

Who Needs Mr Darcy?

Chapter 1

Pemberley – Sept.1815

Black does not become me: I am convinced that it drains my complexion of all life. I suggested to Lizzie that I might wear something in pale grey; perhaps a frilled muslin threaded with purple velvet ribbon at dinner this evening. The look of horror on her face rapidly put an end to that idea. Marriage to Mr Darcy has transformed my sister into a model of propriety and mysteriously removed her sense of humour.

'How can you think of going into half mourning so soon?' she gasped. 'Think of the scandal it would cause.' I lowered my eyes so that she would not see the gleam in them at the prospect of a little scandal - anything that would lighten the atmosphere here at Pemberley. Spirits were higher on the battlefield at Waterloo.

'I only thought...my black dress is so drab. I would not want to embarrass you.' I am, naturally, regarded as an embarrassment by the entire family. Miss Georgiana Darcy looks down her long, aristocratic nose at me. I am not fooled by her reputation for sweetness.

'Are you quite comfortable in your rooms Mrs Wickham? We all feel deeply for your loss Mrs W.'

She sneers elegantly at my poor apparel, as if I did not know of her previous entanglement with my late, unlamented spouse. If only Wickham had successfully enticed her away and married her. I would not then have attached myself to him. I might have thrown my cap at a wealthier and less indifferent officer.

I loved him once; he was my handsome hero for a while, until I realised that money was the only thing he cared about. I can hear his voice still.

'I bought you my dear...ten thousand pounds if I would make an honest woman of you.' Except that I am no longer honest; Wickham saw to that.

These thoughts tumbled through my brain as Lizzie patted my arm awkwardly.

'You need not worry about anything, Lydia dear, while you are under this roof, least of all your wardrobe.' I smiled gratefully as she left the room.

I peered out of the window and saw Mr Darcy riding up to the house. I must contrive to meet him alone so that I may persuade him to make me a small allowance. Then I might retire to the continent and begin to live. Paris! Paris is calling me like a siren song. Naturally, I shall suggest Calais or Dieppe to my brother-in-law. I hope that the prospect of being rid of me will be an inducement.

I am convinced he is not indifferent to me. His eyes bulge slightly when he looks at me. I need only a little time to work my feminine wiles upon him.

Now I must go to the salon to admire my infant nephew Charles Fitzwilliam, the heir and Pride of Pemberley. Yesterday, when I held the child for a moment the little wretch spewed all over my black tussore, the only respectable gown I possess. I shall prevail upon Lizzie to lend me her black silk with the lace trim and the treble flounce. It is the least she can do in the circumstances. I swear the housekeeper is better dressed than my poor self.

I have been sorely tried since I came here a mere seven days since. I had barely arrived when I was being quizzed by Darcy as to the whereabouts of my husband's corpse, his final resting place.

'Where have you buried him?' he demanded sternly. His eyes bulged on that occasion too; perhaps it is a family trait.

'I will be happy to give you a full explanation of my grievous trials and the whereabouts of my poor husband's body,' I replied.

With hindsight, the dazzling smile I bestowed on him was not wise in the circumstances, but at least I had the forethought to bury Wickham in Brussels, saving the family additional expense and inconvenience.

Thus I find myself in this predicament; homeless, lacking in personal possessions and with nothing but an army pension scarcely sufficient to keep a mouse in cheese. Of course I have told everyone that Wickham died a hero's death. My brother-in-law looked unconvinced, as far as one can detect any expression on his face.

In fact, my late husband was ingloriously trampled upon by his own horse, its reins having become entangled around his scabbard. These details were given to me by a witness. I am only surprised that he had not previously gambled away the beast before the battle.

Ah, Waterloo – or rather, the Eve of Waterloo...the glory, the dancing, the excitement! Of course, I know the loss of life was dreadful and we were all in the most appalling state of fear and shock afterwards, but it was all so thrilling.

The Duchess of Richmond's Grand Ball was the most marvellous and magical event of my life thus far. I cannot imagine anything greater happening to me unless I can contrive to be presented at court. I have heard that the Prince Regent always has an eye for a pretty woman and now that he has grown tired of that other widow, Mrs FitzHerbert, I might have a chance, but I digress.

The first thrill was in actually obtaining a ticket for the ball. In the normal way of things we would never have been invited but during that week Wickham was experiencing one of his rare runs of luck at the card tables. The invitation was

accepted from an officer in the 5th Inniskillen Dragoon Guards who could not pay his gambling debt to my husband.

It was extraordinary, I recollect, because I had also been modestly successful at cards so that I was able to purchase the lilac, silk gauze gown with a deep lace border and the dark blue velvet cape that were so much admired at the ball. Even the great Wellington himself was heard to remark, 'Who is that pretty little thing?' before returning to the arms of that silly Lady Frances Wedderburn-Webster. Men say she is alluring but I cannot see it myself. I am aware that we should have spent the money on clearing some of our debts but such an opportunity occurs only once in a lifetime.

How wonderful, how glittering were the surroundings and the company that night. When I think of the dreary occasions when we danced cotillions at assemblies in Meryton I am filled with shame that I ever thought them elegant or the company anything other than dreary clodhoppers.

My dance card was filled all evening and I barely saw Wickham who was occupied with card playing in one of the ante rooms to our mutual satisfaction. The Prince of Orange actually asked me to dance. I cannot describe my feelings at this point; I was quite transported with joy, even though he had mistaken me for another lady, the wife of a General. Nevertheless, he was most gracious.

The atmosphere of gaiety was, I suppose, tinged with desperation: so many of those gallant officers would be lost in a few hours or days. However I had only Wickham to lose and that would be a blessing to both of us. I think my husband was ill at ease with himself and bitter with lost hopes and desires.

When we emerged into the splendid Grand Place in Brussels after the ball the anticipation was almost tangible. The shouts of the soldiers, the beat of the drums, mingled with the sound of trumpets and the wailing of the Scottish pipes. Women cried out from nearby houses as the men prepared to leave, news having come of Napoleon's advance. I bade farewell to Wickham who was in a strange mood, defiant and resigned simultaneously.

'It's all up with us, my dear,' he told me. 'The little Emperor is nearby with a huge force.' He kissed my cheek and rode away to Quatre Bras. I, however, had every faith in Wellington; he would see us through.

And so I returned to Pemberley trailing widow's weeds and anticipating Paris. Naturally, my family disagreed.

'My husband will never allow it, Lydia, you may be sure. France, indeed! How will you manage there? You do not speak more than three words of the language; now if you had applied yourself when our father was instructing us...' I interrupted at this point, not wishing to hear another lecture on my intellectual deficiencies from my blue stocking sister. I am very fond of dear Lizzie but I am amazed that someone of only average good looks and over fond of reading

should have secured one of the richest and most eligible men in the country. One cannot help feeling a few pangs of jealousy.

'Never fear, dear sister; I shall manage very well. I plan to live quietly in Calais where I understand there is a small colony of the English. My living costs will be greatly reduced in France and, of course, I shall apply myself to the language. You will be surprised at my determination when it is necessary.'

'I should indeed,' she replied with heavy sarcasm. Ignoring this unfeeling remark I begged her to speak to Darcy on my behalf, but I fully intended to snaffle him first. Tactics are required here and I have not spent the last three years among soldiers without learning the basics of those. I decided to approach him after luncheon: never ask a favour of a man who has not eaten recently.

I dressed with care - I am in mourning, after all. I wore the gown borrowed from Lizzie that is most becoming. I did not think Darcy would recognise it; he has a better eye for a horse these days. Some discreet jewellery, the deep red garnets, a soft but tantalising perfume...a spray of essence of lily and clove completed the ensemble.

Lizzie's French maid arranged my hair which I believe to be my crowning glory. Oh, to have the luxury of a French maid! It is so unfair; Lizzie cares very little for her appearance. She still takes long, muddy walks despite being mistress of this great estate. Wealth is wasted on some people.

After enjoying an excellent jugged hare and a glass of claret I followed Darcy in the direction of the Orangery where he invited me to inspect a fine specimen of tiger lily lately arrived from India.

I made the appropriate noises of admiration before heaving a deep sigh, fluttering my bosom as much as possible. The triple frills moved most satisfactorily.

Darcy looked puzzled, 'Are you unwell, Lydia?' I looked up at him coyly and then fingered the red stones at my neck. I noticed that his eyes had fallen towards my bosom.

'I am greatly perturbed about my future, dear brother,' I sighed. 'I could never be a burden to you or to the rest of my family, but my financial state is a parlous one. If I could manage to live quietly abroad on a reduced income I feel that would be the best solution.'

'Abroad?' Darcy yelped. He has all the horror of foreign parts that les rosbifs are noted for. You see I am already acquiring something of the French language.

'Oh yes,' I continued; 'the cost of living is so much lower on the continent and I might offer English lessons to some genteel French families in order to supplement my paltry income. Do you not agree dear brother?'

At this point I contrived to lift my skirt discreetly so that a glimpse of a trim ankle in white silk hose flashed before my brother-in-law's eyes. In the past this manoeuvre has been known to drive men mad with desire. In Darcy's case his eyes began to swivel alarmingly before bulging in the manner I have often remarked on.

'That will not be necessary!' he said sternly, 'I am prepared to make you an allowance that will enable you to live as a lady should, although not in any great luxury.'

'Naturally,' I murmured sotto voce

'However,' he added; 'there is no question of my sister-in-law living alone on the continent; it is unthinkable. Arrangements can be made for you to live closer to your parents at Longbourn.'

I hope he did not catch the look of horror that I could not repress at this suggestion. Some quick thinking was required. Fortunately, I had been married to a master of devious behaviour for three years. My brother-in-law would be child's play in comparison.

'I could not possibly live at Longbourn, dear brother. My father would not wish it and my mother would be mortified. If you were generous enough to make me an allowance I could not think of leaving Pemberley. I would stay here and make myself useful to my sister and yourself in any way possible. It would be my solemn duty.'

I stared mournfully at his face, watching the expressions of disgust and alarm passing over them. This was my opportunity. 'Of course, I have been offered an invitation for an extended stay with the Caruthers in London, friends from my husband's regiment. Captain Miles is now retired from the army and his wife, Selena, is a dear friend....' My voice trailed away and I watched to see whether he would clutch at this straw.

'Well, er, umph,' he spluttered, 'that is a possible solution.' He turned away abruptly; 'we can discuss the details later. I have an appointment.' I gazed after him glad that he could not see the face I made at his retreating back. Why must I be treated like a child solely because I am poor and female? If I had a reasonable pension my relatives might disapprove of my removal to France but they could do little to prevent it. I am a respectable widow - at least for the moment.

London... there could be worse fates for a single woman. It would certainly be an improvement on Newcastle, Pemberley or Longbourn - and it was considerably closer to the continent. Something could be contrived.

First of all I would have to contact the Caruthers and inveigle an invitation from them. We have not spoken for a while but Selena owes me a favour after I distracted her husband one evening to prevent him finding his wife flagrantly flirting with a fellow officer.

The next important matter was how much of an allowance Darcy could be persuaded to part with, followed by where would I lodge in the capital? I could not remain forever with my friends and I absolutely refused to be placed under the watchful eye of any relatives. There was always the home of my aunt and uncle Gardiner. They are a benevolent couple but they disapproved of my marriage to Wickham and they are far too close to Lizzie and Darcy. In addition they have no entrée into high society and I, I have danced with the Prince of Orange.

I needed pleasant rooms in a respectable house in a fashionable street, with an obliging but unobtrusive landlady who could act as a sheepdog on occasions when I needed a chaperone. Having thus arranged my future satisfactorily I wandered towards my room, almost failing to notice Miss Georgiana Darcy emerging from the library. She gave me an all-encompassing regard that took in my borrowed gown and the red necklace.

'Oh, Mrs Wickham, is that gown not excessively elegant? It looks so well on your sister - and on you too,' she added after a pause that could only be described as pregnant. I curled my lip in a caricature of a smile and pointed to the book she was carrying.

'I see you are reading Miss Clara Reeve's new novel *The Old English Baron*. I was greatly diverted by it and I would be happy to explain some of the more difficult passages to you at any time convenient.' I went on my way with a gay wave of the hand leaving Georgiana with her mouth fallen open in a most unattractive manner.