Tea-time Tantrum

by FemmeMalheureuse

Summary

After two years of patiently waiting on Anne de Bourgh, Charlotte Collins won't take no for answer — and with very good reason.

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

“Anne, please come inside and join us for tea.”

“Oh Charlotte, I really don’t think I should.”

“Anne, please. You’ve reduced me to begging once again. Please come inside.”

For more than two years this ritualistic exchange of call-and-response was performed in front of the parsonage at Hunsford. The curricle would pull up as Miss de Bourgh made her twice-weekly call on the parson’s wife; Mrs. Collins, the ever-patient parson’s wife, would greet her at the garden gate.

And every visit went thus: the mutual greeting, the mutual inquiry as to the respective household’s health, the request to tea, the refusal, the reciprocal request to tea or dinner at Rosings where applicable, the acceptance, the exchange of any other new information regarding the parish and Rosings’ tenants (weather permitting), and finally the mutual farewell.

Only minor deviations from this pas de deux occurred during these two years, consisting mainly of the occasional interjection by Miss de Bourgh’s companion or Mrs. Collins’ husband if he should
happen upon the ladies as he came and went from the parsonage.

But the pattern was different this morning, in no small part because the larger circumstances inside which these meetings occurred were also different.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh was ailing; her heart was not functioning as it should. Perhaps the grand dame’s heart had truly broken with the marriage of her favorite nephew, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, to an insignificant country gentleman’s daughter rather than her own daughter Anne.

If one were to ask Rosings’ serving staff, however, they’ll say the lady’s heart was diseased — black and bitter, through and through — long before Mr. Darcy’s marriage. It was merely just desserts that the darkness inside the woman finally turned inward on her instead of outward against the generous nephew and his kind and vivacious wife.

The lady’s physician and the local apothecary agreed that her diet needed less rich foods and the addition of a foxglove tisane. These measures were accepted after the usual grumbling expostulations, but they did help relieve some of the older woman’s symptoms. This was only a temporary measure, however; given her sedentary lifestyle and her intense personal attitude, Lady Catherine’s heart would eventually peter out.

And then what would become of Miss de Bourgh?

Lady Catherine was not on terms with her brother, Lord Matlock and the rest of the Fitzwilliams after the break between Rosings and Pemberley when her nephew married that obstinate, headstrong girl. They limited contact to exchange of letters only and would be of little help until Lady Catherine was in extremis — far too late in Mrs. Collins’ opinion — and any chance of reconciliation was too nebulous on which to bank the future of the Collines’ household.

Mrs. Collins worried that Mr. Collins, though selected and favored by Lady Catherine, would wear on the younger lady’s nerves. The good Lord knows Mr. Collins wore on her own nerves and then some; she was obligated to put up with the man’s ridiculousness, though, bound for this lifetime to him in exchange for her own home. Miss de Bourgh could easily ask the archbishop to find another living for the annoying Mr. Collins, subjecting them to circumstances worse than these in which the Collins currently lived, and in a location even farther away from her family in Hertfordshire.

There was the possibility that Mr. Collins could find himself in possession of Longbourn, as heir to entailed Bennet estate. But as luck would have it, Mr. Bennet — Mr. Darcy’s acerbic yet beloved father-in-law — was in fine health and would likely live another ten, twenty or more years. In fact Mr. Bennet seemed even healthier now that three of his daughters were married and prospects for the remaining two had improved substantially.

If one asked the serving staff at Longbourn, Mr. Bennet’s health had improved because Mrs. Bennet had suffered an attack of apoplexy eleven months after her daughter Elizabeth’s wedding, not long after Lizzy gave birth to twin boys. The apoplexy left Mrs. Bennet without the use of her left arm and leg, and speechless as well. Further, the poor woman’s disposition had changed; she seemed much more like the happy young wife she had once been, though limited to half-smiles without words to communicate her pleasures.

Poor Mr. Bennet; to have to endure the loss of his wife’s companionship...nevertheless, the gentleman seemed more chipper, in the pink, a ready smile and a bit of conversation for anyone who visited Longbourn. His two daughters at home both seemed happy, too, their lives richer for the new piano and art masters that their Darcy and Bingley brothers and sisters had hired for them, along with a companion to train them in literature, languages, and household management as well as nurses to care for Mrs. Bennet. At least Mrs. Bennet could rest easy, knowing her remaining
daughters were well cared for — if she was capable of fully understanding this point.

It fell then by default to Mrs. Collins to worry about Miss de Bourgh’s future. She had asked for guidance from her childhood friend, Mrs. Darcy — Charlotte was still struggling with calling her Mrs. Darcy or Lizzy, since she’d always called her Eliza. But now that Lady Catherine was ailing and sometimes seemed confused, it was better to refer to her by the names that were more commonly used by the Darcy and Fitzwilliam families. So to Lizzy-not-Eliza it was that she sent her letters pleading her case for assistance with Miss de Bourgh.

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Lizzy could not get away from Pemberley or Darcy House in London. She was an unfashionable hands-on mother, caring directly for her infant sons; while she had the best possible domestic help, she didn’t want to leave her boys to visit Charlotte, nor did she want to subject the family and staff to three or more days’ torture confined in carriages with two very needy babies. Given the circumstances, she did the next best thing: she asked her beloved husband for his guidance with regard to Miss de Bourgh.

“A woman of Anne’s age will not be able to make her first season without causing herself more trouble than it is worth, Will. She’s been on the shelf already, and she hasn’t the accomplishments necessary to attract a husband save for the worst kind. She could come live with us, but that’s not a true solution as a vacant Rosings would create a new challenge.”

“I know, I know. I am very sorry about Anne’s situation.” Darcy stared out the window over the lawn toward the stream as he thought about his neglected cousin. The once taciturn man had learned a thing or two from marriage, though; he could now feel his wife’s eyes boring a hole in his backside. Before he was married he might have felt her gaze, but missed the intent behind it if he’d taken note at all.

“I’m not so sorry that I’d ever regret not marrying her, though. Her lack of accomplishments alone, particularly in comparison to your gifts, made her unsuitable as mistress of Pemberley.”

*That was a close save, Will thought to himself. It’s the truth but Lizzy deserves another reminder there was never any chance in hell I’d have married Anne. There was only Lizzy, ever.*

Elizabeth continued to watch her husband carefully; she could almost read his mind now, knowing he felt a bit on the spot. If she left him to stew on this, he’d solve the problem with little prodding save for her intense if quiet attention. *Master of Pemberley, humpf. Master of the universe,* she thought.

“The same lack of accomplishments also make her inadequate to the task of running Rosings, even with a good steward like the one I’ve hired for the estate. She can’t properly audit the work or provide options should the steward get in over his own head with an estate problem. And as a woman, she may find it difficult to direct men effectively.”

Silence reigned in the study; Lizzy bit her tongue, resisting the urge to offer a sharp retort.

“Yes, yes, dear, you and Lady Catherine are exceptions. She’s a bully and you are a beloved tyrant — I mean, queen, to your people. In either case, the two of you know how to ensure staff do your bidding successfully, though you use opposing methods. Anne has not a whit of the talent, knowledge, or experience you or her mother possess. She truly needs to marry a good man who will take care of her and the estate, one who won’t abuse her, won’t spend her dowry, and will maintain the estate for the future.”

Lizzy could taste blood, having bit her inside cheek as well as her tongue in order to let her
husband continue his rambling monologue toward a solution.

“The best candidates would be familiar with Kent, preferably close to Rosings, someone with a vested interest in seeing the county as well as the estate do well. A younger son, perhaps, but not one who is a hardship case or one who has bad habits like gambling.”

Her skirts would need to be ironed before guests arrived for tea that day, as Lizzy had forced deep wrinkles in them, gripping the fabric tightly in her fists as she fought the urge to question Will.

“Hmm.” Darcy squinted, looking off into the distance where sheep grazed at the edge of the lawn and the home farm began. All the while he spun his signet ring as he thought; the harder he concentrated, the faster the ring spun.

And then the spinning stopped.

“Aha! I’ve got it!” Darcy turned and grabbed his wife by the shoulders as he stared intently into her dark eyes. “Edward North! He was a classmate at Cambridge. His older brother will be the Earl of Guilford, but now serves as a viceroy overseas. Edward is managing the estate, Waldershare House, near Dover in Kent. If his brother comes home, he’ll be under foot. The estate is wealthy and the earldom has a number of smaller holdings.”

At this point, wrinkled, self-injured and impatient, Lizzy could take no more. “So? Is he a good man? Is he patient and willing to take on an unaccomplished, landed gentlewoman? And how do we manage to introduce the two of them when we are not traveling to act as hosts? Nor do we want to excite Lady Catherine. The possibility of another failed match might be more than her heart can bear.”

Darcy gathered his wife into a firm embrace. He couldn’t have asked for a better wife; in spite of Lady Catherine’s obstreperous behavior toward her, Lizzy still cared about his aunt’s well-being. He kissed her luscious pouty lips, then spun her around to sit on his lap as he parked himself in an armchair.

“Don’t fret, love. Edward is a good man. He was a bookworm, not a rake. He was a cautious student, unlike his brother who always sought excitement. But he was friendly, easy going, a gentle chap. He’d be a perfect fit for Anne, and Rosings would be perfect for him.”

Elizabeth, keeping her thoughts to herself about Darcy’s matchmaking skills rivaling her mother’s, ran her fingers through her husband’s thick, curly hair to scratch his scalp in the way he adored. Ordinarily he would have seen such a move as an invitation to kiss her passionately and then some, but he was still thinking, thinking, thinking...

Finally, when he’d arrived at a decision of some sort, he looked deeply into Lizzy’s eyes. “We can write the letters now to set up a meeting with Charlotte’s help, or we can write them later.”

A lingering kiss of gratitude in response persuaded him to write the letters in time to make the post the next day. Coincidentally, Mrs. Darcy’s abigail was able to iron her skirts within the hour, just in time for tea that afternoon.

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Darcy and Elizabeth had arranged by exchange of several letters for Mr. Edward North to call on the parsonage to meet Mr. and Mrs. Collins. Elizabeth had insisted on a preliminary meeting, during which Charlotte would carefully screen Mr. North before they proceeded any further with an introduction to Darcy’s cousin Anne. Mr. North arrived under the guise of interviewing the Collinses about the parish school that Charlotte wanted to establish for the children around
Hunsford and the Rosings estate. Mr. North’s family had already established a patronage to do the same for the parish surrounding Waldershare House, and were willing to look at increasing their patronage within the county. Charlotte kept a tight rein on her husband’s effusions; she had learned a thing or two about managing her spouse’s verbosity, now able to steer him adeptly in both social conversations and his sermons. He’d grown more solicitous after her miscarriage the previous year, a sentiment she used shamelessly to her advantage.

The meeting went very well. Charlotte found Mr. North to be a pleasant, soft-spoken man of quiet intellect and firm beliefs. She wished that she could have found someone like him for a spouse for herself, but she dispelled the thought quickly being pragmatic. Having Mr. North married to Anne as master of Rosings would be the next best thing, solving a number of challenges very neatly.

Another volley of letters later, Mr. North found himself calling on the Collinses, this time prospectively with more information about establishing a school. Coincidentally, his visit fell on the same day as one of Miss de Bourgh’s twice-weekly calls.

And this time, Charlotte wouldn’t take no for an answer.

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The usual pas de deux began with the same predictable words exchanged—and then a new twist. Charlotte pulled the guilt card out of the tricks in her hand.

“Please, Anne, you’ve never once come in for tea since I married Mr. Collins nearly two years ago and moved to this neighborhood.”

“Mrs. Jenkinson, please tell Charlotte I can’t come in for tea,” Anne countered, throwing Jenkinson under the carriage, figuratively speaking. But the poor long-suffering companion to Anne and Lady Catherine’s erstwhile whipping boy was in on the plan with Charlotte. She was ready to retire, having cared for Anne for more than a decade under Lady Catherine’s thumb and with no desire to continue to cater to Anne’s every little frustrating whim.

“No, Anne, I really believe you need to go in for tea with Mrs. Collins. You absolutely must learn to be more outgoing, less reticent, while you still have the leisure to do so.” Jenkinson looked at her charge with a jaundiced eye, her lips forming a tight moue.

“Anne, please. I insist.” Charlotte’s forehead knotted tightly, conveying more emotion than Anne had ever seen the parson’s wife display, not even when Mr. Collins was deep into his most annoying effusions.

The same party had emerged from the parsonage to see what kept his wife and guests.

“Ladies, you are causing a scene that the rest of the village will witness. We cannot have the help talk about this either, at the risk of disturbing my esteemed patroness—”

“Yes, Mr. Collins, I know. Please return inside so as not to embarrass Miss de Bourgh and exacerbate this situation.” Charlotte shut her husband down promptly, before he could begin one of his little pretty and affected speeches for Anne’s benefit. Mr. Collins scurried quickly back inside, his wife silently thanking the Lord that her husband had not revealed the presence of another guest for tea.

“Come, Anne, I’ll get out first and help you down,” Mrs. Jenkinson offered. By now she could really use a cup of tea herself, though a good tot of sherry would be much nicer. She stepped out of the curricle.

“No, thank you, I’ll wait here if you’d like to enjoy tea with the Collinses.” Anne’s jaw was set,
her lips pursed, her arms now crossed in a gesture of resistance. Mrs. Jenkinson turned and went inside, knowing that Anne would continue to plead with her if she remained in sight. She hoped Charlotte wouldn’t be put out if she asked Mr. Collins for sherry; she’d earned it.

“Anne, you are followed every time you drive out by a footman. Don’t make me ask him to pull you out of the curricle.” Charlotte was becoming enraged with this foolishness over such a little thing as taking tea in the parsonage. Her face was pinkening with angry heat.

“Charlotte! You wouldn’t dare!” Anne blanched, looking panicked. Her resistance wavered.

Charlotte leaned in over the door of the curricle, her face roiled in a storm of emotion.

“Yes, I most certainly would dare! I am tired of your treating me with such disrespect. Every time you come to call I must stand here while you talk down to me from the curricle. Your avoidance of the parsonage proper also sends a less-than-happy signal to every member of my staff, Rosings’ staff, the villagers. It says you have no faith in me and my husband when it doesn’t communicate that you are spoiled and sickly. How do you think the tenants and villagers feel about that, knowing that your mother is not well and that you are the lady of the estate by default?” She whispered as loudly as she could, so as to make her point and not be heard by staff or the guest waiting inside, her voice carrying like a hiss at a distance.

“Ladies, please come inside—” The parson, looking distinctly anxious, had quietly reemerged from the parsonage and approached his wife from behind.

Charlotte rounded on him, speaking sotto voce, “Mr. Collins, if you do not go back inside this instant, you will sleep on the too-short and too-firm settee in your study for a week, and I will snap your ‘little olive branch’ like a twig the next time you want me to ‘bend it’ for you,” making a pretense of breaking an invisible stick of shortish length between her tightly clenched hands. She stared at him hard, willingly him to be both silent and smart enough to ken the exact nature of her threat.

The gawky parson walked backward, wide-eyed and wordless at her threat, easing his way by feel through the entrance.

“John, come here.” Charlotte called out, gesturing to the footman who had followed the curricle on horseback at a distance. “Please help Miss de Bourgh down from the curricle.”

Anne capitulated, realizing as the footman dismounted that she must get down and go inside to take tea. Her bluff had been called; she was already near tears at the thought of the repeated insult she had offered the one person who had been both kind and friendly without obligation to her.

She had an epiphany at that very moment, glancing up to look in Charlotte’s eyes as she stood in the curricle. She had no true friends in Kent, save for this plain, earnest woman before her, someone who had come to Anne on Anne’s terms at sacrifice to herself, twice a week without fail for nearly two years. Charlotte was a beloved, dear friend, her one and only real friend in Kent; she’d proven it over and over without making any demands on Anne.

Choked by emotion, Anne cleared her throat before speaking.

“Thank you, John, I only need your hand. Would you please see to the horses while Mrs. Jenkinson and I have tea with the Collinses?” Anne stepped down, holding John’s hand firmly, having issued her order in a distinctly new voice; she sounded like the lady of Rosings estate.

Charlotte noticed John winked over Anne’s head at Mrs. Jenkinson who stood in the window, watching; Jenkinson winked back. Apparently the rest of Rosings staff was in on the secret.
Charlotte took her friend by the arm, patting her hand, as they walked through the garden gate and up the walk and into the foyer.

“Anne,” she whispered, “I have a surprise and I very much need a favor of you. Please understand that this is very important to me. You must follow my lead with alacrity if you are to help me. I don’t have time to explain. Just trust in me.” She winked at Anne.

“I am in your debt, Charlotte. Whatever you need, if I can give it, it’s yours,” she whispered back to her friend before they entered the sitting room where Mr. Collins was entertaining Mr. Edward North with a game of chess.

“Mr. North, please allow me to introduce Miss Anne de Bourgh, daughter of Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings. Anne, this is Mr. Edward North, son of the Earl of Guilford, of Waldershare House, in Tilmanstone parish, near Dover.”

An average looking man of a bit more than average height, with wavy light brown hair and liquid green eyes stood, took Anne’s hand and bowed over it.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Miss de Bourgh. The Collinses have been very complimentary about the support your family provides to their work here in the parish.” Mr. North’s voice was soft but resonant, conveying authority.

“Thank you, Mr. North. I am likewise pleased to meet you,” Anne said, enjoying the intensity with which this man looked at her, as if she was the sole reason he was in this sitting room today.

Tea time was extended far beyond the prescribed hour that day; as the needs of the children of two parishes were considered and debated during course of this visit, it seemed only proper that the guests should invest more time on this call.

So, too, did the next call the following week extend beyond the usual allotted time for tea. After a half-dozen such meetings and an equal number of lengthy walks around Rosings’ grounds, the establishment of a Hunsford parish school was solidly outlined and ready for initial funding. Miss de Bourgh asked if Mr. North would join the Collinses for dinner hosted by herself and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, in order to lay the groundwork for funding by the Rosings estate.

Lady Catherine was not at all obstreperous the evening of the dinner; she had been having some chest pains and had availed herself of a small dose of laudanum to ease them. Feeling more warmth and comfort than she had in some time, she was quiet but friendly with her new acquaintance, Mr. North. Lady Catherine had known his father and mother both and thought highly of them, sharing this opinion with Mr. North and Anne. It was not at all a condescension to meet and dine with this young man; he was the equal of the de Bourghs and Fitzwilliams.

Mrs. Jenkinson began to plan more earnestly for her retirement that evening, after sending a note to Mrs. Darcy in which she recounted her observations of the dinner.

Two months after their first meeting, Mr. North asked if he could pay court to Anne, asking Lady Catherine’s blessing after receiving permission. Anne was of age and could decide her fate for herself, of course, but ensuring Lady Catherine was happy would go a long way toward a successful courtship and anticipated marriage.

And Lady Catherine was just that, happy. She was very pleased that her daughter had fallen in love with a man who loved her as well, though that was really the icing on the cake. That Anne had managed to win an affable and gracious suitor of a titled family — one with well-practiced
skills to ensure Rosings would prosper for another generation — was much more than she expected after her nephew Darcy’s defection.

She was still happy, wearing a smile as she closed her eyes and took a last breath, six months after Anne gave birth to a very pretty and healthy Charlotte Catherine North.

A year after Lady Catherine had been laid to rest, two young mothers sat watching their daughters crawling and toddling across the sitting room rug in the parsonage at Hunsford. Little Charlotte offered a slobbery wood block to little Catherine Elizabeth Collins who took it with eager curiosity.

“Look at them, so beautiful, the two of them. It all turned out so well, didn’t it? I hope you’ve forgiven me my deception about tea when Mr. North. Oh, and Lizzy and Darcy, too, since they were such great help in writing to Mr. North.”

“Oh Charlotte, how many times must I tell you I’ve forgiven you and my dear cousins? I thank you every day for being such a tremendous friend, especially when I needed one. You not only gave me the gift of my husband but the chance to give back to others, what with the school needing patronage I could readily afford. I’d never had to be or give anything to anyone my entire life until that day.”

“Well, it’s certainly a relief to know that you and your husband are not only happy, but that you’ve forgiven me. Perhaps it’s this second pregnancy that makes me doubt myself. I lie awake at night, feeling the baby kick, entertaining about all sorts of ‘what ifs’ that never before crossed my mind. What if I hadn’t married Mr. Collins, what if you hadn’t married Mr. North, what if you hadn’t forgiven me—”

“Stop, there’s no need to think like that, ever. You should take Lizzy’s philosophy to heart in those wee hours and think only on the past as it brings you pleasure.”

“Why I’ll do just that, Anne, what a marvelous idea.”

“Besides, the only thing I’ve never forgiven you about is the tea. You invited me in for tea for nearly two years, dined at Rosings innumerable times, you even had a hissy tantrum insisting I come in to have tea, and you never noticed I dislike tea? If it’s the only thing on hand I’ll force myself to drink it, but I prefer coffee, lemonade, cider, what have you. Anything but tea, dear friend. I detest the dead leafy taste. It’s like drinking warm pond water.”

The toddlers looked up at their mothers, surprised by the teary gales of laughter followed by a chime of the bell summoning the maid to bring lemonade and coffee.

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