Infinite Use

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

Lady Catherine has been of infinite use, which ought to make her happy, for she loves to be of use. -- Pride and Prejudice, Ch 58

starring:

COLONEL THE HONOURABLE JOHN FITZWILLIAM

THE LADY CATHERINE DE BOURGH

FITZWILLIAM DARCY

ANNE DE BOURGH

DARCY HOUSE — afternoon

[FITZWILLIAM is sprawled comfortably across a sofa. DARCY sits across from him, his spine ramrod-straight, and his hand resting on his omnipresent copy of King Lear.]

FITZWILLIAM: I never saw the point. It is not as if it does anything for the story.

DARCY: It is the thematic import — oh, never mind.

FITZWILLIAM: I think he realised the play was nearly over and couldn’t think of another way to wrap it all up, so he just killed everyone.
DARCY [smiles thinly]: Except Edgar.

FITZWILLIAM: And what’s-his-name, the servant who’s the only sensible character in the play.

DARCY: Kent.

FITZWILLIAM: Cordelia should have married him.

DARCY [looks pained]: Fitzwilliam, that is hardly the —

FOOTMAN: Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Miss de Bourgh to see you, sirs.

[LADY CATHERINE and MISS DE BOURGH enter RIGHT. DARCY and FITZWILLIAM spring to their feet in unison with identical expressions of astonishment and dismay.]

LADY CATHERINE: What are you doing here, Fitzwilliam?

DARCY: Well, this is my house.

FITZWILLIAM: I am visiting Darcy, aunt.

[LADY CATHERINE sniffs. DARCY recovers his composure and coughs.]

DARCY: My dear aunt, what an . . . unexpected . . . er . . .

FITZWILLIAM: Pleasure! We had no idea . . . no idea that you were . . . [looks pleadingly at DARCY]

DARCY: Er . . . that you were coming to town, aunt. If we had known, I certainly would have invited you.

FITZWILLIAM: Yes. Certainly.

[They look at one another, and suddenly see the humour in their situation. FITZWILLIAM suppresses a snicker. DARCY smiles.]

LADY CATHERINE: What are you smirking at, Fitzwilliam? Well, it is of no consequence. I am here on a matter of urgent business!

FITZWILLIAM: Urgent, is it? Oh, I beg your pardon, cousin . . . [MISS DE BOURGH, a bland-looking woman of about thirty, appears disinterested to the point of sedation.] We are, of course, delighted to see you, as well. Aren’t we, Darcy?

DARCY [supremely unenthusiastic]: Oh. Yes.

LADY CATHERINE [beaming]: Anne looks very well, does she not, Darcy?

DARCY: Er . . . [MISS DE BOURGH is wearing a gown in a particularly unflattering shade of bright green. She looks anaemic.] Yes, of course . . . she seems as . . . remarkably fine . . . as ever. How is your health, Anne?

MISS DE BOURGH [scowling]: Very poor.

DARCY [more sincerely]: I am sorry to hear it.

FITZWILLIAM: Speaking of Cousin Anne’s poor health, what business could be so urgent as to, er . . .
DARCY: — as to risk her health in coming to this, this . . .

[Everyone looks blank.]

FITZWILLIAM: . . . thriving metropolis?

[MISS DE BOURGH seems singularly unimpressed.]

DARCY: Hotbed of sin . . . and dissipation . . .

[MISS DE BOURGH’s expression is unchanged.]

FITZWILLIAM: . . . and disease!

MISS DE BOURGH [horrified]: Mama! You never said that . . . [has a fit of coughing]

LADY CATHERINE: I am sure that your cousin does not tolerate disease in his house, Anne.

FITZWILLIAM: Quite so, aunt. This is not the sort of wild establishment where servants are permitted to go about coughing and wheezing.

DARCY: Certainly not! — no fever darkens my door.

FITZWILLIAM: Except from family members, of course. They may cough and wheeze to their hearts’ content.

DARCY: Naturally.

LADY CATHERINE: Do you see, Anne? I knew your cousin could not be so lax.

MISS DE BOURGH: Yes, Mama. [She throws a suspicious glance at the bookcase, and runs her finger along the shelves. FITZWILLIAM stares, then turns away, his shoulders shaking.] Your servants seem adequate, Fitzwilliam.

DARCY: Thank you, Anne. [He turns towards LADY CATHERINE.] Aunt, I believe you mentioned some rather pressing business with me?

LADY CATHERINE: Yes! Why, I have never seen such impertinence in all my life!

[DARCY and FITZWILLIAM blink.]

FITZWILLIAM: Im . . . pertinence?

LADY CATHERINE: Yes, impertinence! No respect for her elders . . . well, I knew it must be a scurrilous rumour . . .

[MISS DE BOURGH examines the next shelf, then pulls out a book.]

LADY CATHERINE: — but I determined to know the truth of the matter at once!

[DARCY and FITZWILLIAM look blank.]

DARCY: Oh . . . did you?

FITZWILLIAM: How, er, nice.

LADY CATHERINE: Yes, of course I did! Do you suppose me the sort of woman who shirks
my duty to my relations?

DARCY and FITZWILLIAM [feelingly]: No, Lady Catherine.

LADY CATHERINE: Then, she absolutely refused to oblige me! Have you ever heard of such insolence? such temerity? such a wilful lack of respect for rank and authority and what is due to one’s elders?

FITZWILLIAM [sympathetically]: It must have been a great shock, ma’am.

LADY CATHERINE: Well, I should not have expected anything better of a girl of such low, common breeding.

FITZWILLIAM: Er . . . quite.

MISS DE BOURGH: There is mould growing on this book! We could all be poisoned! In fact, I am beginning to feel quite faint . . .

DARCY [shortly]: It is an illustration, Anne.

MISS DE BOURGH: Are you certain?

DARCY: Yes.

FITZWILLIAM: Lady Catherine, you were speaking of your encounter with this terribly ill-bred young lady?

LADY CATHERINE: Why, can you imagine what she said to me?

DARCY: I really have not the slightest idea.

LADY CATHERINE: She said that any wife of yours would have such ‘extraordinary sources of happiness’ attached to her situation that she cared nothing for the disgrace of the world and the feelings of all your nearest relations!

DARCY [utterly bewildered]: Did she?

LADY CATHERINE: Yes! And then she said some nonsense about being your equal! Well, her father may be a gentleman, but he is nothing more than a common country squire, and her mother! Not to mention her jezebel of a sister, and . . . and That Man. To think that he would be your brother, and Georgiana’s! It is intolerable, I say!

FITZWILLIAM: Madam, we seem to have missed a few salient points. Who, exactly, is the young lady in question?

LADY CATHERINE [looking disdainful even for her]: Have you taken of your senses? Miss Elizabeth Bennet, of course!

[DARCY draws his breath in sharply. FITZWILLIAM is more confused than ever.]

FITZWILLIAM: Miss . . . Elizabeth . . . Bennet?

LADY CATHERINE: Yes, Miss Elizabeth Bennet! Who else?

FITZWILLIAM: Er . . .

[DARCY seems too stunned to speak.]
MISS DE BOURGH: You remember, Jack — Mrs Collins’ friend, the pretty one.

FITZWILLIAM: Yes, of course I remember, but . . . I did not think . . . Lady Catherine, I have never heard anything of this rumour. *mutters* And I would not have believed it if I had.

LADY CATHERINE: Well, gentleman do not concern themselves with gossip.

FITZWILLIAM [*coughs*]: Ah . . . who did you hear this from, then?

LADY CATHERINE: Mr Collins, naturally. His wife’s family seemed to think a proposal was imminent.

FITZWILLIAM: Oh. Well, it is a bit of a joke, do you not think? They do not even like each other!

LADY CATHERINE [*snippily*]: I may assure you, young man, that this insignificant hussy is determined to have him!

[DARCY makes a strangled sound.]

FITZWILLIAM: I hardly think there is anything to worry about. The rumour clearly has not gone beyond Mrs Collins’ family; Miss Bennet probably knew nothing of it herself, and was reacting mainly out of surprise. I am sure it is only friendly neighbourhood speculation, one marriage leading to another and all that.

DARCY: Madam, are you *quite* certain that she said . . . that she said my wife must necessarily be a happy woman?

LADY CATHERINE: Yes, of course I am certain! I am always certain! Why, when I graciously condescended to ask that she refuse ever to marry you, she would not! What else could it mean?

[DARCY has the expression of someone who is trying to add two and two and keeps coming up with ten.]

FITZWILLIAM: Come, ma'am, this is really very inconsequential. I hardly think that Darcy went into Hertfordshire to ask Miss Bennet to marry him! Did you, Darcy?

DARCY [*considers*]: No, that is not why I went to Hertfordshire.

FITZWILLIAM: There, you see?

[MISS DE BOURGH glances up, narrowing her eyes at her cousins.]

LADY CATHERINE: Hmmph. Perhaps you are right. Be on your guard, nephew — she may try and use her *arts and allurements* to draw you in!

[DARCY clearly does not find the prospect terribly distasteful.]

FITZWILLIAM [*hastily*]: Quite so, ma'am. We are exceptionally grateful for your solicitude, are we not?

DARCY [*straightening, his expression suddenly composed and confident again*]: Oh yes. I found your information most enlightening, Lady Catherine.

LADY CATHERINE: I should hope so. Well, that is a great burden off of my mind. I shall see you at Easter, I suppose?
FITZWILLIAM: Of course.

[DARCY compresses his lips and looks away.]

LADY CATHERINE: Very well, then. I take my leave of you both.

DARCY and FITZWILLIAM: Farewell, Aunt.

[LADY CATHERINE sweeps away, exiting RIGHT. MISS DE BOURGH is still examining the bookshelves. Several awkward moments pass.]

FITZWILLIAM: Er, Anne?

MISS DE BOURGH: May I have this book, cousin? The mou — pictures are pretty.

DARCY: Yes, if you would like.

[She continues to search the shelves. DARCY and FITZWILLIAM exchange bemused glances.]

FITZWILLIAM: Anne, I think that your mother —

MISS DE BOURGH [to DARCY]: Fitzwilliam, do you know that you are my only relation who has not offended me?

DARCY: That is truly astonishing.

FITZWILLIAM: What did I ever do to you?

MISS DE BOURGH: You pulled my hair when I was eight. [She turns back to DARCY.] I do not expect that I shall ever be married, at my age, and on further consideration, I do not think I wish to be.

DARCY: Oh?

MISS DE BOURGH: I liked Miss Bennet. After you marry her . . .

FITZWILLIAM: What?!

MISS DE BOURGH: As I was saying, after you marry her, if you and she both refrain from insulting me, I shall leave Rosings to one of your children.

[DARCY blinks several times. FITZWILLIAM’s mouth works.]

DARCY: My dear Anne, you are . . . very generous, but surely Rosings should stay in the de Bourgh family?

MISS DE BOURGH: I don’t like them. They offended me, too.

DARCY: Ah.

MISS DE BOURGH: And, pleasant as Miss Bennet is, you shall have to come up with a great deal of money for your daughters and younger sons.

DARCY: It is hardly a settled matter, cousin.

MISS DE BOURGH [confidently]: Oh, it will be, soon enough; I saw her face. And with four sisters, I am sure that she will give you plenty of children.
DARCY: Anne, I hardly know what to . . .

LADY CATHERINE [from RIGHT]: ANNE!

MISS DE BOURGH: You used to hold my chair for me, when we were children . . . well, I hope you are very happy. Oh, and you too, Jack, if you ever find a woman who can tolerate you.

DARCY: Thank you, Anne.

FITZWILLIAM [disgruntled]: Yes, Anne, thank you so very much.

[She sniffs, clasps DARCY’s hand and exits RIGHT in exactly the same manner that her mother did. FITZWILLIAM begins laughing.]

FITZWILLIAM: What a joke! You, marry Miss Elizabeth Bennet! Have you ever heard anything more ridiculous? [He pauses.] Why, Darcy, you don't look amused. Surely you are not offended by something so trivial as this?

DARCY: Forgive me for not cackling as you do, Fitzwilliam. I assure you, I am highly -- diverted.

FITZWILLIAM: A pity, though, about Rosings. Perhaps you should marry her, after all!

DARCY [smiling]: Perhaps I should.

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