



HEATHER
MOLL

FORGOTTEN
FACES

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AN 1837 MEETING

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

FORGOTTEN FACES

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 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 travelling, he felt every single one of his fifty-one years.

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

Whenever he changed horses in Cheapside it brought to mind his marriage to Lydia Bennet twenty-five years ago. How did he allow Darcy to convince him to marry her for a mere one thousand pounds and a few debts settled? He cursed whomever it was who had ended up marrying Georgiana Darcy and her thirty thousand pounds.

Wickham glanced around for women to flirt with to pass the time. A pretty-looking lady's maid strode past, but she surprisingly 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 to lure them from their guardians. *Of course, if I so desired it, it could be easily done.* Wickham winked at a curvaceous maid, but she immediately lowered her gaze and scurried away.

It would be a dull afternoon 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 ask the innkeeper for a place to sit.

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

"My good man, you cannot force an injured soldier to stand while he waits." Wickham offered a charming smile and an emphatic look to his cane. The ability to manipulate a situation to his advantage was a lifelong skill.

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

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 girl, he would just as soon prop his foot on a cushion. The journey to Bath seemed to drag longer every time he undertook the trip.

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.

Through narrowed eyes, he could see she was tall and graceful, but only a little handsome. Her frilled cap over corkscrew curls said that she was married. 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. Wickham resigned himself to a tedious afternoon.

"The baroness is gracious enough to allow you to rest in here, sir," the proprietor said. "Lord Keefe has just stepped out with his children, but we expect them back momentarily."

The innkeeper left and the baroness appeared nervous at finding herself alone with a stranger. Wickham could not believe that an affluent woman, at such an advanced age as forty, might be shy with a handsome man like himself.

"Lady Keefe, 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 to a chair and reclined his foot on the nearby stool.

The lady offered a polite smile. 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, she then squared her shoulders, raised her eyes, and said, "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. Lady Keefe thought a moment, and then said, "My sister often attempts to lure me out of my reticence. If I tell her that I 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, but yes. Their younger daughter is to marry 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 own son to marry your niece? Is that not the way of wealthy and titled families?" He always regretted not having made his own fortune through marriage.

She shook her head. "My son is fifteen and too young for my only brother's two daughters; they are both over twenty." The baroness 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."

His hopes for a satisfying encounter with a pretty girl were rekindled and his eyes looked eagerly toward the door.

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

Hang them all. He wondered if Lady Keefe would take offense if he took a swig from his flask.

By squinting he could see Lady Keefe stared at him curiously, but she then shook her head and asked, "Have you any children?"

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

Wickham neglected to mention that he and his two sons 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. Wickham had always thought that the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet might have held a small *tendre* for him.

"Have you encouraged a match between the cousins?" Lady Keefe asked.

He had not laid eyes on Darcy in nearly two decades, but he thought the selfish man would 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 girls when they were young?

"I leave matters of the heart to their own devices," he said, shifting his weight in his chair. Coaching inn parlours had such small chairs nowadays. "I would never 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 seeing him promoted to captain did not come near to equalling what he ought to have had if he had married Georgiana Darcy all of those years ago.

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

Lady Keefe had said something, but Wickham's 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 and how much longer he would have to wait before he could taste it again. His hands shook 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, I go to Bath."

The post chaise was an expense he could ill afford—as were most of the things he deserved—but he refused to arrive in Bath in a stage coach. Retirement from active service and the death of his wife had severely limited his funds. Now that Lydia had passed away and his children were grown, Mrs Darcy and Mrs Bingley saw no reason to send him supplemental relief from the economy of their own personal expenses.

He silently cursed Darcy for not doing enough to provide for his comfort.

The door opened and a tall, dark-haired youth peered into the room. He was lanky and awkward 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 squinted. He thought there was something familiar in his features, but rather than look again he took the distraction as his chance to pull out his flask. He could almost taste the warm, smooth liquid swirling in his mouth.

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

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

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. Even without squinting, he could see that Lady Keefe's son 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 well, sir?" Lady Keefe asked, rising after her son left.

Wickham stowed his flask 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.

"I am quite well, my lady, I thank you." She bid him good day and turned to leave, but Wickham called after her. "If I may, did you address your son as 'Darcy'?" Lady Keefe nodded, her eyes narrowing in confusion. "And that is his Christian name?"

"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 return the favour and name her second son Keefe." Lady Keefe smiled in amusement. "Best of luck in your travels." Lady Keefe left without a backwards 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 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Moll is an avid reader of mysteries and biographies with a masters in information science. She found Jane Austen later than she should have and made up for lost time by devouring her letters and unpublished works, joining JASNA, and spending too much time researching the Regency era. She is the author of *An Affectionate Heart*, *Nine Ladies*, *His Choice of a Wife*, and *Two More Days at Netherfield*. She lives with her husband and son, and struggles to balance all of the important things, like whether or not to buy groceries or stay home and write.

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