The Mysterious Mr. Stone

by FemmeMalheureuse

Summary

While Mr. Gardiner is all that is good as a husband, father, uncle, and businessman, he is bolstered by a longtime friend who is everything Gardiner is not. Say hello to Mr. Stone. (Full four-chapter version, expansion of Greetings, Mr. Stone.)

This is an excerpt from my soon-to-be-published P&P-based anthology.

Notes

Note: This work was written to another site's Playground prompt, One-Hit Wonders, about a minor character mentioned only once in Pride and Prejudice (P&P). This four-chapter piece augments the existing Austen novel by fleshing out “Mr. Stone” while following timing and canon as much as possible; it will become part of a soon-to-be-published anthology of similar works providing “the rest of the story” not visible from Austen’s third-person/over Elizabeth’s shoulder POV in P&P.

This chapter has previously been posted in un-beta’d format as "Greetings, Mr. Stone" vignette.

(WARNING: mild violence in Chapter 3.)

[Image: Sketch of Ursin Jules Vatelle by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres circa 1825 is the inspiration for Mr. Stone. (Image is in public domain.)]
Offering more than a nod and less than a half-bow, the dark-haired man greeted his business partner. He extended his hand as the maid took his hat and walking stick.

“Mr. Gardiner, how are you today?”

“I am well, Mr. Stone, well enough under the circumstances as I first related in my express on the seventh, but very glad to see you as always. I hope you bring news.” Edward Gardiner offered a similar gesture of respect and shook his guest’s hand. The formalities were a bit of a joke to lighten the mood between the two longtime friends.

“I do have information for you, though it will not be pleasant.”

“Yes, well, I believe we expected little else since we talked three days ago, considering the situation. Come, at least we can have some port or brandy to smooth off the rough spots.” Gardiner gestured toward his study. They were meeting away from the shop to prevent their staff
from overhearing the nature of their discussion.

“Please have a seat. I’ll dispatch a boy to Grosvenor Street.”

“No need, Ed. I’ve already done so before I made my way here. You can expect more company
in a matter of minutes. I’ll have some of your brandy if you don’t mind.”

The men settled in, each with a tumbler in hand, chatting about the week’s business transactions as
they waited.

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He had long envied Edward. His friend had a pretty and loving wife, beautiful children, and a
pleasant home in addition to a thriving business. Any one of these would have been a blessing, but
Edward had it all, and he was genuinely smart, fair, and decent, too.

Edward also understood the ways of the Beau Monde, but cared not a whit for the lot of them. He
lived his life on his own terms.

Yes, Edward Gardiner was a man worth envying.

In truth, Robert Stone should have envied no one. He was wealthy enough to intimidate the
uppermost members of the merchant and educated classes. He was connected, if on the wrong
side of the blanket, to Scottish peerage. Having loved his mistress and their illegitimate child, his
Scottish lord-father ensured his natural son received a small estate with an income, along with a
gentleman's education. Mr. Stone was otherwise unfettered by responsibility incumbent with titles
and heredity, free to do as he wished.

Along with a certain je ne sais quoi, these attributes made him a dangerous man.

Stone went to school with Gardiner. Although not of the same class, they were of similar innate
gifts when it came to business machinations. They were similar, too, in that they were related to
peers but not of the peerage itself. They had to earn their way through life; they learned to respect
intelligence, common sense, and hard work. The two men became fast friends because of their
shared values. The character of their relationship made them natural business partners, more
faithful to each other because of their mutual respect and trust than many married couples of the
day.

In spite of Stone’s many positive points, he had not found a woman he considered a worthy life
partner. Far too many in the lowest levels of the peerage would consider him out of desperation,
their family’s fortunes having been gutted by corruption or stupidity. These women were too often
thrown at him; he couldn’t respect them. Just as many daughters of trades and professions were
likewise pushed at him. Most were poorly educated, having been prepared for a life above their
family’s heritage where useless skills like purse netting were appropriate. Many were poorly
trained; they weren’t taught how to keep a home, let alone how to help with a business or a small
estate. Nearly all of them were a nuisance to converse with as they were shallow or stupid, when
not deliberately hiding their intellect as instructed by their mothers.

Madeleine Gardiner and her two eldest nieces were the few women he respected. Unfortunately
for Stone, Maddie found Edward’s open affability lovable; though he cared deeply for the
Gardiners’ nieces, they were far too young. It wasn’t unheard of for a man of forty to offer for a
woman half that age, but he still thought of the Misses Bennett as sweet, charming children.

If Miss Elizabeth was ten years older he might have reconsidered his perspective. She was much like Maddie — whip-smart, quick-minded, pleasant to talk with, easy to look at, and utterly unspoiled. When in town she often helped Edward with the business’s books, entering bills of sale and payments, as well as auditing for errors. Miss Elizabeth also knew something about estate and home management, thanks to the unexpected combination of her father’s indolence and her Aunt Maddie’s encouragement. She was the model of the perfect wife for Stone, but alas, only a model.

It was unfortunate that Miss Elizabeth as well as her fair sister Miss Jane and their aunt were not models of behavior for the rest of the Gardiner-Bennett family. Stone had met the Gardiner sisters before Edward married Maddie; he found them vulgar gossips who had not half the sense between them that their younger brother possessed. Both women had been very attractive young ladies, but their lack of personal initiative beyond nosey inquiry and spending money annoyed him greatly. The former Fanny Gardiner — now Mrs. Frances Bennet — had been just plain lucky to draw the attention of Mr. Thomas Bennet. Clearly it was passion that compelled the two to pair off, and little more. In the case of the former Meg Gardiner — now Mrs. Margaret Phillips — he knew of little more than the attraction of common business interests to inspire Mr. Frederick Phillips to marriage. Their lack of children may have reflected the lack of passion between them.

And then the younger Bennet girls — horrors, the three of them, running from one extreme to the other. A moralistic monster in the making in Miss Mary, to a loose-lipped ladybird in Miss Lydia, with the cork-brained truckler Miss Kitty in the middle. Not one of them appeared to have the intellect the good Lord gave a dog. It was hard to believe these three came from the same dam as Misses Elizabeth and Jane.

Yet Stone knew he was expecting rather much from a society which held both men and women to shallow standards — education was not expected uniformly, nor were good manners evenly distributed, regardless of class. He had been lucky his father thought well enough of him to insist on his education, considering his origins. The same, too, for Gardiner; he was not a gentlemen but the first son of a second son, excised from the gentry by accident of birth.

Whatever he felt or believed was neither here nor there. His personal sentiments would not change the situation at hand.

His friend’s youngest niece had fallen to society’s utmost depths. He owed it to his friend and the reputation of the very few women he respected to assist in the remedy.

To that end he brought to bear his dangerous talents.

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August 14, 1812
Cheapside, London
Very late evening hours previous day, or very early that same morning —

Barnes rapped gently on Stone’s bedroom door. A muffled voice granted entry.

“Your man is here, sir. I’ve seated him in the study.”
Stone dressed quickly, throwing a robe over his open-necked shirt and trousers. He raced downstairs; no other staff save for Barnes were up and about yet at this pre-dawn hour.

“What did you find?” He offered some whisky to his dark-cloaked visitor, who waved off the proffered liquid.

“Just as expected, in the pub in St. Martin’s Lane, faring badly at cards. One of the boys was able to get into the same table and lose money to him, before persuading him to join a rout we set up in private rooms on Craven Street. We let him win enough to put some bread and ale on the table. The man is abominably bad at cards. If we had not encouraged him to drink too much, he surely would have noticed our efforts to allow him to win.”

“Did he share any more information?”

“He has no intentions of marrying the chit, which confirms your fears. He was a trifle desperate before we let him win. He made some noises about letting the girl work off his debt.”

Stone shook his head. If Miss Lydia had been his daughter, he’d have simply paid to have Wickham dispatched and packed her off to a farm in Scotland. But there were other innocent lives affected by these degradations, some of whom he cared for, as well as the names and reputations of peers and gentry associated with these two sorry excuses for humanity.

“No worries, sir. We’ve persuaded him to join us again at another rout at the same location. He’s won money there. He’ll be back now that he’s had a taste.”

“Thank you. Let me give you some working capital to ensure he stays through the evening.”

Stone pulled some ready cash from a drawer in his study. “And the girl?”

“She remains fine, sir, a bit down at the mouth now and loud, but fine. We had someone dressed as a maid check in on her and leave a bit of food and wine. A bit of the wild, that one. She may prove more difficult than her banty cock bawd if she gets too restless. If she tries to leave you will be notified immediately.”

“Good. Do let me know if we need more men. The colonel can call up more if the situation merits.”

“We should be fine, sir. With our men and the few the colonel has already furnished, we have ample for these two mutton-heads.”

Stone dismissed his man, who left through the rear of the house before the master went back to bed.

Wickham has no idea who he was dealing with, Stone thought as slumber took him.
CHAPTER 2

In more than a few ways, Gardiner and Stone were mirrors of each other. Not identical copies, per se, but reversed images. Where Gardiner was outgoing, charming, and fair in appearance, Stone was saturnine in looks, his manner coolly polite and his nature reticent. Where Gardiner was open and transparent in his business dealings, Stone was silent and shadowy. They were a perfect pair, truth be told; Gardiner was the face of their business, but Stone was its seamy underbelly. Both parts were essential to a successful business; one could not expect to survive in trade without having a thorough understanding of the many corruptions to which business could fall prey. Gardiner ran the vanguard, while Stone protected their flank and backside from illicit incursions.

Being a bastard opened doors to Stone — portals filled with greasy personages of murky backgrounds gifted with dark skills. No one looked askance at his presence in these places; he belonged more to them than he did to salons and ballrooms. Though his staff in town and at his estate treated him with deference due their employer, they also saw him as one of their own. Stone was never surprised to find one of his staff in places even tradesmen might avoid, and his staff were never shocked by his presence in the same venue. Master and employees alike appreciated the value of certain kinds of discreetly gathered and shared information.

Stone’s access allowed him to meet and hire people whose talents and experience would make Gardiner uncomfortable. But the discommodious contrast in their contacts ensured their business partnership thrived. If Gardiner was everything above board, Stone was everything under the table necessary to ensure the safety of fair transactions. No one cheated or stole from Gardiner without Stone responding in measured, swift fashion, and in kind if necessary.

The two men worked so well together that Stone made far more from his partnership with Gardiner than he did from his estate. Gardiner could well afford an estate twice that of his brother Bennet’s Longbourn. Being an exceptionally prescient businessman, though, Gardiner felt he would be further ahead not to tie up his capital in an estate. Invested in the business, he could realize returns that would greatly surpass anything he could earn through a well-managed estate. Stone’s small estate was proof of this, if Bennet’s wasn’t already sufficient evidence.

At some point Gardiner might buy an estate if investment yields dropped off — change was in the wind, though, and he could sense things would be very different for his children. The French and American revolutions had sent ripples through English society. The monarchy and peerage were not seen in the same light as they had been before the revolutions. The ability to change one’s standing merely by sailing to the Americas challenged the notion that one’s rank was static. Stone was intrigued by this; he could shed the lingering stigma of illegitimacy were he to consider opening a business office on the American east coast.

There was considerable utility in entertaining such a move even now.

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The maid ushered Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam into the study where Mr. Gardiner greeted them, offering a libation of their choice. Once Darcy had accepted a port and the colonel a whisky, Mr. Stone began his briefing.
“My men found them in a ramshackle rooming house owned by the brother of a Mrs. Younge. Your bribery was effective, Mr. Darcy.” Darcy offered a tight-lipped nod in acknowledgement.

“Miss Lydia has not left the rooms they let, though she has been seen looking out from the windows, and some of the occupants have sworn to seeing her.”

“Wickham has left her alone in the evenings in order to game.” At the mention of Wickham’s name, Gardiner looked more intently. Darcy stood and began to pace while casting furtive glances at the colonel. Stone continued. “He was allowed to win a few times to assure he had money on him when he returned to Miss Lydia.”

“If you like, I can arrange to have a female check on Miss Lydia if you have concerns about her welfare before we corner Wickham.” Stone posed the question to the other three as a group; though Gardiner was her uncle, it was clear that Darcy would have something to say if he was worried about Lydia.

“Do you still have men stationed to monitor the building?” Gardiner’s face reflected his fears that Wickham might try to move Lydia into even less favorable circumstances.

Stone looked to both Darcy and the colonel, who in turn nodded in assent. Gardiner was not aware that his men had been augmented by a few of Darcy’s staff and several former military men who had served previously with the colonel. The three men agreed that Gardiner should be advised on a limited basis as to the nature of the efforts taken to effect this “rescue.” If Gardiner did not know, he would never be in a position to disclose to the Bennets or anyone else the actions taken — and some underhanded, shady work might yet be required.

“There are men watching the building, some of which have been instructed to follow Miss Lydia if she leaves the building. There are several others assigned to follow Wickham and ensure he does not leave.”

“Ah, thank you. I should have guessed you would be thorough, Stone.” Gardiner looked more at ease. “Since we’ve agreed to approach Wickham right away, I believe having a female checking on Lydia is not warranted at this time. Have there been any changes to our plans?”

“No. Mr. Darcy and the colonel will approach Wickham the next time he turns up at the rooming house. One of the men assigned to watch the building will inform them first that the miscreant has returned. You will be notified next as you are needed to handle Miss Lydia’s recovery and return to Gracechurch.”

Stone did not tell Gardiner that he would also be on hand when Darcy and the colonel arrived on site. He would standby in a carriage with extra men in case Wickham created a scene; any ruckus would be put down quickly to prevent notice by the public and ensuing chatter. The last thing the Gardiners and Darcy needed was potentially damaging gossip; it would defeat much of the effort so far. Stone would wait until the morning to disclose his role.

The four men negotiated the next steps they would take. Darcy continued to take on full financial responsibility, insisting it was his fault that Wickham had not been brought to heel before he could inflict himself on yet another young woman. The other three men thought he was assuming too much, but it bought them no more security to argue with him.

Gardiner would obtain the special license and arrange for the wedding with St. Clement’s Church in Eastcheap, as Wickham was lodged in that parish. He invited the men to stay for dinner; only Darcy accepted, wanting to speak with Mrs. Gardiner about the prospective plans for Lydia’s stay
at Gracechurch Street and the anticipated wedding.

Colonel Fitzwilliam would arrange with all due speed for the purchase of a commission with a particularly tough regiment of the regulars far away from London and Hertfordshire.

Darcy had already dispatched men to buy up Wickham’s debts in Meryton and Brighton, preparing to use them as leverage should Wickham resist their efforts.

Stone made continued arrangements for all the intelligence and muscle they would need to keep Wickham in line.

Unbeknownst to the other three men, Stone also called in a couple of favors to establish contingencies. He reserved passage for two on a vessel headed for the West Indies. He also booked on standby the services of a woman who could ensure a death that looked like barrel fever.

The bastard businessman wouldn’t take chances with a known whore’s bird like Wickham.
The next morning found the men assembled as agreed, in front of the rooming house in unmarked closed carriages. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr. Gardiner entered the building; Stone’s crew remained stationed around the building, in both obvious and covert positions. Stone himself remained in his carriage with a female companion — a stern looking Mrs. Johns — hired for the purposes of escorting Miss Lydia and seeing to her immediate needs.

A half hour had passed after the men had converged on the building, when Gardiner exited the building with Miss Lydia in tow, her auburn hair mussy and her dress in scruffy disarray. She wore no bonnet and her arms were bare. Gardiner’s face was tight and grim while Miss Lydia looked flushed and angry, pulling at her arm gripped firmly by her uncle. Stone exited his carriage in order to help her into the conveyance.

“Lydia, not a word before you enter the carriage. Not one word. You will keep your voice down and act like a lady once you are in the carriage, waiting patiently. Mr. Stone will take us to Gracechurch Street momentarily,” Gardiner whispered into his niece’s ear.

“Miss Lydia, allow me.” Stone offered his arm to the petulant creature. She yanked away from her uncle’s grasp with a huff, taking accepting Stone’s aid reluctantly before stepping up into the carriage and flouncing onto the padded bench.

“I need to go back inside. I can’t let Darcy handle all of this by himself on behalf of my family.”

“Certainly, Ed. Go on, do as you must, we’ll be waiting here for you. Miss Lydia will be perfectly safe with Mrs. Johns and me.”

Gardiner went back into the rooming house while Stone returned the carriage.

“Miss Lydia Bennet, I’m sure you remember me from previous visits to your uncle’s home and our mutual business. This is Mrs. Johns, your companion for today. Please feel free to ask her or me for any assistance you need.” Mrs. Johns nodded politely, murmuring a greeting.

“I don’t understand why I have to leave Wicky, Mr. Stone.” The girl ignored Mrs. Johns rudely, failing to look at the older woman seated beside her; Lydia folded her arms as she pouted.

“Are you hungry, Miss Lydia? Mr. Gardiner’s cook prepared a small picnic in case you needed something to eat while waiting.” Mrs. Johns gestured to the basket on the seat across from her.

“No,” she snapped, “I just want to know when I can see my Wickham. I don’t know why I have been separated from him.”

“Miss Lydia.”
Stone’s voice was low and measured, a veritable growl.

Lydia refused to look at him, turning away to look out the window at the rooming house entrance.

Stone reached across and pulled the shades.

“No! I want to see my Wicky!” Lydia cried, yanking at the shades to open them.

Mrs. Johns just shook her head, tut-tutting. She knew her services were not needed just yet.

“Lydia.”

Stone’s voice was even lower and colder, sounding like death. He reached over and closed the shades one more time. Lydia scrabbled again at the pulls.

Stone grabbed both of her wrists in his large left hand, then administered a quick grazing slap across Lydia’s cheek with his right. She was so surprised that she wasn’t even sure it had happened, save for the fact her wrists were still tightly held in Stone’s hand.

“What have I told you about disrespecting Mrs. Johns?” Her eyes wide, her lower lip trembling, tears collecting, the girl nodded yes.

“Good. Now listen closely to me, or I will have to take steps to capture your attention again. Do you understand?” She nodded again, a tear tracing slowly down her now-pink left cheek.

“You will treat Mrs. Johns with the respect due a lady. Any further mistreatment and rude behavior towards her and I will correct you.” Lydia’s lip trembled again.

“You are to wait in this carriage quietly, while your uncle negotiates with Mr. Wickham the terms of your marriage.”

Lydia relaxed slightly and grinned. “Oh, he should not be long, then. Mr. Wickham and I will be married soon as may be now that Mr. Darcy has been brought to heel. He will have to pay dear Wicky the money he owes him.”

“Lydia, you are quite mistaken. Mr. Wickham was never planning to marry you——”

“No! He swore we would be married! He would never lie to——”

Mrs. Johns could foresee the next move and looked in the opposite direction just as Stone administered another brushing slap to Lydia’s right cheek with the back of his hand.

“Shut up. You are a stupid, foolish girl, a poor reflection on your uncle’s good name. You have been taken in by a pimp. You do know what a pimp is, yes? A procurer of prostitutes, a panderer of whores?”

Lydia’s eyes opened even wider, both cheeks now slightly puffy and pink, her mouth slack. Yes, the chit knew what a pimp was, Stone could see the dawning in her teary eyes. What a horror this spoiled beast was; no young woman her tender age and of her class should need to know this.

“Your Wicky,” Stone spat, “was intending to sell your body if he could not raise funds through gaming. I have witnesses who can attest to this if you feel a need to question this. Mrs. Johns here can also verify this, having been briefed by the men we have had following your dear Wicky.”
Lydia’s face blanched, her cheeks appearing even pinker as the blood left the rest of her face.

“You do know what I mean by ‘selling your body,’ yes?” As Stone said this, Mrs. Johns looked at Lydia, arching an eyebrow at the young woman as if to confront her. Mrs. Johns offered no rebuttal to Stone’s chilling statement and subsequent question.

Lydia nodded slowly.

“Yes, well, that makes your beloved Wicky a pimp, a whoremonger, and you the whore he was going to sell. You are an embarrassment to your family. You have brought shame on the reputations of your sisters, who have done nothing ill to deserve this.” Mrs. Johns nodded affirmatively, to emphasize Stone’s statement.

The girl began to blubber as her circumstances sank in. Mrs. Johns retrieved a handkerchief and wiped the girl’s face as Stone still held the girl’s wrists in his left hand, his right hand still at the ready.

“Your family’s friends Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam are assisting your Uncle Gardiner in negotiations. They expect your silence with regard to their role. You will not mention to anyone they were here and involved. Do you understand?”

Lydia nodded twice.

“Good. You will not see Wickham again—” at this Lydia’s childish face bunched up as she began to bawl once more.

“Stop it, you spoiled child. Do I need to correct you again?” Stone snarled. She halted and sniffed, allowing Mrs. Johns to blot her face once more as if she were but two years old.

“Let me finish. As I was saying, you will not see Wickham again until you are housed with your uncle and aunt, and the terms of your marriage settlement have been completed. Only then, and only with your uncle’s permission, will Wickham be allowed to see you.”

The girl sniffled, her eyes still wide as she struggled to make sense of what her Wicky had told her over the the last month, in comparison with Mr. Stone’s comments.

“This is not a done thing yet. We may not know for several days whether your uncle and Wickham have come to an agreement. You must brace yourself for the fact that Wickham may reject the agreement. If he does, he will face both debtors’ prison and court martial for absenting his position from the militia without leave.”

Lydia gasped. “No—” catching herself as she watched Stone’s right hand flex.

“Yes, Lydia. Your Wicky has been a very bad boy. He is a serial cheat and liar. Whatever he told you about Mr. Darcy has been untrue, for example. Mr. Darcy paid Wickham a total of four thousand pounds, both for the amount willed to him by Mr. Darcy’s father, and as settlement for the living that Mr. Wickham refused. He has spent or lost all of that four thousand pounds, and is now in debt for more than another thousand between Meryton and Brighton alone.”

Confusion knotted her forehead; it was clear the girl had no inkling as to the true nature of her paramour’s ways.
“You will have to learn very quickly how to control the money in your household, Lydia, should your uncle come to terms with Wickham. If you do not, you will starve. You will not have serving staff based on the amount Wickham will earn in the regulars. You will have to exercise economy to keep a roof over your head and clothes on your body. And you will have to watch your pocketbook as well as your back if you wish to stay fed. Your future husband will take every penny he can cull from you and throw it down on his debaucheries.”

Fear finally manifest itself in her eyes. No one had ever talked to her this way before. She really couldn’t remember any man talking to her this much at one time, let alone so seriously.

“Do you understand me, Lydia?” She nodded her head slowly; she had finally shut her once-slack mouth, her lips now pulling into a straight line of determination.

“Good. I will let you go now. But know that if you act disrespectfully like a child again I will correct you, no matter that your uncle is my closest friend. It is time to grow up.”

Lydia looked at Mrs. Johns to see if the woman was at all shocked by Mr. Stone’s monologue. The older woman only nodded her head at her, affirming what Mr. Stone had said.

“One more thing, Lydia. I expect you to keep this understanding to yourself. You will not blab about the agreement, about Mr. Darcy or the colonel, about your living out of wedlock with Wickham. It is not to be discussed anywhere, ever. To do so would invite gossip that would hurt your family, and I would be forced to find a way to correct the situation.” Her eyes opened wide once again at the implied threat.

“Further, I recommend strongly that you do not discuss this situation with Wickham. You must become a woman now, and know that there is knowledge one must keep to one’s self for personal protection. Learn how to keep your eyes and ears open, and your mouth shut. Perhaps you should look at your mother and Aunt Phillips as examples of what not to do. Their idle, careless chatter has hurt your family, whether you are aware of it or not. Do you understand me?”

Another nod.

“I need to hear you say that you understand me, Lydia.”

“Yes, Mr. Stone.”

“Good. And now perhaps you will assist Mrs. Johns with the picnic. I need to step out of the carriage for a moment.”

Stone nodded to Mrs. Johns, knowing that the older woman would now confirm and validate more gently everything he had just communicated to the overindulged child playing at adulthood. He almost felt sorry for the girl; she had committed a sin for which she would serve a life sentence, without fully understanding what she had done until it was far too late. Even if she did not marry that wretch Wickham, she would have to be sent away to quell the gossip, likely never to see her family again.

Growing up wearing the stigma of a gentleman’s by-blow was less punishment than this chit would face. She was surely going to slip up and make many mistakes, the first of which had already been committed by running away and sleeping with Wickham.

Stone hoped that another illegitimate child would not have to suffer for the lack of social status merely because this ridiculous girl had been so naive, unprotected, and stupid.
CHAPTER 4

August 31, 1812
Cheapside, London

Stone observed the wedding from the farthest corner from the altar, between St. Clement’s nave and narthex. He could hear nothing but faint murmuring at this distance, but he had no need to hear the words. The transaction had already been effected with Wickham’s and Gardiner’s signatures on the marriage settlement. This rushed service, requiring a more generous gift and the cooperation of a lesser officiant of the church before noon, was but a formality for the benefit of the bride and her family not in attendance. Even the signing of the church register was more important than these ritual motions.

So far everything had gone according to plan. Wickham had not skipped out, remaining appropriately afraid of prison and court martial — and unbeknownst to Gardiner, terrified of Stone’s and Colonel Fitzwilliam’s men. Wickham had received a visit late one evening when it looked as if the prospective groom was getting a bit restless after unexpectedly winning at cards. His gains had been taken from him, to be returned only after the completion of the ceremony today. The necessity of compliance with the terms of both verbal and written agreements was emphasized with a little roughing up that did not mar his face.

Stone had met with Gardiner just before the service, to confirm Wickham’s continued cooperation, and to let Gardiner know there were men outside the church in case of any last minute hesitation on the part of the groom. A handful of men organized by both Stone and Colonel Fitzwilliam had also been detailed to ensure discreetly that the bride and groom made it safely to Longbourn and remained there until Wickham was required to report for duty. The team would also follow the couple to Newcastle, until Wickham reported to his new colonel in the regulars.

Only after he received confirmation that Wickham was ensconced with his new regiment would Stone release the berths he had reserved on a ship sailing to the West Indies the first week of October.

Miss Lydia met Stone’s gaze but once, blushing and looking away rapidly. Good, he thought. She had taken his words to heart, even if it appeared on the face of it she was still wild and ill-mannered. Perhaps she was smarter than her groom after all.

Mr. Darcy stood behind the groom, tall and silent, his face devoid of emotion. Stone liked Darcy; if he ever had a son one day, he hoped he would be like him. The younger man was cool and calculating, and the epitome of gentlemanly manners. Stone laughed to himself, thinking if were ever possible two men like he and Gardiner could have created an heir between them, he would have been someone like Darcy. The man understood the necessity of swift, ruthless decision and corresponding action, and yet he was considerate and ethical in his behavior.

If Ed and Maddie were right — that Darcy was besotted with their niece Elizabeth — the two young people were a fine match in his opinion. Darcy would make an excellent future investor in their business; Elizabeth could handily explain the bulk of the business’ activities. If Stone never married, he might entertain naming one of Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s second or third sons heirs to his estate and his share of the business.
Only time would tell this bastard what to do.

September 2, 1812
Longbourn, Hertfordshire

One morning, soon after their arrival, as she was sitting with her two elder sisters, she said to Elizabeth:

"Lizzy, I never gave you an account of my wedding, I believe. You were not by, when I told mamma and the others all about it. Are not you curious to hear how it was managed?"

"No really," replied Elizabeth; "I think there cannot be too little said on the subject."

"La! You are so strange! But I must tell you how it went off. We were married, you know, at St. Clement's, because Wickham's lodgings were in that parish. And it was settled that we should all be there by eleven o'clock. My uncle and aunt and I were to go together; and the others were to meet us at the church. Well, Monday morning came, and I was in such a fuss! I was so afraid, you know, that something would happen to put it off, and then I should have gone quite distracted. And there was my aunt, all the time I was dressing, preaching and talking away just as if she was reading a sermon. However, I did not hear above one word in ten, for I was thinking, you may suppose, of my dear Wickham. I longed to know whether he would be married in his blue coat."

"Well, and so we breakfasted at ten as usual; I thought it would never be over; for, by the bye, you are to understand, that my uncle and aunt were horrid unpleasant all the time I was with them. If you'll believe me, I did not once put my foot out of doors, though I was there a fortnight. Not one party, or scheme, or anything. To be sure London was rather thin, but, however, the Little Theatre was open. Well, and so just as the carriage came to the door, my uncle was called away upon business to that horrid man Mr. Stone. And then, you know, when once they get together, there is no end of it. Well, I was so frightened I did not know what to do, for my uncle was to give me away; and if we were beyond the hour, we could not be married all day. But, luckily, he came back again in ten minutes' time, and then we all set out. However, I recollected afterwards that if he had been prevented going, the wedding need not be put off, for Mr. Darcy might have done as well."

"Mr. Darcy!" repeated Elizabeth, in utter amazement.

"Oh, yes!—he was to come there with Wickham, you know. But gracious me! I quite forgot! I ought not to have said a word about it. I promised them so faithfully! What will Wickham say? It was to be such a secret!"

"If it was to be secret," said Jane, "say not another word on the subject. You may depend upon my seeking no further."

"Oh! certainly," said Elizabeth, though burning with curiosity; "we will ask you no questions."

"Thank you," said Lydia, "for if you did, I should certainly tell you all, and then Wickham would be angry."

On such encouragement to ask, Elizabeth was forced to put it out of her power, by running away.
Author’s note: The last section dated September 2 is a direct excerpt from Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, Chapter 51. Boldface mine, along with the date to which the text is attributed; the date is my best guess based on the book itself.

Questions about the origins of “that horrid Mr. Stone” have led some to believe this was a vague, anti-Semitic reference to a figurative tradesman in/around Cheapside, where there may have been a greater number of Jews at that time. The oldest synagogue in England is in Eastcheap, adjoining the area known as Cheapside.

After researching likely locations of lodging and gaming dens from Eastcheap to Charing Cross, I found a reference to a "Mr. Stone's in Cheapside, at the sign of the Maiden head," dating to 1600. It is not unusual for businesses in London to retain identities for hundreds of years; White’s gentleman’s club, for example, is still known by that name, though founded in 1693, and in the same location since 1778.

My personal opinion is that Austen may have known of Mr. Stone’s in Cheapside and opted to use the name as a one-off reference. Lydia also called her aunt and uncle Gardiner “horrid unpleasant” in the same paragraph, leading one to believe that any adult who did not offer deference to the spoiled Lydia was likely to be labeled “horrid,” regardless of their status or relationship.

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