

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

The Elizabeth Bennet Series Book 5

by

GILL MATHER

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.

They enlist the assistance of Darcy and Lizzy who also drop everything and travel overnight to York with all possible speed. The four of them set about making enquiries and chasing down the witnesses to the will. Against them stands Nicholas Parrish, a vicious criminal from Newcastle who will stop at nothing to realise his ends and inherit Fanny's estate himself.

This extract takes place the day after Darcy and Lizzy arrive in York and Darcy makes his second visit to the magistrate Sir Kenneth Gant, after discussing the case the previous evening with their barrister, Harris.

Chapter 10

Friday 12th July 1799

DARCY had taken heed of one piece of advice offered to him by Harris over dinner last night and thus had today repaired early on to the home of Sir Kenneth Gant. Sir Kenneth was a merchant of the town dealing in fine fabrics, spices and coal amongst other commodities, but Darcy hoped that nine o'clock in the morning would be early enough to find that he had not yet left the house on business but had probably risen from his bed already. If Darcy interrupted the man's breakfast, then he and Elizabeth, who was accompanying him, would simply have to wait.

As turned out to be the case.

Darcy and Elizabeth sat in a small front parlour resting their feet after their walk from the George to St Andrewgate and, having breakfasted already, ate almost none of the small cakes offered but accepted coffee. Elizabeth sipped hers sparingly, but Darcy, still weary from his late night with Harris, found the coffee very much to his taste and accepted a second cup when offered by the maid who waited on them.

Lizzy had donned her very best brocade day dress. The dress hid her condition well. Her glossy hair was piled onto her head and pinned with pearls. A more finely dressed lady could not have called upon a gentleman at this hour.

At length, they were told that Sir Kenneth could receive them and they followed the maid to a saloon on the first floor, admiring portraits of the family on the way. Sir Kenneth was

standing in the middle of the room buttoning his coat and appeared ready to quickly make his excuses and leave, when Darcy stepped forward and introduced Elizabeth which somewhat slowed Sir Kenneth's progress.

Sir Kenneth bowed and Elizabeth curtsied. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Sir Kenneth," she said. "As you know, my sister Mrs Lydia Wickham, at your instance, is presently incarcerated in the Female Prison here in the most inappropriate conditions on a charge so spurious that it must be clear to anyone that she is wrongly accused by a man who would intimidate witnesses—and worse. We come here today to beg that you release my sister from the prison into the custody of my husband, Mr Darcy. He is presently seeking a suitable house to rent within the parish or nearby and will take full responsibility for Mrs Wickham to ensure that she attends the Assizes in due course to answer the charge against her."

Sir Kenneth opened and closed his mouth at this tirade. At length his chest heaved as he took a deep breath and replied.

"I fear I must postpone any decision on the matter you raise, for today at least. I am obliged to call in the coroner, Thomas Harrison, and I cannot delay."

"Sir Kenneth, for my sister to have concocted a will which required her to give birth to a child before she could inherit would have been a preposterous thing for her to have done. I must tell you, Sir Kenneth, that Mr and Mrs Wickham have been married for a year already and have no children."

"I hear you Mrs Darcy and take full heed of what you say. But I must attend to this other business."

Darcy cleared his throat. "I take it that there has been an unexplained death in the vicinity."

"Unexplained if you can call it that. Deaths by drowning are not so rare. The fellow was probably pining after the recent demise of his mistress, took too much liquor and fell into the river, but the reason for the death has to be formally recorded. The watchmen hauled his body from the Ouse and I was woken up at four o'clock this morning. So if you would excuse—"

"I beg your pardon, Sir Kenneth, but do you know the name of this man and the name of his mistress?"

"Oh, his name. Welsh...Welch? Something similar. As fate would have it, he worked for Mrs Roberts, of whose will," he turned to Elizabeth, "your own sister is accused of forging."

The magistrate gave a nervous laugh. Darcy's eyes met Elizabeth's. No doubt she was thinking much the same as he was; that this rather pompous character, whose large stomach was straining against its owner's efforts to contain it behind satin trim and pearl buttons, was making light of their concerns. Perhaps he did so as a matter of course in his position to lighten his load and fend off demands which he perceived to be unimportant. Or perhaps he was downright untrustworthy.

"Sir Kenneth, does it not strike you as, at the very least, coincidental that this man, *Walsh actually*, is now dead? Only two days ago he told my friends Mr Bingley and Mr Davers of his morbid fear of the man Parrish who stands to gain a fortune if he can have the latest will declared a forgery."

"Mr Darcy," Gant chuckled, "I did tell you yesterday that this scandalous gossip—I can only call it that—that Mr Parrish is a criminal has no place in York."

"Sir Kenneth, it was Mr Walsh who wrote to my wife's sister, Mrs Bingley, and alerted her to the charge made against Mrs Wickham and the fact that she had been taken to the prison. But for him, we probably would know nothing of Mrs Wickham's fate. And it now appears that he paid for that noble gesture with his life."

"The two things may be totally unconnected."

“Well, I must tell you also that my associate and friend Mr Davers who spoke to Mr Walsh was brutally attacked and left for dead two evenings ago. He has multiple injuries. I am glad to say that he is out of danger, but can only get about with the aid of a crutch for the time being.”

“And does he know who his attackers were? Was it indeed Mr Parrish?”

“I have only spoken to him briefly this morning. His attackers were masked and he does not know who they were. He was on his way back from Kexby where he endeavoured to ascertain the whereabouts of the housemaid Mary Dunn and the cook Betty Carpenter who have disappeared since Mrs Roberts died. Mr Bingley, who made enquiries in another village where it is thought the maid or cook may have gone, learned that Parrish had recently been in that village trying to find out whether others had been there also making enquiries.

“Mark you, Parrish did not himself ask after the maid or the cook which suggests that he already knows quite well what has become of them. It all adds up to Parrish making a concerted effort to disrupt Mrs Wickham’s prospects of successfully defending the charge against her.”

The magistrate looked off out of the window. “I will think about what you have said.”

“Sir Kenneth, I wonder, has any effort been made by your constables to find these women whose names are on the new will as witnesses? Or indeed the third witness, Christopher Bates, who was a footman at Mrs Roberts’ house at Castlegate? And another woman, the lady’s maid Trimble, has also disappeared.”

“My understanding is that they ran away after Mrs Roberts was found dead in her bed. Servants will do this, frightened by foolish superstition, fearing that ghosts and spirits will emerge from the fabric of the building and chase them to their graves in the night.”

“I grant you,” Darcy retorted, “that two hundred years ago, they might have done so when witches were still being burned and sorcery had not been made illegal. But this is the late eighteenth century. My intelligence is that the housekeeper Mrs Parsons sent them away because she is related to Mr Parrish. I ask again. Have efforts been made to find the witnesses?”

“Well,” Sir Kenneth huffed and puffed. “Not as such. Not thus far. But I acknowledge that it will have to be done.”

“Very well, I am pleased to hear it. But now, given that my wife’s poor sister may be one of the next obvious targets of Parrish’s distinctive methods of organising legal matters to his advantage, are you prepared to release her from the gaol? Mr Parrish, I would hazard, would not find it beyond his capabilities to arrange my sister’s demise in that dangerous place with the assistance of a Turnkey or one of the other prisoners—”

A desolate cry rang out across the room as Elizabeth all but collapsed. Darcy rushed to support her.

“I will find a house to rent today, Lizzy,” he whispered. And to Gant he said, “Please, what is your answer on this point?”

“Very well. It is somewhat irregular, but I will release Mrs Wickham to you once you have a house in the town of which you are the master until after the Assizes. Three months should be sufficient. Bring the tenancy agreement to me.”

NOTE. A blog on the janeausten.co.uk website about the trial of Jane Austen’s aunt in Bath in March 1800 for stealing £1 worth of lace from a shop in Bath, which was a capital crime at the time (5 shillings was the limit), says: ‘Due to her station as a gentlewoman, she was not lodged in the public gaol, but instead, lived with the jailer and his family’. Whether this was a common practice in the realms of eighteenth-century justice I could not say, but I used it as a sort of precedent in *Lydia Wickham’s Northern Peril* to have Lydia released into the custody

of Darcy by the fictional magistrate Sir Kenneth Gant. Other sources suggested that procedures in the eighteenth century could be lax, with magistrates even making decisions in their own homes.