Pemberley House

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

One sister married a wealthy aristocrat, one a gentleman of comfortable means, one a former officer in the military. Years later, the daughter of the last is sent to live with her wealthy aunt and uncle.
Chapter 1

About eighteen years ago, Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn, with only one thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, in the county of Derbyshire, and to be raised to the rank of a great lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. All Meryton exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least nineteen thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it.

Only two of her sisters, out of four, benefited by the elevation, as Miss Bennet and Miss Lydia were respectively engaged and married by the time that they might have gained any prospects by the connection. Miss Bennet's match, indeed, was a remarkably good one, for while Mr Bingley possessed no estate, his inheritance amounted to some four thousand pounds a year. But Miss Lydia married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a lieutenant in the militia, without fortune or connections, did it very thoroughly.

The succeeding years passed as might be expected. The Bingleys removed to an estate some thirty miles from Pemberley, and settled into a quietly genteel existence of hunting and fishing, charity and children. The Darcys, handsome, clever, and rich, wanted for nothing; their income multiplied, their family expanded at convenient intervals, and they had all the pleasure of the occasional blazing row amidst general domestic tranquillity.

Such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Catherine and Miss Mary nearly as handsome as Miss Elizabeth did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage. But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them. Miss Catherine, at the end of half a dozen years, found herself obliged to be attached to the Reverend Mr Stanley, a relation of her brother-in-law. Mr Darcy had given him an income in the living of Pemberley, and Mr and Mrs Stanley began their career of conjugal felicity on very little less than a thousand a year. Miss Mary, with nothing better in sight, married John Jones, a clerk employed by her uncle, and was content to remain a star in the society of Meryton.

As for George and Lydia Wickham, nothing, apparently, could effect a revolution in characters such as theirs; they remained extravagant, heedless, and selfish, always in search of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought.

So matters might have continued into perpetuity, had not Mrs Wickham precipitated a violent quarrel with Mrs Darcy. For a considerable period, nearly all intercourse ceased. Mrs Stanley was also comprehended in the estrangement; she followed her sister-cum-patroness' lead in every thing.

Their homes were so distant, the circles in which they moved so distinct, as almost to preclude the means of their ever hearing of each other's existence during the eleven following years. By the end of that period, however, with a large and still increasing family, Mrs Wickham could no longer afford to cherish pride or resentment. The Bingleys had seven children of their own and could not maintain the excessive generosity that had been her primary dependence, while what little money Mr Wickham earned went straight to drink and other, less savoury, pursuits.

A glance at the society pages brought her sister to her mind, and with no more ado, Mrs Wickham addressed Mrs Darcy in a letter which spoke so much contrition and despondence, such a superfluity of children, and such a want of almost everything else, as could not but dispose them all to a reconciliation. She was preparing for her fourteenth lying-in, and after bewailing the circumstance, and imploring their countenance as sponsors to the expected child, she could not conceal how important she felt they might be to the future maintenance of the thirteen already in
being. Her eldest were a girl and boy of sixteen and fifteen, handsome, lively, longing to be out in the world, but what could she do? Was there any chance that either might be useful to Mr Darcy? No situation would be beneath them —

The letter was not unproductive. It re-established peace and kindness. Mr Darcy sent advice and professions, Mrs Darcy dispatched money and baby-linen, while Mrs Stanley, who had always been on the most amicable terms with Mrs Wickham, wrote the letters.

Such were its immediate effects, and within a year, a more important advantage to Mrs Wickham resulted from it. Mrs Stanley was often observing to the others that she could not get her poor sister and her family out of her head, and that much as they had all done for her, she seemed to be wanting to do more: and at length she could not but own it to be her wish, that poor Mrs Wickham should be relieved from the charge and expense of one child entirely out of her great number.

"What if, among us, we were to undertake the care of her daughter?" she asked.

Mrs Darcy smiled. "Do we have any particular preference as to which daughter?"

"I should not think so," Mrs Stanley said complacently. "It can hardly signify to poor Lydia."

Clearing his throat, Mr Darcy said, "It is a serious charge. The girl would have to be adequately provided for. I could not countenance taking her from her family, otherwise."

"Of course." Mrs Darcy glanced out the window at all the old, familiar sights. Pemberley had been her home for nearly twenty years, and she'd loved it even before then;—but to a young Miss Wickham, brought up in squalor with a dozen siblings?

"—young and impressionable," Mrs Stanley was saying. "Then she may be properly educated into a right way of thinking."

"We must do everything in our power for her," Mr Darcy warned. "It is not an enterprise to be entered into lightly."

Mrs Stanley rushed on. "One of the younger girls might be a good companion for Georgiana. A cousin, naturally, is nothing to a sister — " her brother-in-law's eyebrows shot up — "but a child of eleven or twelve might be quite useful to her."

"I am not thinking of my niece's usefulness," her sister replied.

"Of course not." Mrs Stanley's mind had already leapt ahead. "Bess might be the properest choice; she is your goddaughter."

"And I have very faithfully sent her presents," cried Mrs Darcy, laughing at the expression on her husband's face. "I really do wish her the best, but I have no intentions of bringing a handsome girl of seventeen into my house."

"A child brought up among your own children would never be more than a sister."

"Bess is not a child, and I assure you that my sons will never consider her a sister. No, we must choose one of the younger girls— the youngest, I think. Arabella, isn't it?"

"Isabella," said Mr Darcy.

"Yes, of course, Isabella," Mrs Stanley agreed, beaming at them both, "she is now just of an age to require more attention than her poor mother could possibly give, while the trouble and expense would be nothing to us."
Her brother and sister exchanged a glance and promised to consider the matter, consenting to the plan several long conversations later. Mrs Darcy suggested that the girl might live with them, at the Parsonage; her sister instantly rejected the idea with a string of protests. Their house was simply too small — and poor Mr Stanley’s indifferent health — should she prove to be a spirited girl, anything like her mother at all — or, heaven forbid, her father — and with their affairs so straitened, how could they afford the upkeep of a child?

The Darcys, who had every intention of being real and consistent patrons to the child, concealed smiles. With all his usual succinctness, Mr Darcy said, ‘Then she had better come to us.’

Much later, he elaborated on the subject. “This is not so simple as Catherine seems to believe. I will not authorise any arrogance towards our niece, but nevertheless her expectations will always be different, and there is nothing to be done about that.”

"Still," replied his wife, "it must be better than what she faces in Portsmouth. Lydia has no regard for any of her girls but Bess, and there is so much we can do for her. She may not be exactly equal to our own children, in some respects, but at this age there can be little difference, and I imagine they will be very good friends."

"I hope so," said Mr Darcy, and kept any further doubts to himself.
Chapter 2

Isabella Wickham's life consisted of squalid chaos punctuated by her father's disappearances and her mother's nerves. She neither expected nor received the slightest notice from anybody except her brother Jack, and even he had little attention to spare for one frail, unobtrusive girl. Thus the news of her impending departure struck her as not merely surprising, but incomprehensible. Try though she might, she could not think of one good reason why the Darcys should have chosen her above all the others.

Bella reached Derby in good time, still utterly perplexed by her circumstances. There she met with a tall, angular woman, who looked about ten years her mother's junior.

"You must be Isabella," she pronounced. "I am your aunt, Mrs Stanley. Come, there is no time for dawdling, we still have a long way ahead of us."

Once in the carriage, she went on in a brisk manner that was clearly habitual with her, "Let me look at you, child. Oh! Well, at least you have the Gardiner eyes. Now, what did your mother explain to you?"

"M-my mother?" Bella stared at her. "I . . . I did not even know I was to come until Bess and George and Jack told me."

Mrs Stanley frowned. "I see. Well, I am sure you understand that you owe a great deal to your aunt and uncle. Though the original idea, I confess, was mine, the expense will be all theirs, and quite considerable. You must not forget to be very grateful."

Bella shook her head fervently. She was grateful already, for whatever might happen, the peace and quiet which had reigned thus far seemed to her the greatest of luxuries.

Both spent the rest of the journey, from Derby to Pemberley, fast asleep. Mrs Stanley woke both herself and her niece shortly after they had passed onto the Pemberley estates.

"D-does my uncle own this all?" Bella asked tremulously.

Mrs Stanley laughed. "Yes, of course, and some other property besides. He is very rich; that is why they are taking you in, and not I."

"Oh . . ." She stared out the window as they passed cottages and villages and farms, everything appearing neat and prosperous, far more so than her own, larger house had ever been. Then the carriage brought them down, across an arching bridge. Mrs Stanley was still prattling away, but Bella heard not a word in ten. Through the profusion of trees and flowers, she could just make out hints of what looked, to her bedazzled eyes, like a castle; then, with a sudden sharp turn, they were on a path lined with even more greenery, the trees casting long shadows everywhere, and she could see it. Pemberley House seemed somehow less imposing and even more beautiful when in full view, with all sorts of plants climbing up the walls and around the windows, but it was still far grander than anything Bella had ever seen. She swallowed.

"There, there," said Mrs Stanley kindly, patting her hand. "You will never be a Miss Darcy, of course, but I am certain you shall be very welcome."

Bella did not feel particularly reassured, and walked behind her aunt with a loud pounding in her ears, trying to take in everything at once. Inside, all was quiet and stately, her shoes audible against the polished marble floor. Servants threw frequent curious glances in her direction; Bella
turned a dull red and goosebumps rose on her arms.

"Mrs Stanley and Miss Isabella Wickham," announced a footman, ushering them into yet another room. Four people rose as they entered, and Bella, following her aunt's example, managed an unsteady curtsey.

Though her first impulse was to examine all the light, pretty things scattered about, she instead found her gaze involuntarily drawn towards one slight, delicate lady in the centre of the room, about the same age as Mrs Stanley.

"Catherine, there you are!" the lady exclaimed. "We were afraid something might have happened to you.—And you must be Isabella?"

"Y-yes," stammered Bella, scarcely aware of the room's other occupants, "but nobody ever calls me that, they call me Bella."

"And do you like being called Bella?"

She stared, wondering if Pemberley was always such an elegant, orderly bedlam. "I . . . I think so."

"Well," said the lady, "until you make up your mind on the subject, we shall content ourselves with Bella. I am your other aunt, Mrs Darcy."

"Oh!" Bella's eyes widened. "I thought you'd be taller!" Then she covered her mouth in astonished horror. "That is . . . I meant . . ."

Somebody choked down laughter, and she turned a deep red. But Mrs Darcy only smiled.

"Now, your uncle should be here in a few moments, but as we were all family, I do not think we need stand on ceremony. Please sit down, both of you; I certainly intend to. Bella, are you hungry?"

She hardly knew what to say; her rumbling stomach answered for her.

"Kit," her aunt ordered, "give your cousin a pastry."

Immediately one of the three children clustered about Mrs Darcy, a boy of perhaps thirteen or fourteen, detached himself and held something thin and flaky towards Bella.

"This should keep you until dinner," he said cheerfully, his narrow dark face vaguely similar to his mother's. "Oh, I'm Christopher Darcy, one of your cousins." He held out his hand, and she awkwardly shook it, mumbling her own greeting through the pastry.

After a moment, she summoned enough courage to look directly at the two remaining strangers. Though not at all like him, they could only be Christopher's brother and sister, the former in all his handsome dignity practically a man, while the other, a grey-eyed girl sitting at her mother's knee, seemed scarcely older than Bella herself.

"These are some of your other cousins," said Mrs Darcy, "my eldest son Edward, and my daughter Georgiana."

Edward inclined his head and greeted her politely enough, but true enthusiasm was left for Georgiana, who sprang to her feet with a bright smile, curls bouncing. "I am so glad that you are finally here," she exclaimed, holding out her hands, "I have been waiting for days and days, I thought you would never come. I do hope we shall be friends, almost everybody I know is
frightfully old."

"I . . ."

"How old are you?"

"Ten," Bella managed.

"Mama, did you hear? Bella is the same age as me! I am going to be eleven in December. When shall you be eleven?"

"May — "

"Then I must help you, as you are so much younger. Mama, may I show Bella her room?"

"No," said Mrs Darcy firmly, "you are not going anywhere."

"Oh, very well." Georgiana scowled, then her expression cleared. "You are almost as tall as I am," she observed. "I shall give you some of my dresses, they are much nicer than yours."

Both her mother and eldest brother opened their mouths to scold her, but were interrupted by the sound of soft laughter mingled with light, steady footsteps. Edward and Mrs Stanley straightened anxiously, while Christopher fixed his eyes on the opening door.

Had there been time, Bella would have been afraid, she would have quailed and scarcely gathered the courage to lift her eyes from the floor, but instead she was already gazing with wide-eyed curiosity at the gentleman and young lady who entered the room. They were both tall and handsome, looking a little like Georgiana, a great deal like Edward, and mostly like each other. Bella instinctively stumbled to her feet, wiping one sticky hand on her dress.

"Papa!" shrieked Georgiana, and rushed towards her father and sister, kissing and embracing them both. Her cousin, whose eldest siblings had supplied very thorough accounts of Mr Darcy's awful severity, could only stare in astonishment.

Then, to Bella's horror, he looked at her. She felt the condemnation in his chilly grey eyes as an almost palpable thing, would not have been surprised in the least had he sent her straight back to Portsmouth. Yet she did not shrink back, standing very straight and still as she waited.

"Welcome to Pemberley, Isabella," said Mr Darcy, and everybody, it seemed, exhaled a sigh of relief.

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