The Pritchards

by orphan_account

Summary

Mrs Pritchard returns home from a visit with her sister Wickham with a surprise for her husband. Ten of them, technically.

Frank Pritchard had been married to Catherine Bennet for a decade now, so he was not very surprised when she came back from a routine visit to her sister Wickham with Mrs Wickham’s ten children in tow. She had never done so before, certainly, but he knew his wife’s sentiments when it came to children, particularly her own nieces and nephews.

He furthermore had the unfortunate luck to be acquainted with Mr and Mrs Wickham, a sad consequence of his marriage and patronage (both of which were otherwise excellent), and he knew that the couple was unlikely to care for their children as Mrs Pritchard thought they should.

That Catherine reiterated for him once she had packed the children off to bed — and after she had found beds enough for them, even sending the eldest four to her sister Darcy’s for the night. “Vicious! Foul! Unthinking! Oh!” she ran a hand through her unbound hair. “I thought better of Lydia, I really did, but it appears I was only fooling myself. Mary was right, and Lizzy too. — Mary!”

She sat down at her letter-desk to pen a quick and short letter to her favourite sister Mrs Langley, who was sure to agree, in her reply, that Mrs Wickham was unprincipled and unmotherly.

Mrs Langley was a talented correspondent who could be expected to add praise of her own maternal gifts and of her only child to the letter without sacrificing any criticism of Mrs Wickham. Frank resigned himself to a future full of newsy letters about Jemima’s accomplishments and
successes, painting a very different picture of a girl who Frank had found to be shy and self-effacing.

“I had thought that Mrs Wickham was expecting another child when you visited her,” Frank said. It was in fact the reason behind her visit, for she had wished to assist her sister Wickham during her confinement.

“Yes. It was another daughter, their fifth. Maria Wickham. I'd like to think that she was named in Mary’s honour, but I know better than to suspect Lydia of such generosity. Mary has nothing to offer them, not like Lizzy and Jane. Or me.” Kate Wickham was the fourth of the Wickhams’ daughters, a pretty girl of six who Frank fancied had inherited some of her aunt’s spirit and good nature in spite of her circumstances, based on nothing more than a sweet smile and a clever eye. “She is too young to be separated from her mother presently.” Catherine frowned bitterly at that.

“Ah.”

Catherine did not reply to his insufficient remark, too lost in old and new familial discords. “I should write Papa as well. He ought to do something for his grandchildren, even if he has written off Lydia as a lost cause. He treats the Collins boys better than he treated us! — save Lizzy.”

He knew better than to agree. Catherine could complain about her family all she liked, but she did not react well if someone else dared to voice criticism of them. Instead he asked, “Are the children staying with us?”

She hesitated and bit her bottom lip. It was a bad habit of hers, and one that he had become inordinately fond of over the years. He had never told her so. “I had hoped. I understand if you would rather — I mean, I know that we could find them good schools. Darcy and Bingley will help there, I know.”

“I only wished to know your plans, Catherine. They are our nieces and nephews, and they are welcome here as long as they need shelter.” He smiled grimly. “What sort of clergyman would I be if I refused to give aid where I could?”

She leaned over to press a kiss to his lips. “Dearest Frank! I knew I could depend upon you.”

He blushed. Ten years a husband, and you still flush as easily as a bridegroom! “A man of the Church should have a large family,” he informed her seriously. “It lends him authority to speak on family matters.”

She eyed him knowingly. “One day you will own to your sentimental nature, Francis Pritchard. I will see it done.”

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