Laughter

by snowberryrose

Summary

an attempt to understand Lydia Wickham, nee Bennet

Elizabeth Bennet: Oh, dear, I cannot tease you about that. What a shame, for I dearly love to laugh.

Caroline Bingley: A family trait, I think.

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Lydia Bennet: What a good joke it will be! I can hardly write for laughing.

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When Lydia Wickham first beheld Pemberley, she felt a flash of jealousy so intense that even the newly acquired bonnet atop her head did little to console. Still, she greeted her sister with a laugh, “My dear Lizzy, how positively dowdy I feel in so rich an atmosphere. You must, oh you simply must take pity on your poor sister and accompany me to town so that I can replace my shabby belongings with ones more befitting this wealth!”

If Elizabeth Darcy’s acquiescence was too perfunctory to be called whole-hearted, young Mrs. Wickham made no note of it but continued with another giggle, “Oh how delightfully funny your footmen look with their darling stockings and powdered wigs. Oh they are pleasing to look at; goodness, how distracted you must be when Mr. Darcy is away, Lizzy.”

A frown signaled the beginning of Mrs. Darcy’s displeasure, but Mrs. Wickham persisted, “But of course I shan’t look at them, no indeed, not when I have my dear George.”

At last Mrs. Darcy spoke, though her tone made it clear that she had much rather not ask after this particular brother-in-law, “And how fares Mr. Wickham?”

“Positively delightful!” Lydia exclaimed, “Why, he is ever so clever. He is in Bath, you know, to
ask after one of his investments. He sent me this bonnet, you see, so it must be doing quite well. He really is very enterprising.”

Glancing at the monstrosity of lace and gaudy silk flowers atop her sister’s head, Mrs. Darcy gave only another restrained smile, “Won’t you allow me to show you to your room? You must be fatigued after your journey.”

Lydia went cheerfully, her voice never ceasing its chatter. On reaching her quarters, however, she declared herself much too excited to rest and insisted on a tour of the house. And so the afternoon passed, with considerable growing impatience on the part of Pemberley’s Mistress but no waning enthusiasm on the part of her guest. The following days were made worse at the distinct discomfort of Mr. Darcy. Gone were changes that the past year of marriage had wrought, his solemnity that had once caused such misunderstanding replaced the small smiles and even occasional chuckles that his spirited wife had patiently but insistently elicited. Mrs. Wickham remained oblivious to her host’s tension but her sister was all too aware of it. So, it was a great sigh of relief when Mr. Wickham finally saw fit to recall his wife.

“I am glad,” Mrs. Darcy, unabashed in her sincere gladness at the sight of the departing carriage, declared as she gave a final hearty wave, “that we could arrange for Georgie to visit with Lady Matlock.”

Mr. Darcy spoke not a word, but the slight pressure of his hand at her back indicated agreement enough.

She turned to bestow a smile on him, “How dear Jane is, to have withstood that for a month’s duration, though even her last letter hinted at some pleading desperation. I am grateful, husband, at your fortitude.”

“She is your sister,” replied he simply.

“And I am all the more severe in my evaluation of her character as a result.” She sighed, some measure of regret coloring her tone, “She remains a flighty creature, too silly to comprehend truly the danger of her circumstances. She is satisfied with the respectability matrimony provides, and long I hope she remains in such a happy state.”

“The years are long; mayhaps the possession of a wife will settle him.”

The look she gave him spoke eloquently of her knowledge of his own disbelief in the possibility of so miraculous a reformation.

“Long may she remain happy in her ignorance!”

Her sentiment was to be repeated on each future occasion that Mrs. Wickham felt bestirred to reacquaint herself with her sisters. If Mrs. Darcy suspected that the infrequency of such bouts of affection derived from Lydia’s conscious awareness of the inferiorities of her own marriage, she kept such thoughts secret even from Mrs. Bingley. And, as Lydia’s behavior showed little change, Mrs. Darcy remained satisfied that her sister suffered little from her manners of living. Besides, the appearance of several little Darcys soon drew enough attention that she had little time to spare for her youngest sister.

When news arrived that Lydia had become a widow at the age of five and thirty, Mrs. Darcy felt no surprise that Mr. Wickham gave as much support to his wife in death as he had in life. A suitable cottage was found and the grieving widow successfully installed in near proximity to her sisters.
Lydia did not mourn quietly. The thirty miles that had so delighted Mrs. Darcy and Mrs. Bingley made for little obstacle as Mrs. Wickham sought an audience for her grief. Mrs. Craven, who had long ago given up her childhood deference to her younger sister in favor of the guidance her elder sisters provided, owned with a sigh that even as the wife of a clergyman, she had difficulty maintaining her kindness.

“She never did approve of Mr. Craven,” the once Kitty Bennet shared with her patroness, “she wrote me the most horrid letter. I could hear her laughing, and certainly not the way you would laugh at a genuinely amusing story, Lizzy, but a nasty one that had always made me feel invisible in my inferiority. And yet, now, she is ever so admiring of his sermons and his kind attention to his flock. I should not mind it so; she has ever been a flirt. And yet…”

Mrs. Darcy patted her sister’s hand, earning a grateful smile.

“You must not misunderstand me, Lizzy. Daniel is not a man to be swayed by flirtation. Well do I know it!” Her smile grew rueful in remembrance of her own misadventures in attempting to gain Mr. Craven’s attentions. “But oh I wish Lydia would not behave so!”

“Grief manifests itself differently for us all.”

Catherine Craven was quiet a moment before venturing a thought that she had been turning over in her mind, “Lydia remains trapped in the realm of yesterdays.”

“Why Kitty! And now I know the muse for Mr. Craven’s pretty phrases! How well you have hid your poetic leanings.”

“But truly, Lizzy,” Mrs. Craven insisted despite her blush, “I do think Lydia will ever be no more than five and ten.”

“With all the impetuousness and yet all the hopefulness of that age,” mused Mrs. Darcy.

“And yet so very difference from either Dorothea or Amelia.”

The mention of their daughters took the conversation in another direction, but Mrs. Darcy did not forget her sister’s words.

When she mentioned them to Mrs. Bingley, she was surprised at the shadow that chased away Jane’s sweet smile.

“If only it were so.”

“Jane?”

At Mrs. Darcy’s puzzled look, her sister sighed. “Lydia has been so very unhappy, Lizzy.”

“And yet she is never without laughter.”

“She laughs because tears never came easy to her.”

At Mrs. Darcy’s incredulity, Mrs. Bingley explained quietly, “Mr. Wickham’s affections were neither constant nor reliable; their mobility was not merely a consequence of their ill-managed finances.”

“How came you to this knowledge?”

“Through guesswork, mostly, for Lydia says little to confide in me.”
“Lydia hardly sees fit to confide in anyone,” Mrs. Darcy’s sharp tone brought to mind the carelessly penned missive of so long ago.

“We have given her no cause for such recourse.”

“How can you say such a thing?! Have we not ever supported her when she has yet again exceeded her income? Did we not suffer her presence when yet another of her husband’s schemes met with failure?”

“Oh Lizzy, can you not hear yourself? So we provided for her materially, but when did we do so without judgment or disapproval? Lydia may be silly, but she is no imbecile. Nor is she without her own pride. Surely, you, Lizzy, can understand?”

Such impassioned words, delivered with such uncharacteristic firmness, caused Mrs. Darcy to fall silent once more.

“It pains me to make such an admission, but we have failed in our duty as her sisters.”

“She made her own choices.”

“Did she indeed? And what did she know of her choices? What understanding did she truly possess to have treated an elopement as a joke? Mama did her part, yes, in giving in to her whims. Papa too, may the good Lord rest their souls. And what did we do? What guidance did we seek to provide?”

“We saved Kitty.”

“How sanctimonious!”

“Lydia was beyond our reach.”

Jane sighed, “Perhaps.”

“She would not have listened,” but her words sounded weak even to her ears.

“Do not judge her too harshly, Lizzy.” Mrs. Bingley implored after a pause, “Lydia knows no other way.”

“Oh or she chooses not to.”

“You speak as though Lydia acts intentionally out of maliciousness when she only does so out of ignorance.”

“Even you, Jane, cannot believe her to be truly ignorant now.”

“No, and so the nature of her unhappiness. Were that she truly remained a child!”

Such echoing of her own once-fervent hopes gave Mrs. Darcy pause. Embracing her sister as much to provide as to seek comfort, she admitted, “I never truly understood Lydia.”

“Nor does Lydia, I daresay.”

“Such cynicism does not become you, my dear Jane.”

Her comment at last drew a laugh. “We must be patient with her, Lizzy.”

“She is our sister.” And that, Mrs. Darcy decided, was answer enough.
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