

# Scarlet Fever and Scarlet Coats: A Pride and Prejudice Variation by Anne Morris

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Mr. Bingley returned the visit from Mr. Bennet. The women of the house only caught as much of a glimpse of the new neighbor as they could from the upper hall windows. He rode his famous black horse and stayed with Mr. Bennet above half an hour. Jane thought him attractive. Elizabeth chided her for such an observation given that her sister had scolded Lydia about only desiring a handsome man as a husband.

“But he is admirable from what I can observe. He did not wear a hat, and we were able to observe that he has a pleasing face. One does not eschew what nature has given, Lizzy,” Jane argued.

“So Catherine need not have misgivings about her beautiful face?” Elizabeth asserted, looking from one beauty to the other. Her point had been to needle Jane about not being the only beauty in Hertfordshire.

“You see Jane, neither of us needs worry about our pretty faces. We have been given a gift from God, and like all gifts, need to use it wisely,” Miss Parks declared from her place on the sofa.

Jane came to sit by her and clasped a hand. “Thank you, Catherine. I sometimes feel that Mamma spends too much time talking about my face winning me a husband. But it is true that I should not be blind to the fact that it is one of the advantages I have to offer.” The two squeezed hands.

Perhaps they both felt that it was a burden as well—to be the designated beauty in their families and to have the pressure of ‘making a match,’ to better their family’s situation.

Elizabeth looked at her sister and her friend on the sofa. “I will allow you to think Mr. Bingley handsome, Jane—as you both have corrected me about handsome faces—and I am sure we will find out more about him at the Meryton ball.”

In the Bennet family, their father’s estate was entailed, and in lieu of male heirs, a distant cousin was to inherit. Their mother’s fortune of four thousand pounds did not provide sufficient income for the daughter’s dowries, and Mr. Bennet had not saved enough over the years to supplement it. The Longbourn estate provided an income of two thousand pounds a year. While Mr. Bennet lived within his means, he always thought to father a son to cut off the entail; a son who would care for and provide for his widow and daughters.

Now the burden fell on Jane, with her handsome face, to marry well. It was a duty to find a husband with a substantial income who would be pleased to have a wife with a pretty face and a

small dowry. Also, to find a husband whose station in life would permit the other daughters introductions to men of equally high status and wealth.

Catherine Parks' situation was, perhaps, more desperate. While Mrs. Bennet had found it difficult, at first, to have this guest in the house, given her beauty, Catherine's situation at home was bordering on frightful to Elizabeth who had only known a loving home. Mr. Robert Parks was a landed gentleman with two children and hailed from an estate in Somerset of many generations. Marguerite was the oldest, and Catherine, the second daughter. His estate allowed him to leave the property to his daughters, unlike Mr. Bennet's.

However, Mr. Parks was not a man who lived within his means and years of making poor choices left him with little choice but to retrench. At the unpopular advice of his attorney, Mr. Parks leased out his family estate, St. Gregory's Abbas, and moved to Bath. Shortly after their move, Catherine had contracted brain fever and had been removed to Priestwood Green to recover. It was one time where her father's habit of 'damn the expense now, we must have it!' proved to be a wise choice; it had probably saved her life.

Between Catherine and Elizabeth, there formed a close friendship. In Catherine, Elizabeth found a reason to hope and to live. For it was in Catherine's nature to keep carrying on, no matter the circumstances. She encouraged Elizabeth to continue on and find new strength each day, despite the loss of her sister Mary and her limited hearing.

In Elizabeth, Catherine found a love of family that she did not have at home. Catherine's mother had died shortly after her birth, which had left her father a bitter man and her sister melancholy and lonely. Marguerite was seven years older, which made for a sister who was more of a mother figure than a companion. Not that they did not share in each other's joys and sorrows, but the age difference had not allowed for the closeness that Elizabeth enjoyed with Jane and Mary, or with Katherine and Lydia.

The Bennet family had slowly been encouraged as letters from Elizabeth, which had been almost unheard of before Christmas, started to list people and places again rather than to give simple health updates. And as was her nature, Lizzy began to comment on the idiosyncrasies of the people around her; she began to observe again as she began to heal.

By the end of February, Dr. Markham felt that Elizabeth was safely on the road to a full recovery. When it became apparent that Miss Parks' fever had severely diminished her eyesight—though many people referred to her as being blind—a solution needed to be found.

And so, Miss Bennet and Miss Parks agreed to be each other's eyes and ears. It was a far better solution than hiring a companion or servant to help either woman. They left Priestwood Green together to visit Miss Parks' family in Bath in the spring. And in early July, Elizabeth Bennet finally came home to her family, bringing her friend with her.

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