

WILDISH

*A Story Concerning
Different Kinds of Love*



ROBERT STEPHEN PARRY

To Ruby

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Also by the same author:

‘The Testament of Sophie Dawes’ 2016

‘The Hours Before’ 2015

‘Elizabeth’ 2014

‘The Arrow Chest’ 2011

‘Virgin and the Crab’ 2009

Cover Illustration includes Westminster viewed to the West on the evening of 27th April 1749

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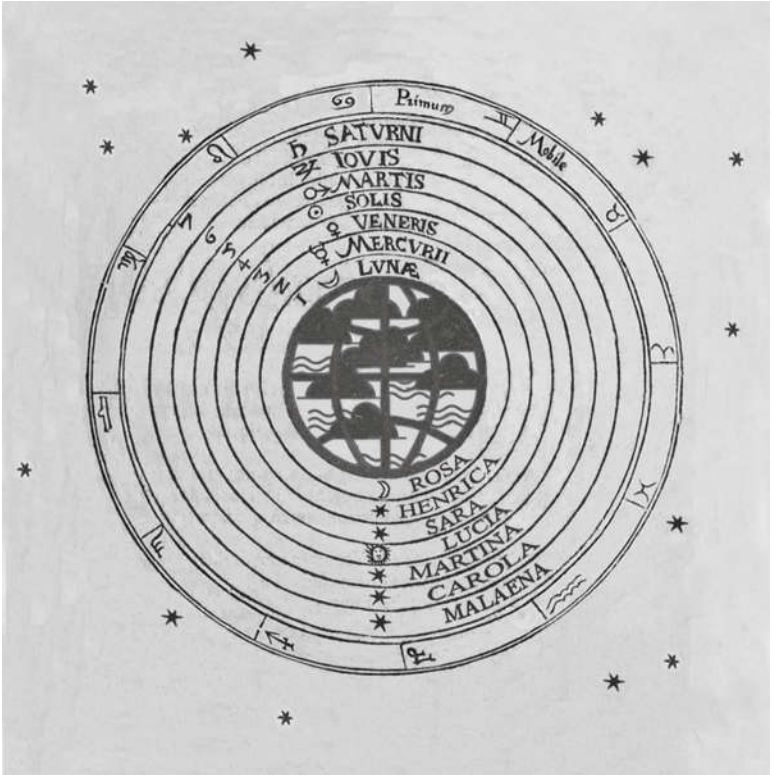
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Maps and Place Names in the story
For printable online versions of the maps, [click here](#)

England & Scotland *Major Place Names Mentioned in the Story*



A Curious Diagram Believed to have Belonged to Matthew Wildish



For printable, online versions of these maps, click [here](#)

MATTHEW WILDISH'S LONDON

1 London Bridge. Built in medieval times, with numerous houses and shops on top.

2 Bankside and Southwark. An area known for its theatres and varied entertainments.

3 St Pauls Cathedral. The famous landmark with its dome and baroque style architecture.

4 The Pig and Whistle - coaching inn. Matthew Wildish's home and work-place.

5 Newgate - one of the old City gates.

6 The Fleet River or Fleet Ditch.

7 Temple Bar. An elaborate arched gateway. One of the ancient boundaries of the city. Demarcation between East-West.

8 Covent Garden. Centre for entertainment - opera, theatre etc. Also a market and major shopping area.

9 Lincoln's Inn Fields. An open park with theatre. Also famed as a duelling ground.

10 Seven Dials or the Rookeries.

Infamous area of deprivation, poverty and criminality.

11 Cockspur Street leading west from Charing Cross. Joins with The Haymarket.

12 Charing Cross. A busy triple junction at the top of Whitehall.

13 St James Square. Top residential area favoured by the aristocracy and *Beu Monde*.

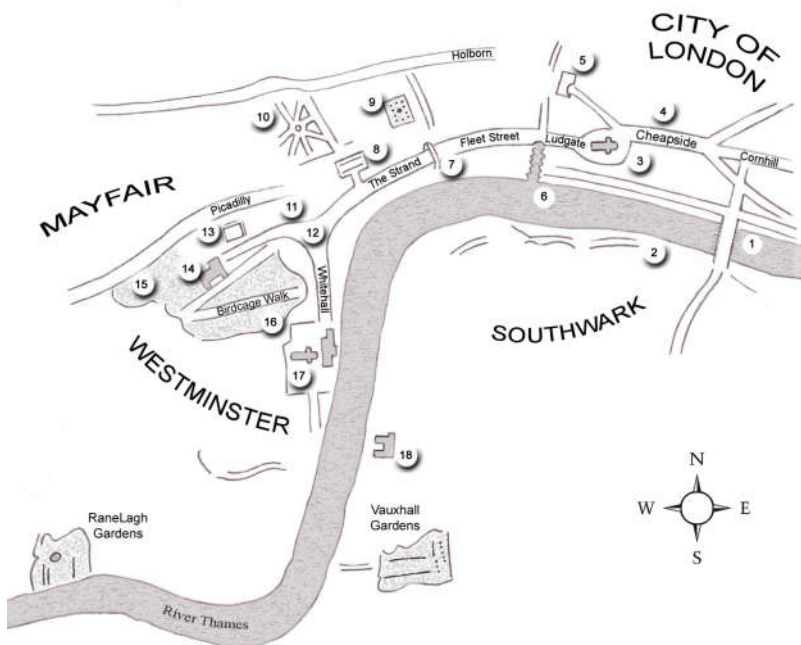
14 St James Palace. Residence of the King.

15 Green Park. Venue for outdoor performances and recreation.

16 St James Park. Public space including long avenues for promenading.

17 Westminster Abbey, Westminster Palace - and Parliament.

18 Lambeth Palace. Residence of the archbishop of Canterbury.



Created half to rise and half to fall,
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all,
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd;
The glory, jest and riddle of the world.

Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man

He had thought about it over coffee at the Rainbow and realised it could not be done. It was outrageous, far too risky and ultimately impossible. But that was hours ago. Thinking about it now, out in the open air as he strides through the streets and down towards the river, the whole idea is already starting to look far more plausible. It *can* be done. Of course it can! It just requires a little planning; a certain degree of courage - and probably not inconsiderable funds - but it can be done. He will ask Sam what he thinks. They are due to meet for supper and to exchange intelligence - their usual routine for a Thursday. And Sam is unshockable, anyway. At least, he hopes, he will be unshockable *this time*.

It is a fine summer's evening, the working day ending, and anybody looking for a good time is already out and about in all their finery - the high and the lowly from every stratum of society all mixed together, some walking, some on horseback, some in carriages, others ensconced within the upholstered splendour of gilded sedan chairs. The air is warm; the river swiftly flowing and thereby not too unpleasant upon the nose, and he has money in his pockets and vigour in his loins. Good to be alive! And so many beautiful women, too. Ah, yes. How he adores them. People grumble, of course; they say he is 'in love with love,' that his head is turned by every pretty face. But what can possibly be wrong with that? Is love not a worthy emotion? From the most base to the most elevated sentiments, is love not the very essence of existence? Of course. And consequently Matthew Wildish, poet, Master Wig Maker and, more discreetly, occasional spy for the Admiralty, his roving eye full of observation, his inner ear full of joyous music and recollections of various jigs and dances from the recital he has just attended in the city, has already allowed himself to fall in love at least half a dozen times on his brief journey along Thames Street down towards the bridge.

And it is here he catches sight of his friend - an unmistakable figure, tall and distinguished in his full-length wig and embroidered coat, his sword harnessed at his side. He is standing at their usual place of rendezvous, a rare stretch of open space between the ramshackle buildings, houses and shops that span the river and where this evening an unusually large crowd has congregated, with people jostling and elbowing one another and, in the midst of it all, a most curious sight. Everyone, including

Sam, has their attention fixed upon it - a man surely - this fabulous being perched upon a balustrade and who, with outstretched arms, like some exotic bird bedecked in feathers, wings and a tail, is clearly about to jump off *and to fly!*

‘Why, Mr Woolveston, a very good evening to you!’ Matthew declares, feigning surprise, as soon as he has fought his way through to where his friend is stationed close to the parapet. ‘And what, I wonder, would a fine fellow such as yourself be doing here?’

‘Searching for an honest man, sir,’ Sam replies in droll fashion, his gaze remaining fixed on the spectacle.

‘And have you found one? What’s this lunatic up to?’

‘No lunatic, sir!’ Sam argues, his bright blue eyes full of laughter now and, with a tug at Matthew’s voluminous coat sleeves, pointing with his cane in the direction of the bird-man. ‘Look - this brave fellow is about to take wing towards the heavens, or so he assures us.’

‘Well, well. Worth waiting for, then - agreed?’

‘*Agreed!*’ Sam responds with a further enthusiastic smile and an almost imperceptible licking of the lips while at the same time using his considerable bulk and physical presence to jostle one or two fellow spectators aside, the better to observe the imminent take off. This is entertainment - at least it is for Sam - as much as a boxing match, a fine wine or a pinch of snuff. For Matthew, however, it is a nuisance - his own plans that he is so anxious to share with his friend being shouldered out of the way by this unexpected distraction. It would all have to wait now, damn it!

‘And may I ask, are you and your good lady well?’ Matthew enquires confining himself instead to a more convivial topic of conversation as they continue to observe the careful preparations of the bird-man, balancing now in a curious crouching fashion on the parapet, almost next to them.

‘Johanna - oh, yes,’ Sam replies brusquely. ‘Asking about you, the other day, she was,’ he adds with a suspicious sideways glance.

‘Oh, really. How very kind,’ Matthew says trying not to appear too gratified.

‘Yes. *And when are we going to ask good Mr Wildish for supper again,*’ Sam continues with increasing petulance, mimicking his wife’s voice as best he can. ‘I mean, what is it with married women and their constant interest in the welfare of bachelors? As if the very existence of anyone brazen enough to escape their clutches becomes a never-ending source of fascination.’

To which Matthew has no opportunity to respond other than to laugh heartily, because the crowd begins to become very animated. Something is definitely about to happen - made all the more dramatic by the setting sun that has cast a brilliant glow over the whole scene - all the red-brick houses on the southern bank of the river, set within their forest of church spires, and even the old rusting pikes at the bridge end, once adorned in times gone by with the heads of traitors - all bathed in a glorious, piercing radiance, as if bestowing a blessing upon the spectacular plumed creature himself as he spreads his wings in readiness. All is silent, a most untypical silence into which only the rushing waters of the river far below can be detected. And then, at last it speaks:

‘Man hereby joins as one with the angels!’ comes the cry from the bird-man as he rises from his squatting position and puffs out his chest. ‘Open forth the windows of the sky, ye Gods! Mark this occasion all who are gathered here and recount it with pride to your grandchildren in times to come. God save the King!’

To which the brave fellow leaps off - his wings flapping with a curious squeaking sound while everyone holds their breath.

Instantly, he begins to descend - possibly even faster than would normally be the case for a man jumping off a bridge - to plunge feet-first into the swirling waters below. The weight of his wings carries him under the flood at first, which is very swift at the piers of the great stone structure, but he emerges shortly afterwards, down-stream on the other side, minus his feathers and tail, and not to cries of adulation from the crowd, sadly, but to howls of cruel derision.

‘Never thought it would work, did you?’ says Sam - master of the understatement as always as he turns and hastens away, losing all interest in the poor wretch fighting for his life in the waters below.

Matthew, not willing to quit the scene quite so soon, tarries until satisfied that the man has at least managed to thrash his way towards the shore - by which time Sam is already through the southern end of the bridge and away, down into the crowded lanes of Southwark, so Matthew has to run to catch him up. It is noisy here, full of the sounds of carts and wagons, the roar of bears and barking dogs from the pits and the cries of hawkers and street traders on every corner, and none too clean underfoot, either with cattle being driven through to market.

‘Our feathered friend will survive, you will be relieved to learn,’ Matthew announces with irony, overtaking his friend - a portly, robust figure of agitation and nervous energy now, his long, affluent wig of meticulously coiffured curls that Matthew

once made for him bouncing and flapping as he goes.

‘Oh, good,’ Sam responds crisply, oblivious of Matthew’s displeasure. Distracted for a moment by the alluring aspect of a young woman on the corner, selling oranges, he is only saved from a collision with a number of cattle by a timely nudge in the ribs from Matthew himself - fortunately a little more alert.

‘The devil take these creatures!’ Sam exclaims, scowling at the enormous presence of a bull as it passes, all frothing at the mouth and with a big brass ring through its nose, its well-stocked neither regions swinging beneath it as it ambles away. ‘We have far too many of these beasts being driven through the streets these days - and at all hours. One even entered the courtyard of the Royal Exchange recently. Can you imagine the pandemonium! Oh, by the way, that reminds me: did I tell you I made over twenty guineas the other day at Garraways. Bought on a dip - East India stock at twelve - and then, in no more time than it took to enjoy a dish of coffee, the jobbers were selling it at almost thirteen. Not bad for an hour’s work, eh!’

And with an extravagant swing of the arm, he dashes the tip of his cane against a stone upon the ground, sending it flying across the cobbles with a spark. Sam could be so boastful at times - so unbecoming of a gentleman. No doubt a similar level of enthusiasm would have attended South Sea stock some years ago, Matthew thinks - until the bubble burst and everyone lost their savings, their property and in some cases their lives in the process. But the stock market, like Sam, has a short memory.

‘Actually, there was someone in Italy who believed in flying,’ Matthew volunteers, still with half his thoughts on the bird-man, ‘only this was with the aid of a mechanical device upon which a man might be seated, as we would normally ride a horse. Ingenious. And, you must admit, if anyone could succeed in such an endeavour it would be worthy of more than a little consideration among your business friends in Exchange Alley.’

‘Nonsense!’ Sam replies, chortling in his typical gruff, sanctimonious fashion. ‘Only a fool would invest in such insanity. Typical of Italy, though, with all their Popery and ridiculous fantasies. If God had meant us to fly, sir, he would have given us wings. But no. Instead, he has given us our mental faculties - our reason. And I for one, am grateful for the distinction.’

Sam is jealous, of course. He has never been overseas, never visited Italy, never so much as considered doing the *Grand Tour* as any self-respecting gentleman should have done by his age.

Another minute of brisk walking brings them to their destination, the entrance to one of their regular meeting places, a

garden tavern - not exactly one of the haunts of the nobility, but adequate enough for their needs, and ideal for listening to the common talk, to gauge the mood of the populace. Mounting the steps into the outdoor area with its modest entertainments of skittles and occasional music, they collect their ale and then, amid the profusion of pergolas and hanging lanterns, benches and wooden pedestals, locate a seat in a relatively secluded area and settle down. This is business they are to discuss now, serious ministerial business. And therefore Matthew realises he is to be frustrated yet again, unable to explain his unique idea to his friend who has already produced a small note-book from his pocket in readiness.

‘So, tell me,’ Sam begins again, his voice now reduced to an untypical whisper after fetching a lamp and setting it down on a nearby barrel, the better to peruse his notes, ‘any interesting commissions lately from Jacobites, ripe for our attentions perhaps?’

Matthew is aware of others in the garden observing them with a blend of curiosity and suspicion - and it always makes him feel nervous, exchanging gossip in a place like this. If only Sam would make the occasional concession to his surroundings in matters of dress. But no. Whereas Matthew would usually choose a simple unembroidered coat and waistcoat for such places, Sam always has to look as if he were going to a banquet at the Guild Hall, with great brass buttons everywhere, all flounces and lace cuffs.

‘Actually, I believe I may have something for you this time,’ Matthew answers quietly. ‘A certain Mr McNiell of Derby, a country gentleman with interests in silk weaving. He approached me at my apartments at The Pig and Whistle some days ago with a commission for a wig, and upon learning that I also excelled in the writing of verse brought forth a miniature of his lady wife, that I might compose some lines of dedication to mark their imminent wedding anniversary.’

‘Really!’ Sam responds with interest. ‘McNiell, you say? How did the conversation go?’

‘Oh, I began in the usual way - the odd remark about the unfortunate state of our kingdom, then by degrees revealing my own sentiments as a disgruntled Tory and Jacobite - adding that in order to practice any profession in London, not to mention being able to vote, hold office or serve on juries, I have had to renounce the faith of my Irish forebears. He warmed to me then, and soon we were discussing the plight of the Stuarts in exile and their possible restoration. I have yet to sound him on whether he reinforces his sentiments in any practical sense, but he was so

delighted with my poem concerning his wife, a charming lady, by the way, whom I also had the pleasure of meeting briefly, that he even suggested I might be entrusted with executing a tribute to one of his race horses at some future time.'

'Praise indeed!' Sam observes. 'Keep this one warm for me, Matt, and we shall see what comes of it. He will visit you again?'

'Yes: the final time next week to pay monies owing on the wig.'

'Excellent. I'll put a watch on this Mr McNiel of yours - that we might observe exactly how he spends his time in the capital.'

'Um, *safely* I trust?' Matthew inquires, fixing Sam with a questioning gaze - not altogether certain whether this additional occupation as part-time informant for His Majesty's Government is at all to his liking any longer. 'They are a decent enough couple, with young children.'

'I say, you haven't gone all soft on us, Matt, have you?' Sam counters, not entirely in jest. 'Remember, we threw all that nonsense out years ago - the Stuarts - the divine right of kings, and all that. We have a nice, obedient kind of monarchy in this country now, imported from Germany - and I for one will do my utmost to keep it that way. A secret vocation, to be sure - but a worthy one.'

'Yes. Only just lately I suspect yours has become rather a sinister one, as well,' Matthew remarks.

'Not at all!' Sam protests, with again eyes only for the pages of his little book, checking various annotations in the margins. 'If a prominent family decides to throw in its lot with the Jacobites, then our good King George has every right to seize their assets - especially if His Majesty is to undertake useful and important projects like furnishing his palaces and making wars on the French. I advise our friends in Whitehall on the most likely fruits for picking, that's all. Anyway, how's your love life lately Matt? Still with that special lady of yours - the one I saw you with last time. What was her name ..?'

'No,' Matthew answers curtly. 'No, we parted. Good claret is my mistress now.'

'Parted - what after so long! Why you must have been together with this one for all of three weeks.'

'Very funny.'

'Being a romantic fool is all very well for a man in his youth,' Sam continues pointing an accusing finger, 'but it is far less becoming with the approach of maturity. It is high time, sir - high time you settled down and embraced the blessed state of matrimony, as I have done,' he concludes and, as always, never ceasing to remind the world of what a fine match he has made in

his own lovely wife Johanna, the daughter of a baronet – thus uniting his fortunes with someone not only of beauty and intelligence but of considerable wealth, also.

But Matthew resists the temptation to indulge his friend any further - for inevitably his thoughts have turned once again to his newest obsession: an idea so exhilarating that he really must share it with someone, and soon - or else he will simply burst.

‘Listen, Sam, I want to tell you how I think a man might fly - and no I’m not referring to mechanical devices, or wings of vellum, or anything you could remotely invest in at Garraways. This is much more interesting. I am speaking of none other than the realm of the mind.’

‘The mind ... um, yes,’ Sam mutters by way of courtesy, inviting Matthew to continue with a flourish of the hand. He has a tendency, when feigning interest to speak in a slow, drawling fashion - the word ‘yes’ emerging from his lips as a long, protracted ‘yerrz’ sound, accompanied with the typical vacant stare of a man who is rarely inspired by anything occurring above the level of the waist.

‘Actually, Sam, you have already uttered something quite intelligent this evening,’ Matthew continues undaunted, ‘namely the Good Lord providing us with the faculty of reason instead of wings, remember?’

‘Yerrz,’ Sam mumbles and lowers his eyes to his notes once again.

‘Well, I agree. But we are also endowed with something every bit the equal. We also have our aspirations, our passions. And it is through these that we might explore realms and dimensions of the intellect far beyond ourselves.’

‘Yerrz ...’

‘And that one should employ for this purpose the very act of love.’

‘*The act of love!*’ Sam echoes and suddenly appears for the first time to be gaining interest.

‘Yes, Sam, exactly. Imagine you are in the arms of a beautiful woman. Tell me: have you not experienced occasion when, at moments of the most passionate and intense embrace, you have, as it were, become lost to yourself, transported to a condition of mind in which neither envy or fear nor worry or greed can ever reach you? Have you not felt liberated from yourself and your cares at such times?’

‘Well ... yes, I suppose so, now you come to mention it,’ Sam replies grudgingly. ‘Brief as such moments are, alas.’

‘Precisely - and brief, always, because we lose all self-control

in the throes of our delights, and then - well, the weapon is discharged, we collapse in a heap and all those wonderful sentiments vanish. Well, consider this as an alternative: that one might engage in that embrace in such a way as to rather prolong the ecstasy, and to do so with far more than just one woman.'

'What, you mean like two-in-a-bed? A night at Fanny Cockburn's in Covent Garden?'

'No, no - I am not speaking of a mere fleeting moment of sordid entertainment, Sam - a couple of women of easy virtue.'

'No?'

'Nor even three.'

'Really?'

'No - nor even four or five.'

'Good God! What *do* you mean, sir?'

'A harem.'

'*A harem!*'

'Yes, Sam, that's right. Oh, I am tired of all these petty romances. I want something different. I want to be inspired and swept up in something grand, something magnificent. A substantial variety of beautiful women, for instance - that should do - and all to be enjoyed within the span of a single day and night, because thereby, by such an uncommon intensity of experience, a man would surely be transported to the heavens themselves!'

Sam takes a long deliberate draught of his ale and wipes his lips on the back of his hand before signalling to a server to replenish their drinks, placing the empty jug down upon the barrel with a slow, deliberate and emphatic thud.

'I see,' he says.

'You understand, then?'

'Oh yes, perfectly,' Sam replies. 'Though you do appreciate, of course, that you are utterly and completely barking mad?'

'Mad - what do you mean?' Matthew protests.

'May I remind you, sir, this is England we are living in: not some exotic Eastern seraglio. And anyway, presuming you could ever locate so many women and persuade them to oblige you all at once (unlikely enough, if I may say so), you would simply not be able to rise to the occasion with sufficient frequency. I mean could any man! You would be exhausted after the first hour.'

'No, Sam. My intention is that the whole thing be conducted without once surrendering to that fault so common in men of our age and disposition of losing one's seed. You know - *popping the cork?*'

'What!' Sam exclaims with a look of utter astonishment. 'Why,

this is sounding more and more preposterous by the minute.'

'No listen Sam, believe me, there is a precedent for this. I have heard of it upon my travels. Consider, for example, the exotic East, the Emperor and his concubines; the Sultan and his harem. They say that the arts of love cultivated in such places far outstrip anything any of us can ever aspire to here in the seedy underworld of vice we are so familiar with in the West. Why, they even say there is a science to the coupling, too, which the Sultan controls to such a pitch of perfection that he and his concubines are removed to realms of delight that for us are not only stranger than we imagine, but possibly stranger than we are *able* to imagine.'

'It certainly is stranger than *I* can imagine!' Sam remarks, taking up his ale again.

'So you won't help me?'

'Help you!' Sam exclaims, now utterly exasperated. 'Why in the name of Beelzebub should I help you! If you intend to make a complete arse of yourself, sir, that is entirely your business. And anyway, where do you expect all this might take place - this orgy of yours? Consider the practicalities. They would all be arguing and giggling among themselves. The noise would be intolerable. And unless, heaven forbid, you are considering having recourse to street girls, which I strongly advise against if you wish to preserve your health, you would simply not find enough eligible women to choose from - none that are not already married, affianced or spoken for in some way. What you are suggesting, sir, is little more than some ridiculous, juvenile fantasy. Why, a man jumping off a bridge with wings strapped to his back is beginning to look quite sober in comparison to some of your ideas.'

Matthew turns away in frustration. How very disappointing. Of course, he could argue further with his friend, explain that the intention was never to enjoy all the women together in the same place; that they would be separate experiences, ranged over a span of several hours, an entire day even. But it is of no use. Apart from his skills as a musician, which are considerable, Sam is as unimaginative and earth-bound as his boots. In silence, therefore, both men sup at their ale once more - until Matthew notices, standing in conversation beneath a nearby pergola, none other than a former sweetheart of his, Rose. Yes - the delectable, buxom, fair-haired Rose Tidey - a fine young woman who could definitely be considered as a candidate for his amorous project. What's more, the fates have clearly conspired to aid him this evening, because in her company is another young lady - in many ways even more comely - and both, moreover, are glancing his way, as if speaking about him. The call to action.

‘Will you excuse me Sam,’ he announces. ‘I have resolved forthwith to demonstrate your woeful underestimation of my capabilities in this matter. Observe!’
‘Observe what?’ Sam demands - but Matthew has already got to his feet.

End of Sample