



WHAT
MR. BENNET
KNOWS

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WHAT MR. BENNET KNOWS



“Had it been your uncle’s doing, I must and would have paid him; but these violent young lovers carry every thing their own way. I shall offer to pay him to-morrow; he will rant and storm about his love for you, and there will be an end of the matter.”

Pride and Prejudice, Chapter 59

Mr. Bennet was little indebted to his silly daughters and ignorant wife other than as the follies of the former and the weak understanding of the latter contributed to his amusement. He disliked London, lived near a small market town, and limited his social niceties to only what was required. Where other powers of entertainment are wanting, a true philosopher such as himself had to derive benefit from such as they are given. And so his children and wife, as well as his neighbors, had been his greatest sources of entertainment for twenty-five years.

I never had reason to believe that any thing might surpass it.

That was, until the end of October when his eldest two daughters

found themselves engaged within a fortnight of one another. Jane's betrothed was an amiable young man who had nothing of presumption or folly that could provoke Mr. Bennet's ridicule.

What shall I do with Bingley other than chat amiably? How dull.

This was unfortunate for Mr. Bennet's desire to be amused by others' foibles, because Jane's young man had become a permanent fixture at Longbourn, coming frequently before breakfast and always remaining till after supper. Truth be told, he was happy for his eldest daughter, and supposed that their similarities in temperament would be to their credit. Bingley was not the cleverest man, but he was a likable fellow who adored Jane, and so Mr. Bennet had the satisfaction of knowing that she would be happily settled.

I suppose that my little Lizzy has demonstrated that she shall be happy after all, as well.

Mr. Bennet's newest source of entertainment came from the serious young man who offered his proposals to his second and favorite daughter. Never in all of his imaginings did he believe that Mr. Darcy, whom he thought never looked at any woman but to see a blemish, and who had called his Lizzy "tolerable", would have come along and won her heart.

I keenly observe those in my circle to make sport of them and was taken entirely unaware!

He had been sure of Darcy's perfect indifference and of her pointed dislike. Oh, Lizzy had convinced him of her attachment to the reserved gentleman, and he was not in a position to reject the petition of such a man, so he might as well sit back and enjoy watching Darcy's discomfort amid the Bennet family.

Mr. Bennet had observed that the day-to-day events of the courtship period proceeded along a predictable pattern: Darcy would arrive on horseback near to Longbourn House's paddock in the morning and await the arrival of his friend. Within a quarter of an hour, Bingley would join him and the two men would call together and be shown into the breakfast room. Inevitably by this time, Lizzy would have returned from an early walk and made herself presentable for company. Lizzy and Darcy would greet one another with great solemnity, Jane and

Bingley with more blushes and informality, and the day's activities and wedding planning would then commence. Bingley would smile and be generally pleasing, and Darcy would be polite and generally quiet.

On this afternoon there were no calls to be made and, thus far, no gossiping neighbors intruded. Mr. Bennet read his newspaper and listened to the discussion of lace with unrestrained humor. Bingley and Jane had made their escape early, and as Kitty and Lizzy were occupied in trimming the former's new bonnet, it fell to Darcy's lot to hear all of his future mother's effusions on the subject of wedding finery. Darcy sat as far back in his chair as was possible while Mrs. Bennet stood before him, blocking all possible means of escape.

Mr. Bennet peeked over the edge of his paper, hoping that today would be the day the great Mr. Darcy of Pemberley could no longer keep his patience.

"Oh, my dear Darcy, you cannot mean what you say!" Mrs. Bennet cried.

"I assure you, Mrs. Bennet, you need not defer to me," Darcy replied with his usual gravity.

"A gentleman certainly must be concerned with the lace his bride wears on her wedding day. I daresay you wish tease me in the same manner as does Lizzy."

After a long moment, his future son-in-law replied evenly, "I would not dare to vex you, madam."

Mr. Bennet gave a half-smile and put down his paper in order to properly observe the entertainment. *The day Darcy loses his composure has finally arrived!*

"I will not have it said that my daughters' wedding was shabby and inferior because of a lack of fine lace. You are a wealthy and sensible man; you agree with me, I am sure."

Darcy's eyes swung desperately towards his betrothed, but Lizzy unconcernedly added another ribbon to Kitty's bonnet and did not meet his eye. Mr. Bennet watched Darcy set his jaw and slowly return his attention back to Mrs. Bennet.

Oh my, this is too diverting!

"The gown Lizzy wishes to wear has very little white satin and

hardly any lace on her veil," Mrs. Bennet continued. "It is a pitiful business. You must try to reason with her, my dear Darcy."

Mrs. Bennet looked at Darcy expectantly, and the gentleman looked as though he wished he could disappear into the cushions of his chair. Mr. Bennet trusted that this would be the moment that he had been waiting for but, alas, Darcy kept his patience. "I see nothing deficient in whatever Elizabeth chooses to wear. We neither of us have a taste for finery or parade."

Unfortunately for Mr. Bennet's eagerness to be well-entertained, Mrs. Bennet stood in too much awe of her intended son-in-law to challenge this appraisal. That did not mean, however, that she was by any means finished speaking. "Well, we may reconsider that later. Have you decided upon an answer in regard to the wedding cake. You have not forgot, I hope?"

It was clear to Mr. Bennet, though not to his lady, that Darcy had quite forgotten. Mr. Bennet suppressed a laugh at the sight of the proper Darcy trying to urgently decide whether or not to admit that he had forgotten or to pretend that he knew exactly what she spoke of.

"I am more than willing to defer to your opinion, Mrs. Bennet," Darcy replied cautiously.

Mr. Bennet admired his future son's bravery, for he never ventured that phrase toward his wife in all their five and twenty years together.

Mrs. Bennet laughed and blushed at his gallantry. "Very well, we shall keep the remaining cake and deliver it to our neighbors and friends who cannot attend the breakfast. And what of the preservatives for the cake? Brandy or rum? You must have an opinion; great men always do."

Mr. Bennet crossed his legs and settled in to enjoy the rest of the performance. Any moment now Darcy might shrug his shoulders and roll his eyes, and Mr. Bennet was not about to miss it for all the world. His motions caught the attention of Elizabeth, who tilted her head towards her betrothed and gave him a pointed look. He looked blankly at his daughter and pretended to not understand her. She then widened her eyes in emphasis and slowly mouthed the words, "help him."

Killjoy.

"Darcy, I do hate to interrupt your wedding planning, but I wonder if I might have your company in the library. We have a private matter to discuss. You will excuse us, Mrs. Bennet?"

She could scarcely say a word before Darcy hastily rose and made his escape. Mr. Bennet thought he might have heard Darcy breathe an audible sigh of relief when the door closed behind him, but it was likely wishful thinking. He had thus far shown not one amusing sign of displeasure in his complaisant expression.

Darcy had barely entered the room and taken a chair near the fire when Mr. Bennet sat across from him.

"I have a confession to make, Darcy. I understand from Lizzy that you have taken a great deal of trouble onto yourself on behalf of my youngest daughter."

Darcy's expression turned from relief to astonishment. For a long moment he seemed to struggle for a reply. Mr. Bennet had watched Darcy bear his wife's attentions with admirable calmness; he was rather surprised that this subject caused him the greatest vexation.

Mr. Bennet continued, "I know that you did everything; made the match, gave the money, paid Wickham's debts, and got him his commission. I am obliged to offer to pay you for the trouble of restoring my daughter and my family's respectability."

Darcy abruptly rose to pace. When he finally spoke it was with gravity and thoughtfulness. "You owe me nothing, Mr. Bennet, and I would ask that after this day we speak no more on this matter. It was my own mistake for not making Mr. Wickham's worthlessness well-known last autumn, as to make it impossible for Lydia—or any young woman of character—to love or confide in him. He ought never to have been as well-received as he was and, I confess, it had been in my power to expose him for what he was. It was my duty, therefore, to step forward and remedy the situation." After a glance out of the nearest window Darcy added quietly, "And all due to my mistaken pride."

Mr. Bennet sighed in disappointment as he poured two glasses of wine. He had been hoping that his confession would inspire a more impassioned reply. If Darcy would not be discomposed by his interactions with Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Philips, Sir William Lucas, and all the rest,

then Mr. Bennet had supposed that the subject of Wickham's immorality would provide a reaction. Yet Darcy did not appear angered or ill at ease.

What could possibly make the calm, cool young man fumble for his words or roll his eyes?

"I had presumed that your partiality for my Lizzy was your principal inducement," he tried again.

"I had many inducements to lead me on, but you must understand that I never wished for Elizabeth to learn of my involvement or feel compelled to accept me on the basis of an obligation."

Mr. Bennet waited, but no further reply was forthcoming. He handed Darcy a glass of wine and they returned to their seats. Not even Darcy's love for Lizzy would get him to rant and storm. Not a hint of a violent young lover insisting on having his own way. He could tell that Darcy was not of a disposition in which feelings were overflowing in animated expression, but this was becoming tedious. Not a glimmer of a response that would crack the younger man's ever-composed countenance.

Very well, then. Mr. Bennet sipped his wine and gave Lizzy's choice a long look. *I had not wished to use this so soon, but these are desperate times.*

"You know that you are welcome to join me in my library when the folly and conceit of every other room in the house drives you to distraction."

Darcy took a drink from his glass and politely thanked him.

"I expect the foolishness to increase as your wedding day approaches, and you will need to seek out the library for your own tranquility. You are rising every hour in my esteem, Darcy, and so you ought not to continue to act in a manner as to lose my good opinion."

This prompted a cold stare. "How do you mean?"

"You have nothing that you wish to confess to me, then?" He did his best to adopt a grave demeanor.

Darcy took another drink from his wine but said nothing while his eyes narrowed in confusion. Mr. Bennet took this as leave to continue.

"Well, I will have you understand that I am not unaware as to how you and Lizzy spend your mornings. The time *before* you and Bingley

appear at my breakfast table. I know that you ride out early and happen upon Lizzy while she happens to stroll along the lane towards Netherfield. I am not such a jaded old man that I am unable to imagine how you might be passing your time. The autumn leaves in her hair and on your coat are a significant clue.”

Mr. Bennet did his best to ignore the wine glass that shattered on the floor next to Darcy’s feet and how all color drained from the young man’s face.

“Even if I was so very out of touch, it would be hard even for me to ignore the way that Lizzy tries to greet you so seriously when you arrive. That, as well as her swollen lips and pink cheeks, and the red marks on your neck beneath your loosened cravat. I know that I am not one to dictate to a man of your fortune and consequence, but do not sport with my patience when it comes to the propriety of my daughters.”

The sight of Darcy’s face pale with alarm, and then red in mortification, and the sputtering apologies that followed would make Mr. Bennet laugh heartily every time he thought of it for years to come.

THE END

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