

# Georgiana Darcy's London Season & Caroline Bingley's *Coup de Foudre*

The Elizabeth Bennet Series Book 4

by

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The family gathering at Netherfield over the Easter of 1799 has finished and all is well. Everything can return to normal. Except that Caroline Bingley has offered to sponsor Georgiana Darcy's London Season. So the two set off from Netherfield full of hopes and plans. A round of parties, balls, trips to the theatre and more are promised.

An interesting few months follow.

At the end of April 1799, Lydia Wickham is sent off to York to stay with Fanny Roberts, a rich widow and Caroline's good friend, as arranged by Caroline, due to Lydia's wild behaviour in London after her husband, Lieutenant George Wickham, was posted to Ireland. The handsome Netherfield footman, George Arden, accompanies the post-chaise to escort Lydia. This extract takes place on the third day of the journey after leaving London.

## Chapter 7

Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1799

THE post-chaise carrying Lydia had not yet reached York. Mrs Wickham was proving to be a very difficult passenger, insisting on stopping for at least an hour in the middle of the day to dine, sometime longer. She was late coming down in the mornings and then yesterday, had called for the carriage to stop at six o'clock in the evening and today was the same. By George's reckoning, they should have arrived at York yesterday evening at the latest. Indeed, the journey by stagecoach sometimes took a mere two days or less. But they were still only at Doncaster with about another thirty-five miles to go, therefore he arranged stabling for the horses, and beds and dinner for the night at the Red Lion for himself, the postilion and Mrs Wickham.

At least, George thought, I will get a good night's sleep and, after eating his dinner in the kitchen, gratefully lay down on the cot allocated to him in the male servants' room at the back of the inn. The postilion was playing cards in the taproom, whence a great deal of loud ribaldry was easily audible as was the noise of the comings and goings in the yard at the rear, including carriages still arriving and horses being stabled. The cot smelled of its last ten occupants, the room reeked of stale ale. The only other person in the room snored handsomely. None of it worried George and he soon fell into a deep slumber.

How long he had been asleep or what the time was he did not know when a hand grasped his shoulder and shook him roughly. He assumed it was morning and struggled to raise himself. He yawned. The room was dark so it must be night-time still. The dawn came up at

about five o'clock at this time of year.

And the inn was still noisy, plenty of people up and about, drinking and making merry.

"What is it?" he said, screwing up his eyes to see who had disturbed him. From the size of the person, it must be the boy whom he'd seen about the place earlier performing sundry tasks; cleaning, sweeping, fetching, carrying.

"Mrs Wickham is asking for you, Mr Arden." This wasn't unexpected. He was surprised, indeed, that it hadn't happened before this evening. He had been considering since Tuesday how to deflect such an invitation, how he could somehow frighten her into giving up on such demands as she may have of him.

"Why? For what reason?" he said, knowing that no rational explanation would be forthcoming, but it was worth asking.

He could just detect that the dark figure above him was shrugging.

"Very well," he said, but the boy still hovered. Either he was hoping for a tip or dare not go until he could be sure that George was on his way to the lady's chamber or else he might be thrashed for not delivering the message.

"You can leave now. I am going." He hoisted himself off the bed, ran his hands through his hair and patted down his clothing. This seemed to satisfy the boy who ran out. The snoring of the other man in the room had not faltered as George pulled on his shoes and left the sleeping quarters.

MRS WICKHAM was lounging on her bed wearing some sort of flimsy garment when George knocked and put his head round the door to her call to enter. The poor candlelight flickered, almost spent, and the embers in the grate cast a faint orange glow round the bed chamber.

"Well, come in, won't you?" she said softly.

"How may I assist you, Mrs Wickham?" George asked, most of him outside on the landing, which is how he stayed.

"I cannot speak to you while you are out on the landing," she said. "Would you come in, please."

The tone of her voice ordered him to do so.

"It would not be proper, Mrs Wickham," he told her.

"Oh, balderdash."

This was not very ladylike, though he spied a bottle on the floor next to her bed.

"May I get something for you, Mrs Wickham?"

She laughed. "Well, yes, as you mention it. Come to the side of my bed and I will explain. And please shut the door."

"Mrs Wickham, it is very late and we have a very early start tomorrow, that we may arrive at the home of Mrs Roberts at a reasonable hour. If it is your wish, I will bring you another bottle of wine." He assumed it was wine she had been drinking and his eyes strayed to the bottle by her bed.

Mrs Wickham appeared to be considering this.

"Very well. Would you please do so. But it is port."

"Yes, ma'am."

He sighed, hurrying off down the stairs. She had set a trap, one which, fool that he was, he himself had suggested, and which he had fallen into. On his return, he would have to go into the room and hand the bottle to her or place it on the table near her bed.

Within no time, he was back at her door, knocking and opening it to her call but this time stalking into the room, holding the bottle before him and placing it on the table. He bowed, noting in the few seconds before he turned to leave that she was in the bed, under the coverlet with only her head and neck showing, her dark hair loose, spread over the white pillow.

As he turned, he caught movement from the corner of his eye and involuntarily he stopped. Mrs Wickham had thrown the covers aside and was lying there completely naked with her legs apart. She was a shapely woman, he could not deny, but he was quite repelled by the sight. Misinterpreting his open-mouthed stare, she said:

“You clearly like what you see, George.” Without warning, her hand shot out and she grasped his coat, attempting to pull him nearer to the bed. The move took him by surprise and he almost overbalanced, nearly falling on top of her. Bent over, he pushed hard against the bed and his coat slipped from her fingers. He backed towards the wall.

“George,” she said furiously, “if you do not get into the bed with me and pleasure me, I will scream and say that you have tried to rape me. The door is still open. Everyone will hear.”

“You will not be believed.”

“You think not?” She drew a deep breath and opened her mouth.

“Mrs Wickham,” he hissed, “if you pursue this course then I will make sure that Mrs Roberts knows that you are after her fortune.”

She smiled coldly, then laughed rather cruelly at this. “You give yourself airs. Mrs Roberts will not give you audience.”

“Perhaps not, but I will spread the notion amongst her servants and it will be bound to reach the ears of her lady’s maid who will tell her.”

“I am in no way related to Mrs Roberts. I have never met her. What, pray, causes you to think that she would hand any of her fortune to me? How do you come by such a lie?”

“I could not help overhearing your conversation with Miss Bingley before I came into the upstairs drawing room on Tuesday to fetch your portmanteau.”

“As I say, it is a lie. You must have misheard. And you should not eavesdrop. I will write to my sister Mrs Bingley and tell her what you are about and she will have you dismissed from Mr Bingley’s service.”

“I was not eavesdropping. I had to stop to re-tie my stock. While I was doing so, I heard Miss Bingley say to you quite clearly that if Mrs Roberts takes a great fancy to you, she may wish to make you her heir.”

“And did you hear me agree with Miss Bingley?”

“I heard you thank her. She also mentioned your husband as a possible accomplice in the scheme. If any of this should reach the ears of Mrs Roberts, I suspicion that it would not advance your cause.”

“There is nothing in what you say.” Her face was contorted in anger, her mouth stretched so that he could see a couple of places where teeth were missing. In a few years, her looks would wither and die and she would prematurely become an ugly old hag. She started to roughly pull the coverlet over her legs and body. “But I do not like your tone at all and your cold stare causes me to doubt your capacity to pleasure any woman. I no longer require you to couple with me and would thank you to remove yourself from this room at once.”

“I am more than happy to oblige,” he said. He found her quite disgusting, an aberration of a woman. As he bowed and left, he decided to pass by the taproom and take a tot of rum to help him sleep.

LEFT TO herself, Lydia groaned with frustration. George was as attractive a young man as she had ever encountered. Quite why he was so proper was mystifying. She tried, she really did try not to become embittered and hard. But it was proving more and more difficult. Always lively and frivolous, she covered her unhappiness at first with displays of exuberance, silly chatter, high-spirited flirting and extravagant wildness. None of it provided the least satisfaction.

The hard truth that had gradually penetrated her natural optimism and could no longer be

ignored was that her husband did not love her, indeed thought little of her, thought her a foolish toy and, increasingly, an encumbrance to be endured. And this state of affairs would persist for the rest of her still young life. Since she loved him from the bottom of her heart, she had watched him carefully for signs that such overwhelming love was returned. Surely if the love was not present immediately on the part of a husband, an attentive, pretty, young wife and the bonds of holy matrimony must in time bring forth a spring of reflected devotion and passion, turning, she hoped into a river, then a sea and then an ocean of enduring devotion.

But she was wrong.

The trouble was that Wickham was not a cruel man. In most situations he aimed to please. He was affectionate and gave the appearance of being caring. Had she not loved him so much, his superficial attentions might have sufficed. His eyes roving over her head to other amusements, men with whom to discourse or women with whom to flirt and more, would not have mattered. Had she merely been fond of him and been able to otherwise sustain herself with lively company, reading, drawing, playing the pianoforte, other ladylike pursuits, children yet to be born, she might have lived her life happily enough in the shallow rock pools of his cursory regard for her, studiously ignoring his obvious indifference.

It was clear to her that when Wickham was suddenly ordered to go to Ireland, his major sentiment was relief that the posting would remove him from his wife's proximity for the immediate future. It was then and only then that she had sought succour from such rejection in the arms of other men. Though it brought little real happiness, it did bring a temporary respite from the misery deep within her that would never be quelled until her husband wanted and needed her as much as she wanted and needed him.

As was often the case, she ended the day in sadness, weeping resentful tears at George Arden's coldness towards her. He could have rejected her with less of a show of cruelty. She might then have determined not to carry out her threat to report his eavesdropping to her sister Jane. But he had roundly humiliated her. Why should she have any sympathy towards him?

HAD George Arden seen Mrs Wickham's tears, his attitude towards her might have softened slightly, but he would never have acceded to her demands to lie with her. Since the age of twelve or thirteen, he had received more than enough similar such invitations and been the object of so many unwanted attentions that most women's overtures now simply acted as an irritant at best and hideously repulsive at worst. The woman who eventually snared him, if any could, would have to have a naturally modest demeanour and an engagingly agreeable manner. A pretty face would be helpful; beautiful would be better.

