

A MANY-ASTONISHMENTED THING

"MY dear Mr Bennet," said his lady, "have you heard that number 36 is let at last? What a fine thing for our girls. His name is Bingley, and he's a writer!"

"Bingley? A writer? I wonder if that's the Bingley who crossed Cook Strait last year in a wash-tub to prove that Te Rauparaha was acquainted with the Drift to the North."

"No, no, Mr B. That was Bagley. But I think it likely that this is the Bingley who escaped from a Siamese prison camp by a submarine made from condensed milk tins. Oh, I'm sure he's very romantic. You must call on him at once and offer to lend a hand with the concreting."

"Depend upon it my dear, if he's so handy with tins he'll have the whole place in order, fowl-run and all."

"How tiresome you are. Really, Mr B., I don't see how we're ever to get our girls off if you don't help."

Mr Bennet glanced fondly at his five daughters as they worked at their various novels or took an occasional turn about the room. There was Jane, the eldest, whose literary bent had led her to every cannibal colony in the Pacific in a converted trawler, living the while on sea-water and shark. There was Elizabeth, his favourite, who, with a stronger narrative gift than the others, had gone in for Mau Mau. There was Kitty, whose only literary distinction was to have been a sort of wife to Streicher in the testing thirties. Mary, the little novelette, had been parachuted into Poland to rescue a pedigree pig called Adonis. Finally there was Lydia, still sitting School Cert, who was so grossly misunderstood that her fantasy life promised to sell three editions as well as the film rights.

"Well, don't just gaze at them!" Mrs Bennet bounced upon the sofa. "If you won't make a move I suppose I must. Lady Lucas is bound to have some intelligence of our new neighbour." She stamped out and yoo-hooed piercingly over the back fence, where she was presently joined by Lady Lucas, whose hands still held half-peeled potato and knife.

"Oh, no," asseverated Lady Lucas. "It's not the submarine Bingley at all. He's married long ago to that girl based on actual experiences in plague-ridden Malacca. She went out as governess to the Governor and fell in love with Bingley during an ambush. I'm sure this one is not the same."

"Well, he must be a man of some substance to have taken number 36, the Old Rectory."

"I wonder—no, surely it ain't he?" "Who? Who? Pray, my dear, do not vex my patience so."

"Why, to be sure, the Aqualung Bingley."

Mrs Bennet could with difficulty command her emotions. "If he be he!" she cried, and picking up her skirts made the best of her way back to the parlour.

"Girls!" said she. "If you was to chuse a Mr Bingley for number 36, which Mr Bingley would you wish him to be?"

The girls made no objection to joining in this amusing diversion, and vied each with the other in a pretty animation.

"Bingley who torpedoed his own K.U.P. in order to avoid surrendering his M.I.7's to the S.S.?"

"Bingley who swam across Behring Straits, a boyhood ambition, despite official refusal?"



"Bingley who spent 25 years as a Trappist and whose diary reveals in haunting prose the day-to-day problems of this little-known sect?"

"Bingley who was second cousin to the Archduchess Felicia-Marie and whose nostalgic tale recaptures an elegance and decay all too rare in these disturbed times?"

"Bingley who drove the first oil-pipe through to Matto Grosso and married a head-shrinker?"

"Oh, girls, girls, you quite set my poor wits in a whirl."

No, your guesses are quite out, I assure you. This Mr Bingley is of quite a superior stamp, and here she moved to the instrument where she picked out a little Italian air.

"Mother!" cried all five girls, whose curiosity was now fairly provoked. "You use us all abominably. We shan't be used so! Depend upon it, we shall know."

These and like protestations at length won upon Mrs Bennet who, if truth be told, was but little unwilling to relinquish her secret. "What say you then to the Aqualung Bingley?"

All five girls at once swooned away and for some time the maids were busy with burnt feathers and Rotorua water.

MORE than once did Elizabeth in her rambles chance to pass by number 36.

"Hi, Liz," called Bingley one morning as he stepped out in search of his garbage can lid.

"La, Mr Bingley!" cried she. "Why, you took me quite by surprise. But how came you to learn my name?"

★ "The man was evidently of a strong reserve, for the eyes and nose were close glazed in a deep-sea mask" ★

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet must have supposed me ungallant had I neglected so congenial a task. I asked the milkman. And now that you have broke your walk may I prevail on you to come within and glance at my albums. I have a tolerably rare collection of photos of the giant squid."

"I should enjoy it of all things."

When the pair entered the drawing room Elizabeth was constrained to

give a little cry of amazement. Strange and beautiful tentacles were draped from the chimney-piece; an elegant jellyfish artificially lighted from within glowed upon a table; a stingray was impaled between two windows; and the fine head of a grey nurse shark kept watch above a bookcase in which the precious life-blood of many a master spirit was blood-banked, as it were, for all time. Elizabeth with a small access of pleasure recognised her own *Myself and Mau Mau*.

She had but scarcely taken in the quiet richness of this remarkable room when she was startled by a voice of unexampled refinement which proceeded from a shadowy alcove.

"Down, sir! Down, I say!" A dogfish scuttled away beneath the sofa.

"Ah, Darcy, I had forgot you were there. Miss Bennet, pray allow me to present Mr Darcy."

Her eyes now made out a figure rather above the middle height. The man was evidently of a strong reserve, for the eyes and nose were close glazed in a deep-sea mask. The upper body was richly anointed with some rare grease. An oxygen pack emphasised powerful shoulders which the coming years would doubtless make heavy. A pair of blue nylon trunks gleamed dully in the dim light. The legs passed by way of military calves to a pair of rubber flippers of prodigious size.

"Oh, Mr Darcy, so you're a novelist, too?"

He bowed. Then on some dark whim he spun on his flipper and disappeared through fluttering curtains into the shrubbery.

"You must excuse Darcy," began Bingley. Then after an anxious glance across the terrace he added, "He suffers from bends."

"Does he write then so profoundly?"

Bingley played a moment with the claw of an Indian turtle. Then he murmured pensively: "He is the deepest skin-diver of us all."

IT was the height of summer, and

Elizabeth, with basket on arm, was carrying freshly-made broth to the bedside of Bingley, who had been for some time languishing in the gripe of some mysterious illness, a fever consequent upon a rash plunge down a submerged crater. Finding the front door of the Old Rectory on the snib, she had perforce to essay the back way in.

What was her surprise to come upon a glass tank of monstrous proportions built at the back of the house. Marine life of a myriad gorgeous and sinister kinds moved within this glazen confine. She had just pressed her countenance to the glass when to her horror a squalid turbot was brushed aside and she found her nose within an inch of the nose of—DARCY.

For an intoxicating moment their eyes rolled together like pearls being cultured on a single string. The wind played lightly through her truant curls. A truant eel played through his armpit. His right eye closed wetly in the tenderness of winks. Her head was sweetly inclined as she breathed his name. Another moment and she had shinned over the top and joined him.

RAILWAY STATION for all travellers

At the platform the track runs true,
A single thread of steel
That can be followed through.
The destination labelled and known,
We choose our own.

Ahead the tracks tangle and cross,
Confusing the issue.
The gleaming rails mark out possible loss—
We want to alter course and know
Where other travellers go.

Only one line is ours,
The others are peeled away.
We pass the shortening hours
In changing light and shade
On the track we have made.

Still at every junction doubts arise,
Other routes seem fair.
Perhaps another way fulfilment lies,
And the course held so long
At last prove wrong.

Yet whether we go in pleasure or pain
The route was chosen.
At whatever shelter we step from the train,
In that strange town
Must we lie down.

—Jocelyn Henrici