Incumbrance of Mystery

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

A murderer is loose in Hertfordshire.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

The girl lay on a pile of red-gold leaves. Her arm was flung backward, the fingers loosely curled, her lashes dark against a pale, frightened face. As the wind blew through the trees, another leaf drifted down, resting in her tumbled dark hair.

The Bennet sisters had taken to walking as a group, whenever they left the house. Even Lydia did not dare wander beyond the environs of Longbourn alone, not in these times. Elizabeth was the first to set eyes on the girl.

A scream rose in her throat but just as quickly she quelled it. Her first thought was of her sisters; she could only use her slender form to hide the sight from them. Jane was only a step behind her, the others had not quite rounded the corner.

"Gracious God!" cried Jane. To know of Mary King and Fanny Goulding was one thing; to see this murdered stranger, a girl with expensive clothes and a ruby glowing at her throat -- a girl of perhaps Lydia's age -- was quite another.

"They must not see -- Papa, they must get Papa," Elizabeth said, her thoughts rushing almost faster than she could catch them. "Lydia! Take the others, go to Longbourn, tell them . . . tell Papa that . . . tell him to come here."

Even Lydia knew what was meant; even Lydia hastened to obey. Elizabeth looked at the straight Grecian nose, large eyes, the high ashen cheek; the features were too strong for the delicate girlish
face, but someday, had she lived, she would have been a beauty.

Elizabeth had not cried over Miss King and Fanny, whom she had known; she had wished to, she had held Jane when she wept; but this girl was not one of them. She did not belong here. It had been merely ill-fortune to happen across a murderer's path. Tears rose to her eyes. Elizabeth thanked the Lord every night for preserving her sisters. Whose sister, she thought, had this girl been?

There was something familiar in the lines of her face, the long, slim fingers now stiffened into this last gesture. Elizabeth dropped her eyes to the white arms marred by blue and black marks. The constable had said that the others had been taken by surprise, that there had been no pain. This girl, with bruises running up and down her arm, someone’s blood beneath her broken nails, she had fought back.

Jane gasped again, for different reason. "Mr Bingley!"

"Miss Bennet? Miss Elizabeth? You are here, alone?" Then his eyes landed on the girl, on blood seeping through the fashionable white gown, and all colour drained from his face, a small cry came from his throat, and unheeded tears fell down his cheeks.

Neither knew what to do, or say. "Mr Bingley, perhaps . . . Do you know her? Who should we tell?"

He stared at Elizabeth a moment. Then, somehow, his amiable features altered; the first hint of real steadiness, resolve, that she had ever seen in him.

"He cannot see this," he said decidedly. "I can't let him --"

But it was too late. Mr Darcy was not far behind his friend. Elizabeth had not seen him since that terrible day at Hunsford, though she had known he was at Netherfield, and feared meeting him; but she would have rather seen him in any other circumstances than this; had she watched him sleeping in his own chambers she could not have felt it a greater invasion of his privacy.

In her entire life, Elizabeth did not think she had ever seen anything so terrible as Mr Darcy's face when he laid eyes on his sister's corpse.

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**Georgiana!**

Elizabeth sat upright in her bed. It had been nothing dramatic, no contortions of the features that were so like hers, no tears or tremblings. His sister’s name came out in little above a whisper, when he knelt beside her it was a slow, deliberate movement. She would have rather faced the humiliation of seeing him again, knowing him to be thinking of how silly and credulous she was, any humiliation at all, then *this*, when he did not register her presence at all.

If she had accepted him, he would not have been at Netherfield, and his sister would not have come to see him, and she would not have been killed. Elizabeth shuddered.

It was irrational to blame herself for a decision that, at the time, had been perfectly right. She had believed Darcy to be the worst of men. Now — now, she could see the qualities that had drawn her to him almost from the first. That was not love, but it was *something*, it could have been liking, if circumstances had been different — might it have been enough? If she had not been so ridiculously vain?

She was not to blame. It was not her fault.
The hoarse whisper, betraying an anguish that at the height of her hatred she would never have wished on him, echoed over and over in her head.

Georgiana!

And in her worst nightmares, it shifted, until the hair darkened, the features shifted, and the grief-stricken voice was her own.

Jane!

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“I am sorry,” said Elizabeth listlessly. She suppressed a shudder as she looked at the silent pianoforte. Mary usually began practising about now.

“Lizzy, what were you thinking?” Jane cried. “Do you have any idea how worried we all were? I thought Papa had grown ten years older.”

She set down her cup of tea. “There is no need to tell me, I have already had a very thorough lecture from Mr Darcy.”

Jane looked up, opened her mouth, then shut again. “I can easily imagine it.”

You should not be so careless, he had said harshly. If you do not have consideration for your own life, you might at least think of what your family would feel, should anything happen to you.

Yet you are here, she pointed out, and regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth.

Perhaps you have failed to notice that I have no family left to mourn me, he replied, in a cold, proud voice. Elizabeth flinched, and for the first time allowed him to silence her, flayed by what seemed far worse carelessness than her walk.

“That was very kind of him,” Jane murmured. “He might have caught a chill.” Both glanced at the rain pouring down. He had declined Mr Bennet’s offer of a carriage and walked back to Netherfield.

“I do not think he cares whether he lives or dies,” Elizabeth said, “never mind a trifling cold.”

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The magistrate looked frustrated. “Then it must be something else. There must be a connection. If the motive for this terrible affair could be discovered --”

Darcy had been little more than a silent presence at the other discussions, unmoving, never opening his lips, his icy grey eyes as often fixed on the window as not. Elizabeth had yet to see any of the animation she recalled from before, the young man who had smiled, and bantered, and sometimes blushed -- now there was neither interest nor disdain, nothing at all until this moment. He frowned, his brows drawing together.

“He’s insane, he must be,” Mr Goulding cried. “Who knows why insane people do things? Why do you sit here and talk and talk and not go out and find this monster?”

The magistrate ignored her. “The connection is not in the names, then; it must be --”

Darcy interrupted him, startling everyone. “What if there is no connection at all?”
Mr Goulding, his eyes still swollen with tears, said, “My dear sir, there must be something -- why else would he choose these poor girls?”

Darcy shrugged, and did not speak again except to ask for a pen and paper. His eyes, though, darted from person to person, and occasionally he wrote something down.

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The next day, Sarah rushed into the room she shared with Jane. “Oh miss, did you hear?’’

Elizabeth stared. “Did I hear what?’’

“They’re saying that somebody else was attacked, ma’am, last evening at Netherfield.’’

Jane froze, one hand going to her breast. “Did . . . did you hear who it was?’’

“Twasn’t Mr Bingley, as they’re saying he’s so upset they daren’t leave him be. Oh! Molly, did you hear -- ’’

“It’s Mr Darcy, he was shot, and then he hit him with the poker -- oh, you should have seen the blood!’’ she gasped, and ran out.

Jane sat down heavily. “Oh no. Why -- why would anyone kill him? We were so sure it was only ladies, why should he change now?’’

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “Because, last night, Mr Darcy thought of something, and everybody saw it.’’

“He only said that there might not be a connection between the people that were killed. But there must have been, surely?’’

“I don’t know. Oh, what was on that paper?’’

“If he hit the murderer with something, he must not have been killed,’’ Jane said hopefully. “Perhaps he will wake up and tell us.’’

“Perhaps,’’ said Elizabeth. I must find that paper, she thought.

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It seemed wrong to see him like this, pale, frail, a bandage wrapped around his head. Only Darcy could exert such a force of personality while unconscious, and very probably dying.

Elizabeth prayed she would not be caught. His papers, thank God, were neatly organised. Just as she laid fingers on the crumpled fragment, she heard a low murmur and whirled. Darcy’s eyelids fluttered several times, until he managed to look at her.

“E . . . liz . . . beth?’’

She dropped the paper and ran to his side, grasping his thin hand as tightly as she could. “Sir, you must tell me who did this to you. Who was it?’’

Darcy was clearly struggling to stay awake. He managed to say faintly, “Don’t -- know -- didn’t see -- face.’’

Her mind instantly went to the next possibility. “What did you discover? Before you were attacked, you said something, you asked if there wasn’t a connection -- what did you mean?’’
“Only one, the others aren’t -- just -- mud -- water,” he said, and his eyes closed as he fell unconscious once more.

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“It seems I owe you my life,” Darcy said, only limping slightly. He insisted the other wound was only a scratch, the consequence of his head striking the fender as he fell. He also insisted that the money he had paid in bribes to see the murderer immediately hung was only a trifle.

“It seems that every woman in Hertfordshire owes you her life,” she replied, taking a firmer grasp on his arm.

“Hardly -- I cannot think anyone else could have guessed from what little I managed to say.” A sprig of rosemary fell from his free hand to the foot of Georgiana’s grave.

“It was enough.”

They stood silent, surrounded by all of Darcy’s ill-fated siblings, until the moment was interrupted by Sarah.

“Mrs Darcy! How could you think of standing out in this weather with only a shawl? The doctor says -- ” She blushed at Elizabeth’s smile and turned to Darcy. “You oughn’t be out in this cold either, sir, the doctor says --”

They laughed together, and the couple -- he with his hand at her waist, she holding his arm as tightly as she could -- walked to Pemberley together.

End Notes

The (cracktastic!) solution is in the comments.

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