



Backstage at Pride and Prejudice

JACK CALDWELL

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Blurb: What do Miss Austen's characters do in the off-time?
A P&P short story.

GEORGE WICKHAM CAREFULLY LOOKED over the cards in his hand. Selecting the ten of spades, he placed it face up on the discard pile.

“Thank you, George,” said his playing partner as he took the card.

“Damn it!” cried Wickham. “I thought you were collecting hearts!”

“Wrong, old boy.” Colonel Fitzwilliam grinned. “And... gin!” He placed his hand on the table. “That’s twenty-five points, plus...”

Wickham threw his hand down in disgust. “Forty-two. Bloody hell, Fitz! You right slaughtered me.”

“The score is 92 to 16. Your deal.”

“Damned stupid American game,” Wickham grumbled as he shuffled.

“Would you prefer piquet? If we can get a few more to play we can switch to whist or poker.”

Fitzwilliam glanced around the room. It was an austere place, this room in the middle of Space and Time. The walls and ceiling were stark white, the floor jet black. No art adorned the walls—only a few doors leading *Elsewhere*. A modern kitchen was at one end. The furniture, while plentiful, was all the same dull brown leather. There were several television sets and a bank of computers.

The colonel dismissed Darcy and Elizabeth. They were sitting on one of the couches, holding hands and making goo-goo eyes at each other. *As usual*. Jane and Charles were watching a home improvement show on telly, while Hurst and Mr. Bennet were watching a replay of last night’s football match on another. Mary was engrossed in a book, and Kitty was playing

an online video game. Louisa, Charlotte, and Mrs. Bennet were baking scones. Neither Lydia nor Caroline had made it in yet. *No surprise there.*

William Collins, munching on a sandwich, seemed to be bored.

“Billy!” Fitzwilliam cried. “Care to sit in?”

“Good God, Fitz,” Wickham whispered, “do we have to have that oaf play?”

The large, heavy-set man shook his balding head. “I’m skint, sorry. Perhaps after next payday.”

Wickham whistled. “That was a close one.”

“Shut up and deal,” responded Fitzwilliam evenly.

Wickham dealt, as he had done for countless years. What else was one to do while they waited for their next assignment?

One of the doors opened, and in burst Caroline Bingley, a mobile phone glued to one ear. Unlike everyone else, who were dressed rather causally, Caroline wore a Russian fox fur coat over a white silk shell top and gunmetal gray pencil skirt. Her black three-inch heels beat a staccato rhythm on the hard tile floor. She was talking someone’s ear off.

“... And for the photo shoot I want Nick Knight ... Yes, *that* Nick Knight ... What do you mean he’s not available? ... Well, get him, darling! What do you think I pay you for?”

“*Nick Knight?*” cried Lady Catherine de Bourgh from her overly large, ornate chair. “Hah!”

Caroline gave Lady Catherine one of her death stares and continued talking on her mobile. “Well, if it’s *impossible*, then we’ll just have to get Annie Leibovitz...”

Just then, another of the doors—a small, rarely used one—opened. A handsome, dark haired man stuck his head in. “Anything come in for me yet?”

“Nothing yet, Buford. We’ll let you know,” said Mrs. Hill.

“Right. Okay.” John Buford shut the door behind him.

“Original characters,” mumbled Mrs. Hill. “All the same.”

Suddenly, a smuttily-dressed young woman approached Wickham. “Wicky-love, give us a light.” The tall, buxom blonde had a cigarette between her plump, red lips.

Wickham pulled out a lighter and did the honors. “So, Lyddie, you’ve finally graced us with your presence. Had a rough night, eh?”

“Don’t be a prick,” spat Lydia Bennet. She blew a puff a smoke in his face and wandered off.

“What was that all about?” asked Fitzwilliam as he studied his hand.

“Word is she got pissed at a rave yesterday. I’m surprised she’s conscious.” Wickham picked up a card and almost immediately discarded it.

“With all her drinking and drugs and smoking, I wonder how she’s kept her looks.” The colonel discarded a card from his hand.

“I suppose it helps being immortal, doesn’t it?”

Just then a siren went off. The space was filled with flashing red lights. A robotic voice blared from speakers fixed into the ceiling:

“ALERT! ALERT! NEW FAN FICTION SCRIPTS COMING IN! ALERT! ALERT!”

Everyone stopped what they were doing.

“ALERT! ALERT! SCRIPTS ARRIVING! ALERT! ALERT! SCRIPTS ARRIVING!”

Hidden doors opened throughout the ceiling. At once, numerous booklets fell from them, landing beside many of those in the room. Two plopped on the table in front of Fitzwilliam and Wickham.

Wickham put down his cards. “Another day, another story. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

Fitzwilliam had already opened his. “Regency... Yep, here I am.”

“What’s your name this time?” asked Wickham.

“‘Richard.’ Crimeny, you’d think they would come up with another name sometime soon.”

“At least it’s not ‘Algernon.’”

“Too right, there.”

The Original Characters’ door opened again. “We heard a script came in,” cried a different handsome man.

“You’re not in this one, milord,” said Mrs. Hill. “You know the routine. A script is automatically delivered if you’re in the story.”

“I-I thought that maybe they forgot—”

“They don’t forget. You know that!”

Viscount Andrew deflated. “I know, I know.”

Mrs. Hill softened a little. “It’s a WIP. The author can always change her mind. If she does, they’ll let you know.”

The viscount nodded. “Thanks, anyway, Mrs. Hill. Break a leg, everybody.” With that, he shut the door.

Meanwhile, several people came out of the Seldom-Used Characters room: Maria Lucas, Mrs. Jenkinson, Lady Fitzwilliam (who was Lady Matlock in this story), and Mr. Denny.

Fitzwilliam and Wickham moved towards a group of lockers against the wall. “What army unit this time?” asked Wickham.

“Infantry—red jacket.” He opened the locker to find his costume hanging within. The Automatic Costuming System was back up and working.

“That will make Kitty happy.” Wickham paused. “You ever get any of that?”

“No—absolutely not!” The colonel then grinned. “Now, don’t ask about Mary, though.”

“And Jane?”

“Shush—Bingley will hear.”

“What was that?” Charles Bingley shouted from his locker across the way.

“Just wondering if you’re up for a beer later, old chap,” cried Wickham.

“Oh—we’ll see.” With that, Bingley dug into his locker.

The soft banter was interrupted by a cry of anguish. “Oh no, not again!”

Fitzwilliam looked over. “What’s wrong, Billy?”

The tall reverend gestured at the script. “My physical description! The author—she’s copying David Bamber’s depiction! This is the third time this year!”

“Bad luck there, old boy,” Fitzwilliam said sincerely.

“You know what to do, Billy.” Wickham gestured at The Machine.

“I know, I know.” Head drooping, William Collins reluctantly trudged over to the huge, black monstrosity, Mrs. Hill already attending it. “They *always* have me short and oily! Damn that Andrew Davies!”

“One moment while I make the adjustments.” Mrs. Hill fiddled with some dials. “You may enter now.” She opened a hatch.

Collins took a deep breath and entered The Machine. Mrs. Hill shut the hatch with a bang and pressed a button. The Machine lit up and a low hum grew louder and louder. There was a crash—lightning danced about the device—and Collins screamed in pain. The Machine then went dark.

Mrs. Hill opened the hatch, and in a puff of smoke, Collins, now short and oily, staggered out. "Oh God, that never gets any easier," he groaned.

"Cheer up, mate, you have a major supporting role this time," said Fitzwilliam. "Why, you even get killed!"

"*What!?* How?"

Fitzwilliam opened the script. "Drowning in a pond."

Collins sadly put a hand to his face. "Oh, that's marvelous."

"By the way, what happens to me?" asked Wickham.

The colonel studied his script. "Hmm, it seems I kill you."

Wickham rolled his eyes. "How do you do it this time?"

"Sword fight. I'll try to make as quick and painless as possible."

Wickham sighed. "It would be appreciated. At least that's better than that American western story a few years back. Do you know how much it hurts to get shot in the face?"

Fitzwilliam patted him on the back. "You never looked prettier, George."

"Bugger off," Wickham said good-naturedly. "What's in the rest of the script?"

"The usual. Lizzy's perfect, Darcy's an arse, you're despicable, Caroline's insufferable, and Lydia is a slut. Lots of naughty bits. I give it a seven out of ten."

"Yeah, nothing new. Why so high a score?"

The colonel grinned. "I get some action in this one. An OC—Lady Gwendolyn Snodgrass."

Mary walked by. "You know, that is not the way *MISS JANE AUSTEN* created us." She pronounced the name of The Creator as they all did—with great reverence.

"Except for Lydia," Wickham quipped, earning him a slap on the back of his head.

"I heard that, you bastard!" cried Lydia.

Wickham rubbed his head. "Now, is that any way to treat your lover?" He leered. "We're supposed to have *fun* in this one."

"Yeah, maybe— if you don't have *performance issues*, that is!" she shot back.

Wickham leaned over and whispered, "Maybe if someone put forth a little *effort*, someone else might get aroused—"

A slap was his reward and Lydia stormed off. Fitzwilliam shook his head. "You live dangerously, my friend."

“After two hundred years, you have to do something.” They watched an angry Caroline stomp by in an ugly orange Regency gown with an overly large headpiece.

“Damn that Andrew Davies!” she grouched. “I despise orange!”

“Quit your bitching,” Collins barked. “The author could’ve made you a redhead and earn *you* a trip to the Machine!”

Her response was the one finger salute.

Wickham shook his head. “I see Caro’s getting into character already.”

Fitzwilliam chuckled. “Caroline’s not all that bad, George, but the authors keep making her the original mean girl.”

“Speak for yourself. I can’t stand her.”

“That’s because she hasn’t fallen for your smooth act.”

“Exactly! She has terrible taste.”

“ALERT! ALERT! PREPARE FOR TRANSIT TO REGENCY ENGLAND!”

The assembled characters, all in proper Regency clothing now, approached a door. Darcy and Elizabeth, holding hands, shared a quick kiss before assuming their roles: Darcy inscrutable and Elizabeth oblivious.

Wickham patted Fitzwilliam on the back. “Well, once more into the breach and all that.”

“Have a good one, George. Want to catch the Manchester United match at the pub when we get back?”

“You buying?”

“Up yours.”

Wickham laughed as the door emblazoned with the words REGENCY ENGLAND opened and the immortal story began again.

THE END



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

