Blasted Brandy

by FemmeMalheureuse

Summary

In vino veritas, they say. After a bit of the boosted grape juice, Darcy's truths spill out.

This is an excerpt from my soon-to-be-published P&P-based anthology.

The closer to Pemberley the carriage drew, the more conflicted Darcy felt, and for a variety of reasons.

The heat of the city had been oppressive, though it could have been worse; at least the wet, cool summer had kept down much of the dust and smells inimitable to London. But as refreshing and relaxing as a return to country should be, Darcy was worried about the harvest. The cold, wet spring had delayed plantings and the lambings were not as productive as past years. The harvest looked as if it would be pushed back, based on the appearance of the many fields he passed along the road to Derbyshire. At least this month had been warm and dry; it was a pity that he’d had to spend so much time away from his home and his heart.

His heart...yes, his poor heart, still bruised by disappointment, yet so eager to grasp any slim thread of hope on which to cling. He trusted his mad trip to London to hunt down that miserable excuse for a man would expiate his sin of omission—his failure to disclose the risk George Wickham posed to the Bennets and to Meryton at large. He protected his sister’s reputation, but at a cost to other families’ daughters. Now he bore part of that expense quite literally, through the expenditure of time and energy tracking Wickham, as well as negotiating the details necessary to salvage Elizabeth’s sister and the Bennet family’s reputation.
If only he could have offered all of this effort of atonement on a platter to her, to reveal to her the degree to which he was willing to work for her love. Pride, though, still occluded his thinking; he would not have her learn to love him out of any sense of obligation.

He wanted her respect, her admiration, her desire, her love, and ultimately her commitment, unfettered by any persons or events outside the two of them. She’d proven she would settle for nothing less than love and respect; she’d taught him to expect the same. She was worthy of being pleased, and only a reciprocal felicity would do if he were ever to make her home at Pemberley.

Until he resolved the mess he’d created through his high-handed deception, he could not expect her to ever respect him. He would have to swallow his pride, risk their friendship, and disclose to Bingley that his happiness had been obstructed by Darcy’s ineptitude at reading people, though motivated by good intentions.

No—he had to stop lying to himself, as well. He’d already put a friendship at risk for selfish reasons. If he was honest with himself it wasn’t just Bingley he’d removed from Hertfordshire. It was Darcy’s own person he’d removed in a misbegotten effort to adhere to ridiculous and hypocritical societal norms. How could any member of the Beau Monde sincerely vow before God they would love and honour their spouse if they were marrying only to improve fortunes and connections, and make heirs? In the strictest sense, the wedding vows did not make any reference to marriage for the purpose of procreation; they demanded quite simply both parties swear to love and honour their wedded spouse. He had spared himself through hypocrisy, clinging to misguided criteria, applying false principles in measuring Elizabeth’s suitability as his spouse.

Elizabeth.

Yes, he could and did love her, honour her, respect her. The steps he took to remedy the latest Wickham fiasco were in her honour, rendered out of his respect for her family’s name. He would do it again and again if he could earn the chance to win the kind of love she bestowed so freely on her friends and family.

Fixing his resolve, he waited patiently as the last miles passed beneath the carriage wheels, donning his neckcloth, waistcoat, and jacket in the stuffy, overwarm closed chaise only after entering Pemberley’s gates.

Unfortunately he arrived with enough time to refresh himself and meet his sister and guests for dinner; he wouldn’t be able to escape the latter. He’d asked the coachman to use an alternate approach so as not to draw attention to his arrival, though. Mrs. Reynolds would ken the meaning in this method; she would not inform the serving staff of his impending disembarkment, which would otherwise have drawn the attention of the Bingley family as well as Georgiana. He was hot, tired, and road sore; the last thing he needed was that which he damned well didn’t love or honour thrust in his face.

Within a short distance of the manse he jumped off the carriage, waving his coachman on. Darcy walked over the lawn, following the hedges along the ha-ha as he made his way toward the service entrance. He entered through the kitchens and used the service stairs to reach the family wing and his rooms, giving a quick nod here and a brief half-bow there depending on the seniority of the staff member he passed en route. Well-trained and conscious of the Darcy family’s privacy (not to mention the shared rabid dislike of the Bingley sisters), they bowed and curtseyed back silently so as not to draw attention to their master. Efficient as always, the kitchen staff put water on to heat as soon as Darcy had passed through.

Arriving at the master’s room through the servants’ passage, Darcy summoned his valet Jenkins and asked for a bath, a shave, brandy, and a change of clothing. Between the bath and the change for dinner, he squeezed in a brief catnap while soaking in the tub, drifting off as he pondered the
best manner in which to reveal his duplicity and stupidity to Charles. The brandy soothed his overactive brain and eased travel-borne aches that the bath didn’t otherwise relax.

An hour later Darcy was rested and dressed, ready to meet his guests for dinner. He stopped by Georgiana’s room to see if he could escort her to the dining room.

“Fitzwilliam!” Georgiana looked like she was ready to cry with relief as she flung herself at her brother. Indeed she began to sniffle as she fought back tears.

“Sweetling, whatever is the matter? I’m pleased you’re happy to see me, but this looks like something other than joy.” Darcy hugged the girl and kissed the top of her flax-blond head, then gently moved her to arm’s length in order to get a look into her eyes. Tears pooled then fell in spite of the girl’s best efforts; he deployed his handkerchief quickly to wipe them away.

“Will, I really missed you this time. I’m just not up to being a hostess yet. They were—” she stopped herself short, biting back her words. “I’ve been feeling a bit out of sorts, I’m afraid. I’ve had megrims for several days while you were gone.”

Darcy laughed. “Georgie, I’m told young women will have headaches on occasion, and I’m sure there have been irritants that made your headaches worse. Lud, I’m sure I’d have had a megrim or two as well under the circumstances.” He winked as she smiled and sniffled again.

“Would you like me to escort you down to dinner, or would you like to take dinner in your room? You’ve earned a quiet night if you want one. Just say the word.” He could see the temptation in her troubled blue eyes, wide with concern.

“No, you’ve had a long day of travel. The least I can do is help you through this evening. You’re going to have to tell me all about the urgent business that took you away, though.”

Darcy winced, not wanting to bring back memories of Wickham’s perfidy at Ramsgate by discussing Lydia Bennet’s fall from grace. He’d have to think of a way to explain it gently to her—maybe tomorrow they could have some time away from guests, riding out to survey the surrounding park and call on tenants.

“I don’t want to discuss it this evening in front of company, if you don’t mind, Georgie. Let’s talk about it tomorrow morning after we break our fast, yes?”

She nodded and smiled, taking his arm as they made their way to dinner. If only it was just the two of them.

Or perhaps just them and Charles...they both thought this, sharing not a word as they braced themselves for dinner.

The siblings stopped in the main sitting room, finding the three Bingleys in various states of repose. Miss Bingley all but jumped up like an orange satin flash from the settee on which she had been sitting in a studied manner, an excess of feathers worn in her hair emphasizing her excitement with their heaving and waving.

“Mr. Darcy! What an unexpected pleasure! How wonderful to have you back home so early!” Both the Darcy siblings had adopted their tightly closed social faces, but Caroline’s presumptuous gushing made their jaws clench tighter.

“Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst, Charles.” Darcy bowed as Georgiana curtseyed in greeting.

Charles rose and bounded toward Darcy in a manner cannily like a happy retriever, shaking his hand and clapping his friend heartily on the shoulder. “Darcy! Good to see you back! I’ve missed
the drubbings you give me over billiards, old chap! It’s well past time for you to give me a crack at winning back the stakes of my last bet.”

“I look forward to it. I don’t mind taking your money at all. A little more of your pocket change won’t hurt me.” Darcy smirked briefly as Charles laughed. There was no avoiding the fact that he’d have to talk with Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley next.

“I trust that Pemberley has treated you well in my absence, Mrs. Hurst, Miss Bingley?” He’d be damned if he’d apologize for his trip.

Miss Bingley piped up, halting whatever response her sister might have had on the tip of her tongue. “Oh, Pemberley has been lovely as always, Mr. Darcy, as lovely as it could be in the absence of its proud master,” she gushed, batting her eyes.

Darcy and Georgiana both fought the urge to roll their eyes. If only they knew how alike their thoughts were at that moment, they would surely have laughed.

Miss Bingley moved in on Darcy, patting his arm familiarly. “How was your business trip? You left in such a hurry, and now you’ve returned so unexpectedly. Why one might think you were working for the Home Office in intelligence, the way you came and went,” she warbled.

“My business was completed to my satisfaction, though I may be called away again soon on related matters.”

“Oh come now, Mr. Darcy! Surely a steward or an attorney can handle this business for you! A man of your prestige must be able to delegate such functions.”

_Blast your eyes! I should have had another brandy before I came down here_, thought Darcy, clenching his jaw again.

Mrs. Hurst only smiled and nodded her concurrence, small feathers in her hair waving as she did so. Of course they were nothing to the larger plumes Miss Bingley wore in her hair that fluttered with each condescending and possessive pat she gave Darcy’s arm.

Georgiana didn’t know whether to surreptitiously creep backward to the periphery of the room and off to her suite, or stay and slog it out. She could feel waves of tension rolling off her brother as Miss Bingley continued her effusions.

“We’ve dearly missed your companionship here. Riding around the park is nothing without your leadership, you must know. The evenings have been far too quiet.” More eyelid batting and chest puffing were employed as she leaned in closer, emphasizing Miss Bingley’s desires.

Darcy felt a cold finger of fear flicker its way along his spine. _Devil take it...he would have to ensure that his master bedroom suite doors were bolted and a footman stood guard else risk facing this creature’s unwanted and uninvited longings in the middle of the night._

“Ha! Yes, Darcy, it’s been too quiet without you, even though you are so bloody—oh, forgive me, Georgiana—such a reticent chap. At least now we can count on you to play some cards for entertainment. Georgiana has not felt up to playing of late, begging off early. This heat must be sapping the poor dear, fatiguing her excessively.”

Georgie smiled and nodded at Mr. Bingley. Darcy examined his sister; her eyes darted in his direction. Ah, she was fine, just put out by an evening with the Bingley sisters.

The head footman announced dinner, conveniently forestalling any further effusions by Miss Bingley. The orange enrobed one clasped her hands tightly about Darcy’s arm like a cat’s claws in
a mouse, silently demanding he escort her into dinner. Charles happily offered his arms to each of Mrs. Hurst and Georgie, following Darcy and Miss Bingley into the dining room.

Georgie took her place at the mistress’ end of the table; Miss Bingley eyed the place setting possessively as she passed it, wishing at first she sat there then thinking better of it as she could sit in a place of honor at Darcy’s right hand.

Darcy tried very hard not to shudder as Caroline settled into her seat. He nodded to the footmen as quickly as possible after sitting, indicating dinner should be served immediately.

And the wine, yes the wine—he drank far more than he usually did, in part to numb down his annoyance and as a prevention against terse words. As long as silver, china, or crystal were at his lips he couldn’t say anything untoward.

Miss Bingley continued to badger him through the meal in her indirect manner—what was the news in London? He must have had many callers in spite of the off-season, yes? Were there any new shows at the smaller venues and did he attend? All her questions eventually worked their way around the same locus: who and what took him away from her and her intended future home?

Georgie had all she could do to choke through her dinner. She kept her head down and focused on each course, looking up only when spoken to while contributing little to the conversation over dinner. Even the usually ebullient Bingley couldn’t draw her out, but then he was a little off himself, not as open and happy as the Darcys had come to expect.

Finally the dessert course had been cleared; Darcy chose not to separate the sexes after dinner, though Charles looked a bit down at the mouth at the loss of time away from his siblings. The cohort moved to the sitting room where tea, coffee, and digestifs were served. Georgiana took to the piano immediately, playing several pieces she had recently learned. As soon as she was done, she begged off requests for another piece and excused herself for the evening with a brief kiss on the cheek from Darcy as a blessing.

Georgie ran for her room as soon as she was out of earshot. Her brother had drunk far more wine with dinner and oloroso sherry afterward than she had ever seen him drink. She could smell it on him when he kissed her cheek. Nothing good could come from this; she wanted to be well away in the quiet of her room. She sighed with relief as she settled into her bed with a good book and made plans to resume her lessons in the morning with Mrs. Annesley rather than ride with Fitzwilliam.

The girl hadn’t noticed that Charles had also kept pace with Darcy, not wanting to be his puppy but his companion. Both Charles and Darcy were feeling no pain by the time Georgia had settled into her bed.

“How convenient! There are just the four of us now! We can play loo, though it will be quiet without Georgiana’s lovely accompaniment on the piano,” Caroline warbled as she made a beeline for the cabinet where the cards and baize tablecloth were kept.

Darcy couldn’t restrain a sigh and a roll of his eyes as he looked to Charles. His friend looked a bit flush in the face, though it wasn’t clear if it was the evening’s warmth, the wine consumed with dinner, or embarrassment over his sister’s persistent pushiness. Darcy ignored it and poured himself and Charles a draught of brandy each; Bingley drank his a bit too quickly after nodding enthusiastically with gratitude as he accepted it.

Mrs. Hurst shuffled and dealt the cards as her sister continued her assault on Darcy, taking slightly different tacks on her earlier questions. It bordered on badgering, making her target more taciturn and tense than he had been.
Trapped at cards for nearly two hours, at least two more brandies and too many tricks later, Miss Bingley led with the trump ace, calling, “Pam, be civil,” as required to prevent anyone else playing that ace on a trick.

Darcy snarled under his breath, “Pam best not be the only one civil.”

Miss Bingley gasped.

Mrs. Hurst froze.

Charles barked a coughing laugh.

“Mr. Darcy! I trust you are joking! I should never allow my partner to talk that way at loo!” Caroline’s eyes bugged wide in shock, unable to believe what she heard.

But the brandy at bathtime, five glasses of white and red wines with dinner, two shells of sherry, and three more postprandial brandies had taken control of Darcy’s tongue.

“Partner? Bah, woman, I’m not your partner here at loo nor at anything else! And I’ll say what I bloody well want to say in my own demmed home!”

“Mm-Mister D-Darcy! How dare you!” Caroline sputtered, her face now so flush with anger that one could not tell by the candlelight where her flesh ended and her brick-orange dress began.

Her brother continued to cough-laugh, having made the mistake of sipping brandy to wash down his last laugh just as Darcy rejoined, inhaling deeply at the same time.

Mrs. Hurst wavered like a juggler with invisible balls hovering in the air, unable to decide whether she should slap her brother on the back or rush to her sister’s aid since Caroline looked in need of a handkerchief, or just ignore it all and continue to manage her hand.

“How dare I? HOW DARE I? Madame, how dare you? You’ve pestered me every blasted way to Sunday since you clapped eyes on me this evening. Thank God I had the sense to hide from you for a while after I arrived home or I’d be worn right through from your incessant nosey hammering at my private business!”

Charles finally coughed up the last of the brandy’s fumes he’d inhaled and began to laugh maniacally at the tableau before him—Louisa, pale and flapping like a mute swan, Darcy thundering darkly like a storm cloud, and Caroline now blanching from reddest-red to whitest-white.

“CHARLES! Get a grip on yourself, man! Put a leash and a muzzle on your sister! She’s like an untrained lap dog, yapping and nipping at me constantly! You would do well to know she’s bitten you in the ass as well, the spoilt bitch, lying to you about your beloved Miss Bennet!”

“Wha-wha—” Charles blanched, his turn now to gasp in surprise. “WHAT?!” the now less-than-amiable younger man shouted.

Mrs. Hurst, still mute, collapsed in her seat, still fluttering a handkerchief ineffectually.

Caroline froze, her eyes widest yet, her skin whitest but mottled in pink splotches along her chest and cheeks. The color orange never looked as ill on her as it did at that moment.

“What’s the matter, Miss Bingley? Cat finally got your sharp tongue now, eh? This is the quietest you’ve been any time I’ve been around you during the last year!” Darcy had risen, knocking over his chair, drawing the attention of a footman who peered around the corner of the sitting room.
door. The footman’s eyebrows were raised up tight into his hairline, his lips drawn taut to prevent a smile as Darcy slammed his fist on the baize-covered table.

All three Bingleys jumped, surprised at Darcy’s action; the footman ducked quickly out of sight but within earshot.

“Yes, Charles, your younger sister not only hen-pecked at you AND me to separate you from Miss Bennet, but she lied about Miss Bennet’s presence in London this winter. Go on, ask her exactly what communications and interactions she had with Jane, what she knew about her whereabouts. You may call me out for my role here as I erred in my belief that Miss Bennet did not feel strongly for you. But this shrewish bit here had no such concerns for your future well-being, only for herself.”

Miss Bingley had blanched completely, now sporting a pale green cast as if she would be ill, looking more like the stem on a ripening pumpkin. She sagged in her seat as if waiting for a blow.

Mrs. Hurst sniffled, her eyes watering out of confusion and frustration over her conflicted loyalties.

Wagging his finger at her, he continued. “Oh no, Mrs. Hurst, you’d best not start caterwauling. You’ve a role here, too. I don’t suppose you said anything to Charles about Miss Bennet’s presence in London this winter either, not to mention your own share of the nagging against further involvement with her. It’s no bloody wonder to me that your husband conveniently left to visit family instead of spending time here with you.”

The tears began to leak, trailing slowly down her pasty powdered cheeks.

“LOUISA! You’re the eldest of our family! Does this mean you allowed Caro to call the shots on both of our lives by subordinating your role to her?” Charles’ forehead knotted with fury, his teeth gritted as he snarled at his older sister.

“Bu-but—” Mrs. Hurst could only babble. Nothing intelligent emerged from her moist, sputtering lips.

Darcy’s head now ached from imbibing too heavily combined with too much tension. He needed to escape to the quiet of his room before he said or did anything more drastic than he already had. He drew himself up carefully into his Darcy hauteur, blinking his eyes slowly.

“Please accept my apologies for my outburst. I’m afraid I am well into my cups and have spoken irresponsibly. Please excuse me. I’ll turn in for the night.”

“But Mr. Darcy—” Caroline whined. She was desperate now. Everything she’d longed for hung in this moment.

“There will be no more ‘but’ anything, Miss Bingley. I am your brother’s friend, and that is all I have been to you, and will ever be, if he chooses to retain me as a friend.”

Darcy bowed slowly, picking his way with exaggerated care around the fallen chair before righting it.

“Charles, I’ll see you in my study late tomorrow morning. That is, if you still care to talk with me. I learned much this spring and summer that I wish to share with you. In private.” Darcy glared at Miss Bingley for emphasis before turning around and walking toward the door.

Bingley, vacillating between slack-jawed shock and sulky seething, could only hiccup and nod his assent.
Darcy pulled the sitting room door closed behind him. He nodded at the footman standing at attention in the hallway as he walked toward the family wing and his apartment.

As he approached the end of the hall he heard a tremendous outburst of muffled shouting and screaming behind him. He looked over his shoulder only to see the footman still standing at his station outside the sitting room, eyes closed, tears rolling down his face as he heaved silently with laughter, white gloved hands clutching his belly.

He couldn’t help it; he was too bosky not to give into the sudden urge to laugh at the unseen furor in the sitting room, as well as poor Henry the footman suffering torments from pent-up amusement. What would his darling Elizabeth think of this mess? She dearly loved a good laugh, after all.

Darcy laughed all the way to his rooms, as threw open his windows, as he shed his clothes, as he dismissed poor puzzled Jenkins. He chuckled himself into an inebriated stupor and then brandy-soaked sleep, slumped in his favorite armchair before the tightly banked fire in his bedroom fireplace, still clutching another bedtime bumper of brandy, and naked as the day he was born.

Sadly for his dizzy, pounding head, the chambermaid woke him with a surprised shriek after dawn when she came to check the fireplace and windows.

Oh what she would have to add to the chatter below stairs that morning...

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!