

Lydia Wickham's Northern Peril: Darcy and Wickham's Rapprochement?

The Elizabeth Bennet Series Book 5

by

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When Jane Bingley receives a letter from York telling her that her sister Lydia is in prison charged with forging the will of Fanny Roberts, a rich society widow, she is devastated. In the eighteenth century forgery carried the death penalty. Charles Bingley and Mr Davers, Caroline's new husband, waste no time dashing off to the North of England to save Lydia.

Naturally, Darcy's assistance is regarded as crucial but Darcy and Elizabeth are still returning from the Moorhouse Abbey party in Cambridgeshire, also attended by Georgiana, Caroline and Mr Davers. They are partaking of a miniature tour of some notable towns en route therefore their exact whereabouts is not known.

This extract takes place on the fourth day after they leave Moorhouse.

Chapter 4

Wednesday 10th July 1799

DARCY peered out of the window at Westgate Street below as Lizzy, still in their bed chamber, readied herself to go out. The town was very lively as they had been fortunate to arrive yesterday during the St Peter's Fair taking place in nearby Market Square which lasted two days; fortunate, too, to have secured a fine suite of rooms for the intended duration of their stay. Today was the second day of the fair and the street was crowded with people, animals, goods of every kind and all descriptions of vehicles vying for space. The fair took place only once a year, therefore merchants, tradesmen, artisans, shopkeepers and farmers were taking the opportunity to sell all the wares they possibly could.

Darcy smiled at the sight of two men. A fight had broken out between them, apparently over a wheel having fallen off a wagon carrying barrels containing presumably some kind of liquor.

They had so far enjoyed their tour of the towns along the Great North Road since leaving Moorhouse Abbey on Saturday. They had cut off at the great milestone at Alconbury Hill to take the Old North Road to Peterborough, and looked forward to another two days at least in the town, casting their eyes today over the goods displayed on the stalls and in the more elaborate booths. The town was not the most wealthy, but improvements were taking place. Oil lamps lit the streets at night and the town boasted a theatre. There were sedan chairs for hire and, of course, the fine medieval cathedral to visit and marvel at. Moreover, it was a convenient place to break their journey.

A smartly-clad man on horseback cast his eyes over the crowded street, then turned and wove his way through the throng towards The Bull Hotel, disappearing under the archway to the rear of the building. He stood out from the majority of folks clearly intent on going about their commercial business. Darcy could not see the man's face properly, but his appearance, tidily though not richly dressed as were the wealthy merchants visiting the town, led Darcy to fleetingly judge the man to be a footman or similar, possibly a secretary. Certainly, in any case, a house servant of some category. Darcy immediately forgot about him as he mused on the diversions of the fair.

Colour was everywhere. Banners were strung above the streets and flags hung from windows. The fair had been held for several centuries and the town was well prepared for it. Skilled jugglers and tumblers held the eye with their tricks and contortions. Even the small vendors plying pies and sweetmeats, gaudy trinkets, adornments, frills and trimmings from trays on tapes or ropes strung round their necks and balanced on their bellies added to the festive spirit. The paraphernalia of the fair put Darcy distinctly in mind of the July Stakes at Newmarket which they had attended while at Moorhouse.

He suddenly felt slim arms around his midriff and smiled as shapely hands ranged up and down over the front of his waistcoat. He caught one of the hands and raised it to his lips as its owner moved to his right and joined him in his regard of the scene outside.

"I hope," Lizzy said, "that we can visit the cathedral again today. The stonework is stunning. The stone columns that spread out from the top, quite like fans, are amazing. I cannot imagine how anyone could have built such structures. It seems almost miraculous."

"Indeed, such incredible work puts my efforts at mill-building distinctly in the shade."

"I know it was not the best time for us to be away and that you are itching to proceed with the necessary work at home."

"You are right. I am keenly anticipating a full summer of planning and of course learning more about the paper-making business on our return to Pemberley. At least the purchase of Ratcliffe's mill was able to be concluded before we left for Moorhouse. His proposal to me was a Godsend."

"Well, I do think that Georgiana benefitted from our being at Moorhouse. She needed our advice. Caroline had looked after her very well, but when it comes to serious marriage prospects, I feel that no one could be better than her family to provide the proper guidance."

"That is true, although," he put his arm around her waist and smiled down at her, "you and I managed quite well on our own."

Elizabeth laughed softly at the memory. "Of course, I had no fortune to cloud the waters and render you a less than worthy suitor." Her laughter deepened. "Indeed, a match with me and my inferior connections could hardly be rejoiced at."

"Lizzy! How could you? You know how bitterly I regret my words at Rosings and—"

Elizabeth put her hand gently over his mouth.

"I am sorry, my love. I should not tease you."

They stood for a time with their heads together.

"Anyway," Elizabeth said at length, "with Georgiana, it was a different case."

"Quite. A woman's fortune can be as much of a hindrance as a blessing."

"I do wonder what Georgiana has in mind with her lack of interest in material things, as she said. I hope that when she comes into her inheritance, that she does not give it *all* away to some charitable cause."

"Better, then, in some ways to get her suitably married off swiftly." He sighed and squeezed her waist. "I jest, of course."

At which there came a knock on the door. They both turned.

"Come in," Darcy called and the door opened to reveal the innkeeper.

"This came for you, sir, ma'am, delivered by a Mr Lambert. He says he is from Netherfield in Hertfordshire and waits downstairs for any reply."

"Thank you. Tell him I will be down directly."

As the door closed, Darcy shrugged and they both looked down at the letter.

"'Tis from Jane, I am sure," said Elizabeth. "Matthew Lambert is one of her footmen, I recall."

IN FACT, it was a full half an hour before Darcy left their sitting room. He let Elizabeth read the letter first. They walked to the gateleg table and sat down. Elizabeth pulled the seal apart and unfolded the paper. He watched her as she related the contents to him as she read through the letter herself.

"It is from Jane, as I thought. She says to begin with that she hopes that Matthew will be able to find us swiftly." Elizabeth raised her eyes to Darcy's face. "It is very urgent, she writes, that you travel at once to York to join Charles and Mr Davers there. Upon my word, what can be the matter?"

At this point, Elizabeth ceased to read aloud and Darcy was left to frown as Elizabeth grew increasingly agitated. It was only a short missive and within less than a minute Elizabeth had slapped the paper down on the table. She sat wide-eyed and open-mouthed at first, then put her other hand to her mouth as tears welled in her eyes and ran down her cheeks and she began to sob.

"Lizzy!" he exclaimed, drawing his chair close to hers and placing his hand on her arm. He prised the letter from beneath her hand and read it through himself.

"Good God!" he said. "If this is not some prank as Jane herself suggests it might be, then this is terrible."

He wondered if Lizzy would realise quite how terrible it was. As a magistrate, he knew full well that forgery was a capital offence punishable by hanging. Dare he say so to Lizzy? Yes, indeed, he must journey to York to add his own efforts to those of Bingley and Davers in the cause of somehow rescuing Lydia from this disaster. Silly as Lydia was, he very much doubted that she could be guilty of the crime of which she had been accused. Such a crime would surely take some considerable care, as well as stealth and planning. He judged Lydia to be a girl who acted always on impulse with no thought for the future.

He swallowed, wondering quite what to say to Lizzy, but first he must comfort her, and then after she had calmed somewhat, they could decide what to do.

"It will be all right," he said soothingly as he rocked her in his arms. "It will be all right."

It seemed as though his words were having their desired effect at first. Then Lizzy pulled away from him and cried, through her tears:

"All right? How will it be all right? She will be hanged! It is true. I read the newspapers, you know."

His mouth drew a thin line at her words. There was clearly no possibility of softening the situation for her benefit. "I must therefore go with all speed to York and assist Bingley and Davers to have the charge overturned or otherwise defeated." He leapt from his chair. "I must hire a post-chaise. I will go down now and ask Lambert to make enquiries. And I will find Chadwick and speak to him. Will you be all right if I leave you for fifteen minutes or so while I away to make these enquiries?"

Unexpectedly, Lizzy also stood and quickly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I must come with you to York."

"Lizzy, no. The journey will be uncomfortable, possibly fraught with danger, travelling through the night, little sleep to be had and—"

"What would be the quickest way to get there?"

Her collected tone surprised him. She suddenly seemed to have herself completely under control.

"I don't know. The post-coach I believe does not run through Peterborough. Possibly the nearest point at which it could be caught would be Alconbury Hill, but that may not be until late tonight or tomorrow at some time. As to the stagecoach, they generally stop overnight. It would take several days."

"Well, we have a carriage. We could leave now and travel without stopping except for the horses to be changed."

"Yes but, Lizzy, you cannot understand how difficult it would be. It would take at least twenty-four hours. And those driving the carriage would have to sleep. You must travel back to Pemberley in the carriage and I will hire a post chaise to take me to York."

"No. I have to come to York with you. There would be four of us. I believe that both the coachmen have weapons. You could take a turn at driving the carriage, and I also. And those not driving could sleep in the carriage."

He came towards her in great alarm. "Lizzy, no, no. I cannot agree to you driving a large carriage, especially in your present condition. I utterly forbid it. It is impossible. Since Peggy is travelling separately straight back to Pemberley, you wouldn't have her in York and you would need a lady's maid."

"Then I will hire one in York." Elizabeth lightly stamped her foot, her expression desperate. She clenched her fists. "William, I can live without a lady's maid. Let that be the least of our concerns. I must come with you. She is my sister. My little sister. I have to be there. And be with you. I cannot abide this situation without you by my side."

Tears sprang to her eyes again.

"All right, all right," he said, nodding and taking her hand. "Let us sit and consider this."

They talked for another ten minutes. Darcy took up a quill and a piece of the hotel's paper and made some calculations.

"Well," he said, "taking into account rest stops and some meal stops, we may be able to reach York by some time tomorrow afternoon. I think it would be wise to take another man with us. Rather than hiring a stranger, I could ask Lambert and you could perhaps write a short letter to be posted to Jane apprising her of our actions."

"Oh yes. I would not wish to share the carriage overnight with a stranger. The coachmen we know would be bad enough, especially if you were outside driving."

"Of course, that is so. Lizzy, are you sure about this?"

"Quite sure. I think I told you that last year after I had received Jane's letter with the news of Lydia's elopement with Wickham, Aunt and Uncle Gardiner and I hurriedly left the inn at Lambton and travelled in their carriage overnight to Longbourn. You had come upon me at the inn and I apprised you of that terrible news. We left within an hour and had to sleep on the road. It was uncomfortable, but it had to be borne."

"Yes, again it was Lydia." He sighed and nodded. "Then I had better away and inform Chadwick and Elliot. Warn them, indeed. Neither of them drink to excess to my knowledge but they have been expecting not to have to take to the road again until Friday probably at the earliest. It would not be surprising if they had decided to spend their day sampling the local taverns. I do not know about Lambert, but if he is the horseman I saw outside on the street a little earlier, then he looked eminently sober to me."

"And I will speak to the hotel and order a hamper of food and small ale for the journey."