The Education of a Chaperon

by Shrubbery_Girl

Summary

The year 1796 sees England as a scandal-ridden country. Forced marriages are all too common, fathers of young ladies make sure to always have a marriage license ready, wealthy gentlemen make sure to never be alone in a room with a female, not even their own mothers. In the county of Hertfordshire, for example, no fewer than 78% of the newly-wed couples give 'to avoid a scandal' as the main reason for their marriage (compared to 43% in 1785), a recent survey showed.

Dire times force the British government to enact drastic measures, and Elizabeth Bennet is forced to seek out the education of a chaperon in order to comply with the new laws.

Notes

This was written many years ago as a challenge to come up with stories for titles that were generated by a random title generator for JAFF. I do not recall where it was located, or if it still exists, but it gave me 'Education of Chaperon' as a title, which I took as a challenge to examine that most curious phenomenon of the ubiquitous compromise of young females in JAFF, and the burning question why Emma never was compromised by Mr Knightley.
“The year 1796 sees England as a scandal-ridden country. Forced marriages are all too common, fathers of young ladies make sure to always have a marriage license ready, wealthy gentlemen make sure to never be alone in a room with a female, not even their own mothers, and guardians of heiresses will not let a single man come near the young girl without a statement from his banker - under oath - testifying his wealth. In spite of all these precautions, every family has at least one member who entered the state of matrimony because they had been discovered in a scandalous situation and many daughters have to leave the houses of their fathers at as early an age as 15 just because they have been found playing scrabble with their would-be-husband cousins. In the county of Hertfordshire, for example, no fewer than 78 % of the newly-wed couples give ‘to avoid a scandal’ as the main reason for their marriage (compared to 43 % in 1785), a recent survey showed.

‘Foreign newspapers and magazines tend to make fun of the problems England finds herself in, but England’s politicians dread the outcome of this crisis. The crisis reached a new peak three weeks ago when the Italian ambassador refused to attend a private meeting with the Foreign Secretary of State for fear of being married to him (for the Secretary is still single and the Italian ambassador is heir to a large fortune as well as a mansion in Tuscany). Our Most Gracious Monarch George III now has finally realised it is time to act, and quickly, before more harm can be done ...’

‘My dear Mr Bennet,’ said his lady to him one morning, ‘have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last; to a Mr Bingley from the North, with five thousand pounds a year?’

Mr Bennet replied that he had not and begged his wife to inform him about the importance of this event.

‘Oh, you must know how important this is for our girls! Surely you realise!’

‘No, not at all, my dear. How can it affect them?’

‘Well, he will marry one of them, my dear Mr Bennet, do you not see that?’

‘Is that his reason for coming here?’

‘Oh, Mr Bennet! How can you be so stupid! Of course it is not.’

‘So how do you know he will marry one of them? Surely this must depend on the gentleman’s decision, does it not?’

‘You do not think I would leave such an important decision to him? I do not even know him! No, Jane and I shall walk over to Netherfield Park to welcome him to the neighbourhood. Then I shall lock him into a room together with Jane, and when I let them out again fifteen minutes later, he will have to marry her (for I will make sure that they are seen). Do you not see that it is that simple, really?’

‘Yes, and illegal, my dear,’ Mr Bennet said from behind his newspaper.

‘How can you say such nonsense, Mr Bennet? You know fully well it is not illegal. Why, two of the Miss Gouldings were married that way, and Mrs Long’s niece, and Miss Betty Purvis - even though she is ugly as sin - and …’

‘That may be as it is, Mrs Bennet, but such tactics are now illegal.’ Mr Bennet showed his wife the article he had just been reading. ‘As of today, the Act of Chaperonage, which passed through both Houses last week, says that no unmarried lady between the age of 15 and 50 is to be left
alone without the chaperonage of either a married female relative or a government-approved lady chaperone, who has undergone a special chaperon-training in a governmental school of chaperonage. The only females exempt from this rules are said government-approved lady chaperones. Several such schools are being established all over the country while we are speaking. Tuition fees will be paid by the government in order to allow all ladies to enter these academies, whatever their financial status may be, if they do not have the means to hire their own chaperone.’

Later that day, Elizabeth Bennet found herself called to her father’s library. She thought this rather strange, for she knew that as of the morrow, this was illegal; had she not had to spend the whole day in her mother’s company, for want of a lady chaperone at Longbourn?

‘My dear Elizabeth,’ Mr Bennet said, ‘you do realise that we have a problem, I take it?’

Elizabeth nodded.

‘All that rambling alone all over the country - all those solitary walks - that tree-climbing out in the grounds - that all is no longer possible for you.’

Elizabeth nodded again.

‘You also understand, of course, that we will need to hire a chaperone, or maybe even two, for your mother cannot possible chaperon all five of you, not with her nervous condition and everything.’

Elizabeth nodded a third time.

‘And needless to say, such a chaperone will be quite expensive,’ Mr Bennet went on, ‘more than likely more expensive than we can afford. Your mother and I have therefore decided - and it was not an easy decision, you may believe us - that we will send you to chaperon school, and hire a chaperone from your wages.’

‘But papa - could not I be my sisters’ chaperone, once I have finished chaperon education?’

‘Oh, no, my child. Chaperones, you know, are given their charges by government, depending on the difficulty of the situation and the experience of the chaperone. As a beginner, I think you would be given an easier situation than this here.

‘No, it is decided. Your aunt, Mrs Gardiner, will come hither and accompany you to Mrs Annesley’s School of Chaperonage in London, my dear (for it would not do for you to travel unchaperoned, you know. Only fully qualifies chaperones can travel without their own chaperone). You better pack all your bags, for she will be here the day after tomorrow.’

There was nothing Elizabeth could do but try to make the best of the situation, and she told herself that after all, it was only for the best of her family. And little though she did foresee it, Chaperon School indeed suited her very much and learning all the important things gave her pleasure. Her teacher attested her a natural talent in finding her charge in case she ever got lost. She was the best in her foreign language classes (for it was deemed necessary that a chaperone know all the languages that her charges might know, so that she could understand any conversation her charge might have with a foreigner). In her role-playing lessons, she was much praised because she soon learnt to dissuade anybody from walking out alone ever so subtly. Finally, after ten months of intense training, Mrs Annesley called her into her office and told her that all her teachers agreed that it was time for her practical examination (she had passed all her written tests with distinction.)

‘You will have to guard an assigned charge for one day,’ Mrs Annesley explained to her. ‘You will visit the centre of London with her, attend a tea party and take a walk in Hyde Park, during all
of which you will be closely observed. If the examiner assigned to you is satisfied with your work, he will make you a chaperone on probation. You will receive your first assignment - usually a very easy charge - during which your examiner will check on you every week. If, after a trial period of three months, he is still satisfied with your work, he will make you a fully qualified chaperone. Be assured, my dear, that I fully believe in you. You are one of the best girls I ever trained, and I am sure that not even the strictest examiner could not let you pass.’

The day of Elizabeth’s practical examination finally came. On the eve of it, a group of three examiners came over to the school from Whitehall, for they wished to have a close look at the reports of the three girls that were to be tested the following day. Elizabeth saw them enter the school from the upstairs landing of the entrance hall, where she had been sitting on the stairs enjoying the silence (the common room was always much too crowded).

‘Really, I do not see why we have to undergo all this trouble, Richard,’ one of the examiners said. ‘Most of these country girls will get married before the year is out; they use the post of chaperone as an excuse to meet wealthy men, I tell you. And it is we who have to find replacements for them all the time. Now, if, just once, we could find a chaperone who was really dedicated to the job - I mean, it is not as if these country girls were in any way really interested in the art of chaperonage, or talented in it.’

‘Come on, Darcy, do you not think that you may be a little too strict? I heard from your supervisor that when you were still examining in Derbyshire, you let 37 girls fail. Out of 37 girls tested, mind you. Now, this is London, and I assure you, Mrs Annesley’s institute is the most respected chaperon school in town, and her girls are the best, really.’

‘Oh, I have seen their files in the office, and they read just like the average chits that I had to test in Derbyshire.’

Elizabeth was furious and anxious at the same time. How did that man dare judge her and her classmates, when he had never met them? Was he even aware of how much they had studied and trained during the last ten months? And what if he was her assigned examiner? Would he let her fail? Simply because he could? It sounded as if he had never before let anyone pass. And what on earth did he mean by ‘the art of chaperonage?’

In spite of all her fears, Elizabeth’s practical examination went exceedingly well. Her assigned charge for the day made sure to set up several traps for her, including a clandestine meeting in a library, an exchange of letters during the tea party and a conversation through a gap in a brick wall in the ladies’ powder room, but Elizabeth was very much on her guard and managed to evade all traps and thwart all her charge’s attempts. Even Mr Darcy (who turned out to be her examiner) could not find any fault in her behaviour and had to let her pass, albeit grudgingly.

‘You must be aware, however, Miss Bennet,’ he told her afterwards, when he briefed her for her first assignment, ‘that this does not mean you are fully qualified yet. You are still on probation, and I will keep a very close watch on you during your assignment. Do not think there is time to relax. I will probably visit once a week. My visiting day for Surrey is Friday, but do not expect me to stick to that. If I find your behaviour in any way questionable, I may visit more often, and unannounced. Also, I should let you know that we have free-lance workers in your assigned area who will keep me informed if they should observe you doing anything against the guidelines.’


‘This book, Miss Bennet,’ Mr Darcy said, handing it to her, ‘shall from now on be your bible.
You are expected to keep it on you at all times and to refer to it whenever you are not sure how to act. Also, I expect you to read a chapter per week during your probationary period, make notes on that chapter and hand in a short essay - about five to seven pages - about the assigned chapter every week. I will mark these essays and they will play an important role towards your final grade at the end of your probationary period, which will determine whether I can grant you approval or not.

Elizabeth asked herself inwardly how she was supposed to achieve all this if she was not to move from her charge’s side at any time.

‘Also, if I am not fully satisfied with your work, I may schedule other examinations, such as research papers, oral examinations or further practical tests, to find out whether you are indeed ready to receive your approval and work as an independent chaperone. I therefore want you to be aware of the fact that you are still under close surveillance and need to keep your work on high standards, because there will be no pity passes as far as I am concerned.’

At this point, Elizabeth only wondered why he did not tell her directly that he would let her fail no matter what.

‘Now, the charge you have been assigned is considered a very easy charge by many, though I would not call it that. In my eyes, each and every chaperoning assignment should be taken seriously, and to classify them would mean to distract from the fact that a chaperone should always give her very best, regardless of the situation. I will admit, however, that this charge should not present any particular differences, and I think it highly unlikely that even an untrained chaperone on probation, like you are, will have any difficulties with the young lady. Which does of course not mean that you should take this assignment too lightly, but I think I already had given you my opinion as far as that is regarded.

‘Now, as to your charge -’ Here he reached for an enormous file - ‘we are informed by her former governess - who did of course not receive any formal training, but seems to be well-meaning enough - that she is a sweet-tempered, intelligent young lady, about your own age, with a taste for music and literature. She is highly respected in her social circle - yes, she goes out in society, and I fear that there is nothing to prevent it, even though I do not advise it at all for unmarried young ladies - and obviously enjoys friendships with quite a few ladies of the parish. She lives alone with an elderly, male, parent - thus the need for a chaperone - in a large house. The grounds are not that extensive, which should make your task a little more manageable. There are, as far as we are informed, no eligible young gentlemen in the area at all, but then, as you have hopefully learnt during your training, one never knows, and even the dirtiest, most illiterate farmhand can present himself as an advantageous opportunity to naïve young ladies. Although I must add that Miss Woodhouse does not appear to be very naïve. I do think that even you should be able to manage her.’

With such cheerful prospects before her, Elizabeth journeyed to the tiny village of Highbury in Surrey, known to many as the garden of England (although many counties are called that). She was accompanied by her aunt, Mrs Gardiner, of course, for she was not yet a fully qualified chaperone. Miss Woodhouse was, just as Mr Darcy had described her, a very agreeable and intelligent young lady and she and Elizabeth got along very well, practicing the piano, discussing books and visiting Miss Woodhouse’s former governess, Mrs Weston. Miss Woodhouse did not receive many visitors, and when Elizabeth enquired, she got the following answer.

‘Well, there are not that many young ladies in Highbury with whom I regularly visited. There is Miss Smith, of course, a very good friend of mine, but she is an orphan without money, so she has been sent to chaperone school. Then there is Miss Fairfax, who recently returned to Highbury and now lives with her grandmother and an elderly aunt, and she and her aunt can only go out when
her grandmother is up to it, for the aunt is not yet married and she was only 48 last March, you know. The Misses Otway - not that I had much to do with them anyway - have been sent to Wales to be chaperoned together with their twelve cousins. Then there are the two Misses Cole, but their chaperone is such a vulgar thing, I could not possible visit them any more, even if I had before. Yes, and I do not think there are many other people around here that I frequently see. There are the Westons, whom you know already, and Mr Weston’s son Frank, but I have not seen much of him lately; whenever we visited he had just gone out to buy a pair of gloves, it seems. Yes, and Mr Knightley of course, but you have not yet met him, for he has been in town the past few weeks with his brother and my sister.’

Mr Knightley, however, was expected to visit this very evening, it turned out, which was also the evening on which Elizabeth expected Mr Darcy for his first control visit. She had duly prepared chapter one of his book, ‘The Basics of Proper Behaviour and Their Development Throughout the History of Christendom’ and written a six-page essay, with which Miss Woodhouse had helped her. She felt quite ready for the examination, although she was not sure what exactly Mr Darcy might contrive in order to make sure she failed.

About half an hour before Mr Knightley was expected for supper, Miss Woodhouse showed some signs of nervousness. She repeatedly asked her father what time he thought Mr Knightley would arrive, until Mr Woodhouse claimed he could not get any rest while she was interrogating him, and retired to his library (something that had never happened before, Elizabeth noticed). Then, Miss Woodhouse almost tore down a curtain while waiting for Mr Knightley at the window. Elizabeth pointed out to her that to show such a marked preference for a gentleman was very much unladylike, and that Miss Woodhouse would not wish Mr Knightley to see it. (Elizabeth concluded that Mr Knightley was not an eligible gentleman because Mr Darcy had not listed him amidst the dangers of the environment, and she did not wish Mr Darcy to observe any particularity in her charge during his visit.).

‘Oh, it is not that, Miss Bennet!’ Miss Woodhouse exclaimed and laughed nervously. ‘I am not preferring Mr Knightley or anything, you must not mistake that. We are like brother and sister! It is a silly notion, indeed. Mr Knightley and myself! No, indeed not. It is merely -’ here Miss Woodhouse blushed furiously - ‘I said something stupid to a mutual acquaintance of ours, and he chided me for it, and now I want to let him know that - oh, nothing particular really. It is not of great importance, and I am sure that it would not interest you at all.’

Elizabeth would have replied to the contrary (for it was, she had been taught, always necessary to know what exactly was troubling a charge’s mind), but she was prevented by the entrance of Mr Knightley himself, a handsome gentleman of about thirty-five.

‘Mr Knightley!’ Emma exclaimed and jumped to her feet. ‘I dare say it is such a pleasure to see you again. I have been expecting you for quite some time, now.’

‘Have you, Emma?’

‘Oh, yes, I have. There is something I meant to tell you and -’ Here, she broke off and blushed again.

‘Is it not usually those who travel who have tales to tell?’ Mr Knightley asked her and smiled. ‘What is it that you wish to tell me, Emma?’

‘Oh, I could not tell you - not with - you have not met my new chaperone, Miss Bennet, have you?’

Mr Knightley greeted Elizabeth with sincere warmth in his eyes and shook her hand. Miss Woodhouse looked at Elizabeth pleadingly.
‘Miss Bennet, could you not - just for a moment, of course - step out, while I discuss something in private with Mr Knightley?’

‘Miss Woodhouse, you know I cannot.’

‘It would only be for a minute, really. It is quite important.’

‘It is illegal, Miss Woodhouse, you know that.’

‘This is ridiculous! I have been alone with Mr Knightley a lot of times before.’

‘That does not matter; under the Act of Chaperonage such behaviour would be illegal and I am not to move from your side at any time.’

Elizabeth did not have any problems handling this situation; it was what had been considered a standard situation in her role-playing classes and had been trained at least once a week at Mrs Annesley’s Institute. She suspected that Mr Darcy might have asked Miss Woodhouse to enact something like this as a test for herself during his control visit.

‘Miss Bennet, I assure you nothing could happen to me when I am with Mr Knightley! You must see this, do you not?’

‘Miss Woodhouse, believe me it is both for your own and for Mr Knightley’s security that I cannot permit it.’

‘But I tell you explicitly that I completely trust Mr Knightley! He would never dare to compromise me, I keep telling you. It is safe for me to be alone with him.’

‘Still, Miss Woodhouse, even if it is so, you have to think about Mr Knightley, too. It would be quite awkward for him to be alone with you in a room, would it not?’

‘Miss Bennet, I must agree with Miss Woodhouse, this is ridiculous,’ Mr Knightley said suddenly. ‘I am all for upholding the law, but do you really think I should feel awkward if I were left alone with Emma for a couple of moments? The mere idea that Emma would want to entrap me is silly! I have known her all my life, and I am convinced that she would never betray my trust in her in such a way. Also, Emma is the last person in this world who would ever willingly bring anyone into a situation that is unpleasant for them, and she would never, not even if her life depended on it, take refuge in lowly means to achieve her aims, none of which, I am sure, is to in any way betray me into anything I was not willing to do. And I promise you that she shall have nothing to fear from me either.’

‘Really, Miss Bennet, do you not see this? Mr Knightley is the most honest, most upright gentleman that I know. If he promises that I shall have nothing to fear from him, you can believe him. You can trust him completely, for he never breaks his word, and he has never in all my life done anything to harm me. If I trust him with my life, surely you can do so, too, can you not?’

‘Emma, do you -’ Mr Knightley started, but Elizabeth interrupted him because she could see this all would not lead to anything. She was determined to stay firm.

‘No, really not. It is simply not possible, I keep telling you. I assure you, it is nothing personal. It is my job, it is as simple as that!’

‘So, tell me, then, Miss Bennet,’ Mr Knightley said, ‘what would happen if I just grabbed Emma, flung her over my shoulder (‘Mr Knightley!’ Miss Woodhouse shrieked.) and carried her over to the dining-room in order to talk to her there?’
‘Well, in case you are lucky, you would not be detected by anybody but me and my examiner and both you and Mr Woodhouse would have to pay a hefty fine and attend a three-week seminar on proper behaviour in Blackpool. If you were discovered by anyone outside the Chaperons’ Association - in either case, I should probably lose my job and my probation.’

‘Oh, we cannot lose poor Miss Bennet her job, Mr Knightley,’ Miss Woodhouse said. ‘I suppose I will not be able to tell you what I meant to tell you after all. I will simply write it down and hand it to you later, I suppose. It is not the same, but -’

Elizabeth could not believe it; how could anybody be so stubborn?

‘Miss Woodhouse, you are not supposed to exchange letters with Mr Knightley either.’

‘Miss Bennet,’ Mr Knightley said, sounding exasperated, ‘let us be frank. Well, no, let us not be Frank. I would not want to be Frank. Let us be totally open. Is there anything I could do in order to be able to talk alone to Miss Woodhouse for a couple of minutes? Anything, I must add, that would be legal?’

‘Well, there is really only one thing to do, Mr Knightley, and that is -’

‘Emma, will you marry me?’

When Mr Darcy came to Hartfield an hour later, he found Elizabeth alone in the drawing-room.

‘Miss Bennet!’ he exclaimed. ‘Do tell me that my eyes deceive me! You have not failed in your very first week here, have you? How could you, miss? This was honestly the easiest situation I could get for you, because I could feel you were not ready, but even I could not fathom that you would not even last seven days, when I -’

Elizabeth looked up at him with red and swollen eyes and a puffy face.

‘You have not been crying, have you?’ Mr Darcy asked both incredulously and slightly taken aback. ‘What good would crying do? And pray tell me, Miss Bennet, where is your charge?’

‘She is enjoying her honeymoon, I suppose,’ Elizabeth said, ‘she was married in this room half an hour ago to a Mr Knightley. He had a license.’

‘Married?’ Mr Darcy asked, even more incredulous and taken aback than before. ‘Really, truly, legally married?’

‘Yes, they were married by a Mr Elton, an ordained Anglican priest of the Church of England. I checked his papers, they were all in order. He had the right to perform the ceremony. The license was genuine, too. It was one of the new standard-issue all-purpose licenses which are mandatory under the new law. Their marriage is definitely legal. And before you ask: I did not cover up any scandal by forcing them to marry. Mr Knightley proposed to her out of his own free will, and she accepted him, all in my presence. I spoke to her father and he agreed, if somewhat reluctantly, to their marriage and sent for the priest himself. Before the ceremony, I informed both parties that there was no need for them to get married as there was no scandal, and that it was their own decision to go through with the proceedings. They both signed these documents in which they testify that they were not forced into their marriage, that a lady chaperone was present at all times of their courtship and during the time they were meeting as an engaged couple, that they were both aware of the kind of legally binding contract they were about to enter, and that they would not sue the Chaperons’ Association for compensation. Mr Elton, James the coachman and Serle the cook signed as witnesses.’
She sighed heavily and handed Mr Darcy the documents.

‘If you would excuse me, I need to pack my belongings and send an express letter to my aunt.’

‘Pack? Why pack? What are you up to, Miss Bennet?’

‘Well, I failed, did I not? And that means that I am no longer allowed to move unchaperoned. Therefore I shall send an express to my aunt begging her to come as soon as possible and collect me before anyone tries to marry me to Mr Elton, Mr Woodhouse, or, heaven forbid, you.’

‘What are you talking about, Miss Bennet? You did not fail. You followed all the rules that Richard and I set out in Chapter 38, ‘The Course Of Action That A Lady Chaperone Should Take In Case Her Charge Wishes To Get Married To A Respectable Eligible Gentleman Of Whom Her Parents Approve’. I am very much pleased with you, I had no idea that you had so much dedication to the job. You seem to be a chaperone at heart, Miss Bennet. You truly have it in you, I am amazed. I will see to it that you get a very good new post as soon as possible, where you can end your probationary period most agreeably before you start your work as a chaperone.’

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say something, but before she could do so, the door flung open and a housemaid handed a letter to Mr Darcy which had obviously come by express. Mr Darcy tore it open and read it at once. His countenance froze while he did so and he uttered some words that were not at all appropriate for the ears of a young lady and only barely tolerable for those of a lady chaperone in training.

‘Well, I wonder,’ he said after having punched his fist into the air repeatedly. ‘This is quite soon - but on the other hand, you are one of the most capable chaperones I have seen - and Mrs Annesley herself seems to think that you are the best for the job. No - no - no, there is no going back.

‘Miss Bennet,’ he said, drawing a pocket Bible out of his coat, ‘I must swear you in at once. There is no other choice, the Association needs you. We have a dreadful situation at hand and there is no chaperone so capable as you. We cannot waste any more time on your probation. Place your right hand on the Bible - like that - and speak after me: I, Elizabeth Bennet, hereby faithfully promise to be a dutiful chaperone to all the charges assigned to me by the Chaperons’ Association or the British government, to uphold all the laws of the Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and never to violate the Chaperons’ Code of Behaviour. Thereto I give my promise, so help me God. Very well, Miss Bennet, very well. You are now a fully qualified lady chaperone, my congratulations. This is the badge - yes, pin that to your collar. And now make haste, Miss Bennet, for we must leave for Hertfordshire at once. I will accompany you to Meryton myself and help you sort out the dreadful situation that seems to have befallen this Longbourn mansion.’

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