



Mr. Bennet and His Daughters

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of *Evelyn*, co-edited for Juliet McMaster's Juvenilia Press. "Mr. Bennet and His Daughters" was performed at Boston with his daughter, Emilie Sabor.

Lydia: Only think of its being *six* months since I went away; it seems but a fortnight I declare; and yet there have been things enough happened in the time. Good gracious! when I went away, I am sure I had no more idea of being married till I came back again! though I thought it would be very good fun if I was. Do the people hereabouts know I am married, or do they know only of Jane's and Lizzy's weddings? I was afraid they might not know of mine; and we overtook William Gouling in his curricule, so I was determined he should know it, and so I let down the side glass next to him, and took off my glove, and let my hand just rest upon the window frame, so that he might see the ring, and then I bowed and smiled like any thing.

Mr. Bennet: Lydia! A married woman! And just turned sixteen! Twenty-three years ago, Miss Gardiner of Meryton became a married woman too, and I, to my lasting sorrow, became a married man. She was not much older than you are now, and just as trifling and empty-headed. Her brother Edward was a sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister as well by nature as education. Happily for him, he married an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman: not for nothing is she a great favourite with all her Longbourn nieces. I, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, married a

woman of weak understanding and an illiberal mind. All my views of domestic happiness were overthrown. To my wife I am very little otherwise indebted, than as her ignorance and folly have contributed to my amusement.

Lydia: Like mother, like daughter, I always say. I trust that *my* ignorance and folly will contribute to my dear Wickham's amusement too. Is he not a charming man? I am sure that Kitty and Mary must envy me. I only hope they may have half my good luck. They must both go to Brighton. That is the place to get husbands.

Mr. Bennet: Yes, my dear, you two are made for each other. Wickham is as fine a fellow as ever I saw. He simpers, and smirks, and makes love to us all. I am prodigiously proud of him. I defy even Charlotte Lucas's father Sir William to produce a more valuable son-in-law.

Lydia: Oh papa, you are such a quiz. How can you compare my Wickham to that horrid Mr. Collins. And while poor Charlotte Collins must carry out the dreary duties of a clergyman's wife, I shall be mingling with the most dashing officers in the realm.

Mr. Bennet: Mingle as you will, Lydia, so long as you do so far from Longbourn.

Lydia: Newcastle is a long way off indeed. But I have a fine surprise for you all. Wickham and I will soon present you and mama with your first grandchild; how happy you will be! And you need not worry about the cost; my brother-in-law Darcy will be a splendid godfather, and provide for the little one in style. Darcy has money to spare, you know. Fitzwilliam Wickham would sound very well.

Mr. Bennet: Darcy would, no doubt, be delighted to put his wealth to such good use. He and Wickham are friends of long standing. Perhaps he will build you a house at Pemberley, with enough rooms, of course, for all of your growing family.

Lydia: Oh what a fine idea, and we can call it Wickham Hall, and

hold dances in the ballroom, and entertain the officers, and I will be able to stand up with dear Denny again; it seems an age since I saw him last.

Mr. Bennet: The grounds of Pemberley, I hear, are in need of improvements, and Wickham could help Darcy with the designs. The banks of the stream are sorely in need of adornment, and the ridge of high woods should certainly be cut down. Ah Kitty, my dear, you seem in need of improvements yourself.

Kitty: It is liberty, father, that I need. I am seventeen, almost two years older than Lydia, but everyone treats me as though I were the youngest sister. Why did Mrs. Forster invite *her* to Brighton, and not me. A little sea-bathing would set me up for ever. And if I should ever go, I would behave better than Lydia.

Mr. Bennet: *You* go to Brighton, Kitty!—I would not trust you so near it as East Bourne for fifty pounds! No, Kitty, I have at last learnt to be cautious, and you will feel the effects of it. No officer is ever to enter my house again, nor even to pass through the village. Balls will be absolutely prohibited, unless you stand up with one of your sisters. And you are never to stir out of doors, till you can prove, that you have spent ten minutes of every day in a rational manner.

Kitty: [*Cries bitterly*]

Mr. Bennet: Well, well, child, do not make yourself unhappy. If you are a good girl for the next ten years, I will take you to a review at the end of them.

Kitty: But father, I cannot spend all my time visiting my elder sisters, or sitting at home like Mary, dwindling into an old maid. Lydia and Wickham have invited me to stay with them in Newcastle for the winter; you must let me go.

Mr. Bennet: To that, Kitty, I shall never consent. You are not of so ungovernable a temper as Lydia, and, removed from the influence of her example, you may become, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid.

Kitty: Proper attention and management indeed: just what we have never received. You laugh at mama, yet she at least has done all she can to find us suitable husbands and save us from becoming destitute and dreary spinsters. You sit in your study, immersed in your books, savouring the life of the mind. But what about the lives of your daughters? Don't blame Lydia for her ungovernable temper; who has there ever been to govern her?

Mr. Bennet: It is all very well, my dear Kitty, to blame your father for your own folly. But I cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. None of my daughters has much to recommend her; they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters.

Kitty: Silly and ignorant, you say, but Lizzy's sisters may have talents that your jaded eyes cannot see. On many occasions you have laughed at my love of the stage, and my passion for private theatricals. Yet during our last visit to my uncle Gardiner in Cheapside, we were introduced to his acquaintance Mr. Sheridan, who told me that I had all the makings of an accomplished actress, and could become the toast of Drury Lane.

Mr. Bennet: You astonish me, Kitty; I must speak to my brother Gardiner about this. But what say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts.

Mary: Yes, papa, I read great books and try to learn from them. When Lydia eloped with Mr. Wickham, I wished to console my sisters by quoting the useful lesson of Mr. Villars in Miss Burney's novel *Evelina*: "that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable — that one false step involves her in endless ruin — that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful, — and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex." Yet Elizabeth only lifted up her eyes in amazement, and made no reply at all.

Mr. Bennet: That was very inconsiderate of her, Mary; you hoped to pour into her wounded bosom the balm of sisterly consolation, yet

she failed to appreciate your attempts. No doubt Mr. Collins would approve of your good intentions, and would report them to his ever-esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Mary: You mock me, father, because I know more about books than the human heart. It is true that I am ill at ease with others — family, friends, and strangers alike. I am a connoisseur of lending libraries, not of lovers' liaisons. How I envy you. From my youngest days, I have seen you in your study, surrounded by the wisdom of ages, while my empty-headed mother has talked of nothing but muslins, money, and men.

Mr. Bennet: You have, I fear, read too much for your own good. A learned lady will never find a husband; a wife and a mother should know more about puddings and pastries than philosophy and poetry.

Mary: But you criticize all that I do: nothing that I undertake has ever impressed you. Do you recall, father, the ball at Netherfield, when I was asked to entertain the gathering with a song at the pianoforte? As I was preparing to oblige the company, Elizabeth endeavoured to prevent me by many significant looks and silent entreaties; she has always been jealous of my singing. I refused, however, to let my sister discourage me with the pretext that my voice was not fitted for public display. And I was right; I received the thanks of the table, and the request to favour them with a second song. Yet what applause did I receive from you? I shall remember your words to my dying day: "That will do extremely well, child. You have delighted us long enough. Let the other young ladies have time to exhibit." I pretended not to hear, but I heard all too well; how Elizabeth must have rejoiced!

Mr. Bennet: My dear Mary, I used to think that Kitty and Lydia were two of the silliest girls in the country, but I believe that you are sillier yet. What, pray, was I to do? Your voice is weak and your manner affected; two songs from you were more than sufficient, and it fell to me to stop you from attempting a third. As for Elizabeth being jealous of your singing, is the nightingale jealous of the crow?

Mary: I may well be unjust to Elizabeth; it is hard for an unloved daughter not to resent her father's favourite. How could you, immersed in books every day of your life, fail to apply your learning to the education of your other daughters? How could you leave us to our own untutored devices, instead of sharing with us the fruits of your reading? And how, worst of all, could you leave our upbringing to a woman whose own weak understanding makes her utterly unfitted for educating young minds? "Delightful task! to rear the tender thought, / To teach the young idea how to shoot," in the words of that admirable poet, Thomson. But the tender thoughts and young ideas in your household have never been taught how to grow.

Mr. Bennet: (*Sighs*) These are serious charges. But for me to develop your minds as you wish, there must be something to cultivate; what signs of this have you ever given me, Mary?

Mary: Had you but once opened the Notebooks in which I have been writing for many years, you would regard me in a different light. Only last week I wrote two new stories, "Evelyn" and "Catharine." They are among my best, I believe, although neither is as yet complete. I am determined to succeed as an author. And I shall never marry. Let Elizabeth tend to her puddings and pastries; I shall write novels in which the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

Mr. Bennet: I am amazed to find that I have both an actress and an author among my daughters. Jane, Jane, do not tell me that you too have a secret life; have you become a disciple of Mary Wollstonecraft?

Jane: I have not, papa, had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of this Miss Wollstonecraft; pray do introduce her to me. I have, though, found the best of husbands, and you are the kindest of fathers, and mama the sweetest of mothers.

Mr. Bennet: You are a good girl, Jane, and I have great pleasure in thinking you are so happily settled with Bingley. I have not a doubt of your doing very well together. Your tempers are by no means unlike. You are each of you so complying, that nothing will ever be

resolved on; so easy, that every servant will cheat you; and so generous, that you will always exceed your income. But what say you, my dear, to these complaints of Kitty and Mary; have I been remiss in my paternal duties, as they claim?

Jane: Poor Kitty and Mary. They have always been the fondest of sisters, and we must help mama find husbands for them now. If only Mr. Bingley had brothers for them to marry; then they might be almost as contented as I am.

Mr. Bennet: Poor Kitty and Mary indeed. But you have not answered my question: have I, as they say, been neglectful of my daughters? Is it my fault that Lydia eloped with a scoundrel; that Kitty thinks only of officers and ballrooms; and that Mary is affected and pretentious? What is more, Lydia has just informed me of her condition. Are *you* aware of this Jane?

Jane: Lydia *has* shared the delightful news with her sisters and with mama; we encouraged her to confide in you too. Her wish that Mr. Darcy should provide for the infant is perhaps unlikely to be fulfilled, but my dear Mr. Bingley has already offered to stand as godfather. And if we may have such happy hopes for Lydia, why not for Kitty and Mary too?

Mr. Bennet: I should have known, Jane, that from you I would hear nothing but sympathy and sentiment. I see that my grandson-to-be is set up for life already: little *Charles* Wickham will be a most fortunate child! Ah! — but Lizzy, you arrive at an opportune moment. You have always enjoyed a spirited discussion, and I expect you to speak frankly. Have I not, to the best of my abilities, guided you and your sisters through the tangled thickets of life?

Elizabeth: Before I became Mrs. Darcy, dear papa, two young men had, in their very different ways, taken an interest in me. When I declined the proposals of the first, Mr. Collins, you gave me your full support, and for that I shall always be grateful. I knew that if he persisted in considering my repeated refusals as flattering encouragement I could apply to you. And I knew that your negative would be uttered in such a manner as must be decisive; your behaviour at least

could not be mistaken for the affectation and coquetry of an elegant female. My mother, of course, was swift to encourage him, and I well remember your comical summary of the dilemma in which this placed me: "An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your own parents. — Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do."

Mr. Bennet: Mr. Collins was certainly as absurd as I had hoped; I listened to him with the keenest enjoyment, and found in you, my dear Lizzy, a silent partner in my pleasure. Although you scolded Lydia for interrupting him as he was holding forth with one of Fordyce's interminable Sermons, I know you took as much pleasure as I did in seeing him so thoroughly discomposed.

Elizabeth: Happily, Mr. Collins soon found consolation in the arms of Charlotte Lucas, to whom I wish all imaginable happiness. My second suitor, Mr. Wickham, was far more troublesome, however. He toyed with my affections, only to drop me in favour of a Miss King, who had unexpectedly inherited ten thousand pounds. He had not won my heart, so no great damage was done. But here, sir, you were of little help to me. You neither advised me how best to deal with Mr. Wickham, nor sympathized with poor Jane, who at the time was being neglected by Mr. Bingley. As for my third suitor, Mr. Darcy, I am happy that you gave him your consent, but wish you had done so for better reasons than fear of refusing whatever he condescended to ask. Had Napoleon asked for my hand in marriage I might, in such a manner, have become Empress of France.

Mr. Bennet: You are severe, my dear, but just.

Elizabeth: Father, you asked me to be candid, and I shall take you at your word. You know, I believe, that you should have kept your younger daughters under much firmer control. But since you did not wish to do so, why did you not engage a governess to attend to us? When Lady Catherine de Bourgh put this question to me, I smiled as though it were absurd, yet I knew in my heart she was right. And what about your financial recklessness? This is not a woman's province, yet Mr. Darcy, upon my repeated entreaties, has at last

revealed to me what had to be done before Mr. Wickham would marry Lydia. Oh papa, it is a dreadful story. When you supposed that it was my uncle Gardiner who had interceded with Mr. Wickham, you said . . .

Mr. Bennet: I recall precisely what I said. "Wickham's a fool, if he takes her with a farthing less than ten thousand pounds. I should be sorry to think so ill of him, in the very beginning of our relationship." I know now, of course, that Darcy, not my brother Gardiner, was the benefactor. But tell me Lizzy, was I wrong as to the amount?

Elizabeth: You were very wrong, father. Wickham spoke of Lydia to Mr. Darcy in the vilest of terms. He called her a portionless girl of abandoned morals, and said that since he had already enjoyed all she had to offer, nothing would induce him to marry such a creature. It took all of Mr. Darcy's persuasive force to conclude an agreement, and the price was heavy indeed: not ten but twenty thousand pounds.

Mr. Bennet: Surely, Lizzy, you are mistaken. Did you not tell me yourself that Darcy undertook to pay off Wickham's debts, purchase his commission, and settle one thousand pounds on Lydia? How can that amount to so vast a sum?

Elizabeth: Mr. Wickham's debts, papa, were far greater than he at first led Mr. Darcy to believe. Twenty thousand pounds is two full years of Mr. Darcy's annual income. To pay off Mr. Wickham's clamorous creditors, he has been obliged to sell off much of the timber at Pemberley. Timber-merchants are now polluting its shades, and the noble woods will not recover for generations to come.

Mr. Bennet: This is truly shocking. To think that I made light of the matter, saying that when I offered to repay Darcy, he would rant and storm about his love for you, and there would be an end to the matter. I did make such an offer; he refused it, of course, but did so with what I then thought was ill-concealed disdain.

Elizabeth: Not disdain, father, but pain. Mr. Darcy has always lived within his means, and he has confided to me his fears that in allow-

ing Pemberley's woods to be cut down, even for so good a cause, he has blighted his custody of the estate.

Mr. Bennet: You make me realize, my dear, how blind I was to the extent of Darcy's generosity. And you confirm what I have long suspected: how much harm I have done through my own reckless imprudence. If only, instead of spending my whole income, I had laid by an annual sum, for the better provision of my children, the satisfaction of prevailing on one of the most worthless young men in Great Britain to be Lydia's husband might have been mine, not Darcy's.

Elizabeth: Better provision for your children, if I may say so dear papa, involves more than pounds, shillings, and pence. For Jane and for me, you have been an excellent father indeed. For your other daughters, alas, your indifference to their mental and spiritual growth, your contempt for their mother, and your endless fondness for mockery have deprived them of the paternal guidance they so sorely need.

Mr. Bennet: It was just such a love for mockery that made me once say to you, "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?" But the joke, at last, is on me; and I need no further persuasion to see the error of my ways. To be light and bright and sparkling is not sufficient when the welfare of one's children is at stake. It is, after all, a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of five daughters must be in want of the power to raise them.

Elizabeth: And yet, papa, all has not turned out ill. Kitty will henceforth spend the chief of her time with the Bingleys and at Pemberley, far from the influence of Lydia's example, and there can safely indulge her love for theatrical performing. Mary, with her sisters removed from home, will no longer be mortified by unflattering comparisons, will mix more with the world, and will spend less time scribbling in her notebooks. Lydia, even with Mr. Wickham, has the respectability of being a married woman, and Jane will forever enjoy domestic felicity with her beloved Mr. Bingley. As for myself: to be mistress of Pemberley, with or without its old timber, is something.