The Pine-Apple of Discord

by a_t_rain

Summary

Mr. Collins attempts to impress Lady Catherine with a display of conspicuous consumption. Things go wrong.

Notes

Once, when I was preparing to teach Northanger Abbey (in which General Tilney complains that his pinery has yielded only one hundred pineapples in the last year), I stumbled across the interesting fact that pineapples would have been worth about a hundred dollars apiece in Austen's day, and that they were such a status symbol that people would rent them to display at dinner-parties. This made me wonder, what would happen if your guests ATE the rental pineapple? And so this story was born...

“A pine-apple!” exclaimed Lady Catherine de Bourgh. “We are so looking forward to it! Anne is excessively fond of pine-apple, are you not, Anne?”

“Yes, mama,” said Anne. Anne’s conversation, as a rule, consisted of a great deal of “Yes, mama.”

There are certain married couples who are in the habit of speaking without words, whose mutual sympathy is so deep that every glance carries a world of meaning. Mr. and Mrs. Collins were not, ordinarily, one of those couples. It was a testament to the singular and appalling nature of their present circumstances that they exchanged a single anguished look, and understood one another’s distress perfectly.
The pine-apple had been hired for the dinner-party; it was to be returned to the fruiterer’s on the following day, after it had graced the table as a center-piece. Or so they had planned. Pine-apples cost a guinea apiece, and they certainly could not afford to eat one. But it appeared that Lady Catherine had other plans, and one did not disappoint Lady Catherine.

Charlotte never remembered, afterwards, just how she got through that dreadful meal. Inwardly, she cursed her husband for insisting on the pine-apple. It had been entirely his idea: a piece de resistance to impress Lady Catherine, which now seemed a wretched, pretentious piece of foolishness.

When the moment came, Mr. Collins took up his carving knife and fork. It was all too obvious – to Charlotte, at least – that he had no idea what to do with the pine-apple, and was pathetically desirous of concealing this fact. The spiky crown of leaves at the top would have to be sliced off – that much was obvious – but what did one do after that? Experimentally, he tried carving off a paper-thin slice from the exposed end, as one would carve a turkey, only to have it collapse in a limp heap of golden flesh and juice. He tried to look as if he had done this on purpose.

His next attempt – a lengthwise, V-shaped slice – was more successful. He carved off the rind and served Lady Catherine, then the other ladies.

Charlotte could not bring herself to eat hers. A whole guinea! Lady Catherine, however, appeared to be enjoying the pine-apple very much, as did Anne, and that was something.

After the guests had gone, she sent the remainder of the pine-apple down to the kitchen, to be eaten by the servants. There was no sense in wasting it, but she never wanted to see the miserable object again.

It was not until much later, as she was preparing for bed, that curiosity overcame her and she asked her maid, “What does pine-apple taste like?”

Sarah sighed rapturously. “Like summer sunshine and flowers, ma’am.”

* * *

Mr. and Mrs. Collins lingered over the breakfast table, plotting how to proceed in the wake of the previous evening’s calamity. It was not that they absolutely could not afford to pay for a pine-apple, but it would mean scrimping on many other things – and the baby, now more than a year old, was forever outgrowing his clothes, and Charlotte’s sister Maria was coming to visit and would need to be amused, and there was every risk that Lady Catherine would swoop down upon them again. Besides, the replacement pine-apple would have to be found somewhere outside of Hunsford Village, since the only shop that sold them was the one where they had hired it in the first place. That meant that they would need to buy time.

It occurred to Charlotte that it might be easier to simply tell the fruiterer that there had been an unfortunate accident to the pine-apple, and to pay for it at once; but her husband would not hear of it. The local tradesmen must not be allowed to think that they were careless people. As a clergyman, he had an example to set.

And so Charlotte wrote to the fruiterer, begging his forgiveness for her failure to return the pineapple on the appointed day, and assuring him that she would send it with one of her servants as soon as the shop opened on Monday. A scrupulously honest woman under ordinary circumstances, she made the usual errors common to inexperienced liars: not only was baby Lucas sick, perhaps with measles or something else contagious, which made it imperative that the household remain in a state of quarantine; but also, the servant who usually attended to such matters had run off unexpectedly; also, Mr. Collins’s horse was lame; also, the threatening weather made it wholly impossible to send
anyone on foot, especially not Sarah, who had been coughing lately; and the household in general
was in such a state of confusion that the fruiterer might be excused for wondering how Mrs. Collins
had ever managed to pen and send off such a long list of excuses in the first place. A more habitual
reprobate would have confined herself to one such explanation, or brazened it out with no
explanation at all; poor Charlotte spent half the morning in the composition of this epistle, and sent it
off fearing that she had left something out. Howbeit, the fruiterer seemed to accept her excuses, and
gave her leave to keep the pine-apple until Tuesday afternoon, when it was wanted for another
dinner-party.

Meanwhile – although Charlotte mercifully knew nothing of this – Lady Catherine was writing to
her nephew, Mr. Darcy.

* * *

Under the careful tutelage of his wife, Mr. Darcy had slowly learned to find his aunt amusing rather
than infuriating – or at least, to regard her as infuriating in an amusing way. He therefore read her
letter aloud to Elizabeth.

We have dined at Hunsford, and I fear that Mr. and Mrs. Collins were sadly discommoded by our
presence. Pray have your wife assure them that they are not expected to provide luxuries such as
pine-apples at every dinner-party – we are by no means so overnice that we cannot face a meal
without them. Besides, such fruits may show well at the dinner-table at Rosings, where they are in
keeping with their surroundings, but in a country parsonage, they savour of ostentation. Simple food,
well cooked, should be the rule in a clergyman’s household, especially since Mr. Collins is prone to
dyspepsia, as I have often reminded him ...

“Poor Aunt Catherine,” remarked Mr. Darcy. “It must be a sad disappointment for her that she no
longer has the only pine-apples in the village.”

“She must either reduce Mr. Collins’s living, or contrive to raise the price of pine-apples – or more
probably both,” replied Elizabeth. But privately, she was thoughtful. She had inferred rather more
from this letter than her husband had – for she had grown up in a household with more pretensions
than money.

* * *

My dear Charlotte,

I trust that this letter finds you well. I have sent some of the first fruits of our pinery at Pemberley; I
hope you will enjoy them as much as we have ...

Charlotte gasped, and flew to open the package that had accompanied the letter. There, nestled
among the wadded-up paper, were two pine-apples.

It seemed positively Providential – so much so that Charlotte had an awful doubt that her husband
might have written to Lizzie requesting pine-apple. She was his cousin, and very rich, and he could
be wholly shameless at times. She repressed this fear. After all, Mr. Collins had just ridden out to see
whether there were any pine-apples to be had in the next village, and he would hardly do that if he
were expecting one from Lizzie. She sent Robert, their only manservant, to chase him down and
bring him back before he could make a rash purchase, and left one of the pine-apples on the table
where he would see it when he came in.

She deposited the other one in the cool of the kitchen, a place where she felt, oddly, more at home
than anywhere else in the parsonage. It was one place where her husband never came. Lucas was
playing on the flagstoned floor; Annie and Sarah were drinking tea and gossiping in the niche set aside for the servants’ meals.

Charlotte stood contemplating the pine-apple for a moment. She really ought to save it for their next dinner-party, she supposed. Also, she ought to tell her husband about it when he came home.

Instead, she attacked it with a large carving knife, making the sweet golden juice run down onto the chopping board.

Sarah was right. It did taste of sunshine and flowers – but hotter suns than any that had ever shone in England, and more exotic flowers than she could imagine. She had a vague vision of palm trees, and bright bursts of color.

She picked Lucas up, and poked a bit of the pine-apple into his mouth, and watched his eyes widen with wonder and delight.

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