

A detailed watercolor-style illustration of a young woman with dark brown hair styled in an updo with a small white flower accessory. She has large, expressive brown eyes and a soft, rosy blush on her cheeks. She is wearing a light blue, off-the-shoulder dress with lace detailing. A grey and white cat with striking orange eyes is nestled behind her, looking directly at the viewer. The background is a simple, light-colored draped fabric.

LYR NEWTON

**A TALE OF
TWO SUITORS**

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE VARIATION

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A Pride and Prejudice Variation

By

Lyr Newton

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are results of the author's imagination, inspired by Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice."

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Author's note

One

Ramsgate, July 1809

“Dearest Lizzy, I cannot thank you enough for helping me and keeping me company. With three young children and an infant, one could hardly keep one’s sanity, to be honest.”

Elizabeth laughed at Mrs Gardiner; they were enjoying a cup of tea in the garden after dinner, in one of the rare moments of peace before retiring for the night. From their position, they could hear the sound of the waves and feel the pleasant breeze.

“Dear aunt, it was you who invited me to spend two months in Ramsgate. I should be the one thanking you, which I hope I have already done.”

“You have, too many times. Do not misunderstand me — I adore all my children, and I am grateful for your uncle’s efforts in finding us this lovely cottage in which to spend the summer, even if he cannot be with us often. I know I sound selfish complaining about tiredness when I have several servants to help me.”

“You might have the servants, but you wish to do everything for the children yourself. It is no wonder you are tired. I am glad that I can at least help to care for them and play with them during the day.”

“It is a significant help, Lizzy. It seems playing out of doors is not only excellent for their health but also exhausts them. When we are in London,

they sleep half as well as they do here.”

“I could say the same about myself too,” Elizabeth said laughing.

“This cottage is perfectly situated, with direct access to the beach and the water, on the opposite side of the road from the houses of the very rich, and away from Ramsgate’s hustle and bustle. It has been a peaceful and comfortable stay. Your uncle made an excellent choice.”

“I adore this cottage. I dream that someday I might own or at least rent one of my own, which I doubt will happen. So, when will Uncle come to escort us back to London?”

“In his letter he said it would be next week. If nothing delays him, of course. He works so hard, but how can I complain since he provides us with everything we need — and much more. He is truly the best husband and father.”

“You and Uncle have always been my example of a happy marriage, Aunt. I hope to find someone like him myself one day. If not, I would rather remain a spinster and take care of your children.”

Mrs Gardiner laughed heartily. “I am sure you will find a good husband very soon, Lizzy. Just do not be too hasty in deciding on your future. You need time, wisdom, and good judgment to make such a lifelong commitment.”

“I have no intention of marrying soon, Aunt. I cannot imagine where I might find a suitor whom I could love, admire and respect. As you well know, we are rather poor, and a good dowry is an essential inducement for most men.”

“For most, but not all of them. Perhaps you will find the right gentleman when we finally take you on that long-promised journey to the Lakes. However, considering your uncle’s business affairs, it might be years before it happens.”

“In truth, I am far more eager for that journey than for marriage. After all, what are men to rocks and mountains?”

The two of them shared more laughter and continued to speak until they noticed a horse and rider moving along the shore. He could not see them through the trees that bordered their garden, but they could make out his form, even though his features remained obscured.

The rider intrigued Elizabeth as there were rarely any visitors at that hour on that part of the beach. She glanced at her aunt, who returned an equally puzzled look. Then the rider leant forwards in the saddle and threw something — seemingly a package — far into the sea, then departed at a gallop.

“That was strange,” Elizabeth said. “And quite rude. Why would you throw something into the water just in front of the houses? It is very poor manners.”

“Very poor manners, indeed, and if there was a little more time, I would have told him as much.”

The peaceful night was suddenly broken by a loud, agonising cry, so tormenting that Elizabeth jumped to her feet.

“What in the Lord’s name...?” Mrs Gardiner cried.

Missing not a single moment, Elizabeth picked up her skirts and ran towards the sound, which resembled a heart-rending scream. She realised the noise was coming from the water and noticed a writhing dark bundle bobbing on the waves. With no thought for her own safety and heedless of the protestations of her aunt, she waded into the sea, deeper and deeper until she managed to grab it. In her arms, the movement of the bundle increased, as well as the wailing.

Pressing the package to her chest while fighting back through the waves in her soaked and heavy gown, Elizabeth realised she was carrying a cat, bound in a thick fabric and evidently thrown to its death. As she reached the sand, she held it tight, caressing it and speaking gently, but the cat still struggled to escape.

Reaching her relieved aunt, they carefully unwrapped the fabric, holding the cat carefully.

With amazement and anger, Elizabeth watched as a little grey face appeared from inside the fabric, mewling in despair and trying to break free. She held it closely, stroking it while she continued to talk softly.

“Dear Lord, who could do such a thing to such a beautiful creature? Not just turn it out but condemn it to a painful drowning! This is just awful!” Mrs Gardiner exclaimed.

“Who? Someone with no character and no heart!” Elizabeth replied furiously. “If only I had seen his face and was able to recognise him, I would make him pay!”

“What a vicious, cruel act, indeed. Outrageous and frightening!” Mrs Gardiner uttered, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Poor, poor little thing,” Elizabeth continued. “You are safe now. Come, let us go inside — we both need to dry ourselves and to drink something warm. A little milk, perhaps? You would like some, would you not? Aunt, I hope you do not mind if I keep it. Tomorrow I shall ask the neighbours to see whether perhaps someone recognises it.”

“Of course, my dear. Just be careful to keep your windows and the door closed, so it cannot escape. It must be terrified, the poor thing.”

Mrs Gardiner retired to her room, and Elizabeth took the cat to her chamber and wrapped it in a towel. Then she changed her own clothes and dried her hair before going to the kitchen for some milk.

Sleep evaded Elizabeth for several hours. The cat, with beautiful grey and white fur, was so scared that it remained hidden most of the time. It came out only briefly to lap some milk but stayed away from Elizabeth.

Having owned pets all her life, Elizabeth knew she must not force the cat in any way. She spoke to it from a distance but did not attempt to approach it. The creature certainly needed time to recover after such a shock.

The more she thought of it, the angrier Elizabeth grew. Who would purposely catch and wrap up a cat and throw it to its death? Why would someone do that? What harm could such an innocent soul have done that it was required to pay with its life? What sort of human could be so evil and heartless?

Time passed with many such questions but no answers, and it was late in the night, when she was certain the animal was unharmed, that Elizabeth finally found some rest.

The following morning proved that the cat was in perfect health, though still frightened. Elizabeth guessed it was around a year old, and Mrs Gardiner assumed it belonged to someone as it was clearly well fed and cared for. The question of who might have sent it to its death became more puzzling.

Over the next few days, Elizabeth asked about the neighbourhood, and Mrs Gardiner sent a servant to enquire farther afield, hoping to find the owner — all to no avail.

The cat, however, became more comfortable and eventually allowed Elizabeth to stroke it and to hold it. Only then did she notice it was a male, and soon afterwards he proved he was a delightfully mischievous boy who liked to be stroked, to sit on a lap, and to sleep in a bed with his human. Since nobody claimed him, Elizabeth decided to keep him and named him Mr Ash.

When Mr Gardiner arrived to take the family back to London, he was equally surprised to hear the story of the cat and agreed with his wife that it looked like it probably belonged to someone. More enquiries were made around Ramsgate, but in the end, Mr Ash travelled back to Longbourn with Elizabeth.

September 1811

“Put that cat down, Lizzy!” Mrs Bennet demanded. “Your dress will be covered in fur, just when we expect Mr Bingley to call!”

“Yes, Mama. I shall take him to my room so he will be in nobody’s way.”

“You should do that. That cat is so wild that he should not be allowed in the drawing room, especially when we have company!”

“He is not wild at all, Mama. He is the sweetest boy most of the time. He simply has a strong personality, and he dislikes certain people.”

“In fact, he dislikes most people and only likes a few,” Mrs Bennet replied. “Remember when he scratched Sir William?”

“I cannot fault the cat for that,” Mr Bennet interjected. “He was probably weary of Sir William’s endless comments about St James’s. I would have scratched him, too, if I could.”

“Mr Bennet! Do not encourage Lizzy to spoil that cat even more! He is dangerous in company, I tell you!”

Despite her amusement, Elizabeth could not actually argue with her mother. In the two years since she had rescued him, Mr Ash had become exceedingly demanding of her attention and extremely miserly with the attention he gave others.

Apart from Jane and Mary, he did not allow himself to be touched by anyone else. The Gardiners’ children adored him and would have liked to play with him, but their joy seemed overwhelming to Mr Ash, and he kept his distance from them. The only time he was obedient and calm and would allow other people to touch him was when Elizabeth held him in her arms and stroked him. That seemed to be his happy and comfortable place.

“Come, Mr Ash, let us go to my room, and you can sleep there,” Elizabeth said, picking up the cat. “But I doubt Mr Bingley will care about fur on my dress. His interest certainly lies elsewhere,” she said with a smile and a glance at her eldest sister.

“I am sure it does, especially after he danced two sets with Jane at the assembly!” Mrs Bennet replied enthusiastically, while Jane blushed. “What a handsome and amiable young gentleman, and what fine taste he possesses. Unlike his friend, whose name I shall not even mention!”

“You mean Mr Darcy, who refused to dance with Lizzy?” Mr Bennet interjected again, and Elizabeth laughed, slightly uneasy.

She had been annoyed and offended by the strange man who had called her tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt him. Who would make such a rude remark at a party? Someone proud, arrogant, and uncivil, she was certain. Three days later, after hearing the story repeated countless times by her mother, her younger sisters, and even Mrs Long and Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth was able to laugh about the incident with her father. Her mother, however, was not so forgiving.

“You should never dance with him, even if he asks you, Lizzy! He might be tall and handsome and worth ten thousand a year, but he is an unpleasant sort of man and not worth any consideration!”

“Dear Mama, precisely because Mr Darcy is worth ten thousand a year and is such an unpleasant sort of man, I doubt he will ever ask me to dance with him. I shall take Mr Ash away — I believe Mr Bingley’s carriage has arrived.”

Mrs Bennet ran to the window, then exclaimed, “Dear Lord, it seems Mr Darcy has come with Mr Bingley! What on earth is he doing here? Lizzy, you had better leave the cat. With a little bit of luck, he might scratch or bite him, as he deserves!”

As if hearing his name mentioned, the cat struggled in Elizabeth’s arms and jumped to the floor, running towards the door. Elizabeth ran after him,

and in the hall, she almost collided with the guests, losing her balance. Mr Darcy grabbed her arm, preventing a most unladylike fall.

“Forgive me. My cat was running away from me,” she mumbled, her cheeks hot with embarrassment.

“Should I try to catch it?” Mr Darcy offered, and Elizabeth stared at him in disbelief.

“No, there is no need. He will take a turn in the garden and return soon. Please come in, gentlemen,” she said, remembering to be a polite hostess.

In the drawing room, the guests were welcomed enthusiastically, and Mr Darcy was introduced to Mr Bennet.

The conversation began with some difficulty, despite Mr Bingley’s attempts. As joyful and amicable as he was, the difference between him and his friend was striking. Mr Darcy was stern and withdrawn, observing them with apparent disdain and hardly saying a word, showing his lack of pleasure in being there. Elizabeth wondered why he had even come. Was it just to make them feel uncomfortable? Yet he had offered to catch the cat for her. She even regretted refusing the offer; Mr Darcy running about after Mr Ash and likely being scratched would have been a scene to remember.

Mr Bingley suddenly mentioned Mr Darcy’s preference for books and sport, and the subject interested her father, who addressed their guest directly. Shortly afterwards, a separate discussion, in low voices, began between the two, while Mr Bingley continued to talk to the ladies.

Surprisingly, Elizabeth heard her father invite Mr Darcy to the library — an offer that was immediately accepted. Puzzled, she watched the two so different men leave together and close the door behind them.

Half an hour passed, and Mr Bingley seemed to be enjoying himself exceedingly. Refreshments were brought, and out of a mixture of politeness and curiosity, Elizabeth offered to take some to her father and his companion.

On entering the library, she was bewildered to see her father talking animatedly and in a friendly manner with the arrogant Mr Darcy, both holding glasses of brandy. But the greatest surprise came moments later, when she noticed none other than Mr Ash purring and rubbing his head against Mr Darcy's legs.

"Come in, Lizzy," Mr Bennet requested. "We are having an interesting debate here, and your cat seems to approve of it. He entered through the window and did not run away when he saw us. Nor has he scratched either of us yet. Of course, there is still plenty of time."

Elizabeth was too shocked to even notice the joke, even less to smile at it. In the room sat three males, none of them known to be friendly towards strangers, who were all barely acquainted with each other, yet they seemed to be bearing each other's company and even unexpectedly enjoying themselves.

Two

Elizabeth placed the tray of refreshments on her father's desk and was about to leave when their guest addressed her, increasing her amazement.

"Miss Bennet, please allow me to tell you how deeply sorry I am for my improper behaviour on the night of the assembly."

"Oh...there is no need, sir..."

"Such ungentlemanly behaviour requires an apology. For a while, I have not been in the right disposition for entertainment, and I should not have attended at all, but Bingley insisted on being there. He also insisted I should dance, which made me withdraw even more. I am not fond of dancing even when I am in my highest spirits, let alone then."

Elizabeth was so surprised by his words that she delayed her answer. It was a gesture of courtesy that she had not expected from such a proud man; of course, she could enquire why he had needed to call her tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt him and to state that she had been slighted by other men, instead of a simple and polite refusal to his friend. But it mattered little, coming from a man who was obviously accustomed to giving offence with little consideration for the feelings of others. He had apologised, and it was enough.

"I appreciate your explanation, Mr Darcy," she replied. "After all, nobody can force someone to dance, even at an assembly when men are scarce," she concluded with a meaningful smile that implied more than her words.

“You have my sympathy, Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet said. “There are few things I loathe more than being dragged to parties and forced to dance because etiquette requires it. Of course, that happened when I was younger. Nobody has insisted on my dancing in many years, not even my wife. A benefit of getting older is that you have the liberty to attend gatherings and drink in peace.”

“I understand you perfectly well, sir,” Mr Darcy responded.

“Of course, I was never particularly handsome or wealthy, so people showed little interest in me in any case. You, sir, must carry a heavier burden,” Mr Bennet uttered in the mocking tone Elizabeth knew too well. Mr Darcy, however, frowned and nodded while gulping from his glass.

“I shall not bother you any longer,” Elizabeth said. “And I shall take the cat with me. He can be a real annoyance around strangers.”

“It is a beautiful cat,” Mr Darcy offered. He leant down to stroke him, but Mr Ash immediately ran away.

“He is, but not friendly with people he does not know. I am surprised that he even entered the library with you here, Mr Darcy.”

“And he rubbed against Mr Darcy’s ankles a few times, which I have rarely seen,” Mr Bennet added.

“He must know I am fond of animals,” Mr Darcy declared, finally smiling. “Especially cats, dogs, and horses.”

“He must do. Now please excuse me. I shall leave you two gentlemen to continue your conversation,” Elizabeth said, grabbing the cat.

She took Mr Ash to her chamber, wondering about Mr Darcy's change of manners. Apparently, her father and her cat were the gentleman's preferred company in Hertfordshire.

Once Mr Ash was secured in her room, Elizabeth joined her mother and sisters, who were all still engaged in conversation with Mr Bingley.

The gentlemen's visit lasted another hour, much to Jane and Mrs Bennet's delight, and at the end, both expressed their desire to call again in a few days, much to Elizabeth's amazement.

"Dear Jane, I can safely declare that Mr Bingley's admiration has lasted beyond those two sets," Mrs Bennet said after the guests had gone.

"Mama, let us not assume more than there is," Jane answered, blushing. "Mr Bingley is the most amiable gentleman of my acquaintance and the most pleasant companion."

"In case anyone cares, I also enjoyed spending time with Mr Darcy," Mr Bennet interjected. "He might not smile as much as his friend, nor does he possess the same amiable manners, but the man has a great knowledge of books. He promised to lend me two volumes published only last week. How kind is that?"

"Dear Papa, do not set your hopes too high," Elizabeth replied. "These rich people can be rather inconstant with their favours, and he might change his mind by tomorrow."

"I wonder when you became so proficient at judging rich people, Lizzy, since you hardly know any," her father mocked her. "As for Mr Darcy, he seemed a gentleman whose word can be trusted. You should have more faith in one of the very few people whom your cat seems not to despise."

“We certainly do not care much,” Mrs Bennet interjected. “I am content for you to keep him busy while Mr Bingley calls on Jane. I welcome you enjoying Mr Darcy’s company so much since Mr Bingley seems to value his opinion highly. He even said he decided to rent Netherfield at Mr Darcy’s suggestion. For that, I can forgive him for calling Lizzy tolerable!”

“We should forgive Mr Darcy for that indiscretion in any case, since he apologised to me,” Elizabeth answered. “Papa was a reliable witness.”

“Did he? How kind of him! I am sure Mr Bingley demanded he apologise as you are Jane’s sister. I am sure all was done for Jane,” Mrs Bennet concluded.

“Mama, please do not say that,” Jane murmured, though her eyes shone with joy.

“Oh, hush, girl. You do not know better than your mother! He even mentioned he would host a ball at Netherfield once he is completely settled. Why would he do that, if not to dance with you again?”

“Oh, I long for another ball!” Lydia exclaimed. “Aunt Phillips said a militia regiment is expected to arrive in Meryton next week. Can you imagine a ball with all the officers?”

“A ballroom full of officers would be the most wonderful thing,” Kitty approved, while Mr Bennet rolled his eyes.

“Oh, I always admired men in uniform in my youth,” Mrs Bennet admitted. “Hill, bring me my smelling salts — I might need them.”

The argument over Mr Bingley’s intentions continued till dinner time, and nobody could dampen Mrs Bennet’s dreams of happiness related to that

gentleman. Later on, Jane confessed to Elizabeth that her own hopes were no different, but she was attempting to keep them under good regulation in order to avoid disappointment.

“He is so amicable, so friendly, and has a lovely smile,” Jane said. “I feel such a strange warmth when he talks to me. Am I silly? Please do not laugh at me, Lizzy. To you, I can confess such a thing, but you must keep the secret. I do not wish Mr Bingley to become distressed by our expectations when he may want nothing more than a friendship.”

“You are not silly, Jane. I like Mr Bingley too. He is also very handsome, so I allow you to like him as much as you want.”

“Did Mr Darcy truly apologise to you?”

“He did — out of nowhere. I was quite shocked. He explained to me he had been in a poor disposition, but Mr Bingley had insisted on him attending the ball and dancing against his will. Apparently, Papa understood him all too well.”

“Mr Darcy must be a good man since Mr Bingley admires and trusts him so much. I cannot approve of him offending you, but perhaps he was truly feeling unwell. If it was in his character to be unkind and uncivil, he would not have taken the trouble to apologise, would he?”

“I agree, Jane. Oh, and another extraordinary thing, Mr Ash seemed to approve of Mr Darcy too. He entered the library through the window, and he actually rubbed himself against Mr Darcy’s legs a few times.”

“Did he? How very strange!”

“Indeed. Mr Ash tolerates Papa and sleeps in the library occasionally, but no other men have been to his liking. Seemingly, he found Mr Darcy tolerable enough to tempt him. Who would have imagined that Papa and Mr Ash would see Mr Darcy differently from how we see him? Either we or they must be utterly wrong.”

“Dear Lizzy, you are as good as Papa at making sport of people, which frightens me at times,” Jane declared, laughing. On the other side of the bed, Ash miaowed once, then returned to his peaceful sleep.

“Mama, you will not believe what news we have!” Lydia cried as she returned from Meryton with Kitty.

“I have news too, if anyone is interested,” Mr Bennet interjected.

“What news, my dear?” Mrs Bennet addressed her daughter.

“The regiment will arrive tomorrow! Colonel Forster is already settled, and his wife Harriet is so lovely and pretty! We happened upon them in Mr Green’s shop. She is a little bit older than me. How fortunate for her to marry a colonel. I am sure we shall be good friends. Oh, I am greatly anticipating seeing all the officers tomorrow! We shall go to Meryton and wait for them!”

“We certainly shall! Mr Bennet, you must give us the carriage,” Mrs Bennet uttered.

“You may have the carriage if you wish, madam,” Mr Bennet responded. “Just keep in mind we need a good dinner for the day after tomorrow since I am expecting a visit from my cousin. Yes, the one who will inherit