Truth in His Cups

by Buzzy

Summary

What if Darcy didn’t give Elizabeth that letter at Kent? She would certainly have been more friendly to Wickham when she returned to Meryton. Maybe even friendly enough for him to let down his guard and confess something he shouldn’t.

On Elizabeth’s very first day after returning to Meryton, Mr. Wickham dined, with others of the officers, at Longbourn; and so much was Elizabeth disposed to greet him in good-humour that, on his asking how she had passed her time at Hunsford, she mentioned Colonel Fitzwilliam's and Mr. Darcy’s having both spent three weeks at Rosings, and asked him if he were acquainted with the former.

He looked surprised, displeased, alarmed; but with a moment's recollection and a returning smile, replied that he had formerly seen him often; and, after observing that he was a very gentlemanlike man, asked her how she had liked him. Her answer was warmly in his favor. With an air of indifference he soon afterwards added –

"How long did you say that he was at Rosings?"

"Nearly three weeks."

He gestured to the footman for more wine. "And you saw him frequently?"

"Yes, almost every day."

"His manners are very different from his cousin's."

"Yes, very different."

“And does Mr. Darcy improve on acquaintance?”

“No indeed,” said Elizabeth with a most impertinent look. “How should he improve? Is it in his address? Has he deigned to add ought of civility to his ordinary style! -- for I dare not hope," she
continued in a lower and more serious tone, "that he could ever improve in essentials."

"Oh no!" said Wickham, grinning. "In essentials, I believe, he will always be very much what he ever was. And Miss DeBourgh, what did you think of her?"

“I think her a perfect match for Mr. Darcy. She will never have an opinion of her own and he will never ask her for one, so he will be perfectly happy to never be contradicted and she will be equally pleased to never have to bother thinking of anything at all.”

At that, Wickham laughed aloud and drained his glass, this time making sure that Elizabeth’s glass was refilled along with his own. They discussed every detail of the pending marriage of Fitzwilliam Darcy and Anne DeBourgh, from the number of shawls the bride would be wrapped in for the wedding to the lectures of Lady Catherine on acceptable names for the heir, with a great deal of both laughter and cruelty.

When dinner was over, none of the officers wanted to be separated from the ladies, and Wickham carefully escorted Elizabeth to a settee where they could continue their conversation, interrupted only by his regular trips to replenish the port in his glass. He offered to get Elizabeth some sherry, but she had already drunk more than usual at dinner and was feeling rather tipsy. By the time they had listed all the accomplishments the future Darcy children would have had if they had ever bothered to learn, Wickham was well into his cups, and returned to his favorite subject, the wrong done him by Mr. Darcy.

“That living were worf much more’n he gave me. Five or sixsh thoushand pounds at leasht, but all I got was a meashly three. He’s shtingy, thass what he is. Hash all that money and won’t efen share a bit with hish oldesht friend.”

“Did you say he gave you three thousand pounds?” asked a shocked Elizabeth.

“Thass nuffing. I coulda had firt- fir- thirty thoushand, if he hadn’t interfered.” Leaning in close he whispered, “Hish shister’s dowry is jush lyin’ there, waitin’ to be spent. But he won’t let me near her. Not good enuff for a Darshy.”

“But, is she not still a child?”

“Fifteen’s old enuff in Shcottland,” he replied proudly, sitting back and closing his eyes. “A man could live well on firty thoushand pounds.”

As Wickham began to snore, Elizabeth fled the parlor and ran up the stairs, shutting herself in her bedroom. She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried; "I, who have prided myself on my discernment and entertained myself with unwarranted distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, from the very beginning of our acquaintances I have chosen ignorance, and driven reason away. Till this moment I never knew myself.”

By the time he reached his rooms, Darcy was out of breath. Fortune had brought Elizabeth to Pemberley and he would not let her leave without ... something. At the very least he could show her that he was capable of being civil, that much he could manage. As he quickly washed and changed, he wondered if it was possible that there could be something more. After all, she
wouldn’t have set foot on his property if she truly hated him. People did say things in anger that they regretted later. All these months he had been torturing himself with her words, maybe she had been regretting them. Particularly since Wickham was involved; there had been enough time for that man’s true nature to begin to show.

He was halfway into his waistcoat when he froze. What had Wickham done in Meryton? And how was it that in all those months, when he was fretting over what Elizabeth thought of him, he never once considered what Wickham might be doing to her? Was that why she was in Derbyshire? Had that bastard ruined her, so she had to be sent away to ‘visit friends’ until their child was born?

Shaking his head, he gave his valet an apologetic look and finished dressing. It would not do to guess, he could only show her every civility and hope for the best. And if the worst had happened, he promised himself that he would do everything in his power to help both the mother and the child.

The walk from his rooms, and through the house and the grounds to find her, gave him time to think over their earlier encounter. She had not seemed either angry or ashamed, but rather uncomfortable. Perhaps it was only the awkwardness of meeting again after their horrible argument. Holding onto that thought, he stepped forward and asked to be introduced to her companions.

"By this time, my dearest sister, you have received my hurried letter. Dearest Lizzy, I hardly know what I would write, but I have bad news for you, and it cannot be delayed. Imprudent as a marriage between Mr. Wickham and our poor Lydia would be, we are now anxious to be assured it has taken place, for there is but too much reason to fear they are not gone to Scotland."

"Oh! where, where is my uncle?" cried Elizabeth, darting from her seat as she finished the letter, in eagerness to follow him, but as she reached the door it was opened by a servant, and Mr. Darcy appeared. Her pale face and impetuous manner made him start.

"Good God! What is the matter?" cried he, with more feeling than politeness. "Is there nothing you could take to give you present relief? A glass of wine; -- shall I get you one? You are very ill."

"No, I thank you," she replied, trying to recover herself. "There is nothing the matter with me. I am quite well; I am only distressed by some dreadful news which I have just received from Longbourn." She burst into tears, and for a few minutes could not speak another word.

Darcy, in wretched suspense, could only say something indistinctly of his concern, and observe her in compassionate silence.

At length she spoke again. "I have just had a letter from Jane, with such dreadful news. My youngest sister has left all her friends -- has eloped -- has thrown herself into the power of -- of Mr. Wickham. They are gone off together from Brighton. You know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money, no connexions, nothing that can tempt him to -- she is lost forever."

"Thank God," he exclaimed.

"Mr. Darcy! You cannot be pleased to hear this," she cried in horror.

"No, of course not. You misunderstand, or rather, I misspoke." Taking a deep breath, he began again. "These past few days I have been torturing myself with the possibility that Wickham had
imposed himself upon you; that you were here in Derbyshire because you had been forced to leave your home to conceal the consequences of his depravity. When I have considered that I might have prevented it! I, who knew what he was. Had I made his character known, you would have been safe. I am immeasurably grieved by what has happened to your sister, but you must forgive me if I am, at the same time, relieved that you yourself were not harmed.”

“It is not your fault. When my eyes were opened to his real character -- Oh! had I known what I ought, what I dared to do! But I knew not -- I was afraid of doing too much. Wretched, wretched, mistake!”

Though he wished desperately to know how she had learned such a thing, he knew it was not the time for that conversation. “But is it certain -- absolutely certain?” Darcy asked.

"Oh yes! They left Brighton together on Sunday night, and were traced almost to London, but not beyond: they are certainly not gone to Scotland."

"And what has been done, what has been attempted, to recover her?"

"My father is gone to London, and Jane has written to beg my uncle's immediate assistance. But nothing can be done -- I know very well that nothing can be done. How is such a man to be worked on? How are they even to be discovered? I have not the smallest hope. It is every way horrible!"

Kneeling before her, he took her hands between his own. “I am familiar with his habits and some of his acquaintances. We will find them, I promise you that.”

“You are too generous, sir. I cannot allow you …”

“Your allowance is not needed,” he interrupted her speech. “If I had acted as I should in Hertfordshire, Wickham would never have been permitted near your sister. I will do this, whether or not I have your permission."

“You are too good. After abusing you so abominably to your face, I do not deserve such kindness.”

Placing a tender kiss on each of her hands, he replied, “There is a great deal that I wish to say to you, and even more that I hope to hear, but time is pressing. For the moment, can we simply agree that we are, at least, friends?”

“I hope that we are.”

“Then accept that, as your friend, I am determined to help you, and your family, in this matter. Go find your aunt and uncle and make your preparations to leave. I will catch up with you on the road.”

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