



1837

HEATHER MOLL

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Cover image: Josef-August Schoefft—*Lady with à gigot bouffant sleeves*

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Twenty-five years after the events of Pride and Prejudice, a widowed George Wickham passes some time with a stranger in a coaching inn.

Wickham clumsily stumbled from the carriage and leaned heavily on his cane to make his way across the courtyard of the Swan and Neck. After hours of traveling to London, he felt every single one of his fifty-one years. Aching though he was, he would never admit that there were more days behind him than ahead.

My handsome looks have hardly been spoiled by time.

A few crow's feet and his graying temples might suggest to some ladies that he was getting on in years. A slightly jaundiced eye and some liver-spots on his hands could perhaps hint that those younger days had been rather wild. But he knew his eyes were just as sharp as they were in the grandeur days of his youth. He absolutely refused to wear spectacles; they were the hallmark of an old man.

Every time he changed horses here in Cheapside it brought to mind his marriage to Lydia Bennet twenty-five years before. *What was I thinking to allow Darcy to convince me to marry her for a mere one thousand pounds and to have a few shopkeepers' bills settled?* The fortune he ought to

have had was a splendid one, and he cursed whomever it was who had ended up marrying Georgiana Darcy and her thirty thousand pounds.

He loitered in the crowded inn-yard, glancing around for women to flirt with to pass the time. If any of them were willing to have a little more enjoyment before the horses were ready, all the better.

A pretty-looking lady's maid following her mistress's orders strode past him, but did not give him a second glance. *Too old in any event.* The few young ladies present were accompanied by gentlemen, and he was not in the mood at present to lure them away from their guardians for a quick liaison. *Of course if I so desired it, it would be easily done.* Wickham winked at a curvaceous maid who was about to enter the inn, but she immediately lowered her gaze and scurried away.

It would be a dull afternoon indeed if there were no coquettish women to inspirit the scene. He took a long swig from his flask, enjoying the warmth as it spread through his chest. Standing on his gouty foot began to trouble him, and he shuffled inside to inquire after the proprietor for a place to sit while he waited.

"All of the private rooms were hired, sir."

"My good man, you cannot mean to force an injured soldier to stand while he waits for the next post-chaise." Wickham offered a charming smile, with an emphatic look to his cane. The ability to manipulate a situation to his advantage was a lifelong skill. *I am not above resorting to pity to obtain his desired ends.*

The innkeeper shifted his feet and gazed across the busy inn while he gathered his thoughts. "There is a small family in one of the private rooms that will be leaving shortly after they change their horses. Permit me to ask them if you may sit in their room until they depart."

He went to one of the doors, knocked, and was bid to enter; Wickham leaned on his cane and waited for the reply. He was ordered to walk to keep off the gout, but if he could not have a brief encounter with a willing young girl, he would just as soon prop his foot on a cushion and wait for another pair and carriage. The journey to Bath seemed to drag longer every time he undertook the trip.

God damn Fitzwilliam Darcy. Had his finances been more steady, Wickham might have taken permanent lodgings in Bath. Instead, for

some reason, he was always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and no thanks to Darcy. He had only helped to see him raised to captain, and Darcy could have passed a little more money into his hands

After a few moments of squinting he realised that the proprietor was gesturing for him to come near. Wickham plodded through the crowd to enter the private parlour. A woman in a rich yellow gown with wide gigot sleeves and a full skirt that reached the floor looked up as he entered.

I miss the more revealing silhouettes of my youth.

She was tall, womanly and graceful, but only a little handsome. Her frilled cap over corkscrew curls said that she was married, but such trivialities had never stopped him in the past. Wealthy though she appeared to be, she was clearly on the wrong side of thirty, in all likelihood over forty.

Old and married, likely with children in tow. No reason to trifle with this one. Wickham resigned himself to a tedious afternoon.

"The baroness is gracious enough to allow you to rest in here, sir," the proprietor said to him quietly as he entered. "Her husband, Lord Canning, has just stepped out with his children, but we expect him back momentarily."

A resounding crash shattered the quiet and the innkeeper ran out to investigate without another word. The baroness appeared inhibited at finding herself alone with a stranger and gave no indication that she intended to speak. Wickham could not believe that such an obviously affluent woman, at such an advanced age as forty, might be ill at ease with a handsome man like himself.

"Lady Canning, I fear our introduction was interrupted, but you need not trouble yourself with me. You are very kind to allow one of His—pardon me, *Her*—Majesty's soldiers the opportunity to rest." Charisma was never something he lacked, and such a talent had not diminished with age. He hobbled inelegantly to a chair and reclined his foot on the nearby stool.

The lady said nothing, and after offering a polite smile appeared content to remain silent. She looked around the room but avoided his gaze, and she fidgeted with the cuff of her sleeve.

A bashful society matron? Will wonders never cease?

After opening and closing her mouth a few times, she squared her shoulders, raised her eyes and said hesitantly, "This will not do, sir; we ought to have some conversation. Introduction or not, there is no reason we cannot speak cordially to pass the time."

"You are very gracious, my lady." He offered her a winning smile that had charmed girls and matrons alike.

For some reason, this woman did not return his advance with a flirtatious smile of her own. *She either terribly shy or too proper to be any satisfying at all.*

Lady Canning thought a moment, and then said, "My sister often attempts to lure me out of my reticence. If I tell her that I amiably chatted with a stranger, she would be quite impressed with me."

Wickham could see that the demure woman was attempting to be lively. "Might I enquire if you and your husband are traveling to visit your dear sister?"

"My sister by marriage, to be precise, but yes. Their younger daughter is to marry in Derbyshire in a week. They have two daughters and a son." She then added, "I have one of each myself."

"Did you not wish for your son to marry your niece? Is that not the way of wealthy and titled families?" Wickham endeavoured to not allow his regret at not having made his own fortune through such an alliance stray into his voice. *How did I allow myself to be coerced into marrying Lydia Bennet for only a commission, my debts being settled, and one thousand pounds?*

"My son is but fifteen and too young for my only brother's two daughters; they are both over twenty." The lady offered a small laugh and looked to force herself to continue the conversation. "I do hold modest hopes that my Anne might catch the eye of my brother's son and heir, but I would never encourage the union unless they were both inclined."

A young, unattached daughter? Wickham's hopes for a satisfying encounter this afternoon were rekindled and his eyes looked eagerly toward the door.

"But my nephew is only seventeen and my daughter is not yet out," Lady Canning finished.

Hang them all. It was with great effort that Wickham did not roll his eyes. He wondered if Lady Canning would take offense if he took a swig from his flask.

Lady Canning was staring at him curiously, but she then shook her head and looked away. They were now in danger of sinking into silence, and it was possible that this lady had another daughter or perhaps a maid who might be more inclined to flirt with him, or more. He would have to try to keep her attention engaged for a little longer.

To his surprise, the lady then asked, "Have you any children?"

"I do, my lady, two sons, both grown up. I would be fortunate indeed to see them happily married to one of their charming cousins. My wife had four sisters."

Wickham neglected to mention that his two surviving sons, wherever they were, were not admitted to the society of most of their cousins. Lydia had once told him that Mrs Darcy even went so far as to say that while *she* could come to Pemberley, he was never to so much as be allowed on the grounds. It was likely Darcy's injunction; he had always thought that the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet might have still held a small *tendre* for him.

"Have you encouraged a match between the cousins?" she asked him.

He had not laid eyes on Darcy in nearly two decades, but he thought it likely the selfish man would as soon tell him to go to the devil before he let Wickham's sons near to his daughters now that they were grown up. So what if his boys had been a little cruel, a little teasing to Darcy's two daughters when they were young? Childish pranks was all; but since then Darcy's three children had been told not to acknowledge his sons. Lydia's other sisters barely deigned to recognize their presence.

"Well, no...call me a romantic, but I leave such matters of the heart to their own devices," he said, shifting his weight in his chair. Coaching inn parlours had such small chairs nowadays. "My sons must find their own happiness and I would not stand in the way of their desired union because I preferred a match to unite family fortune."

If only I had made my fortune through marriage. Darcy's help in

furthering him in his profession did not come near to equaling the funds he ought to have had if he had succeeded in marrying Georgiana Darcy all of those years ago. Darcy had only seen him promoted to captain, and then all assistance in his career was at an end.

"Quite right," agreed her ladyship. "My mother and aunt planned the union of their children while they were in their cradles, but as adults the cousins did not care for one another as intendeds should. It would have been tragic indeed had they been forced to marry each other instead of where their hearts lay. In fact, in my brother's case, I think being able to choose for himself was the making of him. His wife gave him a little more liveliness, certainly. Softened his manners, a bit. It is rather lovely to see him devoted to his wife after all of these years."

Lady Canning had said something, but his mind wandered and he did not bother to ask her to repeat herself. *I cannot recollect the last time I spoke with George or Frank.* He was indifferent to all things related to Lydia, and those two boys were their mother's children through and through.

Wickham had no desire to discuss his sons, and his thoughts wandered to brandy. He thought of the silver flask in his pocket, of how long it had been since he had taken a drink in the courtyard and how much longer he would have to wait before he could taste it again. His hands nearly began to shake in anticipation.

"You shall have the room to yourself presently; we have only stopped to change the horses," his companion's voice interrupted his musings. "Do you travel north, as well?"

"No, your ladyship; I go to Bath. I wait only to hire another coach and driver for the next stage."

It was an expense Wickham could ill afford—as were most of the things he deserved—but he refused to arrive in Bath in a mail coach. Retirement from active service and the death of his wife had severely limited his funds. Living on half-pay was something to which he never became accustomed. Now that Lydia had passed away and his children were grown, Mrs Darcy and Mrs Bingley saw no reason to send him further supplemental relief from the economy of their own personal expenses.

Damn Darcy! He silently cursed the man who had not done enough to provide for his comfort.

The door to their private parlour opened and a tall, dark haired youth peered into the room. He was lanky and ungainly in that way all boys in limbo between childhood and adulthood tend to be, but there was the potential for handsomeness about his face. Wickham briefly thought there might be something familiar in his features, but took the opportune distraction as his chance to pull out his flask. He could almost taste the warm, smooth liquid swirling around in his mouth.

"Mamma, the horses is ready. Anne is outside with Father."

"You may tell your father that I am on my way, Darcy."

The boy turned to leave, but not before Wickham sputtered his brandy down his front and across the girth of his midsection. He coughed violently and reached clumsily for his cane to rise in alarm. Lady Canning's son widened his eyes and gave him that look of criticism that only an adolescent boy can give. He turned his questioning gaze to his mother, who dismissed him with a nod.

"Are you quite well, sir?" Lady Canning asked after her son left. "Shall I call a manservant to attend you?"

Wickham stowed his flask in his pocket and awkwardly swung his gouty foot off its stool. There was no reason that hearing that name should shake him so. He ignored the wet splashes of brandy soaking through his waistcoat and tried to regain his composure.

"No, I am quite well, Lady Canning, I thank you." The lady turned to leave, but Wickham called after her. "If I may, did you just address your son as 'Darcy'?" Lady Canning nodded slowly, her eyes narrowing in confusion. "And that is his Christian name, ma'am?"

"That is correct; it is a family name. My brother's wife is the playful type and, although she has not born a child in years, promises to someday return the favor and name her second son Canning."

Lady Canning smiled in amusement, but Wickham had no reply. *As soon as she leaves I can take a drink.*

"Best of luck in your travels. I bid you good day." Lady Canning left without a backward glance, the swish and rustle of her skirts the only sound until the door clicked closed.

Wickham leaned on his cane and, with some difficulty, lowered

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himself back into his chair. Now that he was alone, he pulled out his flask and took a generous swig. By the time he tipped the flask back a third time, all thought of the room's previous occupant vanished from his mind.

THE END

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