

## Regrets

By Joseph P. Garland

There was a girl, as I daresay there often is," he told his cousin as they sat in the library that was the late Sir William's. The house was now their aunt's. It sat majestically in the Kent countryside.

The two had just finished dinner at the aunt's table and, most particularly, with the aunt's daughter. The aunt had a name, and it was Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her daughter was Anne. The two gentlemen had arrived from London some hours earlier, and the talk immediately after they were alone and settled into their fat leather armchairs, each with a fine claret, turned into what was clearly the wish of their aunt. That Darcy marry Anne de Bourgh.

"Tell me about this girl," the Colonel said. Darcy rose and filled his glass, lifting the decanter to his friend, who declined. He came back and resumed his seat, taking a long draught of the wine when he did before lowering his glass and holding its stem between his fingers above his lap.

"My friend Charles Bingley—who you've met in town—was renting an estate in a quiet part of Hertfordshire. As is the custom in such country parts, a fuss was made about a local ball commemorating some event or another. It would have been churlish for him not to attend and so he did, bringing not only his sisters but me as well."

He took a slight sip of his drink before placing the glass on a table beside his chair.

"You know my view of the country."

"Yes, Darcy, I've heard you say one moves in a very confined and unvarying society in a country neighbourhood. Other than, of course, around Pemberley."

"True enough," Darcy said with the sort of smile he reserved for his closest friends, of whom his cousin was among, "I may have said some such thing a time or two."

"The girl, Darcy. Tell me of this girl you mention."

"Word had reached us that there were some few women and girls of some accomplishment and much beauty and so I went to the country ball with great expectations as to who would be there."

"Even if they were just country girls."

"I was willing to be convinced."

"You, Darcy? Willing to table your prejudices on that front? I should have liked to have accompanied you."

Darcy ignored this slight.

"Charles and I rolled up with his sisters and his brother-in-law and, of course, much was made of our appearance. It was like some country livestock auction with mothers pressing their daughters to the front of the crowd and I was half-tempted to check the teeth on some of them as we passed."

"You are incorrigible but I must know about this evasive girl."

"Ah, the girl. She was, in fairness, far more a woman. She was there with her four sisters and introductions were made and, my god, how her mother was the very epitome of an ill-raised country mother."

"Who cares about the mother? "

"So there were five of them, daughters I mean. The oldest was very pretty, I will say that, but she lacked any sort of spirit or depth, though my friend found her enchanting."

"But you did not."

"It will take more than a pretty face to tempt me."

"But this other one, I'm guessing that she did tempt you."

"She was the second daughter. The other three were truly girls of no consequence. Two of them flitted about like children and and the other plainly made it obvious that she was miserable at being there."

He lifted his glass, took a sip, and restored it to his fingers, turning it this way and that without conscious thought.

"At first I found her tolerable and not handsome, though she'd been labeled a beauty."

Though his glass was half empty, he rose to fill it. When he put the decanter back and its stopper in, he turned to his cousin.

“Things got very peculiar after the ball. Charles’s sisters invited the girl’s older sister—and just her older sister—to their house for a visit when Charles was out but the sister got sick from being caught in the rain and as a matter of kindness the sisters—Charles’s sisters—allowed her to stay until she was well enough to travel back to her own home. The sister, the one I’m referring to—”

“The one you won’t get to.”

“Indeed, the one I haven’t gotten to. She appeared a day later, having walked the three miles from their home through the muck and the mud to see how her sister fared.”

“She didn’t have a carriage to carry her?”

“She was...strange. I spent a fair amount of time with her over the ensuing days. And like a fool I didn’t fully understand it, though I was impressed by her devotion to her sister.”

“Her name, Darcy? What is her name?”

“Didn’t I say? Elizabeth. Elizabeth Bennet.”

Darcy returned to his chair, cradling his wine.

“Over time, given what I took to be Charles’s infatuation with the eldest Miss Bennet, I found myself in the presence of Miss Elizabeth with some frequency. I confess I was not as discreet as I might have been, though I daresay she never suspected a thing as to my fascination with her. With observation, I began to find her face was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes.”

“You are now a romantic, Darcy? I hardly know you.”

“Indeed, I hardly know, or knew, myself. She was not in the least fashionable in her manners but had an easy playfulness one would never encounter in town.”

“Especially by a single woman in want of a large fortune.”

“Quite so. Especially not. She was completely lacking in perfection in any particular, but I now realise that she came together quite well. Her looks alone were light and pleasing.”

“And the rest of her?”

“That is the worst part. Light and pleasing as she was in appearance, she was...intriguing in herself and I think had I given

her a chance I would have found it very pleasing, if not light. I think I should have very much enjoyed going for walks with her and simply sitting of an evening with her nearby."

"Did you not pursue her? She was a gentleman's daughter, was she not?"

"She was. There were some difficulties in that regard, though. He had five daughters and no sons, and his estate was entailed."

"To whom?"

"To, much to my regret, a distant cousin."

"Regret?"

"The daughters had to marry well. I understand now why their mother was so intent on that, more so than most mothers, I think. Were the father to die, they'd all be left in poverty were none of them to marry well."

"Not unlike me, being a second son and needing himself to marry well for just that reason."

"The way of the world, Richard. The way of our world, at least. And I'm afraid that's where that distant cousin comes in. He is, in fact, Mr. Collins."

"Mr. Collins'? The parson?"

"The very same. The one given a living in Hunsford by Lady Catherine."

"So, he will inherit the Bennet estate?"

"He will inherit the Bennet estate. And at Lady Catherine's suggestion, he traveled to that estate some months ago and not long after I myself was introduced to the Bennet family. His specific intent was to find one of the daughters to marry."

"Him? He is such a stupid fellow."

"He is, but he has somehow earned the favour of Lady Catherine. In any case, he went to Longbourn—that's the Bennet estate—and proposed to Miss Elizabeth Bennet and she said yes."

"But if she was as you say, why would she accept him?"

"Because what choice *did* she have? When her father dies, she will become mistress of Longbourn and be able to protect her mother and those of her sisters who remain at home."

"If she is Mrs. Collins, I assume I will meet her presently."

"Yes. Lady Catherine mentioned to me that they would be invited to dinner several times while we are here."

"And this is what brought back memories of her?"

"I'm afraid I cannot say that. It takes nothing to bring back thoughts of that woman. She has long tortured me. Even in my sleep. I've long compared her to the women I meet, those who thrust themselves at me."

"Like Bingley's sister?"

"Especially like Bingley's sister. And none of them was or is or, I'm afraid, ever could be her equal. In beauty or any other womanly trait."

"So, are you resigned to marrying our cousin Anne?"

"And joining Lady Catherine's estate with Pemberley? It is what is expected and having lost the one opportunity to truly be content by my pride and refusal to see beyond her family."

"Your prejudices have done you in, then, as I always feared they would."

"And I was too proud to do what I now regret more than I daresay anything in my life. Not giving her the slightest encouragement about my growing feelings towards her."

"And her sister? The beautiful one?"

"It is not my proudest moment and perhaps was beneath me but I convinced Charles that there was not the slightest hint of true affection on the side of the Miss Bennet and that she'd likely forgotten him before he'd reached town upon leaving the country house he leased and so nothing more was done about it or with her. I do not know what became of her and I'm sure that given her family—"

"Other than Miss Elizabeth."

"Indeed other than Miss Elizabeth, he is well rid of her and perhaps even regrets leasing that estate so near Longbourn since it led to this unrequited infatuation. But that's all I can say on that."

Darcy was again up, though without his glass.

"Damn, Richard, had I only rejected my first instincts with that woman and allowed the truer feelings I had for her to grow, I

know I could have convinced her to have me. And now I am all anxiousness about the thought of seeing her, of being in the same room with her after these years."

With that, Fitzwilliam Darcy turned on his heel and abandoned his cousin to fend for himself when the Colonel was called into the drawing room to make conversation with his aunt and the cousin, Anne, who seemed destined to become Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy, the mistress of Pemberley.

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Not a mile from the events just recited, the object of the gentlemen's conversation was herself ill at ease. Her husband had given her the fine news that they were invited to Rosings Hall for dinner the next day and that they were to be graced to be in the company of Lady Catherine's nephew Fitzwilliam Darcy—who Mr. Collins had met at Meryton while he was seeking (quite successfully in his view at least) a wife—and a separate nephew who was a Colonel who neither Collins had met.

His wife was strangely affected by this news. She'd not thought of Mr. Darcy very much or very deeply since those days long ago when they crossed paths when Darcy's friend leased Netherfield. Indeed, the whole lot of them vanished and Bingley gave up the lease on the place with barely a by-your-leave and Elizabeth's older sister Jane was still prone to moments of regret for that disappearance. Their uncle, Mr. Gardiner, had managed to find a husband for the beautiful Jane and she already had a little boy from the union and was living in Cheapside, London but she confessed to at times wonder what would have happened had Charles Bingley not gone to town and not come back.

As was her custom when she felt deep emotions, Elizabeth decided to write to Jane. Her only other friend in the world was Charlotte Sebel, as was Charlotte Lucas, but Charlotte was not a woman to whom Elizabeth could divulge the deepness of her heart, much as she was a great friend.

Mr. Collins had suggested he read something to his wife while she did needlepoint, as was their usual way of spending an evening, but Elizabeth deferred, saying she wished to write to her sister. Her husband accepted this and sat in the front parlour with one of his books and was contentedly reading as Elizabeth extracted some stationery and pens from the desk that sat in the corner. She sat down to write to her sister.

*Dearest Jane,*

*I hope you and the baby and your dear husband are well. I confess to you that I do not know if I am.*

*I've just received the most startling news. Do not worry, it is of no significance except, perhaps, to my heart which I find is rumbling in a manner I have not known it to for many, many years.*

*Mr. Collins advised me with some excitement while we were at dinner that Lady Catherine has two visitors and that we are to be honoured to dine with them tomorrow at Rosings Park. I will not long tease you. The two are Fitzwilliam Darcy and his cousin, an unknown colonel who is related in some manner to both Darcy and Lady Catherine.*

*You'll recall that Darcy is Lady Catherine's nephew and, according to what Mr. Collins said upon delivering the news to me, he is destined to marry Lady Catherine's daughter. That is Anne de Bourgh, of whom I have made reference as a small, rather sickly creature of great financial worth and, so far as I can make out on the evenings I have been with her at Rosings House or when she has deigned to stop while passing the Parsonage, little else.*

*But Mr. Darcy.*

*He was such a disagreeable man when I met him—as you and everyone else agreed—that I at least was pleased when he disappeared from Netherfield and Meryton while Mr. Collins was “courting” me. I am sorry to bring up what I know is a difficult period for you, but I fear I must explain the difficult period through which I am going through.*

*You see, the mention of Mr. Darcy's name and the prospect of again seeing him has roused something in me that I did not know existed, or at least that I did not know existed since I have become a married woman.*

*Oh Jane. I must take care as Mr. Collins is not ten feet from me as I write this, reading some sermon or another, but I cannot but tell you that the time apart from Mr. Darcy and the time not given to a thought of him has allowed the fermentation of something truly womanly and I fear what might become of me the moment we are together, when we are introduced and I must feign complete indifference which is, I fear, the exact opposite of what I will feel.*

*I know this is insanity. I know nothing can come of it. I know so many things but I cannot but know my heart.*

*I write in the hope that this fever may break between now and when I curtsy to him and he bows to me. I know he is completely indifferent to my existence. He never indicated by word or deed the slightest interest in me as other than a curiosity. Of being a country girl with something of an independent streak. Of some attractiveness but not nearly enough to tempt him.*

*I so wish you were here with me again. That we could walk along the paths around the Parsonage and talk in the manner we did as children, though the subject will be that of women.*

*My only hope, dear Jane, is that the reality of Mr. Darcy proves far less than my imaginary Mr. Darcy has become. Yes, I am sure that is the case. He was an unattractive man when I met him—save for his looks and his money!—and I am sure he still is. He was indifferent to me then as I am certain he is indifferent to me now. I should not be the least concerned that whatever ember once was present in my heart has long since gone.*

*It is only that I fear that to the contrary it has been smoldering and smoldering and that it will burst into flames the moment it meets the oxygen of the presence of Fitzwilliam Darcy.*

*As what happens will have long since happened when you read this, I am not sending this letter to you. I do not know what I will be able to say in twenty-four hours' time. I do not know if I*



*will be able to say anything. But I am afraid, Jane. I am afraid in a way that I have never before known.*

*Love,  
Elizabeth*

“Are you finished my dear?” Mr. Collins asked when he saw his wife blow on the page to help dry the ink. “I hope you sent my regards to your sister.”

“Of course, my dear, I have done. As I always do.”

Mr. Collins rose, and Elizabeth lifted the pages to shake them dry and he could not see them.

“Very good, my dear,” her husband said, as he came to her. “I am tired—perhaps from all the excitement about tomorrow—and am retiring. I wish you good night.”

He gave his wife a kiss on the cheek before carrying his Sermons in one hand and a candle in the other to retire to his bedchamber.

Elizabeth Collins looked at the letter. It had served its purpose. There was a small fire in the grate. She placed the pages on top and watched as they crinkled away and then opened the window slightly to allow the smoke to vanish into the Hunsford night.