

JANE AUSTEN AND HER WORKS.



JANE AUSTEN.

Jane Austen

& *Her Works*



by

Sarah Tytler.



Steventon Rectory Hants

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BY
SARAH TYTLER.

WITH A PORTRAIT ON STEEL.

Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co.:
LONDON, PARIS & NEW YORK.

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PREFACE.

My intention in this book is to present in one volume to an over-wrought, and in some respects over-read, generation of young people the most characteristic of Jane Austen's novels, together with her life. I think the tales and the life are calculated to reflect light on each other; I think, also, that the arrangement of the tales—which I have selected as the author wrote them, and not as they happened to be published, particularly in reference to the fact that the two which I have given first were written more than ten years before “Emma” and “Persuasion”—is an advantage, in permitting the growth of the author's mind and taste to be recognised. I have used my own judgment in the selection of the stories, and in the degree and manner in which I have condensed them. It is with reverent hands that I have touched these great English novels, for the purpose of bringing them into such compass as may make them readily accessible to all, and especially to young readers, apt to be wearied by the slightest diffuseness. Wherever it has been possible, in view of my aim, I have used the author's own words, as incomparably the best for the characters and situations. I have pointed out here and there the great changes in [Pg viii] social standards, customs and fashions since Jane Austen wrote; while it is her glory that the human nature in her books and the human nature in every generation are the same. I have occasionally called attention to an unrivalled piece of art, which a too eager or an inexperienced reader may be in danger of overlooking.

So far from presuming to wish to draw readers from Jane Austen's novels in their complete form, it is my earnest desire to send many a young student who may be tempted to quench her intellectual thirst at sources utterly unworthy of the great English novelist, to the originals of the tales I have abridged.

I have much pleasure in acknowledging the obligation I owe to Mr. Austen Leigh, Jane Austen's nephew, who, with tender and reverent care, gathered together and recorded all the particulars that remained of her personal and family history. I have drawn solely and largely from this biography, which is, indeed, the only authorised memoir of the author.

* * The portrait which, by the kindness of the Austen Leigh family and Mr. Bentley, we are enabled to put as the frontispiece to this work, has the interest of being a faithful copy of the only portrait that was ever taken of Jane Austen, a rough sketch made by her sister Cassandra, and afterwards touched by the hand of a professional artist, and

while it cannot claim to be a perfect portrait, it is considered by those who have seen and known the great novelist to be a fairly good likeness of her.

[Pg 1]



JANE AUSTEN AND HER WORKS.

JANE AUSTEN.

I.



It is said there is an ancient tradition in the East, that close on a certain date of the year are born the men to whom are given special gifts to enlighten and delight their fellow-creatures. To, or near to, this date we can assign the birthdays of William Caxton, by the invention of printing the father of widely-diffused learning; William Shakespeare, with his marvellous knowledge of human nature; Cervantes, the great humourist; and William Wordsworth, to whom skies and hills, trees and flowers, beasts and birds, had a voice, and told a story which he could make plain to the duller comprehension of thousands. But no Oriental sage had a word to say in anticipation of the birthday—at a very different season of the year—when there looked out for the first time on the world and its wonders, the child-eyes of a woman who was to edify and charm some of the wisest men of her own and succeeding generations.

Women may well be proud of the woman who has [Pg 2] been held, on high authority, second only to Shakespeare in the comprehension of the springs which move the heart.

Girls may well be proud of the girl who, strange to say, wrote two of her masterpieces, “Pride and Prejudice” and “Northanger Abbey,” before she had completed her twenty-third year. When other girls were practising their music and working at their embroidery, having their youthful gaities and youthful dreams, Jane Austen, who was fair to see and charming to listen to, who practised her music, sewed at her worsted-work, joined in gatherings of young people, and had her morning visions with the best, possessed in addition the power, and found the time, to accomplish those wonders of fiction which, for their subtle reproduction of character, and exquisite weaving of a web so like that of the common lot, have been the instruction and solace—not of companion girls alone, but of statesmen and historians, philosophers and poets, down to the present day.

Both men and women may be proud of the woman who did this great thing, yet who never forfeited a tittle of her womanliness; who was essentially as good, true, and dear, as devoted to home, as cherished in its narrow circle, as the most obscure of her sisters, who are nothing to the world while they are everything to their own people.

The slight yet not unsatisfactory record of Jane Austen’s life came late to literature, after most of the materials which might have supplied a fuller memoir had been destroyed, and nearly every contemporary recollection of her was lost. The relatives who were left to accomplish a biography of the “Aunt Jane” whose personal kindness had made so deep an impression on them half a century before, and of whose permanent and still-increasing fame they have remained justly proud, were more or less elderly people, and were not writers like the subject of the biography. But any disadvantages which exist are not without their ample [Pg 3] compensation in the affectionate simplicity and pathos of the narrative.

Jane Austen was born a hundred and four years ago, on December 16th, 1775, at the parsonage house of Steventon, in Hampshire. The Austens were a Kent family, originally one of those aristocratic clothworkers who, possessing landed property in the Weald, did not disdain to work in wool, and who were generally known as “the Greycoats of Kent.” Mr. Austen Leigh, Jane Austen’s nephew, writes that a trace of the family origin survives in the family livery of light blue and white, called “Kentish Grey.”

Jane Austen’s father, an orphan, brought up by an uncle, a lawyer in Tunbridge, was, in succession, a scholar at Tunbridge School, a fellow of St. John’s, Oxford, and rector of the two livings of Deane and Steventon, Hampshire villages little more than a mile apart, and numbering a united population of not more than three hundred.

The young rector married Cassandra Leigh, a daughter of the incumbent of Harpenden, near Henley-on-the-Thames. The Leighs were a Warwickshire family,

descended, on the mother's side, from the Chandos house. Jane Austen's grand-uncle, Dr. Theophilus Leigh, was Master of Balliol College for upwards of half a century. I mention him because he was a man famous in his day for ready repartee, and it is possible his wit may have descended to his grand-niece Jane.

For thirty years the Austens resided at Steventon; and there Jane Austen spent, for the most part, the first twenty-five years of her life, in a quiet country circle, certainly not without its cultured members, among whom was her father, a scholarly and accomplished man.

When Mr. and Mrs. Austen were still a young couple, they were entrusted with the charge of a son of Warren Hastings, but the child died in infancy; otherwise we might have had a long train of life-like [Pg 4] Anglo-Indians in fiction, many years before they were conjured into existence by Thackeray.

The next parish to Steventon was Ashe, of which the clergyman then happened to be Dr. Russell, grand-father of Mary Russell Mitford.

The Rev. George Austen was so good-looking a man, from youth to age, as to have been called "the handsome proctor" at Oxford, and to be still noticed at Bath, when he was over seventy years of age, on account of his fine features and abundance of snow-white hair. I have already said he was a man of ability. He directed the studies of all his children, and increased his income by the practice, usual with clergymen, of taking pupils. Mrs. Austen was also reputed a clever woman, endowed with a lively imagination, in addition to much good sense.

Jane Austen's biographer says rightly, the members of her own family were so much to her, and the rest of the world so little, that a brief sketch of her brothers and sister is necessary, to furnish a complete idea of her life. He remarks elsewhere, in alluding to the retirement in which she generally dwelt, that she had probably never been in company with anybody of greater literary ability and reputation than herself. In these observations, he touches inadvertently on what I think formed the root of the defects—to which I shall refer afterwards—in an otherwise fine character.

Jane Austen had five brothers and one sister. James, the eldest of the family, and the father of Jane's biographer, is described as well read in English literature, writing readily and happily both in prose and verse. When yet a young man at Oxford, he originated a periodical called the "Loiterer," and by his example may have turned Jane's attention to authorship. He was a clergyman, and succeeded his father at Steventon. Edward Austen was early adopted by his cousin, Mr. Knight, of Godmersham Park, in Kent, and Chawton House, in Hampshire. He adopted the name

of Knight, and was, like Frank Churchill in [Pg 5] “Emma,” a good deal separated from his family in their youth. But it was to his neighbourhood, and to the support of his position as the squire of the parish, that the women of the Austen family returned at last. This brother Edward is said to have been full of amiability and fun. He seems to have borne some resemblance in his character, as well as in his circumstances, to the Frank Churchill of Jane’s story.

Henry Austen was a good talker, but he was the least successful of the brothers. While he resided in London, he appears to have been the literary authority, and the means of communication between his sister Jane and her publishers.

Francis and Charles Austen were both sailors, and both lived to become admirals. Francis possessed a firm temper and a strong sense of duty. He was distinguished by his religious principles at a time when a religious profession was rare in the service. At one station he was pointed out as “the officer who knelt in church.” Charles—specially beloved in his family for the sweet temper and affectionate disposition which resembled Jane’s—was, on one occasion, seven consecutive years absent from England on active service. He died of cholera in the course of the Burmese war, Lord Dalhousie expressing his admiration of the staunch, high spirit which, notwithstanding his age (seventy-four) and previous sufferings, had led the admiral to take his part in the trying service that closed his career.

Cassandra Austen was three years Jane’s senior. The warmest affection subsisted between the two, Jane, in her maturity and fame, continuing to look up to her elder sister, a beautiful, staid, thoughtful woman from her girlhood. When Cassandra was sent to the school of a Mrs. Latourville (probably a French *émigrée*), in the Forbury of Reading, Jane went with her, not because she was old enough, but because she would have been miserable without her sister, her mother observing “that if Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate.”

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Steventon was one of those villages and parsonages which Jane Austen so often described. “It was situated among the low chalk hills and winding lanes of North Hants. The parsonage house stood in a shallow valley, surrounded by sloping meadows well sprinkled with elm-trees, at the end of a small village of cottages, each provided with a garden, scattered about prettily on either side of the road.” Within the house, though it was reckoned rather above the average of the parsonages of its day, no cornice marked the junction of wall and ceiling, while the beams which supported the upper floors projected into the rooms below in all their naked simplicity, covered

only by a coat of paint or whitewash. About five years after Jane Austen's death, her old home at Steventon was pulled down.

"At the front of the house was a carriage-drive through turf and trees. On the south side the ground rose gently, and was occupied by an old-fashioned garden, in which flowers and vegetables kept each other company, flanked on the east by a thatched mud wall, and overshadowed by fine elms. Along the upper side of the garden ran a terrace of fine turf, where Jane in her childhood might have emulated young Catherine Morland in rolling down the green slope."

Mr. Austen Leigh says the chief beauty of Steventon was in its hedgerows—borders of copsewood and timber, often wide enough to contain a winding footpath or rough cart-track. "There the earliest primroses, anemones, and wild hyacinths were to be found, the first bird's-nest, and sometimes an unwelcome adder." Two such hedgerows radiated from the parsonage garden. One, a continuation of the turf terrace, ran westward, and formed the boundary of the home meadows. It was made into a rustic shrubbery, with occasional seats, and was called, in the sentimental language of the day, "the Wood Walk." No doubt Jane Austen often strolled or sat there, alone, or with her sister, or one of her brothers. She might carry there her little work-box, or the volume of "Evelina," or "Cecilia," the [Pg 7] "Mysteries of Udolpho," or the "Romance of the Forest," which she was devouring. It was to such a shrubbery or "wilderness" that she sent Elizabeth Bennet to seek her father—to read an important letter—or to hold her famous interview with Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

The other hedgerow bore the name of "the Church Walk," because it climbed the hill to the parish church, near which, surrounded by sycamores, was a manor-house of Henry VIII.'s time, tenanted for upwards of a hundred years by a yeoman family bearing the appropriate name of Digweed.

The little church without a spire, with its narrow early English windows, is said to have been upwards of seven hundred years old. ^[1] Sweet violets, purple and white, grew in profusion beneath the south wall. The churchyard had its hollow yew coeval with the church, its old elms and thorns among its mossy stones and green mounds.

We hear many regrets in our day for the demolition of the old church of Haworth, in which the Brontë family worshipped, that may very likely be followed by the destruction of the old parsonage house. Jane Austen's admirers, though they are choice spirits and cannot be denied the merit of fidelity, have not been so enthusiastic. I do not know that one protesting voice was raised when the iconoclast's changes and improvements reached the peaceful old parish. I am not sure whether many pilgrims ever sought that birthplace, and as to those who have visited the grave

in Winchester Cathedral, we have Mr. Austen Leigh's authority for the statement that they drew from the verger the puzzled inquiry—what was there particular about the lady buried there that people should come and ask to see her resting-place? No: Jane Austen and her work must always be regarded in one of two lights—that of quiet[Pg 8] though intense appreciation, or that of puzzled non-comprehension.

The large family at Steventon were worthy, prosperous, and happy. They had in some respects the position and privileges of the family of the principal squire, as well as the rector of the parish, since the Rev. George Austen represented the absentee cousin, of whom the clergyman's second son was the adopted son and heir. The Austens kept a carriage and pair of horses, and lived in a style equal to that of the neighbouring county gentry, whose near relatives or intimate friends the household at the parsonage were. In reckoning up the special advantages of such a home in one of her novels, Jane Austen lays stress on its being well connected, "a well connected parsonage."

Among the most frequent visitors at Steventon were two families of cousins, who could both of them bring fresh experiences to the country parsonage. The one family, the Coopers, lived in the brilliant Bath of their generation, where Cassandra and Jane Austen, as young women, visited their relations long before they ever thought of Bath as a residence for themselves. Jane was still able to enjoy the gay watering-place with the keen appetite of a country-bred girl, and it is these vivid reminiscences which she transfers to the pages of "Northanger Abbey," while she reserves the much more sober, rather adverse estimate of later years for the concluding chapters of "Persuasion." One of these cousins, Jane Austen's dear friend and namesake, was married from her uncle's house at Steventon to a captain in the navy, under whom Charles Austen served. A few years afterwards, this favourite cousin was suddenly killed in a carriage accident.

Another cousin had been brought up in Paris, and had married a Count de Feuillade, who was guillotined during the French Revolution. His widow escaped through many perils, took refuge in her uncle's parsonage of Steventon, and ended by marrying her cousin Henry Austen, with whom she went to France, during the short Peace of Amiens, in 1802, and narrowly[Pg 9] escaped being detained among the unfortunate English prisoners of war, by Napoleon.

Thus the quiet Hampshire parsonage was not entirely without its excitements, in addition to the arrivals and departures of its sailor sons, the naval battles and sieges in which they were engaged, the ship-intelligence which was always eagerly scanned on their behalf. Had the future author been so disposed, she might have found in the

conversation and adventures of her cousin and sister-in-law materials for novels which would have been more to the taste of a large section of the public than Jane Austen's perfect tales. As it was, the chief immediate results of the young widowed countess's stay at Steventon, when Jane Austen was just entering on her teens, were the improvement of the family French, and the performance of amateur theatricals in a summer theatre in the barn and a winter theatre in the little dining-room. Out of these theatricals Jane Austen made stock for "Mansfield Park," in which, by the way, she infers decided disapproval of the amusement. Whether or not the real theatricals led to the attachment and engagement of Henry Austen and Madame de Feuillade we may conjecture, but cannot ascertain from Mr. Austen Leigh's narrative.

Jane Austen's biographer writes of the Austens' long stay at Steventon as having remained unshadowed by any serious family misfortune or death. But one great disaster, which, though it did not concern Jane directly, touched her nearly, befell a member of the family. Cassandra Austen, more regularly beautiful than Jane, wise for her years, and good, was engaged to be married to a young clergyman who had a prospect of early preferment from a nobleman, his relative and friend. The two men went together to the West Indies, the one to act for a time as chaplain to the regiment of the other. Very soon the chaplain died of yellow fever. The melancholy news, descending like a thunderbolt on the cheerful Hampshire parsonage, brought great grief to Cassandra Austen, and Jane was certain to suffer with her sister.

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II.

In person Jane Austen seems to have borne considerable resemblance to her two favourite heroines, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse. Jane, too, was tall and slender, a brunette, with a rich colour—altogether "the picture of health" which Emma Woodhouse was said to be. In minor points, Jane Austen had a well-formed though somewhat small nose and mouth, round as well as rosy cheeks, bright hazel eyes, and brown hair, falling in natural curls about her face.

With regard to her knowledge and accomplishments, Jane Austen was well acquainted with the English history and literature of her day. When very young she was an ardent partisan of Mary, Queen of Scots, and Charles I., though one may be tolerably sure she modified her views in later years. She read the Queen Anne essayists and their followers. She was a warm admirer of the works of Johnson, Crabbe, and Cowper. Of Crabbe she said jestingly, in reference to the author—not the man, whom she had not seen—that if she ever married at all she could fancy herself Mrs. Crabbe. She knew Richardson's novels almost by heart. She had great pleasure

in Sir Walter Scott's poetry. Of his novels, only "Waverley," "Guy Mannering," and "The Antiquary" had come out before her death. She has expressed more than once in her tales her lively appreciation of the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe, Madame d'Arblay, and Miss Edgeworth.

As to foreign languages and literature, Jane Austen had a considerable knowledge of French, and a slight acquaintance with Italian. In music she could play and sing pleasantly, with much the same degree of proficiency that she attributed to Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse. Jane was accustomed to practise her music before breakfast, with the laudable purpose of not disturbing other members of the family [Pg 11] less musically inclined. She would sing of an evening, when required, simple old songs to her own accompaniment. She was fond of dancing, and danced very well, like several of her own heroines, and like her sister-author, Anna Maria Porter.

Jane Austen was exceedingly neat-handed, with a quick eye and a firm grasp. Her handwriting was at once strong and fine, as well as very legible, ^[2] I should say, in broad contrast to what may be called the Italian hand—an overflow of characterless elegance which belonged to the generation. She sewed and embroidered, as she did everything else, with exquisite finish. She was great in satin-stitch. She spent much of her time in sewing—not being above making her own clothes, as well as those of the poor. She was an adept in any of the old-fashioned games founded on dexterity of hand, such as spillikins, and cup and ball. She liked to play at such games when unable to read and write long at a time, from weakness and weariness in those bright, searching eyes of hers.

The great novelist was very fond of children, and much beloved by them, like Anna Maria Porter again. She could tell no end of fairy stories, was the make-believe visitor in the children's make-believe houses, and readily improvised for her young listeners' benefit.

Jane Austen was not without suitors, whom her independent spirit, absorption in her family, and quiet reserve could not repel. Her descendants were aware of addresses paid to her by one gentleman who had every recommendation of character, connections, and position, to whom nothing was wanting save the lady's favour. There is also the lingering recollection of a sorrowful little romance, bearing a resemblance to that of her sister Cassandra, in connection with the brilliant, witty, successful author. It was told by Cassandra Austen to her young relatives long after Jane's death. [Pg 12] The two girls, while spending some weeks during their youth at a seaside place, became acquainted with a gentleman whose attractions of person, mind, and manners made even Cassandra think him worthy of Jane, and likely to win her. When

the young people parted, the new friend expressed his intention of soon seeing the sisters again, and Cassandra at least had no doubt of his motives; but the second meeting never took place. The sisters heard, not long afterwards, of the gentleman's sudden death, and with him perished, in Cassandra Austen's opinion, her sister Jane's solitary, short love-dream.

III.

Jane Austen wrote stories, in addition to all manner of quips and cranks, impromptu verses, and mocking stanzas, from her childhood upwards. In admitting the childish practice, after she was a middle-aged woman, she called it an innocent amusement, but a waste of time which, as she had found to her regret, might have been more profitably employed. She had accumulated numerous copies, full of such stories—for the most part burlesques of the melodramatic extravagances of other writers—by the time she was sixteen. The published story which is nearest to this style is “Northanger Abbey.” She seems to have completed two stories, which were not parodies, between the age of sixteen and twenty. Both of these were in the old-fashioned form of letters. One of them she re-wrote, in another shape, and it was ultimately published under the title of “Sense and Sensibility.” The other, “Lady Susan,” was only published along with the little memoir of the author, nine years ago.

[Pg 13]

Two among her masterpieces were written between her twenty-first and twenty-third years. “Pride and Prejudice,” named originally “First Impressions,” was written in ten months, between 1796 and 1797; “Sense and Sensibility,” the reproduction from the earlier story, in letters, called “Ellinor and Marianne,” occupied the author between 1797 and 1798; but “Northanger Abbey,” which holds a place beside “Pride and Prejudice,” was written also in 1798.

Jane Austen wrote with the knowledge and approval of her father and mother and the rest of her family. There is still in existence a letter written by Mr. Austen and addressed to Mr. Cadell, in November, 1797, immediately after the completion of “Pride and Prejudice.” The father simply states that he has in his possession a MS. novel in three volumes, about the length of Miss Burney's “Evelina.” He asks whether Mr. Cadell would choose to be concerned in bringing it out, what would be the expense of publishing if at the author's risk, and what the publisher would venture to advance for the copyright if, on perusal, it was approved of.

The proposal was declined by return of post, more from excess of caution than from erring criticism, since the MS. was never in the publisher's hands. It is almost

needless to say that the rejected novel has been considered the best, as it is unquestionably among the best, of English novels.

“Pride and Prejudice” was not published till sixteen years after it had been composed; “Sense and Sensibility,” the first published of Jane Austen’s novels, not for thirteen years after the first time it was re-written. “Northanger Abbey” was the first sold of these earlier novels, but it cannot be considered more lucky than its predecessors. Its fate was, if possible, still more mortifying. It was disposed of to a publisher in Bath for the modest sum of ten pounds, five years after it was written, and two years before the death of Jane Austen’s father. It lay ignominiously in a drawer in the shop of its purchaser for many years. At last it was bought[Pg 14] back for the sum originally given, by one of the author’s brothers, who, when the transaction was finished, triumphantly informed the dilatory publisher that he had just re-sold a work by the well-known author of “Pride and Prejudice.” “Northanger Abbey,” on which Lord Macaulay set such store, was not brought out till 1818, after Jane Austen’s death, when it appeared together with her last story, “Persuasion,” just twenty years from the date at which the former novel was written. Surely, few young authors have had to suffer greater and more prolonged disappointment in finding a publisher and a public. The experience may serve as a consolation to all struggling literary aspirants. On the other hand we may seek generation after generation of authors doomed to obscurity, temporary or permanent, before we find another Jane Austen. Of a nephew and a niece of the author’s who took to youthful novel-writing in their aunt’s lifetime, and received all indulgence and encouragement from their kinswoman, it is recorded that neither of their novels ever saw the light; yet we might have said of them that they had novel-writing in the blood. One of them wrote with the inspiring association of dwelling in Steventon Parsonage, the other received invaluable hints and suggestions from a mistress of her art; but it was all of no avail.

It is said that Jane Austen bore her early literary disappointments very philosophically. She did not write for money; her father was in easy circumstances. She might not then anticipate fame—though she was far from undervaluing her powers—and she did not over-rate the worth of a literary reputation; still I can scarcely comprehend the equanimity of a very young woman remaining entirely unshaken by the unbroken train of undeserved failures and rebuffs. There is one thing that I feel sure Jane Austen must have grieved for:—her father, who had superintended her education, and taken a fatherly interest in her first attempts at authorship, did not live to see the faint dawn of[Pg 15] the success which, though it came late, has proved ample.

Before quitting the subject of the novelist’s youth at Steventon, I should like to say a word on the influences already referred to, which I believe affected her as a woman

and an author. During her whole life she remained to a great extent engrossed by the interests of her family and their limited circle of old and intimate friends. This was as it should be—so far, but there may be too much of a good thing. The tendency of strictly restricted family parties and sets—when their members are above small bickerings and squabbings—when they are really superior people in every sense, is to form “mutual admiration” societies, and neither does this more respectable and amiable weakness act beneficially upon its victims. In the incessant intercourse between the Great House and Upper Cross Cottage in “Persuasion,” we have an example, under Jane Austen’s own hand, of the evils of such constant communication among people of inferior understanding and intelligence. If we look nearer home, we may have a glimpse of disadvantages of a different sort, attendant on what Scotch people call “clannishness” in a higher region. Good as Jane Austen was, there is a certain spirit of exclusiveness, intolerance, condescension, and what may be classed as refined family selfishness, in the attitude which she, the happy member of a large and united family, distinguished by many estimable qualities, assumed to the world without. She was independent of it to a large extent for social intercourse; and so she told it candidly, and just a little haughtily—forgetting, for the most part, the wants of less favoured individuals—that she needed nothing from it.

Fondly loved and remembered as Jane Austen has been, with much reason, among her own people, in their considerable ramifications, I cannot imagine her as greatly liked, or even regarded with anything save some amount of prejudice, out of the immediate circle of her friends, and in general society. I hope I may not be [Pg 16] misunderstood. I do not mean that the novelist was other than an excellent woman, pre-eminently a gentlewoman. What I mean is, that she allowed her interests and sympathies to become narrow, even for her day, and that her tender charity not only began, but ended, in a large measure, at home. No doubt I am alluding to the characteristics of a generation and class, which showed themselves, in a marked manner, in the repugnance with which other intellectual gentlewomen shrank from acknowledging the profession of authorship, with its obligations, no less than its privileges, as if it involved a degradation—something distinctly injurious to them, both as women and gentlewomen. Fanny Burney, on the other hand, was brought up among artists of every description, which, perhaps, accounts for the transparent literary vanity which forms so broad a contrast to the shyness—often equally self-conscious—of her sister-authors. But the whole bent of Jane Austen’s disposition and rearing seem to point in the contrary direction.

Jane Austen was the clear-sighted girl with the sharp pen, if not the sharp tongue, who found in the Steventon visiting-list materials for the *dramatis personæ* of “Pride and

Prejudice.” It would have been little short of a miracle if she could have conducted herself with such meekness, in her remote rural world, or during the visits she paid to the great English watering-place—while she was all the time laughing in her sleeve—so as not to provoke any suspicion of her satire, or any resentment at what might easily be held her presumption.

We may grant fully that Jane Austen was far too good an artist to make absolute copies from real persons to figure in the pages of her books, and too good a woman not to regard such a practice as a breach of social honour and propriety. But we all know how human beings—especially the duller among us, distrust and dislike being turned into ridicule. “A chiel amang us takin’ notes” is not half so offensive as an [Pg 17] audacious boy or girl convicted of taking us off, whether behind our backs or to our faces. I do not mean to infer that Miss Austen at any age was guilty of the mean and disloyal practice called “drawing out people” until they expose their weakness, and then making game of the weaknesses, whether in the victim’s company or out of it. I have it on excellent authority that, however thoroughly she was able to sympathise with the witty repartees of two of her favourite heroines, in general company she herself was shy and silent; even in more familiar circles she was innocent of speaking sharp words, and was rather distinguished for her tolerant indulgence to her fellow-creatures, than for her hard judgments on them. The tolerance belonged, by right, to her breadth of comprehension, and to the humour which still more than wit characterised her genius. The suggestion I make is that, seeing her neighbours’ foibles, as she certainly did see them, she could not, however generously she might use her superior knowledge, conceal it altogether from her neighbours, and this was less likely to be the case when she was a young girl with some share, presumably, of the thoughtlessness and rashness of other girls, than when she was a mature woman, with the wisdom and gentleness of experience. I have pointed out the softened as well as the more serious tone of her later novels, the difference, for instance, between “Northanger Abbey” and “Persuasion.” But who is to guess that the boy or the girl is to turn out a great novelist and humourist, whose genius is a fire in the bones, and an excuse for a hundred liberties?

As an author, in the few letters that have been preserved in which we have Jane Austen’s private feelings on the subject of her novels frankly written to her family and friends, she gives one the impression of having always found herself the queen of her company: never in an arrogant, vulgar way; on the contrary, with a sweet playfulness and gracious kindness to those who were closely allied to her by kindred, [Pg 18] blood, and the ties of friendship; but all the same she reigned queen. She might come down from her throne and defer to her elder sister Cassandra, or to any other

relative, but her sceptre was still in her hand. I do not draw inferences merely from Jane Austen's hearty, undissembled appreciation of her own work, and her distinct perception, freely announced, of its superior claims; doubtless that was inevitable to such a woman as she was, in the circumstances in which she found herself. It is in the whole assured tone of the half-jesting criticism; the half-pretended impatience that any new great novelist should enter the lists; the total absence—as in the case of Mrs. Radcliffe—of any natural desire to know and be known by her fellow-writers, to measure herself in familiar intercourse with them, above all, to give and receive sympathy.

Of course these peculiarities in the individual woman were not enough to hinder her from admiring at a distance, and occasionally generously proclaiming the admiration for, some of her contemporaries. I am bound also, in fairness, to add to my own impressions that it remained the firm persuasion of Jane Austen's biographer that she was as far as possible from being censorious and satirical. With regard to the censoriousness, I agree perfectly with this witness; but as to the satire, I must bring forward the opposite and impartial testimony of her own writings. Jane Austen was on the whole more humorous than satirical, yet in the earlier novels the satire is prominent. I can give far more unqualified credence to the statement that, while her unusually quick sense of the ridiculous led her to play with all the common-places of every-day life—whether as regarded persons or things—she never played with its serious duties or responsibilities.

With all her neighbours in the village—her humbler neighbours, I suppose—Mr. Austen Leigh says she was on friendly though not on intimate terms, "She took a kindly interest in all their proceedings, and liked to hear about them. They often served for her amusement,[Pg 19] but it was her own nonsense that gave zest to the gossip." The last is a nice distinction, hardly likely to be understood by the neighbours over whose affairs she laughed.

That Jane Austen, with her singular Shakespeare-like sympathy in little, her power of putting herself in another's place, could not help feeling both interested and entertained by the proceedings of the fellow-creatures around her, I can easily believe. What I doubt is that she who turned those simple souls, and the incidents of their lives, inside out, for her mingled instruction and diversion, could altogether conceal the process, or render it palatable to the subjects of the operation.

It was the conviction of the Austen family that Jane's occupation as a novel writer continued long unsuspected by her ordinary acquaintances and neighbours. That may have been, but we cannot imagine that her close study of the characters around her,

with her shrewd, humorous conclusions—so extraordinary at the age at which she began to make them—could have been either quite unperceived or wholly approved of by her associates.

There are one or two of Jane Austen's letters from Steventon published in her memoir. They are bright, chatty letters, not far removed from those which any merry-hearted, clever girl might have written. They deal entirely with domestic and local details. The arrival of a set of tables, with which everybody, for a wonder, was pleased; a great November storm, that made havoc among the Parsonage trees; an accident to a neighbour's son; an anticipated ball; the fact that Jane was then reading Hume's "History of England," form the topics. As there is no continuity, either in the letters or the narrative, of which such incidents might supply a part, they fall vaguely and flatly on the reader. The most interesting paragraphs are those which refer to the absent sailor brothers, and the eagerness of the mother and sisters to hear stray news of them, or to forward[Pg 20] letters to them, and procure answering letters by the chances of coming and going ships. There is one passage which tallies with the details of a gift made in "Mansfield Park":—"Charles has received thirty pounds for his share of the privateer, and expects ten pounds more; but of what avail is it to take prizes if he lays out the produce in presents to his sisters? He has been buying gold chains and topaz crosses for us. He must be well scolded.... I shall write again by this post to thank and reproach him. We shall be unbearably fine."

IV.

During an absence from home on Jane Austen's part, it was settled, before she knew, that her father, who at the age of seventy had resigned his living of Steventon to his son James, should remove with his wife and daughters to Bath. However much Jane may have felt the fascination of her girlish visits to Bath, she did not approve of it as a place of residence in her more mature womanhood. We are reminded of a sentence in "Persuasion" where the author remarks drily Anne Elliot did not like Bath; fancied it disagreed with her; would have preferred any other place; therefore, to Bath, as a matter of course, the family went. So much for the unpropitiousness of events.

The Austens went to Bath in 1801, when Jane was twenty-six years of age. The family resided first at No. 4, Sydney Terrace, and later at Green Park Buildings. An attraction to Bath, suggested by Mr. Austen Leigh, is that Mrs. Austen's only brother, Mr. Leigh Perrot,^[3] with his wife, was in the habit of spending his[Pg 21] time between Bath and his place of Scarletts. Like his uncle, the Master of Balliol, Mr. Leigh Perrot was a witty man, and some of his epigrams and riddles, in which he must have far outshone Mr.

Woodhouse, found their way, among other morsels, into print. The Austens, with their strong family proclivities, were much with the Leigh Perrots.

Jane was still young, pretty, and cheerful enough to enter with a fair proportion of enjoyment into the gaieties of the place. She had given up writing, in a great measure, since she was three or four and twenty, whether chilled by her lack of success or distracted by other engagements and amusements. However, it is thought that it was during her stay in Bath she wrote several chapters of an unfinished novel called "The Watsons," which, unlike the youthful performance, "Lady Susan," published along with these chapters in the same volume with the memoir, bear a strong flavour of Jane Austen in her sagacity and banter.

She may have been inspirited to the effort by the sale, though for so small a sum, of the MS. of "Northanger Abbey," which happened two years after she came to Bath, when she was twenty-eight years of age. We know the sale proved fruitless, so far as speedy publication was concerned, but the mortifying conclusion could not have been foreseen, and the sale of one of her novels for ten pounds was Jane Austen's first faint gleam of good fortune in authorship, the only one which visited her during her father's lifetime.

The Austens remained at Bath about four years. In their last autumn there, the autumn of 1804, Jane, with her father and mother, spent some weeks at the lovely sea-bathing place of Lyme, which she admired so much, and has immortalised in "Persuasion." We cannot avoid being struck by the small number of the opportunities which Jane Austen had of seeing the world, and by the great use she made of them. Her journeyings were not so very much more extensive than those of the Vicar of Wakefield and his wife in the days [Pg 22] of their prosperity, but they were sufficient for her to avail herself of them for the information and delight of her fellow-creatures. It is not the amount of what we see, but the eyes with which we see it, that signifies.

In the following spring, that of 1805, the Rev. George Austen died at Bath. His widow and daughters then removed to Southampton—drawn to its society very likely by the sailor Austens—and there they stayed for four more years. Mrs. Austen occupied a large old-fashioned house in a corner of Castle Square. The house had a pleasant garden, bounded on one side by the old city wall. A flight of steps led to the top of the wall, which formed a walk with an extensive view of sea and land.

V.

In 1809 the Austens made their last removal. It was back to the country—of which Jane always makes her heroines fond—back to the old neighbourhood of Steventon,

her birth-place. Edward Knight offered his mother a choice of two houses—the one on his estate in Kent, the other on his estate in Hampshire. She selected the house in Hampshire, Chawton Cottage, near the squire's occasional home, Chawton House.

Chawton Cottage, in the village of the same name, was not originally a farm house, like Upper Cross Cottage, in "Persuasion;" it had been intended for an inn. Indeed, it stood so close to the high road on which the front door opened, that a very narrow enclosure "paled" in on each side had been necessary to protect the building from the danger of collision with runaway vehicles. In addition to the Gosport Road in front, the Winchester Road skirted the house on one side, so that it could not be regarded as a secluded habitation, but in those days cheerfulness was more prized than seclusion.[Pg 23] There was a large pond close to Chawton Cottage, at the junction of the two public roads. Happily the theory which connects insalubrity with such ponds had not yet been aired, so that to the Austens, no doubt, Chawton pond was a very desirable sheet of water, tending still more to enhance the attractions of the scene. They would not much mind the duckweed and other slimy vegetation. Horses and donkeys, ducks and geese, would disport themselves there in summer. In winter village sliders would bestow animation on the ice.

The squire added to the house, and contrived some judicious planting and screening. A good-sized entrance and two sitting-rooms were managed. In the drawing-room a window which looked to the Gosport Road was blocked up and turned into a bookcase, and another window was opened out and made to command only turf and trees, for a high wooden fence and a hornbeam hedge shut out the Winchester Road. Here was a little bit of genteel privacy. A shrubbery was carried round the enclosure, which Mr. Austen Leigh tells us gave a sufficient space for "ladies' exercise," though we cannot help thinking the exercise-ground must have been rather limited for the middle-aged women.

However, there was a pleasant irregular mixture of hedgerow, gravel-walk, and orchard, with grass for mowing, made by two or three little enclosures having been thrown together. As it happened, walking had to be relinquished before many years by the younger sister, and Jane Austen, as well as her mother, had to resort to a donkey-carriage for exercise.

Altogether Chawton Cottage was "quite as good as the generality of parsonages, and nearly in the same style." It was capable of receiving other members of the family as frequent visitors. In this respect it must have contrasted favourably in Jane's mind with the cottage in which she had established Ellinor and Marianne Dashwood with their mother, in "Sense and Sensibility." Chawton Cottage was sufficiently well[Pg

24] furnished.^[4] Altogether it formed a comfortable and “lady-like” establishment for a family of ladies whose means were not large. To Jane Austen it was her own house, among her own people, points which meant a great deal to her. Besides, she was a woman possessed at once of too much self-respect and self-resource, and of too serene a spirit and lively a temper to care much either for outward show or interior luxury.

Jane Austen was thirty-four years of age when she settled down at Chawton, her sister Cassandra was thirty-seven, their mother seventy. They were a household of old and middle-aged women, increased either then or a little later by a family connection—a Miss Lloyd—who lived with the Austens. Their prospects were as clearly defined as earthly prospects could well be, and they accepted the definition. Jane Austen was never seen without a cap, either in the morning or the evening, after she went to Chawton. The Austen sisters assumed early the caps which were then the mark of matronhood or confirmed spinsterhood. Possibly Cassandra Austen first adopted the badge as a quiet sign that she wished to have nothing more to do with love and marriage, and Jane bore her faithful company in this as in everything else. Mr. Austen Leigh mentions also—and every trifle is welcome which bears on the novelist’s character and habits—it was held that his aunts, though remarkably neat in their dress, as in all their ways, were not sufficiently attentive to the fashionable or the becoming. In short, Jane and Cassandra Austen, though they had been the young beauties of Steventon in their time, entertained no fear of being styled dowdies or frights in their middle age, whether by their young relatives or the “dressy” among their contemporaries.

The Austens dwelt in the centre of family interests, several members of the old Steventon household living[Pg 25] near, while a younger generation was growing up, with fresh claims on the affectionate sympathies of their grandmother and aunts. In her family and among her old friends Jane Austen was unsurpassed as a tender sick-nurse, an untiring confidante, and a wise counsellor.

In these congenial circumstances it seemed as if a fresh spring of courage and hopefulness, and with them renewed inspiration in her art, came to the author. She began the very year of her arrival at Chawton to revise and prepare her old MSS. for publication. She had found a publisher in a Mr. Egerton, and she brought out in succession two novels—the first, “Sense and Sensibility,” when she was thirty-six years of age, in 1811, fourteen or fifteen years after it was re-written at Steventon. She got for it, though after how short or long an interval, or by what arrangement, we are not told, a hundred and fifty pounds. In her gay way she exclaimed at so large a reward

for what had cost her nothing—nothing save genius, ungrudging trouble, and long patience. “Pride and Prejudice” was published two years later, in 1813.

In the meantime Jane Austen began fresh work, for “Mansfield Park” was commenced the year before. She had no separate study; she worked in the family sitting-room, undisturbed by the conversation, or the various occupations going on around her, and subjected to all kinds of interruptions. She wrote at a little mahogany writing-desk, on small pieces of paper, which could be easily put aside, or covered with blotting-paper at the sight of visitors. But it would be a great mistake to suppose that she did not take the greatest pains with her work. She wrote and re-wrote, filed and polished; her own comparison for the process was painting on a few inches of ivory by repeated touches.

“Pride and Prejudice” attracted attention before long.[Pg 26]^[5] When the secret of the authorship became known, in spite of the author’s name being omitted on the title-page, Jane Austen’s experience was that of a prophet who has no honour in his own country. Mr. Austen Leigh says that any praise which reached the author and her family from their neighbours and acquaintances was of the mildest description, and that those excellent people would have considered Miss Jane’s relatives mad if it had been suspected that they put her, in their own minds, on a level with Madame d’Arblay or even with far inferior writers. A letter is given in which the novelist describes to her sister Cassandra in the liveliest terms her feelings on seeing “Pride and Prejudice” in print. She had got her own darling child from London. The advertisement of it had appeared in their paper that day for the first time. Eighteen shillings! She should ask a guinea for her two next, and twenty-eight shillings for her stupidest of all.

A friend who was not in the secret had dined at Chawton Cottage on the very day of the book’s coming, and in the evening the family had fairly set to it and read half the first volume to her without her having any suspicion. “She was amused, poor soul!” observes the author, and then adds, with admirable *naïveté*, “*That* she could not help, you know, with two such characters to lead the way, but she really does seem to admire Elizabeth. I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least, I do not know.”

In another letter Jane Austen refers to the second reading, which had not come off quite so well, and had even caused her some fits of disgust. She attributed the comparative failure to the rapid way in which her mother, who seemed to have been the reader, got on, and to her not being able to speak as the characters ought, though she understood them perfectly. When we recollect that the old lady was already seventy-four years of age, we[Pg 27] are rather astonished that she found voice and

breath for such a labour of love as reading aloud her daughter's novel, than that she was not able to give the dialogue with sufficient point. Upon the whole, the daughter winds up, she was quite vain enough and well satisfied enough, and the only fault which she found with her story was that it was rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wanted to be stretched here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense. Unquestionably the novelist was not plagued with diffidence, any more than with mock-modesty.

In the same letter she refers to an out-of-the-way book for a woman to read, with which she was then engaged; it was an "Essay on the Military Police, and Institutions of the British Empire, by Captain Pasley, of the Engineers." She declared it was delightfully written, and highly entertaining, and that the author was the first soldier she had ever sighed for. The last assertion reminds one of Jane Austen's strong preference for the sister service, which may be best explained by the circumstance that she had two brothers in the navy, and none in the army. Her heroes are squires, clergymen, and sailors, just as the male Austens were. She uses their Christian names, James, Henry, Frank, Edward, as well as her own. Her sister's name was too singular and conspicuous to be thus employed.

Another letter a year later, in 1814, supplies an account of a journey which Jane Austen made "post" to London, in company with her brother Henry, who read the MS. of "Mansfield Park" by the way. It sounds as if the brother and sister were themselves the bearers of the new work to the publisher, who brought it out the same year.

"Emma," the heroine of which proved almost as great a favourite as Elizabeth Bennet with their author, was written and published two years later, in 1816. It was in connection with this, the last book of hers which Jane Austen lived to see come out, that she received [Pg 28] what her nephew calls the only mark of distinction ever bestowed upon her. She was in London during the previous autumn of 1815, the year of Waterloo, nursing her brother Henry through a dangerous illness, in his house in Hans Place. Henry Austen was attended by one of the Prince Regent's physicians. To this gentleman it became known that his patient's nurse was the author of "Pride and Prejudice." The court physician told the lady that the Prince was a great admirer of her novels; that he read them often, and kept a set in every one of his residences; that he himself had thought it right to inform his royal highness that Miss Austen was staying in London, and that the Prince had desired Mr. Clarke, the librarian at Carlton House, to wait upon her.

The next day Mr. Clarke made his appearance and invited Jane Austen to Carlton House, saying that he had the Prince's instructions to show her the library, ^[6] and other

apartments, and to pay her every possible attention. The invitation was of course accepted, and in the course of the visit to Carlton House Mr. Clarke declared himself commissioned to say that if Miss Austen had any other novel forthcoming, she was at liberty to dedicate it to the Prince. Accordingly, such a dedication was immediately prefixed to “Emma,” which was at that time in John Murray’s hands.

The first part of the civility, the invitation to Carlton House, was a gracious enough mark of attention from the first gentleman in Europe to the first lady novelist in his kingdom; but at this distance of time, in the full light enjoyed by posterity, it seems passing strange that two such women as Jane Austen and Jane Porter—equal in moral worth, though standing on very different intellectual heights—should have eagerly availed themselves of the permission to dedicate books to George IV., though he had been ten times the Prince Regent, and [Pg 29] the future king. And what is if possible stranger, is that the Prince Regent should have been, even professedly, an admiring, assiduous reader of the novels—altogether apart in literary merit, but alike in good tone and taste—of these two upright and blameless women. The fact is enough to tempt people to a disheartening doubt of the moral influence of books.

As a qualification to the pleasure derived from the princely compliment, Jane Austen had to suffer the annoyance of receiving and declining to comply with two rather preposterous suggestions offered to her by Mr. Clarke. The one was for her to pourtray the habits of life, character, and enthusiasm of a clergyman who should pass his time between London and the country, and who should bear some resemblance to Beattie’s Minstrel.

In a letter in which she thanks her correspondent for his praise of her novels, and expresses her anxiety that her fourth work might not disgrace what was good in the others, remarking she was haunted by the idea that the readers who have preferred “Pride and Prejudice” will think “Emma” inferior in wit; and those who have preferred “Mansfield Park” will consider the present novel deficient in sense, she demurely puts aside Mr. Clarke’s hint for her next story, on the plea that, though she might be equal to the comic part of it, the learned side of the clergyman would demand a classic education and an amount of acquaintance with ancient and modern literature that was far beyond her. Perhaps in self-defence from similar assaults, she concludes by boasting herself, “with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.”

But the irrepressible Mr. Clarke was not to be deterred from his purpose of advising the novelist as to the direction of her talents. His second piece of advice was more startling and incongruous than his first. Prince Leopold was then on the eve of his

marriage with Princess Charlotte. Mr. Clarke had had the good [Pg 30] fortune to be appointed Chaplain and private English Secretary to the Prince. The clergyman might have had a generous desire that another clergyman's daughter should have the chance of sharing his good luck and assurance of preferment. Or he might have had a wish to procure a compliment for his last princely patron, and might have believed it was specially due from Jane Austen as a small return for the notice which the Prince Regent had condescended to take of her and her work. Mr. Clarke proposed that Miss Austen should write an historical novel illustrative of the august house of Cobourg, ^[1] which would just then be very interesting, and might very properly be dedicated to Prince Leopold. The date of the proposal brings vividly before us the deliberation with which public events were discussed in those days. For a public event to be dealt with now-a-days so as to take the tide of public interest at its height, an author would require to be as much in advance of the historical circumstance as publishers show themselves in their anticipation of Christmas. It would be necessary, in order that a novel founded on a royal marriage should command readers, that the author should be taken into what Mr. Clarke would have called the august confidence of the principals at the very first step of the negotiations, so that he might be able to bring out his work within twelve hours of the ceremony.

Jane Austen was not so profoundly honoured by the recommendation as Jane Porter felt when she set herself to comply with a royal wish that she should commemorate the first beginnings of the House of Brunswick.

After all, so-called historical novels were in Miss Porter's way and not in Miss Austen's. Mr. Austen Leigh speaks of the grave civility with which Jane Austen refused to make such an attempt. It seems to me that while she respectfully acknowledges the courtesies of Carlton House, and readily responds with answering friendliness to the friendly tone of Mr. [Pg 31] Clarke's communication, there is considerable impatience and scorn in her merry but most decided dismissal of his ridiculous project. Even to her congratulations on his recent appointment she adds a sentence which has a suspicion of irony in it. "In my opinion," she writes, "the service of a court can hardly be too well paid, for immense must be the sacrifice of time and feeling required by it." She goes on to say, "You are very kind in your hints as to the sort of composition which might recommend me at present, and I am fully sensible that an historical romance, founded on the House of Saxe-Cobourg, might be much more to the purpose of profit or popularity than such pictures of domestic life in country villages as I deal in. But I could no more write a romance than an epic poem. I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up, and never relax into laughing at myself or other

people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter. No; I must keep to my own style, and go on in my own way; and though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other.”

There is an anecdote of Jane Austen which coincides with her character, and has been widely circulated, though it is not mentioned by Mr. Austen Leigh. If it had a foundation in fact, it must have occurred either during this visit to London or in the course of that paid not long before. It is said that Miss Austen received an invitation to a rout given by an aristocratic couple with whom she was not previously acquainted. The reason assigned for the invitation was, that the author of “Pride and Prejudice” might be introduced to the author of “Corinne.” Tradition has it that the English novelist refused the invitation, saying, that to no house where she was not asked as Jane Austen would she go as the author of “Pride and Prejudice.”

The anecdote is often quoted with marks of admiration [Pg 32] for the author’s independence. But even the most honest and honourable independence has its becoming limits. That of Jane Austen, ultra self-sufficing, fastidious, tinged with haughtiness, is just a trifle repellent out of that small circle in which she was always at home.

Whether or not Madame de Staël was consulted about the proposed meeting, she was not an admirer of her sister author. The somewhat grandiloquent Frenchwoman characterised the productions of that English genius—which were the essence of common-sense—as “*vulgaires*,” precisely what they were not.

Apparently, Jane Austen was not one whit more accessible to English women of letters. There were many of deserved repute in or near London at the dates of these later visits. Not to speak of Mrs. Inchbald,^[8] whom her correspondent, warm-hearted Maria Edgeworth, rejoiced to come to England and meet personally, there were the two Porters, Joanna Baillie—at the representation of whose fine play, *The Family Legend*, Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron had lately “assisted”—and the veteran writer, Madame d’Arblay, whose creations were the object of Jane Austen’s early and late admiration. But we do not hear of a single overture towards acquaintance between Miss Austen and these ladies, though her work must have left as lively an impression on some of their minds as theirs had done on hers. Men of letters were no better known to her.

Jane Austen was destined to add only one more tale—and that a short, if charming story—to the list of her novels. In the course of 1816, she wrote “Persuasion,” which is not merely very good, in her own style, but possesses distinguishing excellences wanting in the others.^[9]

[Pg 33]

Between February, 1811, and August, 1816, rather more than five years, Jane Austen wrote her three later novels, "Mansfield Park," "Emma," and "Persuasion"—pendants, as it were, to her three earlier works, "Pride and Prejudice," "Sense and Sensibility," and "Northanger Abbey," belonging to 1796, '97, and '98—twenty years before. The author's second period of composition was as productive as her first, if we take into consideration that "Sense and Sensibility" was simply an adaptation from a more juvenile story still.

Making allowance for the novelist's strong individuality, there is an undoubted change in the tone. There are greater tolerance and tenderness especially noticeable in "Persuasion"—more thoughtfulness and earnestness in "Mansfield Park"—a perfection of composition which belongs peculiarly to "Emma." All the three novels are distinguished by greater polish of the simple, vigorous diction, and a still more determined adherence to probability. The later novels may lack some amount of what Jane Austen herself defined as the sparkle of "Pride and Prejudice"—a sparkle which was often hard as well as bright; but the notion of any falling-off in power in the author would be absurd. There was an ample equivalent for anything she might have lost in fresh spontaneousness by what she had gained in reflection and feeling, and in delicacy of execution.

VI.

The shadow of what proved a mortal illness was already hanging over Jane Austen while she was working[Pg 34] at "Persuasion," and this circumstance may help to account for a certain soft pensiveness in the book, in opposition to the author's earlier unbroken, often hard, brilliance. But, as a proof that her high standard of literary excellence, and the pains which she did not grudge in order to attain it, had not abated, Mr. Austen Leigh tells us that, having ended her novel, "Persuasion," she was dissatisfied with the close, and her dissatisfaction preyed on her mind to such a degree as to affect her usually cheerful spirits. She retired to bed one night quite depressed, but rose next morning with renewed energy and hope to make a fresh effort. She pulled down what she had done so far as to cancel the chapter containing the re-engagement of the hero and heroine, which she had pronounced flat and tame. She wrote two entirely new chapters—among the most delightful in the book—in its place. Instead of reconciling the couple at the Crofts' lodgings, she brought the Musgroves and Captain Harville to Bath, and we know the result. Any one who has the least idea of the relief implied to a conscientious artist in the conclusion of a long thought out, long laboured at piece of work—the double relief when bodily health and

spirits have failed under the task—will comprehend something of the devotion to her art and concern for her reputation which compelled the novelist thus to resume and re-construct her last scenes.

Struggling against illness as Jane Austen was from the earlier stages of the internal disease which ultimately proved fatal, in the January of 1817—the year in which she died—she began another tale, and wrote on—in spite of such bodily weakness that the last portions were first traced in pencil, though the quantity continued as great as twelve chapters in seven weeks—till the 17th of March, two months before she left Chawton not to return, and four months before her death. Mr. Austen Leigh mentions some family troubles in the spring of 1816, which his aunt took to heart, and which might have aggravated her complaint. I do not know whether these had anything to do with the persistent industry under adverse[Pg 35] circumstances; whether she might be anxious to contribute her share still, as she had been doing within the last few years, to the family income; or whether she might be prompted feverishly to seek the distraction from other cares afforded by mental work.

Certainly, those of Jane Austen's letters which belong to this date are as lively as ever, and wittier than in her younger days. She wrote to a nephew in reference to the weather that it was really too bad, and had been too bad for a long time, much worse than any body could bear, and she began to think it would never be fine again. This was a *finesse* of hers, for she had often observed that if anybody wrote about the weather it was generally completely changed before the letter was read. She chaffed the Winchester boy on having first dated the letter from his father's house at Steventon, and then given the superfluous information that he had returned home. She was glad that he had recollected to mention his being come home. Her heart had begun to sink within her when she had got so far through his letter without its being mentioned. She had been dreadfully afraid that he might have been detained at Winchester by some illness—confined to his bed, perhaps, and quite unable to hold a pen, and only dating from Steventon in order, with a mistaken sort of tenderness, to deceive her. But now she had no doubt of his being at home, she was sure he would not have said it so seriously unless it were so.

She changed the subject to describe countless post-chaises full of Winchester boys passing the cottage on their return home for their holidays—chaises full of future heroes, legislators, fools, and villains. Before he came to see his grandmother and aunts his mother must get well, he must go to Oxford, and *not* be elected. After that, a little change of scene might be good for him, and his physicians, she hoped, would order him to the sea, or to a house by the side of a very considerable pond.

In another letter to the same correspondent, Jane [Pg 36] Austen said that one reason of her writing was for the pleasure of directing to the young fellow as Esquire. She wished him joy on having left Winchester for good. Now he might own how miserable he had been there; now it would gradually all come out, his crimes and his miseries: how often he had gone up by the mail to London and thrown away fifty guineas at a tavern, and how often he had been on the point of hanging himself, restrained only, as some ill-natured person writing on poor Winton had it, by the want of a tree within some miles of the city.

This nephew, like one of the author's nieces, appears to have been perpetrating a boyish attempt at a novel under the fascination of the favourite Aunt Jane's vocation. There was some delightful banter from her on their common craft. After a brief allusion to his Uncle Henry's very superior sermons, she proceeded to suggest that the budding novelist and herself ought to get hold of one or two and put them into their novels; it would be a fine help to a volume; they could make their heroines read them aloud on a Sunday evening, just as well as Isabella Wardlaw in the "Antiquary"^[10] was made to read the history of the Hartz demon in the ruins of St. Ruth, though Jane believed on recollection Lovel was the reader. She was quite concerned for the loss the lad's mother had mentioned in her letter. Two chapters and a half to be missing was monstrous. It was well that she had not been at Steventon lately, and therefore could not be suspected of purloining them; two strong twigs and a half towards a nest of her own would have been something. She did not think, however, that any theft of that sort would be really very useful to her. What could she have done with his strong, manly, vigorous sketches, full of variety and glow? How could she possibly have joined them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which she worked with so fine a brush as produced little effect after much labour?

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Jane Austen's disease increased gradually, while she was spared much suffering. Her friends were not aware how soon or how late she apprehended the serious nature of her complaint. Her unselfishness and her buoyant temper alike inclined her to make light of any illness. An instance is given of her constant consideration for those around her. In the usual sitting-room at Chawton Cottage there was only one sofa, frequently occupied by Mrs. Austen, then in her seventy-eighth year. Jane, who was forced to lie down often, would never use the sofa, even in her mother's absence. She contrived a sort of couch for herself with two or three chairs, and alleged that the arrangement was much more comfortable to her than a real sofa; but the importunity of a little niece drew from the invalid the private explanation that she believed if she herself had

shown any inclination to use the sofa, her mother might have scrupled being on it so much as was good for her.

In a long letter to a friend, in the beginning of 1817, Jane wrote happily about herself, as having certainly gained strength during the winter, and being then not far from well. She thought she understood her case better than she had done, and ascribed her symptoms to biliousness, which could be kept off by care. After various bits of family news she finished the letter, then added in a postscript that the real object of the epistle was to ask her friend for a recipe, but she had thought it genteel not to let it appear early.

By April Jane Austen was seriously ill, and a young niece who had walked over with an elder sister to inquire for her aunt, received the impression of her as quite like an invalid. She was in her dressing-gown, sitting in an arm-chair, though she could get up and kindly greet the visitors. She was very pale, her voice was weak and low, and there was about her a general appearance of debility and suffering. She was not equal to the exertion of talking, and the visit of the nieces to the sick room was a short one, their other aunt, Cassandra, soon taking them away.

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In the following month, May, Jane Austen was induced to go to Winchester, to be near a skilful doctor, who spoke encouragingly to his patient, but who from the first entertained little expectation of a permanent cure. She was accompanied by her life-long friend and sister Cassandra. They could leave their aged mother behind them with the friend and family connection who made one of the household at Chawton Cottage. Besides, Mrs. Austen was near several of her children and grandchildren. In Winchester, where the sisters had lodgings in the corner house in College Street, at the entrance to Commoners, the Austens had old and valued friends among the residents in the Close. Still Jane wrote hopefully about herself to the nephew to whom she appears to have been so much attached. There was no better way of thanking him for his affectionate concern for her during her illness than by telling him herself, as soon as possible, that she continued to get better. She seems to have been aware of the change in her penmanship, which struck him also, and hastened to observe gaily that she would not boast of her handwriting: neither that nor her face had yet recovered their proper beauty, but in other respects she gained strength very fast. She was then out of bed from nine in the morning until ten at night—upon the sofa, it was true, but she ate her meals with Aunt Cassandra in a rational way, and could employ herself and walk from one room to another. Mr. Lyford (the surgeon) said he would cure her, and if he failed, she would draw up a memorial to the Dean and Chapter, and

had no doubt of redress from that pious, learned, and disinterested body. The sisters' lodgings were very comfortable. They had a neat little drawing-room with a bow window, overlooking Dr. Gabell's garden. Thanks to the kindness of her correspondent's father and mother in sending her their carriage, her journey to Winchester on Saturday had been performed with very little fatigue, and had it been a fine day, she thought[Pg 39] she would have felt none; but it had distressed her much to see Uncle Henry and William Knight, who had kindly attended them on horseback, riding in the rain almost the whole way.

The cheerful letter ends solemnly: "God bless you, my dear E——. If ever you are ill, may you be as tenderly nursed as I have been. May the same blessed alleviations of anxious sympathising friends be yours; and may you possess, as I dare say you will, the greatest blessing of all, in the consciousness of not being unworthy of their love. / could not feel this. Your very affectionate aunt, J. A."

For amidst the sweet and jubilant sights and sounds of an English May and June in the old grey cathedral town, the great English novelist was fast passing away. Jane Austen had always been a sweet-tempered, contented woman, and all that was best and noblest in her nature and her faith came out in the patience, humility, and thankfulness with which she met her last enemy. "I will only say farther," are her loving words, in one more letter, that "my dearest sister, my tender, watchful, indefatigable nurse, has not been made ill by her exertions. As to what I owe her, and the anxious affection of all my beloved family on this occasion, I can only cry over it, and pray God to bless them more and more."

The sister who had lived together with Jane in their home—who had been with her waking and sleeping for forty-two years—who had served the little girl as a model—who had held the office of the young author's sole confidante beforehand, as to her characters and plots—who had rejoiced and suffered with her, stood by and soothed Jane Austen's death-bed; so did a sister-in-law, to whom the dying woman said, almost with her last breath, "You have always been a kind sister to me, Mary."

Two of her brothers, whom she had so cherished in her faithful affection, both clergymen living near, were frequently with her, administering the consolations[Pg 40] and services of their church, as well as testifying their constant regard. She was fully acquainted with her danger, though she continued hopeful. She had much to bind her to life. "We may well believe," Mr. Austen Leigh writes, "that she would gladly have lived longer; but she was enabled, without dismay or complaint, to prepare for death. She was a humble, believing Christian." And she was strengthened to rule her spirit to the last. Her sweetness of temper never failed. She was always considerate

of, and grateful to, those who attended on her. At times, when she felt a little better, the ruling spirit of playfulness revived, and she amused her companions even in their sadness. She sank rapidly in the end. On being asked whether there was anything she wanted, her reply was, "Nothing but death." These were her parting words. In quietness and peace, records Jane Austen's nephew, she breathed her last, on the morning of July 18th, 1817, at the age of forty-two years. She was buried on the 24th of July, in Winchester Cathedral, near the centre of the north aisle, opposite the tomb of William of Wykeham. A slab of black marble marks the place.^[1]

The words with which Mr. Austen Leigh concludes the memoir are full of simple pathos. "Her own family only attended the funeral. Her sister returned to her desolated home, there to devote herself to the care of her aged mother, and to live much on the memory of her lost sister, till called many years later to rejoin her. Her brothers went back sorrowing to their several homes. They were very fond and very proud of her. They were attached to her by her talents, her virtues, and her engaging manners; and each loved afterwards to fancy a resemblance in some niece or daughter of his own to the dear sister Jane, whose perfect equal they yet never expected to see."

Surely to be thus prized and mourned by her nearest and dearest was beautiful and good—in one [Pg 41] sense best—while it need not have interfered with wider interests and influences; and, doubtless, to be so cherished was the meet reward of Jane Austen's faithful performance of the home duties from which no literary career, however arduous and distinguished, absolved her, and of her unswerving loyalty to the domestic affections which form the inner citadel of all true natures. For charity or love must always begin at home, and reign paramount there, wherever it may end, though the extremities of the earth may own its sway.

Jane Austen's mother survived her ten years, dying at the great age of eighty-eight. Cassandra Austen lived nearly twenty years after her mother's death, nearly thirty years after the death of Jane, dying at the age of seventy. On the death of Cassandra Austen, Chawton Cottage was suffered to fall far down in the social scale of houses: it was divided into tenements for labourers. The rooms continued to be so used while the walls were still standing, nine or ten years ago.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] My readers may remember the old church at Kellynch, which was mentioned by Charles Musgrove as an apology to Captain Benwick for visiting the village.

[2] We are reminded of the discussion on handwriting, and the praise of Emma Woodhouse's handwriting in "Emma."

[3] The members of the Austen and Leigh families seem to have been much given to changing their names—sometimes acquiring estates in the process. Thus we have Mr. Leigh Perrot, Mr. Knight (who was originally Edward Austen), and at last Mr. Austen Leigh.

[4] There was a wise and really dignified moderation about people's ideas then. Is it to our honour to have departed so far from the contented minds and simple habits of our predecessors?

[5] At the same time many popular lady novelists, including Miss Edgeworth, Lady Morgan, the Miss Porters, and Mrs. Brunton, were already in the field, and it was not immediately recognised, except perhaps, by a few great men, that a queen of novelists had appeared among them.

[6] It appears, however, to have been to her new publisher, Mr. Murray, that Jane Austen was indebted for an early sight of the books of the season, including "Paul's Letters to his Kinsfolk."

[7] Mr. Clarke's tall language recalls the phrases of Mr. Collins in "Pride and Prejudice."

[8] We have a single hint of Jane Austen's delight in "a good play." She alludes with eager expectation, in one of her letters, to her brother's strenuous efforts to get tickets to hear Kean.

[9] "Persuasion" was published, together with "Northanger Abbey," by Mr. Murray, in 1818, the year after Jane Austen's death. The proceeds of her books which had fallen to her share in her lifetime were seven hundred pounds, but how the sum was apportioned to each novel we are not told. If contemporary favour is rarely a test of a book's merit, still less is the sum of money which it fetches to begin with. Among the lady novelists of her day—none of whom, not even Maria Edgeworth or Susan Ferrier, deserves to be mentioned in the same breath with Jane Austen—there were several whose pecuniary gains must have been double and treble hers.

[10] *The novel of the year.*

[11] In addition, there is now a monument which was erected to Jane Austen's memory by her nephew, the writer of the memoir.



JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS.



he study of Jane Austen's novels is in some respects a liberal education. The proper appreciation of these stories has been suggested as a gauge of intellect. But though the verdict of the best judges, including the earnest, well-nigh reverential approbation of Sir Walter Scott, and the boundless enthusiasm of Lord Macaulay, who has pronounced Jane Austen, in her more limited walk, next to Shakespeare, the test is unfair, so long as men and women's minds, no less than the schools of fiction, are in two major, in addition to many minor divisions. Of course, where authors are concerned, in rare and great instances, as in that of Shakespeare, the divisions are united, and we have a comprehensive, many-sided genius. But these exceptions are few and far between, like stars of the first magnitude. There is a cast of inventive intellect, and a school of writing which deal exclusively with human nature in the mass, choosing to work with common materials, and to make them valuable by the penetrating fidelity, and nice perception and adaptation of the workmanship. There is another order of genius and of wit, which selects an extraordinary, sometimes an abnormal subject, whether man or woman, story or surroundings, and by the sheer power and the passionate insight which are shown in the treatment, [Pg 43] compel our comprehension and sympathy for what would otherwise be strange, perhaps repugnant to us.

These minds and schools are, and always must be, in natural antagonism to each other. The disciples of the one have rarely such breadth of faculty and taste as to be the disciples of the other. Among women, Jane Austen may be taken as the representative of the first class, Charlotte Brontë of the second. The fervent, faithful followers of the one genius are apt, more or less, to condemn and slight the other.

It is more than questionable whether the two women, had they been contemporaries, could have sympathised strongly. Of course, the opportunity was not granted to Jane Austen; but in the case of Charlotte Brontë, who stands here for what is, after all, the narrower school, though its inspiration may be deeper, she was perplexed and annoyed by the recommendation of a critic to whom she paid deference that she should read and re-read Miss Austen. Jane Austen's work was "tame and domestic," if not peddling, to Charlotte Brontë.

After dismissing the unfair insistence on a universal acknowledgment of the surpassing qualities, in her own line, of Jane Austen, it is still true that they are as nearly as possible perfect. Great variety of character, though in one class and amidst the same surroundings—which rendered the achievement of such variety the more remarkable—lively interest excited by the most legitimate means; the artistic cunning with which every-day events are handled; keen irony; delicate, exquisite humour, which never fails; the greatest capacity for selecting and grouping her materials—where shall we find these attractions in an equal degree to that in which they are to be met in Jane Austen's novels? Above all, every story is as wholesome and sweet, without cloyness, as English wheat-fields repaying the cultivation of generations, and the roses, set in hardy prickles, of English gardens.

We hear much, with reason, of the great English[Pg 44] humourists. Why has a secondary place among them not been assigned to Jane Austen? Making due allowance for sex and rank, and the double restrictions which they laid upon her, none can read her novels with intelligent appreciation and fail to see that she deserves to stand high in the rank of English humourists, unless, indeed, the root-word humour is understood to mean oddity and eccentricity, and the definition humourist is confined to the writer who illustrates oddities. For it is one of Miss Austen's crowning distinctions, that just as she hardly ever exaggerated or caricatured, so she did not care to have to do with men and women riding their hobbies.

I have been amazed to read one criticism of Jane Austen, which denies her all humour, and only grants her a sense of the ridiculous and a power of expressing it, in addition to her life-like pictures of English country life in her own rank. The critic remarks that she only provokes a smile, never a laugh. No doubt standards are different, but I am inclined to suspect that the broad burlesque and screaming farce, which to this critic appears to sum up every display of humour, and which might draw shouts of laughter from him and his school, would not win so much as a smile from the admirers of Miss Austen.

Another accusation which has been brought against Jane Austen is, that she is deficient in strength and warmth. But violence is not strength, neither is demonstrativeness warmth. Unquestionably this novelist never tears her passion to tatters. For that matter she elected not to deal with fierce passions. But in her own field of art, if restrained power and marvellous flexibility be strength, then she is strong. Indeed, the idea of weakness associated with Jane Austen is superlatively absurd. Again, self-respectful, delicate reticence may be called cold, but if so the coldness is shared by some of the best writers of fiction in every generation, and it would be well for modern English literature and its readers if such coldness were more common.

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I should like to say a word on the real limitations of Jane Austen's genius in her novels. In the first place, while the talk and writing of our mothers and grandmothers were, with regard to many things, simpler and more plain-spoken than ours, there is another side on which they were strictly reserved. Deep feeling, religious opinions, personal testimony on the highest questions, were, unless in exceptional circles, withheld and kept hidden as too sacred for general discussion; above all, as unfit for the pages of a story. No one who knows much of the women and their books can doubt the vital religious principles of Jane Austen and Jane and Anna Maria Porter. But though Jane Porter always included fervent religious faith among the attributes of her idealised fantastic heroes of romance, Anna Maria, in the only tale in which she showed how well and pleasantly she could deal with contemporary life, apologised anxiously in the preface for the serious tone of the later volumes. Jane Austen, a stronger-minded woman, could entertain a still more decided view of her calling, and could restrain any impulse to overstep it. She is almost absolutely silent on every motive and principle out of what she held to be her province; nay, she frequently brings forward the lower motives of sound common sense and rational prudence, just as a sensitive person would prefer to urge them still, in mixed company, rather than bring in loftier obligations, when to do so might be casting pearls before swine. We have to study the conduct rather than the speeches of her characters, just as we have to look at the lives of some of the best men and women in every generation, to discern to our satisfaction that they are, with all their human frailties, thoroughly reverent and noble-minded.

There is nothing in the last observation to imply that the author shirked any duty of speech which she recognised. On the contrary, in carrying out her purpose of exhibiting the deplorable results of an entirely worldly education in the Crawfords and Bertrams in [Pg 46] "Mansfield Park;" in indicating the little straws of former bad habits

which are enough to expose a hypocrite to eyes willing to be enlightened in Mr. Elliot in “Persuasion,” she probably put force upon her natural reserve, that she might not fail in her fidelity to her moral. For one of the most gifted English novelists never wrote without a good moral, more or less conspicuous. So universally was the true morality of Jane Austen’s novels acknowledged, that at a time when novels were, with too much cause, largely tabooed in many households, there was a general exception made in favour of the tales in which the characters said little or nothing about religion, but lived it to some extent.

The absence of the most distant allusion to a higher life and its power is most conspicuous in the clergymen who figure largely in Miss Austen’s novels. Her biographer and nephew, Mr. Austen Leigh, himself a clergyman, and the son and grandson of clergymen, sees himself called upon to refer to this, when he says in her memoir that the standard of duty in the Church is much higher than formerly, and that the profession and practice even of Henry Tilney and Edmund Bertram would be different to-day.

It is to this marked restraint which Jane Austen put upon the expression of all sacred depths of feeling, whether they belonged to religion or not, quite as much as to her mental constitution, or to the formal conditions of her generation, that another result is due. While we have so much that may instruct, entertain, and delight us in her stories, we have nothing that will harrow, and not much that will move us to thoughts which lie too deep for tears. There is no end of enchanting humour; there is curiously little pathos.

With regard to that other criticism which may be made of defective taste and sentiment in some of the work which is otherwise so excellent, as in “Pride and Prejudice,” in the free discussion not only by a vulgar matchmaker like Mrs. Bennet, and by her silly, giddy [Pg 47] younger daughters, but by modest and charming girls like Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, of the probability of Mr. Bingley’s falling in love with one of the girls among whom he has come, and marrying her—thus at the same time securing her happiness and providing her with an unexceptionable establishment—I believe it is an example at once of blunter candour than exists at present, and of the sole light in which a girl’s position was then regarded. It goes without saying that Jane and Elizabeth were incapable either of instituting unbecoming and unwomanly attempts to attract the hero of the hour, or of consenting to marry any other hero, whom they could neither respect nor love, simply as the means to secure an establishment in life. As it happened, Cassandra and Jane Austen, in whom some of their contemporaries saw the originals of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, proved equally incapable of the last piece of unworthy time-serving. But Miss Austen was what all

true artists and teachers must be,—in advance of the prevailing morality of her day. She argued and acted on the side of what was upright and unworldly; still she was so far affected by the tone of thought around her as to cause her best women in “Pride and Prejudice” to wait and watch for Bingley’s throwing the handkerchief, while they coolly debate Jane Bennet’s chances of attracting and fixing his regard. A hundred or eighty years ago there was but one career for a woman not possessed of an independent fortune—that of marriage. Jane Austen never concealed—on the contrary, she publicly proclaimed in “Emma,” that she looked upon the necessity of a gentlewoman’s working for her livelihood as a very hard and well-nigh degrading obligation, an ordeal which would expose her to much that was at once painful and injurious. We may hope that we have to some extent happily changed all that. Besides the prejudices, no doubt not ill-founded, on all the evidence which was then in the possession of even the wisest and most liberal-minded of our predecessors, we must not forget that Miss Austen has placed her five [Pg 48] Miss Bennets in a specially trying and precarious position. Their father’s estate was entailed on male heirs, and on his death passed to a cousin, who was a stranger to the family. The interest of the mother’s small fortune of four thousand pounds was inadequate to maintain her daughters, save in a poor way, altogether beneath what they had been accustomed to. The circumstances were not enough to tempt the fine-spirited, true-hearted elder girls into any betrayal of their real dignity and independence in the matter of marriage. But Jane Austen did not mean—it would be ridiculous in taking the generation and its rooted restrictions into consideration, to suppose she could—that the precariousness of the Bennets’ prospects did not influence them, and their friends for them, in desiring that they should be speedily and well married.

There is an undeniable occasional hardness and sharpness of satire, most perceptible in the earlier of the novels, and softening as the author’s nature mellowed. As an instance of change in a familiar custom, there is hardly ever an abbreviation of a christian name in the family life of Miss Austen’s novels, any more than in the family life of her class in that day. With the exception of Lizzy Bennet in “Pride and Prejudice,” and Fanny Price in “Mansfield Park,” the abbreviations end with the period of childhood. No perpetual Charlies and Neds, Kates or Kittys, and Babs, meet us at every step. There may be less formality in the modern practice, but there is also a suspicion of less manliness and womanliness, with their earnestness and responsibility. What serious sense of duty can be expected from a Hal, or a Loo, not to say from a Dolly representing an Adolphus, or a Dot standing as a pet name for a stately Margaret or a grandly simple Mary?

Jane Austen had a high opinion of the merit of her work. When her characters were compared to living people, she maintained stoutly that she was too proud of her gentlemen to admit that they were only Mr. A. or Colonel B., although she qualified the assertion by allowing—for [Pg 49] the credit of human nature, and for her own credit—to avoid the accusation of painting angels instead of men, that with regard to her favourites, Edmund Bertram and Mr. Knightley, they were very far from being what she knew English gentlemen often were.

In the long list—growing always longer with the years—of the distinguished admirers of Miss Austen's books, Mr. Austen Leigh quotes formidable names—formidable to those who hold an opposite view of her claims as an author. Among widely different names of men are those of Southey, Coleridge, Sir James Mackintosh, Guizot, Lord Holland, Whewell, Sydney Smith, Archbishop Whately, Sir Walter Scott,^[12] the American statesman Quincey, and Lord Macaulay. Only one woman's name is given—that of Miss Mitford. We must hope, for the honour of intellectual and literary women, that many more names might have been added of women who have gladly and gratefully acknowledged Jane Austen as a queen of novelists. To the examples cited, large additions might be made from the names of modern thinkers and students of human nature, since among them the novelist's fame is still increasing.

Let it never be said, for women's own sakes, that it is among women—among bright, quick-witted girls such as she herself was when she wrote "Pride and Prejudice" and "Northanger Abbey," far outstripping mature competitors—that Jane Austen begins to be no longer read and revered.

In her own day, Jane Austen kept a collection of such criticisms of her books as she could come across, including in the collection various contemptuous opinions as that "one lady could say nothing better of 'Mansfield Park' than that it was a 'mere novel.'"

Another owned that "she thought 'Sense and Sensibility' [Pg 50] and 'Pride and Prejudice' downright nonsense, but expected to like 'Mansfield Park' better, and, having finished the first volume, hoped that she had got through the worst."

Another "did not like 'Mansfield Park.' Nothing interesting in the characters, language poor."

"One gentleman read the first and last chapters of 'Emma,' but did not look at the rest, because he had been told that it was not interesting."

"The opinions of another gentleman about 'Emma' were so bad that they could not be repeated to the author."

Among the most remarkable of the criticisms worthy of the name of Jane Austen, are those of Sir Walter Scott and Macaulay. The generous entry in Sir Walter's diary is as follows:—"Read again, for the third time at least, 'Pride and Prejudice.' That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements of feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big bow-wow strain I can do myself, like any now going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!"

Macaulay has this entry in his journal:—"I have now read once again all Miss Austen's novels—charming they are. There are in the world no compositions which approach nearer to perfection."

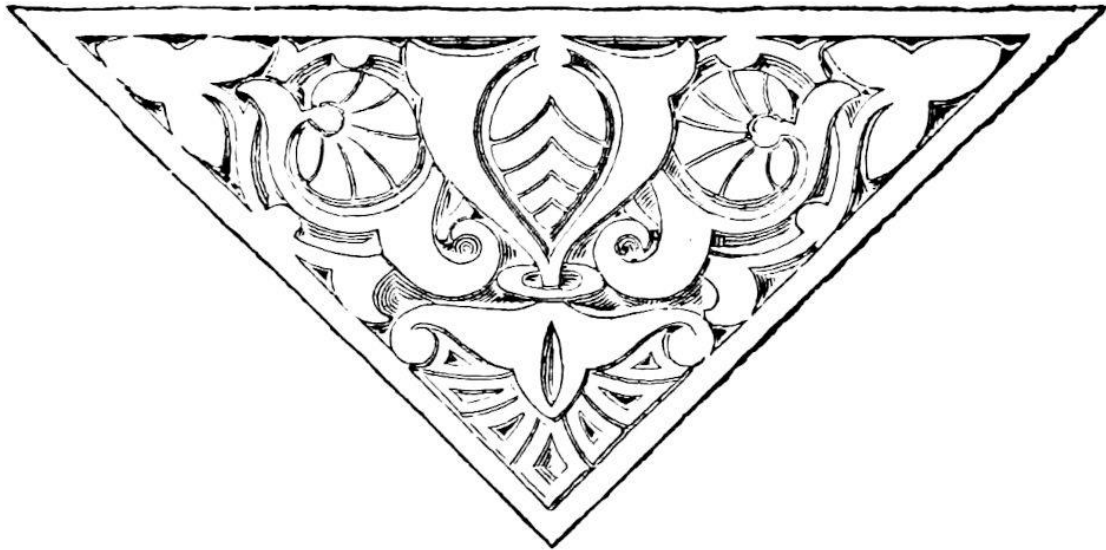
In Macaulay's well-known essay on Madame d'Arblay, there is, in the course of an admirable comparison between the two writers, the following high praise of Jane Austen:—

"Highest among those who have exhibited human nature by means of dialogue, stands Shakespeare. His variety is, like the variety of nature, endless diversity, scarcely any monstrosity. The characters of which he has given us an impression, as vivid as that which we receive from the characters of our own associates, are to [Pg 51] be reckoned by scores. Yet in all these scores hardly one character is to be found which deviates widely from the common standard, and which we could call very eccentric if we met it in real life. The silly rule that every man has one ruling passion, and that this clue, once known, unravels all the mysteries of his conduct, finds no countenance in the plays of Shakespeare. There man appears as he is, made up of a crowd of passions, which contend for the mastery over him, and govern him in turn. What is Hamlet's ruling passion? Or Othello's? Or Harry the Fifth's? Or Wolsey's? Or Lear's? Or Shylock's? Or Benedick's? Or Macbeth's? Or that of Cassius? Or that of Falconbridge? But we might go on for ever. Take a single example—Shylock. Is he so eager for money as to be indifferent to revenge? Or so eager for revenge as to be indifferent to money? Or so bent on both together as to be indifferent to the honour of his nation and the law of Moses? All his propensities are mingled with each other, so that, in trying to apportion to each its proper part, we find the same difficulty which constantly meets us in real life. A superficial critic may say that hatred is Shylock's ruling passion. But how many passions have amalgamated to form that hatred? It is partly the result of wounded pride: Antonio has called him dog. It is partly the result of covetousness: Antonio has hindered him of half a million; and when Antonio is gone, there will be no limit to the gains of usury. It is partly the result of national and religious feeling: Antonio has spat on the Jewish gabardine; and the oath of revenge has been

sworn by the Jewish Sabbath. We might go through all the characters which we have mentioned, and through fifty more in the same way, for it is the constant manner of Shakespeare to represent the human mind as lying not under the absolute dominion of one despotic propensity, but under a mixed government, in which a hundred powers balance each other. Admirable as he was in all parts of his art, we most admire him for this, that, while he has left us a greater number of striking portraits than all other[Pg 52] dramatists put together, he has scarcely left us a single caricature.

“Shakespeare has neither equal nor second; but among the writers who, in the point which we have noticed, have approached nearest to the manner of the great master, we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud. She has given us a multitude of characters, all in a certain sense commonplace, all such as we meet every day; yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings. There are, for example, four clergymen, none of whom we should be surprised to find in any parsonage in the kingdom—Mr. Edward Ferrars, Mr. Henry Tilney, Mr. Edmund Bertram, and Mr. Elton. They are all specimens of the upper part of the middle class; they have all been liberally educated; they all lie under the restraints of the same sacred profession; they are all young; they are all in love; not one of them has any hobby-horse, to use the phrase of Sterne; not one has a ruling passion, such as we read of in Pope. Who would not have expected them to be insipid likenesses of each other? No such thing. Harpagon is not more unlike to Jourdain, Joseph Surface is not more unlike to Sir Lucius O’Trigger, than every one of Miss Austen’s young divines to all of his reverend brethren. And almost all this is done by touches so delicate, that they elude analysis, that they defy the powers of description, and that we know them to exist only by the general effect to which they have contributed.”

Macaulay’s sister, Lady Trevelyan, told Mr. Austen Leigh that her brother had intended to write a memoir of Jane Austen, with criticisms on her works, to prefix it to a new edition of her novels, and from the proceeds of the sale to erect a monument to her memory in Winchester Cathedral. It is said that the references to the novels in Lord Macaulay’s “Journal” served to carry out his purpose so far, attracting a public which—to[Pg 53] its shame, shall I say?—knew not the author, and selling off a whole edition of Jane Austen’s tales. That the erection of the monument in Winchester Cathedral followed is of less consequence. She needs no monument save what her brain and hands wrought out. Let her own works follow her.



FOOTNOTES:

[12] Jane Austen's nephew, on visiting Abbotsford, was suffered to take into his hand one of the volumes of Sir Walter's well-worn set of her novels.

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JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS, AND JANE AUSTEN.

“PRIDE AND PREJUDICE.”^[13]

I.



It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Such is the lively sentence with which "Pride and Prejudice" begins. Then the author proceeds to illustrate the statement in her own admirable way.

Mr. Bingley, a young bachelor, well-born, wealthy, good-looking, agreeable, kindly-disposed—even sensible, while not too clever for his company, suddenly sets the whole country gentry of a quiet neighbourhood into a pleasant ferment, by taking a lease of Netherfield Park, and coming to occupy the house. My readers must remember that it is nearly a century ago since this happened, for it actually happened. The charm of Jane Austen's situations is that they must have happened thousands of times. Her people all lived, are living still, since human nature never dies. We may correctly think and talk of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, and their father and mother; of Bingley and his sisters; of Darcy and his sister; as if they were real men and women. They were and are the very men and women whom our grandfathers knew, whom we [Pg 55] know and visit, like and dislike, marry and refuse to marry.

A few customs have changed: greater breathing-space has come into every-day intercourse with better education, increased facilities of helping ourselves, moving about and knowing our neighbours—not only in the next parsonage and country house, or at most in a popular watering-place, but in the busy, endless streets of London, or up in the romantic glens of the Scotch highlands, or still farther away, in nooks of the Apennines, or recesses of the Black Forest. Such revolutions on revolutions have occurred in dress, that we have come back from the antipodes of one fashion to the same fashion again, looking new and fresh once more on the lithe figures and about the blooming faces of our nineteenth-century girls. Still we do not see a young lady, her hair in turret curls, wearing a low-necked gown long before even her early dinner-hour, and holding above her head, as a much-needed protection, one of the first specimens of the original large, green, tent-shaped parasols such as I remember in a representation of Elizabeth Bennet, when she accompanied Lady Catherine de Bourgh to their memorable interview in the wilderness on one side of the lawn at Longbourn. Wildernesses, in their turn, have disappeared; certain phrases have grown obsolete; but the men and women who led that kind of life, dressed in a style which, when we do not chance to be familiar with it, we insist on regarding as *outré*, and spoke in a manner half racy, half precise, are among us still, and will always be among us, with merely slight superficial differences.

But I wish to recall, at this moment, the distant date of "Pride and Prejudice," in order to say that the arrival of a young man like Charles Bingley, or "Bingley," as he is called

in the old use of surnames in conversation, was a much greater event to a country circle then, than it could be now.

It would still be a good deal—witness the use of [Pg 56] the same situation in the clever modern novel, “Mr. Smith.” But the class of women who are powerfully affected by Mr. Smith’s appearance on the scene, and who make him the centre of all their hopes and plans, are altogether inferior, socially and intellectually, to the women with whom Jane Austen dealt.

About a hundred years ago “to paint tables, cover screens, and net purses,” formed the general standard of girls’ accomplishments—a standard which did not furnish many topics of conversation. It is the girls’ own fault if they have not wider interests to-day. Therefore, those among them who are in a fever of curiosity when a new comer crosses their path, are decidedly lower in the scale, in every respect, than the gossips were in the time of Jane Austen.

We are first introduced to the Bennets of Longbourn in their animated discussion of the welcome event in their quiet lives. Soon we know the family intimately. We find vulgar, shallow Mrs. Bennet assailing her husband with unvarnished arguments that he ought to be one of the first to call on their new neighbour “for the sake of his daughters.”

We listen with much amusement to eccentric, witty, Mr. Bennet, who has married his wife for her beauty, and seeks compensation for her silliness in laughing at it on all occasions, in those mocking, terse little speeches, in which he responds to her profuse “my dears” with an answering flow of “my dears,” while he takes her off, to her broad, over-blown face, unsuspected by her, at every word.

The two elder daughters are the cream of the family. Jane is lovely and loveable. Her good understanding is so well balanced by her gentle, tolerant temper that she is able to bear patiently and tenderly with her mother’s foibles, including her vain-glorious Jane’s beauty. Jane is so fair, sweet, and reasonable in the most unassuming fashion, that she cannot help winning—without any effort at popularity—good opinions on all sides, even from the most unlikely quarters.

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Elizabeth, with her fine eyes, brown skin, light, graceful figure, nimble feet in dancing, nimble tongue in talking, is a warm-hearted, softened, womanly edition of the father whose favourite she is. In answer to the covert reproach once addressed to her, that the wisest and best of men—nay, the wisest and best of their actions—may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke, she defends herself

frankly yet earnestly, and we feel it is Jane Austen speaking for herself by the lips of Elizabeth Bennet. “Certainly there are such people, but I hope I am not one of them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.” Withal, this laughter-loving girl, in spite of her naturally hasty conclusions and rash judgments, struggles so faithfully to be fair, is so candid in confessing her mistakes and submitting to pay the penalty when they are brought home to her—she is at once so frank and fearless, yet so dutiful and reverent in the middle of her innocent daring, so unselfish and devoted in her sisterly attachment, so true a woman, so thorough a lady, that while we willingly respect and like the more faultless Jane, we do more, we love the more tempted and tried Elizabeth.

It is good for young readers of the present day to look at Elizabeth Bennet, and learn to discriminate between the sparkling intelligence and gay, sweet temper of the good, kind, young girl in her lawful attractiveness, and the miserable travesty of her in many modern heroines, in whom profanity and levity do duty for wit, audacious ignorance for originality, and coarse licence for nobility of nature.

The bond of sisterhood, more than any other relation, seems to have influenced Jane Austen in her art. With her own closest life-long friend in her sister Cassandra, the author who so rarely repeats herself in the circumscribed sphere in which she chose to work, again and again draws a pair of sisters, for the most part sharing [Pg 58] every joy and sorrow.^[14] In two or three cases—those of the Bennets, the Dashwoods, Mrs. John Knightley and Emma Woodhouse, we have the contrast between the milder and more serene elder, and the livelier, more impulsive younger sister, which caused their contemporaries to say that Jane and Elizabeth Bennet stood for Cassandra and Jane Austen. But the author’s nephew pronounced against this conjecture. It is said, indeed, that in gentleness of disposition and tenderness of heart Jane Austen bore more resemblance to Jane than to Elizabeth Bennet.

Mary Bennet, the third daughter in the household at Longbourn, and the plainest member of a handsome family, tries to supplement her deficient personal attractions by such mental acquirements and accomplishments as are within her reach. These are laboriously learnt for the purpose of display. In contrast to her sister Elizabeth, she has no natural shrewdness. She is a pedantic, sententious young goose, with her elaborate exhibition of worthless knowledge and formal speeches out of commonplace books. Mary Bennet contrives to render herself as ridiculous as her younger sisters, Kitty and Lydia, who are precocious, noisy girls of seventeen and fifteen. They are too unformed and callow to be treated separately at first, but we have one significant distinction between them. Lydia, big and bouncing for her age, already

arrogating rights from being the tallest of the family, spoiled by her mother, invariably takes the lead. Kitty simply runs after her more headstrong junior. The most individual trait Kitty shows is the peevish impatience of contradiction which belongs to a weak character.

We may remark, by the way, that Jane Austen, while she cuttingly condemns pedantry and conceit,[Pg 59] never dreams of offering a premium to sheer juvenility, empty-headedness, and frivolity, after the example of some of the strange preferences which are presented for the consideration and edification of nineteenth-century readers.

Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty Bennet spend the chief part of each day in walking to Meryton, a market town, where a militia regiment is stationed, which, unhappily for the growth in wisdom of the young ladies, is situated only a mile from the village of Longbourn, and Longbourn House, their home.

In Meryton dwells Mrs. Philips, Mrs. Bennett's sister, the wife of a country attorney in a lower social grade than the Bennets. Good-natured, commonplace Mrs. Philips is gratified by her nieces' company, and willing to indulge them with any amount of dawdling and gossiping in her house. When no better goal presents itself, the shop windows, with the latest bonnets and muslins, are always to be had. Above all, there is the chance of encountering some of the militia officers in their regimentals—those dazzling red coats, which filled the imaginations of girls like Lydia and Kitty Bennet, and which were not without their picturesque merits even in the more reflective eyes of the elder sisters. Well for girls that they have no regimentals, worn off parade, to turn their heads to-day. If they are still caught by the pomp and circumstance of glorious war, and enthralled by its blatant trumpeting, at least, the "red rags," which are now for the most part kept sedulously out of sight, are no longer to blame.

Mr. Bennet calls on Mr. Bingley, as he has always meant to do, in spite of all his protests to the contrary, but the sisters first meet the hero at a Meryton assembly.

That was the era of assemblies—subscription balls, in rooms provided for card-playing and supping as well as dancing, under highly respectable auspices, given at regular intervals in all the country towns, and duly patronised by gentle and simple, clergy and laity.

If people stayed all the year round and year after[Pg 60] year in their own quiet country neighbourhood, some recreation must be provided for them. The assemblies were at once simple and social. The stereotyped recreations of the last century were dancing and card-playing. If both were liable to grave abuse, we may still hope that many worthy people used them temperately and not unconscientiously.

A rousing report had gone beforehand through the ball-goers that the already popular Mr. Bingley was to crown his popularity by attending the assembly, and bringing with him twelve ladies and six gentlemen. The reality falls short of the rumour, but there is consolation to the belles of the place in the dwindling down of the dozen strange ladies into Mr. Bingley's two sisters, one married and one unmarried, even though the six gentlemen also fade away into a couple, one of whom is Mr. Hurst, the husband of Mr. Bingley's married sister. But for half the time the ball lasts the other gentleman makes up for every defalcation, and is a power in himself. He is not only a tall, handsome, distinguished-looking young man, he is also discovered to be allied to the peerage, and to possess a large estate in Derbyshire, with an unencumbered rent-roll of ten thousand a-year—and here gossips' tongues do not wag too wildly.

But the exultation over such a guest is soon damped by his cold, reserved manners. The stranger dances once with Mrs. Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, speaks only to the members of his own party, and declines any introductions. And Meryton is spirited enough to resent the inference. If Mr. Darcy considers himself above his company, the company decline any further homage to his air and figure—even to his estate in Derbyshire.

In fact, Mr. Darcy is clever, proud, fastidious—conceiving himself entitled by his many undeniable advantages, which, however, he does not wear generously and genially, to his pride and fastidiousness.

A man in a similar position may very well be [Pg 61] tempted to corresponding faults still, but even with a later code of manners disfigured by laziness, self-indulgence, and superciliousness, such arrogant haughtiness as Darcy betrayed, could hardly now be entertained by a man of Darcy's sense and worth, and even if entertained, would no longer be openly exhibited in modern society. Local magnates were formerly permitted the tone of small sovereigns, and even when they were from home they were not required to come down from the heights of their overweening dignity and exclusiveness.

It is at so early a stage of their acquaintance as this important Meryton assembly that Bingley, accessible and agreeable to everybody, and dancing every dance, as a young man ought, shows his admiration of the sweet young beauty of the room—Jane Bennet, of Longbourn—by distinguishing her among his partners. He dances twice—one may say four times, with her—for we must remember that the old social, quaintly-performed, quaintly-named country dances were generally arranged in double sets. The couple who danced down the first were landed, so to speak, at the bottom of the second, up which they had to work their way, and then dance down a second time. A

very respectable portion of time was thus employed. There were natural and graceful opportunities afforded for making friends, and for engaging, while still in a crowd, unexposed to invidious notice and comment, in cheerful or sentimental, more or less brilliant conversation *à deux*, but not so much *à deux* that the speakers could not fall apart and talk by way of variety to the ladies and gentlemen, whom the couple were pretty sure to know, standing above and below them in the set. Jane Austen repeatedly uses these country dances as a means to the speedy acquaintance of her young people. We have it on record that she herself had a hearty enjoyment in dancing, and was, like Anna Maria Porter and Susannah Blamire, a proficient in what was then held a peculiarly elegant accomplishment for a young lady. She was not, therefore, likely to undervalue the merely graceful exercise [Pg 62] of dancing. Still, dancing must have been to her, as no doubt it was to her heroes and heroines, a fitting excuse for conversation—sensible as well as sprightly, serious enough sometimes, without any consciousness of incongruity in being in earnest in the middle of a country dance.

I may be told that there is an ample and better provision for a *tête à tête* in the conspicuous or the secluded saunter between the rapid whirls of round dances, but to my mind the earlier mode was the more daintily decorous, the freer from compromise, not to say the more social. One is tempted to wish back again the old English country dances, in which fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, often stood up in the same dance, and went with merry method through the intricate mazes with the suggestive names, “The White Cockade,” dating from the Jacobite rebellion, “The Wind that Shook the Barley,” of Irish origin, “The Country Bumpkin,” an English measure, “Petronella” and the “Boulanger,” like the Cotillon, of French descent. Will they not return, with the Queen Anne furniture and the Gainsborough costumes, and take their places along with the time-honoured “Sir Roger de Coverley?”

Mr. Bingley’s promising preference for Jane Bennet in these significant four dances is artlessly enough hailed by all her friends and neighbours, and ingenuously owned by herself to her dear sister and confidante, Lizzy.

It is at this ball, too, that Darcy makes that slighting speech within earshot of Elizabeth, which starts their acquaintance on an entirely wrong footing.

Elizabeth Bennet, with her own unapproachable gifts of eyes, and tongue, and toes, is a belle only second to her sister, and it is an unwonted experience for her to be sitting down during a couple of dances for lack of a partner. As if that were not enough, she has the mortification of hearing the repulse given to the well-disposed but rash assault which Bingley at that moment makes on his impracticable friend standing near her.

“Come, Darcy,” cries the amiable, indefatigable[Pg 63] dancer, “I must have you dance. I hate to have you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had much better dance.”

“I certainly shall not,” declines Darcy. “You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner.” He adds that Bingley’s sisters are engaged, and that there is not another woman in the room with whom it would not be a punishment to him to stand up.

Bingley cries out at his friend’s fastidiousness, and maintains he has never met so many pleasant girls in his life as on that evening, and there are several of them uncommonly pretty.

“You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,” says Darcy, looking at the eldest Miss Bennet.

“Oh! she is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld,” vows Bingley, with effusion. “But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you who is very pretty, and I daresay very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you.”

“Which do you mean?” asks Darcy, and, turning round, he looks for a moment at Elizabeth, till, catching her eye, he withdraws his own, and coldly says, “She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me, and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other young men. You had better return to your partner, and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me.”

Was ever heroine so put down in her own hearing? Elizabeth, we are told, remains with no very cordial feelings towards the offender, but, being the bright young girl she is, she makes stock of the incident by telling the story with great spirit among her friends; and for the superb Mr. Darcy there is a proper punishment preparing.

Mr. Bingley’s sisters are drawn with a few fine touches. They are fashionable, stylish-looking women, each possessing a fortune of twenty thousand pounds. They have a great opinion of their own claims, and a[Pg 64] corresponding disdain of what they reckon the greatly inferior claims of others. With all their polish and *savoir faire*, which enable them to be entertaining when they like, they are always arrogant and ill-bred, and can be insolent when provoked.

Yet even Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley are attracted by beautiful, gentle Jane Bennet, and drawn into the semblance of a friendship for her. They are too independent and too far removed, as they conceive, from such rivalry, to experience any jealousy, or to

take alarm on their brother's account, till matters have gone a considerable length between Bingley and Jane.

Among other minor characters in the book are the Lucas family, who occupy the next county house, and are the nearest neighbours of the Bennets, and on intimate terms with them. Charlotte Lucas, the eldest daughter, a plain-looking, but sensible and agreeable young woman of seven and twenty, is Elizabeth Bennet's great friend after her sister Jane. Charlotte's father, Sir William, has been in trade, from which he has retired on the accident of receiving the honour of knighthood. He was always civil and obliging, and from the great era in his life he became elaborately courteous, with *bourgeois* fine manners. He is profuse in good-natured—sometimes *mal-à-propos*—compliments. Thus, at a large party at Lucas Lodge, the host blandly praises Darcy—for his dancing of all things, and then, struck with the notion of doing a gallant thing, arrests Elizabeth Bennet, who is passing them: “My dear Miss Eliza, why are not you dancing? Mr. Darcy, you must allow me to present this young lady to you as a very desirable partner. You cannot refuse to dance, I am sure, when so much beauty is at hand.”

Have we not all known, at some period in our lives, the well-intentioned, obtuse, complacent, slightly Brummagem Sir William, who can be terrible, without the slightest suspicion of it, on occasions?

Elizabeth draws back, and refuses the partner very decidedly, and her resistance does her no harm with the [Pg 65] gentleman, though he has really not been unwilling to lend himself to Sir William's clumsy move.

In truth, the stately, grave Mr. Darcy, after refusing to see anything worth the trouble of bestowing his notice in Elizabeth Bennet—after taking the greatest pains to convince all his party that she has not got a good feature in her face—becomes keenly alive to the charm of that face, and captivated by the animation and archness which neither fear his censure nor solicit his favour. For Elizabeth simply regards him as the man who makes himself disagreeable everywhere, and who has spoken slightly of herself. She is happily careless of his pretensions. What are his birth, estate, intellect, and person to her? With her it is “handsome is that handsome does.”

And Darcy, with all his faults, has enough sterling manliness and merit to be not piqued, but strangely attracted by her easy indifference to his worldly advantages, combined as it is with the girl's quick intelligence and happy, winning playfulness.

We appreciate, too, the independent spirit which causes Darcy to make no secret of his change of opinion; not that it is a matter of much consequence to his mind, for a

Darcy of Pemberley can never lower himself in his own eyes, or those of his world, by marrying the daughter of a poor, second-rate country gentleman, whose wife has been taken from an inferior professional circle. What is a great deal worse, the whole family of the Bennets, with the exception of Jane and Elizabeth, are more or less objectionable—Mr. Bennet in indulging his caustic humour in total disregard of the figures his wife and daughters cut in society; Mrs. Bennet, in continually exposing her vulgarity and folly; Mary Bennet, in rendering herself a laughing-stock by her assumption of learning and wisdom, with small claims to the same. As for Lydia and Kitty Bennet, while there are militia officers in Meryton the girls will flirt with them; and while Meryton remains at a mile's distance from Longbourn, the younger Miss Bennets will go there every day.

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But Darcy, in the face of the pronounced dislike to the second Miss Bennet entertained by his friend's sisters—one of whom is laying close siege to Darcy's hand and heart—calmly revokes his judgment, announces his admiration of Elizabeth's eyes, and defends her vivacity from the charge of pertness. It is in vain Miss Bingley, with her eyes sharpened by jealousy, takes the woman's method to drive him from his position by chaffing exaggeration of his sentiments, and malicious predictions of his future experiences with his mother-in-law; asking him if he will have his Elizabeth's uncle, the attorney's, portrait, opposite that of his uncle, the judge's, and whether it may not be advisable for him to restrain that something in the coming Mrs. Darcy's manners which borders on impertinence. Darcy stands to his colours, so far as admiring Elizabeth Bennet, and owing to the admiration, are concerned.

Elizabeth is so thoroughly without suspicion of her modified conquest, that when she finds Mr. Darcy looking at her, listening to her, and taking up his station in the quarter of a room where he can see and hear her better, she is so puzzled for his reasons, that she is compelled to conclude there is something about her peculiarly repugnant to his taste and sense of propriety; and being of the temper which she supposes, she fancies he takes a certain satisfaction in reckoning up her deficiencies. When he asks her to dance, she is so surprised that she accepts the unwelcome honour before she knows what she is doing; and then, provoked with her mechanical compliance, she seeks revenge in trying to behave in the manner most disagreeable to him. She will go down the double set in unbroken silence, so far as the conversation rests with her; and she is aware young Darcy is a quiet, grave man, while she is well known as a ready, gay talker. All at once it strikes her that a solemn mute performance of their duty as dancers may be exactly what he wishes; and then she challenges him, in an archly-defiant speech, to make conversation for her. After all [Pg 67] he is nothing loth,

though she does provoke and offend him by the determined conviction she constantly shows that they are two persons of entirely different characters and inclinations, and by her wilful, half-jesting misunderstanding of his feelings and opinions.

On one occasion he is led into the admission that he has an unyielding temper. His good opinion once lost is lost for ever.

“That is a failing indeed,” cried Elizabeth. “Implacable resentment is a shade in a character. But you have chosen your fault well; I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe from me.”

The girl’s mingled light-hearted banter and vehement antagonism form, after all, part of her fascination; and we are told that against any affront they inflict she has a powerful pleader in the feeling she has already excited in Darcy’s breast.

The progress of Bingley’s lover-like attentions to Jane, and Darcy’s brisk skirmishing with Elizabeth, is considerably accelerated by a visit of almost a week’s duration paid perforce by the girls to Netherfield.

Jane had been invited to dine with the two ladies of the house, to relieve their dulness in the absence of the gentlemen, who were dining with the officers in Meryton. She had been detained by rain in the first place, and by a violent cold in the second.

Elizabeth hearing of her sister’s illness, and being unable to procure the carriage, set out and walked the three miles between Longbourn and Netherfield. She was fearless of fatigue, or the accusation of unfeminine, unladylike independence of escort. She was equal to muddy roads, intervening stiles, and the cool reception she was likely to receive from Miss Bingley, so that Elizabeth could but relieve her anxiety concerning Jane, reach her, and be a comfort in nursing her through her little illness.

Elizabeth arrives with draggled skirts and rosy cheeks. She cheerfully surmounts Miss Bingley’s and Mrs. Hurst’s contemptuous amazement at what they [Pg 68] regard as Miss Eliza Bennet’s uncalled-for Amazonian feat. At last they are under the necessity, in common civility, of requesting Elizabeth to remain with her sister; and the patient, suffering Jane is ill enough for the moment to make Elizabeth thankful that she has come, and to justify her in the step she has taken.

Besides, Elizabeth is gratified by the master of the house’s cordial reception, and by his unfeigned anxiety on behalf of his invalid guest. As to the fact that Darcy is successful in silencing the strictures of the ladies of the house on the “fright” Miss Eliza Bennet has chosen to appear before them, by dwelling on the additional brilliancy the early walk has lent to her complexion, and by maintaining that certainly

the expedition proves her to be a most affectionate sister, Elizabeth remains profoundly ignorant of his championship.

Two new figures appear on the stage. The first is Mr. Collins, the vicar of Hunsford, in Kent, and the cousin, hitherto a stranger to the Bennet family, who, by the terms of the entail, succeeds to the Longbourn estate after Mr. Bennet's death. He proposes a friendly visit, in a letter which is the reflex of the writer, who is a stupid, narrow-minded young man, while yet perfectly respectable and not ill-intentioned. His pompous self-importance, in which there is some family likeness to the leading mental traits in his cousin Mary Bennet, is blended with an equally natural subserviency and obsequiousness, with such a breadth of skill and comicality, that he is one of the great artist's triumphs.

Jane Austen was a good woman and a good church-woman. She was a clergyman's daughter, and two of her brothers were clergymen. The parsonage as well as the hall had a special place in her novels. In "Mansfield Park" she insisted on the honourable office of a clergyman. She was the last person wantonly to bring disrespect on her father's cloth, but she was also the most sincere of women and of artists. She was acquainted with the Collins type of clergymen, which had replaced the still more accommodating, even vicious, family[Pg 69] chaplain, under the lower and coarser moral standard of previous generations. Her Mr. Collins is not unprincipled or unconscientious, but his patroness engrosses his small, mean mind, and usurps the rights of his other parishioners; until, to give satisfaction at the great house—to come in there as an acknowledged, privileged dependent—to carve a joint—to help to make up the card-table—to amuse the old and the young—to pass away a dull hour—to take upon himself any troublesome task he can appropriate, are looked upon by him as at once among his chief duties and greatest advantages.

With unshrinking, incisive hand, Jane Austen did good service to all the churches by aiding in ridding them of despicable toadies.

Mr. Collins is all in a piece, while he is of complex fabric, with his haunting self-consciousness, his perpetual references to his "humble abode," and his "revered patroness, Lady Catherine," with her splendid establishment at Rosings, to which he is so affably summoned several times a week. His densely thick-headed, sycophantish homage is extended to Lady Catherine's kindred in the person of her nephew, the resisting, disgusted Mr. Darcy. Mr. Collins's self-complacent, over-done, heavy civility is bestowed freely on everybody, and he promises liberally beforehand formal letters of thanks to his hosts for their esteemed hospitality.

Such a man, however diverting to her strong sense of the ludicrous, cannot but be odious in other respects to Elizabeth Bennet, yet it is at Elizabeth's feet that he lays his dull, conceited, exasperatingly considerate proposals.

Lady Catherine is of opinion Mr. Collins, as a clergyman, should marry soon. His solid merits and unexceptionable position in life warrant him in seeking a wife. He is led to Longbourn with the laudable intention of making some reparation to his fair cousins for the circumstance that, on the death of their respected father, Mr. Collins must inherit the property; and in Elizabeth he flatters himself he has found the excellent, charming, [Pg 70] economical young woman who will at once secure to him the felicity he is entitled to expect, and satisfy the just expectations of Lady Catherine.

To the extreme mortification of her mother, but with the entire approval of her father, Elizabeth declines the obliging proposal. The scene is unique and unapproachable, in which the sublimely confident, quite unembarrassed Mr. Collins does not so much plead his cause solemnly as unfold his credentials, while Elizabeth refuses him in stronger and stronger language, for the suitor will not accept his *cong e*, and persists in attributing it to the becoming coyness of "an elegant female."

At last Elizabeth escapes, referring Mr. Collins to her father, protesting in despair that whatever his answer may be, at least Mr. Collins cannot interpret Mr. Bennet's behaviour as the becoming coyness of "an elegant female."

Mr. Collins' heart is scarcely touched, but his vanity—thick-skinned as it is—has received a wound, for which, however, there is a speedy cure, since within three days he transfers his suit with the happiest result to Elizabeth's friend Charlotte Lucas, who has not hesitated to plan this conclusion.

Elizabeth is amazed and hurt at the absence of right principle and feeling on the part of Charlotte, who has been so quickly wooed and won—nay, who has herself stooped to woo a man for whom she can have neither respect nor regard.

But in Jane Bennet's remonstrances against the hard terms which Elizabeth uses when speaking of the marriage—in the emphasis with which the elder sister dwells on Mr. Collins' respectable establishment as well as his unblemished character—above all, in the way in which Charlotte's choice is made to turn out tolerably well for her in the end, we find that Jane Austen, while revolting at the conduct which she herself could never have practised, is inclined so far to endorse the reasoning of the prudent, steady gentlewoman who has offended against Elizabeth's nobler instincts.

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“Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony,” Jane Austen says of Charlotte Lucas, “marriage had always been her object: *it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and, however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservation from want.* This preservation she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it.”

Poor Mrs. Bennet’s chagrin is complete. She is deprived of the opportunity of “marrying” one of her daughters very fairly. Lady Lucas is to have a daughter married first. And Charlotte Lucas is eventually to supplant Mrs. Bennet in her own house of Longbourn. Can the irony of destiny go farther?

The other new comer appears in a fresh officer who joins the militia regiment in Meryton. He is a Mr. Wickham, a young man of exceedingly attractive looks and manners, being as universally agreeable and sympathetic as Darcy is the reverse.

Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Wickham are mutually struck with each other on their introduction in the High Street of Meryton, and the impression at first sight is confirmed when they spend an evening in company together, at a tea and supper party given by Mrs. Philips, the Bennets’ aunt.

Wickham’s place in the round game of cards for the young people is between Elizabeth and her boisterous young sister Lydia, who would have proceeded to engross the gentleman had it not been for the rival attractions of the game of “Lottery Tickets,” and her zeal in acquiring mother-of-pearl fishes—the old counters.

Elizabeth and Wickham are permitted to talk together and to discover how their views and tastes coincide. Not the least bond of union is the confirmation of Elizabeth’s worst prejudices against Mr. Darcy. Wickham happens also to be a Derbyshire man, and he has actually been brought up in the most intimate [Pg 72] relations with the Darcys. Wickham’s father was the confidential agent of Darcy’s father, who had been George Wickham’s godfather, and had charged himself with educating and providing for the lad. By appearing to respond unwillingly to the roused curiosity of Elizabeth, and by the flattery of giving her the idea that he is confiding in her alone, the young man manages, without seeming to be publicly proclaiming his wrongs, to convey to her the information of how badly he has been treated by young Darcy. This haughty, hard, unscrupulous man has defrauded his early companion of the church living bequeathed to him by his godfather. Darcy has a young sister, Georgiana, who had been very fond of her father’s favourite when he petted and played with her as a child, but her brother has infected her with the inordinate pride and selfishness of the family, and set her also against Wickham.

Elizabeth drinks in the whole story, which is a testimony to her own acuteness, is full of pity for Wickham and of wrath against Darcy.

The younger Miss Bennets have teased Mr. Bingley to give a ball, which comes off with great *éclat* at Netherfield. The host's attentions to Jane Bennet are the talk of the room.

Mrs. Bennet goes so completely off her head that, to the intense mortification and shame of Elizabeth, she overhears her mother enlarging on her eldest daughter's brilliant prospects to Lady Lucas, at the supper-table, with so little reserve, that Elizabeth is sure Darcy, who is opposite, is listening—first with grave surprise, and afterwards with an unsuppressed expression of scorn.

Indeed, poor Elizabeth is doomed to experience anything rather than pleasure at the long-looked-forward-to, much-talked-of, ball at Netherfield. In the earlier part of the evening she is disappointed by the non-appearance of Wickham with the other officers; and she is full of resentment against Darcy for having either deprived him of an invitation, or caused the injured young man to avoid the painful encounter, though he had expressly [Pg 73] told his warm adherent that it was not for him to go out of Mr. Darcy's way.

Under the irritation produced by this suspicion, Elizabeth, when Darcy seeks her out, turns upon him with serious instead of playful antagonism. She mentions Wickham's name, for the express purpose of observing Darcy's annoyance. She provokes him to the cold observation that Mr. Wickham is well qualified to attract friends, but it remains to be seen whether he is equally fitted to retain them.

Elizabeth's blood boils at the insinuation from the man who has so wronged her friend.

Then, as if the evil genius of the family had been at work, not Mrs. Bennet alone, but more of Elizabeth's relations, make themselves obnoxious to censure and ridicule. Mary in her conceit consents, with her weak voice, to sing an after-supper song; and when it is received with forced approval, she volunteers to give another, amidst the covert smiles of her audience.

Elizabeth looks in agony to her father to interfere, lest Mary should go on singing all night; and he crowns the trying situation by one of his most ironical, disconcerting speeches.

"That will do extremely well, child. You have delighted us long enough. Let the other young ladies have time to exhibit."

One word on the terribly keen young eyes with which Elizabeth Bennet sees the faults and follies of her family, including her mother's silliness, and the objectionable behaviour of her father in amusing himself at the expense of his wife, so as to risk rendering her an object of contempt in the eyes of her children.

No doubt, Elizabeth Bennet does not dream of being anything save respectful and dutiful to her father and mother, whom she addresses commonly with the old-fashioned, ceremonious "Sir" or "Madam." The partiality of the former to her not only fills the young girl with honest filial pride, but it touches her indescribably [Pg 74] at a crisis in her history. She seeks to screen her mother, and she strives to improve her younger sisters.

Elizabeth Bennet would have died rather than proclaimed the shortcomings of her family—far less have been so lost to all wholesome shame as to have made game of what formed her greatest affliction. She is removed, by a world of good principle and good feeling, from those heroines of the present day whose authors write as if they considered the absence of all reverence and tenderness, in the sacred relation in which children stand to parents, as a mark of emancipation from old-fashioned prejudices, of freedom from what is goody-goody, narrow and obsolete. These desperately ill-bred, benighted, worse than heathen young people, in their professed confessions to the public, or their confidences to their fellow-puppets, speak evil of dignities with a vengeance, have nothing save an ugly grimace or a heartless gibe for all that is honourable in years, wisdom, or virtue, and for all that is holy in natural affection. They pour forth their railings and mockings at the authors of their being with an absolute profanity, a base disloyalty, and an absence of common decency in their family disclosures, which would be altogether horrible and hideous, were it not also absurdly false and despicable, as well as odious.

Elizabeth Bennet was a very different being—an essentially Christian and civilized gentlewoman.

But one is impelled to wish that, especially where her mother was concerned, there had been a greater reluctance, even an incapability, to judge and condemn—a piteous veil drawn by the strong over the weak, in a relationship in which these attributes ought to have been reversed. For, whether the offence be wickedness or vulgarity,—

"A mother is a mother still,

The holiest thing alive."

Jane Austen would have said probably that if Elizabeth Bennet's nearest relations were guilty of impropriety [Pg 75] and folly, she could not help seeing it. We know that

the author herself was very happy in the family relations of which she proved herself worthy. She was a devoted daughter and loving sister, tempted to rest content with her own family circle, and to refuse, with a certain refined churlishness, other and wider associations. She may have been in his position who

“Jests at scars that never felt a wound.”

She could hardly perhaps realise, though she excelled in realising, how a good, affectionate girl, while forced in her sense and sincerity to condemn the failings of her kindred, yet instinctively shuts her eyes to them, so far as she can do so without moral injury to herself and others; or sees them through a half-shrouding mist of eager respect and faithful fondness for the merits which, in most cases, we may be thankful, balance the failings.

Besides, Jane Austen was very young when she wrote “Pride and Prejudice,” and gentle in some respects as youth may be, it is not from it that we are warranted in expecting charity. Youth at its best—a very sweet best, but with its sweetness consisting mainly of the unbounded promise of still better things—is in its ignorance, rashness, and unshaken self-confidence, impatient of all wrong-doing, nay, of all blundering, and intolerant to the wrong-doers and blunderers. It would be to rob the bountifulness of riper years of one of their chief gains if we were to deny them their prerogative of greater long-suffering with stupidity and pity for error.

In none of her other novels was Miss Austen quite so unsparing in her censure and withering in her satire—sufficiently provoked though it was—as in “Pride and Prejudice.” She is gentle to the comparatively harmless, kindly silliness and selfishness of Lady Bertram in “Mansfield Park;” while she is really tender, with a touch of pathos, to that worthiest and most lovable of old chatterboxes, Miss Bates, in “Emma.”

The Netherfield ball is fatal to Jane Bennet’s interest,[Pg 76] innocent as Jane is of any of the family misdemeanors on the occasion. Bingley has to leave the next day for London, from which he certainly means to return soon. But his sisters and friend suddenly make up their minds to follow him, with the intention, if they can manage it, that the household shall not come back to Netherfield for the winter. Caroline Bingley communicates the news of the step, which takes the whole neighbourhood by surprise, in a plausible note to the victim, Jane.

Elizabeth reads between the lines, and discerns the truth, that the sisters and Mr. Darcy have at last taken alarm, and are bent on putting an end to the attachment on Mr. Bingley’s part before it has gone the length of a declaration, by detaining the

naturally light-hearted, easily-impressed young fellow among the excitements and distractions of the town, away from Netherfield.

The sequel shows the conspirators successful. Sweet Jane Bennet is ruthlessly jilted, while bearing no malice, and insisting in her confidential intercourse with her sister that the affair has been all a mistake, caused by her fancy, the partiality of her friends, and Bingley's amiable desire to please. She declares she is sure she will soon forget it, and be as happy as before.

In the meantime, Jane has to endure the mortification of hearing her mother lament, openly and loudly, over the ill-usage which her daughter has received.

The modern match-making mother has more guile, if she is not more delicate-minded, than to betray her feelings in a similarly unreserved fashion.

Elizabeth hotly resents the wrong done to her dear and gentle sister, is furious with Darcy and Miss Bingley, and begins to despise Bingley for proving a mere tool in the hands of his friends, whose interference in his affairs has been utterly unjustifiable.

Elizabeth and Wickham's mutual preference goes no further. She says afterwards that every girl within visiting distance of Meryton lost her senses for a time where the winning young officer was concerned. But she herself did not lose her senses to such an extent as [Pg 77] to be beyond recovering them; though the only remonstrance which reached her was on the indiscretion of allowing herself to be drawn into an attachment and engagement with a penniless officer, while she herself was little better provided for in a worldly sense, so that their marriage must either be impossible, or an event long deferred.

The warning, no doubt, has a mercenary ring, especially for young readers; but such worldly considerations were simply held reasonable in Jane Austen's days, and reckless disregard of consequences and headstrong wilfulness in marriage, as in any other affair in life, were not qualities held up for admiration.

At the same time, Jane Austen was too true a woman not to deprecate what amounted to cold-blooded, calculating caution in marriage. More than once she exposes its fallacy and danger, and she has devoted a whole novel to show the injury which may be inflicted by over-carefulness on the part of a well-intentioned friend, and by over-submissiveness on the side of an amiable girl, in breaking off an engagement with a young man who had only his high character and hope of rising in his profession as hostages to fortune.

Elizabeth Bennet and Wickham's mere liking for each other rather dwindles away after a time than meets with a sharp check; and Elizabeth considers that if they had been sufficiently in love they might have justifiably faced the risks of a long engagement and a poor marriage—even while she tries to be so hardened and cynical a philosopher as to think and say that Wickham is doing what he ought in withdrawing his attentions gradually from her, and setting himself to pay his addresses to a girl in Meryton who has nothing in particular to distinguish her save that she has recently inherited a fortune. This worldly argument is forced work by Elizabeth, and when she is a very little older and wiser she recants, and is affronted by the coarseness of sentiment into which her determination to be indifferent and reasonable had led her.

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II.

In the following spring Elizabeth Bennet accompanies Sir William Lucas and his daughter Maria, travelling post, to pay her old friend Charlotte a visit in her Kent parsonage.

Any little awkwardness and coolness—there never was estrangement—between the friends have died out; “a good memory is inexcusable in such a case.” Elizabeth only recollects that she was Mr. Collins' first choice when she has a passing comical impression that he is showing off his excellent garden and comfortable house, not without a design of letting her feel all she has lost.

But Mr. Collins is well content, as he may be, with the sensible, good-tempered wife who, in making the best of the home she has secured for herself, fully recognises that it is for her dignity to keep up his; though she encourages him to spend a great part of his time in working in his garden, and has her sitting-room at the back of the house, since, if it had commanded a view of the lane, and the passers-by, it would have been apt to entail on her a large portion of her husband's spare time and company.

Elizabeth has the honour of being included along with the Lucases in the Collins summons, twice a week, to relieve the dulness of Lady Catherine de Bourgh's family party at Rosings, and of being patronised and dictated to by Lady Catherine, a domineering, self-sufficient woman, who tells Mr. Collins how to manage his parish, Mrs. Collins how to keep her house and rear her poultry, Elizabeth how to practise her music, and Maria Lucas how to pack her trunk.

With the exception of Charlotte and Elizabeth, the recipients of these favours are overwhelmed, and awed into the humblest gratitude and obedience. Charlotte looks over Lady Catherine's foibles, because they belong “to a superior woman and kind

neighbour,”[Pg 79] exactly as the judicious young matron takes care to value at the highest rate all the advantages of her position, and to ignore as far as possible its drawbacks, thus contriving to remain tolerably satisfied with her lot.

Elizabeth, entirely undazzled by the assumption and splendour which prevail at Rosings, amuses herself with detecting a resemblance between Mr. Darcy and his aunt, and feels satisfied that Lady Catherine’s only child, Miss de Bourgh, a sickly, supercilious girl, with a large fortune, who is designed for her cousin, will make him a fit wife.

Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, another nephew of Lady Catherine’s, arrive on a visit at Rosings, while Elizabeth and Maria Lucas are still staying at Hunsford Vicarage, which is only divided by the lane and the park palings from the great house.

Naturally, the two young men, whatever the aristocratic trammels under which they labour, are attracted daily to the more congenial society of the parsonage. For that matter, Colonel Fitzwilliam, though the younger son of an earl, is agreeable and unassuming, likely to make himself happy among any fairly well-born and well-educated young people, and especially with a pretty, witty young girl like Elizabeth Bennet.

But even Darcy, under stress of circumstances, thaws considerably. He pays his homage unmistakably in the same quarter as that which attracts his cousin, and betrays considerable annoyance and shame when his aunt’s impertinence is directed at Elizabeth.

With regard to the great lady, she is so firmly convinced of her own supreme deserts and those of her daughter, that she does not so much as see the strong inclination to defection on the part of the gentlemen. Elizabeth Bennet likes Colonel Fitzwilliam, and is rather surprised to find that he is on cordial cousinly terms with Darcy. It does not mollify her in the least to discover that the latter seeks to renew their acquaintance on a more intimate footing, and perplexes Mrs. Collins by the extent of his civilities to the parsonage.

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Elizabeth avoids the man she detests as much as she can; and when she has the ill luck to encounter him in the pretty country walks, and the strolls in Rosings Park, of which she is the only lady in the house to avail herself, she expressly mentions to him, without a grain of coquetry, her favourite path, that no untoward accident may occur again. She attributes the circumstance that she still meets Mr. Darcy to his letting himself come in the way, as a resource for sheer idleness, if not with the express

purpose of spoiling her walk. He turns and walks with her without getting any encouragement, asks odd questions as to her opinion of Mr. and Mrs. Collins' happiness, and—most unaccountable eccentricity of all—seems to imply, when they are talking of the rooms at Rosings, that the next time he and she are in Kent, she too will be staying at the great house, instead of at the parsonage. Elizabeth wonders, is momentarily put out, and thinks no more of it.

In a conversation between Elizabeth and Colonel Fitzwilliam, just before the two gentlemen are to take their departure, after the Colonel has mentioned that they would have been gone long ago, if Darcy had not, again and again, put off their leaving Rosings, and Elizabeth has hinted that Mr. Darcy has no objection to direct his friends' movements, the talk turns on Darcy's well-known influence over his great friend Bingley. Fitzwilliam, in his ignorance, refers to a service which Darcy has done this friend, and of which the benefactor has spoken to his cousin, without, however, mentioning names. Darcy has congratulated himself on having been able to rescue a friend from the misfortune of contracting a very undesirable marriage.

Elizabeth, understanding the allusion, feels her blood boil at what she regards as a heartless boast thus unconsciously repeated to one interested in the transaction. After she has parted from her innocent informant, she occupies herself with re-reading Jane's last letters, and imagines she sees in them proofs of broken spirits and impaired tranquillity.

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Elizabeth is herself so troubled that she pleads with reason a violent headache to excuse her from accompanying the Collins' and Maria Lucas to dine at Rosings. Elizabeth feels she cannot encounter Darcy with calmness, after this confirmation of the injury he has inflicted on her sister.

In the course of the evening Elizabeth Bennet is startled by a ring at the door-bell. To her utter amazement, Mr. Darcy walks in. He has left the party at Rosings, and he at once imputes his visit to a wish to hear that she is better.

Elizabeth answers with cold civility.

He rises and walks about the room, comes towards her in an agitated manner, and bursts forth "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you!"

Elizabeth's astonishment is beyond expression. She stares, colours, doubts, and is silent. "For once a young lady is incredulous on the subject of a proposal made to her."

Darcy treats her silence as sufficient encouragement, and proceeds to plead his cause—speaking well, like the able man he is.

But, unfortunately, there are other feelings than love to be described, and he is as eloquent on his pride—of which he has never learnt to be ashamed—on the contrary, he has always been proud of his pride—as on his tenderness. With great candour, but little tact, he expatiates on the obstacles his attachment has had to overcome, refers to her inferior position, and lets it be plainly seen he considers an alliance with her family in one sense a degradation.

In short, Mr. Darcy pays his addresses in a high and mighty fashion, which belonged as much to the privileges of the great "quality" of the period as to the man.

Little wonder that, though he urges with some justice the strength of a regard which has been proof[Pg 82] against such trials, and claims its due reward in her acceptance of his hand—speaking of apprehension and anxiety, but with his countenance expressing real security, so that it is evident he has no doubt of a favourable answer—a high-spirited girl like Elizabeth Bennet, who already looks upon herself as aggrieved by this man, her sister's worst enemy, should become exasperated into forgetting her first sense of the compliment of Darcy's affection, and pity for his inevitable disappointment.

With hardly more humility than he has displayed, she gives him his answer. She waives with disdain the usual expressions of obligation. She declares she cannot thank him. She has never desired his good opinion, and it is certain he has bestowed it most unwillingly. She is sorry to cause pain to any one. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and she hopes will be of short duration. The feelings which he has just told her have long prevented the acknowledgment of his regard, can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation.

Mr. Darcy, who is leaning against the mantelpiece with his eyes fixed on her face, hears her with as much resentment as surprise or pain. In fact, it is with the white heat of anger, rather than the extremity of grief, that his complexion grows pale; and when he has put just enough force on himself to speak calmly, it is with imperiousness and not with despair—above all, without the most distant idea of stooping to implore her mercy—that he demands, "And this is all the reply which I am to have the honour of

expecting? I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little endeavour at civility, I am thus rejected. But it is of small importance.”

Thus pressed and goaded, Elizabeth speaks her mind with passionate, youthful freedom as well as dignity and scorn. She accuses him of a design to offend and insult her, by choosing to tell her he likes her against his will, against his reason, even against his character. She [Pg 83] asks if he could think that, though her feelings had not decided against him, though they had been indifferent, even favourable, any consideration could ever induce her to marry a man who has destroyed the happiness of a beloved sister?

He is guilty of saying that he has been kinder to Bingley than to himself.

She retorts that she has long ago known his character from Mr. Wickham, and dares him to contradict what she has heard.

His hasty exclamation, “You take an eager interest in that gentleman’s concerns!” betrays that jealousy is the first emotion aroused by her reproach.

But when she goes on to protest against the injuries he has inflicted on his father’s godson, in withholding from him what Darcy must have known to be his due, other feelings are awakened in her hearer.

“And this,” he cries, as he walks with quick steps across the room, “is your opinion of me? This is the estimation in which you hold me? I thank you for explaining it so freely. My faults, according to this calculation, are heavy indeed.”

But he is not so much hurt that pride and resentment are not to have the last word. He stops his indignant cry, to assert that perhaps his offences might have been overlooked if he had not wounded her pride by the honest confession of his scruples. Her bitter accusations might have been suppressed if he had flattered her with the belief that he was impelled by unqualified inclination. But he is not ashamed of the feelings he has related. They were natural and just. Could she expect him to rejoice in the inferiority of her connexions?

Here is the most masterful of incensed lovers. But he meets his match in the most resolute of indignant girls.

“You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth says, with all the calmness she can summon to her aid, “if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected [Pg 84] me in any other way than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt, in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.”

She sees him start at this terrible home-thrust, and she is not inclined to be magnanimous in pursuing her advantage. “You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it,” she adds. Surely this is enough. But the obvious astonishment with which he hears her, the expression of mingled incredulity and mortification with which he looks at her, spurs on the intrepid, wrathful girl to explain further that from the very beginning—from the first moment of their acquaintance almost—his manners have impressed her with the fullest belief in his arrogance and conceit. She speaks out the disapprobation which has ended in invincible dislike, and winds up with the somewhat gratuitous statement that she had not known him a month before she felt that he was the last man in the world whom she could ever be prevailed on to marry.

Rash, foolish—if perfectly sincere—words can go no further.

“You have said quite enough, madam,” Darcy puts an end to the altercation. “I perfectly comprehend your feelings, and have now only to be ashamed of what my own have been. Forgive me for having taken up so much of your time, and accept my best wishes for your health and happiness.”

So the stormy interview terminates, and Elizabeth is left to recover from the tumult of her feelings, though it is too soon for her to be sorry for having spoken so many vehement words in her anger.

Of course, Elizabeth keeps an honourable silence on what has befallen her. She has no confidante save her own thoughts, and she is reduced next morning to walking out alone to indulge them in peace, when again she sees a gentleman in the distance. This time she retreats from him, but she hears Mr. Darcy’s voice repeat her name. She has no choice save to stop and face him.

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He comes up, holds out a letter, and saying quietly and haughtily, “Will you do me the honour of reading that letter?” bows himself off.

With the strongest curiosity, though with no expectation of pleasure, Elizabeth opens the letter, and is still more surprised to find it contains two sheets (the old, spacious sheets) written quite through in a close hand, with the cover also full.

The letter is not a love-letter, or a letter of apology; it is simply a vindication of the writer’s character from the charges which Elizabeth had impulsively brought against it.

In the first part, which deals with the accusation against Darcy for having deliberately separated Bingley and Jane, he begins by making the small atonement of emphatically

declaring that he had acted under a mistaken impression. He has been persuaded that, while his friend was rapidly becoming attached to Miss Bennet, she, on her part, was still sufficiently indifferent to him to prevent her happiness being seriously implicated in the affair. In this light, Darcy has thought himself at liberty to take all lawful means to hinder the marriage for his friend's sake, while he himself was still successfully struggling with his admiration for Elizabeth.

In recapitulating the objections to the marriage, the writer sins afresh, and worse than ever where his reader's feelings are concerned. He writes some very plain and hard words of the Bennet family which, in the middle of his strong determination to clear himself, he must have known would wound Elizabeth to the quick. He says that the inferiority of her mother's origin, however much to be regretted, is nothing in comparison with that total want of propriety so frequently—almost so uniformly—betrayed by Mrs. Bennet herself, by Elizabeth's three younger sisters, and occasionally even by her father.

Apparently, Darcy has relented a little after writing these harsh words, for in the next sentence he does ask her shortly to pardon him. He protests it pains him to [Pg 86] offend her. He even goes a little out of his way, to bid her, in her concern for the defects of her relations, and her displeasure with him for unreservedly pointing them out, take comfort from the consideration that she and her elder sister have so conducted themselves as to escape any share of the censure liberally bestowed on the others. He says, with lurking tenderness, under the guise of stern justice, that the exemption is honourable to the sense and disposition both of Jane and Elizabeth.

In proceeding to dispose of her violent advocacy of Wickham's cause and consequent severe aspersions of his own character, Darcy treats the subject as more serious, and here the higher nature of the man comes in. In proportion to the greater injury done him, he grows calmer, more reasonable, almost magnanimous. With a manly self-restraint and absence of all invective, which are in themselves proofs of his honesty of purpose, he consents to make plain to her, at whatever sacrifices of his pride and reserve, how very different from what she supposes have been his relations with Wickham. He even puts himself to the pain of entrusting to her honour a portion of the story which involves another member of his family, the young sister to whom he is confessedly the best of brothers, in order to complete the exposure of the wholesale misrepresentation, the tangled web of truth and falsehood, with which Wickham has deceived her.

While young men at college together, Darcy knew how far Wickham fell short of the elder Darcy's good opinion, without attempting to deprive the lad of his patron's

favour. In those days Wickham had shown himself as disinclined, as he was unfit, to take orders; and at the death of his godfather, who had only recommended him to the family living conditionally—on his proving suitable, and on the younger Darcy's approbation of the presentation—Wickham had announced his objections to the step proposed, and had accepted £3,000 as an equivalent. It was not till after he had [Pg 87] failed in studying for the bar, and when he had wasted the money he had received, that he had again applied to Darcy with cool effrontery, professing his readiness to comply with the necessary conditions, and claiming the presentation to the living.

On Darcy's refusal, Wickham had attempted to revenge himself, and at the same time to secure Georgiana Darcy's fortune of £30,000 by renewing his acquaintance with Darcy's sister, and making use of her childish affection for him, until he had sufficiently ingratiated himself with the inexperienced girl of fifteen, to induce her to believe herself in love, and to consent to an elopement with him. Georgiana was only saved from a miserable fate by the affection for the elder brother who had been like a second father to her, which caused her, at the last moment, to refuse to go any further in deceiving and defying him, and to confess to him her foolish intention.

Darcy ends his letter by referring Elizabeth Bennet for confirmation of his account, should she be inclined to question it, to his cousin. Colonel Fitzwilliam, who is acquainted with the entire particulars, and who can have no motive in misleading her.

Then with the revived regret and charity with which a man will say farewell to the woman he has loved—and loves still, in spite of her cruel treatment of him—he bids God bless her, before he signs himself Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Elizabeth reads eagerly, with a throng of conflicting emotions. She commences by being incredulous. "This could not be true," she says of his assertion that he has thought Jane free from any special partiality for Bingley, while she writhes under the cutting references to her other relations and their exhibition of themselves at the Netherfield ball.

Again she cries out with still more energy, "This must be false," when she comes to the temperate statement of Wickham's misconduct and absolute untrustworthiness.

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But as she reads, and re-reads, and reflects on the contents of the letter, the girl's good sense, her own fairness and truthfulness come to her aid against the rooted prejudice which had so blinded her judgment—finding ample food as it did in the besetting sin of Darcy, which reflected itself in his unpopular and unconciliatory

manner, in contrast with the superficially pleasant address, masking the unprincipled selfishness of Wickham.

Elizabeth is forced to see how completely she has been taken in, how little ground she has had to go upon in either case, save vanity piqued on the one hand and gratified on the other. She shrinks abashed before her own errors of observation and reasoning—she who has been so proud of her penetration and cleverness.

She hates to remember her zealous support of Wickham, of whom she had literally known nothing, except that he was handsome and agreeable, and from the stories he has told her himself with a frankness which, even if he had been perfectly sincere, would have been imprudent and indelicate in so recent an acquaintance.

She recoils from the recollection of her sharpness and uncalled-for taunts to Darcy, and is brought to admit that his warm, constant regard for her, in the teeth of her unconcealed dislike to him, has been no common compliment from such a man; though she must still think that he urged his suit in an improper and unamiable manner.

When Elizabeth returns to Longbourn, she is doubtful whether or not she ought to tell so much of what she has learned of Wickham's real character as to open the eyes of their common acquaintances; but hearing, to her immense relief, that the militia regiment stationed at Meryton is under orders to go into camp at Brighton, and that Wickham must leave the neighbourhood, in company with the rest of the officers, in the course of a fortnight, she resolves, with the approval of her sister Jane, who has been the astonished listener to all Elizabeth's adventures, to leave Wickham [Pg 89] the opportunity of redeeming the past, by refraining from the uncongenial task of exposing him to his associates.

The two younger Miss Bennets, in company with the more thoughtless girls of their immediate circle, are sunk in the depths of despair at the prospect of the loss of liveliness in their society, which the removal of the regiment involves. But Lydia, who has been loudest in her lamentations, is more than consoled, for the present, by an invitation from the wife of the colonel of the regiment, a newly-married woman, little older and hardly less empty-headed than Lydia herself, to accompany her on a visit to Brighton.

As Lydia's ideas of felicity are summed up in flirting noisily with six officers at once, Brighton and its camp appear like Paradise to her.

In some respects, Lydia Bennet and George Wickham are not unlike the fast heroine and lady-killing hero of many modern novels. It is edifying to contemplate the unqualified contempt and reprobation with which Jane Austen viewed the couple.

Elizabeth Bennet is so conscious of the risk and harm to Lydia, in allowing her to go to a town which combines all the disadvantages of a watering-place and regimental quarters with such slender guardianship as that of her friend, Mrs. Foster, that the elder sister feels bound to risk giving mortal offence to Lydia, and incurring the indignation of their mother, who is nearly as bent on her daughter's paying the undesirable visit, as is the forward, spoilt girl of sixteen on her own account. So Elizabeth goes to her father, and urges him to keep her youngest sister at home.

But Mr. Bennet will not be stirred up to exercise his authority. He is as convinced as anybody can be of the silliness and folly of Lydia, but, acting on his usual plan, he is more inclined to laugh at her than to try to restrain her. Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself at some public place, and she could never do it at less expense and inconvenience[Pg 90] to her family. They will have no peace at Longbourn if she does not go to Brighton. As the officers will find women better worth their notice there, let her relations hope Lydia may be taught her own insignificance. At any rate, she cannot grow many degrees worse, without authorising them in locking her up for the rest of her life.

III.

Elizabeth has a gratification in store for her, to which she has long looked forward, so simple and common a one in this generation, that it is refreshing to hear how much, even in anticipation, a trip to the Lakes or to Derbyshire has been to the untravelled girl, with her fresh, unjaded tastes. In the same way, it is touching to read in some of the last published letters of Charlotte Brontë how the gifted, hard-faring woman was disposed to think a week by the sea, which she had not seen before, in the company of a congenial friend, implied almost too much happiness for this world.

The Bennets have an uncle and aunt in London, in trade, like the rest of their mother's relations, inhabiting a house in the City region of Gracechurch Street, but who are in all other respects different from Mrs. Bennet and the Philips in Meryton. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are sensible, intelligent, amiable people, much esteemed by their elder nieces. The couple have promised to take Elizabeth with them on a summer tour of a month's duration to the Lakes; the idea cheers and consoles the girl under a hundred depressing and mortifying influences.

As it happens, Mr. Gardiner cannot go so far as the Lakes, and the expedition is limited to Derbyshire,[Pg 91] with its dales, towns, and great houses, its Peak, and its caverns. Elizabeth enjoys herself heartily, without an *arrière pensée*, till the excursion brings the party to the little town of Lambton, where Mrs. Gardiner had once lived for several years, and where she has still old acquaintances. Elizabeth is aware that Lambton is within a mile or two of Mr. Darcy's estate and house of Pemberley. She cannot be without some curiosity to see the fine place, of which, had she so chosen, she might have been by this time mistress. Therefore, when her companions, who are in complete ignorance of their niece's special interest in Pemberley, propose to drive to it, as one of the show-places of the neighbourhood, Elizabeth, having carefully ascertained that not one of the family is at home, willingly consents to accompany her uncle and aunt.

Jane Austen hardly ever describes scenery. The criticism on a recent tale, that there is not much of human nature but a great deal about the weather in the book, could never have been spoken of her stories. The fashion in the fiction of her day tended to two extremes—to the gorgeous ideal foreign landscape of Mrs. Radcliffe, or to the ignoring of inanimate nature in all save the barest accessories, practised by Mrs. Inchbald and Fanny Burney. Jane Austen preferred the latter style of treatment; her interest is not merely centred in her men and women, it is monopolised by them. As in the old tragic ballads, which were yet so far removed from her stories, there seems no time for elaborate analyses of earth, sea, and sky, with the moulding of these mute forces into subtle sympathy, or clashing discord with men's moods, a tendency which belongs to artificial and self-conscious art.

Yet we receive the impression that Jane Austen loved the country and country walks. Once and again she paints little landscape pictures which indicate her taste and feeling. As might have been expected in her generation, she shows her preference for rich, cultivated, smiling, or at most prettily picturesque, thoroughly[Pg 92] domestic scenery. Her description of Pemberley Park is one of her rare bits of landscape. She dwells with much approbation—not only on the large, handsome stone building (the age which revels in mellow brick, and puts Queen Anne, not to say Queen Elizabeth, houses, far before Georgian mansions, had not yet arrived), standing well on a rising ground—but also on the ridge of wooded hills which forms the background, and on the stream of some natural importance, and “swelled” into still greater, but without any artificial appearance, with banks which are neither formal nor falsely adorned, that constitutes the foreground. One has no difficulty in conjuring up the place—somewhat heavy, yet stately and tranquil, with its stretches of fine wood, its open vistas contrived for “prospects,” and its careful adaptation of the fall of the ground to

“a valley narrowing into a glen,” according to the principles of the landscape gardening of the period.

Elizabeth is disinterestedly delighted. She feels that to be mistress of Pemberley might have been something. She is no less pleased with the house, and its lofty, well-proportioned rooms, each window commanding a charming view; the furniture suitable to the fortune of the owner, but neither gaudy nor needlessly fine, with less splendour but more real elegance than the furniture at Rosings. “And of this place,” thinks Elizabeth, with some pardonable hankering, “I might have been mistress. With these rooms I might have been familiarly acquainted. Instead of viewing them as a stranger, I might have rejoiced in them as my own, and welcomed to them as visitors my uncle and aunt. But, no—” a wholesome recollection stops the current of her thoughts in time—“I should not have been allowed to invite them.”

The housekeeper, an elderly, respectable-looking woman, much more civil and less fine than Elizabeth had expected, shows the visitors over the house. After Elizabeth has recovered from a momentary alarm, and made a mental note of thanksgiving that they have not [Pg 93] come a day later, on the servant’s observing that she expects her master the next morning with a large party of friends, the girl is able to listen with a mixture of feelings, in which wonder and bewilderment are not the least, to the talk which goes on among the others as the family pictures are being looked at. The housekeeper, on finding by some words which drop from Mrs. Gardiner that Elizabeth is acquainted with her master, begins to speak of him with honest pride and warmth. How good a master and landlord he is! How affectionate a brother! How kind to the poor! Does the young lady not think him a very handsome gentleman?

“Very handsome,” answers poor Elizabeth briefly.

One example of the praise thus freely bestowed strikes Elizabeth as of all others the most extraordinary. “I have never had a cross word from him in his life, and I have known him ever since he was four years old,” declares the old servant. And yet, if there was one fault more than another which Elizabeth Bennet had been accustomed to ascribe unhesitatingly to the lordly bear, Darcy, it was a bad temper; but, according to this credible witness, the bear abroad must be a lamb at home.

As Elizabeth digests the reflections aroused by this evidence, and looks at a full-length portrait of the master of the house, in which the face wears such a smile as she had noticed sometimes on the lips of the living man when he looked at her, she feels a deeper sentiment of gratitude than she has yet experienced for the love which had been so strong, though there was little of the courtier in the lover.

The little party are consigned to the gardener, who is conducting them across the lawn to the river. Elizabeth has turned back to look again. Her uncle and aunt have stopped also, and are conjecturing the date of the house, when its owner comes suddenly forward from the road leading to the stables.

The two so much interested are within twenty yards[Pg 94] of each other, and cannot avoid an encounter. Their eyes meet; both grow crimson. He absolutely starts, and for a moment seems immovable with surprise, but shortly recovering himself, advances and speaks to Elizabeth with perfect civility, if not perfect composure.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner recognise Mr. Darcy from his resemblance to his picture and from the exclamation of the gardener. They stand a little aloof, while the new comer and their niece exchange greetings.

In the meantime Elizabeth is reduced to a state of extreme confusion and discomfort. She scarcely dares lift her eyes to her quondam lover's face. She cannot forget, and she knows he must recall with equal vividness, the circumstances under which they parted at Hunsford.

She is keenly alive to the impropriety, the indelicacy of his finding her at Pemberley. Why did she come? or why has he thus returned a day before he was expected? How strange her being there must appear to him! In what a disgraceful light may it not strike so vain a man! For Elizabeth still holds forlornly to the last rag of the mental and moral habiliments in which she clothed him. She clings to the conviction of his high opinion of himself and his deserts. But, in spite of herself, amidst all the jumble of sensations which his appearance has excited, none is more distinct or strikes her more forcibly, than the realisation that he is heaping coals of fire on her head, by behaving to the girl who had rejected him—well-nigh with contumely—with the greatest, most sedulous courtesy that a true gentleman could show on such a trying occasion. More than that, there is a complete alteration in his whole tone, which she cannot fail to observe, that might have been perceptible even to a stranger. He has overcome his old aversion to the small polite forms and genialities of social intercourse, along with his old stiffness and coldness. He puts himself to the trouble of inquiring for the very relations he stigmatised, as well as for herself. He asks when she has left home, and how long she[Pg 95] means to stay in Derbyshire. He is interested in her answers. He is animated and agreeable, in the middle of his evident agitation, for the first time since she has known him. His words only fail him when his last idea deserts him, and, after standing a moment silent, he recollects himself, and takes his leave.

Elizabeth is full of astonishment in her distress, and all the time she walks about the grounds, mechanically responding to their praises on the part of her companions, and

hearing the gardener triumphantly announce that the park is ten miles round, she is puzzling out the riddle, asking herself what Mr. Darcy thinks of her; whether she is still dear to him, in defiance of everything? She cannot tell, not even from her own heart, if he has felt most pain or pleasure in seeing her again; but certainly he has not been at ease.

While the visitors are still wandering about, Elizabeth is again surprised by seeing Darcy at a little distance coming towards them. For a moment she thinks he will strike into another path, but when a turn of the road shows him still advancing, and preparing to greet them with all his newly-acquired cordiality, she determines to emulate him, and gets out the words “delightful,” “charming,” when it strikes her that praise of Pemberley from her may be misconstrued, and she colours and is silent.

Darcy asks if she will do him the honour of introducing her friends.

This is a stroke of civility which even yet Elizabeth did not expect. She cannot suppress a smile at his seeking the acquaintance of some of the very people against whom, viewed as her connections, his pride had revolted. “What will be his surprise,” she thinks, with girlish glee in her reviving spirits, “when he knows who they are? He takes them now for people of fashion.”

As she names the Gardiners’ relationship to herself, she steals a mischievous glance at Darcy, to see how he bears it. She is not without a suspicion that he will decamp, as fast as he can, from such disgraceful companions.

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On the contrary, though he is surprised, he bears the news with apparent fortitude, and, so far from going away, turns and walks with them, entering into conversation with Mr. Gardiner.

Elizabeth cannot but be pleased—cannot but triumph. It is consoling that Darcy should know she has some relations for whom there is no need to blush. She listens attentively to all that passes, and glories in every sentence of her uncle’s which marks his intelligence, his taste, or his good manners.

Soon Elizabeth hears Mr. Darcy invite her uncle, who is fond of fishing, to fish in the stream while he is in the neighbourhood. Elizabeth says nothing, but it gratifies her exceedingly; the compliment must be all to herself. In place of continuing to torment herself with the reproach “Why has she been so foolish as to visit Pemberley?” she begins to ask more agreeable questions. “Why is he so altered? It cannot be for me? It

cannot be for my sake his manners are thus softened? It is impossible he should still love me.”

Elizabeth finds an opportunity, when Mrs. Gardiner has taken her husband’s arm, and their niece has been forced to walk behind with Darcy, to let him know she had not expected to see him there, observing that his return must have been unexpected, since his housekeeper had said he would certainly not be back till to-morrow.

He tells her he had ridden on before his party, to arrange some business with his steward. His sister and the others—among whom are old acquaintances of hers, Mr. Bingley and his sisters—will follow early the following morning.

Elizabeth simply bows. Her thoughts fly back to the last occasion on which Mr. Bingley’s name was mentioned between them, and if she may judge by his complexion, his mind is not very differently engaged.

But Mr. Darcy is still to give the crowning proof of his condonement of Elizabeth’s offence, and his unshaken—if possible, increased—respect for her. He tells her there is one person in his party who particularly wishes [Pg 97] to be known to her. Will she allow him or does he ask too much, to introduce his sister to her acquaintance during her stay in Derbyshire?

This flattering request from the proud, exclusive, great man of the neighbourhood, who is naturally still more exclusive for his young sister than for himself, is delicate homage indeed, such as Elizabeth is well qualified to appreciate. Any desire Miss Darcy has to know her must be the work of her brother, and, without looking further, it is very gratifying to have this strong testimony that his resentment has not made him think really ill of her.

Elizabeth hardly knows how she accedes to the petition, only it cannot have been very ungraciously. He wishes her to walk into the house, but she excuses herself, saying she is not tired, and the two stand together on the lawn talking indefatigably of Matlock and Dovedale, to avoid an awkward silence, till the Gardiners came up, when, after a renewed and pressing invitation to enter the house and take some refreshment, Mr. Darcy hands the ladies into the carriage.

Elizabeth has to listen to her uncle and aunt’s remarks on the Squire of Pemberley, who, in spite of his formidable reputation for hauteur and reserve, has shown himself “perfectly well-behaved, polite, and unassuming.” “I can now say with the housekeeper,” ends Mrs. Gardiner, with a great deal more point than she is aware of, “that though some people may call him proud, I have seen nothing of it.”

The probability of such a reformation of manners on Darcy's part remains an open question. Perhaps the sudden change in him is one of the most unlikely occurrences which happen in Jane Austen's life-like novels. But her readers must remember that Darcy was only eight-and-twenty years of age. He was a young man of high character and many fine qualities, though these had been warped by the false self-importance which was the result of the over-indulged, isolated, really narrow experience of the only son and heir of a great family,[Pg 98] confined largely to the circle of his own friends—at the utmost his dependents. And the influence brought to bear on Darcy, with such telling effect, was his strong attachment to the bright, true-hearted girl who told him his faults so plainly, yet who could not alienate him, partly because of the single-heartedness of her nature, partly because of the elements of nobility in his. Love and his mistress, acting together on good principles which had been suffered to lie dormant, were Darcy's teachers, and at twenty-eight such teachers are still powerful.

The gradual change of Elizabeth's feelings towards Darcy is wrought out with great skill.

Darcy is so eager to fulfil his intention with regard to Elizabeth Bennet and his sister, that on the very afternoon of Georgiana's arrival at home he drives her over to the inn in Lambton, where the Gardiners are staying.

Elizabeth has not been able to tell her uncle and aunt the compliment which she is to receive, and her confusion when the Pemberley livery is seen in the streets, together with the effort to be calm, impresses them with a new idea. There is no way to account for so marked attentions from such a quarter, unless by supposing a partiality for their niece—a supposition highly acceptable to the worthy uncle and aunt.

Elizabeth finds Miss Darcy, who is a ladylike girl, though not pretty, no alarming critic. She is shy instead of proud, but her shyness does not prevent her from being eager to like the friend her brother has presented to her.

A few minutes afterwards Bingley also "waits upon" Elizabeth, and is as friendly as of old. Her anger against him has vanished long ago. She is glad to see him again. She is pleased to fancy that he looks at her once or twice as if he were seeking to trace a resemblance between her and Jane. He is clearly on terms of simple friendship with Georgiana Darcy, for whom his sister, in complacently contemplating the possibility of a [Pg 99] double family match, has designed him. And Elizabeth believes she detects a regretful remembrance in the tone in which he refers to its having been a long time since he has seen her. She approves of the promptness and exactness of the mental

calculation which follows: “It is above eight months; we have not met since the 20th of November, when we were all dancing together at Netherfield.”

An invitation to dine at Pemberley follows. It is accepted with pleasure by the Gardiners, under the agreeable persuasion that Mr. Darcy is much better acquainted with Elizabeth than her friends had any idea of; in fact, that he is very much in love with her. Of the gentleman’s feelings there can be no doubt; with regard to the sentiments of the lady—whom her relatives do not choose to embarrass by pressing for her confidence on the great conquest of which she has been far from boasting—there is still an interesting uncertainty.

Once more in agitating circumstances Elizabeth visits Pemberley, in paying the return call which she and her aunt make upon Miss Darcy prior to the dinner.

Miss Darcy is as hospitable as her shyness will allow. Darcy comes in and shows how anxious he is that Elizabeth and his sister should get better acquainted.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst are the marplots. They greet Elizabeth with no more than a curtsey, till, in the imprudence of anger at the master of the house’s manner towards one of his guests, Caroline Bingley, who has been watching the pair jealously, calls out, “Pray, Miss Eliza, are not the ——shire militia removed from Meryton? They must be a great loss to your family.”

The impertinence stings more than one of the listeners, in a way which the speaker has never contemplated. The friend to whom Miss Bingley professes herself to be devoted, Georgiana Darcy, is yet more distressed than Elizabeth at the association with Wickham which the mention of the militia regiment calls up, while Darcy actually neglects to watch the effect of the malicious speech on Elizabeth, in his sympathy with his young sister.

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The callers are no sooner gone than Miss Bingley expatiates on how ill Eliza Bennet is looking. She has never in her life seen any one so much altered. Eliza Bennet has grown quite brown and coarse.

Mr. Darcy confesses he has seen no alteration in Miss Elizabeth Bennet, save her being tanned—no miraculous consequence of travelling in summer.

The infatuated woman is not to be silenced. She pulls every feature of her successful rival’s face to pieces. Elizabeth’s face is too thin; her complexion has no brilliance; her nose lacks character; her eyes, which have been called fine, possess a sharp, shrewish look.

Darcy remains resolutely silent.

His assailant, unfortunately for herself, is determined he shall speak. "I remember when we first met in Hertfordshire," she continues in an airy strain, "how amazed we all were to find that she was a reputed beauty;^[15] and I particularly recollect your saying one night after they had been dining at Netherfield, 'She a beauty! I should as soon call her mother a wit.' But afterwards she seemed to improve on you, and I believe you thought her rather pretty at one time."

"Yes," replies Darcy, who can contain himself no longer, "but that was only when I first knew her, for it is many months since I have considered her one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance."

Well done, Mr. Darcy! always fearless in announcing even a change of opinion, and now loyal to the absent, and true to your mistress's colours!

A terrible catastrophe is at hand.

That dinner-party at Pemberley never takes place. Elizabeth has been expecting a letter from Jane, and wondering at its non-arrival.

The delay is explained by two letters coming at one time, and the Gardiners set out to visit some of Mrs. [Pg 101] Gardiner's old friends, leaving Elizabeth at the inn to go leisurely through the home news. They are of an alarming, disastrous description. Lydia has eloped from Brighton with Wickham. The worst reports are in circulation with regard to his debts and his disreputable character. The family at Longbourn are in the utmost distress. Mr. Bennet has followed the fugitive pair to London, where Mr. Gardiner is implored to join him. Elizabeth is summoned home immediately.

As Elizabeth reads the letters in the height of dismay, passionately lamenting what is likely to be the miserable fate of her youngest sister, keenly sensible of the disgrace brought on the whole family, bitterly blaming herself for having abstained from letting her circle know what she had heard against Wickham when she was at Hunsford, Mr. Darcy is shown into the room.

"Oh, where is my uncle?" Elizabeth has just been crying to herself, and she has no further words for her visitor than a hurried "I beg your pardon, but I must leave you. I must find Mr. Gardiner this moment, on business that cannot be delayed; I have not an instant to lose."

Before he has time to think, he calls out, "What is the matter?" then begs to go himself, or to send a servant after Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. He fears she is ill. He cannot

leave her in such a state. With the utmost gentleness and consideration he urges her to let him help her, to suffer him to call her maid, to get her a glass of wine.

Elizabeth is forced to explain herself. There is nothing wrong with her health. She is only grieved by dreadful tidings from Longbourn, and at the words she bursts into tears. After having said so much it is idle to withhold the rest of the truth; indeed, the scandal must be over the whole country soon.

Elizabeth tells Darcy her youngest sister has eloped and is in the power of Mr. Wickham. She breaks off to reproach herself anew. She might have prevented it, if [Pg 102] she had but explained some part of what she had learnt to her family. But it is too late! too late! and Darcy might have said, "I told you so. The tables are turned with a vengeance." But he is only amazed, sorry, shocked. At last he scarcely seems to see her, as he walks up and down the room in earnest thought, his brow contracted, his air gloomy.

Elizabeth observes and understands. Her power is sinking in the balance; everything must sink under such an overwhelming evidence of family weakness. "And never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him as now, when all love must be vain."

At last Darcy recollects himself, and with a voice which indicates compassion, but also restraint, excuses himself for intruding on her and staying so long. He would fain have helped her, but he will not torment her with vain wishes. He fears the unfortunate affair will prevent his sister's having the pleasure of seeing her at Pemberley that day.

Elizabeth hastily acquiesces, begs him to apologise to Miss Darcy, and adds a miserable entreaty that he will conceal the unhappy truth as long as possible—she knows it cannot be long.

He readily assures her of his secrecy, again expresses his sorrow for her distress, wishes it a happier ending than seems probable, leaves his compliments for her relations, and with only one serious parting look, goes.

As Darcy quits the room, Elizabeth feels how improbable it is that they two will ever see each other again on the happy terms which have marked their meetings in Derbyshire. But though the consideration is full of pain, the loyal girl has no time to spare for her own loss, in the calamity^[16] which has befallen her family.

The Gardiners, returning, are ready with the utmost sympathy and regret. They promise every assistance in their power, including the immediate escort of Elizabeth [Pg 103] to Longbourn, after which Mr. Gardiner will join Mr. Bennet in London.

“But what is to be done about Pemberley?” exclaims Mrs. Gardiner. “John told us Mr. Darcy was here when you sent for us. Was it so?”

“Yes; and I told him we should not be able to keep our engagement; that is all settled,” cries Elizabeth, hurrying out of the room in a fever to set off.

“What, is all settled?” repeats the other; “and are they on such terms as for her to disclose the real truth? If I only knew how it is!”

IV.

In as short a time as fresh horses can convey them, the party are at Longbourn. Mr. Gardiner repairs to London, and induces Mr. Bennet, whose researches have been fruitless, to return home.

At last, after a period of wretched suspense, the news reaches Longbourn from Mr. Gardiner that he has discovered the couple. For Lydia's sake, little as she has deserved it, they are married from Mr. Gardiner's house. Certain stipulations have been made on Wickham's part, that the bride shall in time inherit her share of her mother's few thousand pounds; that her father shall allow Mrs. Wickham a hundred a year during his lifetime; that Wickham's debts shall be paid, and a commission procured for him in “the regulars.” Withal, little real happiness could be expected from such a marriage. Wickham has only turned to Lydia when he was repulsed in other quarters. His debts have been the compelling cause of his flight from Brighton. Her fondness for him is made up of giddiness and a foolish passion on which she has put no restraint.

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But Mrs. Bennet is as elated at having a daughter married at last, and married at sixteen, as if the marriage had come about in a more honourable way.

Mr. Bennet views the matter in a different light. He is satisfied that his brother-in-law has kept back the amount of money furnished by him to Wickham, which Mr. Bennet must somehow, sooner or later, repay.

Her father has told Kitty, in the driest of sore-hearted jesting, that no officer is to be allowed to enter his house again, or even to pass through the village. Balls are to be absolutely prohibited, unless she stands up with one of her sisters; and she is never to stir out of the house till she can prove that she has spent ten minutes of every day in a rational manner.

Kitty has received those threats in a serious light, and begins to cry.

“Well, well,” cries the incorrigible humourist, “don’t make yourself unhappy. If you are a good girl for the next ten years, I will take you to a review at the end of them.”

At first, Mr. Bennet refuses to permit a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Wickham before he shall join his regiment in the North; but, on the earnest representations of his two elder daughters that to withhold the forgiving countenance of Lydia’s family from the young couple will be to lessen their slender chances of respectability, he allows the culprits to come for a short time to Longbourn, on their way to Newcastle.

The arrival of the Wickhams is in perfect keeping with what went before it, and is a splendid bit of serio-comedy. Jane blushes and Elizabeth blushes; but the cheeks of the two who cause their relations’ confusion suffer no increase of colour. Lydia is Lydia still, untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless. Wickham is not at all more distressed than herself; but his manners have always been so pleasing that, had his audience not known his character, the smiling ease and grace with which he claims their relationship would have delighted them all. Elizabeth had not before [Pg 105] believed him quite equal to such assurance, but she resolves thenceforth to draw no limits to the impudence of an impudent man.

I hope I may be pardoned for drawing particular attention to the exquisite truthfulness of the couple’s behaviour. The correct definition of it is specially valuable at a time when slightly-altered versions of such conduct are classed differently, and passed off on inexperienced and thoughtless readers, to the grave detriment of their standards of good morals and good taste.

Lydia, in her total want of proper feeling and modesty, cries out, “Oh, mamma, do people hereabouts know I am married to-day? I was afraid they might not; and we overtook William Goulding in his curricle to-day, so I was determined he should know it, and so I let down the side glass next to him and took off my glove, and let my hand just rest upon the window-frame, so that he might see the ring, and then I bowed and smiled like anything.”

When the family party go in to dinner, Lydia, with eager parade, walks up to her mother’s right hand, saying triumphantly to her eldest sister, “Ah, Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman.”

After dinner the bride retires to show her ring, and boast of being married, to the housekeeper and maid-servants.

When the ladies are all together again in the breakfast-parlour, which a hundred years ago did duty as a drawing-room, unless on state occasions, Mrs. Wickham patronises her whole family by giving them a general invitation to Newcastle, where she hopes

there will be balls, and she will take care to find good partners for her sisters. After her father and mother go away, one or two of the girls may be left behind, when their *chaperon* expresses a sanguine hope that she will get husbands for them before the winter is over.

“Thank you for my share of the favour,” says [Pg 106] Elizabeth, “but I do not particularly like your way of getting husbands.”

“Sour grapes! spiteful thing!” we can imagine Lydia saying, hardly below her breath. Do we not see her before us, as large as life, in all her native colours, the pert, hoidenish, vulgar-minded girl—as destitute of delicacy as of dutifulness, or sweet unselfishness, or gentle affection—who has become, by some strange, sad chance, a favourite in the literature of the day? I appeal to my readers—Is she not still the same, though the fashion of her dress, or the manner in which she wears her hair, and a few of her phrases, may be altered, and though—alas! for the lower tone of much modern English fiction—she is now held up to approbation instead of reprobation.

In the course of her shameless boasting about her marriage, Lydia lets out before her sisters that Mr. Darcy was present.

“Mr. Darcy!” exclaims Elizabeth, in utter bewilderment.

“Oh! yes, he was to come there with Wickham, you know. But, gracious me, I quite forgot! I ought not to have said a word about it. I promised them so faithfully. What will Wickham say? It was to be such a secret.”

“If it was to be such a secret,” says the honourable Jane, “say not another word on the subject. You may depend upon my seeking no farther.”

“Oh! certainly,” says Elizabeth, though burning with curiosity, “we will ask you no questions.”

“Thank you,” answers Lydia coolly, “for if you did I should certainly tell you all, and then Wickham would be angry.”

Elizabeth has to run away from the temptation. She has one resource, however; she can write and ask a private explanation from her kind aunt.

Elizabeth learns the whole truth, though Mrs. Gardiner does not conceal her surprise that the information is required in such a quarter. After Darcy’s [Pg 107] parting from Elizabeth in Derbyshire, he had gone immediately to London—and, in fact, done everything. It was he who, through his previous acquaintance with Wickham’s habits and associates, had discovered the couple, and brought them to Mr. Gardiner’s

knowledge. It was Darcy who had conducted all the negotiations—in fine, it was Darcy who had insisted on paying the necessary money—a thousand pounds for Wickham's debts; another thousand to be settled, in addition to her own, on Lydia; and the purchase-money for her husband's commission. The reason which Darcy had urged for being allowed to take the lead in the matter, and to furnish the money, was that it had been through his own unjustifiable reserve, and want of consideration for others, that Wickham's character had not been known, so that he had been received and noticed in respectable society.

But Mr. Gardiner would not have yielded up his right of making some sacrifice for his niece—or, rather, for her family—had he not been persuaded that Mr. Darcy of Pemberley had even a nearer interest in the affair, by being either actually engaged, or on the point of being engaged, to Lydia Bennet's sister Elizabeth. Indeed, Mrs. Gardiner is still so convinced of the truth of the impression, and of the happy prospects of one of her favourite nieces, in a marriage with a man of much worth, as well as of great social consideration, who only wants a little more liveliness—which a judicious choice of a wife may supply—that, in closing her letter, she gaily begs Elizabeth not to punish the writer's presumption by excluding her from Pemberley, since she can never be quite happy till she has been all round the park—an expedition for which a low phaeton, with a nice pair of ponies, would be the very thing.

Elizabeth is greatly moved by the efforts and the sacrifices of feeling—still more than of money—which Darcy has made on Lydia's behalf. It could not have been for Lydia alone. But when Elizabeth asks herself, Were the Gardiners right in arguing it was for her—Elizabeth's—sake?[Pg 108] she is met by the humbling reflection that the assistance he has rendered must, and ought to be, the last tribute paid by Darcy to a loyal, disinterested regard, which has proved in every way unfortunate. The idea of the proud, sensitive master of Pemberley voluntarily seeking to become the brother-in-law of Wickham, the son of his father's steward—the man who has so wronged him and his, who has outraged Darcy's every principle and instinct—the man whom of all others Darcy most abhors, and has reason to abhor—is not to be thought of for an instant. Yet Elizabeth is half-pleased, in the middle of her pain, to see how confidently her uncle and aunt have reckoned on her marriage with Darcy.

Mrs. Bennet is consoled for the Wickhams' departure by the news, which quickly circulates in Meryton, that Mr. Bingley is coming down to Netherfield for the shooting. At once she resumes all her former projects for her eldest daughter, and poor Jane, in addition to the conflict in her own heart, has to submit to her mother's pointedly looking at her, smiling at her, or shaking her head over her, every time the tenant of Netherfield's name happens to be mentioned—which, for the present, is incessantly.

The old argument as to Mr. Bennett's calling immediately at Netherfield is renewed.

Mr. Bennet stoutly refuses. "No, no; you forced me into visiting him last year, and promised me if I went to see him he should marry one of my daughters. But it ended in nothing, and I will not be sent on a fool's errand again."

In the middle of the doubts as to what brings Bingley back, and whether he comes with or without his friend's gracious permission, Elizabeth thinks in her own merry way, "It is hard that this poor man cannot come to a house which he has legally hired without rousing all this speculation. I will leave him to himself."

On the first morning after Bingley's return into Hertfordshire, Mrs. Bennet has the joy of seeing him, [Pg 109] from her dressing-room window, riding up the paddock to Longbourn House. She calls her daughters to share her exultation. Jane sits still. Elizabeth, to satisfy her mother, goes to the window; she looks, she sees Mr. Darcy with his friend, and sits down again by her sister.

"There is a gentleman with him, mamma," says the unconscious Kitty, and then adds the next moment, "La! it looks just like that man who used to be with him before, Mr. What's-his-name? That tall, proud man."

"Good gracious! Mr. Darcy; and so it does, I vow. Well, any friend of Mr. Bingley will always be welcome here, to be sure; but else I must say that I hate the very sight of him."

These are some of the many expressions of dislike to Darcy and misconception of his character, for which Elizabeth has partly herself to thank, since she had helped largely to originate them. She has now to listen to them in silence, while she alone is aware of the benefits he has conferred on the whole family, and that he has saved her mother's favourite daughter from destruction.

Elizabeth had meant to watch closely Jane's first interview with Bingley on his return; but the attention of the young watcher is sadly distracted by her own position and that of Darcy, while she has nearly as many doubts of Darcy's intentions as of Bingley's. Darcy's coming there at all might have been supposed to have only one significance, but Elizabeth will not be sure.

As it happens, the double awkwardness of the situation is so great that all those most concerned in it labour under the greatest constraint—a constraint which, unhappily, is only too likely to be misconstrued.

Jane is pale and sedate.

Bingley is looking embarrassed as well as pleased.

Darcy strikes Elizabeth as more like what he used to be in Hertfordshire than as he had seemed in the pleasant days in Derbyshire.

[Pg 110]

Of Elizabeth's own unwonted gravity, naturally she can have no just conception.

Matters are made worse by Mrs. Bennet, whose fulsome civility to Bingley, on the one hand, contrasted as it is with her cold politeness to Darcy, on the other, fill both her elder daughters with distress and mortification; though it is only Elizabeth who suffers agonies of shame from Mrs. Bennet's most *mal à propos* dwelling on her youngest daughter's marriage, and her hit at Darcy when she reflects, in reference to Wickham, "Thank Heaven! he has some friends, though, perhaps, not so many as he deserves."

In the vehemence of youth, Elizabeth Bennet is persuaded that years of happiness—supposing they should ever come—could not make Jane and her amends for moments of such painful confusion. The first wish of her heart, Elizabeth declares to herself, is never more to be in the company of either of the gentlemen again. "Let me never see either one or the other again."

Yet Jane Austen remarks with quiet fun, in the very next sentence, the misery for which years of happiness were to offer no compensation received material relief when Elizabeth was able to observe how speedily Bingley's admiration for her sister was reviving in her presence. No doubt, also, Elizabeth derived some pleasure from the fact that both visitors engaged themselves to dine at Longbourn, on Mrs. Bennet's eager invitation.

"Mrs. Bennet had been strongly inclined to ask them to stay and dine that day, but though she always kept a good table she did not think anything less than two courses^[17] could be good enough for a man on whom she had such anxious designs, or satisfy the appetite and pride of one who had £10,000 a year."

After the visitors are gone, Elizabeth asks herself [Pg 111] again, "If he came only to be silent, grave, and indifferent, why did he come at all?"

The dinner brings no satisfaction and enlightenment where Elizabeth's private affairs are concerned. Bingley, no doubt, is renewing his attentions to Jane beyond the possibility of mistake, so that Mrs. Bennet may be almost excused for fully expecting him to come and propose next day; though the sensible and amiable Jane still nervously assures herself and her sister Elizabeth that any apparent partiality to her only proceeds from Bingley's pleasing manners; and that, as for herself, she has

become most desirably and comfortably indifferent with regard to his sentiments. But Darcy at the dinner-table is entirely separated from Elizabeth, and seated at the right hand of Mrs. Bennet, with whom he only exchanges an occasional formal word. In the drawing-room he does show an inclination to stand by Elizabeth, at the table where she and Jane are making tea and coffee, in the old, pretty, genial fashion; but the mere accident of the ladies of the party gathering about the table, and of a girl moving closer to Elizabeth with the stage whisper, "The men shan't come and part us, I am determined; we want none of them, do we?" is sufficient to cause him to walk away. His tongue may have been tied, and yet his eyes might have spoken; but as far as Elizabeth could discern he looked as much and as earnestly at Jane as at herself, both on this occasion and on that of his call. It is all a tormenting puzzle.

V.

Bingley calls again without his friend, announcing that Darcy has gone to London, but will return to Netherfield in ten days. From this date Bingley's wooing thrives apace. He makes daily engagements to shoot, or dine, or sup at Longbourn.

[Pg 112]

Mrs. Bennet practises the most transparent manœuvres to leave him alone with Jane, so that he may have the opportunity of saying "Barkis is willin'," or some equivalent phrase, since Barkis had not yet made his model proposal. For a short space Jane and Elizabeth defeat these arrangements.

At last, one evening when Elizabeth has gone out of the room to write a letter, believing that all the others, including Bingley, are safely seated at cards, the indefatigable matchmaker contrives to dissolve the party, sends Mary to her piano, and carries away Kitty to sit with her mother in her dressing-room, while Mr. Bennet is, as usual, ensconced in his library. Elizabeth, returning to the drawing-room, where she expects to find the family, discovers that her mother has been too ingenious for her. On opening the door she perceives her sister and Bingley standing together over the hearth, as if engaged in earnest conversation, and had this led to no suspicion, the faces of both, as they hastily turn and move away from each other, would have told all. There is a momentary awkwardness, till Bingley leaves the room to seek Mr. Bennet, when Jane is ready to proclaim herself the happiest girl in the world.

Elizabeth smiles at the rapidity and ease with which an affair that has cost them so much suspense and anxiety is finally settled. "And this," she says to herself, "is the end of all his friend's anxious circumspection, of all his sister's falsehood and contrivance,—the happiest, wisest, most reasonable end."

If Jane Bennet is the happiest girl, Mrs. Bennet is the happiest woman, according to her ideas of happiness. Lydia and Wickham are superseded; Jane is promoted, beyond comparison, her mother's favourite child.

Meryton soon hears the tale, and after having, only a few weeks before, when Lydia ran away, pronounced the Bennet household marked out for misfortune, now declares them the luckiest family in the kingdom.

One morning, shortly after Jane's engagement, a chaise and four drives up to Longbourn House. The [Pg 113] equipage and liveries are not familiar. The horses are "post." It is too early for visitors.

Amidst the speculation thus aroused, Jane and Bingley retreat into the shrubbery, leaving Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth, and Kitty to receive the strangers, whoever they may be.

In a few minutes Lady Catherine de Bourgh is shown into the room. With the same arrogant ill-breeding which had distinguished the great lady's behaviour at home, she now conducts herself in another person's house, merely bowing to Elizabeth—the only member of the family with whom she has any previous acquaintance—sitting down, and in return for Mrs. Bennet's fluttered attentions, putting her through a series of impertinent questions, and finding fault with the park and the sitting-room.

Elizabeth is at a loss to account for the unsolicited favour of her ladyship's company, unless, indeed, she comes with a message from Mrs. Collins, but none is given.

At last Lady Catherine proposes that Elizabeth should take a turn with her in the wilderness, to which the girl accompanies her visitor, followed by an anxious direction from her mother to show her ladyship the different walks and the hermitage. As the couple go out, Lady Catherine opens the doors of the dining-parlour and drawing-room, and after a short survey, allows that they are "decent-looking rooms."

The carriage stands at the door with Lady Catherine's waiting-woman in it, announcing that Lady Catherine is on a journey taken with a set purpose.

Elizabeth leaves her companion, who is more than usually insolent and disagreeable, to begin the conversation, which she is not slow to do. "You can be at no loss, Miss Bennet, to understand the reason of my journey hither: your own heart, your own conscience, must tell you why I come."

Elizabeth professes her unaffected astonishment and entire ignorance.

[Pg 114]

“Miss Bennet,” says her ladyship angrily, “you ought to know that I am not to be trifled with.” Then, with a little preamble on the sincerity and frankness of her own character, she informs Elizabeth that a report of a most alarming nature had reached her two days before. “I was told,” says Lady Catherine, “that not only your sister was on the point of being most advantageously married, but that *you*—that Miss Elizabeth Bennet—would in all likelihood be soon afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy. Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood, though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you.”

Filled with resentment as Elizabeth is, she remains mistress of the situation. “If you believe it impossible to be true,” says the high-spirited, quick-witted girl, “I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your ladyship propose by it?”

“At once to insist on having such a report universally contradicted.”

“Your coming to Longbourn to see me and my family,” says Elizabeth, with cool shrewdness, “will be rather a confirmation of it, if indeed, such a report is in existence.”

“If! Do you then pretend to be ignorant of it? Has it not been industriously circulated by yourselves? Do you not know that such a report is spread abroad?”

But Elizabeth is a match for her absurd inquisitor. The girl is neither to be insulted nor browbeaten into giving Lady Catherine such satisfaction as she has not the smallest right to require, or into submitting to her tyranny.

In vain Lady Catherine presses her as to the report and its origin; Elizabeth will neither confess nor deny the implication.

“This is not to be borne!” exclaims her ladyship. [Pg 115] “Miss Bennet, I insist on being satisfied. Has he, has my nephew, made you an offer of marriage?”

“Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible,” replies Elizabeth, with demure imperturbability.

“It ought to be so,” her ladyship protests, hotly; but then—as she hints, broadly—Elizabeth’s arts and allurements may have made the young man, in a moment of infatuation, forget what is due to himself and his family. She may have drawn him in.

“If I have, I shall be the last person to confess it,” Elizabeth answers.

Lady Catherine brings forward another imperative reason why such a proceeding can never take place: Mr. Darcy is engaged to her daughter.

“If he is so,” says the unshaken Elizabeth, “you can have no reason to suppose he will make an offer to me.”

Lady Catherine is forced to hesitate, and to condescend to an explanation. The engagement is a family arrangement, based on perfect suitability of rank, fortune, and character. It had been planned by the two mothers, when the cousins were still children in their cradles. Can Elizabeth, a young woman of inferior birth, and of no importance in the world, be so lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy as to disregard the wishes of Mr. Darcy’s friends, and presume to alter the destiny which, from his earliest years, has united him with his cousin?

Yes; Elizabeth is intrepid enough to do it, and to tell the domineering woman that if there were no other objection to her—Elizabeth’s—marrying Lady Catherine’s nephew, she would certainly not be kept from it by knowing that his mother and aunt had wished him to marry Miss de Bourgh.

It is useless for Lady Catherine to threaten the penalties which the outraged family will inflict, ending in that direst indignity of all, that Elizabeth’s name will never be mentioned by any one of them; Elizabeth assures the speaker, almost airily, that though these [Pg 116] may be heavy misfortunes, the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness, that upon the whole she could have no cause to complain.

No wonder the incensed great lady is reduced to the somewhat undignified alternative of calling Elizabeth names—“obstinate, headstrong girl;” to telling her she is ashamed of her; to sitting down and crying—well-nigh piteously, waxing childish and maudlin, like many another balked, irrational tyrant—that she will carry out her purpose; she has not been used to any person’s whims; she has not been in the habit of brooking disappointment; and it is not to be endured that her nephew and daughter are to be divided by the upstart pretensions of a young woman who, if she were sensible of her own good, would not wish to quit the sphere in which she had been brought up.

Elizabeth ventures to suggest that she is a gentleman’s daughter.

“True,” grants Lady Catherine; only to add, “but who was your mother? who are your uncles and aunts?”

“Whatever my connexions may be, if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to you,” says Elizabeth. She could not have been without a tingling recollection that he had objected to them pretty strongly, though she had just been marvelling how she could ever have imagined a resemblance between him and his

aunt—the fact being that Lady Catherine presents a striking caricature of Darcy's original defects, without any of his redeeming virtues.

“Tell me, once for all, are you engaged to him?” demands Lady Catherine.

Though Elizabeth has no cause to oblige Lady Catherine by giving a reply, her own candour and self-respect compel her to answer, “I am not.”

Lady Catherine shows herself pleased. “And will you promise me never to enter into such an engagement?” She pursues her advantage with determination. “I will make no promises of the kind,” Elizabeth refuses [Pg 117] point-blank, and Lady Catherine's short-lived satisfaction is dashed to the ground. She resumes her reproaches. She is shocked. At last she is guilty of the meanness and cruelty of taunting Elizabeth with her sister Lydia's misconduct, ending by crying, “And is such a girl to be my nephew's sister? Is her husband—the son of his father's late steward—to be his brother? Heaven and earth, of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?”

The extravagant theatrical declamation of her ladyship might have provoked a smile from Elizabeth, but she has already borne too much, and she winces under the last ungenerous stab. “You can have nothing further to say to me,” she exclaims, in her wounded feeling, with a simple dignity that contrasts well with the inflated pretensions of the other. “You have insulted me in every possible method; I must beg to return to the house.”

Lady Catherine is not to be taught a lesson: she has long outlived such a possibility. The thick skin of her arrogance and conceit is impenetrable. She assails Elizabeth with fresh abuse and importunity.

“Lady Catherine, I have nothing further to say,” Elizabeth contents herself with repeating. “You know my sentiments.”

Lady Catherine talks on till the carriage is reached, when she finishes her prolonged attack very characteristically. “I take no leave of you, Miss Bennet; I send no compliments to your mother; you deserve no such attention. I am most seriously displeased.”

The interview between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth, like the scene in which Mr. Collins proposes to the heroine, is a triumph of art. It is the perfection of true comedy, as opposed to the coarse farce which frequently stands for it, not only in its wonderful exhibition of Lady Catherine's densely stupid egotism and self-importance, but in what is so successfully opposed to them in Elizabeth Bennet's strong common sense,

racy mother wit, and sterling truth to her lover and [Pg 118] to herself. Where a weak woman might have been cowed—at least, into a show of yielding for the time—or a foolishly sentimental girl might have been betrayed by the false glamour of unnecessary and uncalled-for self-sacrifice, Elizabeth stands firm, and comes out triumphantly. The whole passage, in its genius and wisdom, is a protest against the bathos of mock heroism, which is occasionally in danger of entrapping unwary actors in the drama of life. It is still more apt to mislead the artists who picture life, and mistake soft, even silly submission for unselfish resignation, and self-martyrdom for true martyrdom.

Elizabeth Bennet is dutiful in all the relations of life; she is even scrupulous as to its proprieties; but she is not a puppet in the hands of a Lady Catherine.

There is a curiously parallel scene drawn by one of Jane Austen's favourite authors—Fanny Burney, in her novel of "Cecilia"—where the heroine is driven by nearly similar arguments—employed, however, by the mother, and not merely the aunt of the hero, who has also been a true friend, to whom Cecilia was deeply indebted—to give up the lover to whom she is doubly bound. In spite of these differences in the situation, which are in Fanny Burney's favour, the opposite results of the two chapters go far to prove the immense superiority of Jane Austen as a writer.

Elizabeth has undergone the ordeal without blenching; but the reaction is to come. No doubt Lady Catherine will see her nephew in passing through London—how far may not her prejudiced version of what has passed between her and Elizabeth, with a vigorous personal appeal to Darcy, sway him as he still halts between two opinions? It is said that a woman who hesitates is lost—on the other side of the question; but the same saying does not hold good of a man. Lady Catherine is Darcy's aunt; he must view her in another light from that in which Elizabeth regards her. It is natural to suppose she has some influence over him, while Elizabeth is only too well aware how much [Pg 119] weight he once put on some of his kinswoman's violent objections.

Elizabeth makes up her mind that if Darcy does not return to Netherfield at the appointed date, she will know what to think.

In the meantime Elizabeth is summoned by her father to hear a letter from Mr. Collins read. In the tallest of tall language the writer solemnly congratulates the family on the brilliant prospects of his cousin Jane. Then, after referring to what is even the surpassing splendour of the alliance said to be within his cousin Elizabeth's reach, Mr. Collins servilely and with nervous timidity states the unconquerable opposition of his revered patroness, and implores Elizabeth not to provoke Lady Catherine's anger.

Mr. Bennet regards the report to which Mr. Collins has alluded, as the most preposterous mistake, and calls upon Elizabeth to laugh at it, as the best joke out. "Now, Lizzy, I think I have surprised you. Mr. Darcy, who never looks at any woman but to see a blemish, and who probably never looked at you in his life!"

Mr. Bennet is rather provoked because his daughter does not enjoy the absurdity of the idea as he had expected. "You are not going to be missish, I hope," he says reproachfully, "and pretend to be affronted by an idle report."

Poor Elizabeth! such incredulity is hard at this moment.

But Darcy returns punctually, and comes over to Longbourn with his friend; and in a walk undertaken by several of the young people, in which Elizabeth is Darcy's companion, she musters courage to thank him as the only member of the family who knows how much they owe him for what he has done for her sister.

Darcy is surprised, but perhaps not sorry to have such an opening given to a shy man. "If you will thank me," he says, "let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you might add force to the other inducements which led me on I shall not attempt [Pg 120] to deny; but your family owe me nothing, much as I respect them; I believe I thought only of you."

Elizabeth is too embarrassed to say a word.

After a short pause her companion adds, "You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. *My* affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on the subject for ever."

Elizabeth, feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forces herself to speak, and immediately, though not very fluently, gives him to understand that her sentiments have undergone so material a change since the period to which he has alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure his present assurances.

The happiness which this reply produces is such as Darcy had probably never felt before, and he expresses himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love could be supposed to do. Had Elizabeth been able to encounter his eye, she might have seen how well the expression of heartfelt delight diffused over his face became him; but though she cannot look she can listen, and he speaks of feelings which, in proving of what importance she is to him, make his affection every moment more valuable.

Various happy explanations follow. Among others he tells her Lady Catherine did visit him and relate the substance of her conversation with Elizabeth, dwelling on every expression of the latter which, in her ladyship's opinion, denoted Elizabeth's perverseness and assurance. But, unfortunately for his noble aunt, the effect of the communication proved the reverse of what she had intended. "It taught me to hope," he says, "as I had scarcely ever allowed myself to hope before. I knew enough of your disposition to be certain that had you been absolutely, irrevocably decided against me, you would have acknowledged it to Lady Catherine frankly and openly."

Elizabeth colours and laughs as she replies, "Yes,[Pg 121] you know enough of my frankness to believe me capable of that; after abusing you so abominably to your face, I could have no scruple in abusing you to all your relations."

"What did you say to me that I did not deserve?" protests the ardent, magnanimous lover, and goes on to farther penitent and grateful confessions.

In reference to the engagement between Bingley and Jane, with which Darcy declares himself delighted, "I must ask whether you were surprised," says Elizabeth.

"Not at all. When I went away I felt it would soon happen."

"That is to say, you had given your permission. I guessed as much." Elizabeth rallies the speaker gaily.

Though he exclaims at the word, she finds that it had been pretty much the case.

On the evening before his last visit to London, Darcy had honestly told his friend of his own attachment and proposal to Elizabeth Bennet, which rendered his former interference between Bingley and Jane Bennet "simply impertinent." The speaker had also courageously acknowledged that he believed from his observation of the latter he had been mistaken in his impression of Jane's indifference.

"Your assurance," says Elizabeth, with half-smothered fun, "I suppose carried immediate conviction to him?"

"It did," replies Darcy, in perfect good faith. "Bingley is most unaffectedly modest. His diffidence had prevented his depending on his own judgment in so anxious a case; but his reliance on mine made everything easy."

Elizabeth longs to observe that Mr. Bingley has been a most delightful friend—so easily guided that his worth is invaluable; but she checks herself. She remembers that he has yet to learn to be laughed at, and it is rather too early to begin.

Here is one of Jane Austen's characteristic touches.[Pg 122] Elizabeth, in the middle of her love and admiration for Darcy, sees, as such a woman could not fail to do, his weak points, and is not only tempted to laugh at him, but with a grand faith in his sense and love, and true to the character which had won his regard, she contemplates subjecting him in time to the wholesome discipline of her kindly laughter. And she lives to put her purpose into execution, for we are told Darcy's young sister, in her delight in the sister he has given her, is forced to wonder at the liberties Elizabeth takes with her husband. For Georgiana Darcy had to learn that a wise man will bear and relish from his wife what would be out of place and unwelcome from the sister fifteen years his junior.

Surely any man worthy of his salt would prefer to be so dealt with by the woman who in her heart of hearts dearly loves and heartily honours and obeys him, rather than receive the mawkish and fulsome—even when it is free from deliberate falsehood—flattery and submission, not of a friend and mate, but of a toy and slave.

Elizabeth, in her happiness, has still to suffer for the violent, unreasonable prejudice, so freely expressed, which had marked the commencement of her intercourse with Darcy. She knows what she has to expect when even Jane, who, through Bingley, understands something of Darcy's really fine nature, and who is besides prepossessed in his favour by what she imagines his hopeless passion for Elizabeth, yet meets her sister's news with something like stony incredulity. "You are joking. This cannot be! Engaged to Mr. Darcy! No, no; you shall not deceive me. I know it to be impossible."

"This is a wretched beginning," cries Elizabeth, lively in her very vexation. "My sole dependence was on you; and I am sure nobody else will believe me if you do not."

"Oh! Lizzy, it cannot be. I know how much you dislike him."

"You know nothing of the matter," Elizabeth contradicts[Pg 123] her indignantly. "That is all to be forgotten. Perhaps I did not always love him so well as I do now," she submits to own, "but in such cases as these a good memory is unpardonable. This is the last time I shall ever remember it myself."

"My dear, dear Lizzy, I would, I do congratulate you; but are you certain—forgive the question—are you quite certain that you can be happy with him?"

"There can be no doubt of that," asserts the bride-elect, briskly. "It is settled between us already that we are to be the happiest couple in the world!"

Elizabeth has still to hear the ungracious epithets she herself had first applied bestowed liberally on her lover. So successful had she been in diffusing her ideas, that the faith in them—together with Darcy's reserve—prevents even Mrs. Bennet, whose head is as full of lovers and future husbands as the feather-head of any extremely silly girl of sixteen, from viewing him in that light. "Good gracious!" she cries, as she stands at a window next morning, "if that disagreeable Mr. Darcy is not coming here again with our dear Bingley. What can he mean by being so tiresome as to be always coming here? I had no notion but that he would go a-shooting, or something or other, and not disturb us with his company. What shall we do with him? Lizzy, you must walk out with him again, that he may not be in Bingley's way."

Elizabeth cannot help laughing at so convenient an arrangement; still she smarts at the prolonged echo of her own idle words.

It is still worse when Darcy has asked Mr. Bennet for Elizabeth's hand, on the understanding that she herself has accepted him, and Elizabeth is bidden go to her father.

Mr. Bennet is walking up and down the library, looking grave and anxious. "Lizzy," he says, "what are you doing? Are you out of your senses to be accepting this man? Have not you always hated him?"

How she wishes her former opinions had been more [Pg 124] reasonable, her expressions more moderate, that her pride and modesty might have been spared unsaying her own declarations on the one hand, and on the other making professions which are generally taken for granted. In some confusion she assures her father of her regard for Mr. Darcy.

"Or, in other words, you are determined to have him. He is rich, to be sure, and you may have finer clothes and finer carriages than Jane. But will they make you happy?"

"Have you any other objection than your belief in my indifference?" Elizabeth finds voice to say.

"None at all," her father admits. "We all know him to be a proud, unpleasant sort of man, but that would be nothing if you really liked him."

"I do, I do like him, I love him," protests poor Elizabeth, with unwonted tears in her bright eyes, partly called forth by the trial of having to make such an awkward confession, partly provoked by the aspersions cast on Darcy, for which she was to blame in the first instance. "Indeed, he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable.

You do not know what he really is; then pray do not pain me by speaking of him in such terms.”

In spite of this warm defence, Mr. Bennet, with an honourable disinterestedness that does him credit as a man, and with no lack of fatherly tenderness—which even goes so far as to hint at the rock on which his own happiness has been wrecked—continues to remonstrate with his favourite daughter. No doubt he has given Darcy his consent, he says, with a flavour of his usual sardonic humour in his speech, for he is the kind of man to whom he should never dare refuse anything which he condescended to ask. Her father will give the same consent to Elizabeth if she is resolved on having it. But, changing his tone, he implores her to think better of the step she is about to take. She will be neither happy nor respectable unless she truly esteems her husband—unless she looks up to him as a superior. Her lively talents [Pg 125] will be a snare to her. “My child,” he ends with seriousness and feeling, “let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life.”

It is only after Elizabeth has entered into the fullest details of the progress of her love and Darcy’s, with the obstacles it has overcome, and after she has told all that Darcy did for Lydia, that Mr. Bennet is not merely reconciled to the match, but is duly impressed by the merits of his future son-in-law. “And so Darcy did everything, made up the match, gave the money, paid the fellow’s debts, and got him his commission! So much the better. It will save me a world of trouble and economy. Had it been your uncle’s doing, I must and would have paid him; but these violent young lovers carry everything their own way. I shall offer to pay him to-morrow; he will rant and storm about his love for you; and there will be an end of the matter.”

At last Mr. Bennet is in sufficient spirits to dismiss his daughter with the injunction, “If any young men come for Mary and Kitty, send them in, for I am quite at leisure.”

Mrs. Bennet receives the announcement of her second daughter’s prospects in a very different fashion, for which Elizabeth is not responsible. Elizabeth takes care to tell the tale in the privacy of her mother’s dressing-room, after she has retired for the night. Here is the witty account of what followed. After remarking that the effect of Elizabeth’s communication was most extraordinary, the author enters into particulars:—

“Mrs. Bennet sat quite still, and unable to utter a syllable; nor was it until many, many minutes that she could comprehend what she heard, though not in general backward to credit what was for the benefit of her family, or that came in the shape of a lover to any of them. She began at length to recover, to fidget about in her chair, get up, sit down again, wonder, and bless herself. “Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think!

dear me! Mr. Darcy! who would have thought it? and is it really true? Oh, my sweetest Lizzy! [Pg 126] how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money! what jewels! what carriages you will have! Jane's is nothing to it—nothing at all! I am so pleased—so happy! Such a charming man! so handsome! so tall! Oh, my dear Lizzy, pray apologise for my having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it. Dear, dear Lizzy! A house in town!—everything that is charming. Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! what will become of me? I shall go distracted!”

When Elizabeth escapes, she has not been in her own room three minutes before her mother comes after her. “My dearest child!” she cries, “I can think of nothing else! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more! 'Tis as good as a lord! And a special licence! You must and shall be married by a special licence! But, my dearest love, tell me what dish Mr. Darcy is particularly fond of, that I may have it to-morrow.”

Elizabeth dreads the next day, but after all, it goes off better than she has dared to expect; for, luckily, Mrs. Bennet stands in such awe of her intended son-in-law, that she does not venture to speak to him, unless it is in her power to offer him any attention, and mark her deference for his opinion.

Elizabeth turns for relief to write, like an affectionate young girl at the summit of human bliss, telling her Aunt Gardiner to suppose as much as she chooses, bidding her write again soon, and praise *him* (the one him for Elizabeth then) a great deal more than she has done in her last letter; thanking her for not going to the Lakes last summer; declaring the idea of the ponies is delightful. They will go round the park every day. She—Elizabeth—is the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but none with such justice. She is happier, even, than Jane; *she* only smiles, Elizabeth laughs. Mr. Darcy sends Mrs. Gardiner all the love in the world that he can spare from the writer. They are all to come to Pemberley at Christmas.

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Was ever a young bride's letter more full of frank, girlish joy; natural exultation, and glad look-out into the future?

Darcy writes to Lady Catherine, and acquaints her with the impending catastrophe, and she replies in such terms as for a time puts a stop to all intercourse between aunt and nephew.

Jane Austen begins her last chapter in her most sarcastic vein. “Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters. With what delighted pride she afterwards visited Mrs. Bingley and talked of

Mrs. Darcy may be guessed. I wish I could say, for the sake of her family, that the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman for the rest of her life; though, perhaps, it was lucky for her husband, who might not have relished domestic felicity in so unusual a form, that she still was occasionally nervous, and invariably silly.”

The rest of the few remaining paragraphs are in a gentler strain, though they record that even Bingley’s easy temper and Jane’s affectionate heart discover a year’s residence in the immediate neighbourhood of Mrs. Bingley’s relations enough for them; though scrupulous mention is made of Miss Bingley’s paying all her arrears of civility to Elizabeth as Mrs. Darcy of Pemberley; and though a place is found for Lydia’s letter, wishing her sisters joy, and containing the impudent, mendacious request that, after they have become so rich, they will think of her and Wickham when they have nothing better to do. He would like a place at Court, and she does not think they have money enough to live on without some help.

The concluding paragraphs tell a little more which is pleasanter as far as human nature is concerned. Jane and Elizabeth’s darling wish is gratified by Bingley at last buying an estate in one of the counties next to [Pg 128] Derbyshire, so that the sisters dwell only thirty miles apart.

Mr. Bennet misses his second daughter so much that he is frequently found, a welcome guest, at Pemberley.

Mary and Kitty—especially the latter—derive lasting benefit from their elder sisters’ marriages, and the superior society opened up to them.

Elizabeth and Georgiana Darcy love each other, like true sisters.

By Elizabeth’s intercession Darcy is reconciled to his aunt, Lady Catherine, who consents to revisit Pemberley, in spite of the pollution which its woods have sustained, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but from the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city. For Darcy and Elizabeth show how true and lasting is their happiness by always testifying the most cordial esteem and gratitude to the friends who had been the means, by bringing her to Derbyshire, of uniting the couple.

Thus ends a novel which has for nearly a century been viewed, with reason, as one of the best novels in the English language, which has been the delight of some of the greatest geniuses of this and other countries. It must always remain a marvel that it was the work of a country-bred girl in her twenty-first year.

FOOTNOTES:

[13] Written in 1796-97.

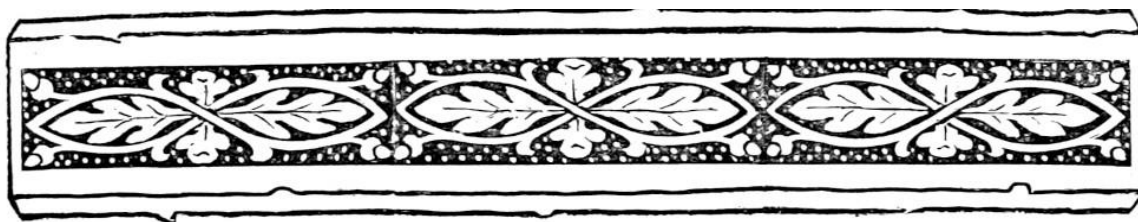
[14] Besides Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, we have Ellinor and Marianne Dashwood, Anne and Lucy Steele, Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove, among the sisters who have most things in common; and as couples of unsympathetic and rival sisters there are Elizabeth and Anne Elliot, and Maria and Julia Bertram.

[15] When such gifts were strictly localised, the possession of them was better defined and more insisted upon. The “beauties” as well as the “fortunes” of a district were carefully classified and registered for the public good.

[16] Elopements were not uncommon among the highly-coloured events of those days, but the consequences were apt to be even more disastrous than they are to foolish young people of this generation.

[17] Would anything less than two courses be now reckoned “a good table” for a country gentleman’s family? Can we say the growing reckless luxury of these expensive times is well for ourselves and well for our fellow-citizens?

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NORTHANGER ABBEY. [18]

I.



orthanger Abbey” begins in a quizzical vein, with a record of Catherine Morland’s disqualifications for her post of heroine, according to the popular acceptance of the term in Jane Austen’s days.

“No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard, and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence, besides two good livings, and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born, and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on—lived to have six children more, to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself. A family of ten children[Pg 130] will be always called a fine family, where there are heads, and legs, and arms enough for the number, but the Morlands had little other right to the word, for they were in general very plain, and Catherine, for many years of her life, as plain as any. She had a thin, awkward figure, a sallow skin, without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features; so much for her person; and not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind. She was fond of all boys’ plays, and greatly preferred cricket, not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, and watering a rose-bush. Indeed, she had no taste for a garden, and if she gathered flowers at all it was chiefly for the pleasure of mischief, at least so it was conjectured, from her always preferring those which she was forbidden to take. Such were her propensities; her abilities were quite as extraordinary. She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught, and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid. Her mother was three months in teaching her only to repeat ‘The Beggar’s Petition,’ and, after all, her next sister, Sally, could say it better than she could. Not that Catherine was always stupid; by no means; she learned the fable of ‘The Hare and Many Friends’ as quickly as any girl in England. Her mother wished her to learn music, and Catherine was sure she should like it, for she was very fond of tinkling the keys of the old forlorn spinet, so at eight years old she began. She learned a year, and could not bear it; and Mrs. Morland, who did not insist on her daughter’s being accomplished in spite of incapacity and distaste, allowed her to leave off. The day which dismissed the music-master was one of the happiest of Catherine’s life. Her taste for drawing was not superior, though whenever she could obtain the outside of a letter from her mother, or seize upon any other odd piece of paper, she did what she could in that way, by drawing houses and trees, hens and chickens, all very much like one another. Writing and accounts[Pg 131] she was taught by her father; French by her mother. Her proficiency in either was not remarkable, and she shirked her lessons in both

whenever she could. What a strange, unaccountable character! for with all these symptoms of profligacy at ten years old, she had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper, was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny. She was, moreover, noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house.”

The story agrees with the first paragraph. With the exception of “Pride and Prejudice,” “Northanger Abbey”—another of Jane Austen’s earlier novels—is the most purely humorous and satirical of the whole.

At fifteen, appearances are mending with Catherine. She begins to curl her hair, and long for balls. Her complexion improves, her features are softened by plumpness and colour, her eyes gain more animation, her figure more consequence, and from fifteen to seventeen her mind is in training for a heroine. She reads—in addition to the stories which had formerly constituted all her voluntary reading—such books as Jane Austen tells us, in her merry mockery, heroines must read in order to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives. Catherine studies Pope and Gray, Thomson and Shakespeare. Can Catherine’s sisters, in these days of much cramming and innumerable pursuits, bring forward even so respectable a list of authors with whom the young readers are intimately acquainted?

In drawing^[19] Catherine is most wanting. Though she cannot write sonnets, she can read them; though there seems no chance of her throwing a whole party into raptures by a prelude on the piano, of her own[Pg 132] composition, she can listen to other people’s performances with very little fatigue. But she has not even sufficient command of the pencil to attempt a sketch of her lover’s profile, that she may be detected in the design. She is not so conscious of the deficiency in the meantime, since she has reached the age of seventeen without the suspicion of a lover. Her biographer accounts for the blank in that bantering tone she assumes:—“There was not one lord in the neighbourhood; no, not even a baronet. There was not one family among their acquaintance who had reared and supported a boy accidentally found at their door; not one young man whose origin was unknown. Her father had no ward, and the squire of the parish no children.”

But the perverseness of forty families cannot interfere with the destiny of a young lady who is to be a heroine: the wind will blow a hero to her.

Mr. Allen, the principal squire in Mr. Morland’s Wiltshire parish of Fullerton, is ordered to Bath for the benefit of a gouty constitution; and his wife, a good-humoured woman,

fond of Miss Morland, and probably aware that, if adventures will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad, invites the happy Catherine to accompany her.

Catherine was in luck, for Bath was the queen of the old watering-places; and a popular English watering-place at the close of the last century was a centre of bustle and gaiety, just as a country village was apt to be sunk in obscurity.

Before beginning Catherine's Bath career, Jane Austen suddenly lapses into seriousness for a moment, to tell her readers—lest they should ever have doubted it—that this young Catherine, going out into the world to meet her fortune, has an affectionate heart, her disposition is cheerful and open—without conceit or affectation of any kind, her manners are just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a girl, her person is pleasing, and when in good looks pretty. Here the author's not very lavish indulgence to her heroine collapses—"and[Pg 133] her mind," the sentence ends, is "about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is."

How old was the judge who made this sweeping, though good-humouredly disdainful estimate of the mental acquirements of her companions? Just five or six years older. Jane Austen had not quite attained the venerable age of twenty-three when she uttered this severe reflection.

Compared to some of Jane Austen's other heroines, Catherine Morland has none of the astuteness and brilliance of Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, the delicate intuitions of Fanny Price, or the gentle, womanly wisdom of Anne Elliot. Catherine is a simple, single-hearted girl who, in her guilelessness and ignorance of the world, falls into mistakes impossible for the others. But she does not lack judgment, which one feels will ripen with her years. Above all, she is like every one of her author's heroines, right-minded and wholesome-hearted. At the same time she is a genuinely girlish girl, as much carried away by her feelings and her imagination as the most foolish of good girls can be; but withal we always recognise in her the possibilities of a sensible as well as an amiable woman.

The witty banter on the author's part is soon resumed. At parting, Mrs. Morland, in place of solemnly warning her daughter against the noblemen and baronets who were in the habit of cozening away young ladies to remote farm-houses, simply bids her wrap herself warm about the throat when she comes from "the Rooms" at night, and try to keep an account of what money she spends.

Sally, or rather Sarah (for what young lady of common gentility will reach the age of sixteen without altering her name as far as she can?), the sister next Catherine in age, does not exact from her a promise to write by every post, and repeat each detail that happens to her.

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