



FIFTEEN THOUSAND NIGHTS

(a Pemberley Ranch Vignette)

JACK CALDWELL

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ELIZABETH “BETH” DARCY, *NEE* Bennet, awoke suddenly from a deep slumber, startled by a strange sound in a strange place, and worse, a strange condition—she was without a stitch of clothing.

It took a moment to remember where she was, why she was there, and how she came to be undressed. Her confusion was understandable, for less than twenty-four hours ago, she was a maiden, living under her father’s roof on the Bennet farm outside of Long Branch, Texas. Now she was the wife of the owner of the largest ranch in the county, and her nudity was a result of her husband’s efforts to relieve her of her virginity—*rather delightful efforts*, she recalled.

Beth slowly rolled onto her back and carefully stretched her arms above her head. The counterpane slipped below her breasts with her movements, but thanks to the warmth offered by the fireplace in the bedroom, she paid it no mind.

The bed was large and sturdy, made in the Spanish style of dark wood with intricate carvings at the head and foot. All the furnishings were massive but, because of the size of the room, they did not overwhelm the space. Tall ceilings assured the place would be cool in warm months, while the fireplace was there for comfort in the winter. A source of heat in the bedroom was a treat for Beth, having lived all her life in farmhouses warmed by a single fire, blankets, and hot bricks. This was luxury indeed!

It was to her surprise that there was but one bedroom for the master and mistress in the vastness of the Pemberley ranch house. True, her parents shared a bed for all of their married life, but that was not unusual for a farmer. Space, after all, was at a premium in a small farmhouse. But Beth had been led to believe that the wealthy lived very differently—that rich husbands and wives had separate apartments and only rarely “visited” each other.

Will had laughed when he heard her expectations. *“That might be the way things are done in Austin or New York City,”* he had declared, *“but here at Pemberley, things are different. Like my daddy said to Cate one day in my hearing, ‘Why should I go search for my wife in the middle of the night? Damned foolishness—that’s what that is!’”*

With a smile on her lips, she turned to the figure beside her, the light of the flames causing shadows to dance upon his handsome countenance. For long moments she gazed at the tousled features of William Darcy—her husband, friend, and lover—with a happiness that took her to near dizzying heights. Beth could hardly believe her good fortune. She knew of his goodness, his loyalty, his courage, his generosity, his devotion, his sometimes-brutal honesty, and his unending care for those under his protection. But his gentleness had been a new revelation.

Like most brides before her, she was concerned over the mysteries of the marriage bed. Her mother tried to be helpful, but for once, Fanny Bennet was tongue-tied. She would not describe the act in any but the barest detail—*“You’ve seen the horses in the corral? Well, it’s something like that.”* What good was that? Mrs. Bennet was reluctant to share her own experiences, and she stopped at, *“I hope your husband is good and kind and... well, patient—like your father was.”* The shared blushes between mother and daughter ended that line of conversation quickly.

Her sisters were hardly any more help. For a doctor's wife, Jane Bingley was quite restrained in her revelations about the wedding night, but it was consistent with her modest character. Mary Tilney was no help at all—all she could talk about was “submitting gratefully to one's husband.” The very idea of surrendering to *anyone*, even Will, was Beth's abhorrence.

How foolish it was for her to fear this night! Will was so gentle, so loving, so... so... nervous! Beth laughed softly in remembrance. He was as uneasy as she was. Apparently, he was far less experienced than she had anticipated. He had spent little time, if any, at Younge's Saloon. Yet, they had managed to bumble along with giggles and sighs. There was pain, but it was bearable. Indeed, she welcomed it, for it meant she was his forever, although it took a while to convince her darling man afterwards that the pain was only fleeting.

Beth lay on her side, staring at that beloved face, so calm and youthful-looking in repose—far different from the passionate strain from only... what was it? A few hours ago? She should know exactly when Darcy entered her secret place and filled her, heart and soul, she reflected. That was the moment she left childhood behind and became Mrs. Darcy forever.

Beth was almost ashamed of how proud she was that she had such a handsome husband—almost, but not really. She had to admit that, if it was her fate to look across the dinner table at a man for the rest of her days, he might as well be a good-looking one. Beth was as giddy as a miner that had struck the mother lode and smiled at her good fortune. His dusky skin and jet hair, products of his unusual heritage—one-half Spanish and one-quarter Indian—were undeniably attractive. But coupled with his bright, penetrating blue eyes, especially when filled with passion for *her*—well, who could blame Beth if that turned her head?

A sudden thought struck her: what would their children look like? Would they be fair like their mother? Or would they favor their father? Perhaps a mixture of the two? His coloring and her curly hair? Might she be carrying the heir now in her womb? Her sons would be tall, she decided, tall like their brave and good papa. And their daughters would be laughing, sweet, beautiful, and the delight of their parents.

Her eyes returned to the person who inspired such thoughts. She recalled the gentle way his coarse hands removed the wisp of nothing that had been her bridal nightgown and how she felt to stand before her beloved in nothing but that with which God had graced her. His response, once the man could move, was to, well... worship her. His attentions to her body could be called nothing else. It was beyond delightful to feel his fingertips caress parts of her skin no man had even seen before.

If Beth had any disappointment from their initial joining, it was that Will had not removed his own night-shirt. She knew the reason. Months ago she had accidentally seen the white scars that covered his back. She learned that they were further evidence of his honor and loyalty. He had taken a beating that had been intended for a friend, and in doing so, probably saved Charles Bingley's life. It was not surprising that Will hid those scars. For all his assets, the man did have his pride, and besides, he had no idea that Beth knew of his old injury.

Disguise of any sort was impossible for Beth. She knew what had happened during Darcy's imprisonment, and she considered it a badge of honor. She joyfully and eagerly had married William Darcy, scars and all. There would be no secrets between them, she vowed, and she intended to make that clear to the dear man, right here and now.

She snuggled as close as she could to her sleeping husband, lightly kissing his cheek and eyes. “William. William, dearest.”

A grin grew on Darcy's lips as his eyes cracked open. “Mmm... Well, ain't this a pretty sight. Howdy, Mrs. Darcy.”

Beth's whole body flushed with joy at the sound of her new name. “Howdy, Mr. Darcy,” she returned, her voice low and husky.

Darcy's throat worked as his gaze left her face to trail down to her exposed bosom. “I... I trust you've slept well, sweetheart?”

One perfect eyebrow rose. “Never better. But... I'm not sleepy anymore.” She ran a finger along his rough cheek, already needing a shave. “Are you?”

"No," he said, his voice gravely.

"I didn't wake you?"

Darcy let out a soft bark of laughter. "Beth, you can wake me in this manner anytime you please." He reached out and pulled her into his embrace.

"Oh, good," Beth breathed before their lips met in a passionate kiss. Beth had to fight to recall her intentions and not lose herself to the dizzying intoxication that was threatening to envelop her. She pushed herself away, trailing kisses on his chin and neck, as her hands moved to the buttons on his nightshirt. She got further than she had anticipated; it wasn't until she'd unfastened the third button that Will moved to stop her.

"Will, please, let me," she said in her most seductive manner. "I want to feel you—all of you—against me." She tried again, but Will moved up on one elbow.

"No, honey, just leave it."

"Will—"

"Beth, leave it be." There was a bit of an edge to his voice.

She paused, staring into his eyes. "Will, I know."

"What?"

"I *know*," she said with emphasis. "I know what happened to you."

It took a moment for Will to understand her words. His eyes grew wide as he cried, "Who told you?" Beth tried to take his hand, but he resisted. "Tell me! Was it Charles?"

Beth frowned. "Will Darcy, I've seen your scars."

"When?" he gasped.

"At the B&R, the night of our... discussion. I helped Anne and Bartholomew carry you to your room after you fell and hurt yourself. It was while we were putting you to bed that I discovered your injuries. Our talk gave me reason to believe that it happened while you and Charles were prisoners, so I badgered Charles until he told me all."

"All?"

"Yes." Her eyes filled. "I'm so proud of you."

Will fell back onto the bed, face up. "Being beaten isn't something a man's proud of."

"It is if he did it for the reasons you did. Oh, you and your stubborn pride! Why can't you accept gratitude for what you've done?"

"I didn't do it for gratitude."

"No, you didn't. You did it for love." Darcy jerked his head around towards Beth. "Love of your fellow man. You did it for Charles and all the people he would minister to as a doctor. You made an unselfish sacrifice of your own body for people you would never know, just because it was the right thing to do. How can I not be proud of you? I think that's when I began to love you."

Will didn't say a word. He only looked at her in wonder.

"I... I began to really think about who you truly were. I knew all my previous opinions were wrong, so I had to start somewhere. That was as good a place as any. Here was a man willing to lay down his life for another. That same man vowed his ardent love for me. How could I not feel something for that? How could I not think about what I had done to deserve such a man's attentions and admiration?" She softly kissed his cheek. "My darling, darling William. The moment I saw those blessed scars, I could do nothing but begin to love you."

"I—" He was interrupted by a kiss. "I don't really understand."

"Neither do I, but it's true. Now, help me take off this infernal nightshirt."

Reluctantly, Darcy helped his wife strip him of his garment. Beth tossed the shirt away, to join her nightgown on the floor.

"Now," she said when the task was done, "roll over."

"What? Beth—"

Her eyes and voice were firm. "Roll over, dearest."

Darcy shrugged his shoulders in defeat and rolled over onto his stomach. Beth drew a breath before pulling the covers down, exposing his back to the flickering light of the fire. She bit her lip to prevent any exclamation of alarm and forced herself to view the damage.

Darcy's strong, wide back was covered with overlapping white scars, each outlined in pink. She slowly reached out and touched them. As she expected, they were as rough as they appeared. Instead of drawing back, she moved her fingers over the expanse, touching each and every line.

"Does it hurt?" she asked softly.

Darcy's voice was slightly muffled by the pillow. "No. It... it feels... strange. I don't really feel things on my back right since it happened. It's like there's this... cover on my skin."

Beth's eyes filled again, imagining the pain he must have endured. "How did you rest while you were healing?"

"I didn't rest a whole lot at first. Charles tried to get something to help me sleep, but there wasn't any tonic or such for prisoners. I was on my stomach for weeks."

Beth's tears flowed freely now, thinking of Will's weeks of agony. The tears fell from her face onto his back, and she massaged them into the damaged skin. The story of the woman who bathed the Savior's feet with her tears and dried them with her hair came to her mind. In a way she was doing the same, Beth thought, and she stopped holding back, allowing herself to cry softly, anointing Will with herself.

"Beth?" Worry resonated in his voice.

"I'm fine," she answered with a sniff. "Don't move—please." Her hair was not as long as the woman from Luke's Gospel, certainly not long enough to use as a towel, so she lay prone on him, warming his skin with hers and worshiping his skin with her body as he had worshiped hers with his hands and lips. She did not recoil from the roughness against her cheek; instead, she closed her eyes, thanking God for the gift of this man and for sparing him so long ago so that he could become hers.

The pair remained that way for a time until Darcy began to move.

"Are you uncomfortable?" Beth moved her head.

"No. It... emm... feels good, to tell you the truth."

She smiled in understanding—the coarseness against her nipples was having a very pleasant effect upon her. She understood now how desire felt, what it meant, and what she needed. She needed him. Slowly she began to move, undulating on his back, pleasuring herself and her lover. She heard him groan, only belatedly realizing that it was but an echo of her own moans.

Her kisses and touches were too much for her husband. In an instant, he had turned over, his manhood proudly erect. "Thank you, sweetheart, but now it's time for me to return the favor," his voice playful as he reached for her. She laughed dodging his hands, when inspiration struck her.

"No! Will, stay still."

Darcy actually whined. "Darlin', you're driving me loco."

"Will, wait... let me." She had no words that she was comfortable to share with him. She could only show him. She sat, straddling his thighs, studying his body.

"Beth, what are you—"

"Hush," was all she could say. She gingerly reached out and touched that intriguing part of him that had brought her such pleasure, first with her fingers and then her hand.

A moment later, she mounted him, his gasp assuring her that he had no objection. She began to move, as only a practiced horsewoman could, mimicking his earlier motions. Her hands on his chest were covered by his at first before they sought her breasts. She cried out as he joined in her rhythm. Faster and faster they moved, Beth now throwing her head back, focusing on an itch that seemed to grow to ever-greater heights. Between the fire in the grate and the one in her soul, she was perspiring, her mind locked on a foggy goal just out of her reach. Closer and closer she worked, harder and harder she rode.

With a mighty cry, Will grasped her hips, and holding her close, rolled them over, pinning Beth once again on her back. Supporting himself on his arms, he began his loving assault, driving his wife out of her mind. The pinnacle she tried so hard to reach was near... and then she was there. Beth screamed as she took her pleasure for the first time, as wave upon wave crashed into her senses. Just as the intense vibration began to recede, she was taken over the edge again by her husband's own release.

"Beth? Beth, are you all right?"

Beth's eyes fluttered open at the sound of Will's worried voice. "I'm fine," she managed.

"Good. I was... concerned there... You weren't moving."

"I have no intention of moving." Will nodded his acknowledgement and began to roll off her, something Beth was averse to at that moment.

"As you wish, Mrs. Darcy." She could make out his grin in the firelight.

"I lied to you before."

"How's that?"

"When I said I never felt better. I had no idea." Her smile grew bawdy. "If it gets much better than this, I may never let you leave this bed."

"Not even to eat?"

"They can bring us food."

"Sounds good to me." He grew serious. "I love you, Elizabeth."

"I love you, William."

They would spend the remainder of the night kissing, talking, sleeping and loving. As it was one of the longest of the year, it suited the pair well.

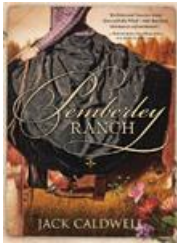
Not all the nights they shared in their bed would be as momentous as this one. The forty-one years of their marriage would not be that different from any other happy one that had come before or would follow in the future. They would have their disagreements. Emergencies, fires, and storms would be faced together. Days of separation caused by business were circumstances that would pain them both. Illness would come and go. Children would come, all conceived and born in their bed. Weddings and grandchildren would be celebrated. Lost family and friends would be grieved. They would share tears, fears, and disappointments, but mostly enjoy contentment, love, and devotion. Never would either want to be in anyone's company but each other's, especially at night.

But even in the twilight of their lives, William and Elizabeth would look back with fond memory on this night—the first and most wonderful of their fifteen thousand nights.

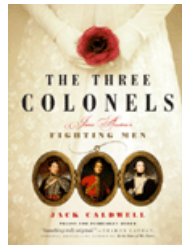
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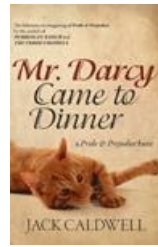
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