The Natural Daughter of Somebody

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

In talking over their route the evening before, Mrs Gardiner expressed an inclination to see the place again.

Mrs Gardiner, as a young girl, visits Pemberley for the first time.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

“I am thinking,” said Mrs Evans, “of taking Miranda to Pemberley.”

Her father and sister exchanged bewildered glances.

“Pemberley?” repeated Mr Brennan. “Is it not rather early for that?”

She stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“It is a splendid place, but - well, you have only been in Lambton a year, and Miranda is so young. I do not think she has the patience to stand still and admire the architecture, nor should it be expected of her. It can hardly go anywhere. Wait a few years -”

“A few years? Nonsense.” Mrs Evans sliced at her lamb with quick, sharp motions. “Perfect strangers and their children see it every week. Why should not my daughter?”

Miranda, playing noisily in the corner, glanced up. Her gown was smeared with dust, her face with dirt, and one small cut - courtesy of her favourite tree - adorned her forehead. “Aunt Lucy? Where are we going?”

“To Mr Mortimer's shop, darling,” said Miss Brennan hastily, and swept her away without even bothering to wash her face.
Miranda was not fooled, but she trailed after her aunt willingly enough. Her mother had been different ever since they came to live with her family in Lambton - nervous and irritable. She often tried to make Miranda come inside and help in Grandpapa's shop, talking about charity and obligation and other dull things. Aunt Lucy, however, always laughed merrily and cried, “What splendid nonsense, Alice! - but there is no need to trouble the child with it.” And sometimes she added, “Miranda is a joy to us - you know that her existence is ample recompense for her maintenance.”

Miranda adored her.

When they went to Pemberley a few days before Christmas, she attached herself to her aunt's skirts. “Aunt Lucy? Aunt Lucy, I'm cold! My teeth are chattering - see - and my lips are turning blue and my nose - oh.”

She had never thought that so many trees could be gathered into one place. They were everywhere - guarding the twisting, icy strip of the stream, dotting the park, sprawling into a wood that seemed to go on and on, even up into the snow-covered hills. Lambton's little stand of cedars, where she played with James and Maria Leland, was nothing to it, and the water seemed designed to be skated upon. The house was pretty too.

While Grandpapa and Mama talked to Mrs Tate, the housekeeper, Miranda looked around at the tapestries and statues and bright floors. It was a little like her aunt's shelf full of pretty, dusty things she wasn't allowed to touch, only a whole mansion of it instead of one shelf. There wasn't any dust, either.

Aunt Lucy disengaged Miranda's fingers and held her hand. “There is nothing to be afraid of,” she whispered.

Miranda swallowed and nodded. She was only a little afraid after that, and very bored. There were so many nice things that she couldn't look at anything in particular - and even Aunt Lucy wouldn't let her touch any of it - and the housekeeper never stopped talking. She trailed behind her family, trying to look interested in Mrs Tate's prattle about Mr Darcy and Lady Anne and their baby, then sent a desperate glance outside.

“This is the long gallery,” Mrs Tate announced. “It was built by Sir John Darcy towards the end of Elizabeth's reign -”

Miranda glanced at the long line of paintings and suppressed a yawn. Grandpapa and Mama looked fascinated, but her aunt - she couldn't help notice - was smiling very politely.

Even she, however, stared up at the painting of Mr Darcy. Miranda couldn't see what was so interesting about it. He was rather nice-looking, with deep blue eyes and lots of chestnut hair, but so were lots of people - Lady Anne, in the picture next to him, and a bored-looking girl on his other side. There wasn't even a dog, like his mother had in her portrait.

The door at their end of the gallery swung open. She jumped, then turned to look at the very pretty young woman walking through it. The woman was very tall, and had the same hair and eyes and smile as Mr Darcy, so Miranda supposed she must be his wife.

“Mrs Tate, I was wondering about tonight's menu – oh!” The young lady caught sight of Miranda's mother and the others, and flushed.

Mrs Tate looked as irritable as Mama. “Miss Carteret, I was just showing this gentleman and his family about the house.”
“I see,” said Miss Carteret, turning to smile at Mama and Aunt Lucy. “Welcome back to Pemberley. I hope you have found everything as pleasing today as it was six years ago.”

Miranda scowled. “Well, I haven't,” said she. “I've never been here before.”

“Miranda!” gasped Mama.

Aunt Lucy bent down to the now thoroughly bewildered Miranda and whispered, “She is Mr Darcy's half-sister.”

“Oh,” said Miranda, then added stoutly, “I'm sorry if I shouldn't have talked to you.”

Miss Carteret stared at her, then chuckled. “This must be your daughter, madam,” she told Mama. “I would know that spirit anywhere.”

She seemed friendly, so Miranda – after another longing glance outside – blurted out, “Does anybody ever skate on the stream?”

“Miranda!” That time, even Aunt Lucy looked aghast, but Miss Carteret only laughed.

“We certainly do – and if your mama will permit it, so shall you. I am certain there are skates that would fit all of you.”

Mama's eyes widened. “Oh, but I cannot – ”

“It is a small enough thing,” said Miss Carteret, resting her slim hand on Miranda's rich hair for a moment, “and it would please me to do something for a child of my brother's own neighbourhood.” Her mouth curved into a slow smile, cheeks dimpling and blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Oh, Mama,” Miranda cried, certain that Miss Carteret was the most beautiful lady in the world.

Mama hesitated – then after a glance at Miss Carteret's smiling face, gave in. “Well – if you have no objection – Miranda, what do you say?”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Afterwards, Miranda could scarcely believe Miss Carteret's kindness to a stranger, a child from a village the family did not even visit. At the time, however, she noticed only the wind rushing past her ears, her mother and aunt's hands in hers, her grandfather's laughter - and once, though she might have imagined it, the great lady standing at a window and waving at her.

End Notes

In case it's not clear, the fic + commentary is here.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!