An aerial photograph of a wide, calm river meandering through a lush, green valley. The river is the central focus, curving from the upper right towards the lower left. The surrounding landscape is densely forested with various shades of green, and the hillsides are steep and covered in vegetation. The sky is a pale, hazy blue, suggesting a bright but slightly overcast day. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic, typical of a rural or wilderness area.

VARIATIONS

A SERIES OF JANE AUSTEN “WHAT-IFS”

JACK CALDWELL

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Story I – An Uninterrupted Visit

(Author's Note: In this Pride & Prejudice variation, Lydia does not go to Brighton, therefore, she does not run off with Wickham.)

ELIZABETH HAD BEEN DISAPPOINTED a good deal in not finding a letter from Jane on their first arrival at Lambton. This disappointment had been renewed on each of the following mornings that had now been spent there, but on the third, her repining was over, and her sister justified with the receipt of two letters from her at once. One of the letters had been delayed by being delivered elsewhere in error. Elizabeth was not surprised at it, as Jane had written the direction remarkably ill.

They had just been preparing to walk as the letters came in, and her uncle and aunt, leaving her to enjoy them in quiet, set off by themselves. The one misdirected must be first attended to, since it had been written five days ago. The beginning contained an account of all their little parties and engagements, with such news as the country afforded, but the latter half, which was dated a day later and written in evident agitation, gave more important intelligence.

"...Since writing the above, dearest Lizzy, something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature; but I am afraid of alarming you—"

Mr. Darcy appeared at that moment, announced by the maid. Elizabeth looked up in surprise, her fist jammed against her mouth.

Her pale face and impetuous manner made Darcy start, and before he could recover himself enough to speak sensibly, he exclaimed with more feeling than civility, "Good God! What is the matter?" Then, recollecting himself, he continued. "Let me call your maid. Is there nothing you could take to give you present relief? A glass of wine—shall I get you one? You are very ill."

At that, Elizabeth could no long restrain herself and let out a most unladylike howl of laughter. Darcy, in wretched suspense, could only say mutter his concern and observe her in compassionate silence as tears of mirth rolled her pretty cheeks. After several moments thus engaged, Elizabeth took pity on the poor man.

"I thank you for your concern, Mr. Darcy, but let me assure you that I am quite well. It is only that I have received some surprising news from home."

Darcy sat down with no little relief. "I trust your family is well?"

"They are, I thank you, sir. My aunt and uncle are visiting the church, and everyone at Longbourn is in excellent health. No—the news is from Brighton. I would not spread gossip, but this is news that I believe in which you would have some interest. It seems Mrs. Forster—young Harriet Forster, wife of the unfortunate colonel of the ---shire militia—was caught in a compromising situation with a gentleman of our mutual acquaintance." Elizabeth's eyes danced merrily.

Her companion sat back, considering this disclosure. "Mutual acquaintance? In Brighton? Oh!" Darcy's eyes lit in recognition. "You don't mean to say—?"

Elizabeth laughed again. "It seems Lt. Wickham is under arrest, facing several charges, and his commanding officer is not of a mind to show leniency!" She watched Darcy in expectation of his delightful dimples, which surely would be in evidence given this inducement. However, to her great surprise, Darcy's face fell. He stood and walked to the window, hands behind his back. Elizabeth, taken aback at this behavior, could only sit in intense curiosity. Her conscience began to hurt—had she offended the man with her amusement at the Forsters' expense?

She stood. "Mr. Darcy, I must apologize—"

The gentleman raised his hand. "No, Miss Elizabeth. You have nothing to apologize for. The fault is mine."

Elizabeth was flabbergasted. "You, sir?" she exclaimed.

Darcy kept his face to the window. "Yes. If only I had revealed Wickham's true character to the world, this sad turn of events would not have happened."

"Mr. Darcy, you take too much upon yourself!" The gentleman turned to her as she continued. "I think the proper place for blame must reside with the parties involved!"

“But... I knew of Wickham’s ways—”

“Indeed you did, and I thank you most heartily that you trusted me with that information. Because you put your trust in me, I was able to convince my father not to allow my sister, Lydia, to accompany the Fosters to Brighton.” At his alarmed look, she added, “Do not fear, Mr. Darcy. I said nothing of... of Ramsgate.”

Darcy was silent as Elizabeth began to pace the room. “We both know the kind of man Mr. Wickham is. I have made the acquaintance of Mrs. Forster, and a sillier girl has never been born. She married the colonel for his money and status, so she was easy prey for the first rake to cross her path. Had it not been Mr. Wickham, it would have been someone else. She is a married woman; she must have known what she was about.

“And her husband—what of him? Taking for his bride a young, foolish child almost half his age! What kind of wife could she be to him?” She glanced at her companion, only to see him hide a grin. A picture of Harriet Foster’s pretty face and well-formed figure came into her innocent mind, and in a flash, Elizabeth knew *exactly* what had attracted the colonel. Realization of what she had said mortified her, and she blushed red.

Darcy crossed to her. “Do not distress yourself, Miss Elizabeth. I comprehend your meaning.”

Elizabeth hid her face in her hands. “Oh, what must you think of me?”

Speaking very low, Darcy responded, “Of all people, you know most certainly what I think of you, and your defense of my actions—or inactions—have only increased those feelings.”

Elizabeth was confused. Before coming to Pemberley, she was certain that Darcy despised her for her stupid and intemperate words in Kent. But the gentleman’s kind and open friendliness to her and her relations at Pemberley and Lambton had given rise to improbable hopes. Might he still love her? What did his words mean? She looked at him, the question plainly in her eyes.

Darcy seemed suddenly to realize that they were alone in a closed room. “Miss Bennet, might I tempt you to a stroll about the gardens of the inn until your relations return?” Elizabeth agreed to the scheme, and upon notifying the maid, the pair set off directly. When they reached their destination, Darcy offered his arm to the lady, who demurely took it.

Walking beside a rosebush, Elizabeth said, “You have been very kind to my aunt and uncle, sir.”

“Say nothing of that. While I enjoy meeting such excellent people as Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, my first thought was to take to heart a hard lesson taught to me by a very kind lady and take the trouble of practicing more the art of gentlemanly behavior.”

“Oh!” she cried, “pray do not repeat what I then said. I assure you that I have long been most heartily ashamed of it.”

Darcy looked at her with a small, ironic smile. “What did you say of me that I did not deserve? For, though your accusations were ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises, my behavior to you at the time merited the severest reproof. It was unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence.”

“We will not quarrel for the greater share of blame annexed to *that* evening,” said Elizabeth, shaking her head. “The conduct of neither of us, if strictly examined, would be irreproachable. But since then, we have both, I hope, improved in civility.”

“For you, I will make no such claim. You have always treated me in a manner that I most richly deserve, a service for which I thank you. But I cannot be so easily reconciled to myself. The recollection of what I then said—of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it—is now, and has been many months, inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied! I shall never forget: ‘Had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.’ Those were your words. You know not, you can scarcely conceive, how they have tortured me, though, it was some time, I confess, before I was reasonable enough to allow their justice.”

“I was certainly very far from expecting them to make so strong an impression. I had not the smallest idea of their being ever felt in such a way.”

“I can easily believe it. You thought me then devoid of every proper feeling. I am sure you did.”

"*Had* anyone had such thoughts in the past," she prevaricated, "please know that they would be completely overthrown by any causal study of your character. I can assure you that for many months, I have considered you one of the most admirable men of my acquaintance." Elizabeth stopped. She had not planned to go so far, but after a moment, she added, "Sir, you really should learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure."

She chanced a look at her companion and saw that her words had left their mark. His dark eyes burned in a manner she had seen before in Hertfordshire and Kent. Then, she thought he only looked upon her to find fault. Now she knew better. A frisson of nervousness, anticipation, and trepidation flowed through her body.

"I cannot give you credit for any philosophy of the kind. Your retrospections must be so totally void of reproach, that the contentment arising from them is not of philosophy, but, what is much better, of ignorance. But with me, it is not so. Painful recollections will intrude, which cannot, which ought not, to be repelled. I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child, I was taught what was right; but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Unfortunately, an only son—for many years an only child—I was spoilt by my parents, who, though good themselves (my father particularly, all that was benevolent and amiable), allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing—to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. Such I was, from eight to eight-and-twenty; and such I might still have been but for you!"

Elizabeth thought she would faint.

"What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you I was properly humbled. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased."

The couple stopped, and in a low earnest tone, Mr. Darcy said, "You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged; but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever."

"Mr. Darcy... I—"

"But," he continued, "if you would give me one more, underserved chance, I swear you will not be sorry for it. Allow me to court you—properly, openly, as you deserve."

Elizabeth had not known how much she wanted Mr. Darcy to renew his addresses until she heard his words. She knew that there was no man on earth that so suited her, in manner and disposition! If anyone could make her happy, it was he, and she was sure she brought some small level of joy into his life—

Jane! Her mind screamed that one issue unresolved between them. Darcy seemed to see the confusion on her face, for he spoke again.

"You are uncertain. I am sorry to declare myself so forcefully, when you are unprepared. Forgive my selfishness—"

"No, Mr. Darcy! I... I must admit I receive the assurances of your continued regard with nothing but pleasure, but we must have some conversation before I answer you."

"Of course, of course! Shall we sit down?" A bench suited their purposes, one that offered some privacy, but was not too hidden to cause scandal.

Elizabeth could not look at her suitor. "Mr. Darcy, there are two issues I must raise with you. One is the matter of my sister and your friend."

"I expected this conversation. I had already decided to speak to Bingley as soon as practical about returning to Netherfield, where, I hope, he may judge for himself the level of your sister's attachment." At Elizabeth's perplexed look, he said, "I am done with match-making and match-breaking. As I said before, disguise of any sort is my abhorrence. You see how it has ill-served me. Bingley must see to himself. Should Miss Bennet return his affections, I will confess all to him."

"You are very good, sir." Elizabeth then smiled impishly. "Of course, Mr. Bingley's return to Hertfordshire suits your purposes, if you intend to carry out your courtship of a certain lady there!"

At first, Elizabeth thought she had gone too far, as Darcy's face blushed. But he saw the twinkle in her eye and barked out a relived laugh. "I suppose you are correct, as always, Miss Elizabeth!"

Lizzy's heart beat wildly at the sight of his dimples. *Heavens! Had he smiled like that at Netherfield, how things might be different!*

"But, now for your second question."

"Sir," she hesitated. This argument was far weaker than it had been only minutes before. How was it that Darcy could so overthrow her thoughts? "Sir, please know I do receive your assurances with pleasure—a great deal of pleasure. However, my character demands that I be open with you. You should know that while there has been a warming of my regard, I cannot say my feelings are equal to yours."

Darcy sighed. "I could not hope that they were. Thus, my intention to court you. To give you time to know me and allow me the opportunity to convince you to accept me."

"You are not concerned?"

"Elizabeth, I have loved you for a very long time. I can be patient if I have hope."

Elizabeth's heart turned over at Darcy's use of her name; his voice was a caress. She knew she must answer him, but her innate fear of totally surrendering to him was hard to overcome.

"Your name is Fitzwilliam, I believe?" She hoped her answer would serve for now. It did—his dimples made their reappearance as he nodded. "Fitzwilliam, you may speak to my father."

"And your uncle here in Lambton?"

Elizabeth laughed. "I see you are most determined!"

Darcy took her hand. "Have you just realized that? Do you not know I will do whatever I must? Are you uncertain of me?"

"No," she breathed. "It is just... that this ... is all so new to me."

"For me, as well." He kissed her hand. "Elizabeth?"

"Yes?"

"May I seal our agreement with a kiss?"

Elizabeth grew lightheaded, but she managed to say, "I believe, Fitzwilliam, it is a requirement."

As his lips approached hers, he whispered, "I believe you are right again, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth!"

The End



Story II – A Most Deserving Couple

(Author's Note: In this Pride & Prejudice variation, things are not what they seem, especially in Ramsgate.)

FITZWILLIAM DARCY, AN ERSTWHILE knight errant, walked the evening streets of a most disreputable section of London, looking for a particular boarding house. With him were two burley footmen, for once not dressed in Darcy livery. At a corner, he checked the slip of paper in his hand again. The few words scribbled upon it in Mrs. Younge's crabbed hand had cost him a gold sovereign. Satisfied that the directions were complete, he waved his men on. The three entered a run-down public house and strode directly to the barkeep.

"My man," Darcy said without preamble, "I am looking for George Wickham. He should be with a young woman. I have reason to know that he is here. Which room is he in?"

The man, wiping a glass with a filthy towel, scowled at the well-dressed gentleman. "Be your name Darcy, guv'nor?"

Darcy hid his astonishment at being recognized. "I am Mr. Darcy," he replied in a frosty tone.

The barkeep returned to his task. "Room six, at the top o' th'stairs."

Darcy placed a shilling on the bar and the small group ascended the stairs. Darcy quickly found the room and rapped on it with the head of his cane—a cane that concealed a thin sword.

"Wickham! Wickham! Open up, I say!"

The two footmen crowded close to the door as they heard noises from within. Suddenly, the door opened.

"Darcy! You finally got here!" cried George Wickham.



Having ordered his footmen to stand guard outside, Darcy entered the small room at Wickham's invitation. Stepping over an empty wine bottle and some discarded clothing, Darcy eased himself into the rather rickety chair. "All right, Wickham," he began, "I will not mince words. I have come for Miss Lydia Bennet. Produce her immediately."

"Here—who are you to order me about?" Wickham cried. "My wife is no concern of yours."

"Wickham, I warn you—I beg your pardon? Did you say wife?"

"I did."

"You are married?"

"Yes."

"To Miss Lydia Bennet?"

Wickham grinned. "I'll say!"

Darcy thought for a moment, then scowled. "It cannot be a real wedding. You had not the time for the bans to be read or to go to Scotland, and you do not have the money to purchase a special license!"

Wickham looked abashed. "Well... that's true. But it's not because of lack of trying! Lydia's my wife, and there's an end to it!"

"What did you do?"

"You see, there's this gent I know near the Thames. Captain of a riverboat—"

"Wickham! A riverboat captain cannot perform a marriage!"

"Why not? A ship's captain can! We rowed right offshore—did it right. Damn near capsized, we did!"

Darcy put a hand to his face. "Wickham, it is not the same."

"Well, maybe not in a strictly legal parlance—"

"That is the only parlance that counts!"

"Well, what else could we do? Denny took all my money!"

"What?"

"I really was trying to do things right this time, Darcy. No more drinkin' or gamblin'. I was saving my money so's we could get married, proper-like."

"Wickham, why are you speaking in that Cockney manner? You are not an East Ender; you are from Derbyshire."

"Oh! Ha! I suppose I have been around the docks too much lately. You know my ear for accents. I will attempt to refrain from offending your sensibilities, Darcy. To continue, Denny found out and threatened to write to Mr. Bennet. I had to pay him off."

Darcy shook his head in confusion. "Perhaps you should start at the beginning."

"Very well. You see, Lydia and I—"

"Hold on, Wickham. Where is Miss Lydia?"

"That's *Mrs. Wickham* to you, sir!"

"Wickham—!"

Wickham sighed. "She's out delivering hats to a shop a couple of streets away."

"Hats?"

"Bonnets, actually. She's very good, and we need the money. She should be back within the hour."

"Are you saying Miss L— urr, she's making bonnets for sale?"

"Yes. The first ones she made were old ones fixed up with scraps of cloth from an old dress. We took the money from them to buy more cheap plain bonnets and cloth."

"Indeed?"

"Our inventory and raw materials are in the closet there. Care for a look?"

"That is all right. I believe you."

"It's no trouble. You ought to see this blue pattern we found. Very sharp—it should fetch a pretty penny."

"Wickham, let us get back to the story."

"Oh, very well. I had not been long in Hertfordshire before I found I fancied Miss Lydia Bennet above any other lady of my acquaintance. But me, a poor lieutenant of militia—how could I afford to marry her? There was no way Mr. Bennet would approve. I thought things were hopeless."

"Wait. You liked Miss Lydia? Then how do you explain your attentions to Mary King?"

"That little freckled thing? That was only about the money. But after a while, even her ten thousand was not anywhere near enough for me to put up with her any more. But she was fixated on me, so I had to extract myself."

"How did you do that?"

"Who do you think wrote to her uncle? Worked like a dream."

Darcy grew grim. "I see. Ten thousand was not enough, but thirty thousand—"

Wickham hung his head sheepishly. "Uhh, Darce, it was not quite like that."

"What do you mean?"

"Really, I had very little to do with all that—"

"Do not lie to me!" Darcy thundered. "You tried to seduce my sister!"

"Darcy, keep your voice down!" Wickham cried. "Do you *want* to ruin Georgie's reputation?"

"That is fine, coming from you," Darcy responded, but in a quieter voice.

"Darce, you do not understand. That was all Mrs. Younge's idea. And... you are not going to like this—"

"Like what?"

"I'm telling the truth—"

"Tell me!"

"Georgie was in on it."

"WHAT?" Darcy leapt to his feet, almost overturning the table between them.

"DON'T HIT ME! LET ME EXPLAIN! Sit down, please!"

"I will NOT ALLOW you to defame my sister!"

Wickham was begging. "Just listen to me first! If you do not believe me, you can have the first punch."

Darcy, his face dark, sat back down.

"The whole idea was Mrs. Younge's. She wanted to get her hands on Georgiana's money, and figured I would be the tool to extract it. She convinced Georgie that I was destitute and that the way to get you to give me money was to pretend to run away with me. But what Younge really had in mind was a real marriage. That way she would control Georgie's money through me."

"Wickham, that makes no sense! How would she control the money through you?"

"She was to be my mistress."

Darcy thought about that. "Oh God, you were sleeping with Mrs. Younge?" Wickham nodded guiltily. "So you were going to have both of them?"

This time, Wickham leapt to his feet. "YOU TAKE THAT BACK!"

"Pardon me?"

"You take back that part about Georgie and me! That is just sick!"

"You... you were not after Georgiana?"

"You sick bastard! She is like a sister to me! Ugh!"

"Then... then why did you say that you were?"

"Because it was part of the plan to get some money from you. We did not know until the last moment that Younge had her own game going."

"How can I believe you?"

"Who do you think wrote to you about traveling to Ramsgate?"

"You... you know about that? No one knows about that note!"

"Except the person that wrote it."

"Then... then why was Georgie so upset?"

"You were so angry, and Mrs. Younge proved to be so wicked. Is there any wonder she took the blame on-to herself? You are not the only Darcy with an over-developed sense of honor!"

Darcy simply sat there, absorbing all that he had learned. "So, you say you were not trying to seduce Georgie."

"Right."

"But you were trying to get more money from me."

"Yes— Oh, come on, Darce! I was hungry!"

"That is no excuse."

Wickham shrugged. "Younge was worse."

Darcy sighed. "Let us return to Lydia. Why did you blacken my name in Meryton?"

"Well, I thought that if everybody felt sorry for me, it would ease my way into Meryton society. You must admit you did not do yourself any favors during your time in the neighborhood. If you would have danced with a few of the local girls, you would have been the toast of the village! I would not have had a chance!"

Darcy winced. That was too close for comfort to what Miss Elizabeth had said back in Hunsford.

"So, all the time you were in Meryton, you were pining for Miss Lydia?"

"That's so. But I thought I had no chance. But Providence smiled me when Mrs. Forster invited Lydia to travel to Brighton with us! For a month I courted her, meeting secretly and in public, often right underneath Mrs. Forster's nose. All the while I was trying to raise the funds to be able to ask Mr. Bennet for Lydia. Then everything went wrong."

"Denny."

Wickham nodded. "Yes, he was part of it. But the main difficulty was Mrs. Forster."

"Why? Did she discover you?"

"No. She wanted me for herself."

Darcy groaned, "Oh, good lord!"

Wickham raised his hand helplessly. "I cannot be held responsible for that! Women throw themselves at me. You remember what it was like at university."

"You could have said no."

"Sure, I could," Wickham said dismissively.

"I did."

Wickham gave his old childhood friend a sideways glance. "Humph. I'll bet you're gay."

"Hardly."

Wickham narrowed his eyes. "You are not as upset as I thought you would be—me questioning your sexuality. Are you getting some?"

Darcy started. "Wickham!"

"Sweet on someone, then. Who? Let me think."

"Wickham—" Darcy said dangerously.

"Not that Bingley bitch—I know! Miss Elizabeth Bennet!"

"Wickham, stop it!"

"Now it makes sense why you have shown so much interest in the Bennets. I thought there was something there. Good choice, old boy!"

Darcy pounded the table with a fist. "Wickham, I will not stand for you making untoward statements about— What was that?"

"Let me tell you, old chum, when it comes to pleasure, if Miss Elizabeth is anything like her sister... well, let us just say you have a happy life before you!"

Darcy was both offended and intrigued by Wickham's words. Curiosity won out. "I do not understand your meaning."

"Are you *sure* you're not gay?"

"Dammit Wickham! Tell me what you mean!"

"Darcy, I am no stranger to a woman's bed. But I have NEVER been with anyone like my Lydie!"

"Lydie?"

"Yes. So many curves where a man might find comfort. Always ready for a romp. A quick learner, and able to come up with some *interesting* ideas of her own! And that mouth of hers! Good for something other than talking, if you catch my meaning."

"I am... not sure—"

Wickham sat back, disgusted. "Ah, you should have gone to the brothels while at Cambridge, like I told you!"

Darcy got it. "Wickham, you are no gentleman!"

"Yes, I'm well aware of that. Fortunately, Lydie's no gentle-lady in the boudoir, thank goodness! I'm in love!"

"In love!" Darcy repeated derisively. Catching Wickham's look, he grew amazed. "Are you in earnest?"

"Yes! I know, I know! I can hardly believe it myself. But it is true. Lydie's a female version of me!"

At that moment, the door to the room opened, and in bounced a short, buxom girl in a dress that had seen better days. "Wicky!" she cried. "Wicky! Guess how much— Mr. Darcy! What a surprise!"

Darcy got to his feet and gave the girl a short bow. "Good evening, Miss Lydia."

She presented her hand with a smile. "No, Mr. Darcy. I am Mrs. Wickham, now! Wicky, have you not told him?"

Wickham gave his bride a discreet peck on the cheek. "I did, my pet, but my old friend did not believe me."

Lydia tried to give Darcy a stern look, but her giggles spoiled her performance. "Dear Wickham and I married almost a fortnight ago, Mr. Darcy. We have the certificate, if you would care to see it."

Darcy gave in to the girl's delusion. "Forgive me, Mrs. Wickham. Your husband indeed gave me details of your... wedding."

"It is too bad you could not be there, but the boat was so small! That is why I could not invite my sisters. Wicky, did you not offer Mr. Darcy any refreshments?" She turned to Darcy. "Forgive us, sir. I will be right back!" To her husband, she said, "Here is the money from the shop, dear."

Wickham laughed as he took the shelf of notes. "Twenty pounds! You're a wonder!"

"There is more where that came from, but we will have to get to work!" Lydia advised him. "I will be just a moment, Mr. Darcy." With that, Lydia went into a back room. Meanwhile, her common-law husband put the money in a lockbox near the table.

"Twenty pounds, just for bonnets?" Darcy asked in wonder.

"Hah! You have not priced ladies goods lately, have you?" Wickham smiled. "The secret is good materials and a French name. *Chapeaux de Mme. Minou*—ladies will pay extra for something French, you know."

"Hats by Miss Pussycat?"

"You know that, and I know that. But they do not know that, or they do not care!"

A headache was starting just behind Darcy's right eye when Lydia returned with a tray. "Here. It is not much, but I hope you will like it." She put the tray of biscuits on the table. "I will pop down for the tea. Won't be a minute!" She blew a kiss to Wickham and left through the main door.

Wickham grinned. "Try some o' this, old boy!" he said as he handed a biscuit to Darcy. Never had Darcy put something so delicious in his mouth. His obvious pleasure drew a laugh from his companion. "Not bad, eh? Now do you understand? She can cook, she can fuck, and she makes more money than she spends! What more can you ask from a wife, eh?"

Darcy cleared his throat. "Intelligent conversation?"

"Overrated in my opinion, especially since Lydie has other talents her tongue is better suited for, like—"

"I really DO NOT need to know, Wickham!" Darcy collected himself. "The point remains that you are not legally married!"

"Yes, I know. But that is where you come in. You can help us—front the cash so we can get a special license. Maybe be a silent investor in *Chapeaux de Mme. Minou*. We certainly can use the capital."

"You expect *me* to help?"

"Darcy, come on. Help a fellow out. Besides, we will give you part ownership in the business. You will make a tidy profit, you'll see."

"You really think this venture will make enough to support both of you?"

"Well, we hope so. If we can expand the market, we might be able to gross two hundred a month."

Darcy's business mind mulled over the figures. "That is not net. You will need outside income to cover your living expenses. What will you do?"

Wickham sighed. "It is a shame about the militia. I rather fancied the military life. The discipline was good for me, and the red coat really got Lydie's juices going—"

"Too much information, Wickham! All right, here is my offer. I will pay for your special license, get you a commission in the regulars, pay off any debts you have left, and make an investment in the business. I will cover a year's worth of fabrics from Lydia's uncle, Mr. Gardiner. How's that?"

"Splendid! Umm, do you think you can get us in a regiment some distance from Hertfordshire? Mrs. Bennet is a bad influence on Lydia."

I have gone insane, Darcy thought. "I can make no promises. Colonel Fitzwilliam might be able to help."

"Excellent!" Wickham reached into the lockbox and removed a bottle of brandy. "Been saving this for a celebration, and this is as good a reason as any!" He got two rather clean glasses and filled them. Handing one to Darcy, he said, "You know, if you get off your high horse and marry Lizzy, we will finally be brothers! Here's to the Bennet ladies!"

Darcy returned the toast and threw back the drink. "Ow, but that is good stuff!" He leaned forward. "Now, before your wife gets back, what's that about the Bennet girls being talented?"

The End



Story III – Three Conversations

(Author's Note: In this Pride & Prejudice variation, due to illness in the family, the Gardiners do not go on their trip to Derbyshire and the Peaks. Therefore, Elizabeth is home in Hertfordshire.)

Part 1

"DARCY, I AM THINKING about giving up Netherfield."

Darcy looked up in surprise at his guest. "Indeed, Charles? What makes you consider that now?"

Bingley paced the length of Darcy's Pemberley study. "It is been on my mind these many weeks. Why should I lease a house and property that I do not intend to inhabit? It is not that good an investment. No, I believe I should leave." He glanced at his great friend. "What is your opinion?"

Darcy shifted uncomfortably in his chair as he set down his glass of brandy. Since Kent, he knew he would have to talk to Bingley about what he had learned of Miss Bennet. With Bingley and his sisters at Scarborough these few months, his friend's summer visit to Pemberley with Georgiana was the first opportunity for this conversation—a dreaded one, he had to admit to himself.

"Bingley," he began cautiously, "as I said before, Netherfield shows great promise, given close and attentive management. The lease was very reasonable, and the price under contract, should you buy the place, is a good one. It is a fine opportunity. I cannot say you will find its like again soon. You should consider this carefully."

"I have thought it over, most constantly. You said it needs my close attention, and you are right. But I... I have no desire to live in Hertfordshire. It would be too painful."

Darcy took a sip of his drink. "I understand, Charles." *Better than you think!* "But, this is a momentous decision. You should not commit yourself until you can see for yourself that things are beyond repair—both at the estate and...elsewhere."

"What do you mean?"

Darcy picked his words with great care. "Charles, I too have been thinking of Hertfordshire. I believe I might have been deceived about... certain aspects and opinions of some of the inhabitants. Further study is warranted—nay, required."

"I fail to understand your meaning."

"It is possible I may have been mistaken about Miss Bennet."

"What?" Bingley stared at him. "Why do you think this?"

The last thing Darcy wanted to do was confess his actions in Hunsford. "Since we last spoke of this matter, I have reflected on my considerations and conclusions. I must admit I am dissatisfied with them and with my advice to you. Some things I spoke of were beneath me." He looked at Bingley with regret. "I apologize. I should never have interfered."

"Do you say you were wrong?"

"I think I might have been, yes."

Bingley just stood, blinking, an action that increased Darcy's unease.

"Charles, I am so very sorry!"

"No, it not that," Bingley said in a voice of wonder. "It is just you have never admitted to being in the wrong to me—not in all the years I have known you."

Bingley could not know how those words caused pain to his friend. He started to pace again. "So, you think I should return to Netherfield?"

"Yes, to get a proper feel for the 'lay of the land,' as it were."

"I take it we are speaking of more than the estate."

"Yes."

Darcy watched as a glow of excitement grew in his friend's face, only to see it vanish in a trice. "No, it is impossible! I cannot hope. It is unsupportable!"

"Charles—"

"No, Darcy. I appreciate your encouragement, but I must be realistic about Miss Bennet." He slumped into an armchair across from Darcy. "She cannot hold me in any particular regard. I must accept that. Else, she would have written to Caroline whist we were in Town." He dropped his face into his hands.

Darcy groaned inwardly. The time had come for a very uncomfortable conversation. He had intended to postpone this discussion until it was certain that not only Miss Elizabeth had been proven correct about her sister's feelings, but that Miss Jane still harbored those sensibilities. But Darcy had reckoned without taking into account Bingley's insecurities. There was only one thing to be done—a full confession. He took a full breath, steeled himself, and began.

"Charles, you do Miss Bennet an injustice. She did write your sister."

Bingley looked up. "What? She did?" At Darcy's nod, he continued. "How do you know?"

"Caroline told me."

An astonished Bingley gasped. "Caroline received a letter from Miss Bennett, and you all hid it from me?"

"Charles, there is more. Caroline and Mrs. Hurst visited Miss Bennet at her relations in Town—"

"Miss Bennet was in LONDON?"

"—and waited upon her at Bingley House."

Bingley jumped to his feet. "You... you— Oh!" Darcy watched as his best friend wrestled with his emotions.

"Charles, I certainly deserve any name you wish to call me. I seriously doubt it will be something other than I have named myself these last months."

"Really? That remains to be seen!" He stared hard at his host. "Why, Darcy? I thought you my friend!"

"Friendship was my motivation."

"Damning me to misery was an act of *friendship*?"

"Better than damning you to an unhappy marriage."

"That again!" Bingley paced about the room, muttering curses, still fighting his anger. With a sinking feeling, Darcy knew he was losing his best friend. For several terrible minutes, he watched Bingley prowl the room.

Finally, he turned to Darcy. "Why are you telling me this now? What has changed?"

Time for the final shoe to drop. "When I was last in Kent, I received information that made me question my belief in Miss Bennet's indifference."

"From whom?"

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

Bingley's jaw dropped. "What did she say?"

Darcy could not stop himself from gulping. "That her sister was unhappy over your departure. I believe the words she used were 'ruined forever the happiness of her sister.' Apparently, Miss Elizabeth learned of my involvement in separating you."

"My God!" Bingley pulled at his hair. "You mean Jane cares?"

"That you must determine for yourself."

"How? How can I do that?"

"By returning to Hertfordshire."

"All this time... eight months! Oh, Darcy! She must think I have abandoned her. She will never forgive me."

"Charles, Charles, listen to me, if but for the last time. If you truly care for Miss Bennet, then your path is clear. You should return to Hertfordshire and judge for yourself the state of Miss Bennet's feelings. If she was sincerely attached, you must do right by her."

"What? You now say I should just barge into Longbourn and propose?"

"No, of course not! But, you must give Miss Bennet the opportunity to see that you will do the honorable thing if she so desires it."

"And if she no longer wants me?"

"Then you must withdraw, taking upon yourself all of the mortification of disappointed hopes as a gentleman should." Bingley sat back, anger, fear, and uncertainty clear on his face. Darcy sighed and stood. "I am certain you have long desired my absence. I will leave you now. Whatever you decide, I want you to know that I have valued our friendship." Darcy's voice broke. "Goodnight, Charles."

"Wait!" cried Bingley. "Where are you going?"

"I... I thought you wanted privacy."

"No! No, I need you! Or rather, I need two things of you!"

"I am at your disposal, Charles."

"I must send an express to Netherfield—tonight!"

Darcy's eyebrows rose. "Very well. I will arrange for a rider immediately."

"Good, good. And I need a coach."

Darcy nodded. "If you wish. But I thought you would rather ride."

"Ride?" Bingley looked at his friend in confusion. "You would rather ride all the way to Hertfordshire?"

"I? You want me to accompany you?"

"Good lord, man, of course I do! You got me into this predicament, and you will damn well help me out of it!" He rose and extended his hand. "After all, what are friends for?"

Darcy shook it, and the two men stared at each other. "Charles," Darcy began, "you are too good—"

"Ah, enough of that! We have planning to do! Can you leave at first light?"

"Charles, I do need at least a day to settle my affairs here."

"All right. One day, but not an hour more! My angel awaits!"



Part 2

AN ANXIOUS CHARLES BINGLEY sat in the comfort of Darcy's coach, watching the green fields of Hertfordshire pass by the window. He glanced at his companion sitting across from him, his nose in a book, perfectly at ease. Not for the first time, Bingley envied Darcy's ability to focus upon the task at hand. He never seemed to be nervous or uncertain. *Unlike me*, he thought.

Since their confrontation three days ago, Bingley's thoughts had been in a state of extreme flux. While Darcy calmly explained to Georgiana that unexpected business had called the two of them to the south, Bingley had been a nervous wreck. At one moment, he wanted to make for Longbourn with all possible speed. A moment later, he was all but certain that his quest was hopeless. He avoided Caroline as much as he could, for he doubted he could restrain his temper in her presence. Bingley had yet to confront either of his sisters

over their deceit, but the day of reckoning had been merely delayed. The extent of his revenge would depend upon the state of Jane Bennet's feelings.

Jane! Her pain—her feelings—were the one constant in Bingley's brain. If he could do anything for her happiness, it would be done. If the price of her affection was the tossing off of his relations, Bingley would do it without a moment's hesitation.

As the miles dragged on during their journey, Bingley began to consider how Darcy received his intelligence about Jane. The source was very surprising. Bingley had no idea that Darcy had met Miss Elizabeth in Kent. He was also intently curious to learn how on earth the subject of himself and Jane had ever come up between them, given Miss Elizabeth's barely concealed hostility towards Darcy.

It is a shame, he thought. Darcy showed great interest in Miss Elizabeth. Of course, only one who knows Darcy as well as I do could see his interest. Did Jane I and I discuss the matter? I believe we did. But recalling Miss Elizabeth's attitude towards Darcy, I do not believe she thinks very highly of my friend. I wonder if she did overhear Darcy's ridiculous refusal to dance with her when we first met at that assembly. She did seem to take an immediate dislike of him. So why would she share such information of a personal nature about her sister?

He looked over at Darcy. *No help there. Darcy can be as stubborn as a mule when he puts his mind to it. No amount of wheedling will get him to talk. I have tried and tried, but he will not speak of it. Something happened, and he is not at all happy about it.*

A signpost came into view. "Darcy! We are almost there," he informed his friend.



The butler met the two gentlemen outside the front door of Netherfield while the groomsmen rushed out to assist the coachman and to care for the horses.

"Welcome back, Mr. Bingley. Welcome, Mr. Darcy. Sir, everything has been arranged as you requested in your message."

"Thank you, Perkins. Any news of the neighborhood?" Bingley inquired off-handily, as he removed his traveling coat.

"No, sir," said the butler, "Meryton is very quiet."

One of the young grooms managing the coach, remarked, "Nothin' new, sir? Nothin' besides the scandal at Longbourn, that is!"

"Henry Dunn!" cried Perkins. "For shame!"

Both Bingley and Darcy froze. "*What scandal?*" Bingley demanded.

The groom looked between the irate butler and agitated master, sighed, and then stepped forward. "Begin' your pardon, sir, I thought you knew. Why, it's all over Meryton that one of the Bennet girls run off and left her family. Took off with one of them officers from the militia a fortnight ago, it seems. Some say they went to Scotland, but others... well, the whole village is in an uproar."

Bingley was in shock. "Perkins! What do you know about this?"

Perkins flinched at the unlikely show of temper from his employer. "I am afraid the unpleasantness is common knowledge, sir. It is known that Mr. Bennet is in Town, and the rest of the family has withdrawn to Longbourn."

Bingley did not want to ask—it could not be Jane—but the words escaped his lips. "Do you know who the gossip is about?"

Henry shook his head. "Not sure, sir," earning a gasp from Darcy, "but I have seen Miss Bennet at the green grocer's just two days ago. Mrs. Goulding gave her the cut direct, right there in the middle of the street! Such a shame how she was treated! And her being such a fine lady."

“Good God! How dare she—!” At that moment, Bingley felt Darcy’s hand on his arm, tugging him towards the front door of the house.

“It is to be expected, Charles,” he said in a low, angry voice.

“What are we to do?” Bingley asked.

“Every man must do as he must,” Darcy growled as he turned to Henry. In a calm voice that would brook no opposition, he said, “You! Prepare a horse for me, this instant.”

It took a moment for Bingley to determine Darcy’s purpose. “Yes! Two horses, if you please. Hurry, man!”



A half-hour later, the two men rode up the lane to Longbourn. During the ride, neither had spoken, which was just as well for Bingley. He was relieved that Jane was not the Bennet girl involved, but he was angry and concerned for her. He knew that he would do anything to relieve her pain and had vowed to tell her so as soon as her could. A boy, surprise clearly written on his face, came to take the mounts as Bingley and Darcy made for the door. The astonishment was redoubled in the expression of Mrs. Hill, but she showed the gentlemen to the parlor. They waited an agonizing five minutes before Miss Bennet made her appearance.

“Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy, welcome to Longbourn,” a flustered Jane Bennet said. Bingley could see the circles under her eyes, and his heart ached for her. “Please be seated. I shall send for tea.”

“Thank you, Miss Bennet. You are too kind.” Jane spoke to Mrs. Hill, then moved to an armchair, and the gentlemen took their seats.

“Thank you for calling on us. I did not know you had returned to Netherfield.”

Bingley could see that Jane would not look him in the eye. “We only arrived this afternoon, Miss Bennet, and hurried to pay our respects.”

“Oh! Then you—” Jane caught herself, and her expression changed from uncertain delight to despair. “I must thank you, but I am afraid there is some news you do not—”

Bingley cut in. “Miss Bennet, please do not trouble yourself. We have been apprised of your family’s misfortune, and we are here to offer our friendship, support, and services.” He glanced at the still silent, grave Darcy. “I speak for both of us.”

An extraordinary occurrence then took place. Jane Bennet broke down in tears. Before he could stop himself, Bingley was on his knees at her side, holding one of her hands.

“Miss Bennet, please!” he cried with more feeling than politeness. “Let me call your maid. Is there nothing you could take, to give you present relief? A glass of wine—shall I get you one? You are very ill.”

“No, I thank you,” said she, her eyes shining wet with tears. “Please accept my apology for my behavior. You are so... so kind. You are too good.”

“If I were a good man, I would have never left Netherfield.” Bingley could not stop the words that had so filled his heart from flowing from his lips. “*You* have nothing to apologize for, while I— I doubt a lifetime will be enough to show my repentance.”

“Mr. Bingley?” Jane looked at him in confusion.

Darcy finally roused himself to speak. He crossed over, placed his hand on Bingley’s shoulder, and said, “Charles, now is not the time or the place.” He turned his eyes to Jane. “Miss Bennet, Bingley and I are eager to offer our services. It would be a kindness if you would allow us to be of use to you at this time.”

Bingley moved to a chair next to Jane. He had not released her hand, however. “Whatever you ask of us shall be done.”

“I... I do not know what to say. My father is not here, but on his behalf, I thank you with all my heart.”

Darcy smiled slightly then became grave again. "Miss Bennet, I would not pain you at this time if I could help it, but we need information if we are to be of assistance. Can you tell us what you know of this matter?"

Jane hesitated, looked closely at Darcy and Bingley, then relaxed. "It cannot be concealed in any case. My youngest sister has left all her friends—has eloped—has thrown herself into the power of—"

"Youngest sister?" Darcy asked in a tone that to Bingley's ears sounded almost of relief.

"Yes, sir—Lydia has eloped with Mr. Wickham."

"*Wickham?*" Darcy cried in anguish.

"I am afraid so. I do not wonder at your outburst. From what my sister, Elizabeth, has said, you know him too well to doubt the rest. Lydia has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him to... to—"

"I understand," said a miserable Darcy.

"We are afraid she is lost forever. Oh! When I consider," she added, in a yet more agitated voice, "that I might have prevented it! I, who was told what he was. Had I but explained some part of it only—some part of what I learnt—to my own family! Had his character been known, this could not have happened. But it is all... all too late now."

Darcy reeled as though he had been struck. Bingley took it upon himself to comfort Miss Bennet.

"Now, now, Miss Bennet. I know something of Mr. Wickham's character. From what I have been told, he is a charlatan. Such men are very well-versed in deceiving people. You must not blame yourself."

"Thank you, but I knew of his character! Had I spoken, Lydia never would have gone to Brighton!"

"I am sure you had your reasons for not speaking."

Jane's eyes flew to a distressed Darcy. "I... I did. You are right."

Bingley was curious at the exchange, but set it aside. "So, all this happened in Brighton?"

"Yes. The ---shire militia was moved to Brighton for the summer, and my unfortunate sister was invited as the guest of the colonel and his wife. There, I suppose, Mr. Wickham carried out his... his . . ."

Seduction, Bingley's mind finished her statement. "I am grieved, indeed. Grieved—shocked. But is it certain, absolutely certain?"

"Oh yes! They left Brighton together a fortnight ago and were traced almost to London, but not beyond. They are certainly not gone to Scotland."

Darcy spoke up. "And what has been done, what has been attempted, to recover her?"

"My father is gone to London and has my uncle's assistance. But nothing can be done—I know very well that nothing can be done. How is such a man to be worked on? How are they even to be discovered? We have not the smallest hope. It is every way horrible!"

Bingley knelt, trying to find something to say. "Your family—are they bearing up, at all?" He winced at his stupid words.

"My mother is tolerably well, I trust, though her spirits are greatly shaken. She is upstairs and will have great satisfaction in knowing of your visit. She does not yet leave her dressing-room. Mary and Kitty are quite well."

"And Miss Elizabeth, is she well?" Darcy blurted out.

Again, Jane wore an unreadable expression as she answered him. "She is, but a sudden headache keeps her above stairs."

Bingley saw that this intelligence, rather than giving comfort, pained his friend anew. Darcy paced a moment, pale and trembling, before he begged to be excused and quitted the house.

Bingley struggled to apologize for his companion's extraordinary behavior, but Jane placed a hand on his arm, silencing him. "Sir, do not trouble yourself. I am not offended. Indeed, I believe Mr. Darcy is very upset. Please, I cannot say more."

Bingley grew more confused than ever. Knowing he had to see to Darcy, he excused himself, assuring Miss Bennet of his swift return, and went after his friend. He found him near the stable, his horse's bridle in hand.

"Darcy! Surely you are not leaving?"

Darcy would not look Bingley in the eye. "I think I must. Pray give my regards to the Bennets."

"Darcy, this is badly done! It will look as if you are leaving them because of their shame."

Darcy's head jerked up. "No! Never! Believe me, the Bennet family has my highest regard." He flushed and put a hand over his eyes. "I must leave to go to Town. I have business that cannot wait. Please, ask no more."

Bingley made sure the stableman was out of earshot. "I am afraid I cannot oblige you, Darce. What is the nature of this 'business?' You will tell me, or I shall think the less of you."

Darcy stared out into the distance.

"Tell me," Bingley demanded. "You owe me at least this."

Darcy looked hard at him. "You will tell no one. Swear it!"

"I will hear what you say first."

"I go to set things to rights. I must find Wickham."

"You? But how? Do you know where he is?"

"I know his ways, Charles. I can find him. I have done so before."

"Why do you not want anyone to know?"

"It would seem I do this to earn the gratitude of— of the Bennets. I would not have my motivations misunderstood. I am proud to do this for them. I do not desire thanks for doing my duty."

Charles clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Then, I shall join you. We will do it together."

"No. The fault is mine and so must the remedy be. I go alone."

"Your fault? How is this? How are you at fault for something Wickham has done?"

Darcy hung his head. "This is not the first time he has done something like this. If I had exposed his character before the world, none of this would have happened."

Bingley gripped his arm. "That is what Miss Bennet said! What the devil is going on? You will tell me now!"

Darcy shook free. "Bingley, leave off."

"Darcy, if you do not tell me, I will announce your intentions to Miss Bennet."

Darcy was furious with Bingley, but the gentleman stood patiently. He had left his friend with no choice.

"In Kent, I warned Miss Elizabeth about Wickham, but asked that she keep the information to herself. Apparently, she followed my wishes, save for sharing what she knew with her sister, which is perfectly reasonable. Had I not restricted her, surely, the whole family would have been told."

To Bingley, this made little sense. "Darcy, I think you take too much upon yourself. But I know you are intent on your purpose. I will make your excuses, but I do advise you return to Netherfield and leave at first light tomorrow. Surely a few hours will make no difference one way or the other."

"But Miss Lydia—"

"Darcy, must I be blunt?" He whispered, "Do you think Wickham has not had his way with her by now? It has been two weeks."

Bingley heard Darcy grind his teeth. "You are right," he managed in a calm voice. "I will leave tomorrow."

"We will talk more when I return to the house. Agreed?"

Darcy jerked a nod, mounted his horse, and with a short wave, set off for Netherfield. Bingley turned back to the house. On his way back in, he thought he saw a movement in an upstairs window. A moment later, he rejoined Jane in the parlor.

"Miss Bennet, I do not mean to impose myself on you at this time, but I would be happy to take tea with you, if you wish company." As she hesitated, he added, "I have not had the opportunity to talk with you since the twenty-sixth of November, since I was ignorant of your visit to Town."

Jane's eyes grew wide, and Bingley held her attention with his open countenance. "I... I do not understand."

"In short, I was misled. Miss Bennet, believe me, *I am very happy to be here.*"

Jane gasped and turned to the window. Bingley thought he heard her murmur, "Lizzy was right." When she turned again, she had collected herself.

"Mr. Bingley, I am glad you are here for tea. Allow me to inform my sisters of your visit. We all will be happy for the company." She paused. "I, most especially."

Bingley's grin almost split his face.

Jane had a becoming blush on her cheeks as she moved to the doorway. "I will only be a moment, sir."

"I am at my leisure, Miss Bennet."



An hour later, Bingley returned to Netherfield, where true to his word, Darcy awaited him. Bingley ordered a cold supper for two be served in the study. Once the sliced meat, cheese, and bread had been served and the servants had withdrawn, the Master of Netherfield spoke to his guest.

"I must say I had a most enjoyable visit with the Miss Bennets, given the present circumstances. I thank you for obliging me by conveying me to Hertfordshire."

"I am happy to have been of service to you, Charles," Darcy said to his plate.

Bingley said nothing and waited. Finally, Darcy raised his head. "And how are Miss Bennet's sisters? Miss Bennet herself seems well."

"She is, and I shall tell you that I will do what I should have done eight months ago. At the appropriate time, I will make my intentions clear, and if Miss Bennet will have me, then I will consider myself the most fortunate man alive."

Darcy snorted. "Knowing you, that time will not be far off." Darcy chewed a bit of cheese. "I must call myself a fool, Charles. No one with eyes in his head could mistake Miss Bennet's feelings. I hope one day you can forgive my interference."

"Oh, I suppose I have forgiven you already, old boy."

"Thank you, Charles. Now, I believe we were speaking of Miss Bennet's sisters?"

Bingley hid a smile, his suspicions proving to be correct. "Miss Mary and Miss Kitty were very gracious, and Miss Kitty especially happy for the company. They have not had callers, except for their Aunt Philips, for some time." He allowed Darcy to twist in his chair before adding, "Oh, and Miss Elizabeth came to see me off."

Darcy froze, and Bingley knew he had hit his mark. "She is well, Darcy, but like the rest of the family, she feels the weight of their troubles most acutely."

His reaction was far more than Bingley had foreseen. Darcy rose quickly, his chair falling back with a crash, and he strode directly over to the window. Bingley, knowing he had gone too far, hurried to follow, professing his apologies. "Darce—Darce—I am sorry! I should not tease you so!"

Darcy did not hear him. "Oh God, what have I done?"

"Darcy, listen to me." Bingley pulled Darcy about by one arm and was taken aback by the despair he saw in his eyes. "Miss Elizabeth asked about you most particularly. She insisted I give you her regards."

"She... she did?"

"Yes, she did." He paused. "There is much you have not told me about your dealings with Miss Elizabeth. Do you not think it is time you told me of them?"

"Charles... I cannot—"

"You admire her, do you not?"

Darcy was silent for a moment. "I do. But we did not part well in Kent."

"It seems she has forgiven you."

"She cannot—not after this."

"I do not understand. What could have happened that this business with Wickham could affect?"

"We... we misunderstood each other. Wickham was a part of it." He looked at Bingley. "Miss Bennet was part of it, too. Miss Elizabeth knows of my interference."

"Good lord." The absurdity of the situation overcame Bingley, and he could not stop a chuckle. "What did you *not* talk of? This is a strange manner of courting, Darcy."

"You have no idea, Charles." Darcy turned back to the window. "So, you see that I must set this to rights, but at the same time, I have no hope for myself. It is too much."

"Darcy, you are wrong."

"Maybe, maybe. Time will tell."

"Well, come back and eat, and tell me of your plans." Bingley was able to coax Darcy back to table. After some more prodding, Darcy gave him a brief outline of his intentions.

"This will not be inexpensive, Darcy. Are you sure I cannot help?"

"I will bear the weight of this and no one else."

"And I must stay here," Bingley grumbled. "What good can I do?"

"More than you think. By being a visible presence with the Bennet family, you restore their standing."

"By Jove, you are right!"

"Bingley, take care."

"What! Surely you do not think that—"

"I think that you must be very careful not to act impulsively, but rather thoughtfully. You must do everything in the proper and correct manner."

Bingley sat back, abashed. "Oh, of course." He thought. "I shall write to Mr. Bennet tonight, offering my support and asking his permission to call on his family."

"Much better. I would only request you keep my intentions to yourself."

"I do not comprehend your reasons, but I will do as you say."

"Thank you, Charles."

"I still say you do Miss Elizabeth an injustice. She does not think ill of you."

“Charles, please, do not tempt me! I cannot be that fortunate. Let us enjoy our meal before I retire. Tomorrow will be a long day.”



Part 3

ON A MILD DECEMBER day, Elizabeth Bennet sat on a large stone and tried to force her anxious mind to be soothed by her favorite sight, the view from Oakham Mount. But it was all for naught, for *he* was coming today.

Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Oh, how she dreaded and longed for this meeting! Not since Hunsford had she laid eyes on him.

No, that is not so. I saw him outside Longbourn and was too cowardly to greet him as I should. Oh, what does he think of me?

Every word, every movement, every emotion of that ill-fated interview in the Collins' parlor Elizabeth could recall with perfect clarity. His horrible and wonderful letter she knew by heart. The day she discovered the colossal extent of his deeds in service to her family would be forever etched in her mind. The moment that she realized that she loved him—that he was the only man in the world that could make her happy—was the most delightful and heart-wrenching of her life.

Oh, where can he be?

For almost four months she had wrestled with the meaning of Darcy's actions. Her heart said he had done it for her. Her mind screamed that it was impossible. She, however, could produce no other motivation, and yet... and yet ... Wickham and Lydia had been in the north county since Michaelmas, and now Christmas was nigh... and yet... he had not come.

If, in spite of everything, he still loves me, why does he stay away?

Now, with Bingley and Jane's wedding in a week's time, Darcy was coming to Netherfield with his sister and cousin to stand up with his friend.

Does he only come to honor his friend? Does he feel nothing for me? Is the thought of my family's permanent attachment to the name Wickham so abhorrent to him? Of course, it must be! For his poor sister's sake he had put all tender feeling aside. And what could I expect, after my hateful words in Kent?

Yet, he comes to Herefordshire now and brings his sister. He could have stayed away. Oh, what is he thinking even now?

Teasing, teasing man! I shall think of him no more!

Resolved for the final time to dismiss the Master of Pemberley, Elizabeth gathered up her bonnet, stood and straightened her spenser, turned—and gasped.

“Good afternoon, Miss Bennet.” The tall, serious man bowed to her.

“Mr. Darcy! You quite startled me!”

“My apologies. I had not known my horse to be so quiet.”

Elizabeth remembered her manners and made her curtsy. “It would do well to have it make more noise, sir, unless it is your intent to frighten young ladies!” Her eyebrow rose. “I cannot see how that would suit your purpose, unless perhaps you have turned highwayman?”

A sudden smile broke out on his grave countenance. “Have you never heard of Darcy the Dastardly?” he asked with a sweeping bow.

Elizabeth giggled, her hands over her mouth, delighted and surprised at the gentleman's teasing. “So that is the source of your ten thousand a year, sir?”

He put his hand to his forehead. “Alas, I am discovered! I have no secrets from you, Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth blushed. "You are very welcome to Hertfordshire, Mr. Darcy. Is your sister with you?"

"She is resting at Netherfield. I hurried to pay my respects to your family."

Elizabeth experienced a not unpleasant rolling of her insides. "And the shortest route from Netherfield to Longbourn was by way of Oakham Mount?"

Darcy grinned. "Your sister, Miss Bennet, was good enough to let me know your destination."

The knowledge that he had been looking for *her* was very pleasing, yet it would not do to smile too much, until she knew his feelings.

"This is a beautiful sight," he said.

"Yes, I enjoy it very much, but I should return home."

"May I accompany you?" He extended his arm.

"Of course, but your horse?"

"He is a good-natured beast. The reins are long enough that he may follow without disturbing us, I think." Taking his arm, Elizabeth and Darcy set off for Longbourn.

They had only gone a short distance in companionate silence before Elizabeth said, "Mr. Darcy, I am a very selfish creature, and for the sake of giving relief to my own feelings, care not how much I may wound yours. I can no longer delay thanking you for your unexampled kindness to my poor sister. Ever since I have known it, I have been most anxious to acknowledge to you how gratefully I feel it. Were it known to the rest of my family, I should not have merely my own gratitude to express."

"I am sorry, exceedingly sorry," replied Darcy, in a tone of surprise and emotion, "that you have ever been informed of what may, in a mistaken light, have given you uneasiness. I did not think Bingley was so little to be trusted."

"You must not blame your friend. Lydia's thoughtlessness first betrayed to me that you had been concerned in the matter, and of course, I could not rest until I knew the particulars from my aunt and Mr. Bingley." She smiled. "Of course, the first person to betray you was yourself."

Darcy turned to her, astonished.

"I saw you from my window when last you were at Longbourn, having an intense conversation with Mr. Bingley. When I finally came down to talk to him, he said, 'Miss Elizabeth, Darcy sends his regards. Do not trouble yourself over this matter. We will stand by you, both Darcy and myself, and will do whatever we can in service for your family.' So you see, I was not as surprised as you might imagine when Lydia let it be known you were at her wedding!" She turned to him. "Let me thank you again and again, in the name of all my family, for that generous compassion which induced you to take so much trouble and bear so many mortifications for the sake of discovering them."

"If you *will* thank me," he replied, "let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you might add force to the other inducements which led me on, I shall not attempt to deny. But your *family* owes me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe I thought only of *you*."

Elizabeth was too much embarrassed to say a word. After a short pause, her companion added, "You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. *My* affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever."

Elizabeth, feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand that her sentiments had undergone so material a change since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure his present assurances.

The happiness which this reply produced was such as Darcy had never felt before, and he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do. Had Elizabeth been able to encounter his eyes, she might have seen how well the expression of heartfelt delight diffused

over his face became him. Though she could not look, she could listen, and he told her of feelings which, in proving of what importance she was to him, made his affection every moment more valuable.

They walked on, without knowing in what direction. There was too much to be thought and felt and said for attention to any other objects. She soon learnt that they were indebted for their present good understanding to the efforts of her sister, Jane, of all people. To Elizabeth's astonishment, it happened that Bingley and Jane had been in a conspiracy to bring their friends together.

Jane had enclosed a note to Darcy, secreted in Bingley's invitation to stand up with him. The note explained that Elizabeth's spirits had been very low since the spring and that Jane had learned the cause was the absence of a certain gentleman from Derbyshire, whom Elizabeth had once despised but now felt altogether differently, even before the events arising from Brighton. His return to Hertfordshire was earnestly requested.

"It taught me to hope," said he, "as I had scarcely ever allowed myself to hope before. I knew enough of your disposition to be certain, that had you been absolutely, irrevocably decided against me, you would have acknowledged it to your sister, frankly and openly."

Elizabeth colored and laughed as she replied, "Yes, you know enough of my *frankness* to believe me capable of *that*. After abusing you so abominably to your face, I could have no scruple in abusing you to all my relations."

"What did you say of me that I did not deserve? For, though your accusations were ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises, my behavior to you at the time had merited the severest reproof. It was unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence."

"We will not quarrel for the greater share of blame annexed to that evening," said Elizabeth. "The conduct of neither, if strictly examined, will be irreproachable. But since then we have both, I hope, improved in civility."

The two spoke of many things—their interactions in Kent, how they both learned from them, how grief and bitterness soon turned to more positive feelings, how both endeavored to improve. Elizabeth's spirits soon rising to playfulness again, she wanted Mr. Darcy to account for having ever fallen in love with her.

"How could you begin?" said she. "I can comprehend going on charmingly when you had once made a beginning, but what could set you off in the first place?"

"I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I *had* begun."

"My beauty you had early withstood, and as for my manners—my behavior to *you* was at least always bordering on the uncivil, and I never spoke to you without rather wishing to give you pain than not. Now, be sincere, did you admire me for my impertinence?"

"For the liveliness of your mind, I did."

"You may as well call it impertinence at once. It was very little less. The fact is that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who always spoke and looked and thought for *your* approbation alone. I roused and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*. Had you not been amiable, you would have hated me for it, but in spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just, and in your heart, you thoroughly despised the persons who so assiduously courted you. There, I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it, and all things considered, I begin to think it perfectly reasonable. To be sure, you knew no actual good of me—but nobody thinks of *that* when they fall in love."

Darcy stopped upon that word dropping from Elizabeth's lips. "Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, may I kiss you?"

She could say nothing, but raised her chin as she closed her eyes. She felt the pressure of his mouth on hers—so light, so sweet—she wished it would never end.

"How... lovely," she whispered after he drew away.

He ran a finger along her jaw. "To hear that you love me—I cannot say what joy that brings to me, my dearest!"

"If it is but a shade of what I feel, then it must be overwhelming, Mr. Dar—Fitzwilliam," she corrected herself. She smiled at his delight. "Yes, Fitzwilliam—the name suits you, sir." Her fingers stroked his cheek. "My own Fitzwilliam! How I love you!"

There was but one answer to that.



A week later, Mr. Bennet had the melancholy task of toasting his new son-in-law and announcing the engagement of his second daughter. He soon turned his mind to the positive aspects of the union between Longbourn and Pemberley. After all, not only was he gaining a potently amusing son, but vast libraries in London and Derbyshire would soon be at his disposal.

The Bennet carriage would have to be re-sprung, he thought. Fifty miles may be nothing to Mr. Darcy, but I would not regard it so!

The End



Story IV – Reflections

(Author's Note: In this *Mansfield Park* variation, Sir Thomas Bertram looks back on his life.)

Mansfield Park, October, 1808

SIR THOMAS BERTRAM SAT behind the ornate desk in his beloved study, listening to his namesake and heir give his report on the family plantations on Antigua. Tom Bertram's face bore the tanned skin common among those who had been to the West Indies.

"So," the tall young man of twenty-five said, "the situation was not as bad as we feared. Once I replaced the overseer and brought in a new man, one who would actually *feed* the workers, all problems seemed to be solved." He sat down, an unreadable expression on his face.

Sir Thomas leaned forward. "You've done well, Tom. I doubt if I could have done better. No, you have done exactly what I would have done, had I gone with you. I am proud of you." Tom waved off the praise. "What ails you, Son?"

"Father..." he hesitated and then looked hard at the older man. "Must we own slaves?"

The question surprised Sir Thomas. "How else can we manage our plantations? Who will harvest the sugar cane?"

"You were not there. I must say it turned my stomach to see how the men were treated. Whipped, starved—"

"Surely not on our lands?"

"No, not after I replaced the overseer. But our neighbors are not so humane. The women—some were for the use of the owners. It ... it troubles me, Father. As honest Christians, can we not pay the workers?"

Sir Thomas bit back his rejoinder, for he could see that this was a serious question. "I have been to Antigua, and I will admit I do not like it either. I do not like it at all. But, if we free our slaves and pay them, our costs go up. Who will buy our sugar when the others can undercut our price? How will the workers or their families get food then? That is assuming, of course, the other landowners will let us free our slaves.

"There is nothing we can do. It is the way things are done there. We must treat our people better than the others."

"Father, I am sorry to disagree with you, but I am of the opinion that owning other men is evil. No amount of money can justify it. If we cannot change things there, should we be in Antigua at all?"

"You are saying I should sell our plantations?"

Tom looked down. "If it were up to me, yes, I would sell."

Sir Thomas could see that his son's whole heart was in this. *Tom has changed. He is a man, now, and I must treat his advice as I would that from any other man.*

"You have given me much to think about. What you ask for is no small thing. I promise I will give it my full consideration."

"I know you will, Father. I am sorry to trouble you about this."

"Say nothing of that." He rose from his chair. "I raised you to learn this business, to be prepared to be the master of Mansfield. I will not begrudge you your honest opinions." He crossed in front of the desk and embraced Tom. "I say again, I am exceedingly proud of you."

Tom smiled, but there was the ghost of pain in his eyes, pain Sir Thomas had seen before. *It haunts him still.*

"Thank you, Father. I should go to my mother, now. It is almost tea, and Fanny can use the rest. Will you join us?"

Sir Thomas glanced at his desk. "No, I have a few other letters to write. Make my excuses, and I shall see you at dinner." Tom took his leave and left the room, Sir Thomas' eyes following him out.

Tom had not always been the hard-working, dependable man he was now. His university years were ones of drinking and carousing. Debts from gambling, especially at the horse track, had hurt the family finances terribly. It reached a crescendo at about the time of his Uncle Norris's death, and instead of having a friend hold the Mansfield living until Edmund was ready for it, Sir Thomas was forced to make a different arrangement, and Dr. Grant was now the rector.

"I blush for you, Tom," Sir Thomas had berated him then, in his most dignified manner. "You have robbed Edmund for ten, twenty, thirty years—perhaps for life—of more than half the income which ought to be his. It may hereafter be in my power, or in yours—I hope it will—to procure him better preferment. But it must not be forgotten that no benefit of that sort would have been beyond his natural claims on us, and that nothing can, in fact, be an equivalent for the certain advantage which he is now obliged to forego through the urgency of your debts."

The effect of his words had been immediate. The pain of guilt had driven Tom to mend his ways and be useful to his family. Edmund had forgiven him—*Edmund would forgive anyone*, thought Sir Thomas—but Tom had not forgotten. Sir Thomas was happy and feared for his eldest. *Guilt can gnaw away at a man's soul just as well as hard living.*

"Father?" Sir Thomas glanced up to see his eldest daughter, Maria, peeking in the room. "Are you not joining us for tea?"

"No, my dear. As you see, I still have much work to do."

"Oh," she said as she walked in, dark and lovely, in full bloom at twenty-one. "Have you a moment?"

"Of course, my dear." He indicated a chair and sat next to her. "What is it?"

"I do not believe I thanked you, as I should, for your assistance with the matter over Mr. Rushworth."

Sir Thomas said nothing, only nodded thoughtfully.

"You were right. I do not believe we were well-suited. I ... I did not feel for him as I ought."

Sir Thomas watched with kindly eyes. *No, my dear. You—and your Aunt Norris—only saw Sotherton Court, a house in Town, and twelve thousand a year. I am glad you see clearly now. I cannot say the same for your aunt.*

"I only hope his disappointment is of short duration," she added.

"I pray that be the case. To be fair, you offered him little encouragement."

Maria hung her head. "I should have offered him none, as Fanny advised."

Sir Thomas patted her hand. "There, there. I shall tell you that my interview with Mr. Rushworth, while uncomfortable, was not devastating. Whatever pain he is feeling will be soon overcome with other thoughts."

A small smile appeared at Maria's lips. "Perhaps there will be new statuary at Sotherton?"

Sir Thomas should have scolded her for her impertinence, but said instead, "I should not be surprised. Now, dear, surely this melancholy stems from another source?"

Maria sighed and turned her head to the windows. "Father, was it necessary for Mr. Crawford to be sent away?"

Sir Thomas took a deep breath, thankful again for Fanny's intelligence. "I am afraid so, dear. Mr. Crawford is a very charming man with much to recommend him. A good estate and a good income. Excellent conversation. He can easily make any girl fall in love with him.

"But to attempt to charm all three of my girls, all at the same time? It shows a want of propriety, even a deficiency of morals. It certainly is a danger to sisterly affection."

Maria blushed. Sir Thomas saw it as a reminder of the rows she had had with Julia and even Fanny. "It ... it is just that he was the most agreeable man I have ever met."

"I know. How did the Bard put it? 'One may smile and smile, and be a villain.'"

"I do not believe him as bad as that!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps it is the fact that my girls are so lovely, he could not make up his mind."

Maria blushed again, this time pleased. He took her hand.

"Please try not to let this matter trouble you. We shall go to Town for the Season. There will be balls and parties and proper gentlemen aplenty for all my girls!"

It served, and a small smile graced Maria's pretty lips. She was a child born for the hustle and bustle of London, Bath and the society of the *ton*. "As long as they are agreeable!"

With mock seriousness Sir Thomas said, "They will be, or your brothers will run them off!" Maria laughed. "Now, dear, off you go to tea, while I finish my correspondence before dinner."

Maria jumped to her feet. "Oh, Father! How thoughtless of me to prattle on when you have business to conduct."

"None of that! Have I not told you my door is open to you at all times?" He gave her a small hug. "Nothing is more important to me than you and your sisters and your brothers."

"Thank you," she said as she gave him a peck on his cheek, and then she went away.

Sir Thomas stood in the middle of the room, thinking over the conversation and recalling the twin disasters he had avoided. His thoughts came back to the reason he had been able to protect his family.

Fanny.

He recalled the conversation he had with Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris eight years ago in his wife's parlor. Lady Bertram had suggested bringing her sister Price's eldest daughter to Mansfield to give relief to the Price family, already with nine children.

He had hesitated, for the responsibility was great, and to some sanctimonious words from Mrs. Norris, he had said, "There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs. Norris, as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up. How to preserve in the minds of my daughters the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin. And how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a Miss Bertram. I should wish to see them very good friends, and would, on no account, authorize in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations will always be different. It is a point of great delicacy, and you must assist us in our endeavors to choose exactly the right line of conduct."

Sir Thomas grimaced in pain. How could he say such words about anyone, but especially about his beloved Fanny?

But he was not the man *then* that he was *now*. He had affection for his wife, Maria, Lady Bertram, and he dearly loved his children, Tom, Edmund, Maria, and Julia. He was also a man of great responsibilities, a baronet and MP with land in Northampton and Antigua. His task had been to care for their properties and interests, while it fell to Lady Bertram to raise the children.

Unfortunately, Lady Bertram proved to be a neglectful mother. In the years after Julia's birth, she had become lethargic and withdrawn, interested only in her comfort and her pug dogs. It was left to Miss Lee, the governess, to raise the children with the guidance of Mrs. Norris. When nine-year-old Fanny came to Mansfield in the summer of 1801, Sir Thomas had little to do with her.

How all that changed on Easter of 1803! Sir Thomas had always considered himself liberal and generous, and when he learned that Fanny did not ride, he provided her with a horse. To his surprise, she was very reluctant to learn. At first, he thought it might be stubbornness or stupidity, but after a word with Edmund, he approached the girl.

"Fanny," he had asked, "do you not wish to learn to ride?"

"Oh, yes, sir. It is just that... that they are so big!"

“Are you frightened, child?”

Fanny looked down, obviously ashamed. “Yes, sir.”

“Fanny, we will stop this foolishness. The horse is very gentle, and you will learn to ride. Do we understand each other?”

Her lip quivered. “Yes, sir.”

Sir Thomas would never know what possessed him to say the next words. “And I will teach you.”

The girl looked up in wonder and apprehension, and Sir Thomas’ heart was struck. *Why, the girl is frightened of me!* He smiled a kind smile and said, “Come, my dear. Change into your habit, and we will have our first lesson.”

Dutifully, Fanny showed up at the appointed place in full riding habit. Now aware of the child’s fears, Sir Thomas gently introduced her to the horse. After spending no little time becoming acquainted, Sir Thomas carefully lifted the girl onto the beast’s back. In soothing tones for both the horse’s sensibilities as well as for hers, he instructed Fanny about the basic skills of riding. Slowly, both horse and rider relaxed, and as they moved about the paddock at a leisurely pace, Sir Thomas saw Fanny’s spirits rise. Lesson over for the day, he reached up to bring the girl down from the saddle. To his surprise, Fanny threw her arms about his neck and hugged him tightly.

“Oh! Oh, Uncle!” she cried. “Thank you, thank you so much!” He could feel her tears of joy on his neck. Touched beyond belief, he found himself hugging the child to his chest.

“Shall... shall we . . .” Fanny’s voice died out.

“What is it, child?”

“Shall we do it again tomorrow?”

Such a simple request! How could he refuse? “Of course we shall, Fanny.” He impulsively kissed her cheek, which resulted in a renewal of her loving hug.

Sir Thomas felt a tear of remembrance run down his cheek. He could not know at the time how his world had changed that day. Mrs. Norris had learned of the riding lesson and, in her usual unpleasant manner, congratulated Sir Thomas on his unnecessary condescension for his unworthy niece. His response was to have Maria and Julia ride along with him and Fanny on the morrow, for he had begun to see the evil of treating Fanny differently from her cousins.

The next day, the five of them set off—for Edmund had joined them—on a short tour of the estate. Sir Thomas reveled in having the attention of the children. How pleasant it was! When Maria complained of the pace, Sir Thomas gently reprimanded her, pointing out that Fanny was just beginning to learn. Maria started to make a comment about Fanny’s stupidity, and her father lost his temper.

“Maria! How dare you speak so of your cousin! Do you think you were such an accomplished rider when you first learned? I want to hear your complete apology to Fanny—quick now!”

The young people were shocked at the outburst. While they all respected—and not a little feared—Sir Thomas, it was rare that he raised his voice, and he had never before done so to his daughters. Maria mumbled the required words to Fanny, and Sir Thomas had to be satisfied with it. A worrisome thought had entered his mind. *My sister-in-law has surely spoiled my daughters. This needs to be corrected as soon as may be, for Maria will be out soon and hopeless of remedy.*

“Maria, Julia, Edmund, I wish to make something clear. Fanny is not only your cousin, but she lives here. She has left her family to join ours. As she is part of our family, I expect her to be treated as such. There will no more such talk. I will not tolerate it.”

From that moment, Sir Thomas began to take an intense interest in the children. When he discovered that Mrs. Norris had left instructions that Fanny’s little sitting room be left with no fire in the grate, he made sure that the room was warm at all times. A talk to Miss Lee ensured that Fanny would receive no less instruction

than the other girls would, and he made clear to his daughters that he expected them to show greater kindness to their poor cousin.

Fanny was not the only recipient of his attention. As Tom was already away at school, Sir Thomas would ride and shoot with Edmund constantly. He took great interest in his daughters' accomplishments, praised them when deserved, and kindly encouraged their improvement if necessary.

More importantly, he worked hard to gain the children's trust. He encouraged them to come to him whenever they desired, to talk of things, to show off their triumphs, or to have a kindly ear hear their troubles. The last was the hardest to achieve, but by his constancy, he won them over.

Many would wonder if this did not take him away from his duties. In fact, Sir Thomas briefly wondered if there were enough hours in the day to do everything that needed to be done. Yet, he found that by entrusting his steward with the day-to-day details of running the estate and making fewer speeches on the floor of the House of Commons, his world did not come crashing down around his ears, and his days were, for the most part, far more enjoyable.

When Mrs. Norris protested, seeing her territory being usurped, Sir Thomas had been quick to put her in her place.

"Not see my children? What nonsense is this? Who should be the children's confidant if not their father?"

"Well, sir, that is very kind of you—indeed, very liberal—but you have many duties, besides, and there are others who have less demands upon them. Surely, this burden can be lifted from your shoulders. Ah, I see you agree with me! Leave everything to me, sir, and—"

"Mrs. Norris, I beg to differ! I most certainly do NOT agree with you. These are my children, I shall do as I wish, and I will thank you not to interfere!"

She cowered. "Oh, sir, I would not think of it! You misunderstand me, Sir Thomas. I only wish for your peace of mind. I shall carry news of your condescension to dear Edmund, Maria, and Julia—depend upon it!"

"That will not be necessary. The children already know of my wishes. Your services are not required, for not only would they be repetitious, they would be incomplete."

"Incomplete, sir?"

"Indeed. Have you forgotten Fanny?"

"Fanny! Certainly, you do not mean Fanny! You cannot mean Fanny!"

"I most certainly do, madam."

"But, she is not your daughter!"

"You are correct. But MY NIECE is under my protection. I remind you that you are not my wife and can have no power here. Be good enough NEVER to correct me again."



As the years flowed by, Sir Thomas saw, to his intense pleasure, that his daughters took pains to befriend and finally love their cousin. The benefits to all were apparent. Maria and Julia grew less self-absorbed while Fanny became more lively. More often than not, Sir Thomas would observe the three of them walking the grounds of Mansfield, arms linked, thick as thieves, and laughing over secrets. Most importantly, Fanny's innate strong moral foundation was not weakened by the constant presence of her two cousins. No—rather, it was *they* who were reminded to do good so as not to shame themselves before their younger friend.

Sir Thomas could not think when the sea change happened—when Fanny stopped being his niece and the children's cousin and became *daughter* and *sister*. It came about so slowly and consistently that it was engrained in their minds before they realized it. Of course, Mrs. Norris was outraged over the change, and in the aftermath of her husband's death in 1806, tried to reassert herself. But it was too late—the damage had been done. The girls would give up Aunt Norris's spoiling in favor of Fanny's agreeable company.

With Miss Lee leaving that same year, Sir Thomas resolved to spend even more time with his children, especially with the return of the now-contrite Tom. Tom threw himself into the study of estate management with the same enthusiasm he had once shown for far more idle pastimes. By the spring of '07, there was such an improvement in Tom that it was decided, reluctantly on Sir Thomas's part, that Tom should sail to the West Indies to inspect the family's properties and report back to his father. At the time, the baronet had been concerned, but as it turned out, it was a very good thing he remained at Mansfield, for in the winter of 1808, Mr. Rushworth came to court Maria, and in the spring the Crawfords arrived.

The Crawfords! Sir Thomas still shuddered at the thought of those two. Relations of the Grants, who had been established at Mansfield Parsonage, the brother and sister had constant access to the estate. Edmund was immediately smitten by the sister, Mary Crawford, and Sir Thomas could not fault him for it. Beautiful, witty, clever, talented, and with a good fortune, Miss Crawford was a good match for Edmund. She befriended all the Bertram girls and Fanny too.

But—there was a worldliness, an unconscious cruelty in her manner that occasionally seemed to make itself apparent. Only a word or two, and then she was extremely agreeable again. Edmund was mostly blind to it, but Sir Thomas and Fanny saw it.

One other observation troubled Sir Thomas. Edmund had been, by education and personality, destined for the church. Thornton Lacey was his once he took his vows. However, on more than one occasion, Miss Crawford spoke of the church as being a waste of Edmund's talents. She seemed bent on persuading him to forgo preaching and go into the law or some other fashionable occupation. Sir Thomas did not interfere, for he was determined that Edmund should live his own life, but he did not like Miss Crawford's actions.

At first appearance, Henry Crawford was also a very agreeable guest. Sir Thomas could see that Maria liked him better than Mr. Rushworth. This was not a concern, for while the newcomer's fortune was less, it was not lacking, and he made up for his relative want of money with an overabundance of wit and charm, something Mr. Rushworth was sorely lacking.

But as the weeks went by, it was apparent that Crawford was flirting with Julia, as well. When Fanny reported the same behavior towards herself, Sir Thomas knew he had to act. It was at that moment that Mr. Rushworth chose to declare himself. It was a busy day indeed for the baronet, as he had to disappoint one suitor and banish another.

It was a shame, he thought. Crawford had some of the makings of a good man. He might have been happy to part with any of his girls into his hands, but his indiscriminate attentions to all three at once showed there was something amiss with the man. No fortune was enough for Sir Thomas to entrust the happiness of Maria, Julia, or Fanny to such a rake.

Crawford's departure led to another. Miss Crawford asked for forgiveness for her brother. When that was refused, she begged and then insisted on pardon for her wayward relation. An astonished Edmund was witness to it, and his amazement doubled when the lady demanded that he choose between her and his family. His refusal led to an irrevocable breach. The Crawfords departed from Mansfield directly, leaving in their wake mortified relations, two disappointed ladies, and one broken-hearted gentleman.

Edmund had yet to recover, Sir Thomas knew, although he rallied upon his brother's return from Antigua. He spent most of his time otherwise preparing to take orders and walking the grounds with Fanny. An afternoon in *her* company seemed to improve his spirits, Sir Thomas noticed.

A movement in the gardens caught Sir Thomas's attention. Sure enough, there were Edmund and Fanny walking about the roses, probably discussing scripture. Sir Thomas smiled at the sight, a plan that had begun to germinate a few weeks ago developing strong roots.

It had been some time since Sir Thomas had considered Fanny as his youngest daughter. Over the years he had toyed with the idea of making that position official—of adopting the girl. It was done all the time. No one would remark about it, save Mrs. Norris.

But now, Sir Thomas was glad he had not acted on his thoughts. For a better way now lay before him. Would not Fanny be even more delightful as a *daughter-in-law*? He had suspected for some time that Edmund

was the girl's most particular friend and cousin. How deep did that admiration go? Did she love him? Could she love him enough to marry? In temperament and talents she was perfect for Edmund.

What were Edmund's thoughts on the matter? Knowing his son, he had probably never given it any passing consideration. Yet, it was Fanny's company he sought. It was always Fanny's opinions he valued.

It would not take much to turn such naked respect and admiration into something deeper, the baronet thought.

Time, Sir Thomas smiled. All it takes is time. Let Edmund go take orders and return. Fanny will be waiting for him. Then everything will run its natural course.

But a new pretty dress for dear Fanny would not be out of place for Edmund's welcome home party, would it?

No, it would not.

The End



Story V – Lovers’ Vows

(Author’s Note: Fans of MP endlessly debate whether country-loving cousins, Edmund and Fanny, made the right decisions when they both rejected the worldly Crawfords, Mary and Henry. Be careful what you ask for. In this Mansfield Park variation, Edmund Bertram pays a call on Fanny Crawford.)

THE BUTLER WALKED DOWN the hall of Everingham Manor in Norfolk and knocked on the door of the sitting room.

“Beg your pardon, ma’am,” he said to the Mistress, Mrs. Crawford, “Sir Thomas Bertram, Mr. Bertram, and Mr. Edmund Bertram here to see you.”

There was a flash of relief on Fanny’s face, as her relations had been expected for the last hour. “Be so good to show them in, please.”

The butler barely nodded and left to do so. Fanny waited anxiously, twisting a lace handkerchief in her hands. It seemed to take forever before the heavy footsteps of the gentlemen could be heard. Finally, the door opened, and there were her uncle and cousins.

“Fanny, my dear,” said Sir Thomas as he crossed the floor and took her into his arms. “We came as soon as we could.”

“Indeed, Fanny,” said Tom, who had placed a hand on her shoulder. “All is in readiness, as you will see.”

Fanny’s eyes flew to Edmund, who stood a little to the side, his look dark and troubled, and then to the butler, still at the door. “Roberts, please have Nanny Betty bring the children down. And have the trunks in my apartment brought down.”

The butler paused as he turned. “Of course, ma’am. I take it you are leaving?”

Fanny’s gaze was firmly on her shoes. “The children and I are to visit Mansfield. We leave this morning.” The men were not so affected; their features were hard and determined.

This intelligence troubled the butler, but he left to do his mistress’ bidding. Fanny and her relations sat and engaged in some small conversation about the Bertrams’ travels until the sound children’s voices brought their attention back to the door. A young man of about three years, followed by a heavy-set middle-aged woman carrying a babe burst into the room. The boy leapt into his mother’s waiting arms and clutched her close, his wide eyes staring at the visitors.

“Now, now Tom,” said Fanny tenderly, “do you not remember your uncle? This is Sir Thomas, your godfather, and these are your cousins. You should remember your manners and greet them.”

Sir Thomas smiled kindly at his namesake. He knew Crawford had named his heir after him to gain the baronet’s favor. An unnecessary honor, Sir Thomas could not but love any child of Fanny’s. “Hey ho, Tom. What a big boy you are! Have you been good for your mamma?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said. “I remember you. Your name is Tom, too. You gave me sweets.”

Sir Thomas laughed. “So I did! And I might have something about me now, if you would help me search my pockets.” The child smiled and climbed into his uncle’s lap. Within moments, a piece of licorice was procured from Sir Thomas’ waistcoat.

Meanwhile, Fanny retrieved the one-year-old William from Nanny Betty’s arms. Receiving assurance that the children’s trunks were packed, Fanny said to the nanny, “The children and I are leaving today to visit Mansfield Park. Our stay there may be of some duration. Do you come with us?”

The woman was confused, and Sir Thomas spoke up. “We will not beat about the bush. Because of certain events in Town, Mrs. Crawford is removing to Mansfield. My niece and her children will be under my protection. If you choose to accompany us, it is certain that Mr. Crawford will discharge you. As for myself, I cannot guarantee employment, but I will take you on for a probationary period. If you do well, I will keep you on.”

The nanny grimaced. “Begging your pardon, Sir Thomas, but it is well known below stairs what event you refer to. I cannot fault Mrs. Crawford for leaving, but I was brought on to care for the boys, and my place is

with them. Besides," she added with a half-hearted grin, "with them gone, there's no reason for the Master to keep me on, is there? I'll take my chances with you, if it's all the same."

Fanny blushed. "Thank you, Betty. You may pack your things."

"Already packed, ma'am."

Sir Thomas got up from the chair, Tom still in his arms. "Excellent. We leave within the half-hour."



As good as his word, the two carriages and a wagon, which were brought along for the purpose of transporting Mrs. Crawford, her children, and her belongings, were ready in thirty minutes. Sir Thomas insisted on having the boys with the nurse in his coach, and Mr. Bertram rode, so it was left for Fanny and her maid, who had earlier agreed to depart with her mistress, to travel in Edmund's carriage.

The departing Mistress of Everingham took her leave of each and every servant, not a few without tears. Such was the general affection and respect that was held for her among the staff. Even Roberts sniffed a bit as Mrs. Crawford took his hand for perhaps the last time. Edmund helped his cousin into the carriage, gave a word to the driver as he closed the door, and the party was off.

Edmund looked out the window as they passed the gates of Everingham. "We are right on schedule. The weather is fine, so we should reach Mansfield before dark, I should think. Are you comfortable, Fan?"

Assured that she was, the three passengers sat in silence for an hour. Finally, exhausted by spending the majority of the night packing for her mistress and herself, the maid slipped off into a snoring sleep. Fanny flashed an apologetic smile to Edmund.

"'Tis all right, Fan," he said in a low voice. "It is well she sleeps, for I wish to talk to you. Are you well?"

Fanny nodded. "I am. Thank you for taking all of this trouble on my behalf."

"Say nothing of that. We are happy to help. We only wish that things could be happier. I am so sorry, Fan."

"It is not your fault."

"No. It is *his*, damn him. I am sorry to lose my temper, but you have been ill-used."

Fanny said nothing to this and only looked out the window at the passing fields. Finally, she said, "I tried, Edmund."

"Tried what, Fan?"

Fanny would not look at him. "I tried to be a good wife to him, but..." She broke off. "Perhaps if I have been more forgiving—"

"Fanny!" he said in a strong whisper. "Forgiving of vice? Crawford has set up a house for his actress mistress in London. He has betrayed you and God. The shame he has brought upon you. No! You owe him nothing."

Fanny shook her head. "You know not the whole story, Edmund. I am not blameless."

"Then tell me, my dear."

She glanced at the sleeping maid. "Not here."

Edmund saw that his cousin was correct. It would not do to have such a conversation in a small carriage where a dozing servant may awaken and overhear, so he changed the subject and spoke at length of his father's plans.

He had set aside an entire wing of Mansfield Park for Fanny's exclusive use. A schoolroom and nursery were being prepared even now, for it was their intention that Fanny and her sons make their home in Northamptonshire.

"It sounds wonderful," Fanny said with tears in her eyes, "but what if my husband comes and demands that I return to Norfolk?"

"He will not be allowed to set foot in Mansfield, Fan. You have sought sanctuary in your family's house. The law will be on our side."

"But ... but the children! Can he not take them away?"

"Legally, yes. But I cannot believe he would want to. Besides, in the *very* unlikely event that Mr. Crawford develops any paternal instincts, he will discover that that his moral choices will make things inconvenient for him. Do not forget that my father is not only a baronet, but a Member of Parliament with many friends in high places—men of influence and power. Sir Thomas will not hesitate in calling on his friends, should the need arise."

"The scandal! How can you bear it?"

Edmund looked out the window. "The damage has been done—I can be hurt no more."

"What do you mean? Your work, your practice . . ." she paused, and softly added, "your marriage?"

Edmund dropped his head to his breast. "All three, I am afraid." Fanny tried to console him, but he would have none of it. "No, Fan, my troubles have been of my own making. I never should have gone into the law. It suits me ill. Oh, I make a good living, have a fine house and carriage," he gestured, "but there is no joy to be had in preparing a writ or contract, knowing that some other clever fellows—some acquaintances of mine—are always ready and eager to attack my work as that of a simpleton just to earn his fees. It is a profession of scoundrels."

"You always wanted to go into the church."

"Yes, and I was too weak to follow my inclination and instead allowed myself to be persuaded to follow another path."

Fanny reached across the carriage and took his hand. "Mrs. Bertram is very convincing."

Edmund's eyes flashed, and for an instant Fanny, could see the power Mary Bertram could wield—power Fanny had never used on her husband. A moment later the look was gone, replaced by self-loathing. "Nay, Fanny. Even a woman with a silver tongue needs a willing ear. Let the blame fall in its proper place."

"Then, am I not equally to blame?"

Edmund darkened. "'Forsaking all others'—is that not what he promised? The man lied before God. You have held true. You are blameless."

Again, Fanny looked to disagree, but a jostle awoke the maid. The three rode on, discussing the passing landscape until it was time to stop at a village, change horses, and eat. The publican was happy for the trade, and while the food was only adequate, it was hot and plentiful. Young Tom spent most of his time playing with his uncle and granduncle, while young William sought his mother's arms. When the travelers prepared to depart, Edmund suggested to Fanny's maid that the views of Northamptonshire, which they were soon to enter, could best be appreciated from the driver's box. Thus persuaded, Edmund and Fanny found themselves alone in the carriage.

"Are you certain you do not have a future in politics?" Fanny teased her cousin.

"Quite sure," Edmund laughed, "but being convincing has served me well at the bar from time to time!"

The carriage rolled on, and the smile on Fanny's face faded as she gathered her courage. Edmund needed to know the truth.

"Edmund, I must tell you the story of my marriage."

"No, it is not necessary—"

"But it is. You must know the truth. Will you hear?" Edmund nodded and she continued. "In the beginning, Henry was as attentive a husband as any wife could dream of. Whatever was needed for my comfort was done in an instant. And Everingham Manor, while no Mansfield Park, was delightful. I was happy, Edmund."

"The only mar on our joy was that Henry was always restless at Everingham." She sighed. "He is not like us, Edmund, with our joy of the countryside. He longed to be anywhere but Everingham, and his favorite place was London. The balls, the parties, the theater . . ." her voice broke a bit, "Henry loved to walk into Almacks, with me on his arm. He was showing me off. Oh, there was always affection, but he was proud of me as well. And I—I tried and tried, but I could never lose my nervousness over being on display. How I longed to return to Norfolk, and my garden and my mare!"

Edmund sat, nodding, thinking how his cousin's story so matched his. He had married the captivating and vivacious Mary Crawford only a month before Fanny wed Henry, and from the beginning, Mary cajoled him, molded him, into a new man. Rather than an obscure country parish vicar, he was a barrister in Town who traveled in a very up-and-coming society. No party was complete without the attendance of Mr. and Mrs. Bertram. The *ton* awaited the moment he would stand for Parliament. He tried hard to please Mary, but he hated London and its hypocrisy. In the depths of his soul, he was miserable.

Fanny continued. "When I learned I was with child, I ... I put my foot down. I insisted that my confinement should be at Everingham. Henry relented, and we went home. Henry was attentive as ever, but as the weeks drew on, he would leave me for a time. At first, it was for an afternoon's sport—riding or shooting—and then for a day or two. Finally, he would leave to visit with friends—I was never sure who—for a week at a time. I was so afraid that he would be away when the time came, but Henry was waiting in his study when Tom came into the world."

"Yes, Mary and I were there."

Fanny acknowledged that. "But after you left, Henry would ask me, with increasing regularity, when we could return to Town, and... and when we could resume... our more private—" Fanny blushed furiously.

"Say no more, Fan, I understand."

What Edmund could not understand was Crawford's unfeeling selfishness. True, he and Mary had never been blessed with a child, but he knew he would behave better than his brother-in-law.

"I left my baby sooner than I wished. Henry assured me Tom was safe with Nanny Betty, but I missed him so! But I was determined to be the wife Henry wanted." She glanced at Edmund. "Cousin, I must tell you that Henry was not best pleased when I fell with child again."

"I am sorry, Fan."

"He put up no argument when I desired a return to Norfolk, but as soon as I was settled, business called him away to London."

Edmund suspected the nature of Crawford's 'business.'

"I didn't know, at first. Truly, I had no idea, until the day the first letter came. It was addressed from a 'friend,' and gave few details, but I was not so simple as to not know the letter's meaning. Henry was in the company of other women while I was in Norfolk." She closed her eyes. "I did not believe it—I did not want to believe it—but then the next letter came. And this time, it contained a pair of cufflinks. Henry's cufflinks."

"Oh, Fanny!"

"I was in agony. I knew what was implied, but I tried to come up with a reasonable explanation. Perhaps, Henry was overheated one night while playing cards and desired to roll up his sleeves and misplaced his cufflinks. Or perhaps he had to help someone in distress, ruining his shirt, and while changing, put on the wrong cufflinks.

"But, when he returned to Everingham and beheld the cufflinks on my bedstead, he said, 'Oh, good, we got them back.' Edmund, he was so unconcerned about it! I told him how I had received them, and he said nothing—he only looked at me as if I was a simpleton. 'My dear,' he said, 'surely you know by now that men have needs. Would you have me bother you at this time in your condition? I think you should be thanking me.'"

Edmund, for the first time in years, cursed.

"We had a terrible argument. At the end of it, he returned to his rooms, packed, and left for Town." Fanny paused. "He has not been in my bed since." Embarrassed, she dropped her face into her hands. "Do you see? I

forced him away. I... I know I am his wife, and I have tried to forgive him, but I cannot rid myself of the thought of him with another woman. I cannot get it out of my mind. Is that not unchristian of me?"

Edmund tried to console her. "Fanny, we are all poor sinners—that is true. But I must say your sins are nothing next to his! Has he never apologized?" Fanny was able to shake her head. "There, you see? The man should be on his knees before you."

"But... but if I had forgiven him, would he have taken that actress as his mistress?"

"Fanny, believe me, denial of favors does not lead a man to sin!" *I should know.* "Besides, you had your own concerns. Forgive me, but do you know of the French disease? He is risking his life—and yours too!"

"And is there nothing we can do?"

"You are doing something. You are protecting your sons. Contact with such a father would ruin them."

Fanny hung her head. "I feared it." She sighed. "You know, he left the choice of William's name to me. He could not be bothered."

Edmund's insides roiled, but he forced himself to speak calmly. "You and the boys are in better company now. All at Mansfield await your arrival with joy and expectation. You all will be loved and cherished, as you deserve."

Edmund did not exaggerate. His reformed brother, Tom, had married a good woman, a lady kind as she was pretty, and she had pledged to love Fanny as a sister. Susan Price, now the vicar's wife, was nearby at Thornton Lacey. And Julia and her husband had promised to visit. *Thankfully, Aunt Norris is removed to Sotherton Court, to live with my sister, Mrs. Rushworth, and bedevil Mr. Rushworth's mother.*

Fanny looked up, a strange expression on her face. "Loved and cherished as I deserve? Thank you; I shall be content." With that, she sat back to gaze out the window again.

Edmund's thoughts remained unsettled, for he was afraid that he had given himself away. He sat back, reviewing the fate of all his siblings. Maria, desirous of a fashionable life, was now united for life with a man she could never like or respect. Julia, seeing the unhappiness in Maria's choice, was able to extract herself from that idiot, Yates, and marry a decent, jolly fellow, a man who would shower her with the attention she desired without overly spoiling her. And the future Lady Bertram was an excellent woman.

And myself? Does anyone know the mistake I made? Blinded by beauty, grace, and wit, I allowed myself to become what I despise—an impostor. To all the world, I am a successful barrister with a brilliant wife on my arm. Do they know how I hate it? How empty my life is? How I loathe society and London? How I long for the peace of the country, with a house filled with children—something I will never have?

He glanced at his cousin. *Yes, Fanny, believe me. I know denial of favors does not necessarily lead a man to sin. I know that all too well. Mary and I have not been husband and wife for over a year now, ever since she demanded that I stand by Henry over you. I wonder where she is now? In my parlor, or in the sitting room of that harlot, entertaining Henry? What a waste my life has become! Mary will do nothing to cause grounds for a divorce, so I am trapped in a loveless marriage, as long as I remain Edmund Bertram and do not become completely whatever creature Mary wants me to be.*

He looked at Fanny again. *I wonder if things had been different, if I had not been so blind, would you—NO! Do not think it! Do not think of things that will never be!*

"Edmund?"

He was startled to be shaken from his thoughts by the very woman of whom he had been thinking. Forcing himself to calm, he said with tolerable composure, "Yes, Fan?"

"Are you certain all will be well?" Again, she looked at him with an unreadable expression.

Obedying an urge he could no longer avoid, he reached over to take her hands in his. "Fanny, you will be happy again. I promise you."

A small smile appeared on her lips, and she squeezed his hands in return. "Thank you, Edmund." Her voice was as soft as a caress.

A cry from the driver caught Edmund's attention. "Look, my dear! We're home!"
Together, hand-in-hand, the unacknowledged lovers watched as dear Mansfield Park drew into view.

The End



Story VI – Highbury Hijinks

(Author's Note: In this *Emma* variation, Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax arrive in Highbury early enough to attend the Weston's Christmas Eve dinner.)

DINNER WAS DONE, AND so was the required separation of the sexes. Emma was glad of it, for as much as she tried, she could not like Jane Fairfax. Treasuring as she did openness, artifice must always distress her, and Miss Fairfax's reserve must to Emma always hint of disguise.

The snow outside showed no lessening—rather, it seemed to fall heavier. Mr. Woodhouse began to talk of leaving and Isabella too. It was distressing to Emma's feelings, for she had no time to talk of Harriet Smith to Mr. Elton. Now, with Miss Fairfax exhibiting on the pianoforte, the headache Emma feared began to grow in intensity.

To Mrs. Weston she excused herself, declaring that a half-hour's quiet in the library would be just the thing to sooth her head. Mr. Churchill and Mr. Knightley saw her distress, but Emma declined any assistance. Within moments, the cool, half-light of the library worked its magic on Emma's sensibilities.

It was then she learned that her escape had attracted another's notice.

"Miss Woodhouse," said Mr. Elton as he came into the room. "Pray, are you feeling well?" His tone was solicitous, but the volume did nothing for the lady's aching head.

"I am well enough, Mr. Elton. Thank you for your concern."

In any other situation, Emma would have rejoiced at the opportunity for a short *tête-à-tête* with the man she intended for Harriet. But now, she would rather it had not happened. Not only did her head pain her, but she believed the gentleman had been drinking too much of Mr. Weston's good wine and felt sure that he would want to be talking nonsense.

To restrain him as much as might be by her own manners, she immediately prepared to speak with exquisite calmness and gravity of the weather and the night. But scarcely had she begun than she found her subject cut up—her hand seized—her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her!

Availing himself of the precious opportunity, declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping—fearing—adoring—ready to die if she refused him but flattering himself that his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion could not fail to have some effect—in short, very much resolved to be seriously accepted as soon as possible. It really was so. Without scruple, without apology, without much apparent diffidence, Mr. Elton, the lover of Harriet, was professing himself Emma's lover!

She tried to stop him but in vain. He would go on and say it all. As angry as Emma was, the thought of the moment made her resolve to restrain herself when she did speak. She felt that half this folly must be drunkenness, and therefore, could hope that it might belong only to the passing hour.

Accordingly, she replied, "I am very much astonished, Mr. Elton. This to me! You forget yourself—you take me for my friend. Any message to Miss Smith I shall be happy to deliver, but no more of this to me, if you please."

"Miss Smith! Message to Miss Smith? Good heaven, what can be the meaning of this? Miss Smith! I never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence. Never paid her any attentions, but as your friend. Never cared whether she were dead or alive, but as your friend. If she has fancied otherwise, her own wishes have misled her, and I am very sorry—extremely sorry. But, Miss Smith, indeed! Oh, Miss Woodhouse! Who can think of Miss Smith, when Miss *Woodhouse* is near?"

"No, upon my honor, I have thought only of you. I protest against having paid the smallest attention to anyone else. Everything that I have said or done, for many weeks past, has been with the sole view of marking my adoration of yourself. You cannot seriously doubt it. No, I am sure you have seen and understood me."

It would be impossible to say what Emma felt on hearing this—which of all her unpleasant sensations was uppermost. She was too completely overpowered to be immediately able to reply, and two moments of silence being ample encouragement for Mr. Elton's sanguine state of mind, he tried to take her hand again, as he joyously exclaimed—

"Charming Miss Woodhouse! Allow me to interpret this interesting silence. It confesses that you have long understood me."

"No, sir!" cried Emma. "It confesses no such thing. So far from having long understood you, I have been in a most complete error with respect to your views, 'till this moment. Am I to believe that you have never sought to recommend yourself particularly to Miss Smith? That you have never thought seriously of her?"

"Never, madam!" cried he, affronted, in his turn. "Never, I assure you. I, think seriously of Miss Smith? Miss Smith is a very good sort of girl, and I should be happy to see her respectably settled. I wish her extremely well, and, no doubt, there are men who might not object to—" He coughed and said knowingly, "Everybody has their level, but as for myself, I am not, I think, quite so much at a loss. I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance, as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith! No, madam, my visits to Hartfield have been for yourself only and the encouragement I received."

"Encouragement? I give you encouragement? Sir, you have been entirely mistaken in supposing it. I have seen you only as the admirer of my friend. In no other light could you have been more to me than a common acquaintance. I am exceedingly sorry, but it is well that the mistake ends where it does. But, as it is, the disappointment is single, and, I trust, will not be lasting. I have no thoughts of matrimony at present."

Mr. Elton turned scarlet and made to speak, when he was interrupted by the library door opening.

"I say, Miss Woodhouse, how does your head—" said Mr. Churchill, who started at the sight of Mr. Elton. "Mr. Elton! I... Am I interrupting something?"

Before Mr. Elton could speak, Emma interjected. "No, Mr. Churchill—you could not interrupt two people with less to say to one another! Pray, sit with me for a while. My headache will improve, by and by, with your good company."

Mr. Elton was too angry to say another word. He stood and made for the library door before another syllable passed. Emma then felt it indispensable to wish him a good night. The compliment was just returned, coldly and proudly, and the gentleman left the two of them alone.

Mr. Churchill made himself comfortable in one of his father's chairs. "I do not believe Mr. Elton displays quite the proper spirit of the season, Miss Woodhouse. I hope he did not impose himself."

Emma assured the pleasant gentleman that she was unharmed and that her health generally was good.

"I am pleased to know it," said he. "This time of year is one that should promote good fellowship, although that may be difficult with the present company in the neighborhood."

"I cannot understand your meaning, sir," said Emma. "I have lived all my life in Highbury, and I find its society very agreeable."

"I am certain that you do, Miss Woodhouse, but you must own it to be dull and unvarying at times. I, myself, enjoy variation in society." He smiled. "Sometimes it is best to remove from a place sooner than not, else one's acquaintances might welcome extended contact as much as week-old trout."

Emma laughed. "Is that why you quitted Weymouth so abruptly?"

Instead of laughing in returned, Mr. Churchill colored. "No! Umm...no, Miss Woodhouse. Weymouth is all delightful, but familial duties called. I am happy to spend this holiday with my father's new family."

"Had you known much of Miss Fairfax and her party at Weymouth?"

Mr. Churchill smiled. "I must pronounce that to be a very unfair question! It is always the lady's right to decide on the degree of acquaintance. Miss Fairfax must already have given her account. I shall not commit myself by claiming more than she may choose to allow."

"Upon my word! You answer as discreetly as she could do herself. But her account of everything leaves so much to be guessed. She is so very reserved, so very unwilling to give the least information about anybody, that I think you may say what you like of your acquaintance with her."

"May I indeed? Then I will speak the truth, and nothing suits me so well. I met her frequently at Weymouth. I had known her guardians, the Campbells, a little in Town, and at Weymouth we were very much in

the same set. Colonel Campbell is a very agreeable man, and Mrs. Campbell a friendly, warm-hearted woman. I like them all."

"You know Miss Fairfax's situation in life, I conclude—what she is destined to be."

"Yes . . ." he said rather hesitatingly, "I believe I do." He changed the subject. "Did you ever hear her play?"

"Ever hear her!" repeated Emma. "You forget how much she belongs to Highbury. I have heard her every year of our lives since we both began. She plays charmingly."

"I have known her from a child, undoubtedly," Emma continued. "We have been children and women together, and it is natural to suppose that we should be intimate—that we should have taken to each other whenever she visited her friends. But we never did. I hardly know how it has happened—a little, perhaps, from that wickedness on my side which was prone to take disgust towards a girl so idolized and so cried up as she always was, by her aunt and grandmother, and all their set. And then, her reserve! I never could attach myself to anyone so completely reserved."

"It is a most repulsive quality, indeed," said he. "Oftentimes very convenient, no doubt, but never pleasing. There is safety in reserve but no attraction. One cannot love a reserved person."

"Not 'till the reserve ceases towards oneself, and then the attraction may be the greater. But I must be more in want of a friend, or an agreeable companion, than I have yet been to take the trouble of conquering anybody's reserve to procure one. Intimacy between Miss Fairfax and me is quite out of the question. I have no reason to think ill of her—not the least—except that such extreme and perpetual cautiousness of word and manner, such a dread of giving a distinct idea about anybody, is apt to suggest suspicions of there being something to conceal."

Mr. Churchill agreed with Emma's observation, and not for the first time did the lady wonder why she did not like him more than she did. Oh, Frank Churchill was the most delightful young man—witty, charming, and even a little sly. Emma sometimes could not understand why she refused to be flattered sufficiently to fall in love with him.

Her headache faded enough for her to laugh at an observation of Miss Bates when the library door opened again.

"Emma, your father was asking— *What is this?*"

Emma saw that they had been joined by Mr. Knightley, and he was not pleased.

"What is the meaning of this, sir?" he directed towards Mr. Churchill. "Closed up with an indisposed young lady, a guest of your family, taking advantage of her infirmity in your father's house? What do you have to say for yourself?"

By this time, Mr. Churchill was on his feet. "I was doing no such thing! I... I was only seeing to Miss Woodhouse's comfort. I followed all prescriptions—the door was open."

"It certainly was not!" For all his fury, Mr. Knightley spoke in a low, measured tone. It only made him sound that much more menacing.

"Oh! I... I suppose Mr. Elton had closed it." Mr. Churchill turned to Emma. "I did not attend—I am very sorry."

Mr. Knightley, glowering, finally spoke to Emma. "What has Mr. Elton to do with this?"

Emma was taken aback at Mr. Knightley's presumption of proclaiming his defense of her virtue, but she answered his question. "It was nothing of importance, but Mr. Churchill's interruption of Mr. Elton's interview was both timely and welcome."

Mr. Knightley was incredulous. "Do you mean to say that man, while you were ill, had the unmitigated gall to—?"

Emma waved her hand. "It is a conversation best quickly forgot. I am unharmed."

Mr. Knightley breathed out and seemed to relax a little. "Thank heaven for that." But his face clouded again. "Still, this is an unfortunate circumstance. You should have taken more care, sir."

Emma did not mistake Mr. Knightley's meaning. "Sir—I am unharmed. Mr. Churchill has been nothing but a gentleman."

"I trust he has," he said, his eyes shooting daggers at the gentleman, "and nothing may come from this. But what if a servant has seen the gentleman come in? Your reputation may be in danger."

"Surely not!" cried Emma.

Mr. Knightley turned again to her, and Emma was surprised to see not anger but deep pain in his countenance. "I pray to G-d you are right, Emma. But we must know if Mr. Churchill is prepared to act as a gentleman, if the necessity arises."

Emma had not seriously thought of marriage to Mr. Churchill previously and was struck how distasteful the notion was to her sensibilities. She sat silently meditating in a fixed attitude for a moment or two. A moment was sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth. It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that *she must marry no one but Mr. Knightley!*

She had no time to explore this surprising revelation before Mr. Churchill said, "I am afraid not."

The others stared at Mr. Churchill, shocked.

"I... I cannot, Miss Woodhouse. Forgive me, but I am promised to another."

"To whom, sir?" demanded Mr. Knightley.

"Miss Jane Fairfax."

"What?" cried Emma. "You are betrothed to Miss Fairfax? Impossible!"

"Is this a recent event?" asked Mr. Knightley.

"It was made in October at Weymouth," said Mr. Churchill.

Mr. Knightley continued to glower. "You do not act the betrothed man, sir."

Deep was Frank Churchill's apparent distress as he addressed this accusation. "No, I do not, and I must admit to my shame it is by design. This betrothal is of a peculiar kind. Ignorant my family must be of our understanding, or we will both suffer for it. I am sure my uncle and guardian, Mr. Churchill, will have no objection to Miss Fairfax, but the same cannot be said of my aunt! I am ashamed to say that her reputation as a capricious and ill-tempered person is accurate. She expects far better of me, and as she owns great power over both my fortune and my uncle, I do not dare to marry without her consent, lest I lose all rights to Enscombe." His countenance took on a pleading aspect. "I know this sounds most hatefully mercenary, and perhaps it is, but I cannot bear for Miss Fairfax to live in poverty if it be within my power to prevent it."

Mr. Knightley was not appeased. "And how long do you intend to keep up this pretense?"

"I am trying to change my aunt's expectations, but it is a slow business. I have little hope for success." He sighed. "She is also in poor health." Mr. Churchill at least had the decency to blush.

The first thought to Emma was, "Poor Miss Fairfax! To endure such a secret! To pretend only a fleeting acquaintance with one's betrothed, and not having the delight of sharing her joy with relations and friends! How she must suffer!"

"Do not believe that I do not suffer as well!" Mr. Churchill cried. "It is an agony not to tell all of Highbury, tell the entire world, that Jane is mine. But I have a part to play, as does she. She is an unwilling actress, but she continues the deception only at my urging and mine alone. She cares nothing for Enscombe."

Mr. Knightley's expression showed his doubt as to Mr. Churchill's sincerity, and even Emma thought this was a little too much. Neither apparently thought to further challenge the man, for Mr. Knightley's next statement was one of dismissal.

"Please," Mr. Churchill begged, "you will keep our secret?"

Mr. Knightley was cold. "Only if you fully confess to your father, Mr. Weston. Your word on that, sir, and I will keep silent—for Miss Fairfax's sake."

Emma found she was not pleased to hear further proof of Mr. Knightley's admiration for Miss Fairfax, but she agreed to the scheme. For his part, Mr. Churchill was relieved and vowed to speak to Mr. Weston that very night, after all guests had departed. With that, he took his leave and left the room.

"Well," exclaimed Emma when the two were alone, "that was a most surprising conversation. A secret betrothal! Who would have thought it?"

"Indeed," said Mr. Knightley, obviously deep in thought. "Miss Fairfax must suffer exceedingly."

"I am sure she does," said Emma drily, still unhappy over Mr. Knightley's defense of the lady, "but *his* sufferings do not appear to have done him much harm."

"He is a most fortunate man!" returned Mr. Knightley, with energy. "So early in life—at three and twenty—a period when, if a man chooses a wife, he generally chooses ill. At three and twenty to have drawn such a prize! What years of felicity that man, in all human calculation, has before him! Assured of the love of such a woman—the disinterested love, for Jane Fairfax's character vouches for her disinterestedness. Everything in his favor, equality of situation—as far as regards society, and all the habits and manners that are important—equality in every point but one. And that one, since the purity of her heart is not to be doubted, such as must increase his felicity, for it will be his to bestow the only advantages she wants. A man would always wish to give a woman a better home than the one he takes her from. And he who can do it, where there is no doubt of her regard, must, I think, be the happiest of mortals.

"Frank Churchill is, indeed, the favorite of fortune. Everything turns out for his good. He meets with a young woman at a watering-place, gains her affection, cannot even weary her by negligent treatment—and had he and all his family sought round the world for a perfect wife for him, they could not have found her superior. His friends are eager to promote his happiness. He has used everybody ill—and they are all delighted to forgive him. He is a fortunate man indeed!"

"You speak as if you envy him," said Emma, hurt.

"And I do envy him, Emma. In one respect he is the object of my envy."

Emma could say no more. They seemed to be within a half-sentence of Miss Fairfax, and her immediate feeling was to avert the subject, if possible. She made her plan; she would speak of something totally different, and she only waited for breath to begin, when Mr. Knightley startled her.

"You will not ask me what is the point of envy. You are determined, I see, to have no curiosity. You are wise—but I cannot be wise. Emma! I must tell what you will not ask, though I may wish it unsaid the next moment."

"Oh! Then, do not speak it, do not speak it," she eagerly cried. "Take a little time, consider, do not commit yourself."

"Thank you," said he, in an accent of deep mortification, and not another syllable followed.

Emma could not bear to give him pain. He wished to confide in her—perhaps to consult her. Cost her what it would, she would listen.

"I stopped you ungraciously, just now, Mr. Knightley, and I am afraid, gave you pain. But if you have any wish to speak openly to me as a friend, or to ask my opinion of anything that you may have in contemplation—as a friend, indeed, you may command me. I will hear whatever you like. I will tell you exactly what I think."

"As a friend!" repeated Mr. Knightley. "Emma, that I fear is a word—No, I have no wish—Stay, yes, why should I hesitate? I have gone too far already for concealment. Emma, I accept your offer, extraordinary as it may seem. I accept it, and refer myself to you as a friend. Tell me, then, have I no chance of ever succeeding?"

He stopped in his earnestness to look the question, and the expression of his eyes overpowered her.

“My dearest Emma,” said he, “for dearest you will always be, whatever the event of this hour’s conversation, my dearest, most beloved Emma, tell me at once. Say no, if it is to be said.”

She could say nothing.

“You are silent,” he cried, with great animation, “absolutely silent! At present, I ask no more.”

Emma was almost ready to sink under the agitation of this moment. The dread of being awakened from the happiest dream was perhaps the most prominent feeling.

“I cannot make speeches, Emma,” he soon resumed, and in a tone of such sincere, decided, intelligible tenderness as was tolerably convincing. “If I loved you less, I might be able to speak of it more. But you know what I am. You hear nothing but truth from me. I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it. Bear with the truths I would tell you now, dearest Emma, as well as you have borne with them. The manner, perhaps, may have as little to recommend them. G-d knows, I have been a very indifferent lover. But you understand me. Yes, you see, you understand my feelings, and will return them if you can. At present, I ask only to hear, once to hear your voice.”

What did she say? Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does. She said enough to show there need not be despair and to encourage him to speak on. Which he did, and as nighttime gives way to the dawn, talking led to touching, and touching gave way to kissing, and—

And the door opened to the library one last time.

“Emma,” said Mr. Woodhouse, “I pray your head is better, but my dear, I fear that if we do not remove this instant to Hartfield, the snows shall trap us here at Randalls until the spring, I declare, and we cannot impose so on poor Miss Taylor—

“Emma? Emma? What are you doing with Mr. Knightley?”

The End



Story VII – A Very Worthy Young Man

(Author's Note: In this Sense & Sensibility variation, Edward Ferrars is a little different.)

EDWARD FERRARS STOOD TALL by the fireplace mantel in his mother's Park Street, London sitting room. In the room, eyes upon him, were Mrs. Ferrars, his mother, and Mrs. Dashwood, his sister. He screwed up his courage, took a deep breath, and declared, "Mother, Fanny, I must ask for your congratulations. I am to be married."

The response to this remarkable statement was immediate. "Edward!" said Mrs. Ferrars, with all the tiny portion of maternal affection she possessed. "This is unexpected! I had not known you were calling regularly upon Miss Morton. Well done, my son, well done! You must have her over for tea." She turned to her daughter. "Fanny, do you think that tomorrow would be too soon?"

Fanny's expression upon hearing his news was not as sanguine as his mother's was, and Edward knew she recalled his extended visit to Norland Park, and his attentions to a certain young lady there. She answered Mrs. Ferrars, however, with tolerable composure.

"I believe that having the Mortons to tea tomorrow is perfectly acceptable. To invite Lady and Miss Morton today, on such short notice, would suggest mercenary motives, while later in the week would exhibit a negligence of an unsupportable magnitude."

"Very true, very true," replied the lady. "All must be done in a correct manner and measure. Tomorrow shall be the day. I shall write to Lady Morton at once."

"I should not write to Lady Morton, Mother," said Edward gravely.

"Not write to Lady Morton?" returned his astonished mother. "Whatever do you mean? Of course I shall write! She is not so above me that I cannot write! Not only are we acquainted, but she is also the mother of your intended! This is stuff and nonsense!"

Edward knew he could no longer delay the inevitable. "You are misinformed, Mother, as to the identity of my intended. I am to marry Fanny's sister."

He noted that Fanny went pale while his mother looked between the two of them. "What do you mean, Fanny's sister?" Mrs. Ferrars demanded. "Edward, explain yourself. What have you done?"

"I have forever assured myself of domestic bliss." Edward puffed out his chest. "Fanny's sister, Miss Elinor Dashwood, has accepted my suit."

"What?" cried his mother. "That is impossible! I will not allow it! You are to marry Miss Morton!"

"No, madam," returned her son. "I am by honor and inclination bound to Miss Dashwood. The bans are to be read this week, and the announcement shall be in tomorrow's *Times*."

Mrs. Ferrars leapt from her chair. "Miss Dashwood?" She turned to Fanny. "Is this young woman by chance related to Mr. Dashwood?"

Fanny recoiled from Mrs. Ferrars' anger, and although Edward could see plainly that his sister would have been happy never to answer this question, she said in a tremulous voice, "Miss Dashwood is Mr. Dashwood's half-sister."

Mrs. Ferrars addressed Edward furiously. "Half-sister to John Dashwood? She has nothing! Have you taken leave of your senses? Is a so advantageous union long in the planning to be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world? Heaven and earth, of what are you thinking?"

"I am of age and sound mind. I shall marry where I choose." He tried a gentler tone. "Mother, Miss Dashwood—Elinor—is the kindest, sweetest young woman imaginable. She is accomplished and intelligent, above her station in manners and comportment, and I am very fortunate to win her tender feelings. She is a worthy addition to our family and will make a loving daughter—"

"Never!" Mrs. Ferrars exclaimed. "I will never allow that woman—that fortune-hunting temptress—into my presence!"

"Madam, pray keep a civil tongue in your head," said Edward darkly. "You shall not disparage Miss Dashwood."

"I shall speak as I will!"

"You know nothing of her."

"I know she is *poor!*" Mrs. Ferrars spat the word as if it was the greatest crime in the world. "Miss Morton has *thirty thousand pounds!*"

Edward raised his chin. "Miss Morton, respectable as she is, could have ten times that to her name and I should not be moved. Miss Dashwood's worth is above rubies to me!"

"Bah!" Mrs. Ferrars railed. "I knew I should have heeded Sir Robert's advice and sent you to Mr. Pratt's at Longstaple in Plymouth! A private education must be superior to a public one, my brother told me. But no—you would go to public school, and thence to Cambridge! You persuaded me against my better judgment! Cambridge is the source of all your wild ideas!"

"If you speak of a university education and becoming a deacon in the Church, then I should agree with you. I told you I should not be idle. Cambridge has been the making of me."

"It will be the ruin of you!" Mrs. Ferrars thundered. "I control your fortune! You *will* divest yourself of this unworthy alliance—I demand it!"

Edward swallowed, seeing what he feared had come to pass. "You threaten me, Mother?"

Mrs. Ferrars almost sneered. "I can cut you off without a penny, should I choose. Do as I demand or I shall know how to act!"

The Rubicon was before Edward. Now he had to make sure. "How will you act, madam?"

"I will cast you off! I will change my will in favor of your brother, Robert, completely disowning you. Choose this *bird of paradise*, and you are no longer my son!"

Edward closed his eyes and sighed. "So be it. I warned you about your manner of reference to Miss Dashwood. You shall not see me again until I receive your full apology."

"Edward, no!" cried Fanny. "Think of what you are doing!"

"Be silent, Fanny!" snapped Mrs. Ferrars. "This is all *your* doing! If you had done as I had advised and instantly expelled those Dashwood chits upon taking possession of Norland, Edward would not be so ensnared!"

Fanny burst into tears, and Edward hurried to her side. Taking her hands into his, he barked at Mrs. Ferrars, "You will leave Fanny out of this! She had shown Christian charity to the less fortunate and does not deserve your scorn!"

Edward was aware he was grossly exaggerating his praise. He knew that Fanny only tolerated the Dashwoods for her husband's sake, and suspected she and his Brother Dashwood had not followed whatever intentions the late Henry Dashwood left for the care of his widow and daughters. Fanny had too much of her mother in her not to be selfish.

In spite of everything, however, she had been a good, loving sister to *him*. Edward's iron-strong sense of honor could not allow Fanny to take the blame for actions of which she was innocent.

"If you must harangue someone, then do so at the only person in this room that has disappointed you, woman!"

Mother and son engaged in a staring contest, and Mrs. Ferrars was the first to look away.

"Take care how you address me, boy, or you shall be starving on the streets."

"Thank you for your concern, madam." Edward could not completely hide the disgust in his voice.

"I meant what I said, Edward. It is not too late. Be reasonable, and all will be the same as it was before."

"That is impossible, madam," Edward replied coolly. "My heart and honor are engaged."

Mrs. Ferrars' lip curled. "Then, where will you live? In that hovel in Devonshire?"

"You are well informed. No, Miss Dashwood and I shall not need to seek sanctuary at Barton Cottage."

"Where will you go, Edward?" asked Fanny.

Edward smiled tenderly at his sister. "For you, I will tell you. I shall take orders and serve God and my parish."

"A parish vicar when you should be a gentleman of property in London?" mocked his mother. "Do not look to me for help acquiring a living, boy! I tell you I will use all my considerable connections to make certain that all doors are shut to you. You shall bend to my will, if you wish to stay out of the gutter!"

Even Fanny gasped at her mother's unfeeling cruelty.

"Thank you for your kind concern for my well-being, madam," was her son's sarcastic reply. To Fanny, he continued. "Do not fear for me, dear sister. I have already had a conversation with the Dashwoods' friend, Colonel Brandon of Delaford in Dorsetshire. Besides, a friend from Cambridge has a living available." He turned to his mother. "Do you remember my schoolmate, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley?"

Mrs. Ferrars' surprised countenance proved that she did.

Edward continued. "The parish of Kympton is in Derbyshire, only a few miles from Pemberley and Matlock. That is the seat of the Earl of Matlock, Darcy's uncle. Are you acquainted with the earl and countess, madam? Or Mr. Darcy's other uncle, the bishop? No? Pity."

"Mr. Darcy has a bishop in the family?" asked Fanny, as Mrs. Ferrars stood stone-faced.

"Yes, a very learned, pious, generous man, I must say, close to the archbishop," Edward said with a glance at his mother.

"You have met the bishop?" Mrs. Ferrars squeaked.

"Yes, through Darcy. I told you a religious education was a suitable one for a gentleman. If I work hard and I am fortunate, Elinor and I shall live very comfortably."

"And... and perhaps, eventually, a stall in Westminster?" said his sister excitedly.

"Perhaps, if that be God's will."

It was obvious that Mrs. Ferrars realized that she had been out-maneuvered—that Edward had foreseen all possible outcomes of this interview and had prepared accordingly. Mrs. Ferrars had but one card to play, and she did so, knowing that she had already lost.

"If you marry Miss Dashwood, I will wash my hands of you. I will recall Robert from Mr. Pratt's and make him my heir. Heed my words."

"I assume you do not wish an invitation to the wedding, then," Edward said.

"Edward, it will be irrevocable. This is your last warning." Mrs. Ferrars came as close to pleading as she could.

Edward nodded coldly. "I have taken your declaration into account, madam. If you have nothing else to say, I will take my leave of you." To his sister, he was warmer. "I shall not place you in an uncomfortable situation and send an invitation, Fanny. You will not have to choose between us. But I shall write once Elinor and I are settled."

Fanny's eyes filled. "Thank you, Edward."

Edward released his sister's hands with a smile, nodded, and left the house without so much as a backward glance.

The End



Story VIII – Combe Magna

(Author's Note: There are those who think that the dashing John Willoughby wasn't all that bad, and that Marianne Dashwood could have been happy married to him. Certainly, she would have a more passionate marriage than with Colonel Brandon. But passion isn't always peace. In this Sense & Sensibility variation, Marianne marries Willoughby.)

MR. JOHN WILLOUGHBY, DRESSED in his hunting attire, strode down the hall of Combe Magna, his home in the county of Somersetshire, the morning sun shining through the windows.

The house, like the estate and its master, was neither grand nor affluent. The rents generated from Combe Magna's fields were modest compared with other estates in the county. The house boasted a very small staff—half of what would normally be expected. Everywhere was signs of *economy* and even *retrenchment*.

But not in the dress of Mr. Willoughby. His hunting costume was of the latest style, and the fowling piece awaiting his attention in his carriage was less than eight months old. Anyone familiar with the details of Mr. Willoughby's situation would know that the gentleman dressed and purported in a manner of a country squire with twice his income. There was no *economy* or *retrenchment* when it came to sport or any of Mr. Willoughby's other entertainments.

Some would call that sort of behavior imprudent, but not Mr. Willoughby. He had *expectations*.

Mr. Willoughby sought out a footman. "Where is Mrs. Willoughby?" he asked the short young man dressed in livery that had seen better days. Told that the mistress of the house was in her study, Mr. Willoughby made his way there directly.

"My dear, how do you do this morning?" he cried as he swept through the door without knocking—the Master of Combe Magna knocked on no door in his house.

Mrs. Willoughby, at her desk writing a letter, put down her pen and tilted her cheek for the expected kiss. "I am very well this morning, Willoughby," she assured her husband after he straightened. "Did you sleep well? You are up early."

Mr. Willoughby gazed at his wife with proud satisfaction. The former Marianne Dashwood, only a few months past her twentieth birthday, was in the fullness of her beauty, something her slightly worn morning dress could never diminish.

"I slept very well, Marianne," said he. "I come to take my leave of you—I am off to hunt with Sir John Middleton at Barton Park."

"Oh," said she, a little of the light fading in her countenance. "I see you are all prepared. Shall you be gone long?"

"Not too long. I shall be back tomorrow." At her frown, he continued, "Marianne, while Barton is no long distance, we shall be hunting until the late afternoon. Surely, you do not want me to risk traveling by moonlight. I told you this last night at dinner."

His wife's eyes flashed. "You did not, sir."

"I am certain I did."

"And I am certain that you did not."

"Dash it all, I must have forgotten. I am sorry, Marianne, but there is no reason to get upset over a little mistake."

Mrs. Willoughby eyes flashed a message that told her husband that this was not the first "little mistake," but she kept silent for amicability's sake.

Mr. Willoughby changed the subject. "You are writing a letter, I see."

"I am. Perhaps you may do me a service and deliver these. It would save us the postage."

"Then they are to Dorsetshire. Your mother or sister?"

Mrs. Willoughby gestured to a closed envelope before her. "I actually have letters to both. My mother's is finished, and I am almost done with Elinor's, if I may have five minutes."

"Take all the time you need, my dear," he said magnanimously. Mr. Willoughby took his ease in a chair by his wife's desk and idly watched as she returned to her writing. He was absently playing with his watch fob when a piece of paper caught his eye. Curious, he rose and retrieved it. What he read upset him.

"Marianne!" he said sharply. "What is this?"

Mrs. Willoughby saw what he held accusingly in his hand and flushed guiltily. A moment later, all mortification gone, she narrowed both eyes and lips.

"It is a banknote, Willoughby."

"I can see that! This is made out to Elizabeth Williams! What is the meaning of this?"

"I think it should be perfectly clear. As I cannot give money directly to your child, I send it to the mother."

"For ten pounds?"

She returned to Elinor's letter. "It is what I usually send."

"*Usually send?* Marianne, speak plainly!"

She looked again at her husband, but this time without affection. "It is the monthly stipend for your child. I send it by way of Elinor."

Willoughby threw the paper onto the desk. "You send *one hundred twenty pounds* of my money a year to a bastard?"

Mrs. Willoughby flew to her feet. "*Your* bastard, Willoughby!"

"You take great interest in the affairs of another woman's child, madam! I would look to your own!"

She shook in her fury. "How dare you! Do you claim I am a negligent mother to Henry? Tell me, sir, how I have failed in my duty to your *heir!*"

In spite of his anger, Mr. Willoughby saw that he had gone too far. "You twist my words, Marianne. You have been absolutely devoted to Henry. *This,*" he pointed to the banknote, "is not your concern."

"It should be *yours*, Willoughby," Mrs. Willoughby shot back, "but you will not attend. Therefore, it falls to me. Besides, it is not your money."

"What do you mean?"

She looked at him coolly. "Some of it comes from funds sent to me by Mrs. Smith. The balance is from my pin money."

"Damn my aunt! She takes too much upon herself!"

"Someone must, since you will not do your duty."

Mr. Willoughby flinched at the verbal slap. He glared at his wife, helplessly. John Willoughby had never raised a hand to a woman in anger in all his life and never would—particularly to the woman he loved. Besides, he owed his situation to Marianne. Not only had she brightened his days and warmed his nights, she had provided him with a fine, healthy son. She managed the estate finances with an iron grip, installing *economy* where she could and *retrenchment* where she must, allowing Mr. Willoughby to indulge in his breeding of horses and dogs, and in sport of every kind.

Besides, Marianne was the saving of all his expectations. He was the heir to Mrs. Smith and all her money and property, including Allenham Court in Devonshire. She was an exacting woman, and she was beside herself when she learned of his dalliance with Eliza Williams, ward of Colonel Brandon of Delaford. She would have disinherited him over the chit and her brat if not for her affection for Marianne Willoughby. It was only on her account, Mrs. Smith had told him, that Mr. Willoughby was still her heir.

Mr. Willoughby stewed for a minute, staring out of the window, to avoid his wife's accusing glare. "I suppose I should be happy that the child is being well looked after," he allowed.

"Yes, thanks to the generosity of Colonel Brandon," said Mrs. Willoughby.

Mr. Willoughby's anger flared at the mention of that hated name. He could not forget how the man brought him low—embarrassed him before his friends—by making him admit his fault with Eliza Williams in that duel in London, at the threat of bodily harm. Mr. Willoughby tried to tell himself that Brandon had been lucky—that he had slipped—but it was a lie. Colonel Brandon was the better swordsman and he only lived because of Brandon's honor.

It was not the only reason Mr. Willoughby hated Colonel Brandon. He knew that the colonel fancied Marianne. How much of that came into play when Colonel Brandon offered mercy to him, he strove not to think about.

"Yes, you are quite right," he bit out, cheeks flushed red in resentment.

His wife turned away. "Oh, Willoughby, let us not quarrel."

"It is not my wish." Mr. Willoughby kept his voice flat, so as not to further offend.

Mrs. Willoughby looked at the surface of her desk. "You will be leaving soon?"

"As soon as you finish your letter."

Her fine, lovely eyes glanced up, catching his. "Thank you."

He bowed. "I shall leave you to your writing, my dear. I will have a word with the steward and await you by the carriage."

She nodded and returned to her seat. For his part, he bowed again and quietly made his way out the study.

A quarter-hour later, Mr. Willoughby received the letters from his wife's hand as he had one foot on the carriage's running board. He gave her hand a kiss, climbed aboard, and was off to Dorsetshire. Mrs. Willoughby stood and waved until he was around the bend of the driveway. She then returned to the house.

Both went their separate ways, both just a little less in love with the other than they were when they awoke that morning.

The End



Story IX – We Have Mrs. Radcliffe to Thank

(Author's Note: In this Northanger Abbey variation, things are not always as they seem.)

NO ONE WHO HAD ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all against her in equal measure. She was the eldest daughter of a country clergyman, and while certainly not rich, she was not destitute either. She loved her family, her home, and her romantic novels and expected very little else out of life, except for a handsome man to sweep her off her feet and carry her away. As the chances of that occurring were very slight, her life was very ordinary.

Thanks to her friends, the Allens, Catherine was taken to Bath, where she made the acquaintance of Miss Eleanor Tilney, the beautiful daughter of a local retired army general, and her brother, the equally handsome Mr. Henry Tilney. Acquaintance rapidly grew into friendship, and just as quickly, an invitation to Miss Tilney's home was extended and accepted.

Catherine never had such an adventure before in her young life—visiting a country estate as the particular friend of a lovely girl with her extremely agreeable brother as escort! Such things did not happen to clergyman's daughters from Fullerton!

Northanger Abbey was a disappointment, however. As a faithful reader of the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe, Catherine could not help but be delighted at the prospect of the expected gothic grandeur that was sure to be the Tilney estate. However, the reality was nothing of the sort. The abbey was a short, squat hall on level ground. Inside, the furniture was in all the profusion and elegance of modern taste. The fireplace, where she had expected to find the ample width and ponderous carving of former times, was contracted to a Rumford, with slabs of plain, though handsome, marble and ornaments over it of the prettiest English china. The windows, to which she looked with peculiar regard from having heard the General talk of preserving them in their Gothic form with reverential care, were yet less what her fancy had portrayed. To be sure, the pointed arch was preserved—the form of them was Gothic, and they might be even casements—but every pane was so large, so clear, so light! To an imagination which had hoped for the smallest divisions and the heaviest stone—work, for painted glass, dirt, and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing.

Another blow was that Mr. Tilney did not reside there with the General and Eleanor. Woodston, nearly twenty miles distant from the Abbey, was his establishment. For at the age of seventeen, Catherine had found someone as worthy of her admiration as her dear novels. In Henry Tilney she found all expectations of her necessities of an agreeable gentleman. He was smart, in both mind and dress, and was clever without being cruel. And there was another accomplishment besides—a depth of feeling she had never known existed in the world outside what her mother called her “dreadful novels.” As much as Catherine enjoyed Eleanor's company, she anticipated Henry's visits with sweet eagerness.

The General, however, was not so agreeable. Dark and foreboding was his aspect. Catherine seldom saw him except at dinner, and sharp was his questioning of his visitor. He insisted on prompt attendance, and his only other command was that Miss Moreland refrain from entering any room in the family wing, save Miss Tilney's.

For a girl raised on novels Gothic, this was the same as an open invitation. Catherine longed to explore the bedrooms there, particularly the room of the late Mrs. Tilney. Ever since she beheld the portrait of the woman in the family chapel, Catherine was convinced that the lady had been a victim of foul play. Moreover, it was fixed in *her* mind that the perpetrator of the heinous deed was none other than the poor woman's husband. Why else would the General, usually so attentive, glower so at her at any approach to the prohibited room?

For several weeks, Catherine tried to talk her friend into an exploration of the chambers to no avail. Eleanor, due to fealty and fear, could not be moved. Catherine's curiosity had to be appeased. She came to the resolution that she would make her next attempt on the forbidden door alone. It would be much better in every respect that Eleanor should know nothing of the matter. To involve her in the danger of detection, to court her into an apartment which must wring her heart, could not be the office of a friend. The General's utmost anger could not be to herself what it might be to a daughter, and besides, she thought the examination itself would be more satisfactory if made without any companion.

Of the way to the apartment she was now perfectly mistress, and as she wished to gain entrance before Henry's return, expected on the morrow, there was no time to be lost. The day was bright, her courage high. At four o'clock, the sun was two hours above the horizon, and she would be the only one retiring to dress a half-hour earlier than usual.

Catherine found herself alone in the gallery before the clocks had ceased to strike. There was no time for thought. She hurried on, slipped with the least possible noise through the folding doors, and without stopping to look or breathe, rushed forward to the one in question. The lock yielded to her hand, and luckily, with no sullen sound that could alarm a human being. On tiptoe she entered. The room was before her, but it was some minutes before she could advance another step.

She beheld what fixed her to the spot and agitated her every feature. She saw a large, well-proportioned apartment, a handsome bed with dimity curtains, arranged as with a housemaid's care, a bright Bath stove, mahogany wardrobes, and neatly painted chairs, on which the warm beams of a western sun gaily poured through two sash windows!

Catherine had expected to have her feelings worked, and worked they were. Astonishment and doubt first seized them, and a shortly succeeding ray of common sense added some bitter emotions of shame. She could not be mistaken as to the room, but how grossly mistaken she had been in everything else! This apartment, to which she had given a date so ancient, a position so awful, proved to be all that was delightful. True, it had not been used in some time, but it bore the mark of the servants—not a speck of dust could be found. There were two other doors in the chamber, leading into dressing—closets, no doubt, but she had no inclination to open either. Would the veil in which Mrs. Tilney last walked or the volume she had last read remain to tell what nothing else was allowed to whisper?

No—whatever might have been the General's crimes, he had certainly too much wit to let them sue for detection.

Catherine was sick of exploring and desired nothing more than to be safe in her own room with only her own heart privy to its folly. She was at the point of retreating as softly as she had entered, when the sound of footsteps—she could hardly tell from where—made her pause and tremble.

To be found there, even by a servant, would be unpleasant, but by the General would be much worse! She listened—the sound had ceased—and resolving not to lose a moment, she passed through and closed the door.

At that instant, a door beneath her was hastily opened. Someone seemed with swift steps to ascend the stairs, the head of which Catherine had yet to pass before she could gain entrance to the gallery. She had no power to move.

With a feeling of terror not quite definable, she fixed her eyes on the staircase, and in a few moments, it gave Henry to her view.

"Mr. Tilney! Good heavens! How came you here? How came you up that staircase?"

He looked astonished too. "How came I up that staircase?" he replied, greatly surprised. "Because it is the nearest way from the stable yard to my own chamber; and why should I not use it?"

Catherine recollected herself, blushed deeply, and could say no more. He seemed to be looking in her countenance for that explanation which her lips did not afford. She moved on towards the gallery.

"And may I not, in my turn," said he, as he pushed back the folding doors, "ask how *you* came here? This passage is at least as extraordinary a road from the breakfast parlor to your apartment as that staircase can be from the stables to mine."

She could not lie to his bright, penetrating blue eyes. "I have been to see your mother's room," said Catherine, looking down.

"My mother's room! Is there anything extraordinary to be seen there?"

"No, nothing at all."

"You look pale. I am afraid I alarmed you by running so fast up those stairs. Perhaps you did not know—you were not aware—of their leading from the offices in common use?"

"No, I was not." She changed the subject. "You have had a very fine day for your ride."

"Very, and does Eleanor leave you to find your way into all the rooms in the house by yourself?"

"Oh! No, she showed me for the greatest part on Saturday—and we were coming here to these rooms—but only," dropping her voice, "your father was with us."

"And that prevented you," said Henry, earnestly regarding her. "Have you looked into all the rooms in that passage?"

"No, I only wanted to see —" She realized how foolish she appeared. "Is not it very late? I must go and dress for dinner."

"It is only a quarter past four. There is time enough."

She could not contradict it, and therefore, suffered herself to be detained, though her dread of further questions made her, for the first time in their acquaintance, wish to leave him.

"My mother's room is very commodious, is it not?" Henry said. "Large and cheerful-looking, and the dressing-closets so well disposed! It always strikes me as the most comfortable apartment in the house. Eleanor sent you to look at it, I suppose?"

"No."

"It has been your own doing entirely?" Catherine said nothing. After a short silence during which he closely observed her, he added, "As there is nothing in the room in itself to raise curiosity, this must have proceeded from a sentiment of respect for my mother's character, as described by Eleanor, which does honor to her memory. The world, I believe, never saw a better woman. But it is not often that virtue can boast an interest such as this. The domestic, unpretending merits of a person never known do not often create that kind of fervent, venerating tenderness which would prompt a visit like yours. Eleanor, I suppose, has talked of her a great deal."

"Yes, a great deal. That is—no, not much, but what she did say was very interesting. Her dying so suddenly, and you—none of you being at home—and your father, I thought—perhaps had not been very fond of her."

"And from these circumstances," he replied, his quick eye fixed on hers, "you inferred perhaps the probability of some negligence, some—something still less pardonable?"

She raised her eyes towards him more fully than she had ever done before.

Henry reached out his hand. "Come, Catherine, please. Come with me, if it be your will."

Without hesitation, she placed her little hand in his. Immediately, he turned and walked with her to his mother's apartment. A moment later, the two were in the middle of the room. Catherine could know no reason why he did this, except to prove to her that her suspicions were wrong.

He said nothing. Instead, he stood before her, both her hands in his. Deeply his blue eyes searched hers, searching for she knew not. She felt her soul open—he knew her every secret, including her love for him.

In a soft voice scarcely above a whisper, he spoke. "Would you like to meet her?"

Catherine blinked. "I ... I beg your pardon? Meet who?"

"My mother."

"Your mother!" she cried. "Is not your mother dead?"

A half-smile marked his countenance. He half-turned, never releasing his hold on her hands, and to one of the doors on the far side of the room, he called out softly, "*Mother?*"

At once, the door opened and a beautiful older woman entered the room. Her face was unlined and her hair a soft shade of gold. Her ivory dress was of an older style, at least twenty years in the past, yet it shown

as if the dressmaker had just completed her labors. Her features favored Eleanor, but she shared the same blue eyes as Henry.

The woman looked at a shock-stilled Catherine with intense interest. Her eyes never leaving the girl, she said in a low, throaty voice, "Henry, is this the one?"

"I believe so, Mother," he answered. Henry turned to Catherine. "Forgive me, my love, but I must know."

Catherine felt her very mind invaded.

Do you love me? A voice filled her head. She felt compelled to answer truthfully.

"Yes."

Do you say this of your own free will?

"Yes."

Do you want to stay with me for all time?

"More than anything else in the world."

Henry turned to the woman. "Yes, Mother. She is the one."

The woman smiled. "I am so happy for you, my son." She spoke to Catherine. "Do not fear, my child. A kiss and you will join us for all eternity."

"Oh, yes—please."

The woman floated to Catherine's side, her hands gently cupping the girl's face. "So pretty, so pure. You have chosen well, Henry. What is your name, sweet child?"

"Catherine."

"Welcome to our family, Catherine." With that, Mrs. Tilney lowered her face to Catherine's neck.

Catherine's world went dark.



Catherine sat on the sofa with Henry in Mrs. Tilney's apartment. They were quite alone, for Mrs. Tilney had retired to her room again. Henry began to tell his bride of their history.

"My mother's malady," he continued, "the change which ended in her death, was sudden. At first, we thought it a bilious fever. But she seemed to waste away, and no doctor could cure her. My father, brother, and I remained in almost constant attendance for four and twenty hours. On the fifth day, she died. As her disorder progressed, we saw her repeatedly, and from our own observation can bear witness to her having received every possible attention which could spring from the affection of those about her or which her situation in life could command. Poor Eleanor was absent, and at such a distance as to return only to see her mother in her coffin."

"But your father?" said Catherine. "Was he afflicted?"

"Immensely. You erred in supposing him not attached to her. He loved her beyond all reason, I am persuaded. I will not pretend to say that while she lived she might not often have had much to bear, but though his temper sometimes injured her, his judgment never did. His value of her was sincere, and he was truly afflicted by her death."

"I am very glad of it," said Catherine. "It would have been very shocking!"

Henry laughed. "Not as shocking as it was when she returned to us! Oh, I thought I had gone mad with grief, and my family, too, but it was no ghost. It was my mother, more beautiful than she was in life. Her death killed all illness. She was whole and well."

"And dead."

"Un-dead, yes. We do not know to this day from where the vampirism came."

"She shared her gift with you?"

"With all of us—yes."

Catherine tried to take all the changes in. When she awoke from her swoon in Henry's arms, she knew her world had changed. She felt new and free. Catherine Morland was no more. Though not yet officially married, she was now Catherine Tilney and would be so forever.

"I do not understand. How can this be? You have been out in the daytime and Eleanor too. I thought the sun was the enemy of vampires. Yet, as I sit here in your arms, watching the sunset, I feel not the least discomfort. And you do not sparkle."

Henry laughed. "I believe that most of what is written about vampires is rubbish, my love, much like your beloved 'dreadful novels.' In actuality, only Mother is a full arch-vampiress. She does not like the full sun all that well. And she can only consume fresh blood—not human, of course," he hastened to assure her. "She is partial to lamb, but cow's blood does well enough. The rest of us are gifted with partial-vampirism, like you. We carry on as we always did. The only exceptions are that we age very slowly, we are impervious to normal death, and we like our meat raw."

"But my meals here—the food was well cooked."

He smiled. "We suffered so as not to offend your sensibilities, my love." He grew serious. "You now understand why we are so reserved. We can be destroyed by the frightened and uninformed. A stake to the heart, beheading by a silver blade, that sort of thing. We pose no threat to king and country—in fact, Frederick, being invulnerable, is a great weapon for England—but as we are considered unnatural, we are feared."

"And your father is gatekeeper to the family secrets?" Catherine stated with new-found prescience.

"Yes. He is perfect for the task, as he is naturally suspicious. It is why Eleanor's admirer has been held off at arm's length. We are not certain that the Viscount would accept the price of joining the family."

"And I was judged worthy?"

Henry smiled. "Yes. Thank you, my love."

Catherine's own smile faded. "Henry, what of children?"

"I do not know, love. As we are only half-vampires, we may yet be blessed." He pulled her into a close embrace. "I do want children with you, Catherine, but that may be denied. Will you hate me if it is so?"

"Never!" she cried. "My life is you, Henry. If that is all I ever have, I will be more than content." She shivered.

"Catherine, are you well?"

"Never better, Henry. I ... I feel so alive! Is it not strange to say that? Yet, I feel..." She blushed. "Henry, may we marry soon?"

Henry's blue eyes seemed to glow. "Are you ... impatient?"

Catherine's eyes glowed in return. "Yes! You know I am! Such...such feelings course through me! I can hide nothing from you, my darling. I ... I feel completely wanton!"

His lips captured hers in a kiss that was so all-consuming that they would have died of suffocation, if they were still fully alive.

The door opened. "Henry? Are you—oh, my!" cried Eleanor.

Henry turned to her, but kept Catherine in a close embrace. "Wish me joy, Sister. Catherine has met Mother!"

"She has?" Eleanor squealed. "How wonderful! Welcome to the family, my dear friend!"

Catherine left her lover's embrace and turned to her sister. "Thank you, Eleanor. But tell me, is dinner ready? I feel positively ravenous!"

Henry laughed. "Come, darling. We cannot have you starve."

As they left for the dining room, Catherine said, "And after dinner, we must speak about this viscount of yours, Eleanor. I think we need more gentlemen in the family." She laughed. "Oh, how right Mrs. Radcliffe is—and how very wrong!"

The End



Story X - In the Year Eight

(Author's Note: In this *Persuasion* variation, Frederick Wentworth swallows his pride and writes Anne Elliot from his new command, the HMS Laconia.)

Letter #1 - Capt. Wentworth to Miss Elliot

Miss Anne Elliot
Kellynch Hall, Somersetshire

Miss Elliot,

Pray forgive the liberty I take in writing to you. However, given the intimacy of our acquaintance, particularly when last we spoke two years ago, I do not believe it is totally inappropriate of me to post this letter. Frankness and honesty have always been part and parcel between us, and I trust you will not think the less of me.

Since last we spoke, my situation has changed. I have completed my posting to *HMS Asp*, and Providence has so smiled upon me as to give my sloop the opportunity to offer good service to our king and consternation to our foes. Thanks entirely to an extraordinary feat of arms by my brave and resolute crew I have lately presented the Navy with a fine prize of a thirty-six gun French frigate. In gratitude for this action, the Admiralty has made me Post-Captain and given command of the vessel, re-christened *Laconia*.

The ship will be refitting at Plymouth for some months, and I have been given leave. In a fortnight, I intend to visit with my relations in Somersetshire. If it be agreeable to you, I would like to pay my respects to the Elliots of Kellynch Hall during my travels.

You may wonder why I make this request of you, rather than your father. While I respect your family, it would pain me exceedingly to cause you any discomfort. Therefore, if I do not receive an answer from you saying that such a visit is welcome, I shall not come. Should this scheme give you the least uneasiness, please do not write to me. Your silence will insure that I shall not enter your father's house.

Before I close, allow me to say that I have thought long and hard upon your words two years ago, and I have come to see the justice in them. I bear you no ill-will; in fact, my feelings are just the opposite. However, I hesitate to impose my presence on you, and that is why I shall not come to Kellynch if that be your desire.

Your obt. servant,

F. WENTWORTH, Captain, RN
HMS Laconia, Plymouth



Letter #2 - Miss Elliot to Capt. Wentworth

Dear Captain Wentworth,

Allow me to send you joy for your promotion and new command. I would be honored to have you call upon my family at Kellynch. I await you with every regard.

Yours, etc.

A. ELLIOT



Letter #3 - Capt. Wentworth to Capt. Harville

Captain Timothy Harville
Lyme

Harville,

I must beg your congratulations again, shipmate, for I am to be married! And to whom, may you ask? To the most wonderful woman in all the world! I know you think you know her, and Mrs. Harville is an excellent lady, I grant you, but none can fill that post in my eyes if her initials are not A.E.!

It is you I must thank for this happy event. You counseled me to put aside my pride and carefully consider Miss Elliot's words when she broke our engagement. I finally did as you bade, and I was humbled. What a fool I was! How could a penniless commander dare to demand the hand of a baronet's daughter? I deserved to be turned out of the house. I should never have attempted to engage Miss Elliot's affections until I could properly support a wife.

But now, thanks to the French, I am a Post-Captain with a few thousand pounds to my name. Now I can dare to set my eyes so high, and I have been rewarded. I wrote to Miss Elliot as you suggested, called upon her at Kellynch, and wonder of wonders, Anne—dear, sweet Anne—has remained true. Our engagement is renewed, and Sir Water has given his consent. I am in Somerset still, at my brother's in Monkford, giddy at my good fortune.

Say you will stand with me on the appointed day. I cannot marry without you and Mrs. Harville in attendance.

Your obt. servant,

WENTWORTH



Letter # 4 – Miss Elliot to Lady Russell

Lady Russell
Rivers Street, Bath

My dear Godmother,

I am grieved that you are troubled at the news of my engagement to Captain Wentworth. I would not distress you for all the world, if my happiness was not at stake.

Because I have now accepted Captain Wentworth, it does not follow that I am resentful of your advice two years ago. In 1806, I was nineteen and in love with a newly-made naval commander with nothing to recommend him, save his character and determination. He had no money, he had nothing to support a wife—all this you said, and it was true. I allowed myself to be persuaded to be prudent and released him. It was the correct thing to do, and I cannot fault you for it. But in my heart, I did not give him up. I never could, you see, and resolved never to marry.

Matters are very different now. You would be very surprised how much Frederick and I talked of these matters—surprised and proud, I hope. He has been made Post and has earned several thousand pounds in prize money, all invested in the Naval Five Percents. He has every expectation of continuing his success in his career and being able to supplement his pay and the interest from my dowry and his prize money. Before you protest, I know my father cannot release the entirety of my portion of the ten thousand set aside from my mother. Frederick and I have spoken of this. With economy, I should be very comfortable. You may laugh, but my needs are very modest, even though I am a baronet's daughter.

I frown at the words above. They sound so mercenary. But such matters must be considered. That is the difference, I believe, between nineteen and twenty-one.

Allow me to let free my feelings. I love Frederick with all my heart and have done so constantly these two years. He had assured me of his affections and devotion, and this is proved by our parting and the passing of time, at the end of which his feelings were as strong as ever. He admits he was wounded and angry when I released him. I truly broke his heart, he says. He was bitter. Yet, his better particulars triumphed. He thought and considered, and at the end, he was humbled and repentant. Only love remains, he assures me, and I am perfectly satisfied. And I have assured him that never shall I be persuaded again, unless it be by my character or his.

Please return home soon. There is much I wish to share with you. My happiness shall not be complete without your attendance.

Your loving goddaughter,

ANNE



Letter #5 – Capt. Wentworth to Mrs. Croft

Mrs. Sophia Croft
Gibraltar

My dear Sophie,

By the time you receive this letter, I shall be married to Miss Anne Elliot of Kellynch Hall. I would imagine that this news surprises you, for you have said that I would never find a woman worth marrying. I have, dear Sophie, for she reminds me much of you. She is strong and sweet and beautiful, and I know I do not deserve her. I am the luckiest man in the fleet.

We marry quickly, for my new command, the thirty-six-gun *Laconia*, is set for a cruise of the Western Islands soon, and we would rather have matters settled first. You may laugh, dear sister, but remember your own wedding to Captain Croft!

My interview with Sir Walter Elliot, Anne's father, was a true comedy. In my Number One uniform and best hat, I called on him to ask for his daughter's hand. He did not know me, even though we had met in the Year Six, when I was visiting with Edward. The walls of his study were covered, not in books, but with mirrors. One cannot get away from one's self! It is my opinion that Sir Walter is a very vain man and foolish, too.

His reaction to my request was—and I quote—"You want to marry Anne? Whatever for?" It appears the man has little regard for her. He asked many questions about my background and connections and looked very disappointed, until I mentioned Sir Edward Pellew. That seemed to impress the fellow—even he had heard of the rear-admiral. He was satisfied with my income and granted his permission with a curious remark. Again I quote—"I suppose you are fine enough for Anne. Not too weather-beaten for a sailor, I see. Do you use Gowland's, sir? I quite recommend it."

I must admit I am quiet perplexed as I consider all of Anne's relations. Her youngest sister, Miss Mary, is a jolly and pretty thing and is on good terms with Anne, but is the most self-centered creature. She is always thinking herself ill, I believe, to call attention to herself.

The eldest Miss Elliot, Miss Elizabeth, is something else entirely. Beautiful, I must say, but I prefer the warmth of Anne. Anne is like a summer's day, when a man is happy to be alive. Miss Elizabeth is as lovely as a diamond and as cold. She thinks of nothing but herself and is dismissive of Anne. There is too much of the father in her.

Anne's great friend is her neighbor and godmother, Lady Russell. I cannot think very well of her, as she does not look favorably on the match. There is more I can say, but I shall not. However, I must forgive the woman, for she has offered to take Anne in her home while I am gone. It is very generous, but I hesitated and would not give way until she agreed that we shall share in the expense. I cannot say whether she respects me more for this or is offended at my determination. Perhaps a bit of both.

I should not paint too black a picture. There are good people in the neighborhood. The Musgroves own the Great House at Uppercross and are very kind. They have a son in the navy, a midshipman. The heir, Charles Musgrove, is as fine a fellow as Harville, and his sisters are very attached to Anne. It is well that Anne should have some friends nearby, as Edward is to leave Monkford for another, better living by the end of the year.

I am happy to have the *Laconia*, but I shall miss Anne. Again I hear you laugh. Should I bring my wife aboard, as Captain Croft has done? We shall see after this short cruise.

I shall write more soon. All the best to Croft, and all my love to you.

Your affectionate brother,
FREDERICK



Letter # 6 - Mrs. Wentworth to Capt. Wentworth

Captain Frederick Wentworth
HMS Laconia, Plymouth

My dear husband,

What joy it is to write such words to you! By reading this you know I have secreted this note in your sea-chest, along with a silhouette portrait. I hope it gives you comfort in the weeks to come.

My dearest love, words cannot describe how wonderful the last few weeks have been. Thank you for allowing me to go to Plymouth to be with you as you completed the fitting out of your dear *Laconia*. I know, as all navy wives know, I have a rival for your heart, but I will not share you with her until the last instant!

But, no, I shall not be missish. You must do your duty, and I must do mine. Worry not, my dear. Lady Russell and I shall make merry in Somerset until your most anticipated return. I shall sign this, the first of many letters to you, with my full name, as it is my delight.

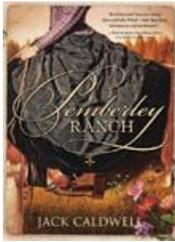
All my love,

ANNE WENTWORTH

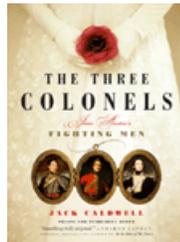
The End



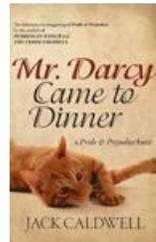
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