

# Easter At Netherfield: Darcy's Dice With Fate

by

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*Easter At Netherfield* is a second sequel to *Pride & Prejudice*. It is set in 1799 approximately 5 months after Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage. By now, Elizabeth is three to four months' pregnant.

Over Easter of 1799, Elizabeth, Darcy and Georgiana are visiting Netherfield for a number of weeks together with the Bennets, Gardiners, Philipses and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Colonel Fitzwilliam is accompanied by Lieutenant Colonel Harvey who became betrothed to Kitty over Christmas. Colonel Fitzwilliam fell in love over Christmas with Elizabeth's Derbyshire friend, Harriet Layham, and she is also now spending Easter at Netherfield.

In this extract from Chapter 9, Elizabeth is thinking over the events of the previous day when Caroline Bingley unexpectedly arrived at Netherfield accompanied by Lord Morley and by Lydia Wickham. Lydia was for the time being living in London with Wickham's commanding officer's wife while Wickham had been posted to Ireland. Darcy was away for the day, visiting a paper mill at Apsley. Darcy has been out of sorts since he and Bingley made a trip to London, Darcy in connection with his London house, and Bingley to explore the sale of Netherfield. Darcy left London a day early and has so far failed to tell Elizabeth what is troubling him.

Morley is known to Darcy and Bingley having been at Cambridge with them. Elizabeth has him marked out as a man who would toy with women with no serious intent. A rake, a dissolute person. Lydia had wanted to play Blind Man's Buff and Sardines and Morley had been chasing Lydia about the house. Elizabeth worried at Lydia's behaviour. If her present benefactor, the commanding officer's wife, abandoned her, where would she go? Dreading what would become of Lydia if Wickham divorced her, Elizabeth sought an opportunity to speak to Lydia.

## Extract from Chapter 9

The Previous Day — Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> March 1799

LYDIA gazed hungrily about her as she and Elizabeth climbed the broad staircase and gained Elizabeth and Darcy's suite of rooms. She had been to Netherfield House twice before, once when Jane was ill and confined to bed and the second time during the ball which she herself, during her first visit to Netherfield, had encouraged Bingley to hold. However, on those occasions the year before last, she had seen but a small part of the house.

Now she feasted her eyes on the wide decorative staircase as they ascended to the first floor, the large proportions of the rooms, the high ceilings and chandeliers, the elaborate plaster mouldings, the paintings and rich hangings, the wall-coverings and furniture and the busts and statues. She caught Elizabeth watching her.

“I suppose,” she said, almost sneered, “that Pemberley is even grander than this; ten times I suspicion.”

“It is in truth a lovely house and beautifully situated, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills.”

Elizabeth, almost dreamlike, recalled her first sight of Pemberley.

“In front is a stream, no doubt widened into a more imposing watercourse, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks are neither formal nor falsely adorned. I have never seen a place for which nature has done more, or where natural beauty has been so little counteracted by an awkward taste.”

Recalling the present, she smiled kindly on her sister, but her warmth was not returned.

“How very pretty.” Lydia’s own expression was scathing. “I suppose he, Darcy, gives you everything you want. So I have heard.”

From whom, Elizabeth wondered, Caroline perhaps? But she would not dignify the comment with a direct response.

“He is a good and kind husband, indeed. But come, make use of the brushes, creams and powders. And the rosewater and the scents. I will help you dress your hair. Or send for a maid to attend you.”

“The grand mistress stoops to provide succour to the fallen sister.”

Elizabeth turned away to hide her astonishment at the bitterness in Lydia’s voice.

“Lydia,” she said, looking out of the window as the grounds became enveloped in the growing gloom, “I am neither grand nor the mistress of this house. And you, I hope, are not fallen.”

She gathered herself and faced her sister.

“If you are unhappy with your lot, then I would remind you that no one forced you to run off with Wickham. I would suggest that now it is done, that you strive to make the best of it. He will be returned from his tour of duty in Ireland in due course, and it is to be hoped that his next posting will enable you and he to stay together. Young as you were when you married Wickham, you must have known that the life would not be settled.”

These truisms did not appear to placate Lydia. She peered down at her feet with a scowl on her face.

“My dear,” continued Elizabeth, moving closer to her sister, “do make haste to dress your hair and neatening your garments. Your antics today, rushing around the house, have caused you to be in some disarray. You are a pretty girl, but you should not appear in public with your hair and garments in disorder. It is not seemly.”

To Elizabeth’s surprise, Lydia pushed her away with some force. Lydia, she knew, had consumed a quantity of wine, including port wine and sherry. Elizabeth realised that she was the worse for it and worried all the more for her sister’s well-being. She drew back.

“Lydia, please do not. I implore you to desist from whatever liaison you are conducting with Lord Morley. I fear he does not hold you in high regard and merely toys with you for his own enjoyment and entertainment. He knows you are a married woman and that any consequences are unlikely to fall on him. By contrast though, if Wickham were to find out about your...friendship with Lord Morley and objected, and if he was minded to break the bonds of matrimony, he may attempt to divorce you. You would then be left with nothing. How would you then fare?”

Lydia pushed past her, her hair still in disarray and her clothes in some disorder.

“You will not lecture me, Lizzy. I will not submit to your censure.”

And with that Lydia left the room.

IN THE grand hall as the guests said their farewells and prepared to leave, Lydia looked neater than earlier, though unhappy, and Elizabeth assumed that she had gone to Jane. She would speak to Jane later, or tomorrow.

As Bingley was talking to his sister and Lydia hung by Jane, Elizabeth found herself beside Lord Morley who appeared to be still in excellent spirits. Elizabeth judged that it would be worth an attempt on her part to persuade him to leave Lydia alone.

Accordingly, she said: "Lord Morley, I fear my youngest sister does not benefit from your attentions. Indeed you could cause her great harm. Would it not be kinder to leave her be? She is adequately accommodated for now in London, and may enjoy London society without a...gentleman friend to cause tongues to wag. Her husband will no doubt soon return from his tour of duty in Ireland and she can resume her former life with him. Why would you wish to disrupt that most desirable outcome?"

Morley sighed. He brushed his rather long, straight, dark brown hair off his face and fixed Elizabeth with a cynical eye.

"Mrs Darcy," he said with his head on one side, "I fear you mistake me for a man who gives a fig for bourgeois morals."

"You need harbour no fears on my account, Lord Morley, but perhaps you should entertain some fear that Wickham may return unexpectedly and call you out for your conduct towards Lydia. I hazard that he must be a skilled swordsman and handy with a pistol. Or even," she laughed, "a man to be reckoned with in a bare-fist fight."

"From all I hear of George Wickham, Mrs Darcy, he is at far greater risk than I of being forced to throw down the gauntlet, in his case before any number of possible parties whom he may have offended."

This was probably nearer the truth and Elizabeth returned to her previous plea.

"Surely, at least you have some compassion, Lord Morley, for my sister's situation, her reputation. I suspicion that your friend Caroline Bingley would not approve of your behaviour, whatever her opinion may be of my sister."

"Caroline Bingley cannot afford to spurn such a friend as I. Caroline Bingley needs friends."

Elizabeth snorted a short laugh.

"I cannot discern your meaning, Lord Morley. Caroline has many friends. She has survived quite well, I surmise, before your arrival in London."

"You think so? And are *you* her friend, Mrs Darcy?"

"My relationship with Caroline Bingley is irrelevant. She does not need *me* to smooth her social path."

"I beg to differ. I believe that a friend such as you would be of great value to Caroline Bingley just now."

Elizabeth laughed. "What you say is preposterous. I am not afraid to tell you that she has never liked me or my family, and we in turn have been...injured in the past by her ill-bred remarks."

He nodded as though in agreement. Yet his next words greatly surprised Elizabeth and she had to suppress her astonishment.

"Caroline is as yet unmarried with no ready prospects of any offer for her hand. She has no appreciable fortune and is largely at the mercy of her brother to provide for her in her spinsterhood. A brother who refused to allow her to stay at Netherfield this Easter, leaving her to find such shelter as she may over the Easter festivities."

No fortune! This had not been the impression given when Netherfield had first been taken in the autumn of 1797. The fortunes of most of the Netherfield party had become common knowledge within a short time of their entering the first assembly they had attended. Of Caroline Bingley, it had been said that she had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, but that

she was in the habit of spending more than she ought and of associating with people of rank. The same was said of her sister Mrs Hurst. Both women dressed exceedingly elegantly and never seemed to wear the same gown twice.

Perhaps Caroline Bingley had squandered much of her inheritance and grown increasingly dependent on her brother as a result. Yet, whether that was the case or not, she would no doubt have assumed that her right to spend such of her time as she chose in her brother's home was unassailable, regardless of her circumstances. For him to have rejected her, if it was true, was so strange.

To cover her consternation, Elizabeth looked towards Jane and Lydia. Jane had a resigned look on her face, and Lydia smirked unpleasantly at Elizabeth who turned away.

Morley continued, regarding Elizabeth with a sardonic eye. "I see that the irreproachable Fitzwilliam Darcy has not provided his wife with this intelligence, as surely he must know that Charles Bingley harshly turned his sister away this Easter. She has made the best of it, with some story about Netherfield House being re-decorated. But I see no workmen about the place and it is clear to me that Bingley did not want her here."

Elizabeth summoned up a bland expression and she purposely avoided glancing over towards Bingley and Caroline, much as she wished to do so after Morley's disclosure, to attempt to detect whether their discourse might be tinged with any acrimony or urgency.

Some reply was called for. She would not give this troublesome man the satisfaction of assuming that he may have discovered any mendacity towards her on Darcy's part. She gave a gentle laugh.

"Lord Morley, you have a lively imagination. You are free, of course, to make your own interpretation of events, but not all is always as it may seem to you."

If challenged, she had no idea in fact how she would justify such sentiments but Morley merely smiled pleasantly enough in acknowledgement and bowed to Elizabeth.

"I am very glad to have made your acquaintance today, Mrs Darcy, but must take my leave of you. I believe the carriage awaits."

Elizabeth watched Morley's tall, thin figure as he strode away across the hall, gathering up Caroline and Lydia as he went.

More farewells followed and then, mercifully, the visitors had departed. Elizabeth raised her eyebrows at Jane who came to her and took her arm, guiding her towards the small parlour which Jane had made her own since coming to live at Netherfield. It would be a relief to be able to share her thoughts with her calm and sensible older sister.