we not? You allowed me to believe we were on holiday, when all along you were planning these rendezvous.”

“Of what have you to complain? You *are* on holiday,” responded the man, who Elizabeth presumed was the woman’s husband. “You spend my money as if you were.”

“Your money! And where is mine? Where is my share of what they have received all these years?”

“Do I not provide for you? You are wearing your share. You dine on your share. You drive about town in your share, patronize half the shops in London with your share. So long as you live under my protection, whom I meet and why is *my* business.”

“Your business—and *you*—can go to the devil.”

“Madam, at times I believe myself already in his company.”

There followed an expletive which Elizabeth had never before heard uttered, let alone by a woman. She edged away from the window to distance herself from the scene of marital discord.

“What of the promise you made me?” the wife continued, her shrill voice rising to a volume Elizabeth could not escape despite the increased distance. “Did you ever intend to keep it?”

“In time.”

“You have run out of time.”

“Not quite yet. I suggest you keep that fact in mind.”

“Depend upon it, I have.”

A brief silence followed. Elizabeth hesitated to take another step, lest her retreat be heard and her presence realized.

“I have friends in Lyme, you know.” The wife’s voice was calm, steadier.

The man issued a low, scornful chuckle. “No doubt you do. Half the navy is ashore. Though in your current state, you hardly present an enticing object.”

“Certain individuals might be very interested in learning what I know. I am not the only person *your* affairs have betrayed.”

“You are hardly guiltless yourself. Unless you are an utter fool, you will keep your mouth shut.”

The next sound was that of a door opening.

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“Where are you going?” the man said.

“Out.”

Though Elizabeth had failed to free her knotted ribbons, she hastened to rejoin her party. An accidental witness to the domestic drama, she had no desire to meet its actors.

Georgiana and Darcy were alone once more; the couple with whom they had been speaking were now a good twenty yards up the street, slowly negotiating the steep incline.

“You just missed my friend Miss Ashford,” Georgiana said. “What a delightful surprise! I had no idea of her being in Lyme. She is here with her brother, who comes regularly. In fact, he likes it so well that he leases a house here throughout the year. They arrived a se’nnight ago. They were just come from a promenade on the Cobb, which they highly recommend. Sir Laurence said the view from the top is very fine. They have gone every afternoon, and invited me to join them tomorrow.”

Elizabeth took Georgiana’s arm and continued walking, hoping to move their party along. “I am glad you have found friends here. Are they Derbyshire acquaintances?” She could not recall having heard the name before.

“No—their family home is in Somerset. I know Miss Ashford from London; she and I have studied with the same harp master since we were girls. I met her eldest brother once about three years ago, but this is the first time I have seen him since he inherited the baronetcy from his father. He is Sir Laurence now. That makes him sound older than merely ‘Mr. Ashford,’ do you not think? Yet he is not too old—” She turned to her brother. “I believe about the same age as you, Fitzwilliam. I did not realize until today that you know each other.”

“We have met occasionally at White’s,” Darcy said.

Georgiana, noting the unaltered state of Elizabeth’s bonnet, offered her assistance, but Elizabeth declined.

“It can wait. I am impatient to reach the waterfront.” She glanced over her shoulder toward the inn’s entrance, but saw no one who answered her mind’s image of the couple she had overheard.

In but a few steps more they passed the Assembly Rooms and arrived at the beach. From here they could see the Cobb half a mile

southwest. Small boats bobbed in the harbor created by the semicircular breakwater, which extended at least a thousand feet from mouth to shore. The seawall met land near a cluster of buildings their landlady had referred to as Cobb Hamlet. Separated from Lyme proper by an undeveloped cliff prone to landslips, the harbor and hamlet were linked to Lyme by an elevated promenade known as the Walk, which ran parallel to a cart road that skirted the beach.

Elizabeth, Darcy, and Georgiana ambled along the Walk, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of the sea. Dusk approached, and waterfront activity both on and offshore was winding down. Vendors packed up their wares; sailors finished unloading goods from recently docked ships; horses pulled the last of the carts toward the Customs House for clearance. Four bathing machines, having long since completed their service for the day, were parked on the beach out of reach of the lapping tide.

A set of steps led from the Walk down to the cart road and the beach itself. The rising tide brought the water quite close, and Darcy asked whether Elizabeth would like to go down and dip her hand in the seawater breaking onto shore. She responded enthusiastically.

At the base of the stair, a young gentleman who had been about to ascend moved aside to grant them clear passage. Even in the fading light, his features evinced considerable time spent at sea. The sun had tanned his skin to a rich hue and bleached to pale gold the long hair tied back beneath his hat. The result was not unfavorable; in fact, he possessed a mien of health and vigor superior to most of the other sailors they had passed as they walked through Lyme. He nodded politely at Elizabeth and Darcy as they reached the bottom step—a civility they returned—but when his gaze shifted behind them to acknowledge Georgiana, a spark entered his blue eyes, and an expression of patent admiration overtook his countenance.

Elizabeth turned to regard her sister-in-law. A well-favored, graceful girl even in ordinary moments, Georgiana at present appeared altogether fetching. The wind that had played such havoc with Elizabeth's bonnet had brightened Georgiana's eyes and loosened tendrils of honey-blond hair that fluttered becomingly around cheeks pinkened by the persistent sea breeze—or perhaps by consciousness

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of being the object of so admiring a look. No one could be insensible of such attention from a handsome gentleman, certainly not a young lady of nineteen.

And certainly not her brother.

Darcy glanced from the sailor to Georgiana, and saw his sister through the stranger's eyes—the eyes of a man. A man who was not her brother, not her protector, but a warm-blooded buck who could not help but respond to the sight of a beautiful woman. Worse—a man turned onshore after months at sea entirely deprived of women's company. Decent women's company, anyway.

Though there had been nothing improper in the sailor's expression or manner, his interest put Darcy on guard. It reminded him all too vividly of the last time he and Georgiana had been at the seaside, and the evil she had so narrowly escaped. Darcy had thwarted the designs of one fortune hunter, but scavengers of Mr. Wickham's breed flocked in watering-places like gulls.

Before Darcy could offer his hand to assist Georgiana's descent, the stranger offered his own. She accepted his aid, placing her hand in his. She negotiated the stairs without incident, but as she stepped onto the beach—her attention entirely upon him, to the neglect of her own feet—a small mound of shingle shifted beneath her, throwing her out of balance.

The gentleman quickly caught her, preventing a fall. Darcy stepped forward to help steady Georgiana, relieving the sailor of any need—or excuse—for further contact with his sister. Georgiana took Darcy's arm, but required it for only a moment. She had regained her equilibrium. Her composure, however, was not so easily recovered. She cast her gaze about, fleetingly meeting the stranger's, then shifting it to look at anything but the man's countenance.

His face reflected amusement. Hers was in high color. She stammered a few halting words of gratitude, by all appearances directed at the wall behind him. The edges of his mouth upturned to a half-smile.

He tipped his hat—"Your servant, miss"—and continued on his way.

Though she had refused to meet his eyes, Georgiana watched his back as he nimbly cleared the stairs and hastened along the Walk.

“He thinks me a careless featherbrain.”

Darcy, too, observed the retreat of the man who had found his sister’s discomposure charming. “The opinion of a common sailor you will never again set eyes upon should cause you no distress.”

“He is not a common sailor. From his manner and dress, he is a gentleman. I wager he is a naval officer, as Gerard was.”

Indeed, there were enough ships in the harbor that the stranger could well be an officer on one of the small naval vessels, if not the master of a merchantman. Darcy doubted, however, that the man could ever wear a uniform as proudly as their late cousin had worn his the last time Darcy and Georgiana saw him. A newly commissioned lieutenant of the Royal Navy, Gerard Fitzwilliam had died three years ago in action aboard the *Magna Carta*.

“Even if that fellow is an officer, neither dress nor stripes make a man a gentleman,” Darcy said. “Put him from your mind.”

They strolled along the beach a little way, but the sun soon dropped so low that the filtered light faded quickly. The wind picked up, and the temperature, which had dropped decidedly since they began their walk, caused both Georgiana and Elizabeth to shudder. Electing to postpone the pleasure of their first promenade on the Cobb itself until the morrow, they headed back toward their lodgings.

Darcy looked at the sky once more. Clouds obscured the young moon. Perhaps a storm was gathering after all.