

In the final version of *The Mischief of the Mistletoe*, Arabella (our heroine) invites her family friend Jane Austen to join her and Mr. Fitzhugh for a jaunt out to a nearby ruin, Farley Castle. In the original version, it's Arabella's youngest sister, Lavinia, who accompanies Arabella and Turnip, with disastrous results. Although I excised the scene, partly to give Austen more air time, partly because we really didn't need to know that much about Lavinia's digestive system, I'm still rather fond of it, because it shows us Turnip at his most lovable.

Lavinia crept into the room, clutching her own shawl about her. It was so cold in the drawing room that her breath misted in front of her, but her eyes were shining. She seemed completely oblivious to the fact that she had just taken five years off her older sister's life.

"I saw the light and thought it might be you," she hissed in an excruciatingly loud whisper. "I wanted to say thank you, for tomorrow."

"Don't thank me until after we've been," Arabella warned her. "It will be cold. And quite possibly dull."

Not to mention swarming with deranged pudding thieves, she mocked herself. They would have to swat them off with their reticules. Or perhaps Mr. Fitzhugh could dazzle them with pugilistic feats.

What had she been thinking to get herself in such a pelter?

Arabella hastily slapped the cover of her journal shut, blots and all. No point in letting Lavinia see.

"Who cares for the cold? Farley Castle! And in a phaeton!"

"It's not a high perch one," Arabella cautioned, before her sister could get too many ideas. "And it will be very drafty. You'll have to bundle up warmly."

"You can bundle me like an Eskimo and I won't mind!" Lavinia flung her arms around Arabella, trailing tassels across Arabella's nose. As Arabella sneezed into the wool, she exclaimed rapturously, "I promise, I shan't be the slightest bit of trouble! You'll scarcely know I'm there."

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"Ooooooh," groaned Lavinia.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Fitzhugh." Smoothing the hair back from Lavinia's forehead, Arabella glanced distressedly at their escort. "I had no idea Lavinia suffered so from carriage sickness."

"Isn't carriage sickness," Lavinia gasped, hunching over against the side of the phaeton, her face a delicate green. "I think it's the k-k-kippers!"

"Oh, dear," said Arabella, and exchanged an anxious look with their escort.

True to his word, Mr. Fitzhugh had collected them at ten that morning. There had been some delay while Lavinia, wild with excitement, had run back and forth for forgotten belongings, ranging from an extra shawl to some preserves she thought Mr. Fitzhugh would like excessively, while Mr. Fitzhugh beamed benevolently over the remains of the breakfast table, blunting Margaret's barbs by sheer obliviousness. There was something to be said for obliviousness, decided Arabella.

Theirs had been a high-spirited party at the outset. It was a glorious, sunny December day, and if the phaeton was a bit cramped with three on the bench, the scramble for space just added to the adventure of it all. Until Lavinia had begun to turn a light green sometime past the first tollgate.

So much for spies, thought Arabella, torn between amusement and concern. They had gone from high drama to low farce.

"Dangerous things, kippers," said Mr. Fitzhugh in sympathy. "Never touch them myself. Have you thought about putting a key down your back?"

Lavinia moaned.

"I think that's for hiccups," said Arabella, with an anxious eye on her sister's pale face. Despite the sharp wind, drops of sweat beaded her brow. "Can you take a deep breath, darling? Maybe the cool air will help."

"Please," gasped Lavinia. "Please, can we stop now? Right now?"

"We're almost there," Arabella said soothingly, stroking her sister's hair back from her face. "If you can just...."

But Mr. Fitzhugh had already drawn the carriage to an expert stop by the side of the road. His tiger dropped down off the perch in the back to run to hold the horses' heads.

Mr. Fitzhugh circled around to Lavinia's side of the carriage.

"Come along down now," he said warmly, half-lifting Lavinia from Arabella's arms. "We'll soon have you right again."

"Urrrgghh," groaned Lavinia.

Arabella's sister clung to Mr. Fitzhugh's neck as she stumbled blindly down from the carriage. Her eyes were closed and her face green.

Arabella clambered down after them. "Loosen her bonnet ribbons," she suggested. "Perhaps that might relieve—"

But Lavinia had found a more immediate form of relief. Doubling over, Lavinia lost a large quantity of her breakfast on the verge of the road. A squirrel that had wandered by to investigate hastily scurried away again.

“There, there,” said Mr. Fitzhugh, keeping a firm grip on Lavinia’s shoulders as she rocked back and forth, producing a series of pitiful gagging noises. “There, there. Won’t be a moment and you’ll feel right as rain again. Just you see.”

Lavinia responded by letting loose another spectacular display of gastric pyrotechnics. Despite the cold, there was a sheen of sweat on her brow. Hastily dabbing a handkerchief with cologne, Arabella pressed it to her sister’s brow, wiping away the sweaty curls from her forehead.

With a muffled sob, Lavinia pulled herself out of Mr. Fitzhugh’s grasp and launched herself at Arabella. Burying her face in Arabella’s breastbone, she sobbed out her adolescent shame. “So miserable... ruined everything... hate kippers!”

“Perhaps we should....” Mr. Fitzhugh wafted his hands, indicating movement away from that particular bit of roadside.

Arabella nodded at him over her sister’s head. “Come along, darling,” she said soothingly, moving her sister along by baby steps. “Let’s just find someplace comfortable for you to sit.”

Lavinia lifted a blotched face from Arabella’s pelisse. Tears oozed weakly out of the corners of her eyes.

“I’ve ruined everything,” she whimpered.

Mr. Fitzhugh dealt her a reassuring pat on the shoulder, carefully calibrated not to jar any more of her innards out of her. “Not everything. Just my boots.”

“Your boots—oh!” With a wail, Lavinia burrowed back into Arabella’s chest, her back heaving. “H-h-hate myself!”

Mr. Fitzhugh looked horrified. “Didn’t mean—That is, meant it to be humorous, that’s all. Dash it all! Don’t distress yourself, Miss Lavinia. Never liked these boots to begin with. Deuced uncomfortable and unstylish to boot. That is, the boots to boot. So I shouldn’t mind being unbooted. Bootless even.”

Arabella cast him a grateful glance over Lavinia’s head as she rubbed her sister’s back.

“Come now, Lavvy,” Arabella said gently. “Pull yourself together. It’s not so bad as all that.”

“You’ll both h-hate me!” Lavinia hiccupped into Arabella’s chest.

“Not in the slightest,” Mr. Fitzhugh declared stoutly. “Have a sister of m’own, you know. Once cast up her accounts all over my favorite waistcoat. Great pity, that. Gave my valet a devil of a turn. But I’d never hold poor Sal to blame for it.”

“Very generous minded of you, Mr. Fitzhugh,” said Arabella, torn between amusement and consternation.

“Not at all,” said Mr. Fitzhugh. “A good sister is above waistcoats. And you can’t help feeling sick when you’re sick.”

Two reddened eyes blinked up from the vicinity of Arabella’s bosom. “R-really? Do you r-really think so?”

“Happens to us all! Deuced embarrassing, but there you are.” With an expression of deep concentration, Mr. Fitzhugh fumbled in his waistcoat pockets, finally emerging triumphant with a slightly dusty candy. “Interest you in a candy?”

A small gloved hand crept out. Mr. Fitzhugh dropped the candy into it. Both Arabella and Mr. Fitzhugh observed closely as Lavinia popped it into her mouth and sucked.

Arabella watched with relief as the color came back into her sister’s cheeks. She wasn’t quite a healthy pink yet, but at least she didn’t look quite so green.

“Shall we take you home?” Arabella asked quietly.

Lavinia’s eyes popped in horror. She emphatically shook her head. New tears seemed in imminent danger of falling.

“Not far to Farley Castle now,” pointed out Mr. Fitzhugh. “A bit of lemonade and rest and we can have a smashing afternoon, eh, Miss Lavinia?”

Lavinia nodded so hard she nearly swallowed the candy. She scrubbed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hands, a curiously childish gesture that made Arabella’s heart twist.

“I’ll be fine now, really,” she said, with a touching attempt at dignity. “I’m so sorry. And I’m so sorry about your boots.”

“What’s a pair of boots among friends?” said Mr. Fitzhugh expansively. “Better ruined boots where one’s friends are than a stalled ox, and all that.”

“How does one stall an ox?” inquired Arabella, partly because Lavinia looked in danger of sniffing again and partly because she just wanted to see what Mr. Fitzhugh would make of it.

He wrinkled his noble brow. “Never looked too closely into the matter, but I imagine it’s a bit like waylaying a cow. Tetchy beasts, cows.”

Several people have been asking me recently about the fate of Tommy Fluellen, Robert's best friend from *The Temptation of the Night Jasmine*. Tommy did have a brief look-in in *The Mischief of the Mistletoe*, until he got cut for length reasons. Oh, well, at least he's in good company. Sir Percy Blakeney, Baronet, was cut from *The Secret History of the Pink Carnation* for similar reasons.

In the meantime, here's Tommy's brief appearance from *The Mischief of the Mistletoe*:

Arabella left the shelter of her tree to fall in with the cavalcade headed back to the house. Behind them, like magic, the torches were being snuffed, the braziers, extinguished, the tools collected, the stray ends of greenery swept up. Ahead loomed the immense façade of Girdings House, the windows blazing with candles, the grounds illuminated with torches.

Inside, the festivities would continue, probably well into the night, with flirtation and merriment and gratuitous use of mistletoe. It was an inexpressibly wearying thought. Arabella wondered if it would be considered a dereliction of her duty as guest if she just snuck away and went to bed.

"Quite the pile, isn't it?" said a friendly voice.

Arabella looked up to see the man who had been standing with Penelope Deveraux. She couldn't see much of him, as his face was almost entirely buried in an enormous woolen muffler that appeared to have swallowed his chin.

He assumed a parade ground pose, somewhat marred by the chattering of his teeth. "Tommy Fluellen, late of his Majesty's Seventy-Fourth Foot."

He was the first person to have spoken to her all evening.

Arabella accepted the introduction with gratitude. "Arabella Dempsey. Did you misplace your regiment, or did they misplace you?"

He grinned at her, teeth very white in a tanned face. "I sold out. It was an act of mercy, really. Couldn't let old Rob—the Duke of Dovedale, that is—come back here alone." He shivered dramatically. "Of course, had I realized quite how cold it would be back in old Blighty, I might have reconsidered my charitable impulse."

"You were in—"

"India. In Seringapatam, mostly."

The name meant nothing to Arabella, but she nodded intelligently anyway. One could get away with a great deal with an intelligent nod. "A long way away from Norfolk."

Lieutenant Fluellen wagged his head emphatically. "Farther than I could ever have imagined."