

Becoming Elizabeth Darcy

A
Pride and Prejudice
Variation

Joseph P. Garland



DermodyHouse.com

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The Cover:

Mrs. Klapp (Anna Milnor) (1814), by Thomas Sully
(American, 1783-1872)

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/72375/mrs-klapp-anna-milnor>

From the Institute:

Over the course of his 70-year career, Thomas Sully painted more than two thousand portraits, including Dr. Joseph Klapp (1950.1363) and Mrs. Klapp (Anna Milnor). Sully's portrayal of Philadelphian Anna Milnor Klapp features her

Empire-style dress and stand-up collar with flourishing brushstrokes of silver, gray, and white. The fluted, monumental column in the background underscores the period taste for elegance and classical traditions. The companion portrait depicts Joseph Klapp in contemplation, emphasizing his study of medicine. Together, the portraits present an image of a sophisticated couple that celebrates their prosperity, intelligence, and taste.

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Prologue

It rained, although not heavily, on the afternoon of the Tuesday when Mrs. William Collins left Meryton in Hertfordshire to live at Hunsford in Kent. The newly-married Mr. and Mrs. hurried to the cover of the second-best of Lady Catherine de Bourgh's carriages, which she'd most graciously sent to collect her clergyman and the cousin he'd selected as his bride.

Elizabeth Collins—Elizabeth Bennet as was—had yet to see the Parsonage where she was soon to live nor the grand house that hovered near it. In some ways, though she'd not set eyes on either, from her new husband's descriptions she almost thought she had long resided in one and close to the other.

Elizabeth did not regret her decision to marry this stranger though she knew him to be stupid and vain in about equal portions. What she did regret was its necessity. Her first reaction to his proposal was shock and surprise and, of course, rejection. But her mother took her own appeal to her father and much as he thought Mr. Collins a fool, his own failure to have provided for his daughters when he could have allowed him to be convinced that he must look to another to care for his beloved Lizzy and that Mr. Collins was as good as any man for that and was, to be sure, the only one to have appeared and asked to take her on.

"An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth," Mr. Bennet said, when he was alone with her in his library while Mr. Collins was pacing not far from Mrs. Bennet and under the watchful eyes of all four of Elizabeth's sisters, near the shrubbery that bordered the garden to the front of the house wondering how he could improve what he considered to be a fine offer already, "for you may never have such an opportunity again and seeing as you are a clever girl—not nearly so silly as your sisters—and he is not a clever man, I believe you can make a fine life for yourself with some significant measure of security by accepting him."

"Oh, papa."

"I have long been pressed on by our reality. We cannot know if the recent attentions paid to Jane will be anything put a passing

breeze but I will sleep better knowing that Longbourn will remain in my family when I am gone, and I hope knowing that will allow you to sleep better.”

“Then you say I must accept him?”

“Lizzy, I do not know that you have a choice.”

She stood and saw Mr. Collins and her mother speaking on the graveled walk, Mrs. Bennet the far more animated of the two.

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth. I truly am,” her father told her from his chair.

“I understand, papa.” She laughed with an effort. “I shall have him tend to the garden he speaks so highly of and tend I imagine to his patroness and her daughter most of the time and be free of him and them to enjoy my books and my correspondence and perhaps”—and she touched her belly—“I will have a little boy to spoil.”

With that she was through the door. Now on a lightly raining day nearly a month later, she was heading to that garden and that patroness and her daughter and she was very, very frightened.

As they rode south, she permitted him to clasp her hand while he extolled and re-extolled the wonders that awaited her. The house. The grounds. The widow. The daughter. The chimneys and the staircases.

* * * *

In the ensuing months, Mrs. Collins did not come to share her husband’s enthusiasm for some of these things—who could have?—and in fact reached a starkly different view, particularly as to the widow and the daughter. It was a blessing, then, that she spent relatively little time seeing either de Bourgh. Mr. and Mrs. Collins were invited to the House but rarely. Miss de Bourgh occasionally stopped when she passed the Parsonage on the way to or from Hunsford but never accepted an invitation to enter the house or to leave her phaeton, even to explore the Parsonage’s fine garden.

Mrs. Collins was, however, successful in encouraging her husband’s enthusiasm for tending to that fine garden. It extended

along the northern side of the Parsonage and had a mix of flowers and vegetables. In part, her husband's labour allowed her to enjoy the solitude inside the house, of the small room on the first floor that was dedicated to her own use, with a fireplace, desk, and several comfortable chairs that allowed her to look out over that garden while she read novels (at her own insistence and notwithstanding her husband's disapproval) or wrote letters.

She read widely and wrote often, having little else to do beyond her regular circuit among the parishioners, and it was a great disappointment if more than three or four days passed without receiving correspondence. She was most dedicated and intimate with her older sister Jane and her best friend Charlotte. Jane was chiefly at her aunt and uncle's house in the Cheapside portion of London, and Charlotte was married to Thomas Sebel, a good man and respected lawyer who had a small house in a town just ten miles east of Meryton.

Elizabeth wrote, too, to her father, though he was irregular in his own correspondence to her. In her letters to him, she made sure to include some bit of information for her sweet mother, which would allow her to spread it liberally among the neighbourhood of Longbourn and Meryton.

Poor Jane, though, the eldest (and prettiest and sweetest) of the five sisters, had yet to find the person with whom she could be happy. It was something of a blessing that Elizabeth had married Mr. Collins. That provided some level of security for the family and allowed Jane to be more particular about the one to whom she extended her affections. Yet again and again in her visits to her aunt and uncle in London, Jane Bennet found none with whom she believed she could be comfortable and Elizabeth, alone among the Bennets, understood that Jane had known such a man and that he was lost to her forever, gone back to town with little likelihood of ever returning just days after Elizabeth's engagement. Jane, it seemed, preferred the life of a spinster loving and caring for her cousins—the four Gardiner children—and perhaps the nieces and nephews that her sisters would produce, would be enough for her.

Alas, Elizabeth had yet produced either of such offspring, a regret not particularly softened by her husband's insistence that it was God's way and not aided by Lady Catherine's insistence that it must be her fault that they'd failed to produce even a single baby Collins.

Chapter 1. Colonel Fitzwilliam's Return from the War

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam could not be more pleased as he hopped from a hackney cab on Brook Street in the Mayfair section of London, just blocks from Hyde Park. He leapt up three steps to the shiny ebony door and pulled the bell of the house. It was the house of his great friend and cousin, Fitzwilliam Darcy. He, the Colonel, had been released briefly from his regiment after it returned from an extended stay on the Iberian Peninsula. He did not know for how long he would remain in England and was determined to make the most of it before he was again called upon to serve King and Country.

It was always a chancy thing, but his great hope was that he would find a woman of some fortune—forty- or fifty-thousand would do quite nicely—and a sweet enough disposition. And then he could retire happily and become a true gentleman, like his brother (the presumptive next earl) and, of course, like Darcy.

The door was quickly opened, and he was quickly being directed by the long-familiar Bradley, Darcy's butler, into the fine sitting room with its view to the street.

He was not there long, and his friend was embracing him and, in a moment, had separated himself from the officer—who was resplendent in his reds—and eyed him from head to toe before smiling.

"I see you are none the worse for wear, Fitzwilliam," said the host, to which his guest retorted with a "In contrast to you, Darcy, who has become frightfully old in my absence and, I will say, frightfully fat enjoying the protection of His Majesty's Army."

"Indeed," Darcy said. "And let us not forget the Royal Navy."

"I suppose they are entitled to some if minor thanks for Trafalgar."

"You are too generous," Darcy replied as he stepped to a small table along the wall. There he lifted a decanter of claret and poured a fair portion of its contents into a pair of Irish crystal

glasses and, after returning the container to the table, brought the glasses and gave one to the Colonel.

“To the King,” he said as he lifted his glass just as Fitzwilliam was lifting his.

“To the King,” was echoed, and the men each took a long drink from his glass and Darcy again lifted his. When Fitzwilliam had done the same, Darcy said, “And to God for seeing to the safe return of my precious cousin.”

“To your most precious *male* cousin, I should think,” said Fitzwilliam, which was echoed this time by Darcy, and they drank once more.

The final toast was to “our dear cousin Anne,” and they each drained their glasses and restored them, empty, to the table.

“Have you become engaged to her, Darcy?” Fitzwilliam asked.

“I expect it will happen soon enough. Perhaps I will do so when we go down to Rosings later this month,” Darcy said, “that being the primary reason for our going there instead of to Pemberley this year.”

“I will say, Darcy, much as I believe Pemberley vastly superior to Lady Catherine’s estate, it is so much more distant from town.”

“Indeed, and it always does well for us to visit our aunt.”

“Though,” Fitzwilliam said, “more important for a penniless second son than for you, my dear cousin.”

Chapter 2. Mr. Darcy's Regrets

“There was a girl, as I daresay there often is,” Fitzwilliam Darcy told his cousin later that month. The cousins were sitting very comfortably in the library that had been the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh’s. The house had in fact passed to their cousin Anne de Bourgh (though it was universally acknowledged as being Lady Catherine’s). It sat majestically in the Kentish countryside.

The two had just finished dinner at the aunt’s table and, most particularly, with the aunt’s daughter. That aunt was Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and her daughter was Miss Anne de Bourgh. The two gentlemen were now alone and settled into their fat leather armchairs, each with a fine claret, and their talk turned into what was clearly the wish of their aunt. That Darcy marry Anne de Bourgh.

“Tell me about this girl,” the Colonel said as the pair were enjoying Lady Catherine’s—in spirit Sir Lewis’s—superb wine. Darcy rose and refilled his glass, lifting the decanter to his friend, who declined. He came back and resumed his seat, taking a long draught of the wine 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 one, “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. I was never, in fact, properly introduced to her but—” He took a quiet sip—“she was, in fairness, far more a woman. She was there with her four sisters and, my god, how her mother was the very epitome of an ill-raised country mother. Daughter of a country lawyer, I believe.”

“Who cares about the mother? “

“Indeed. 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, one about Gorgiana’s age I think, flitted about like children and the other seemed to accept participating in the amusement as some type of obligation.”

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

“At first I found the one of whom I speak tolerable and not handsome, though she’d been labeled a beauty.”

Though his glass was still half full, 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—Bingley’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 her, 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 growing 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 near 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. You could have a colonel’s commission purchased for you. 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 first encountered 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 after some hesitation apparently 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.”

“Now I see. 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?”

Darcy took a sip, a larger sip, of his claret. “I’m afraid I cannot say that. For months it has taken very little, sometimes nothing at all, 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 Caroline Bingley. And none of them was or is or, I’m afraid, ever could be her equal. In beauty or any other womanly trait.”

“This Miss Elizabeth now being Mrs. Collins, I gather that you are resigned to marrying our cousin Anne.”

“And joining the de Bourgh 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. I believe I am so resigned.”

“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. They are quite inappropriate. 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, his glass left on a side table.

"Damn, Richard, had I only rejected my first instincts with that woman and the idiotic abhorrence I had to her family and her circumstances and allowed the truer, more honest 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 this time."

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 soon become Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy, the mistress of Pemberley.

Chapter 3. Mrs. Collins's Regret

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.

Mrs. Collins was strangely affected by this news. She'd not thought, at least was aware of thinking, of Mr. Darcy much or deeply since those days long ago when they crossed paths when Darcy's great friend Charles Bingley leased Netherfield. Indeed, the whole lot of them vanished and that friend 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 melancholia, she wrote, for that disappearance.

Mr. Collins 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 Jane. 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, the light of a single candle being sufficient and appropriate for the intimacy she felt.

Dearest Jane,

I hope you are well. I confess to you that I do not know if I am.

I have just received the most startling news. Do not worry, it is of no significance except, perhaps, to my heart which I find is rumbling and trembling in a manner I have not known it to for so long.

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 help 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 her words.

“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 Fordyce 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.

Chapter 4. Elizabeth Is Interrupted on her Walk

It rained heavily in the early hours of the next morning. When Mrs. Collins looked out into the lane from her bedchamber, the opening in the pales that led to Rosings was hardly visible in the fog. It was going to be a very uncomfortable day with the thick air, but she could not remain indoors.

Sitting down in the breakfast parlour with her husband, she saw how anxious he too was. It was more that she heard it. He continued speaking nearly without taking a breath about how excited he was (“my dear”) for the upcoming trip to the great house and how excited he was (“my dear”) to be seeing Mr. Darcy after having met him in Meryton and how excited he was (“my dear”) to witness the two “lovers” enchant one another.

By the time breakfast was done, the sun had burnt off most of the fog and was breaking through what was left of the clouds, Elizabeth suggested that she would like to go for a turn around the grounds.

“I think it might be rather warm, my dear,” her husband observed, but she said she was quite determined and that she would not strain herself and he was content to sit in his small library with some of the sermons he was of a mind to reread or once it was full day to venture into the garden.

She went out, lightly dressed in a small bonnet, and onto the grounds where she expected she could walk undisturbed for upwards of an hour.

Her preference was to keep far from the house so as not to interfere, though she knew that neither Lady Catherine nor Miss de Bourgh ever strayed far on foot. This left her tremendous privacy and solitude, which she often found lonely being without Jane or Charlotte Lucas (now Mrs. Sebel, a lawyer’s wife) from Meryton.

On this solo walk, her mind was full, and her stomach was anxious about the trip to the great house in under eight hours’ time. The sun was getting high and the air warm. She would soon need to return to the Parsonage. As she turned a corner into a

brief shaded copse, she found herself approaching, or being approached by, a gentleman in a plainly agitated state, gesturing randomly and looking at the ground not five feet ahead of him and no farther.

The pair were within twenty feet of one another when he sensed that he was not alone. For her, so abrupt was his appearance that it was impossible to avoid his sight. Their eyes instantly met, and the cheeks of each were overspread with the deepest blush.

Each recognized the other in a moment. They exchanged the formalities of a bow (his) and a curtsy (hers). He spoke first.

“Miss Eliz...Mrs. Collins. I regret interrupting your solitude.”

“So, you recall me then,” Mrs. Collins responded, perhaps sounding more cynical than she intended.

He reddened further but was at a complete loss for words until without saying anything at all, he recollected himself, and with a bow took leave and was gone.

Mrs. Collins watched him disappear around the corner whence he'd come. *How did he recollect such slight passing encounters we'd had so long before?*, she thought. *Lady Catherine must have mentioned that her vicar and his wife were coming to dinner that night and perhaps he recalled that that wife was the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet.*

But as hearing Mr. Darcy's name mentioned by her husband had triggered some deep memories and deeper emotions in Mrs. William Collins, could it have happened to him? And she prayed that this was not so. As she stood there watching where Mr. Darcy had vanished, all amuddle.

There was a small bench near to where she'd stopped, which she reached as she slowly began her walk back to the Parsonage. It was not truly a bench but had been the remains of a fallen tree that had been fashioned so it served as a seat. They were sprinkled about Rosings Park, and this one had a view out across a large expanse of lawn to the great house. And as she made herself as comfortable as she could make herself under the

circumstances, she saw well on the other side of that lawn a rapidly moving figure heading with determination to the house.

Chapter 5. An Awkward Evening

“Oh, Mrs. Collins,” the hostess said as Mr. and Mrs. Collins entered the large drawing room of Rosings Hall that evening, “you must be properly introduced to my nephews.”

Stepping forward from the left side of her ladyship were two gentlemen. One, of course, was Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. The other, Mrs. Collins soon learned, was Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.

“I have had the honour of meeting Mrs. Collins only last year, when she was still Elizabeth Bennet,” Darcy said over his shoulder to his aunt, as he and the Colonel bowed, and Mr. and Mrs. Collins reciprocated.

“Darcy. You never told me that. But I suppose there’s much you keep from your aunt.”

“My dear aunt,” Darcy returned, slowly releasing his eyes from the guest, whom he’d encountered some hours earlier. “I do not ‘keep’ things from you, as you suggest. It is simply that I do not wish to trouble you with the trifles of my life.”

“Oh, Darcy, do not be so unsociable. You know that all your affairs, and those of your dear cousin, are utmost among my concerns and interests.”

She turned to Elizabeth. “This is especially true, Mrs. Collins, as he is destined to marry my daughter.”

“So, I am led to understand,” Elizabeth said as she and her husband moved to sit on a settee to Lady Catherine’s right, beside Miss de Bourgh and Mrs. Jenkinson (a sort of minder for the daughter). Darcy and the Colonel mirrored this, settling to the Lady’s left.

And the evening progressed well enough. Lady Catherine’s attentions were acutely on her nephews. She expressed scant regard for anyone else in the room then or later when they all sat for dinner.

Lady Catherine had, early on, learned that Elizabeth played with some moderate skill on the pianoforte—an instrument on which she claimed she would have been proficient had she only

had the opportunity to apply herself—though she'd never been able to discover her parson's wife to have any other particular or noteworthy talent. On this evening, she instructed Mrs. Collins to perform for the others.

And she played her Mozart passably enough in a corner away from the others and was largely ignored by them except for those moments when she happened to notice Darcy looking in her direction. When she struggled with the sheets of music, Lady Catherine instructed Mr. Collins, "Oh, go help your wife turn the pages," but before that good man could place his dessert plate down, Darcy was up and with an "I will do it" he took four or five strides and was beside her, helping organize the papers.

"Thank you, sir," Elizabeth said, and he nodded and stayed slightly to the side to prepare for the next turning. When she finished a short piece, he told her how pleasantly she played. This she disputed by saying that in truth she played with more spirit than technique to which he insisted, "it is perhaps more enjoyable for that."

"You are being too kind, sir," she replied, "but I do thank you for your compliment and assistance."

She smiled as she collected the sheets of music. "But I think you must return to your aunt's audience." She nodded to the group sitting on either side of Lady Catherine just as that good woman called, "Thank you, Mrs. Collins."

Darcy bowed and turned towards the others and Elizabeth noticed his shoulders slumping as he reached them and resumed his seat near Miss Anne, by which point Lady Catherine was well into saying something to Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Elizabeth kept her eyes on Darcy. *Oh, how uncomfortable yet natural you look*, she thought as she herself rose to join her husband, hanging onto each and every word of her ladyship's pronouncements, and to be ignored by her for the balance of the evening.

Chapter 6. Darcy's Disappearance

Unlike the day before, the following morning broke clear and warm. The Collinses were somewhat groggy from the prior evening, though Lady Catherine had a carriage bring them home, as they sat for their breakfast as usual. Their quiet, though, was interrupted by the sound of horses passing on the lane, heading from the great house to Hunsford. They were not going particularly fast but did not slow as they passed the Parsonage. Mr. Collins rose to watch.

"It is the two gentlemen, the two nephews," he called over his shoulder to his wife, who immediately rose to join him at the window, but only in time to see the rears of the riders and the animals disappear to the right.

"I wonder why they leave so early," she said. "They made no mention of them going so soon."

"Indeed, they did not, my dear, indeed, they did not."

The couple returned to their chairs to finish the meal, and as they did, Mr. Collins said, "it is truly a mystery and I suppose we must be patient to learn the reason if it is a sudden change in what was planned."

For her part, Elizabeth was completely at a loss.

"Perhaps they are simply running some errand in town and will shortly return."

"I am sure you are right, my dear. But I saw full saddle bags. Perhaps it is as you say and, in any case, there is nothing for you or me to do about it, even if their affairs were of any matter to us."

"Which they are not."

"Yes, my dear. Which they are not."

With that, the two resumed another typical day for a Kentish clergyman and his wife.

Chapter 7. Anne de Bourgh Writes a Letter

Several weeks after Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam departed so hastily from Rosings Park, the Colonel received a letter. It brought unfortunate tidings for the officer, which he promptly shared with his cousin.

“I must be off to America, my friend,” he said.

“Surely the skirmishing there will soon be over, will it not?”

“Well, Darcy, I hope that it shall but nevertheless His Majesty has directed that I and the rest of my regiment sail in under thirty days. I daresay it won’t last long once we somewhat hardened regulars arrive and at least we won’t be going at Bonaparte. But arrive we must and, therefore, I must leave you and my hopes for a quiet and peaceful retirement. At least for now.”

“Well,” Darcy said, largely recovered from the shock of the news, “it is too far to Pemberley, and I think it best in any event that we return to Rosings Park.”

“If you have been able to cure the hasty departure not long ago, though I am still unsure of the reason for that bit.”

“I have apologized to our aunt and our cousin and explained that my return to town could not have been delayed for a moment.”

“It is well that they never learned the true nature of your emergency.”

“And I believe they never need to, as you well understand.”

“Darcy, as always, I am at your disposal, but I agree that it will do us both well to return there before my compelled absence from England.”

“It is the fate of an officer in His Majesty’s Army.”

“It is, indeed.”

“I will write soon and advise Lady Catherine that we will, subject to her invitation, be arriving in three days’ time.”

“And what of cousin Anne?”

“I cannot now say. I do not think we have a choice but to travel to Kent.”

And agreement having been reached, a letter was dispatched to Rosings Park and the two began preparing to accept Lady Catherine's certain invitation.

The invitation in fact came the day before they planned on departing. But it was not what they expected. It was from Anne. After reading it, he passed it to the Colonel.

Rosings Park

My Dear Cousins,

We are pleased to have heard of your returning so soon after you were forced to abandon us, though we regret the circumstances that compel it. We are particularly excited about seeing our cousin before he departs for America.

We are, of course, pleased that you wish to return. My mother has, however, charged me with conveying to you both an item of loss that, I assure you, should not alter or hamper your visit but that, she believes, you should be made aware of so that certain trappings do not come as a surprise to you when you arrive.

It is that our clergyman, Mr. Collins, is dead. You met him on your prior visit. His death was accidental and a shock as well, involving a fall, tragically, at the House while he was running some sort of errand. It appears—so we have been told by the footman who found the poor man beyond recovery at the bottom of one of the House's staircases—that he was returning to the main floor after having collected a volume from one of the rooms on an upper one while my mother and I were out and was startled by our unexpected return. He appears to have rushed to greet us and hurried more than he should have and tripped on a bump in the carpet at the very top of the flight.

A yard or a foot or so either side would not have sent him down but, alas for the poor man, his foot found the one spot that led to his horrible plunge. I am to understand that the unfortunate footman who discovered him was reacting to the

poor parson's scream as it echoed up the stairs and about the foyer.

The House, of course, has entered a period of mourning, which will extend for the period while you are here. I suggest that you arrange for the sending of appropriate garments for your visit and accept that certain of the activities you likely expected to partake in will not be possible.

In any case, we will be quite happy to see both of you again and we will only regret the brevity of your visit. Since Mr. Collins is to be placed in his final resting place in the church's graveyard on Thursday, we think it best that you delay your arrival until Saturday next.

I can assure you both that my enthusiasm in this regard, however tempered by the sad news I am compelled to convey to you, is shared by my dear mother.

*I remain your dear cousin,
etc.*

(Miss) Anne de Bourgh

When he was done, the Colonel handed it over to Darcy, who'd been watching carefully for this cousin's reaction to it.

"Well," Fitzwilliam said, "it is quite a sad story, though I will admit never to have taken much of a liking for the man. He seemed, I'm afraid, rather stupid and obsequious."

"Indeed," Darcy agreed. "But do you not think it an omen?"

The Colonel was surprised. "Darcy you are virtually engaged to our cousin. It is what was always expected. You cannot mean—?"

"I do not know what I mean. I only know that I do not have time to determine what I mean."

Darcy stood. He stepped to the window and looked out. His cousin stared at his back, leaving it to Darcy to say whatever it was he wanted to say. After some moments, with the only sound being from the horses and people on Brook Street, Darcy turned. "I am very glad you have come, Fitzwilliam. But I think I will need your help in determining what I mean."

“You? Asking for my help? My, that is a change. Darcy, though. You know I have no more experience with matters of the heart than you do. I know of dalliances. I know of...other types of meetings. But love? I shall only know it if it comes with fifty-thousand. I’ve not the luxury of you have of falling in love where my heart decides it will fall in love and I am certainly not the one to have any opinion of the woman who you are surely suggesting is the least bit relevant. Who was married to the parson.”

“Elizabeth Collins.”

“Yes, the one you had such regrets about. I do remember that, you see. I will tell you now as your friend and your cousin that your fate is and has long been tied to Anne and I think it a grave mistake for you to upset the apple cart for some imaginary attraction to some recent widow who is still suffering and will in any case be long in mourning.

“You are getting no younger, my friend. You best put this ‘omen,’ as you call it, right from your head and instead confirm your commitment to marry Anne and be done with it. She will be more than adequate to become the mistress of Pemberley and though frail I daresay she will do well in the task of getting you an heir.”

Darcy resumed his seat.

“You are right, of course. It was well, however, for me to hear it from someone I trust. Yes, I will express my condolences to the widow if she is still there and shall make my attentions as to Anne clear to Lady Catherine and that will be the end of it.

“Yes, I am very happy for your words of wisdom, my friend. Very happy.”

Chapter 8. Darcy Goes to Rosings

The funeral for the late Rev. William Collins was a simple affair. He had no immediate family other than his wife and, in a sense, his parishioners. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were there as were all of Elizabeth's sisters but Mary, who was too far away to travel. Kitty and Lydia rode up from Colonel Forster's house, in which they were guests, in Brighton. Jane traveled down with the Gardiners. All but the Gardiners and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet squeezed into the Parsonage, the others taking rooms at the fine inn in Hunsford.

Lady Catherine and Miss Anne, of course, were at the service, sitting in the front pew across the coffin from Elizabeth and her parents and eldest sister.

A vicar from a neighboring parish performed the service in the church and in the churchyard. And then it was done. The earthly remains of the Right Reverend William Collins were safely in the ground and covered in dirt in the area reserved for those who had served as parsons for the parish, dating back well over a century. While there was a spot for the vicar's widow when she reached the inevitable fate of all humans, as she looked at that bit of Kentish property, Mrs. Collins doubted that she would ever be laid to rest there.

All of Elizabeth's family were gone the next morning excepting Jane. She would remain until it was time for Elizabeth herself to go. And they took a stroll that very afternoon. It was overcast as the pair entered the Park and with few words strolled with their arms interlaced until they'd completed a circle that brought them back to the Parsonage. And after some light refreshments, Elizabeth retired to her room briefly and rose again some hours later as the light began to fade, and her sister sat beside the bed keeping watch.