

Fitzwilliam Darcy *May Crawford* CAPTAIN FREDERICK WENTWORTH JOHN WILLOUGHBY *Miss Taylor* IVIR. ELLIOT *1795*
1782 Deacon: Henry Tilney *Emma Woodhouse* Edmund Bertram *Lady Catherine de Bourgh* Mr. and Mrs. Allen Mr.
George Wickham *Hamlet Smith* Mr. Arthur Parker Elizabeth
Fanny Price Frank Churchill *Lady Darnham* MR. WATSON
Sir Walter Elliot *John Bennet* Colonel Fitzwilliam *Jane Fairfax* Fitzwilliam Darcy *May Crawford* CAPTAIN FREDERICK WENTW
Maria Bertram Mr. Bingley *Catherine Morland* Sir Edward *1782* Deacon: Henry Tilney *Emma Woodhouse* Edmund Be
Admiral and Mrs. Croft Henry Crawford *Kitty Bennet* *Fanny Price* Frank Churchill *Lady Darnham* MR. WA
Mr. Elton *Marianne Dashwood* GENERAL TILNEY *Maina Lucas* Sir Walter Elliot *Jane Bennet* Colonel Fitzwilliam *Jane*
COLONEL BRANDON *Mr. Mary Parker* Mr. Rushworth *Maria Bertram* Mr. Bingley *Catherine Morland* Sir E
Eliza Dashwood John Thorpe *Mrs. Clay* George Knightley *Fanny Price* Frank Churchill *Lady Darnham* MR. WA
Thomas Bertram *Lucy Steele* Mr. Bennet *Isabella Elliot* Mr. Elton *Marianne Dashwood* GENERAL TILNEY *Maina*
Edward F Mr. Woodhouse *Mary Bennet* Edward F Ferrars *COLONEL BRANDON* *Mr. Mary Parker* Mr. Rushw
JOHN WILLOUGHBY *Miss Taylor* Mr. Elliot *Mrs. Norris* *Eliza Dashwood* John Thorpe *Mrs. Clay* George Kni
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March Madness

Match-ups

A gift from Austen Variations to you!

March Madness Mash-Ups

by

Diana Birchall, Jack Caldwell, Leslie
Diamond, Monica Fairview, Maria
Grace, Kara Louise, Abigail Reynolds,
Mary Lydon Simenson, Melanie
Stanford, and Shannon Winslow

Published by: White Soup Press

March Mash-ups

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DEDICATION
For our devoted readers.

Authors' Note

We hope you enjoy this brief collection of scenes featuring mash-ups of Jane Austen's characters first featured on our website JaneAustenVariations.com.

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Maria Grace

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Darcy and Wentworth Meet

By Kara Louise

Fitzwilliam Darcy and Captain Frederick Wentworth have a chance meeting in London. Darcy is still reeling from Elizabeth's refusal, and Wentworth is on his way to visit his sister and her husband, knowing he could very possibly soon see Anne again.

Darcy entered the inn, darkened save for the candlelight flickering on the tables and against the walls. He shuddered as he took in the assaulting smells and heard the vulgar language bellowed by the men seated at the tables. He blinked his eyes several times to aid his vision and then let out a groan when he could not find a vacant table.

Normally he visited the finer men's clubs when in London, but tonight he wished to be alone. He wanted no conversation and hoped he could be left in solitude with his drink and his thoughts. While not gregarious, he could readily converse with anyone on most subjects, but he was in no mood now.

His mouth went dry when he thought about the two months since Elizabeth Bennet had refused his offer of marriage. Much to his chagrin, he had not been able to expunge her from his heart and his mind.

He looked about as he meandered through the maze of men and tables and was about to leave when

he noticed a lone table against the far wall. He made his way quickly towards it, squeezing sideways past some men engaged in a card game and apologizing when he bumped into one of the occupied chairs. No one from the table seemed to notice or acknowledge him, and he turned back to reach for a chair at the empty table.

At that moment, however, another gentleman reached for the opposite chair. As the chairs scraped across the floor, both men looked up, startled.

“Pray, excuse me,” Darcy said.

This time he was acknowledged by a gentleman wearing the uniform of a captain in the navy, “I see we had the same thought.”

The two men eyed each other with resignation. Darcy then turned to glance about the room. “I do not see another open table.”

The captain nodded of his head. “I believe we may both wish for solitude, and if you do not mind us both sitting at the same table, I think we can offer each other that.”

Darcy pressed his lips together and extended his hand for the captain to sit. The two men sat silently for some time. Darcy occasionally shifted restlessly in his chair, and the captain occasionally let out a sigh.

Both men ordered brandy and they waited in a comfortable silence until the drinks were brought to the table.

At length, Darcy looked at his table partner.

“Pardon me, but did you see much fighting?”

The captain lifted his eyes and nodded. “I did.” He extended his hand. “Captain Frederick Wentworth.”

Darcy smiled. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Captain. I am Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

Wentworth started. “Darcy... of Pemberley?”

Darcy gave a resigned nod. “I leave on the morrow and am eager to get home. It has been many months.” Darcy took a sip of the brandy and leaned back. “And you?”

Darcy noticed Wentworth grimace and tightly grip his glass. At length, the captain said, “I am here for a few more days and then will set out for Somerset.”

“It must be difficult to come back with all that fighting behind you.”

Wentworth slowly shook his head. “Not so much the fighting.” He paused and drew in a breath. “One would think that being captain of a ship in time of war, fighting off the enemy, and managing a young and undisciplined crew, one would...” He rubbed his jaw and leaned his head back. “Eight years,” he said softly.

“Pardon me?” Darcy asked. “Eight years?”

The captain took a sip of his drink. “It has been eight years, and I have not been able to forget... *her*.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. “A lady? You have not been able to forget a lady in eight years?”

Wentworth looked up slowly. “Pathetic, is it not?”

Darcy cradled his drink in his hands and a low

groan escaped. He did not pry for more information, but it appeared the captain suddenly was in the mood to talk.

“We were engaged. We were very much in love.” He looked down and swirled his drink. “But then she suddenly and quite unexpectedly broke off the engagement.”

“What prompted her to do that?”

The captain slowly shook his head. “Another woman, one who was almost like a mother to her, persuaded her that I had not the fortune or connections worthy of her... of Anne.”

“And you have not forgotten her after all these years?” Darcy’s mouth went dry.

“No,” Wentworth replied tersely, tightening his jaw. “I feel as though she is as much in my heart now as she ever was.”

Darcy looked at him incredulously and then began to shake his head. “But at least she accepted your offer of marriage,” he said softly.

“Pardon me?” the captain asked.

Darcy began tapping his fingers on the table and did not answer for a few minutes. Finally, he said slowly, “My offer was refused most vehemently.”

The captain stared into his drink. “And may I assume you were not expecting that?” he asked softly.

“I went to her fully confident she would accept me. I had no idea the depth of her dislike.”

Now it was the captain’s turn to look incredulous.

Looking up, he said, "I am rather surprised. You are a gentleman of wealth and good breeding, and from what I hear, Pemberley is a magnificent estate. What woman would not be delighted to marry someone like you?"

"What woman indeed!" Darcy said.

There was silence at the table again as the captain waited.

Darcy drew in a deep breath. "She was a young lady who I felt was perfect for me in every respect, but who had her reasons and was more than willing to let me know what they were."

"Do you feel they were valid?"

Darcy bit his lip and drew in a breath through his teeth. "Some were. In others, she had been misinformed."

"She turned you down..." Wentworth said softly.

"Eight years..." Darcy murmured.

Wentworth braced his elbows on the table and clasped his hands. "It is not, however, just the memory of her that is tormenting me this evening, however."

Darcy lifted a brow. "Oh?"

"Her family had financial difficulties and had to let their country home. They settled into a smaller house in Bath. In a cruel twist of fate, my sister and her husband are their new tenants, and that is my destination in a few days hence."

"But you said her family moved to Bath. Do you

anticipate seeing her again?”

“She may be with them; I am uncertain. It matters not, for whether she is there or not, I shall feel her presence and all that we shared eight years ago as we walked together through the grounds and in her home. I do not know if I will be able to remain strong when I feel as though I am being torn apart inside by just the memory of her.”

Darcy’s hand went up to his mouth and he rubbed his jaw. At length, he asked, “What do you think you will do if you see her again?”

Wentworth leaned his head back against the chair and lifted his gaze to the ceiling. “Oh, I have pondered this a great deal. I confess there is a tiny part of me – the part that is still angry at her for breaking our engagement – that would like to make her regret her decision by showing her what I have made of myself. Perhaps even make her jealous.” He clenched his jaw, but then let out a sigh. “For the most part, however, because I still love her deeply, I would hope to discover if she might still love me.” He was silent for a moment. “That is, if she has not already married.”

Darcy closed his eyes for a moment. He did not know how composed he would be if he encountered Elizabeth again. There had been several times in London he had seen a lady at a distance or from the back and thought it was her. His heart always leapt at the hope that it was her. He would hope that if he encountered her again, he might remain composed

enough to exhibit gentlemanlike behavior and possibly change her opinion of him. He shook his head. In truth, however, he doubted he would ever come upon her, and it was unlikely she would give him a second chance.

As he considered this, silence descended upon the two men once again. Darcy finished his drink, his eyes remaining fixed on the glass as he set it down. Would he continue to find himself lost in the love of Elizabeth for another eight years? Would she continue to haunt his thoughts and dreams? As he considered the depth of emotion he felt for her now, even after her stinging rebuke, he doubted that he would ever be able to forget her. It was a painful thought to consider.

The quiet between the two men was abruptly interrupted when a younger man pulled out the chair between them and sat down. Darcy and Wentworth looked at him with surprise and then at each other.

The three sat silently for a few moments until the young man let out a groan and hung his head. "I do not know what I am going to do!" he said to no one in particular.

Wentworth leaned towards the young man. "Are you in financial distress?"

"Did you commit a crime?" asked Darcy

To both of these, the young man vehemently shook his head and then looked up. "I... fell in love with the most wonderful lady. A lady beyond all measure, one with whom I wish to spend the rest of my life!"

Darcy and Wentworth looked at each other and then back to the young man.

“I would have thought you would be delighted at having found such a woman,” Wentworth said softly.

“Does she love you?” Darcy asked.

The young man nodded. “I believe she does.”

“Then what has you so distraught?” Wentworth asked. “Why are you in such distress?”

The young man looked up and then closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I am... I am already engaged to another.”

The two men’s jaws dropped.

“What is your name, young man?” Wentworth asked.

“Ferrars. Edward Ferrars.”

“Well, Mr. Ferrars,” Darcy said. “We are good listeners. Why do you not tell us all about it?”

Colonel Brandon and Elinor Dashwood

By Mary Lydon Simonsen

By rising, Colonel Brandon indicated that his visit had come to an end. Elinor could easily imagine the reason. After seeing the Colonel from their bedroom window, Marianne had kept to her room for the entire length of his visit. It was not the first time the Colonel had been dismissed. A month earlier, prior to his leaving for London, the Colonel had called at Barton Cottage. At that time, Marianne had come into the parlor for a mere ten minutes before mumbling an excuse about writing to some unnamed relation. As her sister spoke, Elinor had looked away so as not to see the disappointment in the Colonel's eyes.

“May I walk with you to the gate, Colonel?” Elinor asked.

The Colonel smiled and gestured for Elinor to go ahead of him. Once on the path, he assured her that she should not be troubled on his account over Marianne's absence. “The reason I call so often is that, for a time, I was genuinely concerned about Miss Marianne's physical and...for her welfare, but after my last visit, all concerns fell away. She is hale and hearty and no longer in need of my attention. The reason I came today to Barton Cottage is that Margaret is a delight, your mother is a gracious hostess, and I savor our conversations. In other words, I did not come to

see Miss Marianne. Rather, I came to visit with the Dashwood family.”

Although pleased by the sentiment, Elinor found it difficult to believe, and the Colonel sensing her disbelief elaborated. “You doubt me, Miss Dashwood, and with good reason. But things *have* changed, and if you will bear with me, I would like to explain.”

Elinor indicated that the Colonel should proceed.

“Previously, I spoke to you of my *grande passion* for my father’s ward, Eliza, who was forced into a loveless marriage with my brother. Do you remember our conversation?”

“Of course, I do. You spoke of Eliza when you revealed that John Willoughby had fathered a child by her daughter.”

“The attributes that drew me to Eliza—a warmth of heart and an eagerness of fancy and spirits—also drew me to Miss Marianne. I had only to watch your sister at the pianoforte to know that a fire burnt within her. Being of a reserved nature, I was overwhelmed by her natural exuberance—her ability to make the most of every minute of every day. For someone, such as I, the attraction proved irresistible. Of course, any hope I entertained of engaging her attention disappeared with the arrival of Willoughby.”

Elinor nodded in understanding but insisted that Marianne’s attachment for John Willoughby would be severed in a moment if the Colonel would release her from her promise not to reveal that Willoughby had

fathered a child by the Colonel's ward.

The Colonel laughed. "Do you honestly think that such knowledge would result in a transfer of affection? I assure you that it would have quite the opposite effect. Marianne would forever resent me for exposing her lover for the scoundrel that he is."

"That is only because my sister believes that if you do not 'suffer for love,' it is not true love. Considering the events that transpired in London, I would think Marianne has suffered sufficiently even for her and that she would look elsewhere—for someone who is steady and honest."

The Colonel acknowledged the compliment with a nod. "Until recently, I thought it my destiny to suffer as well. First Eliza and then Marianne. Marianne's unhappiness as a result of Willoughby's vile treatment of her resulted in my own descent into melancholy. I found the only remedy for my unhappiness was a visit to Barton Cottage."

Elinor started to say something, but the Colonel stopped her.

"Before you apologize for Miss Marianne's failure to return my affection, I must say that such reciprocation is no longer the hoped-for conclusion."

Elinor went wide-eyed. If the Colonel was no longer in love with Marianne, then why had he come to Barton Cottage on so many occasions? Surely, his claim that he found the company of the Dashwood ladies delightful was an excuse for his wish to see

Marianne.

“I can see that you are trying to puzzle through my change of heart. Therefore, allow me to explain. In looking for a companion, I found myself drawn to exotic birds of paradise—birds so rare that they would fight to be free of societal encumbrances—and dullards,” he said with a mocking laugh. “It was then that I realized what I actually needed for my own happiness was not an exotic species but rather a perfectly delightful English songbird—a bird found right here in Devon.”

Now thoroughly confused, Elinor nodded as if she understood, but she did not.

“Miss Dashwood, I am not the only one who has suffered for love. Because of your affection for Mr. Ferrars, you, too, are suffering—”

“Colonel, when speaking of my regard for Mr. Ferrars, you must use the past tense. It is true that I did suffer, but now I have reached a place where I understand that everything has worked out for the best.”

“How so? I thought...” The Colonel shook his head. Now, it was his turn to be skeptical. Although curious, he had no right to pry. “I have no business asking you about so personal a matter.”

“That is very kind of you, Colonel Brandon. But if you will allow me, I would like to speak of my own transformation.”

As they stood by the gate, Elinor explained that

she had had ample time to reflect on her attachment to Edward Ferrars. Even though he had given every appearance of being a man in love, he had never made a promise of any kind about a future together. She could not affix blame when nothing had been settled between them. Even so, she felt herself ill used. But in hindsight, Edward's treatment of Elinor paled in comparison to his treatment of Miss Steele. While Lucy had whiled away her time in Plymouth, waiting for that day when she could make their engagement public, Edward had been engaged in one delaying tactic after another as well as a flirtation with her. In Elinor's mind, he had not acted in a gentlemanly manner.

"Is this how you truly feel?" a surprised Brandon asked.

Elinor assured him that it was. "I know Edward was young at the time of his engagement, but surely with the passage of four years, he should have made it known to Lucy that he no longer had feelings for her and wished to be released from their engagement. She may have held him to his promise—in fact I think she would have—but at least he would have been honest with her. In return for a promise of marriage, she had spent the first bloom of youth waiting for Edward, and she was determined to be rewarded for her patience. I never really a chance."

"If that truly is the case, then I have something to tell you."

* * *

Marianne looked out the parlor window. "What are they talking about?" she asked her mother.

"Of whom are you speaking?" Mrs. Dashwood asked.

"Elinor and Colonel Brandon. They have been talking for above half an hour. What can they possibly be discussing? The Colonel is so boring. I cannot imagine what is holding Elinor's interest." But then Marianne guessed the reason for their prolonged discussion. "It is the Colonel's intention to enlist Elinor as an ally in securing my hand in marriage. Shall we never be safe from him?"

"Not everything is about you, Marianne."

Marianne did not even hear her mother's retort and continued her soliloquy. "He is on a fool's errand if he thinks I can be *talked* into loving him, even by someone as capable as Elinor. I shall be forever grateful that he brought you to Cleveland when I was so ill, but he did not cure me! Am I to be forever in his debt because he is a capable horseman?"

"The Colonel has not so much as hinted at his gallantry in that affair. You are the only one who brings it up."

Marianne reiterated her reasons for refusing to entertain any thoughts of a marriage to Colonel Brandon: He was too old, too dull, too predictable, too little of this, and too much of that. "He has rheumatism and wears flannel waistcoats."

Unhappy, Mrs. Dashwood shook her head. She was sure John Willoughby did not own flannel waistcoats, but neither was he in possession of a conscience. But the mother held her tongue, knowing that anything she said on that subject would fall on deaf ears. There was no convincing Marianne of the Colonel's superior worth. She must arrive at that place all by herself, that is, if it were not too late.

* * *

Elinor was eager to hear what the Colonel had to say as she was sure that it involved Edward Ferrars and Lucy Steele. Although she had decided that their separation really was for the best, there was something unfinished about the business, and she wished to know how it had all ended.

Elinor had hoped for a definitive conclusion, and now she would have it. While in London, the Colonel had heard news regarding the couple: Edward and Lucy had married.

"If that is the case, then I have been rather harsh in my judgment of Edward. He kept his promise to Lucy, and by marrying the lady, he was disinherited."

The Colonel shook his head. "As it turns out, Edward Ferrars was *not* disinherited. It is a rather complicated story. Shall we walk?"

During their walk around a pond that encompassed much of the cottage's acreage, Brandon explained that Lucy Steele had been very clever in dealing with Mrs. Ferrars's reaction to the news of her

son's secret engagement. Upon hearing of Edward being disinherited, Miss Steele sought counsel from a solicitor who advised her that she could sue Mrs. Ferrars for breach of promise.

"Bring a suit against *Mrs. Ferrars*?"

"Yes, the mother. By disinheriting Edward, Mrs. Ferrars had compromised a verbal contract her son had entered into with Miss Steele. Miss Steele insisted that before accepting Edward's proposal, she had taken into consideration his ability to provide for her financially for the rest of her life."

Colonel Brandon explained that in a subsequent interview with the Ferrars's family solicitor, it was established that Edward had, in fact, made such a declaration of providing for Miss Steele's financial well-being. Upon further questioning, Edward admitted that he had willingly entered into the engagement and that he had at no time asked to be released from his promise. He also revealed that in the four years of their engagement, he had visited Plymouth at least twice a year and that, on several occasions, he had provided Miss Steele with money with no provision for repayment.

"Apparently, Edward also bought Miss Steele a pony and cart so that she might travel around Plymouth, and on at least one occasion, he settled Miss Steele's account with a milliner—all indications that he was fully committed to the lady."

"My goodness!" Elinor exclaimed. "I had no idea."

“As a result of the interview, Mrs. Ferrars reinstated Edward as her heir.”

“But I thought the changes were irrevocable?”

“Mere bluster on the mother’s part. Who was to tell Mrs. Ferrars that she could not change her mind about her own estate? The difference is that Edward will inherit only half the estate. The remainder goes to his brother Robert.”

“Poor Fanny! She will have Miss Steele as a sister-in-law!” For the first time, Elinor smiled. “But how do you know all this?”

“It is widely broadcast in Town that Miss Steele succeeded with Mrs. Ferrars where few others had. Apparently, the lady hinted that it would be a terrible thing for the Ferrars’s name to be sullied by gossip and intimated that there was already much talk on the street and that it could escalate.”

“Oh my! That was a threat!”

“Indeed it was, and it worked. So, now that I have told you all, how do you feel about all of this?”

Elinor could think of only one word: *relieved*. “Although there is an excellent chance I shall never wed, I would rather be a spinster than to be married to someone who is so easily dominated. My husband must be strong and have the courage of his convictions.”

“Then it is your choice to remain an unmarried woman.”

Elinor laughed. “It is hardly a choice, Colonel. But

here in Devon, where would I find a suitor? My social circle is as limited as my dowry.”

The Colonel stopped and looked at Elinor. “You might look no farther than Delaford.”

“What... What are you saying, sir?” Elinor stuttered.

“You were the songbird I spoke of earlier. My past—my love for Eliza—drew me to Marianne, and in doing so, I was blinded to what was right in front of me, that is, a lovely, calm, capable, and caring woman.”

Elinor turned away, and in doing so, the Colonel suspected that he had, once again, failed in securing the affection of a Dashwood daughter. But when Elinor finally looked his way, he could see a look—not of rejection—but of possibilities.

* * *

“Elinor, what were you talking to the Colonel about?” Marianne asked as soon as Elinor came through the door. “I shall not marry him no matter what you say.”

Elinor smiled. “Then I shall not try to convince you.”

“Something has changed. I can tell by the way you are smiling. I demand to know what it is.”

“You are wrong, Marianne. No *one* thing has changed. Instead, *everything* has changed, and as a result, the possibilities are endless.”

Mr. Elton Meet Miss Bingley

By Monica Fairview

Mr. Elton was at the frame maker's shop, waiting to receive the framed painting of Miss Smith which he intended to present to Miss Woodhouse. He hoped she would be flattered, even if the portrait was hardly worth the expensive frame. Still, if he achieved his objective and Miss Woodhouse agreed to marry him, it was a small price to pay.

As he was about to turn away from the counter, the bell on the shop door tinkled and a young lady stepped in. His attention was immediately arrested by her tall form, her fashionable attire, and the haughty expression on her face. Outside, two footmen laden with packages stood waiting. She was clearly a young lady of some consequence, with more than a small fortune at her disposal. There was no watchful mama to curb her spending, no sister to restrict her purchases, no husband – and here he glanced at her gloved hand – to keep her to heel, only a dignified maid who made everything quite proper.

She looked around her with a disdainful eye.

As her gaze fell upon him, Mr. Elton felt a strange thrill. Nobody had ever looked at him with quite that expression before. As a clergyman, he was known in the community and respected. His scholarly

knowledge and his advantageous position guaranteed that people would look up to him. He guided their souls in this world and the next. This lady, however, looked at him as if he was nothing. It goaded him. It spurred him into action. It was a delicious provocation.

Curiosity forced him to peek at the painting she was holding as she unravelled it and placed it on the counter. He immediately saw it was a portrait of the lady herself. It was a good likeness, though perhaps a little too studied. There was a perfect curl that was painted on the lady's cheek, just where the blush began. The painting was skilled but it was clearly not executed by a professional hand. He could only conclude that the lady herself had done it.

He could not help it. He had to express his admiration. He had to draw her attention. He wanted to feel again the exquisite pleasure of her contemptuous eyes.

“What an extraordinary likeness,” he exclaimed. “The original is of course more beautiful, but the painting is remarkably true to life.”

She turned to him with that haughty stare – oh, how it agitated him! She said nothing, of course. He did not expect it. It would indeed be quite unmannerly for her to talk to him without being introduced. She turned to the shopkeeper instead.

“I would like a gild edged pine frame.”

“Pardon my intrusion, miss,” said Mr. Elton, “but I

cannot help but feel that such a frame would not do the painting justice. You must have it done in oak, carved and gilded. It is more a more classical design, and more worthy of its subject. Would you not agree, Mr. Harper?"

Of course, Mr. Harper was bound to agree with him, for what shopkeeper would not welcome the opportunity for more profitable trade?

"Yes, indeed, Miss Bingley," said the shopkeeper. "It deserves better."

The shopkeeper knew her name, which meant the young lady was a frequent customer. Better and better. Few people had the means to buy picture frames on a regular basis.

Miss Bingley turned her gaze once more upon Mr. Elton, who settled his face into a very agreeable expression.

"Indeed," said Miss Bingley, addressing the shopkeeper. "However, as I am not acquainted with the gentleman, I find I cannot accept his recommendation."

The shopkeeper, ready to oblige, immediately turned to Mr. Elton.

"If you will permit me to present you to the young lady, Mr. Elton?"

He did not wish to appear too eager. He allowed his voice to show some reluctance. "It is rather unconventional," he said. "However, as I am a clergyman and accustomed to meeting all sorts of

people in my daily intercourse, I have no objection.”

Mr. Elton was accordingly presented to Miss Bingley, who looked pleased to hear that his father owned a sizeable property in the south of England, even if Mr. Elton himself was a younger son. Mr. Elton himself was happy to hear that Miss Bingley was of Netherfield. The name had a fine ring to it. He had the feeling it was a large estate, from the way Mr. Harper had said the words.

Accordingly, Mr. Elton took an extraordinary decision. He was not given to impulsive actions, but action was required if he did not wish to lose this opportunity.

“If you will cut the string, Mr. Harper,” said Mr. Elton, “I will show Miss Bingley the frame that I have chosen.”

The shopkeeper accordingly cut the string and unravelled the brown paper. Miss Bingley looked at the portrait critically.

“Did you paint it?” asked Miss Bingley.

“Oh, no. I admit that I have a natural capacity, and on the occasions when I have dabbled in paint, I have received a favourable response. However, my duties do not allow me the time. No, this was painted by an acquaintance of mine who wishes to give it as a present. I am merely fulfilling an errand.”

He did not wish her to think he cared a fig for either Miss Woodhouse or Miss Smith, who was the object of the painting.

“Then I hope you do not mind, sir, if I remark that there is some disproportion in the execution. The body is rather small compared to the face.”

Mr. Elton beamed. “Exactly what I thought, Miss Bingley. You have a very quick and discerning eye.”

Miss Bingley was not immune to flattery. In fact, since she was rarely the recipient of complimentary remarks, even though she dispensed them often – to suitably eligible gentlemen, of course – she began to form a rather positive opinion of the young man before her. He was handsome, with a proud Roman nose, a good tailor and a good haircut. Moreover, he had a very gentlemanly air about him. He did not compare to Mr. Darcy, of course, but Mr. Darcy had been very preoccupied of late and was no longer as receptive to her comments as he used to be. It would not hurt to have someone else in mind, in case her plans with Mr. Darcy came to naught. Gentlemen who would be willing to overlook her family circumstances were few and far between. She had the feeling Mr. Elton would be amenable.

She sought for a way to commend him.

“It is rare that a friend will go to such lengths to oblige someone. I hope the young lady in question appreciates your loyalty.”

Mr. Elton preened. “I will admit that she does not always appreciate the finer subtleties,” he said, thinking of how Miss Woodhouse had only yesterday offended him by asking him to dance with Miss Smith.

Miss Smith! Surely she realized that a young woman of uncertain parentage was far beneath him, and that to dance with her required huge condescension on his part? He had done so, but only to please Miss Woodhouse. However, she had barely thanked him for his sacrifice, intent as she on introducing that unworthy creature into the higher society of Highbury.

Miss Bingley, it was clear, would never make such an error of judgement. One only had to see how very patronizing her manner was to the shopkeeper, and how she lifted her nose even at him.

He would have to find a way to further his acquaintance with her. There was little enough to go on, but if he found a way—

“Miss Bingley,” he said, rubbing his hands and smiling his most benevolent smile, a smile he rarely bestowed on anyone. “You must allow me to choose a frame for your picture. If you will give me your direction, I will personally deliver it to you. I would be happy to be of service to such an accomplished painter.”

“Well, sir,” said Miss Bingley, feigning hesitation, but secretly delighted that he had called her painting accomplished. “Since it is apparent that you are a gentleman of good judgement, I will leave matters in your capable hands.”

Mr. Elton bowed deeply, keeping his head down to hide the pleasure he knew was written on his face.

Things were progressing exactly as he wished. How angry Miss Woodhouse would be if he brought home a worthy bride to Highbury! How she would regret all those moments when she had failed to recognize his superior position in society!

Mr. Harper cleared his throat, looking from one to the other.

“Is that settled, then, Miss Bingley?”

Miss Bingley gave an arrogant smile that sent Mr. Elton’s pulse racing.

“I do believe it is,” she said.

When Pride & Prejudice Meets Mansfield Park

by Abigail Reynolds

I've always wondered if the rakish Henry Crawford who tries to alleviate his boredom by making 'a little hole' in Fanny Price's heart in Mansfield Park could truly have been redeemed by falling in love with her. Naturally I had to set him up against Elizabeth Bennet to see what might happen! My P&P/Mansfield Park crossover turned into a full-length novel, Mr. Darcy's Noble Connections. For plot purposes, I changed Henry Crawford into Lord Charles Carlisle, brother of Elizabeth's friend Lady Eleanor and distant cousin of Mr. Darcy. Here's an excerpt introducing Lord Charles to the post-Hunsford Darcy.

Darcy did not anticipate finding any pleasure in spending an evening of dancing and cards at Bentham Park. On his arrival, he found the first set of dances had already started. Lady Bentham was leading the set, but Lord Bentham approached Darcy immediately. "Welcome! I am glad you could join us, Darcy. Come, Charles is in the card room and anxious to see you."

Although he had little interest in seeing Charles, Darcy was content to go to the card room. He was in

no mood for making the acquaintance of young ladies. They only reminded him of what he had lost in Elizabeth, and none of them could hold a candle to her liveliness of spirit and arch wit. But that was enough thoughts of Elizabeth – he would not allow her ghost to haunt his every moment. Firmly he put her from his mind.

“Darcy!” cried Lord Charles Carlisle. “What brings you to this godforsaken corner of the country? Never mind; you are just the man I need. Come join us and perhaps my luck will turn. God knows I deserve some good luck!”

Darcy tilted his head in acknowledgement and took a seat across from Lord Charles. Pulling out the handful of coins he had brought for this purpose, he spread them in front of him. “You may do your worst.”

The next half hour passed tolerably enough. Darcy ignored most of the banter between the other three men until Lord Charles pushed his cards away. “That will have to do for now,” he proclaimed. “I must attend to my latest flirt. After all, I have only a fortnight to make her fall in love with me; and the sooner that is accomplished, the sooner I will be enjoying her favors.” He smirked at the other men’s guffaws when he traced out with his hands the shape of a well-endowed female. “I have some very particular plans for that young lady.”

Bradley looked up over his elaborately knotted cravat. “I say, Carlisle, she is a gentleman’s daughter,

don't you know."

Lord Charles's smile widened. "When has that ever stopped me before? I need some amusement to alleviate the utter tedium of this house party. The Season cannot start soon enough for me."

Newbury drawled, "And *I* say you will not manage to seduce her. She does not seem the sort to fall prey to your blandishments."

"Too virtuous, don't you know," added Bradley helpfully.

Lord Charles tapped two fingers on the table. "Would you care to place a bet on that, gentlemen? I would be happy to take your money along with her virtue."

"One hundred guineas says you cannot enjoy her before the end of the house party," said Newbury without hesitation.

"Agreed," said Lord Charles. "Who else is in? Bradley? Darcy?"

Bradley looked up from counting his coins. "One hundred from me as well."

Darcy shook his head, trying not to let his distaste show. He knew of one girl of good family who had disappeared from the *ton* after Carlisle had set his sights on her, and another whose reputation was ruined. "I bet only on sporting events," he said evenly.

Lord Charles laughed. "There will be sport aplenty for me in this case! But I must not keep the young lady waiting. I bribed the musicians to make this set a

waltz. Perhaps I can discover a few of her charms during it – after all, a man’s hand might happen to slip from her waist, might it not?” He pushed back his chair.

The other two made to follow him. Darcy, with no desire to watch Carlisle take advantage of an innocent girl, went to observe the other game for a few minutes, but the table was full and none of the players showed an inclination to leave. As the strains of the waltz began to drift in from the next room, Darcy decided it should be safe to emerge from the card room now. Perhaps he could find Paxton and convince him to play a few hands of cards, unless he had managed to win the hand of his ladylove for the waltz.

Making his way into the parlor, Darcy scanned the room for Paxton while avoiding the eyes of the matchmaking mamas. Damnation – his friend was already waltzing, his expression dreamy. Darcy’s lips tightened. He had no patience with lovers at the moment.

A light, rippling laugh reached his ears, making his blood run suddenly hot. He knew that laugh. It had haunted his dreams for months. Surely he must be mistaken. What would Elizabeth Bennet be doing among such elevated company?

His heart thudded painfully against his chest as he slowly turned his gaze in the direction of the laughter. For a moment he froze, his body gone rigid at the sight of her light, pleasing form moving gracefully in

the turns of the waltz.

Elizabeth was here, in another man's arms, another man's hand splayed against her waist. Bile rose in Darcy's throat when he saw the object of her delighted laughter. She was gazing up into the admiring countenance of Lord Charles Carlisle.

Lady Catherine and Mrs. Elton

By Diana Birchall

Lady Catherine de Bourgh prided herself on the excellence of all that she chose to have about her: and woe betide the person who might dare to suggest that there was any thing amiss about her establishment, her gardens, or her carriage. Her carriage was the problem in this instance. Well built, of the very finest materials – but of a fashion of five and twenty years ago, so that the effect was imposing rather than suggestive of speed.

Four strong horses were required to draw the chaise, to say nothing of the outriders and their steeds; and the maroon-curtained equipage, with livery according, made an impressive appearance. In this countrified quarter of Surrey, there was no one to watch a Lady Catherine sweep by, other than a few gaping yokels; and by the same token, no one witnessed the encounter of a wheel with a particularly sharp stone, which had been thrown into the roadway by a horse pulling another carriage a few hours earlier.

The consequence was that the carriage listed and fell crashing into a soft ditch, the horses screaming as loudly as the ladies inside. That is, Miss Anne de Bourgh and the two waiting-women screamed; Lady Catherine uttered not a sound as the carriage came

majestically to rest. The outriders hurried to the chaise, the shaken coachman jumped down, and together they pried open the door, now uppermost as the lower was in the ditch. The ladies were helped to emerge, the young lady and the maids crying, but unhurt, apart from a few bumps and scrapes. Lady Catherine was silent, but Barrow the coachman, glancing at her face, perceived that she was in a steaming if unspeaking rage.

“Your Ladyship, are you hurt?” he inquired, trembling with real fear, from the knowledge that his job depended on the answer.

“I believe my arm is broken, Barrow,” she returned in clipped tones. “You must seek help at once. Is there a house near?”

“We are not much over a mile from the next town, which is Highbury, I believe, my lady. Shall I send the postilions to fetch help?”

“I said so, did I not, you idiot of a man,” she retorted, and pressed her lips together angrily, to banish pain. “Here – make us a place to sit while we wait, and take off your shirt.”

“My shirt?”

“To make some soft linen for a bandage,” she ordered. “And we have some bottles of wine, fetch me some of that.”

“The bottles is all broke, my lady,” reported one of the men.

“Fools. How did this happen, Barrow? Pray

explain yourself at once.”

“I believe it was that sharp stone, there, that cracked the wood frame covering the metal wheel, if you see, ma’am.”

“You do not deserve to be driving a lady’s carriage such as this,” she pronounced, and then beckoned to the disheveled waiting women, who were too much fluttered to be of much use in binding up her arm.

In the shortest possible amount of time, the neat little equipage of the local apothecary Mr. Perry approached, and the dapper little man emerged to take charge of the case, with a capable air.

“Let us see. Ah, yes, this lady has a break in her arm. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, you say? Well, it appears to be a fairly uncomplicated matter, but will need setting, and nursing. I believe the best thing to do will be to take you directly to our vicarage. It is down this road, the near end of Highbury: that will be fastest, and you will receive the best care there.”

“But how shall I be conveyed?” Lady Catherine demanded.

“We have informed the ostler, and he will be here with a fresh carriage, in moments. You will be carried quite comfortably, I do assure you. Mr. Elton, our clergyman, has a capacious house, with all modern fittings.”

“Is there room for us all at the vicarage? I cannot be without my daughter and ladies.”

“For you and your daughter, certainly – the rest of

the party might best be accommodated at the Crown Inn, in town. But here is John Ostler.”

Half an hour later, Lady Catherine was being helped into the vicarage. Her hostess, Mrs. Elton, came to the door, holding up her hands in amazement.

“Perry! What is all this? Who are these people? We are not an inn you know. If there has been some sort of accident you ought to have taken them to the Crown.”

“Young woman, do you know who I am?” intoned Lady Catherine indignantly.

“No; how should I? But by your disarray you look no better than you should be, and I assure you I will not be imposed upon. Be off, take them to the inn, it will suffice quite well for the needs of such common travelers as these.”

“It is Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” said Mr. Perry, sotto voce, “and her arm is broken. I thought you could not object to my treating her here, Mrs. Elton, as this is the nearest place to the site of the accident.”

“Lady Catherine de – ? You don’t say! Well, in that case, a common inn will not do at all, will it? My housekeeper will ready a room for her. Mrs. Hodges! Come at once and attend to her ladyship.”

Between the housekeeper and Perry, Lady Catherine was helped down the hall into a pretty, airy bedroom, all new furnished. Mrs. Elton, now excited at having a noble guest, never stopped chattering.

“I daresay this won’t be what you are used to, Lady Catherine, but I assure you this room is as large as the third guest room that my sister, Mrs. Suckling, has at her mansion at Maple Grove. She is married to a gentleman in a very great way, and their house is quite as large as that of many titled people.”

“Mrs. Elton, I am going to set her ladyship’s arm. Will you order more rags please, and some warm water.”

“Hodges, see to it at once. Lady Catherine de Bourgh – I don’t know the name. I must look you up in the Peerage. There is one at Hartfield, I know, though I assure you it is just as well you have not been taken there. The haughty manners of Miss Woodhouse, would not please you at all; and her father is quite eccentric. She might order decent vittals for you, but he would never allow you to eat them. It will be another thing entirely, here, Lady Catherine, I can tell you. I will send to the butcher for all the pheasants he has on hand.”

Lady Catherine did not answer, as Mr. Perry was attending to her arm, and beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead. As soon as she could speak, she looked Mrs. Elton up and down, taking in her person, costume, and importunate manners. She gave a disapproving sniff.

“I suppose this room will suffice for myself and my daughter. We usually prefer separate chambers, but we will make allowances. My waiting women can have

another room. I shall need their services, but a servant's room will do for them. We do not require any thing over elaborate for dinner; a light dinner is all the repast that we can take after our ordeal. Will you see to that at once. Some country ham and eggs, perhaps, or cold meat. The pheasants will be too rich, and you need not order them until tomorrow."

Awed at speaking to a real ladyship, Mrs. Elton curtseyed and ran away to consult with the cook. Lady Catherine looked at Anne and shrugged. "Ill bred and vulgar, as you might expect in the country. But the house is clean, I see, and I believe this Mr. Perry is correct in his judgment. I expect that we will be comfortable enough here, for however long it takes my injuries to mend. But what a bore. We are expected at Pemberley, and I know Darcy and his wife will be most concerned at this delay."

"And your injury, Mama," added Anne. "Darcy is so very attached to you! He will be so distressed to hear of your misfortune!"

"Yes," said her mother complacently, "he will. I have been so anxious to make good speed, and take him and his wife somewhat by surprise. How else can we know what has befallen Pemberley. Mrs. Darcy will have more time to prepare now, and put on a better showing. Still, the delay, unpleasant as it is, cannot be helped. I wish we were not so sunk in a nasty little backwater as this, however."

"I believe you will like Highbury," said Mr. Perry

mildly. "It is a nice town, with two or three very fine houses in the neighborhood, and very civil people."

"This Mrs. Elton is not a very good specimen," she observed. "She a clergyman's wife! It is hardly to be believed. I suspect she is not even a lady. I detect a Birmingham accent. Trade, I am sure."

"Ah, true enough, indeed," Mr. Perry agreed, "but her housekeeping is first rate, and her kitchen and offices all the very latest thing. The Eltons do themselves very well, and you will be comfortably lodged, much more so than if you were at the inn. It is so noisy there, with the gentlemen and their card parties."

"What are the great houses of which you speak?"

"There is Hartfield, seat of the Woodhouses, the most ancient, though untitled, family of the neighborhood, of whom Mrs. Elton spoke, madam. Then there is Donwell Abbey, in the adjacent parish; a larger abode, the home of Mr. Knightley. But it is rather out of the way of the town, and might be inconvenient."

"Woodhouse, Woodhouse. That rings a bell. I was at school with a girl who married a Woodhouse, of Surrey. Isabella Carstairs was her name, but I have not heard of her these twenty years."

"Ah, yes, that would be the late Mrs. Woodhouse. Her daughter Emma, a very pretty young lady, keeps house for her father now. It is a small world, my lady, is it not?"

“My circle of connections is extensive,” Lady Catherine informed him loftily, “as is often the case among the aristocracy. What are these Woodhouses like? Are they genteel? Would they not, in your judgment, make superior hosts to these Eltons?”

“Why, I daresay they might; they are very kind and decent people, some of my oldest friends,” he answered, honestly but perplexed by her questions. “Mr. Woodhouse is rather a valetudinarian, and very attentive to matters of health; I attend him several times a week. However, you are not in a state to be moved, and I believe you would be well advised to remain here for the time being.”

“I suppose you are right,” she nodded, and leaned back on the pillows of the four-poster bed where she had been laid, as Mrs. Elton bustled back into the room.

“Cook is dishing you up a basin of the best turkey broth, my lady,” she said importantly, “and a baking of bread. We have very fine butter here, and do nothing by half measures. Only the best victuals at our table, though we do have a care to economy.”

Lady Catherine assented to the broth, after making a close inquiry as to its ingredients. When she had answered to Lady Catherine’s satisfaction, Mrs. Elton had questions of her own, and no hesitation about asking them.

“Tell me, your Ladyship, is your husband a knight? Were you presented at court upon your marriage? Do

you know the princesses?”

For a moment Lady Catherine did not seem inclined to answer such impertinence, but then she nodded. “Sir Lewis de Burgh was of a very noble family, but he is dead,” she grudgingly replied. “Now if you will serve me the soup, and hold your tongue, I will be much obliged.”

Mrs. Elton was chagrined, and seemed inclined to ignore Lady Catherine’s rudeness, in hopes of finding out more; but her persistence resulted in Mr. Perry’s stepping in.

“Lady Catherine must needs get some rest, my dear Mrs. Elton,” he explained gently, and she was unwillingly persuaded to leave the room.

“Dreadful woman!” the patient exclaimed, as soon as the door shut behind Mrs. Elton. “I may be comfortable enough here, in body, but my character is not accustomed to be exposed to such low manners. Tomorrow, Perry, you must arrange to have me removed to Hartfield, no matter what. I am sure that such old connections as the Woodhouses will be most pleased to receive me.”

Girl's Night

By L.L. Diamond

“Your mother actually believed the headline?”

Elizabeth giggled at Elinor Dashwood's bulging eyes and agape mouth. “You stayed at my house when you visited from Uni with Jane. You've met my mum. Didn't you notice the tabloids spread across the table each morning?”

“I suppose I thought she read them for a laugh. My mum would never...”

“That's because your mum is normal whereas ours is off her trolley,” added Jane as she returned to the kitchen. “Not that she cared two bits about the article. When she realised William's net worth, she told Lizzy to continue whatever she did to attract him in the first place.”

“She didn't!” Emma began to giggle as she leaned against the counter. “Well, if you hadn't met William, I had the perfect guy for you.” The other three ladies groaned.

“No!” Elizabeth waved her free hand in front of her. “I am happy with William, and even if I wasn't, I would never go on another of your blind dates!” Elinor, Jane, and Elizabeth all clinked their glasses together as the other ladies agreed.

“There was nothing wrong with Elton!”

“He was pretentious, annoying, and what was that

other thing?” Elizabeth tapped her face with her index finger and looked for a bit to the ceiling. “Oh yes, he fancied you.”

“Do you remember Em’s reaction when he confessed that he loved her?” Emma shuddered as they all cackled.

“Yes!” Jane set her wine glass on the counter. “She called me and went on and on about it! As I recall, he tried to kiss you, and you were in tears about how disgusting it was.”

Elinor clapped a hand over her mouth and swallowed her wine. “This I’ve got to hear! You thought him good enough for Lizzy, but found him disgusting?”

“I didn’t want him to kiss me in the first place, but he licked from one side of my mouth to the other! It was revolting! I didn’t want to be slimed!” Emma turned several shades of red while everyone burst into gales of laughter.

When their amusement subsided, Jane gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Well, it’s your own fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, please!” Elizabeth picked up a carrot and pointed it at Emma. “If you had acknowledged your feelings for George earlier, you wouldn’t have had Elton trying to snog you at that party.”

She took a bite of the carrot. Who was she kidding? Despite her best intentions, the sausage rolls and cake were calling her name. She threw it in the

trash and picked up a tiny sausage roll as the doorbell chimed.

Emma looked between Elizabeth and Jane. “I thought Catherine and Charlotte couldn’t come?”

Jane’s complexion went white. “It wouldn’t be Caroline?”

With a shake of her head, Elizabeth set down her glass and food and headed for the door with everyone following. “I doubt it. The restraining order William had executed indicated she could not come within a certain distance of myself or where I lived. She is still angry she was jailed for the phony 999 call and stalking us at the hotel that evening.”

Elizabeth peered through the peephole and jerked back. “Who told Mary?” She narrowed her eyes at Emma.

“Which Mary—our sister Mary, Mary King?”

“Mary Musgrove?” interjected Elinor.

“No! Mary Crawford!” She whispered loudly. Hopefully, Mary would not hear her.

Emma began to shake her head. “I swear! I didn’t tell her! Don’t you remember when she slipped her hotel room key into George’s pocket at the Children’s Hospice Ball? I haven’t spoken to her since!”

“No! She propositioned Edward at the Cathedral fundraiser last June!”

“No!” exclaimed Jane. “But he’s a vicar.”

“As long as the person has a sex drive and is taken, she doesn’t care. Fanny told me Mary propositioned

Edmund and offered that Fanny could join them.”

The ladies all cringed. “Ewwww!”

Elizabeth peeked back outside, but Mary was gone. She left already? With a jerk back, she opened the door and looked outside.

“There you are! I was beginning to think you were going to leave me out here all night.”

Her head whipped around to where Mary leaned against the wall, studying her expensive manicure by the dim exterior light. “Hello, Mary. How are you this evening?” She pulled the door close behind her as she stuck a hand back to wave everyone back from the entry.

“Catherine Moreland told Isabella Thorpe, who told me you were having a girls’ night this evening. I thought my invitation must have been overlooked. You and Jane would never have a party without moi, so here I am.”

Crap! Catherine probably didn’t even give a first or second thought about shutting her gob! They wouldn’t want Isabella at their party either. She would drink all of the alcohol before they each finished their first glass of wine.

“Girls’ night? Oh! We had to cancel at the last minute since I fell ill. In fact, that is why I was late to the door. I was sick in the bathroom.”

Mary’s nose crinkled. “Your breath smells of wine.”

“I drank a glass of wine with William before I came

home.” She covered her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

“Lizzy!” called Jane as she walked behind her. “Here’s the jug you requested.”

Elizabeth bit the inside of her cheek and took the plastic container. Her usually honest to a fault, terrible liar, elder sister was conspiring with her?

“Now, go change into your jim jams and have a lie down before you become sick again.”

With a last glance at Mary, she stepped behind the door where Emma and Elinor stood with their hands clasped over their mouths.

“As you can see, Mary, Lizzy is feeling rather poorly tonight. Why don’t we call you and let you know when the girls’ night is rescheduled.”

“Of course. You do that.” Mary’s tone was laced with doubt, and Elizabeth began to bite her thumbnail. “I heard the boys are having an evening at the pub, watching football. Perhaps I will join *them*.”

Like hell! Elizabeth began to launch forward, but before she could take a step, a hand clamped over her mouth, an arm wrapped around her shoulders, and another two arms around her waist. She flailed and kicked forward, but it was no use. They would not let her go.

“I believe they decided to watch the game at William’s rather than go to the pub,” lied Jane, though not convincingly. “You must remember he has a small theatre and Mrs. Reynolds to cook whatever they like.”

“Yes well, I hope Lizzy feels better.”

“Thank you.”

After a moment, Jane closed the door and her eyes widened when she turned to see Elizabeth restrained. They released her, and Elizabeth wrenched herself free and dove for the door; however, Jane blocked her.

“You can’t go after her. You’ll give everything away.”

Elizabeth’s arm shot out in the direction Mary would have parked. “You know she didn’t buy our act! Now, she’s going to go proposition our men! Don’t even tell me she won’t because she doesn’t like single men. What is an available man married or taken ones are around?” She leaned closer. “She’ll hit on Charlie.”

With a graze of her teeth to her bottom lip, Jane paused for a second. “I trust Charlie. Don’t you trust William?”

“Of course I do, but I don’t trust that viper!”

An arm wrapped around hers as Elinor pulled her towards the sofa. “William is infatuated with you. He won’t look twice at Mary Crawford as you are well aware.”

“It is the principle of the matter! He’s mine!”

“As Edward is mine and George belongs to Emma—only we’re married and she still tried.”

Jane dropped into her seat with a huff. “What is wrong with that woman?”

Emma sat on Elizabeth’s other side and placed an arm around her. “We need to find her a man.”

“Do you know one who would agree to wear a wedding ring on their date?”

“Lizzy!” Jane and Elinor cried just before bursting into giggles.

With a smirk, Emma caught her eye. “I just might.”

* * *

He despised watching the game at the pub! The noise, the fans of the opposing team, the smell of stale beer combined with fish and chips was enough to set him on edge and make his stomach churn.

Why couldn't they have watched it at his house? He had a bloody theatre room and Mrs. Reynolds to cook whatever they wanted to eat.

Charlie slapped him on the back, causing him to choke on his beer. “This is so much better than your house, isn't it?”

With a fake smile plastered on his face, he turned to his best friend since college. “Delightful.”

Charlie's eyes rolled, and he shook his head with a chuckle. “You are such a hermit.”

“I am not. I just prefer to hear the game rather than a full pub cheering and jeering.” George and Edward each sat two pints on the table as they resumed their seats and halted the conversation.

“Is he still pouting?” asked George.

“I do not pout!” Darcy took another gulp of his beer and folded his arms across his chest. He was in this dive to watch the game and that was what he was

going to do.

Edward pushed a fresh pint in his direction. “Don’t let them bother you. I...”

Darcy furrowed his brow and looked at Edward. “I?” No response came since Edward covered his face with a menu from the end of the table and sank in his chair.

Darcy pulled the menu back. “What are you doing?”

“Do you know Mary Crawford?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

After turning from the game to see Edward, George pointed towards the menu. “What’s wrong with him?”

Darcy shrugged. “I don’t know. He asked if I know Mary Crawford.”

Upon hearing the name, George paled and shifted back and forth to scan the room. “Shit!” He grabbed a menu with fumbling hands and thrust it in front of his face, leaning in so close he couldn’t possibly read it. Charlie turned and frowned at George and Edward, and looked to Darcy.

“For some reason, Mary Crawford is having a pint and watching the game tonight.”

Charlie looked over Darcy’s shoulder as his eyes bulged. “I’m going to the loo.”

After dropping his hiding place on the table, Edward jumped from his seat. “Me, too!”

“I’m going to place an order at the bar. Do you

want anything?” He stared at George agape. The man never lowered the menu, but asked with it still covering his face.

“No, thank you.”

George nearly sprinted from the table as Darcy shook his head and took a gulp of his beer. What were the odds Mary Crawford would find their table in a packed pub tonight?”

“William Darcy, I am so pleased to see you.”

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. No wonder the others ran as soon as the opportunity arose. “I had no idea you’re a football fan, Miss Crawford?”

The viper sat in George’s vacated seat, put her elbow on the table, and propped her chin upon her palm. “What woman doesn’t love football? All those hard, toned men running around the field?”

“Pitch.”

“Pardon?”

“The field is called a pitch.”

She waved her free hand. “Whatever.” After glancing at the still full pints on the table, she lifted one side of her lips and took a sip from Charlie’s beer. “Where are your friends?”

Maybe they are avoiding you! “Edward and Charlie are in the toilets, and George is at the bar.” He was going to make them pay for leaving him alone with her. He would have vowed revenge even if they’d ditched him with Henry Crawford.

Her chair made a squelching noise against the floor as she shifted it closer. “Good, we have a chance to get better acquainted.”

Oh crap! Did her eyelashes just bat? There it was again! Yes, that was definite battage! Lord, if she didn’t resemble her brother when he made the same gesture. Darcy shuddered. Having Henry Crawford make a pass at him was one memory he had no desire to revisit!

“As people who interact for business purposes, I believe we are well acquainted.” He surveyed the pub. Why was she here? “Are you meeting friends?”

She gave a dramatic sigh. “No, I thought I was going to join the ladies for the evening, but when I arrived, they claimed it was cancelled.” Her false tone and tilt of the head to garner sympathy wasn’t working. How did the Americans put it? She was as phony as a three-dollar bill.

“What a shame.”

“It truly is. Lizzy became sick, so they cancelled the entire night...”

He sat straight in his seat and set his beer upon the table with more force than he intended. “Lizzy? Do you mean Elizabeth Bennet?”

A shameless smile lit her lips as she looked at him through her eyelashes. Mary leaned in closer. “Oh, that’s right. The two of you are an item.” She snickered. “Not that I believed the headlines. As if she would be into *that*.” Her blood red nail traced down

the top of his hand. “Though, I wouldn’t mind being naughty if you were so inclined.”

He leapt from the chair. “I need to check on Elizabeth. If you’ll pardon me.”

Mary stood and stepped forward, running her hand along his side. “She has Jane to take care of her. Why don’t you let me take care of you?”

He took her hand between his thumb and index finger (Who knows what she’d touched with those!) and dropped it whilst moving back. “I’m not interested in what you’re offering, Mary. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I am leaving.”

“What about your friends?”

“They can fend for themselves.” After all, they’d left him to deal with Mary. Let them get rid of her.

Without stopping, he rushed out of the door to the car park and twenty minutes later was standing before the door of Elizabeth and Jane’s gaolhouse. He knocked upon the door, frowning at the sound of loud laughter. Elizabeth was sick. Did Jane decide to have someone over anyway?

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Voices became audible through the door just before it swung open to Elizabeth, who gasped. “William? I thought you were at the pub.”

He took her in his arms as he closed the door behind him with his foot. His hands caressed her face. She wasn’t warm, so no fever.

“What are you doing?” she giggled, as she grasped

his hands and laced their fingers together.

“She said you were ill.”

A cute little furrow appeared between her eyebrows as it often did when she was puzzled. “Who?”

“Mary Crawford.”

Emma Knightley snorted and erupted into gales of laughter. “Lizzy lied that she felt poorly to keep her from the house. Mary tried to gatecrash, but none of us wanted her here.”

“She did say she was going to try the pub,” commented Elinor.

Jane looked outside on the front step and at William. “Where is Charlie? Didn’t he ride with you?”

He shrugged. “When Mary arrived, Charlie and Edward sprinted for the toilets and George went to the bar for more food.” Wide eyes from all but Elizabeth made him shift her in front of him.

“You left them with her!” Emma grabbed her purse from the nearest table as a knock filled the room. Jane peeked through the peep-hole and grinned.

“It’s the men!” She pulled open the heavy door to reveal the scowling visages of Charlie, Edward, and George who all called out and pointed when they saw William.

“You left us!”

What! They were the ones who disappeared and left him to deal with ‘Make-it Mary!’ “I did no differently than you lot! I saw an opportunity and took

it! Besides, the two of you were in the loo for a long time and it does not take ten minutes to order at the bar!”

Charlie scratched the back of his neck. “We snuck out the window.”

“Charlie!” Jane grasped her boyfriend’s coat and yanked him inside. “I can’t believe you left William like that!”

As Elinor held out her hand for her husband, he made his way to her, his posture rigid. “I know how uncomfortable she makes you, but you should apologise to William.”

He pulled at the clerical collar on his shirt. “I am sorry. I’ve never climbed through the window of a pub before.”

“They texted me when they reached the car park,” clarified George. “You probably drove away a few minutes before they made it there. Before Mary noticed me hiding at the end of the bar, I made a dash for my car, and drove us all here.”

Emma rolled her eyes and led her husband to the sofa, switched on the football game, and poured herself another glass of wine. “This is what we should’ve done in the first place.”

William sat in an oversized chair and pulled Elizabeth into his lap as everyone settled around the room. This wasn’t his media room, but it was a huge improvement!

“You’re really well?” he whispered so no one else

could hear.

She nodded. “Yes, it was truly a lie. You were really worried, weren’t you?”

“Not worried so much as anxious.” Her forehead crinkled, and he hugged her closer. “Do you remember when the condom tore?”

She drew back, biting her lip, but smiling. “That was a few days ago. It will take a couple more weeks before we know more.”

“You will tell me.” His eyes searched hers.

“If I need to take a test, you will be there with me.” She kissed him on the cheek. “I love you.”

His fingers stroked the silky skin of her cheek. “I love you, too.”

PerfectLizzy® Meets Her Match

by Jack Caldwell

A clearing in the woods in summer. trees arch over the space like a cathedral. a stone bench overlooks a small, picturesque valley.

ELIZABETH “LIZZY” BENNET sits impatiently on the bench. She wears a yellow dress and a white bonnet. She removes a small watch from her reticule.

LIZZY

He is late! My goodness, Mr. Darcy is NEVER late!
I hope no misfortune has occurred, even though
misfortune seems to follow him about.
There is the noise of steps along a leaf-strewn
path.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy, is that you?

FITZWILLIAM DARCY enters. He is wearing a green coat over a white shirt and cravat, and buff trousers tucked into gleaming black boots.

DARCY

(tipping his hat)

Good afternoon, Miss Bennet.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy, we are an engaged couple. You may call me
Lizzy.

DARCY

Are we?

LIZZY

Are we what? Mr. Darcy, I do not know what you mean.

DARCY

Forgive me. I meant to ask, are we an engaged couple?

LIZZY

Why, certainly—

DARCY

(interrupting)

Did you not call it off—again?

LIZZY

Oh, that! A mere formality. Mr. Darcy, you must follow my example and remember the past as it gives you pleasure.

DARCY

A rather unique ability, madam. I confess I do not possess it.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy, you should not argue with me if we are to have the happiest of marriages.

DARCY

A happy marriage is my greatest desire.

LIZZY

It is well we are of like minds about that.

DARCY

We are not of like minds when it comes to remembrance of the past.

Thoughts and memories intrude that ought not—
cannot, must not—be forgotten.

LIZZY

Then you must remember that we cannot have the
happiest of marriages until you propose to me.

DARCY

Again.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy, you are starting to become tiresome!
I would suggest making a lovely proposal very soon,
or I shall be vexed and refuse you until you apologize.

DARCY

What proposal would it be? The sixth? Seventh?

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy, I am waiting.

DARCY

I spoke of memories that intrude. Those previous
proposals, for example.

LIZZY

Your first one—the one at Hunsford—was perfectly
dreadful.

DARCY

Yes, you turned me down because of Mr. Wickham's
tales.

LIZZY

I must say your memory is rather faulty, Mr. Darcy!
As I recall, you also insulted my family and were
instrumental
in separating my dear sister Jane from Mr. Bingley.

DARCY

Yes. By the way, I saw the Bingleys recently. Jane sends you her love.

LIZZY

Ah, Jane! So happy with her Bingley!

DARCY

As I recall, I corrected my mistake with Bingley and your sister, apologized to you for my words about your family, and bribed Wickham to marry your ruined sister Lydia.

LIZZY

You also improved your manners, sir.

DARCY

Thank you. I have taken your criticisms to heart and labored to improve myself.

LIZZY

Well, now that that is settled, should you not be getting on with—?

DARCY

And your own improvements, madam?

LIZZY

Improvements? Do you believe *I* need improvement, sir?

DARCY

None of us are perfect.

LIZZY

(laughing)

But I am! I am PerfectLizzy®!
Nothing happens that is totally my fault!

DARCY

So it seems.

LIZZY

I am waiting for that proposal, Mr. Darcy.

DARCY

I must admit I am curious about something.
I have successfully proposed many times to you,
yet you later find cause to cry off.

LIZZY

There you go again, remembering unpleasant matters.

DARCY

I was wondering if there was a fixed number of
proposals in your mind,
or if you are likely to once again change your mind.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy! If you recall, I had cause to cry off!

DARCY

I must ask you to recount them for me.

LIZZY

Very well, if you wish. But I must warn you, sir,
that this will not put me into a good humor to accept
your proposal!

DARCY

That I understand. But I require it of your justice.

LIZZY

Let me see. I called off our marriage because of your
affair with Caroline Bingley.

DARCY

Yes. But I had no affair with Caroline Bingley.

LIZZY

That is why I took you back.

DARCY

Please be so kind as to remind me who told you
of my non-existent affair with Caroline Bingley.

LIZZY

It was Mr. Wickham.

DARCY

My enemy, Mr. Wickham.

LIZZY

But Miss Bingley did not deny it!

DARCY

The same Miss Bingley who would say anything to
break
our betrothal so that she might force me to marry her.

LIZZY

Yes, that Miss Bingley.

DARCY

Fortunately, I was able to prove my innocence to your
satisfaction.

LIZZY

But then, you abandoned me for Lady Catherine!

DARCY

Indeed, madam, it was your idea for me to go to
Rosings.

I was to “patch up things” with my Aunt Catherine is
what I recall you saying.

LIZZY

Disagreements within the family are so disagreeable!

DARCY

That is true.

LIZZY

You were gone a month complete without a word to me.

And then, that announcement in the paper that you were to marry Miss de Bourgh!

Oh, I was devastated!

DARCY

Certainly. Of course, it never occurred to you that Lady Catherine had intercepted my letters, locked me in the basement of Rosings, and sent a false report to the London newspapers.

LIZZY

I was so relieved when the truth was revealed.

DARCY

It took me all of that month to dig my way out of Rosings, using nothing but my bare hands.

I had to take one of my aunt's horses to make my escape.

By the time I reached my house in London, there was your letter, ending our engagement.

LIZZY

I could not be engaged to a man engaged to another! That is bigamy!

DARCY

I was never engaged to Anne de Bourgh.

LIZZY

I did not know it at that time. I was overjoyed to learn that you were not.

DARCY

Then there was the ball hosted by the Matlocks—

LIZZY

Pray do not mention that night to me again! It was horrible!

DARCY

I advised you not to pay any attention to Lord Blackmore.

LIZZY

You ordered me not to talk to Lord Blackmore!

DARCY

I stand corrected. I was looking out for you best interests.

LIZZY

You jealously demanded I ignore a charming, handsome, and amusing gentleman.

I could not marry a jealous man.

DARCY

I tried to protect you from a notorious seducer.

LIZZY

I had no idea what he had in mind when he escorted me to the balcony.

DARCY

I tried to tell you, but you would not listen.

LIZZY

There you go again, remembering unpleasant matters.
Besides, why would your uncle the earl invite such a
scoundrel to his house?

DARCY

Politics make strange bedfellows. Lord Blackmore was
an ally of Lord Matlock in the House of Lords.

LIZZY

Your assistance was most timely.

DARCY

Thank you. You should know my uncle has cut all ties
with Lord Blackmore.

LIZZY

Pray convey my thanks to his lordship.

DARCY

I shall. Of course, then there was the matter of you
being kidnapped by that Russian count.

LIZZY

I did not end our engagement over that!

DARCY

No, just almost my life.

LIZZY

Thank goodness you are so skilled with the blade!

DARCY

I have had much time for practice. It helps calm the
nerves
when I am under passionate feelings of rejection.

LIZZY

Excuse me, sir, but I did not intend to be kidnapped

by a Russian count!

DARCY

I tried to warn you about him as well.

LIZZY

In my mind, you were being jealous, again.
Besides, I thought he was interested in Miss Bingley.

DARCY

It is apparent that he was not.

LIZZY

I cannot help it if I am so irresistible.
You suffered no lasting harm, did you?

DARCY

I am well. I cannot ever enter Russia, as there is a
death warrant against me,
but as I have no desire to travel to Russia, it is of little
concern.

Unfortunately, this was not the end of our
misunderstandings.

LIZZY

What was I to think when a young woman presented
herself at my
Uncle Gardiner's house with a young child she
claimed was yours?

DARCY

Mr. Gardiner did not believe her for a moment.

LIZZY

That is because he did not see her with my tender
woman's heart!

And when Mr. Wickham verified her claim—!

DARCY

Mr. Wickham, again.

LIZZY

You said yourself that Mr. Wickham was particularly good at deceiving people.

DARCY

You seem to be particularly vulnerable to his persuasion,
given what you know about the man.

LIZZY

I could not at the time see he had anything to gain by telling me such a false story!

DARCY

Besides ruining my happiness? If you recall, the young woman wanted thirty thousand pounds for the upbringing of the child.

LIZZY

It is only right for a gentleman provide for all his offspring, legitimate or natural.

DARCY

You did not wish to be married to such a gentleman.

LIZZY

To live forever with a man that had a child outside of marriage!

Every proper feeling revolts!

DARCY

It never occurred to you that the child was actually Wickham's,

and the two wanted to pass him off as mine and
extort the funds from my soon-to-be wife.

LIZZY

No, never.

DARCY

Even though thirty thousand pounds was exactly the
amount

of my sister Georgiana's dowry, the dowry Wickham
tried to acquire by attempting to elope with my sister.

LIZZY

What a terrible man Mr. Wickham is.

DARCY

Undoubtedly.

LIZZY

My poor sister Lydia.

DARCY

It must comfort you to know that Mrs. Wickham had
no idea of the plot.

LIZZY

It does, although she was stupid enough to run off
with Mr. Wickham in the first place.

DARCY

Undoubtedly.

LIZZY

Well, now that Mr. Wickham's latest plot has been
exposed for the wicked lie it was,

I am now prepared to take you back, accept your
proposal, and live as the happiest woman alive.

DARCY

I see. I believe there is someone here you should meet.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy! You brought an audience for your proposal?

DARCY

A moment and all will be made clear to you.

(He calls out into the woods)

My dear, will you come here?

Two people enter: a pretty young woman, wearing a fashionable wife's cap, and a handsome gentleman.

Darcy takes the lady's hand.

DARCY

Miss Bennet, may I introduce to you my wife, the former Elinor Dashwood? My dear, Miss Bennet.

MRS. DARCY

How do you do, Miss Bennet. My husband has spoken of you.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy, I do not like your jokes.

DARCY

Miss Bennet, this is no joke. After our last...misunderstanding, it became clear to me that not only do you not trust me,

you will never fully trust me.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy, what do you mean? A woman's heart is fragile.

It is always in danger of something intruding on the
owner's happiness!

You cannot expect me not to take the threats to my
future seriously!

DARCY

In each one of these...intrusions on your happiness,
you could have talked to me.

LIZZY

Talk to you? Impossible! It is too mortifying!

DARCY

As I surmised. Miss Bennet, all my life I desired a kind
and intelligent

lady to share my thoughts, secrets, and cares.

Someone to love and to love me.

She would put all her trust in me, as I would in her.

She would be the mistress of my house,
mother to my children, and most importantly, my
deepest friend and confidant.

We would live in peace and quiet, far from the
madding crowd.

Since our last incident, I was happy enough in
town to meet a lady that not only
filled those requirements but desired the same with
me.

Elinor and I were married not two days ago by special
license

and are now headed for Pemberley. Our stay there will
be of some duration.

LIZZY

Mr. Darcy, you are serious? You are married to this lady?

MRS. DARCY

Indeed we are, Miss Bennet. Ours was a whirlwind courtship, but I have no fears of the future. Our two souls are so alike

I have no doubt as to our forthcoming happiness. I wish you to find the same happiness for yourself.

LIZZY

How can I? Mr. Darcy, if you go, where shall I go? What shall I do?

DARCY

I would be lying if I denied a part of me wishes to say, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

MRS. DARCY

Fitzwilliam!

DARCY

Sorry, my dear. In any case, Miss Bennet, I have here a solution to your dilemma.

Here with us is an upstanding young man, moral and learned.

However, he owns not the willful pride I have. In fact, he is not willful at all.

Allow me to introduce to your acquaintance Mr. Ferrars.

MR. FERRARS

How do you do, Miss Bennet?

DARCY

I hope you will believe me that Mr. Ferrars would
make you a capital husband.

True he is not rich, but you yourself said my fortune
meant nothing to you.

He enjoys the countryside and long walks, is very well
read, and is incredibly loyal.

Once he gives his word, it is unbreakable.

Mr. Ferrars plans to take orders. I know how close
you are to your father, Miss Bennet.

Allow me to make a different sort of proposal than you
were expecting,

but one you might find as agreeable. I can use my
influence with the Archbishop

to have the rector of Meryton provided with another
situation,

so that he may give up his place here in favor of Mr.
Ferrars.

That way, should you marry you will live comfortably
near all your friends.

If Meryton is too close to certain of
your...acquaintances,
another parish can be found that would suit your
requirements.

LIZZY

But...I do not know Mr. Ferrars.

DARCY

That is understandable. Please know that my offer is
open-ended.

I do, at the bottom of my heart, wish you all
happiness.

(DARCY lowers his voice)

There is one last thing you should know, Miss Bennet.
Mr. Ferrars is as fine a man as can be found, but he is
far more...tractable than I.

In this, he is more like Bingley. He is not subject to
willful demands of his family, never fear.

But I think he would do just about anything to ensure
the happiness of his wife.

Give the man a chance, will you?

LIZZY

I...I suppose so...

DARCY

Excellent! Let us shake hands and call it a bargain,
eh?

(They shake hands)

DARCY

Well, Elinor, let us be off! Pemberley awaits!

MRS. DARCY

Goodbye, Miss Bennet! Goodbye, Edward!
Darcy and Mrs. Darcy leave. Lizzy and Mr. Ferrars
look at one another.

LIZZY

Well...that was certainly unexpected!

MR. FERRARS

Indeed. By the way, my name is Edward.

LIZZY

Edward Ferrars.

(She smiles.)

My uncle's name is Edward.

MR. FERRARS

May I take it you find it an agreeable name, Miss
Bennet?

LIZZY

I do. How like you the name of Elizabeth?

MR. FERRARS

I believe I can learn to like it very well.

LIZZY

Indeed. And what is your opinion of dancing?

MR. FERRARS

I like it of all things, as long as you do.

LIZZY

Edward, I believe this is the beginning of a beautiful
friendship.

THE END

Snowbound at Hartfield

By Maria Grace

What madness had seized the weather? Richard Fitzwilliam pulled the scarf a little tighter around his neck.

The howling winds battered the coach on the short ride from Highbury to Hartfield.

The Darcy carriage was as snug and warm as such a vehicle might be in a freak blizzard. Still, memories of frigid nights spent encamped on the French plains intruded upon Fitzwilliam's consciousness. He clenched his gloved hands into fists.

Darcy's coach, pulled up to Hartfield's front steps, the baronet's coach just behind. George Knightley's offer had been kind, but decidedly odd. Why did a married man with an estate as respectable as Donwell Abbey live at his father-in-law's neighboring establishment? It was just not done. Darcy's friends were usually so conventional.

Then again, Bennet, who sat beside him, rubbing his hands together, hunched for warmth, proved decidedly odd himself. Darcy had learned to tolerate him with equanimity over the year of his marriage to Elizabeth. Perhaps Darcy was becoming less particular about his connections.

In any case, a little oddity was a small price to pay for being rescued from a possibly long stay in an

overcrowded, dank, unkempt inn. Highbury's Ram's Horn was just the sort of place only dangerous weather could compel Fitzwilliam to consider. Darcy was so fastidious; he probably would not have stayed there under any consideration.

Knightley dismounted and handed his horse's reins to a waiting groom.

It seemed far too easy that Darcy's old school chum just happened to encounter them in the street in front of the inn only too ready to extend an offer of hospitality to them and the baronet similarly caught in the weather. Nothing in life ever proved so convenient. Fate would surely exact some sort of price for this succor.

Darcy handed Elizabeth out of the carriage and steadied Bennet as he followed. Fitzwilliam stepped into the wind and skidded on a patch of ice.

Blast and botheration, this was not fit weather for neither man nor beast. Who would have thought this tempest could blow in so entirely unexpectedly?

The passengers of the other coach, a man and woman bundled in heavy cloaks, trudged toward the front door, following in the Darcy party's footsteps.

Knightley himself opened the door for them. "Pray come in."

A startled looking butler met them and took their coats.

"Prepare rooms for our guests and their servants. Send the grooms for their horses. Emma! Emma!"

Darcy cringed.

No surprise. One did not bellow for his wife as one did a servant.

Elizabeth slipped her arm in his and pressed her shoulder to his. His tension eased. She was a master as restoring his composure.

Lucky man.

At least he seemed to appreciate that fact and treated his wife very well. Anything less would have made him intolerable.

A young woman, blonde and pretty-ish, not older than Georgiana hurried down the grand stairs. "I was so worried with you out there in the weather!"

"Now you are sounding like your dear papa. As you see, I am quite well and have brought guests seeking shelter from the storms themselves. May I present Sir Walter and Miss Elliot of Kellynch Hall?"

No wonder they looked so familiar!

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance." Mrs. Knightley curtsied with girlish energy, far better suited to a miss than a missus.

"I am most pleased to renew our acquaintance, sir." Fitzwilliam stepped forward and bowed.

Sir Walter looked at him, forehead knotted and brows drawn together.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam?" Miss Elliot peered at him, eyes widening. "Father, you recall, we were introduced by the Darymples, at a card party, three, or was it four months ago?"

“Fitzwilliam? Oh, you are Earl Matlock’s son!”

“Yes sir, I am. This is my cousin, Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Darcy, and her father Mr. Bennet.” Fitzwilliam gestured toward them.

Sir Walter bowed from his shoulders, just enough to be proper. Miss Elliot demonstrated a touch more civility. Just as they had at Bath.

Their haughtiness had not won them many friends in Bath. In truth though, it was more the baronet, than his daughter that people avoided. When she was apart from her father, she seemed rather pleasant.

The dark haired woman might have once been regarded handsome, but years on the shelf left her worn and weary along the edges. Society was not kind to women who did not ‘take’ soon enough.

Knightley took his wife’s hand as she descended the last few steps. “Darcy is an old school chum of mine—imagine encountering him on the streets of Highbury at such a time.”

“You are all very welcome. I should very much like to hear tales of my husband’s school days. He rarely mentions them.”

Knightley flashed his brows at Darcy.

What was that?

Darcy never indulged in any sort of high spiritedness during his school days, did he? The look on Knightley’s face suggested otherwise. That was one conversation he would definitely follow up on.

“Oh, Papa!” Mrs. Knightley hurried past them.

An elderly man in a warm banyan, scarf and soft cap shuffled toward them.

“What ... what is this commotion? Such disruptions are not good for the digestion.”

“Knightley has brought us guests, Papa.”

“Guests, in a snowstorm? It is a most dangerous thing to be out in such weather.”

“That is why he invited them to stay with us. They were caught by the storm whilst traveling.”

“I see, I see. Traveling is a trial indeed. No one should be out in this weather. But are there children with them? They bear disease you know—”

“No, there are no children. Why do we not go to the parlor, and you may become acquainted with them. I will send for tea.” Mrs. Knightley slipped her arm in her father’s and guided him down the corridor.

So, Knightley was caring for the old man in his dotage. Sounded like the kind of man Darcy would befriend.

A blazing fire crackled in the fireplace of the old style parlor. Mrs. Knightley seated her father in a large leather chair very near the fire and tucked a lap blanket across his knees. He leaned back and briefly closed his eyes, as though entirely content with the world.

What a fortunate man.

“Pray, be comfortable. I shall see to tea and your rooms.” Mrs. Knightley curtsied and hurried out.

Darcy sat beside Elizabeth on a plump settee just

far enough from the fireplace to be comfortably warm and leaving the closer seating for Bennet and the baronet who seemed to particularly feel the cold. Not that the man would ever admit to feeling it, that would be far too base for him to acknowledge.

Miss Elliot hesitated choosing a seat. Clearly she did not wish to be too near her father, probably enough of that in the carriage. But she vacillated between the sofa and a single overstuffed chair, as though she did not know whether or not to sit too close to anyone else. Fitzwilliam's sister did that often enough when she was not certain of the quality of the company and unwilling to encourage closer contact with someone who might not be of suitable quality.

The expression Miss Elliot wore was not nearly as confident as his sister's.

They had met regularly in Bath, keeping much of the same society. She was a fair card player, though she did not play for more than pennies—wise considering her father's circumstances. On the dancefloor she was graceful and skilled. Given her tendency to attend the same concerts as he, her taste in music was very like his. Why had they not spoken more?

He sat on the sofa and caught her eye, gesturing subtly next to himself. She dipped her head almost imperceptibly and sat beside him.

Knightley pulled a chair closer to his father-in-law and sat, elbows on knees. "Pray forgive me if it is too

familiar a question, Darcy, but how did you come to be traveling in this most disagreeable weather?"

Fitzwilliam cleared his throat—best assure Darcy that he need not worry about carrying the conversation just now. Darcy was not talkative at the best of times, and now, after the strain of traveling under such dangerous conditions, conversation would be positively vexing for him.

"I fear I am to blame for that. I have just received news of the sudden death of a cousin from my mother's family. Unbeknownst to me, he made me his heir. I am now the master of a modest estate not far from here. Darcy and Bennet have graciously consented to view the estate with me and offer their opinions."

Darcy coughed and Elizabeth pressed her foot to the top of his. She probably did not realize Fitzwilliam knew what she was about. It was amusing to see her warn Darcy not to mention Bennet was there to learn as much as himself.

"Do you by chance speak of Listingbrook?" Knightley laced his hands together, smiling.

That was a very good sign.

"Do you know it?"

"I do indeed. A very pretty place. Old Markham's death came as a real surprise. The whole parish has been at sixes and sevens waiting for the new master to arrive."

"So the estate was managed well?" Darcy asked.

Of course, that would draw him into the conversation.

Miss Elliot's attention pricked up. Odd, what would she care of managing an estate?

"Well managed and innovative. He was forever searching out the latest information in farming and applying it to his land. Mind you, not all his farmers appreciated his interference but those who have not fought him tooth and nail have shown strong returns. They credit him for it."

Darcy glanced at Fitzwilliam with raised eyebrows. Did he have to gloat?

"That is very promising indeed." Darcy steepled his hands and tapped them against his chin.

Bennet snorted. "Save your lecture, Darcy, now is not the time. I have been studying everything you have sent me though I remain unconvinced." He turned toward Woodhouse and Sir Walter. "What think you gentlemen of the new farming methods these young men are trying to foist upon us?"

Sir Walter's nose wrinkled. "I leave such matters in the hands of my steward. It is his business to understand such things."

"Are you pleased with the returns you see?" Knightley asked.

Sir Walter looked baffled, and a not a little affronted.

Miss Elliot looked down and covered her mouth with her hand.

“I have no particular farmland to be concerned with,” Woodhouse said. “All the farm land here is in Knightley’s hands. From what I hear, he does it very well. His friend farmer Martin seeks his advice regularly. But is this not an usual conversation for mixed company?”

“Of course you are correct, Mr. Woodhouse.” Elizabeth smiled exactly as Mrs. Knightley did at the old man. “What do you wish to discuss?”

Woodhouse blinked. “I ... I do not know. I usually leave such things to Emma. She is so good at making people feel comfortable.” He glanced over his shoulder, looking a little lost.

“Do you enjoy the theater, Mr. Knightley?” Miss Elliot asked.

“I confess, we are home bodies, much like the Darcys. We rarely go into town or even much beyond Highbury. There are occasionally concerts or productions at our local assembly rooms. Our friends the Coles enjoy home theatricals and often invite us to watch.”

Fitzwilliam bit his tongue. Home theatricals? Mother deemed them positively boorish and Darcy would no sooner perform to strangers in his home than we would in a public place.

Sir Walter looked as though he shared similar opinions.

Miss Elliot wrung her hands in her lap. “We enjoyed the most brilliant concert in Bath just last

month.”

“Was it by chance the trio from Italy?” Fitzwilliam asked.

“Indeed it was. I do not recall seeing you at that concert.”

“We were a bit late arriving that day and sat at the back. I saw you and your father at the front of the room.”

“Ah yes, I remember, we attended with our cousins, Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple, and her daughter, the Honorable Miss Carteret.” Sir Walter sat up a little straighter.

“Were those the ladies I saw you escorting at the Pump Room?”

“Indeed it was.” He thumbed his lapels. “A fine place to take the waters.”

“And to be seen, I suppose.” Fitzwilliam shrugged.

Sir Walter’s eyes narrowed and his look turned dark.

Oh, this was far too easy! Elizabeth would warn him not to take such low-hanging amusement. But truly, the pompous man deserved it.

“I do tire of that sport though, parading about like gamebirds of sorts.”

Sir Walter’s eyes bulged.

Miss Elliot’s brows drew together and the corners of her mouth drooped. “It can be an exhausting show.”

“How can you say that?” Sir Walter’s chest puffed

a bit. "What is more significant than being seen in the right company, by the right company?"

Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes. Father was apt to intimate the same sentiments.

Did Miss Elliot just roll her eyes, too?

"Of course, father."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and snuck a glance at her father.

Bennet's lips twitched with his efforts to be somber, but clearly he was enjoying himself far too much. "All that preening and parading is very well, I suppose when one has unmarried daughters to match off to young dandies equally fond of the parade, eh Lizzy?"

"Papa, do not tease so, I pray you. You must forgive him, my last sister is lately married. We have just finished celebrating her wedding."

"You mean your youngest sister?" Sir Walter asked.

"No, sir, my youngest sister was the first among us to marry." Elizabeth glanced narrowly at her father.

"Mine was, too." Miss Elliot muttered with a similar stare at Sir Walter.

Sir Walter grunted and looked away.

"I am entirely finished with all manner of matchmaking and courtship and shall be happy now to keep to my bookroom." Bennet brushed his palms together and folded his arms over his chest.

"It was a sad day when my Isabella married and

moved away with John Knightley. But my Emma did not leave me when she married.”

“Of course I did not, Papa.” Mrs. Knightley led the maid bearing the tea service in. “How could I ever leave you?” She kissed his cheek.

The maid arranged the tea service on the low table.

“Your rooms will be ready after tea. It seems, though, I have missed some interesting conversation. Pray do not let me interrupt.”

“You were about to tell us your opinions on the Italian trio we heard in Bath, Colonel.” Miss Elliot looked directly at him, her eyes a mixture of polite and pleading.

“Ah, yes...”

Funny how a little story telling allowed him to portion off part of his consciousness to observe his audience. The Darceys and Knightleys listened with polite interest. Bennet watched Sir Walter, probably looking for more fuel for his acerbic wit. Woodhouse seemed to be nodding off.

Miss Elliot though, she regarded him with rapt attention, as though truly interested in what he had to say. Better still, she offered questions and her own opinion, which pleasingly differed just enough from his to provide for a lively discussion. What a surprisingly diverting conversation.

A gust of wind rattled the windows. Perhaps, if he were fortunate, this storm would last several days, days that might be spent in further agreeable

conversation, and getting to know a very intriguing baronet's daughter.

Wickham and Crawford Behave Badly

by Melanie Stanford

It was the kind of party everyone wanted to attend. George Wickham and Henry Crawford were no exception.

Crawford had connections, of the extremely loose kind. He had to call in a favor from a friend of a friend of a cousin to get into the party, and only after promising a blind date with the cousin's sister's divorced best friend.

Wickham had no connections, but he didn't need them. All it took was a few minutes with one of the wait staff, and she was sneaking him in. He had to promise things too, and he would come through—if the party turned into a bust.

Both men surveyed the room, both with the same goal: Emma Woodhouse. Beautiful, blonde, the latest Victoria's Secret Angel to wear the Fantasy Bra, and daughter of a billionaire—landing her was well worth any promise.

Wickham saw her first. She wore a mint green dress and pink lips, her blonde hair dripping down her back. He sidled closer, waiting for the perfect opportunity to make his move. She was chatting with some old guy, giving him polite smiles, but Wickham knew she wanted to get away. He would be a welcome change, she would easily fall for his charm, and soon

enough they'd be sharing a taxi home.

When the old guy finally left, Wickham moved in. His strategy: "accidentally" bump into her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," he said, steadying her. He dropped his hands but caught her gaze. His mouth opened in a tiny gasp. "Wow. I mean, I'm sorry. I mean..."

Emma's annoyance faded. Wickham suppressed a grin. It worked every time. "No harm done," she said.

Wickham flashed his biggest smile. "No drinks were spilled, no dresses were harmed in the making of this clumsiness. My reputation has been saved."

Emma arched a brow. "You have a reputation?"

"Oh definitely. One I would hate to tarnish." He leaned in close. "Truthfully, I have no reputation. No one here knows my name. I'm just happy to be at such a great party."

She smiled, her eyes scanning the room. "It is, isn't it."

He feigned ignorance. "Is this...is this *your* party?"

"My father's. But I do most of the planning."

"Well done. It really is amazing."

She blushed, the color of her cheeks sending his mind to dirty places.

"Thank you," she replied.

"I'm Wickham." He held out his hand. "George Wi—"

“Take this, would you?” Crawford had finally spotted Emma, and he wasn’t the kind to wait around. He’d beelined straight for her. He shoved his empty glass into Wickham’s outstretched hand. “Thanks, man.”

Crawford turned to Emma, blocking her view of Wickham. Looking her up and down, he bit down on his knuckle. “Day-um. You look incredible in that dress. Like a mint ice cream I just want to lick.”

Wickham gaped.

“Excuse me?” Emma asked.

Crawford winked. “Sorry. Inner thought. My mouth runs away with me around beautiful women.”

Wickham finally found his voice. He pushed his way back into Emma’s view, and into the conversation. “Here’s your glass back. I’m not a waiter.”

Crawford didn’t take it. He kept his eyes on Emma. “How embarrassing.” He motioned to a waitress who scurried over. “If you could take his glass please. Thanks.” He rolled his eyes at Emma as if to say, *was that so hard?*

The waitress batted her eyelashes at Wickham—it was the same girl he’d used to get into the party. He shoved the glass in her hand and turned back to Emma.

“Listen, Emma—”

“Emma?” Crawford butt in. “Emma Woodhouse? I thought I recognized that pretty face. I’m Henry

Crawford. You might have heard of me.”

Emma inhaled slowly. She’d been raised to be polite at all times, to all people, no matter their situation or behavior. “Can’t say that I have,” she said, looking for an opportunity to escape.

“Me neither,” Wickham said. “No matter who you are, that doesn’t give you the right to interrupt a conversation.”

Crawford laughed. “Sorry for ruining your game.” He gave Emma a secret sort of smile. “But I don’t think the interruption was unwelcome.”

She opened her mouth to reply but Wickham beat her to it.

“Well, it was. Can’t you see that you’re spoiling the party for her?”

Emma placed her hands on her hips. *Well, really,* she thought.

Crawford smirked. “The only thing I spoil is the sheets, if you know what I mean.”

Wickham snorted. “Whoa, dude. TMI. I don’t need to know about bed-wetting or whatever your problem is.”

Crawford’s face reddened. He shoved two fingers into Wickham’s shoulder. “Why don’t you grab a tray and go back to work, and leave Emma to a real man.”

“Lay a finger on me again and I’ll pound you into next week.”

“You couldn’t pound me into the next hour.”

“Don’t test me, buddy. Not in front of a lady.”

“Why not? Scared?” Crawford poked Wickham again. “Come at me, bro. Come on. Come at me.”

They were in each other’s faces, their chests puffed out. Neither had realized that Emma—their reason for being there in the first place—had walked away.

By now, everyone in the room was watching the spectacle.

“Come at me, bro,” Crawford said again.

“Don’t call me bro.” Wickham shoved Crawford in the chest. Crawford shoved back.

“Boys.” Emma’s voice stopped them cold. They turned. A tall man stood beside her, his arm wrapped around her shoulder, a hard look on his face.

“Thank you for coming to my party, but if you don’t leave now, I’m afraid Knightley—*my fiancé*—will have to escort you out.”

The party was a bust after all. Wickham went in search of his waitress. Crawford left with his chin up, winking at any woman who would look his way, already searching for his next target.

Supreme Council of Baddies

By Shannon Winslow

Everybody who is anybody was there. Wickham, of course, and Willoughby. General Tilney and his eldest son, the captain, showing off their military finery. The Crawfords, both brother and sister, Mrs. Norris, and Lucy Steele. All the A-listers and even some of the more minor players. They only awaited their chairman to get things started.

Finally Mr. Collins, who had vociferously volunteered his services to facilitate the meeting, rushed in and loudly cleared his throat to get their attention.

When the rumble of voices had quieted sufficiently, he announced with hushed reverence, “Our esteemed leader has arrived. I trust you will all join me in honoring her with the attention and respect her rank and position among us must rightly demand.” Gesturing toward the doorway, Mr. Collins elevated his voice to a fevered pitch. “I give you Lady Catherine de Bourgh!”

All eyes turned, and yet they saw only a vacant portal.

Mr. Collins briefly faltered but then tried again. “Please welcome Lady Catherine de Bourgh!”

Perhaps it was the slight bow he added to his introduction or the extra flourish of his arm gesture.

In any case, this time the great lady did appear as bidden. Light applause broke out but was quickly silenced by Lady Catherine's cutting glare.

"This is *not* a celebration," she said sternly upon claiming the podium. "We are not here for our mutual entertainment. We have serious work ahead." She allowed the weight of this pronouncement to settle upon her listeners as she, one by one, took in the faces before her. "Is everyone present?" she asked Mr. Collins.

"Yes, indeed, your ladyship. Everything is as it should be, though I do say it myself," he answered with obsequious humility. "All are present and I have distributed the assignments according to your specific instructions."

"Good. I only wish to say these things once." She then returned her attention to the small conclave before her. "Each of you has had opportunity to review your latest assignments, and I trust you are all ready to carry them out to the letter... at risk of life and limb if necessary." Hearing no immediate contradiction to her statement – it was most definitely not a question, after all – she went on.

"We are not here to debate these instructions, only to address questions and strategize how to most effectively see the battle through. Your theatres of operation may be different, but your main mission is the same. The blight of *true love* is to be overthrown in every case," she said, scornfully emphasizing that

particular phrase. “Unequal alliances and sloppy sentimentality must be stamped out where you find them. The fictional expectation of ‘happy endings’ for these simpering heroines we suffer nowadays must be proven just that: a fiction. You have been given license to use any means necessary – any means short of doing actual bodily harm, that is – to undermine, oppose, and sabotage. Ours is a noble cause, and we must be prepared to meet the enemy forces with cunning and resolve.”

“Hear, hear!” shouted Mrs. Norris, spontaneously rising to her feet.

Some of the others joined in her enthusiasm for Lady Catherine’s inspiring speech, but not General Tilney. No, he wore a look of unmistakable hostility. This, it may be supposed, can be attributed to his lingering disgust over his failure to depose the current speaker in the previous election. Thus motivated, he challenged her with a question.

“You talk a good game, Madam, but what support from headquarters can you deliver to those of us on the front lines? Love is a formidable force. Fine-sounding words will only go so far against it.”

“How wrong you are, sir,” she shot back at him. “There is no more effective weapon on earth than an arsenal of words, finely honed and expertly delivered. If, after all your training, you persist in doubting the truth of it, I suggest you review chapter six of your manual. As for support services, you will receive what

has been promised. You may depend on it.”

“Hear, hear!” Mrs. Norris shouted once again, drawing looks of annoyance from more than one quarter.

Lady Catherine, having successfully thwarted General Tilney’s challenge, expected the rest to fall quietly into line behind her leadership. “I need not remind you of headquarters’ intolerant attitude toward failure. Some of you are teetering on the brink of banishment from this society as it is.” Again she cast her eyes from face to face, this time with a *you-know-who-I-mean* lift to her right eyebrow. “Very well, then,” she continued when satisfied. “If there’s nothing else...”

No one would dare defy her authority, she surmised. In fact, they would probably be too intimidated to even ask questions. She would make quick work of anyone who did, and then she could be on to more interesting endeavors. Really, it was all such a bore, supervising these under-talented pretenders when she had much rather be keeping her rendezvous with that distinguished Count Deering. Now *there* was a man truly worthy of her time and abilities...

Her ladyship’s private reverie was unpleasantly cut short by a noisy uprising. It started small, with a protest from Lucy Steele, directed at no one in particular.

Looking up from studying her assignment, she

said, "I don't mind stirring up trouble. In fact, I'm sure I shall enjoy it immensely. But I cannot be expected to go so far as actually marrying one of these silly Ferrars brothers. What if I don't like the looks of them, or the wrong one ends up with the money? It would be throwing myself away completely!"

Henry Crawford came to her support. "Miss Steele is perfectly right. We are professionals, after all. We must be allowed some room for creative expression, some leeway to carry out our assignments as we see fit."

"I agree with my brother," declared Mary Crawford.

"You would," muttered Captain Tilney.

Lucy Steele gave Henry an appreciative nod and a coy smile.

"What about seduction?" asked Wickham, standing and raising his voice to be heard above the growing disturbance. "Is that allowed or is that considered 'bodily harm'?"

"Depends who's doing the seducing!" returned Captain Tilney with a wry smile, and he was rewarded with appreciative laughter. "The ladies never complain when it's me."

Annoyed by Tilney's derisive implication, Wickham, redirected. "I wasn't asking *you*, sir. My question was for our chairman... uh, chairwoman, I mean."

Before Lady Catherine could address this or any of

the previous remarks, Willoughby added his voice to the growing melee.

“And another thing,” he said to the group at large. “I don’t much care for these veiled threats of banishment if any of us should fail. As far as I can see, Lady Catherine has not succeeded in stamping out the threat of true love either, except perhaps in her poor, unfortunate daughter. Now there is a young lady I should like to see benefited by a little male companionship, if you know what I mean!”

“Silence,” shrieked Lady Catherine before slumping down in a near faint.

Mr. Collins, completely beside himself by now, ran from member to member begging for a return to order. Not surprisingly, he and his pleas went unheeded. General Tilney leant back in his chair, smiling serenely at the scene before him and no doubt anticipating a more favorable outcome in the next election. Nearly everybody else had risen by this time, shouting and gesturing various insults at various parties, present or not. In the chaos, no one even noticed when Henry Crawford and Lucy Steele slipped out the back door together.

What can be said about the outcome of this council meeting except that it was a total loss? As for the success or failure of the members’ subsequent missions? The answers await discovery between the pages of books.

End Notes

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