Unexpected and Highly Scandalous

by fictionalcandie

Summary

Colonel Fitzwilliam accidentally encounters Wickham after the events of Ramsgate, and his reaction is considerably less mild than an altered face and a stiff nod.

Notes

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Being the Account of an Unexpected and Highly Scandalous Debacle Amongst the Military Faction in Meryton

In early December of 18—, less than a month after his cousin Darcy had quit that county, the Honorable Colonel Fitzwilliam was obliged to travel into Hertfordshire, to the village of Meryton, in order to deliver a message to the colonel of the militia regiment encamped there. The man, a Colonel Forster, was an amiable, affable man, and after the message was delivered, Colonel Fitzwilliam was invited to remain in their company until the next day. He agreed easily enough, and the two colonels spent the better part of the afternoon observing the men in their drills.

Later, they dined with Colonel Forster's wife, then went along to join the militia's officers, who had arranged among themselves to have an evening of cards and dice and other ways for a man to divest himself of his earnings. Though he could not be tempted to play, Colonel Fitzwilliam watched some of the games; was introduced to many of the officers, who seemed in general a creditable, gentleman-like set; and seemed to enjoy himself quite sufficiently.
Then his host, not knowing of Colonel Fitzwilliam's relation to Darcy, had a brilliant idea, and decided to introduce his guest to another extremely friendly fellow.

"Here," said Colonel Forster genially, drawing Colonel Fitzwilliam through a door and into another room, toward a pale-haired man in a bright red uniform with his back turned — an alarmingly familiar back, and a head of blond curls that made the pit of Fitzwilliam's stomach roll.

Colonel Forster was still smiling and leading him toward the card table. "Another man I'd like you to meet!" he proclaimed, stopping next to the blond man, who was too focused on his playing to notice he was being introduced to someone. "Colonel, this is Lieutenant —"

But the head had tilted slightly as the player considered his next move, and Fitzwilliam was certain, now, that he knew the man; his blood began to boil. "Wickham," he hissed low and menacing.

That stirred Wickham from his game, and he jerked around immediately, his face going white. Fitzwilliam's own face was settling into murderous lines, and Colonel Forster was looking between them in surprise.

"Pistols or swords?" demanded Fitzwilliam without preamble.

Colonel Forster gasped.

Wickham went even paler. "What?" he questioned, attempting a laugh, as if he could brush off all of Fitzwilliam's deadly intent.

"For months I've been promising myself that if I ever saw you again I'd make you pay for what you did to my Georgiana," snarled Fitzwilliam, hardly noticing his words, he was so intent on his hatred of the man before him. "So chose, Wickham; pistols or swords?"

It was not a choice Wickham wanted to make. When given a pistol, he was a decent marksmen, but Fitzwilliam had been a crack shot since he was ten; people generally accounted Wickham a good swordsman, but Fitzwilliam could beat him with ease even when they were little more than children, and it seemed unlikely that his time in the army had done anything for his skill but improve it. Wickham looked around the room for help. None was forthcoming, all the other soldiers being too busy staring at them in amazement. Not even Colonel Forester moved to put a stop to the proceedings.

"Well, Wickham?" pressed Fitzwilliam relentlessly.

"Pistols," Wickham croaked at last, with a desperate hope that the weapons' unreliability would save him. He did not expect that Fitzwilliam would settle for wounding him — there was death in the Colonel's eyes.

Fitzwilliam nodded. "And your second?" he asked. Then, before the other man could respond, he raised one eyebrow and added tauntingly, "Or can we dispense with seconds, as we are both men of our word?"

Flinching visibly, Wickham looked around again. "Denny," he finally managed, when he saw that man's slight, perplexed nod. "Denny will be my second." He cleared his throat, mustering some of his usual bravado. "Yours?"

"If I can get him here by dawn," murmured Fitzwilliam coldly, a hard smile crossing his face, "then Darcy, naturally."
While everyone else in the room looked perplexed at this pronouncement, Wickham's face, which had just started to regain some of its color, turned an even paler shade of white. He was definitely horrified now. "Oh, God—"

"Gentlemen, if you will excuse me," said Fitzwilliam, and turned to head from the room.

"Listen here," exclaimed Colonel Forster, finally regaining enough sense to realize he should be protesting this. "I can't allow—"

"You're not allowing anything," snapped Fitzwilliam over his shoulder. "You're ignoring everything that just took place — and especially everything that will take place this morning. Aren't you?"

Forster did not seem to have much choice but to nod, and pray that nothing unfixable would occur, like death.

"Listen, surely it doesn't have to be this morning," Wickham suggested wildly. "You'll want time—"

"For you to run?" countered Fitzwilliam sneeringly. He spun back around to glare at Wickham again. "You have a point, though; I should like more time for my second to get here. Very well, tomorrow morning, then. I expect you to show, though, Wickham — and if you do not, I shall find you."

Several of Wickham's fellow officers seemed offended at this suggestion that one of their number would run rather than face an opponent at dawn, but Wickham only swallowed thickly and nodded.

"As long as that is understood..." Fitzwilliam murmured and, with a last long significant look, he left.

Everyone else turned to Wickham, expecting a glib explanation of this newcomer's hostility, but were all disappointed and stunned to discover that their friend could not even muster a defense of his character. They attempted afterward to continue with their entertainments, but for Wickham at least night was ended thoroughly in his cups, and the others found all their enjoyments tainted by a cloud of curiosity.

For his part, after leaving the makeshift card rooms, Fitzwilliam decided it was probably not politic to remain in Colonel Forster's lodgings after challenging one of that man's officers to a duel, and removed himself to the Inn at Meryton.— This small action was noted by those of Meryton's citizens who knew of his arrival, and commented upon; combined with the quietness and social scarcity of the militia officers the next day, it served to generate a small swirl of speculation, which the military men did their damnedest to ignore, with perhaps too great a success.

Before settling into his room, Fitzwilliam sent an express to Darcy in London, the last place he'd heard his cousin could be found. Then, for good measure, he sent a similar express to his brother, who knew less of the events which had precipitated the impending duel, but who could be counted upon to support Fitzwilliam if he'd done anything short of attempt to assassinate the Prince Regent.

Then Fitzwilliam had two glasses of mediocre wine, spent an hour staring into the dark of his room, and finally drifted into a fitful sleep, where he dreamed repeatedly that Wickham had succeeded in seducing Georgiana.

When they awoke the next day, one at dawn and the other after noon, neither of the impending
duel's participants felt very well at all.

In a black mood of determined industry, Fitzwilliam's first actions the next day, after breaking his fast and inquiring of the innkeeper — a trifle indiscreetly — if there were any remote fields nearby, was to call upon Lieutenant Denny, the man Wickham had indicated as his second. He was not sure he could afford to wait for confirmation from his seconds, and certainly could not delay in order to let them arrange things.

Much to Fitzwilliam's surprise, Denny handled the interview in a coolly professional way, and by the time Fitzwilliam left him at noon, they had settled all the details they possibly could before hand, and reached a satisfactory conclusion regarding location, as well.

Fitzwilliam, lacking anything better to do, returned to the inn, where he had luncheon, and waited to hear from his brother and cousin.

There was no response that day from Darcy, but a note had been sent from his townhouse to say that he had repaired to Pemberley for Christmas and that the express had been forwarded to him. That only meant that it would have to double back and pass again through Hertfordshire on its way to Derbyshire; Fitzwilliam did not have three days for his cousin to appear. It was fortunate, then, that he'd sent also for his brother, who arrived in person that evening about dinner time, looking very serious and concerned.

"You know I do not approve of duels," were his first words, after being shown into Fitzwilliam's private parlor. "I assume you have an explanation?"

"I have; and you shall approve of this one," replied Fitzwilliam with a sharp chuckle, and proceeded to tell the story of Wickham, Darcy and Georgiana.

A little while before sunrise on the appointed day, Colonel Fitzwilliam and his brother waited in a field, the former standing unmoving under a tree, the latter pacing along a fence. In the cold, wintry air, through the half-dark and predawn mist, both their faces were serious, and pale with cold. Neither seemed to acknowledge it.

Grim faced, Denny was marching toward them, along with Wickham and several other of the officers. Wickham was between Denny and Carter, who each had a firm grip on one of his arms. Wickham appeared to be sweating, and the men around him looked vaguely contemptuous.

Fitzwilliam surmised, correctly, that Wickham had attempted to flee at some point in the last thirty-six hours, but his fellow officers had caught and stopped him.

Next to Fitzwilliam, his brother cleared his throat. When Fitzwilliam turned slightly and lifted his brows inquiringly, his brother murmured, "Are you sure this is..."

"Wise?" demanded Fitzwilliam scowlingly.

"Necessary," corrected his brother hurriedly.

Fitzwilliam scowled even more deeply. "I assure you, it's most necessary."

His brother looked as if he wished to speak but wasn't sure he ought to. The next moment, the shirts officers had reached them. They all looked curiously to Fitzwilliam's brother, as they had not seen him before. But Wickham had recognized the man, and looked even more miserable.
"Who is that?" asked Denny.

"He is my second," Fitzwilliam replied curtly.

"I thought you said Darcy was to be your second," Carter said suspiciously. He had not liked it when Fitzwilliam had mentioned Darcy's name, for he had been ignorant of their connection; the eventual explanation that he was Darcy's cousin had done nothing to appease him of his distrust.

"Darcy was unavailable," explained Colonel Fitzwilliam uncomfortably. "This is my brother."

"Viscount Fitzwilliam," added the Colonel's brother stiffly. "Eldest son of the Earl of ——."

The officers stared outright.

Wickham attempted to look as small as possible.

Denny's gaze whirled around to the Colonel again. "You're an earl's son?" he demanded weakly.

The Colonel and his brother the Viscount both nodded.

The officers' eyes went back to Wickham. "And this man offended you somehow?" Chamberlayne asked.

The brothers Fitzwilliam nodded again. "He behaved dishonorably by a young lady of my acquaintance," offered the Colonel unexpectedly, with a dark, heated look toward Wickham. "A young lady I considered to be under my protection."

If the Viscount shot a tiny, startled look of speculation toward his brother, the others missed it.

Denny and Carter immediately loosed their arms from Wickham, as if burned. They looked horrified to have touched him. Wickham just looked sour; his lack of denial seemed to be taken by the others as even further conviction.

"Well, he blasted well had us fooled," muttered Chamberlayne, his tone scornful and angry.

Wickham's face settled further into lines of hatred. "Damn you," he snarled at the Colonel.

The Colonel responded with a savage smile. "I take it you're ready to begin, Wickham?"

"Damn you," repeated Wickham, and reached to snatch one of the dueling pistols that had been brought along.

"We need to inspect those," the Viscount objected sharply. Denny and the other officers looked about to agree.

"Let it be," instructed the Colonel, without taking his eyes from the loathing in Wickham's. He was still smiling that animal smile. "I want this over with. Just give me the other."

Amid faint grumbling from one or two of the officers, the other pistol was passed to the Colonel. The military surgeon they'd brought with them — whom they'd taken little notice of to this point — looked between the two duelists, saw the obvious mutual desire to maim, and asked anxiously if honor might not be restored with an apology. He got about eight glares for his trouble, and quickly turned the query into a suggestion that they get on with it.

So they did.

After brief discussion, Wickham and the Colonel stripped to their shirtsleeves while the others
prepared, and then stood, Wickham shivering, until they were called upon again. The Viscount and Denny saw that they counted out the paces, twenty in all, made sure each gun was loaded, and asked the surgeon to do the honors with the handkerchief. The man looked dubious but agreed, and took his place between the duelists. He couldn't seem to stop himself, however, from making one final attempt to forestall injury.

"You could end this now," he offered hopelessly.

The Colonel kept his eyes on Wickham. "I mean to."

Resigned, the surgeon raised the handkerchief. Before he could drop it, Wickham fired; the report of the pistol startled the surgeon, however, and let go of the handkerchief without meaning to; everyone prepared themselves for the Colonel's shot — though he had narrowly missed his target, Wickham had attempted to cheat, that had been clear enough, and now none expected the man to walk away from the field, or even be carried away with breath in his body.

They waited, and they waited.

The Colonel's shot did not come.

A drawn look on his face, Wickham forced himself to meet the Colonel's eyes, over the spent pistol he still held outstretched. The Colonel smirked.

Wickham realized, with sick terror, that he was definitely, completely, inexorably dead. He slammed his eyes closed, and waited, like the rest, for the Colonel's shot.

This time, he did not have to wait long.

The Colonel, having seen what he wanted in Wickham's eyes, adjusted his aim slightly, and pulled the trigger. He had been careful, and the pistol did not misfire or go wide; the ball hit where it had been intended to.

There was a shrill scream of surprise.

The Colonel had hit Wickham in the knee, an injury he would probably survive, but after which he would never be the same.

Wickham gaped down at the blood seeping from under his breeches and staining the white material. The pain did not seem to have penetrated his brain yet. The Colonel approached him, staring with satisfaction at the expanding patch of red. Wickham transferred his incredulous look up to the other man.

"You did not kill me," he muttered dazedly. He winced, and raised a trembling hand to press against his wound, then seemed to think better of it. The surgeon had hurried over, but both men ignored him.

"That is open for debate," the Colonel disagreed, with a small, smug chuckle, especially at Wickham's continued bewildered expression. "Your friends" he said the words with exquisite irony, "are aware now that you are not a saint."

"I don't see…" mumbled Wickham, as the other officers tentatively came nearer, the better to listen to what was being said. Neither he nor the Colonel seemed to notice.

"Knowing that, how long do you expect it will be before they start doubting the things you have said of yourself?" pressed the Colonel coldly; he did not have the particulars of the story Wickham had put 'round, but knowledge of Wickham's character and the general hostility toward Darcy
were enough clues for him to guess the nature of it.

Wickham looked even more bewildered; his eyes had started to go slightly glassy. "I was sure you meant to kill me," he gasped, the pain creeping into his brain now. "You seemed even more likely to do it than Darcy."

"I certainly wanted to see you dead. — But I never would have done it. Clearly, you did not know me, just as you have never understood Darcy — he would no more kill you than he would have forgotten his father's instructions to see you provided for," snapped the Colonel, his voice rich with rather malicious pleasure. He smiled harshly. "Good bye, Wickham. May you rot in hell, you worthless son of a bitch."

With that, he walked away from the man whose reputation, if nothing else, he had just thoroughly destroyed.

Three days later, Colonel Fitzwilliam was not feeling quite so smug.

"Tell me you did not." The stern, deep voice filled the room.

"I did," he admitted.

Darcy regarded Colonel Fitzwilliam with furious disbelief. "Cousin," he began tightly, "we had discussed this."

Colonel Fitzwilliam nodded slowly. "I know."

"You had promised you would be sensible," Darcy continued. "And yet you go and— and do this! What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I couldn't help myself." Colonel Fitzwilliam looked supremely unrepentant.

"What if word of this gets out?" Darcy went on. "What shall we do when they hear of it in London?"

"Georgiana—"

"You already told me that you dropped her name," interrupted Darcy angrily. "To those familiar with you, it will not be a difficult conjecture which Georgiana you referred to, and that may be worse than if you had simply told everyone straight that it was my sister, your cousin. Especially since all anyone in Meryton knows about it is that your quarrel with Wickham involved a woman, who you apparently had under your protection! Good God, man, didn't you think?"

The Colonel didn't speak for a moment. He appeared to be thinking. At length he confessed, quietly, "I don't think I did, really. I saw him and I told myself I should hold my tongue, Darce, I swear I did." He sighed. "But then I thought of what he had done to Georgiana, the pain he put her through, how close he had come to taking her from me, and— I had no choice. I honestly could not help myself."

Darcy was staring at Colonel Fitzwilliam as if he had never seen him before.

"Darcy?" questioned the Colonel, regarding his cousin concernedly. "Cousin? What is it?"

"Take her from you?" questioned Darcy, his voice odd, half-strangled.
The Colonel looked confused a moment longer, and then his face flamed.

"Oh," he mumbled, looking briefly away.

"Cousin," implored Darcy incredulously, staring still, and then he sighed heavily. After a long moment, he said, "I suppose it is for the best, however, as it would help enormously with the gossip, if you were to marry her."

Not even aware that he did so, Colonel Fitzwilliam broke into a wide smile, his entire countenance lighting up. "Do you think so?" he attempted to ask nonchalantly — but it came out eager, and the resulting expression on his cousin's face was a mixture of amusement and irritation.

"I do not see," Darcy grumbled, after nodding and watching his cousin's smile widen even more, "why everything always works out so smoothly for you."

Completely at ease with the recent revelations about himself, Colonel Fitzwilliam took a seat in one of Darcy's best armchairs, and looked placidly around his cousin's library. "I think," he replied happily, "it is because I decided to follow my heart."

Darcy looked startled, then thoughtful, and Fitzwilliam smiled to himself, and retreated into blissful consideration of telling Georgiana that he'd shot Wickham; that he had just been given her brother's permission to marry her; and, last but certainly not the least, how ardently he admired and loved her.

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