

Darcy's POV Episode 13

As the members of the household attempted to control their mirth concerning Mrs. Bennet's ill-conceived opinion of the quality of society in town, Miss Elizabeth deftly redirected the conversation elsewhere.

"Mama, has Charlotte Lucas been to Longbourn in my absence?"

"Yes, she called yesterday with her father. What an agreeable man Sir William is, Mr. Bingley—is not he? So much the man of fashion! So genteel and so easy! He has always something to say to everybody. *That* is my idea of good breeding; and those persons who fancy themselves very important and never open their mouths quite mistake the matter."

Darcy started as if Mrs. Bennett had slapped him across the face.

The color that had lately decorated Miss Elizabeth's comely cheek redoubled, her voice unnatural. "Did Charlotte dine with you?"

"No, she would go home," declared her mother. "I fancy she was wanted about the mince-pies. For my part, Mr. Bingley, *I* always keep servants that can do their own work; *my* daughters are brought up differently. But everybody is to judge for themselves, and the Lucases are a very good sort of girls, I assure you."

The audacity of sharing the private workings of another family's household with relative strangers, did not deter the infuriating woman. She was like a bull in a field of poppies.

"It is a pity they are not handsome!" she continued. "Not that *I* think Charlotte so *very* plain; but then she is our particular friend."

This callous utterance poured cold water on Miss Bingley's revelry. Her open mouth betrayed her complete disbelief that a lady would betray a friend so blatantly in public. It was as though Mrs. Bennett had no intelligence to edit the ramblings of her mind.

As usual, Bingley jumped to defend Charlotte Lucas's honor.

"She seems a very pleasant young woman."

Rather than see the comment as a way to extricate herself from her blunder, Mrs. Bennett ploughed on.

"Oh dear, yes; but you must own she is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so, and envied me Jane's beauty. I do not like to boast of my own child; but to be sure, Jane—one does not often see anybody better looking. It is what everybody says. I do not trust my own partiality."

Darcy chanced a glance at Miss Elizabeth who was shrinking into the taffeta settee.

The whole party was shocked into a stunned silence.

Mrs. Bennett continued to fill the gap.

"When she was only fifteen there was a gentleman at my brother Gardiner's in town so much in love with her, that my sister-in-law was sure he would make her an offer before

we came away. But, however, he did not. Perhaps he thought her too young. However, he wrote some verses on her, and very pretty they were.”

“*Or perhaps he met her mother and escaped before it was too late,*” thought Darcy.

“And so ended his affection,” snapped Elizabeth, impatiently. “There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!” The emphasis and speed of her delivery betrayed her embarrassment of her mother’s lack of refinement and her behaviour’s stark contrast to that of the inhabitants of Netherfield.

“I have been used to consider poetry as the *food* of love,” said Darcy, hoping to help Miss Elizabeth out of the pit her mother had dug.

She regarded him with something resembling gratitude. “Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.”

She was talking nonsense of course, but it prevented her mother from seizing the occasion to disparage anyone else’s character.

Unable to think of a suitably witty response, Darcy only smiled.

But the awkward pause caused Elizabeth to clutch her skirts and grind her jaw, for fear, he supposed, that Mrs. Bennet would embarrass her again.

“You must accept my unbounding gratitude for your great kindness to my Jane,” her mother repeated. Perhaps their shock had brought the woman to her senses. “And I deeply apologize that you must provide for Lizzy too. I told her she needn’t come but she would not listen.”

Closing his eyes, Darcy sighed at the blatant slight.

Bingley replied in an unaffectedly civil manner and with a slight tip of the head and a glare, forced his younger sister to be civil also, and say what the occasion required. However, Darcy was annoyed when she performed her part without much graciousness.

Thankfully, Mrs. Bennett appeared oblivious of the scorn in Caroline’s tone and ordered her carriage.

Hitherto, the three younger sisters had been blessedly quiet though two of them had whispered unceasingly. But upon the signal to depart, the youngest sister, Miss Lydia, put herself forward.

“Mr. Bingley, did you not promise to hold a ball at Netherfield when you first arrived in the country?”

Though she was a stout girl with a fine complexion he understood her to be only fifteen. About the same age as his sister, Georgiana, who would never have supposed to ask her elders such a direct question. Having witnessed Lydia’s high spirits and the attentions given her by the officers at her uncle’s dinners however, he was not altogether surprised that she possessed the brazenness to act in such a way. It was her mother’s fault for bringing her out into society at such a young age.

“I would be almost shameful if you did not keep your promise.”

Darcy watched Bingley to see how he would respond to the attack, knowing they had no intentions of staying long enough in Hertfordshire to orchestrate a ball.

“I am perfectly ready, I assure you, to keep my engagement; and, when your sister is recovered, you shall, if you please, name the very day of the ball. But you would not wish to be dancing while she is ill?”

The two youngest girls squealed with delight while Darcy could not believe his ears.

“Oh, yes—it would be much better to wait till Jane is well,” Lydia responded with no small amount of satisfaction. “And by that time, most likely, Captain Carter will be at Meryton again. And when you have given *your* ball,” she added, “I shall insist on their giving one also. I shall tell Colonel Forster it will be quite a shame if he does not.”

Who did this girl think she was, directing a gentleman and a whole battalion of soldiers how to act?

With that decided, Mrs. Bennet and her daughters departed.

Miss Elizabeth fled instantly to Jane, deducing correctly that her behaviour and that of her relations, would be the topic of snide remarks from the two ladies. Darcy had no heart for the subject and could mount no defense of the lady, in spite of Caroline’s sharp insults, cutting impersonations of Mrs. Bennet and witticisms concerning *fine eyes*.