



DEATH & LIFE

A P&P VIGNETTE (1818)

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a sequel to *The Three Colonels*

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IT WAS EARLY EVENING in the house of Mr. Thomas Tucker of __ Street, and two maids were gossiping in the kitchen. Typically, such activity was not tolerated, but this was not a typical day. The maids were new, the housekeeper was otherwise engaged, and the two girls felt free to vent their thoughts about a certain lady among the many visitors currently in the household.

“Why is *she* here?” asked the first of the second.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” returned the second. “She’s not family. I see no reason for it.”

“She came bursting in the house, pretty as you please, ordering everyone about as though she was a countess instead of just a knight’s lady.”

“Oh ... Mr. Darcy would have something to say about that, I have no doubt!”

“No—that’s what I mean! He was just as tongue-tied as the master or Mr. Bingley; he did as he was requested, as meek as a mouse.”

“Mr. Darcy, meek? Are you certain that the lady wasn’t Mrs. Darcy?”

“As sure as I’m standing here! Mrs. Darcy was upstairs with—”

“Here now—what’s this?” cried a voice from behind the two girls. They turned to see the intruder’s personal maid approaching them with a firm look on her face. “Would you two harpies be talking of my mistress?”

“And if we were, what business is it of yours?” the first responded.

Abigail Frost did not pause; she moved directly to the woman’s face. “I’ll have you know I will stand for no one speaking ill of Lady Buford—man or woman!” she growled. “She is Mrs. Tucker’s dearest friend, as you would know if you had been working here for longer than a fortnight! She has every right to be here as Mrs. Tucker asked for her particularly! If you two don’t stop chatting away and see to your work, I have a mind to speak to the housekeeper!”

The second maid blanched at the threat, but the first grew incensed. “Here—who are you to order us about? You’re just as bad as your lady! You’ll mind your own business, if you know what’s good for you, or you’ll see the back of me hand!”

Abigail said with a voice of ice, “Just try, missy! I’ve handled worse than you—aye, and with less effort.”

The maid could now see that Abigail was deadly earnest. She turned to her friend, “Come along then—we’ve got to put the birds to boil.” The two retreated from Abigail’s righteous anger.

“Humph!” Abigail said to herself. “The two o’ them together are not the trouble of one Sascha, for all their big talk! Gossiping biddies!” She then gathered the towels requested and rushed to return upstairs. Her mistress was deeply involved in Mrs. Tucker’s momentous event: the birth of her first child.



“Thank you, Abby,” said Caroline Buford.

“Yes, milady. Would you be wanting anything else?”

“No, that is all,” Caroline dismissed her. She returned to the figure in the bed, surrounded by two women. “Here are the towels you requested,” she said to the midwife. “How are you, my love?” Caroline asked the prone, sweating lady who was the subject of their attentions.

“I ... I am well, Caroline,” groaned a Mary Tucker, well into her sixth hour of labor.

Caroline turned to the other woman seated by Mary’s bedside. “Eliza, go rest yourself. I shall attend Mary now.”

For a moment, Elizabeth Darcy thought to argue but bowed to her own weariness. She nodded her thanks, kissed her sister, and took Caroline’s hand. “Let us know if Mary requires anything.”

Caroline took no offense. "Of course. Go, Eliza!"

Elizabeth offered a tired smile. After many years and despite countless requests that Elizabeth preferred the sobriquet *Lizzy*, Caroline refused to call her anything but *Eliza*. Elizabeth squeezed her hand affectionately and went into the attached sitting room to join Mrs. Bingley and Mrs. Southerland.

"Lizzy," asked Jane Bingley, "how is Mary?"

"About as well as can be expected." She sat on the small settee. "Caroline is with her. How are you faring, Kitty?"

Kitty Southerland sighed. "I am fine—only a little tired." Kitty was six months along with her second child.

"You should not have come." Elizabeth gently scolded her younger sister.

"Nonsense! I had to be here for Mary. Jane agrees." She and her husband had journeyed from Derbyshire to London in the Bingley carriage.

Elizabeth eyed her eldest sister.

"Kympton was not far out of our way, Lizzy," Jane replied.

Elizabeth turned back to Kitty. "But you must think of your own child."

"I am well, I assure you. Someone must look after Rosanne." The Tuckers served as guardians for Rosanne Wickham, the youngest of Lydia's three daughters, while her mother remained in faraway India. "Besides, I could not stay away. Not after last time ..."

Elizabeth took her hand. "I know what you are saying."



"Yes, Mrs. Tucker," cajoled the physician, "you are progressing well!" He turned to the midwife. "I think another hour should be all that is required. I shall be in the kitchen should you have need of me." He then took his leave of the room.

"Shh, Mary. I am here ..." cooed Caroline in her ear as she grasped her hand.

"Caroline ... I am so frightened!" The whites of Mary's eyes were apparent.

Caroline felt Mary's terror, and her insides turned cold, but she fought to hide her own fear. She resolved to turn Mary's thoughts away from her trial. "Frightened? You? You are the bravest person I know!"

"I-I am?"

“Oh, yes! Who else was brave enough to tease me into righteous action so many years ago?”

Mary was clearly confused. “Tease ... tease you?”

She gently patted Mary’s forehead with a damp cloth. “Have you forgotten the feather you placed in my Bible?”

Mary looked up at her friend. “That? That was so impertinent of me, Caroline. Forgive me.”

“I shall never forgive you, Mary Tucker!” Caroline smiled, leaned close, and whispered, “You were the saving of me, my dearest friend.”

Mary trembled. “You have been so good to me—”

“Nonsense! I have been many things, but ‘good’ is not one of them.”

Mary gave a tired laugh. “Liar.” She then sobered, her fear clearly returning. “But, Caroline, what if I should lose this baby? What if it should happen *again*? How can I bear it? How can I live with—?”

“Enough, Mary! Enough, my love,” Caroline cried. “You know such things happen. It is no one’s fault. And you shall NOT lose this one, Mary. I shall not allow it!”

“Y-you promise?”

“Yes, I promise,” Caroline lied.



Fitzwilliam Darcy turned from his usual perusal of the windowpane to observe his brothers, his partners in anxiety. Charles Bingley was seated in an armchair, trying to give comfort to the pacing Thomas Tucker, both having had one brandy too many. A sober Reverend Franklin Southerland, rector of Kympton, attempted to do likewise, but his attentions were obviously concerned with the health of his own wife.

Sir John Buford remained at Buford House. The Gardiners stayed away too. They did not want to impose on the Tuckers. They knew Mary was in good hands with so many of her sisters in attendance. As for the Bennets, they were ignorant of the event. It was felt that the last thing Mary needed was her over-excited mother. No one forgot the exhibition Mrs. Bennet caused during the birth of the Bingleys’ first daughter. The Bennets would be notified of the outcome when the ordeal was done.

Darcy fought the small ironic grin that threatened to break out across his face. Hours ago, while the gentlemen were trying to calm Tucker, the house in shambles as their wives were occupied upstairs, Lady Buford had marched in like the British Army and, with a few barked commands, restored order to the chaotic household. She glared at Tucker, demanded of him to act as the gentleman he was trying to become, and breezed out of the room.

Darcy shook his head in remembrance. *Depend upon Caroline to use belligerence to quiet a situation!*



Two hours later, as the clock crawled towards midnight, Caroline stood before the window in Mary's sitting room. She looked out into the darkness, hugging herself. Kitty and Jane had relieved her only a half hour before.

Her eye caught her reflection in the glass: a tall, dark-haired woman, dressed very fashionably. She enjoyed strong colors, but tonight her dress was as dark as her thoughts.

Mary's words had shaken Caroline badly. A year and a half ago, Mary's first pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage. The family was distraught but carried on as best as could be done, focusing on Rosanne, trusting in their faith and the support of their families. It was only tonight that Caroline realized how truly terrible it had been for Mary.

Caroline remembered her fears over her first confinement. But after months of fear and hours of pain, she was rewarded with a healthy daughter. That child, the two-year-old Beatrix Albertine, had been joined by a brother thirteen months later. The children now slept sweetly under the watchful eye of their father and grandmother in Buford House, located in a more fashionable part of London than the rented house in which Caroline now found herself.

Caroline gripped herself more tightly. Her fears were not so much for Mary's child, but for Mary herself. She would weep, if she could.

Caroline Buford did not have many friends. It was her own doing, she knew. The behavior she exhibited for much of her life had seen to that. Yes, she had labored to reform, but it was too little, too late for many. Even here, in this house, her reformation was not enough. The pain she has visited upon Jane Bingley and Elizabeth Darcy before their marriages might be forgiven, but it was impossible to be forgotten. As much as she might wish it otherwise, as kindly as they would treat her, as accepted as she was into their families, Caroline would never be the particular friend of either Jane or Elizabeth.

She had been more successful with Kitty. Louisa had always been close to her, but she was her sister. Caroline knew her dearest friends were three very different women, for three very different reasons: Marianne Brandon, Lady Anne Fitzwilliam, and Mary Tucker.

Oh, God, I do not have many friends. I beg you, do not take away Mary.

Caroline had been standing like a statue before the window for no little time, observed quietly by Elizabeth, when Kitty burst into the room.

“Lizzy! Caroline! Come quickly! It is time!”



“It ... it has begun?” asked Mr. Tucker of the doctor.

The physician paused in his ascent up the stairs. “Yes, it has, sir. The first stage has gone on a bit longer than I would have liked, but we have very little say in these matters! Do not be concerned, my dear Mr. Tucker; your wife is healthy and strong. She is in the best of hands.” He smiled in a rather patronizing manner as he continued to the floor above.

“Blast that man!” murmured Thomas.

“Thomas!” cried Franklin. “Mr. Cardwell is very highly respected—”

“He is right, Tucker,” said Darcy, even though his own thoughts were not so very different than the expectant father’s. Mr. Cardwell was no Mr. Macmillan, the Darcy family physician; unfortunately, that brilliant personage was not available. “Worrying will do you no good.”

Tucker resumed his pacing. “Was it any easier for you, Darcy?”

“Darcy?” laughed a slightly inebriated Bingley. “He wore a hole through the rug in his study at Pemberley!”

“I suppose you suggest that Tucker follow your example and spend the wait in his cups?” Darcy suggested dryly.

Bingley held up his glass. “You must admit it made the time pass more rapidly.”

“Yes, and you were fortunate not to drop Susan once you held her for the first time.”

Darcy’s sarcastic remark was dismissed with an unsteady wave of said glass. “I have never dropped any of my daughters, Darcy! I am a prodigiously attentive father, if I may say so.”



Caroline supported Mary in the birthing chair, holding one of her hands in her agony as Elizabeth mopped Mary's brow. Jane and Kitty busied themselves with clothes and water.

"You have the clean clothes ready?" Mr. Cardwell demanded of the midwife.

"And don't I have them right here?" the midwife shot back irritably. "Twenty years I've delivered babes into the world," she grumbled, "but you men of science think you know everything!"

The physician and midwife had been sniping at each other for most of the night. Elizabeth rolled her eyes, but Caroline was not so sanguine, her head aching from their hours of arguing. It took all her willpower not to put those two in their place!

Tears rolled down Mary's cheeks. "Oh, when will it stop?"

"It will end soon, my love," Elizabeth assured her. "I am right here, and so is Jane and Kitty, and Caroline too."

At that moment, Mr. Cardwell lifted his head from his examination. "Now, Mrs. Tucker! Now is the time!" he cried. "Push with all your might!"

"AARRGGG!"

"Yes, Mary ..." chanted Caroline in her ear. "Bear down! Push, my dear ..."

"AARRGGG!"

Caroline almost cried out in pain, so powerfully had Mary squeezed her hand.

"Caroline?" Elizabeth had noticed.

"I am well, Eliza," she managed. Surely feeling would return to her fingers someday.

"Once again, Mrs. Tucker!"

"AARRGGG!"

Mary Tucker, Caroline raged inside, her teeth clenched, you cannot die. You must not die!



"Who ... who shall inform the gentlemen?" an exhausted Kitty softly asked, as she looked at the still form on the bed.

"I will go—" began Elizabeth.

"No, Eliza. I will go," Caroline broke in, a hand on her shoulder. "She is your sister. Your place is here."



The house had been quiet for what seemed an eternity. Just as Tucker rose to his feet, unable to wait another moment, the door to the study opened and Caroline walked in. The gentleman all looked upon the weary woman in breathless anxiety. Her eyes sought the apprehensive husband.

“Thomas Tucker,” she intoned, “you have a son.”

“A ... a son?” Tucker gasped. He closed his eyes and dropped his head. “Thanks be to God.” His head jerked up. “Mary! How is Mary?”

A small smile appeared on Caroline’s lips. “She is well and resting. But, I believe she has a desire for your company for some reason.”

“Ha, ha!” cried Bingley. “Go to her, old man!”

Tucker’s face, at first relieved, broke into a foolish grin as he dashed for the door. Caroline’s eyes followed him in joy before turning to the other gentlemen. She frowned as she observed her brother’s countenance.

“Charles Bingley—you are intoxicated!”

“Not yet, Caroline!” he laughed, “but I think I shall be! Another drink, my friends? A drink to our nephew?”

“Uhh, Charles...” began Darcy.

“Charles!” cried Caroline. “How dare you pour another drink—without offering *me* one first!”

“May we get you a drink, Lady Buford?” asked Mr. Southerland as he helped her to a chair.

“Lord, yes! A brandy, if you please.” As Darcy did the honors, she cried, “Two fingers, sir! I have certainly earned it!”

“I am sure you have, Caroline,” Darcy said smiling.



Everyone involved rested the next day, but on the second day following the birth, the Bingleys, Bufords, Darcys, and Southerlands returned to the house of Thomas Tucker of __Street. Sadly, they were too late.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had arrived.

Mrs. Bennet loved all her grandchildren excessively and felt the entire world needed to know of it—loudly and repeatedly. She was also full of guidance on how to care for them, and she would brook no dissent.

The Gardiners, who were in attendance, did what they could, but it was not long before Mr. Bennet, Mr. Gardiner, and Caroline, seeking peace and quiet, accepted the gentlemen's invitation to join them in the study. Mary's sisters, along with Mrs. Gardiner, remained above stairs to brave the torrent of advice.

"Well," said Darcy, "shall we have a drink to Master Michael Thomas Tucker?"

"Umm, perhaps a small one, Darcy ..." requested Bingley.

Caroline did not try to hide her smirk. "Sherry for me, Darcy," She took a seat next to her husband, Sir John.

"I think I shall have the same," said Elizabeth as she slipped through the door.

"Eliza!" laughed Caroline. "You abandoned your sisters? For shame!"

"I make no excuses, Caroline." She accepted her glass. "As a mother three times over, not counting our ward, Chloe, I have no further need of instruction."

"Indeed," murmured Darcy.

"But, what of Jane?" inquired a puzzled Bingley. "You left her there?"

"Oh, Jane will manage. She is better than all of us," Elizabeth claimed with a smile.

"A perfect angel, according to some," added Caroline.

"Well ... she is!" sputtered the lady's flustered husband.

After the general laughter died down, everyone drank to the new addition to the Tucker household. After a second toast to Mary, Thomas Tucker raised his glass a third time as he looked about the room.

"As you know, like Darcy, I am an orphan. But tonight, I do not feel my loss, surrounded as I am by the best people I know." Tucker paused long enough to look each person in the eye. "To family."

No toast was better received.

THE END



Jack Caldwell is the author of nine novels, all available from your favorite bookseller:

