

Mr. Morland, instead of giving Catherine an unlimited order on his banker, or even putting a hundred pounds bank bill into her hands, gives her only ten guineas, and promises her more when she wants it.

Nay, the journey to Bath provides neither tempests nor robbers (see again the “Mysteries of Udolpho,” with which Jane Austen was so familiar, to which she refers with strong and repeated commendation in this very story, which is, however, in many passages, a burlesque on the old romance). No greater alarm occurs than a fear on Mrs. Allen’s side of having once left her clogs behind her at an inn, and that fortunately turns out to be groundless.

The mention of the clogs, and the inference of the nights at the inns by the way, a necessary experience of travellers who journeyed in their own carriages, or by post as Jane Austen herself was accustomed to do, are the sole things which remind us that the little party travelling thus in the last century do not belong to our neighbours to-day.

Farther removed from us is Bath when it was the height of the fashion, and frequented by crowds of pleasure-seekers in addition to health-seekers. Its gaiety was at once systematic and exuberant, when all the company gathered regularly in the Pump-room, where the visitors not only drank their allotted draughts of water, but walked about, sat, read, gossiped, or looked at the pretty knick-nacks in what formed a kind of bazaar. The evenings were still more social; with their assemblies, held within the early hours that permitted their nightly recurrence, their parties for tea and cards, in addition to dancing, their Master of the Ceremonies to play propriety. Bath brought together old friends and strangers from the ends of the earth, who would not otherwise have had a chance of meeting. It enabled quiet, home-keeping young people to see and enjoy, for a little, society and the great world. In its use and abuse it was the scene where innumerable love affairs had their origin and marriages were made up.[Pg 135] Its seasons had their stars, belles, and lions, like the London seasons.

A few foreign watering-places offer at present the nearest resemblance, but that in a very modified degree, to Bath in its palmy days.

Jane Austen knew Bath well, both by reading and personal experience, alike in her youth and in her mature years. She introduces it as the locality—largely or in part—of two of her novels, and has a pointed reference to it in a third.^[20] The lady humourist indicates with a sharp pen, as she indicates most things, the advantages and disadvantages of the watering-places, which figured so prominently in the social life of the period. In “Northanger Abbey” the advantages rather prevail. If Bath brings

Catherine some undesirable friends, it brings her also the indispensable hero—not forthcoming elsewhere.

Miss Austen had resided years in Bath, and it was common ground which had lost its illusions to her when, after she had quitted it, she brought it and its convenient round of visitors and gaieties into “Persuasion.”

I fancy I detect a different spirit in treating the subject in “Northanger Abbey.” Bath had still to the author something of the ineffable charm it must have had for Catherine Morland, in the glamour of first acquaintance, and of the introduction of a country clergyman’s young daughter into a brilliant and fascinating society—a society which was then great in courtly, gallant, distinguished figures—royal, naval, military, literary. Tunbridge had waned before Bath, which was the field of much picturesque and interesting display. Now it was a wandering prince or princess, who was to be mobbed and stared at by the well-dressed throng. Another evening, patriotic enthusiasm persecuted a brave soldier, who had served in Egypt under Abercrombie and [Pg 136] Moore, or a gallant sailor who had nailed his colours to the mast under Nelson or Collingwood; or it might be the crowd surged to and fro to enable honestly marvelling and admiring eyes to gaze on that wonderful genius, little Miss Burney, full of self-consciousness, as she tripped through the Rooms under the wing of the great brewer’s wife, beautiful, dashing Mrs. Thrale, in the centre of a cluster of learned men and *petit-maîtres*.

Mrs. Allen, Catherine Morland’s chaperon, is thoroughly commonplace—except in a passion for dress, if that can be called uncommon. She believes she has done her best for Catherine in preparing her for her introduction to society, when Mrs. Allen and her maid have seen that the girl’s hair is cut (in a crop!) and dressed by the most stylish hand, and her clothes put on with care. The next thing is to take her to one of the crowded assemblies, to struggle along and get squeezed, in the rush of strangers, to reach the top of the room, and see over the heads of the spectators—who always form a large preponderance of the company—the high feathers^[21] of some of the privileged ladies who are dancing. Then the struggle begins again to reach one of the tea-rooms, and finally Mrs. Allen and Catherine leave, without speaking to anybody save Mr. Allen.

But though Mrs. Allen is content to be fine, and to look at other fine people, Catherine’s wishes naturally extend a little further—to no purpose, for her companion is indolent, and does nothing more than serenely regret that they know nobody, and that the Skinners who were at Bath last year are not there again. Catherine, though by no means an unreasonable girl, feels slightly disappointed and tired of the

irksomeness of an imprisonment in a crush of men and women, in full dress, with faces[Pg 137] unknown to her, furnishing no deliverer. Her first ball—that eagerly looked-forward-to era—threatens her with the shock and mortification of proving a good deal of a failure.

At last, when the rooms are beginning to thin and patient sitters can be better seen, though nobody starts with rapturous wonder on beholding Catherine, no whisper of eager inquiry runs round the room, nor is she once called a divinity by anybody, Catherine overhears two gentlemen speak of her as “a pretty girl.”

“Such words had their due effect. She immediately thought the evening pleasanter than she had found it before; her humble vanity was contented; she felt more obliged to the two young men for this simple praise than a true quality heroine would have been for fifteen sonnets in celebration of her charms, and went to her chair in good humour with everybody, and perfectly satisfied with her share of public attention.”

Fresh-hearted, girlish, young Catherine! with her innocent satisfaction in the bare information that she possesses her moderate share of God’s gift of womanly beauty. One can fancy her little feet, in their clocked stockings and shoes with buckles, tapping out on the floor of the ancient sedan-chair, in which she is borne home from her modest revelry, that dance of which she has been defrauded.

But was it not like Jane Austen to leave her heroine without a partner at her first ball? After all, may not the temporary eclipse befall a girl without any fault of hers, or of others, and cannot the example of Catherine Morland teach her fellow-sufferers good-humoured resignation? It is the arrogant, ungenerous employment of such petty terms of slighting reproach as “wallflowers,” with the exaggeration of their influence by sensitive, inexperienced girls, which often renders harmless, youthful gaieties fertile in miserable mean jealousies, despicable, ill-bred triumphs, and endless heart-burnings.

After the usual routine of shopping and sightseeing, in addition to the Pump-room, after the Allens had[Pg 138] visited the Lower as well as the Upper Rooms with which Bath was supplied, Catherine has at last the satisfaction of finding the Master of the Ceremonies leading up to her, according to the etiquette of his office, a gentlemanlike young man named Tilney, who has desired to be presented to her, in order to ask her to be his partner in a country dance.

Catherine’s partner, whom she regards with a flush of flattered pleasure, because he has flattered her by his selection of her—an absolute stranger in the crowded assembly, is about four or five and twenty, rather tall, and has one of those pleasing

countenances to which Jane Austen always gave a marked and deserved preference over mere regularity of feature or glow of colouring. As to an interesting haggardness, a charming suspicion of wickedness, she, with all other good women in their senses, could not see either interest or charm in them.

Mr. Tilney possesses another advantage which was also in special favour with the author—a very intelligent, lively eye. The languidly supercilious and stupid “swells” of the nineteenth century would have been odious to the brilliant novelist of the eighteenth, even though she could have seen them endowed with tawny beards, Greek profiles, and that comically dubious attribute, a sleepy blue eye. The reputation of these fine gentlemen as lady-killers of the first water would have struck her in the light of an unmitigated disgrace, and not a crowning honour. The flavour of vice which seems to have so irresistible an attraction for many writers and readers would have been utterly repugnant to her, as to all pure-minded, high-souled men and women.

Henry Tilney begins his acquaintance with Catherine Morland, by making kindly fun to her and of her, with great impartiality.

Catherine, sometimes seeing through his assumptions, sometimes thoroughly taken in by them, is equally pleased, in sheer willingness to be pleased.

[Pg 139]

Henry Tilney mimics successfully the stereotyped conversation of newly-introduced partners at the Rooms. For his own amusement and Catherine’s he describes the different lights in which he may figure in her journal—“Friday—Went to the Lower Rooms; wore my sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings, plain black shoes; appeared to much advantage; but was strangely harassed by a queer half-witted man, who would make me dance with him, and distressed me by his nonsense;’ or, ‘I danced with a very agreeable young man, introduced by Mr. King; had a great deal of conversation with him; seems a most extraordinary genius; hope I may know more of him.’ *That*, madam, is what I wish you to say.”

He hoaxes her on the easy style of letter-writing for which ladies are so generally celebrated.

“I have sometimes thought,” says Catherine, naïvely, “whether ladies do write so much better letters than gentlemen.”

Mr. Tilney declares letter-writing among women is faultless, save in three particulars—a general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar.

We fear that ladies' letters still come largely under Mr. Tilney's definition.

The young fellow even chaffs Mrs. Allen, when she appears to beg Catherine to take a pin out of her sleeve. She fears a hole has been torn in the gown, which is a favourite, though it cost but nine shillings a yard.

"That is exactly what I should have guessed it, madam," said Mr. Tilney, looking at the muslin.

"Do you understand muslins, sir?"

"Particularly well: I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent judge; and my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown. I bought one for her the other day, and it was pronounced to be a prodigious bargain by every lady who saw it. I gave but five shillings a yard for it, and a true Indian muslin."

[Pg 140]

Mrs. Allen was quite struck by his genius. "Men commonly take so little notice of those things," said she. "I can never get Mr. Allen to know one of my gowns from another. You must be a great comfort to your sister, sir."

"I hope I am, madam."

"And pray, sir, what do you think of Miss Morland's gown?"

"It is very pretty, madam," said he, gravely examining it; "but I do not think it will wash well. I am afraid it will fray."

"How can you," said Catherine, laughing, "be so——" she had almost said "strange?"

"I am quite of your opinion, sir," replied Mrs. Allen, "and so I told Miss Morland when she bought it."

"But then you know, madam, muslin always turns to some account or other; Miss Morland will get enough out of it for a handkerchief, or a cap, or a cloak. Muslin can never be said to be wasted. I have heard my sister say so forty times, when she has been extravagant in buying more than she wanted, or careless in cutting it to pieces."^[22]

A few inquiries satisfy Mr. Allen that young Tilney is a clergyman belonging to a very respectable family in Gloucestershire.

Catherine having found a partner, is next to secure a young lady friend. Mrs. Allen stumbles unexpectedly in the Pump-room on an old acquaintance of early days in a Mrs. Thorpe, the mother of several sons and daughters.

Isabella Thorpe, the eldest daughter, on being introduced to Catherine, surprises her by exclaiming on her resemblance to her brother, and Catherine recollects that her eldest brother had spent the last week of his college vacation with the family of a member of his college, named Thorpe.

[Pg 141]

Miss Thorpe is a beautiful girl, four years older than Catherine, and more than four years better informed in knowledge of the world. She has no objection to bestow her superior knowledge—in discovering a flirtation between any gentleman and lady who only smile on each other, and pointing out a quiz^[23]—on her companion. As for Catherine, she might have been a little afraid of such undreamt-of powers of observation, had it not been for what she readily accepted as the easy gaiety of Miss Thorpe's manner, and for the gratitude inspired by the circumstance that her new friend was profuse in her expressions of delight over their acquaintance.

The reproach of being “gushing,” with the affectation of being destitute of natural affection, good principles, good feelings, and good manners, did not exist last century. But my readers will observe that, while Isabella Thorpe gushes to excess, Catherine, simple and natural, is in a great measure free from the offence.

Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Thorpe renew their old intimacy, and Isabella and Catherine rush into a bosom friendship. “They called each other by their Christian names, were always arm-in-arm when they walked, pinned up each other's train for the dance, and were not to be divided in the set; and if a rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up to read novels together.”

Jane Austen takes this opportunity of writing a spirited defence of her art. “Yes, novels,” she repeats, “for I will not adopt the ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers^[24] of degrading by [Pg 142] their contemptuous censure the very performances to the number of which they are themselves adding; joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronised by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the reviewers to abuse

such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers; and while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the 'Spectator,' and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogised by a thousand pens, there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labours of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit and taste to recommend them. 'I am no novel reader;' 'I seldom look into novels;' 'Do not imagine that I often read novels;' 'It is really very well for a novel;'—such is the common cant. 'And what are you reading, Miss ——?' 'Oh, it is only a novel!' replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference or momentary shame. It is only 'Cecilia,' or 'Camilla,' or 'Belinda,' or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world [Pg 143] in the best-chosen language.^[25] Now had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of 'The Spectator' instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book and told its name!"

It would be strange indeed if a young lady were now discovered reading a volume of "The Spectator." One might as soon expect to see a modern maiden seated at a spinning-wheel, or twirling a distaff and spindle.

But what an analysis of schoolgirl friendships, occupations, and interests survives in the sixth chapter of "Northanger Abbey!" The following conversation is an example of the attachment of the friends after an acquaintance of eight or nine days, and of the "delicacy, discretion, originality of thought, and literary taste which marked the reasonableness of that attachment:"—

"They met by appointment, and as Isabella had arrived nearly five minutes before her friend, her first address naturally was, 'My dearest creature, what can have made you so late? I have been waiting for you at least this age!'

"'Have you, indeed? I am very sorry for it, but really I thought I was in very good time. It is but just one. I hope you have not been here long?'

“Oh, these ten ages, at least. I am sure I have been here this half-hour. But now let us go and sit down at the other end of the room and enjoy ourselves. I have a hundred things to say to you. In the first place, I was so afraid it would rain this morning, just as I wanted to set off: it looked very showery, and that would have thrown me into agonies! Do you know, I saw the prettiest hat you can imagine in a shop-window in Milsom Street, just now: very like yours, only with coquelicot ribbons instead of green; I quite longed for it. But, my dearest Catherine, what have you been doing with yourself, all this morning? Have you gone on with “Udolpho?””

[Pg 144]

“Yes; I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil.’

“Are you, indeed? How delightful! Oh, I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are you not wild to know?’

“Oh, yes, quite; what can it be? But do not tell me; I would not be told, on any account. I know it must be a skeleton. I am sure it is Laurentina’s skeleton! Oh, I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it, I assure you. If it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world.’

“Dear creature! how much I am obliged to you! And when you have finished “Udolpho,” we will read “The Italian” together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you.’

“Have you, indeed? How glad I am! What are they all?’

“I will read you their names directly; here they are, in my pocket-book—“Castle of Wolfenbach,” “Clermont,” “Mysterious Warnings,” “Necromancer of the Black Forest,” “Midnight Bell,” “Orphan of the Rhine,” and “Horrid Mysteries.” Those will last us some time.’

“Yes, pretty well; but are they all horrid? Are you sure they are all horrid?’^[26]

“Yes, quite sure; for a particular friend of mine, a Miss Andrews, a sweet girl, one of the sweetest creatures in the world, has read every one of them. I wish you knew Miss Andrews, you would be delighted with her. She is netting herself the sweetest cloak you can conceive. I think her as beautiful as an angel; and I am so vexed with the men for not admiring her. I scold them all amazingly about it.’

“My dearest Catherine, have you settled what to [Pg 145] wear on your head to-night?’ asked Isabella Thorpe, a few minutes afterwards. ‘I am determined, at all events, to be dressed exactly like you. The men take notice of that sometimes, you know.’

“But it does not signify if they do,’ said Catherine, very innocently.

“Signify! Oh, Heavens! I make it a rule never to mind what they say. They are often amazingly impertinent if you do not treat them with spirit, and make them keep their distance.’

“Are they? Well, I never observed *that*. They always behave very well to me.’

“Oh, they give themselves such airs. They are the most conceited creatures in the world, and think themselves of so much importance! By-the-bye, though I have thought of it a hundred times, I have always forgot to ask you what is your favourite complexion in a man. Do you like them best dark or fair?’

“I hardly know. I never much thought about it. Something between both, I think;—brown: not fair, and not very dark.’

“Very well, Catherine; that is exactly he. I have not forgot your description of Mr. Tilney—“a brown skin, with dark eyes and rather dark hair.” Well, my taste is different: I prefer light eyes; and as to complexion, do you know I like a sallow better than any other. You must not betray me, if you should ever meet with any one of your acquaintance answering that description.’

“Betray you! What do you mean?’

“Nay, do not distress me. I believe I have said too much. Let us drop the subject.’

“Catherine, in some amazement, complied; and after remaining a few moments silent, was on the point of reverting to what interested her, at that time, rather more than anything else in the world—Laurentina’s skeleton—when her friend prevented her, by saying, ‘For Heaven’s sake! let us move away from this end of the room. Do you know there are two odious young[Pg 146] men who have been staring at me this half-hour. They really put me quite out of countenance. Let us go and look at the arrivals. They will hardly follow us there.’

“Away they walked to the book; and while Isabella examined the names, it was Catherine’s employment to watch the proceedings of these alarming young men.

“They are not coming this way, are they? I hope they are not so impertinent as to follow us. Pray let me know if they are coming: I am determined I will not look up.’

“In a few moments, Catherine, with unaffected pleasure, assured her that she need not be longer uneasy, as the gentlemen had just left the Pump-room.

“And which way are they gone?” said Isabella, turning hastily round. ‘One was a very good-looking young man.’

“They went towards the churchyard.’

“Well, I am amazingly glad I have got rid of them; and now what say you to going to Edgar’s Buildings with me, and looking at my new hat? You said you should like to see it.’

“Catherine readily agreed. ‘Only,’ she added, ‘perhaps we may overtake the two young men.’

“Oh, never mind that. If we make haste, we shall pass by them presently, and I am dying to show you my hat.’

“But if we only wait a few minutes, there will be no danger of our seeing them at all.’

“I shall not pay them any such compliment, I assure you. I have no notion of treating men with such respect. That is the way to spoil them.’

“Catherine had nothing to oppose against such reasoning, and therefore, to show the independence of Miss Thorpe, and her resolution of humbling the sex, they set off immediately, as fast as they could walk, in pursuit of the two young men.”

[Pg 147]

II.

As the girls are crossing a street, they are stopped by the approach of a gig, driven along on bad pavement, by a most knowing-looking coachman, with all the vehemence that could most fully endanger the lives of himself, his companion, and his horse.

“Oh! these odious gigs,” cries Isabella, “how I detest them!”

But the detestation—though so just, is of short duration, for she looks again and exclaims, “Delightful! Mr. Morland and my brother!”

James Morland, a steady, amiable young man, had fallen a victim to Isabella’s charms. Two results which had followed his subjection were his own forced alliance with Isabella’s brother, John, and Isabella’s violent friendship with James’s sister, Catherine.

James and Catherine Morland, an affectionate brother and sister, are very happy to meet each other—quite unexpectedly on Catherine’s part. But little leisure is left for

fraternal greetings, since the bright eyes of Miss Thorpe are incessantly challenging Mr. Morland's notice.

John Thorpe, who has only slightly and carelessly touched his sister's hand, is sufficiently impressed by Catherine to grant her a whole scrape, and half a short bow.

John Thorpe is one of Jane Austen's finished and unsurpassable portraits. He is the "buck" of the period, the slangy, horsey, blustering, bragging young fellow of all time.

"He was a stout young man of middling height, who, with a plain face and ungraceful form, seemed fearful of being too handsome unless he wore the dress of a groom, and too much like a gentleman unless he were easy where he ought to be civil, and impudent where he might be allowed to be easy."

I am not able to afford space for much of his highly characteristic talk, but here is a specimen. "He took out[Pg 148] his watch. 'How long do you think we have been running it from Tetbury, Miss Morland?'

"'I do not know the distance.'

"Her brother told her that it was twenty-three miles.

"'Three-and-twenty!' cried Thorpe; 'five-and-twenty, if it is an inch.'

"Morland remonstrated, pleaded the authority of road-books, inn-keepers and mile-stones; but his friend disregarded them all; he had a sure test of distance. 'I know it must be five-and-twenty,' said he, 'by the time we have been doing it. It is now half after one; we drove out of the inn-yard at Tetbury as the town-clock struck eleven; and I defy any man in England to make my horse go less than ten miles an hour in harness; that makes it exactly twenty-five.'

"'You have lost an hour,' said Morland; 'it was only ten o'clock when we came from Tetbury.'

"'Ten o'clock! it was eleven, upon my soul! I counted every stroke. This brother of yours would persuade me out of my senses, Miss Morland; do but look at my horse, did you ever see an animal so made for speed in your life?'

"Catherine remarked the horse did look very hot.

"'Hot! he had not turned a hair till we came to Walcot Church; but look at his forehead; look at his loins; only see how he moves; that horse *cannot* go less than ten miles an hour; tie his legs, and he will get on. What do you think of my gig, Miss Morland? A neat

one, is it not? Well hung; town-built;” and so on, ringing endless changes on John Thorpe’s possessions, their super-excellence, and his cleverness in securing them.

John Thorpe pronounces his criticism on the novels of the day, in a slashing, manly style, which still survives here and there. Poor Catherine, tired of his bets, and his short, sharp praise or condemnation of every woman’s face they pass, ventures to introduce the subject uppermost in her thoughts, “Have you ever read ‘Udolpho,’ Mr. Thorpe?”

[Pg 149]

“‘Udolpho!’ Oh! Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do.”

Catherine, humbled and ashamed, was going to apologise for her question; but he prevented her.

“Novels are all so full of stuff and nonsense,” he said, with more to the same purpose, winding up by the assertion of novels in general that “they are the stupidest things in creation.”

“I think you must like ‘Udolpho,’ if you were to read it,” Catherine pleads wistfully for her favourite, “it is so very interesting.”

“Not I, faith! No, if I read any, it shall be Mrs. Radcliffe’s; her novels are amusing enough; they are worth reading; some fun and nature in *them*.”

“‘Udolpho’ was written by Mrs. Radcliffe,” said Catherine, with some hesitation, from the fear of mortifying him.

“No, sure; was it? Ay, I remember; so it was. I was thinking of that other stupid book, written by that woman they made such a fuss about; she who married the French emigrant.”

John Thorpe’s manners do not please Catherine, inexperienced though she is; but he is James’s friend, and Isabella’s brother. Besides, Catherine is told by Isabella that John finds her the most charming girl in the world, and John himself engages her for one of the dances at the evening’s assembly. Jane Austen points out—and here she has a gentle explanation of a girlish weakness—that, had Catherine been older and vainer, such attacks might have done little; but where youth and diffidence are united, it requires uncommon steadiness of reason to resist the attraction of being called the most charming girl in the world, and of being so very early engaged as a partner.

The young Morlands and Thorpes, with the good-natured concurrence of Mr. and Mrs. Allen, form many morning and evening engagements together. In the course of these

engagements, Catherine likes John Thorpe less and less, in spite of his boisterous professions [Pg 150] of admiration. She even begins to have painful doubts of the perfect amiability and good taste of her bosom friend and future sister—a prospective relationship which Catherine hailed with delight in the beginning.

Indeed, Isabella behaves with all the rampant selfishness, reckless disregard of appearances, and insatiable appetite for admiration with which a vain, coarse-minded, heartless Isabella Thorpe can behave. Her loud, insincere professions, which her practice contradicts so glaringly, could not have deceived Catherine even so long as they did, had it not been that the younger girl, brought up in the worthy clergyman's upright, kind-hearted household, is unsuspecting of evil, and guileless as a dove.

In broad contrast to the two wilful, wild Thorpes, are Henry Tilney and his sister, a sensible, good, pretty, and well-bred girl, who is young and attractive, and can enjoy herself at a ball, without wanting to fix the attention of every man near her, and without exaggerated feelings of ecstatic delight or inconceivable vexation on every little trifling occurrence.

In these *blasé, nil admirari* days, when many young people find nothing worth the trouble of being excited about, when enthusiasm is dead, and even moderate interest seems fast expiring, it may be thought that such warnings as are conveyed in the praise of Eleanor Tilney are not required. But I suspect it is a case of scratch the Russian, and you will find the Tartar. It is the fashion to appear indifferent and cynical, and so our very children—held up to us in the mirror of “Punch”—babble weariness with the world, and misanthropy. But the languor and scorn—happily for humanity—form a mere accidental crust, beneath which, more or less visible, are the old ardour and impetuosity, which need to be tutored to temperance and prudence, and charged never to forget their Christian baptism of generous self-forgetfulness and chivalrous magnanimity, in a peaceful drawing-room as well as on a stricken battle-field.

[Pg 151]

The Tilneys, to whom Catherine is so strongly attracted, though perfectly civil in any encounter with the Thorpes, instinctively recoil from them. The different qualities of the young people, no less than the different sets in which they move, prevent amalgamation.

Many capital scenes in “Northanger Abbey” exhibit young Catherine Morland's puzzled distress at the clashing social elements among which she finds herself, with her own decided preference for the Tilneys, opposed to what she conceives is her allegiance, alike of friendship and sisterly fidelity, to the Thorpes.

The best and most comical of the sketches are those in which Catherine is twice entrapped into driving with John Thorpe in the watering-place fashion of the time, making one of a party which is completed by James Morland and Isabella Thorpe in another open carriage.

“You will not be frightened, Miss Morland,’ said Thorpe as he handed her in, ‘if my horse should dance about a little at first setting off. He will most likely give a plunge or two, and perhaps take the reins for a minute; but he will soon know his master. He is full of spirits, playful as can be, but there is no vice in him.’

“Catherine did not think the portrait a very inviting one, but it was too late to retreat, and she was too young to own herself frightened; so resigning herself to her fate, and trusting to the animal’s boasted knowledge of its owner, she sat peaceably down and saw Thorpe sit down by her. Everything being then arranged, the servant who stood at the horse’s head was bid, in an important voice, ‘to let him go,’ and off they went in the quietest manner imaginable, without a plunge or a caper, or anything like one.

“Catherine, delighted at so happy an escape, spoke her pleasure aloud with grateful surprise; and her companion immediately made the matter perfectly simple by assuring her that it was entirely owing to the peculiarly judicious manner in which he had then held the reins and the singular discernment and dexterity with which he had directed his whip.

[Pg 152]

“Old Allen is as rich as a Jew, is not he?’ said Thorpe, breaking a silence. Catherine did not understand him, and he repeated his question, adding in explanation, ‘Old Allen, the man you are with?’

“Oh, Mr. Allen you mean. Yes. I believe he is very rich.’

“And no children at all?’

“No, not any.’

“A famous thing for his next heirs. He is your godfather, is not he?’

“My godfather! No.’

“But you are always very much with them?’

“Yes, very much.’

“Ay, that is what I meant. He seems a good kind of old fellow enough, and has lived very well in his time, I dare say; he is not gouty for nothing. Does he drink his bottle a day now?”

“His bottle a day! No. Why should you think such a thing? He is a very temperate man, and you could not fancy him in liquor last night?”

“Lord help you! You women are always thinking of men’s being in liquor. Why, you do not suppose a man is overset by a bottle?”

Modest as Catherine is in her unsophisticatedness, she betrays unconsciously her admiration of Henry Tilney, both to the gentleman and his sister. Fortunately, Catherine has fallen into good hands. Eleanor Tilney only likes her friend the better for liking her brother. With regard to the effect on the hero, of the girl’s tribute to his merits, Jane Austen has made a few pungent observations.

It may be that the world has grown a little wiser as well as older during the last hundred years. Certainly sensible, good young girls—however young and simple—have learnt, for the most part, to put more outward restraint, we would fain hope, in the course of some improvement on their education, on their inner sentiments. Girls have acquired a degree of the subtlety of the serpent in addition to the artlessness of the dove.

[Pg 153]

The Catherine Morland of the past is always frank, sweet, and dutiful. We can never, we are thankful, doubt her reverence and uprightness. We need never fear scandalous defiance of the laws of God and man from her. But drawn as she is, by the masterly pen of Jane Austen, Catherine is often exasperatingly foolish, and especially so in falling deeply in love, on the very slightest provocation, so far as any symptom of reciprocity of feeling on Henry Tilney’s side is made plain to the readers of “Northanger Abbey.”

Indeed, Jane Austen expressly states, with her usual dauntless candour, that the love begins on Catherine’s side, and that the agreeable—let us hope grateful—sense of the regard he has unwittingly inspired, is the spark which kindles a responsive flame in the young man’s breast.

But what would have become of Catherine had Henry Tilney been—not pre-engaged, we do not suspect him of unworthy concealment in such circumstances; of course he would have smiled the smile, bowed the bow, and danced the dance of a man whose heart and hand were bespoken;—but had he only been less complacent, less

gracious, less honourable?—she must have wasted her young love, and smarted under the sense of having given it unasked and in vain. Surely Catherine, inexperienced as she was, might have had the mother-wit to anticipate such a probability, and guard against the catastrophe, by being a little more dignified and reserved in allowing scope to her imagination and inclination? I hope that at least so much forethought may be looked for from sensible girls,—I say nothing of silly ones,—in the present generation. I am free to own that if a modern girl permitted her affections to be so easily entangled, with the entanglement so transparently displayed, as was true of Catherine Morland, I for one should at once set her down as a very impulsive, heedless young woman, from whom little self-respect and discretion could be looked for, at any time.

I do not take it upon me to say, whether a young[Pg 154] girl's chance of winning kindred regard might or might not be imperilled, in proportion to her capacity for practising womanly reticence. For the honour of men, I must hope it would. [\[27\]](#)

It is with diffidence that I presume to differ so far from such a close and accurate reader of human nature as Jane Austen was. But while I look at the different standards of different generations, I say that it would cast a serious reflection on the judgment and disinterestedness of all heroes, real or imaginary, if Jane Austen were in earnest and were right in her inference. This, at least, I entirely believe—that whether or not a girl may more readily gain or lose love by her reserve, without it she will never win respect, either from man or woman, and love without respect is like food without salt, destitute of permanent relish and endurance.

Catherine is eager to go to the cotillon ball, at which she is aware beforehand the Tilneys will be present. “What gown and what head-dress she should wear on the occasion become her chief concern. She cannot be justified in it. Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction, and excessive solicitude about it often destroys its own aim. Catherine knew all this very well; her grand-aunt had read her a lecture on the subject only the Christmas before, and yet she lay awake ten minutes on Wednesday night debating between her spotted and tamboured muslin, and nothing but the shortness of the time prevented her buying a new one for the evening. This would have been an error in judgment, great, though not uncommon, from which one of the other sex rather than her own, a brother rather than a great-aunt, might have warned her; for man only can be aware of the insensibility of man towards a new gown. It would be mortifying to the feelings of many ladies could they be made to understand how little the heart of man is affected by what is[Pg 155] costly or new in their attire, how little it is biassed by the texture of their muslin, and how unsusceptible of peculiar tenderness towards the spotted, the sprigged, the mull, or the jaconet. Woman is fine

for her own satisfaction alone. No man will admire her the more, no woman will like her the better for it.”

I have quoted this paragraph because it ought to be studied by the women of the present day. Alas! for the higher intelligence and refinement in fashion, when even the over-elaboration and extravagance of an earlier generation strike a later, as meagre shabbiness. Would that the young girls who now “walk in silk attire,” and *crêpe de Chine*, and only condescend to tulle over satin, in a variety of evening dresses, could return to the spotted and sprigged muslins which were new when they were clean!^[28] For old people who remember the grandmothers of modern belles, persist in saying that the faces now set in silver hair and puckered with wrinkles, the figures shrunk and bent, were “fairer,” more graceful far—“lang syne.”

Catherine has engaged herself with the greatest alacrity to walk with the two Tilneys among the beautiful environs of Bath the morning after the ball. The weather proves rainy—but Catherine, after alternations of hope and despondency, fruitless solicitations of Mrs. Allen’s opinion, and equally fruitless wishes that they had such weather as was to be found in “Udolpho” the night that poor St. Aubyn died, for instance—has the great joy of seeing the sky clear. She is still waiting for her friends, when the two Thorpes and James Morland arrive in the greatest hurry to claim her for an excursion to Bristol.

Catherine excuses herself from accompanying the others, on the plea of her pre-engagement to walk with the Tilneys.

[Pg 156]

The Thorpes loudly exclaim at such an objection as not worth mentioning, and will take no denial—the truth being that Isabella, free and easy as she is, cannot well accompany the two gentlemen, for the rest of the day, unless she is countenanced by another lady. The casual mention of Blaize Castle, as certain to be visited in the course of the excursion, shakes even Catherine’s fidelity to the Tilneys. Is it really a castle, an old castle such as they read of?

John Thorpe, with his forward unscrupulous assurance, is ready to pledge himself that it is the oldest castle in the kingdom, with towers and long galleries by dozens.

The wavering Catherine admits she should like to see it, but she cannot give up her walk with the Tilneys. She is sure they will be in Pulteney Street soon.

“Not they, indeed,” cries John Thorpe with decision; “for as we turned into Broad Street I saw them. Does he not drive a phaeton with bright chestnuts?”

“I do not know, indeed.’

“Yes, I know he does; I saw him. You are talking of the man you danced with last night, are not you?’

“Yes.’

“Well, I saw him at that moment turn up the Lansdowne Road, driving a smart-looking girl.’

“Did you, indeed?’

“Did, upon my soul, knew him again directly; and he seemed to have got some very pretty cattle too.’

“It is very odd. But I suppose they thought it would be too dirty for a walk.’

“And well they might, for I never saw so much dirt in my life.”

Catherine gives way. She starts in an unsettled frame of mind, divided between sorrow for the loss of her walk and still greater vexation at the thought that the Tilneys have not acted well by her, and delight at exploring an edifice like “Udolpho”—as her fancy represents Blaize Castle to be—which John Thorpe freely promises she shall explore in every hole and corner.

[Pg 157]

Are there left in England half-a-dozen romantic girls to whom the opportunity of visiting an old castle would be so great a treat?

But unfortunately for what peace of mind is left to Catherine, as she and John Thorpe rattle along, his question “Who was that girl who looked at you so hard as she went by?” calls her attention to the right-hand pavement, where, to her mingled delight and dismay, she recognises Miss Tilney on her brother’s arm, walking slowly down the street. Catherine sees them both looking back at her.

“Stop, stop, Mr. Thorpe!’ she impatiently cried, ‘it is Miss Tilney, it is indeed. How could you tell me they were gone? Stop, stop! I will get out this moment and go to them.’

“But to what purpose did she speak? Thorpe only lashed his horse into a brisker trot; the Tilneys, who had soon ceased to look after her, were in a moment out of sight round the corner of Laura Place, and in another moment she was herself whisked into the Market Place. Still, however, and during the length of another street, she entreated

him to stop. 'Pray, pray stop, Mr. Thorpe. I cannot go on, I will not go on; I must go back to Miss Tilney.'

"But Mr. Thorpe only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on; and Catherine, angry and vexed as she was, having no power of getting away, was obliged to give up the point, and submit. Her reproaches, however, were not spared.

"How could you deceive me so, Mr. Thorpe? How could you say that you saw them driving up the Lansdowne Road? I would not have had it happen so for the world. They must think it so strange, so rude of me, to go by them, too, without saying a word! You do not know how vexed I am. I shall have no pleasure at Clifton, nor in anything else. I had rather, ten thousand times rather, get out now and walk back to them. How could you say you saw them driving out in a phaeton?"

[Pg 158]

"Thorpe defended himself very stoutly, declared he had never seen two men so much alike in his life, and would hardly give up the point of its having been Tilney himself."

It is unnecessary to dwell on Catherine's distress when even her unassuming, good-natured civility fails her. Her single comfort is Blaize Castle, but Blaize Castle she is not destined to see. It is too late in the day, the horses are not equal to the expedition, and the party have to turn back to Bath.

Catherine ventures to call on Miss Tilney, to explain why she has not kept her appointment. She is not admitted at the house in Milsom Street, though she has a wretched conviction that Miss Tilney is at home—a conviction confirmed by seeing her in a few moments afterwards go out with her father, General Tilney.

Catherine is punished—even, she thinks, too severely—but she is too miserable to be angry.

Catherine next sees the Tilneys at the theatre. Henry Tilney bows, but with a changed countenance; still, he comes round to the Allens' box to pay his respects to Mrs. Allen, and there Catherine, like the impetuous, humble-minded young girl she is, overwhelms him with the breathlessness and earnestness of her apologies. "Oh! Mr. Tilney, I have been quite wild to speak to you, and make my apologies. You must have thought me so rude; but, indeed, it was not my own fault. Was it, Mrs. Allen? Did not they tell me that Mr. Tilney and his sister were gone out in a phaeton together? And then, what could I do? But I had ten thousand times rather have been with you. Now, had not I, Mrs. Allen?"

The words bring a more cordial, more natural smile to the gentleman's lips, though he suggests a little sarcastically that he and his sister were at least much obliged to her for wishing them a pleasant walk. She had looked back on purpose.

After all, the lingering air of being piqued, which [Pg 159] Henry Tilney cannot conceal, is the best evidence of Catherine's dawning influence.

But the stupid girl takes his words literally. "Indeed, I did not wish you a pleasant walk; I never thought of such a thing; but I begged Mr. Thorpe so earnestly to stop; I called out to him as soon as ever I saw you. Now, Mrs. Allen, did not—Oh! you were not there. But indeed I did; and if Mr. Thorpe would only have stopped, I would have jumped out and run after you."

"Is there a Henry in the world," exclaims Jane Austen, "who could be insensible to such a declaration?" Perhaps not. Yet we are tempted to wonder if Jane Austen had ever listened to the sarcastic old song—

"The fruit that will fall without shaking

Is rather too mellow for me;"

or to that valuable warning in wooing—

"When a woman is willing,

A man can but look like a fool."

If all girls were as quickly captivated as Catherine Morland, what would become of the wooing—the pursuit—the probation, during which Elizabeth Barrett Browning asserts a man may be content to be treated "worse than dog or mouse" when it is but the prelude to the girl's becoming his for ever?

Catherine, in her extreme candour, persists that Miss Tilney must have been angry, since she was in the house, but would not see her—Catherine—when she called.

In Henry Tilney's hasty explanation that it was his father—there was nothing in it, beyond the circumstance that General Tilney wished his daughter to walk out with him, and could not be kept waiting—we have the first hint that General Tilney has "ways." He is, for that matter, an extremely tyrannical old gentleman.

[Pg 160]

Catherine has her walk, and for once the reality fulfils the expectation.

Whether intentionally or accidentally, Jane Austen illustrates the contrast between John Thorpe and Henry Tilney by their different estimates of novels. The walking-party had determined to walk round Beechen Cliff—"that noble hill," Jane Austen calls it, in more than her ordinary chary words of description, "whose beautiful verdure and hanging coppice^[29] render it so striking an object from almost every opening in Bath."

"I never look at it," said Catherine, as they walked along the side of the river, 'without thinking of the south of France.'

"You have been abroad then?" said Henry, a little surprised.

"Oh, no; I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through in the 'Mysteries of Udolpho.' But you never read novels, I dare say.'

"Why not?'

"Because they are not clever enough for you; gentlemen read better books.'

"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The 'Mysteries of Udolpho,' when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; I remember finishing it in two days, my hair standing on end the whole time.'

"Yes,' added Miss Tilney; 'and I remember that you undertook to read it aloud to me; and that when I was called away for only five minutes to answer a note, instead of waiting for me, you took the volume into the Hermitage Walk; and I was obliged to stay till you had finished it.'^[30]

[Pg 161]

"But I really thought before,' persisted Catherine, 'young men despised novels amazingly?'

"It is *amazingly*; it may well suggest *amazement*, if they do, for they read nearly as many as women. I myself have read hundreds and hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julias and Louisas. If we proceed to particulars, and engage in the never-ceasing inquiry of 'Have you read this?' or 'Have you read that?' I shall soon leave you as far behind me as—what shall I say? I want an appropriate simile—as far as your friend Emily herself left poor Valancourt, when she went with her aunt into Italy. Consider how many years I have had the start of you. I had entered on my studies at Oxford while you were a good little girl, working your sampler at home.'"

About this time Captain Tilney, General Tilney's eldest son, a handsome, fashionable young man, arrives on a visit to his family. Catherine is most willing to acknowledge his advantages, but his tastes and manners are decidedly inferior, in her opinion, after she hears him, at one of the assemblies, not only protest against every thought of dancing himself, but even laugh openly at his brother Henry for finding it possible.

Isabella, who has begun by announcing her intention to sit all the evening, in compliment to James Morland's temporary absence, is soon seen dancing with Captain Tilney, in spite of his and her protest.

James Morland's application to his father for his consent to his marriage with Isabella Thorpe brings a kind and considerate answer. A family living of four hundred a year is to be resigned to James; an estate of nearly equal value is secured to him. The greatest trial is that the young couple must wait two or three years, till James Morland can take orders.

James and Catherine, being good and reasonable children, are perfectly satisfied with their father's generosity.

Isabella says the prospect is very charming, but says it with a grave face.

[Pg 162]

The period of the Allens' visit to Bath is drawing to a close; and the question whether they may stay longer or not seems to involve the happiness of Catherine's whole life; and so, when the lodgings are taken for another fortnight, everything appears secured. "What this additional fortnight was to produce to her beyond the pleasure of sometimes seeing Henry Tilney, made but a small part of Catherine's speculation;" Jane Austen comments with regard to her heroine's unreasonable joy. "Once or twice, indeed, since James's engagement had taught her what *could* be done, she had got so far as to indulge in a secret 'perhaps;' but, in general, the felicity of being with him for the present bounded her views. The present was now comprised in another three weeks; and her happiness being certain for that period, the rest of her life was at such a distance as to excite but little interest." This is pre-eminently the calculation of seventeen, when a month in anticipation reckons as a year, a year as a lifetime.

However, when Catherine calls for Miss Tilney with the glad news, she receives an unexpected blow. The Tilneys are to quit Bath soon. Poor Catherine cannot hide her dejection, but an ample compensation, far beyond her brightest hopes, awaits her.

Miss Tilney stammers some words of invitation, which are at once seconded by her father. The General, so far from being haughty to Catherine, has distinguished her by

an oppressively marked degree of attention, which has rather a tendency to extinguish the frank kindness of his son and daughter.

Catherine is now pressed in the most flatteringly solicitous manner, by this somewhat overpowering fine gentleman, to go with the family to Northanger Abbey, and give his daughter the pleasure of her company there, for a few weeks.

Catherine is to be the Tilneys' chosen visitor: "She was to be for weeks under the same roof with the person whose society she most prized; and in addition to all the rest; this roof was to be the roof of an Abbey! Her [Pg 163] passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney, and castles and abbeys made usually the charm of those reveries which his image did not fill. To see and explore either the ramparts and keep of the one, or the cloisters of the other, had been for many weeks a darling wish, though to be more than the visitor of an hour had seemed too nearly impossible for desire; and yet this was to happen. With all the chances against her of house, hall, place, court and cottage, Northanger turned up an Abbey, and she was to be its inhabitant. Its long damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach; and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun."

Catherine's happiness is not without alloy. Isabella improves the occasion of being with Catherine at the Pump-room one morning, to tell her that John Thorpe is over head and ears in love with her, and to urge his suit, greatly to Catherine's astonishment and discomfiture. For has not Isabella long professed herself convinced of a mutual attachment between Henry Tilney and her friend?

Catherine, with all the innocence of truth, protests her ignorance of Mr. Thorpe's wishes, and her incapacity to respond to them.

Isabella accepts her brother's disappointment with a wonderfully good grace, though she will imply, in spite of Catherine's indignant denial, that there has been a relinquished flirtation, a change of mind on Catherine's part, which Isabella would be the last person to blame.

As the girls are speaking, they are joined by Captain Tilney, and Catherine is first bewildered and then shocked to find him addressing her friend and future sister in terms which cannot be mistaken. "What! always to be watched in person or proxy?" he said low, but not too low for Catherine to hear.

"Pshaw! nonsense!" was Isabella's answer, in the same half-whisper; 'why do you put such things into [Pg 164] my head? If I could believe it! my spirit, you know, is pretty independent.'

“I wish your heart were independent, that would be enough for me.’

“My heart, indeed! What can you have to do with hearts? You men have none of you any hearts.’

“If we have not hearts we have eyes, and they give us torment enough.’

“Do they? I am sorry for it; I am sorry they find anything so disagreeable in me. I will look another way. I hope this pleases you’ (turning her back on him). ‘I hope your eyes are not tormented now.’

“Never more so, for the edge of a blooming cheek is still in view, at once too much and too little.”

Catherine will not remain longer. She is confounded; but still the girl who is so honourable herself can think no greater evil than that Captain Tilney has fallen in love with Isabella, and that Isabella is unconsciously encouraging him—unconsciously it must be, for Isabella’s attachment to James is as certain as their engagement.

But when Catherine sees Isabella admitting Captain Tilney’s attentions in public as readily as they are offered, and allowing him almost an equal share with James of her notice and smiles, charity itself cannot vindicate the lady’s conduct.

Catherine has too much good sense to continue to be deceived. She tries to believe still that Isabella cannot be aware of the pain she is inflicting; but her friend must resent the wilful thoughtlessness, since James is the sufferer.

When Catherine Morland learns that Captain Tilney is to remain in Bath after his family have left, she speaks to Henry Tilney on the subject. She expresses her regret for his brother’s evident admiration of Miss Thorpe, and entreats him to make known her engagement.

“My brother does know it.’

“Does he? Then why does he stay here?’

[Pg 165]

“He made no reply, and was beginning to talk of something else; but she eagerly continued, ‘Why do not you persuade him to go away? The longer he stays the worse it will be for him at last. It is only staying to be miserable.’

“Henry smiled, and said, ‘I am sure my brother would not wish to do that.’

“Then you will persuade him to go away?’

“Persuasion is not at command; but pardon me if I cannot even endeavour to persuade him. I have myself told him that Miss Thorpe is engaged. He knows what he is about, and must be his own master.’

“No, he does not know what he is about,’ cried Catherine; ‘he does not know the pain he is giving my brother. Not that James has ever told me so, but I am sure he is very uncomfortable.’

“And are you sure it is my brother’s doing?’

“Yes, very sure.’

“Is it my brother’s attentions to Miss Thorpe, or Miss Thorpe’s admission of them, that gives the pain?’”

Catherine, in her ignorance of the ways of the world, wonders General Tilney does not interfere; is sure if *he* spoke to Captain Tilney he would go away.

Henry Tilney has some trouble in convincing her that her “amiable solicitude” is a little mistaken. Will her brother thank her, either on his own account or on that of Miss Thorpe, for supposing that her affection, or at least her good behaviour, can only be secured by her seeing nothing of Captain Tilney? For anything further, Frederick must soon rejoin his regiment, and what will then become of his acquaintance with Miss Thorpe? The mess-room will drink “Isabella Thorpe” for a fortnight, and she will laugh with Catherine’s brother over poor Tilney’s passion for a month.

This is a novel view of the situation to Catherine, but she cannot refuse comfort from such a quarter; and she parts not only placably but affectionately from her friend.

[Pg 166]

III.

The bustle of the Tilneys starting on their journey is rendered trying by the exactions and complaints of the arrogant, ill-tempered master of the household; still he is all complaisance and sedulous politeness to Miss Morland; and his first fretful murmur at the chaise’s being overcrowded with parcels, is professedly that she will not have room to sit. “And so much was he influenced by this apprehension when he handed her in, that she had some difficulty in saving her own new writing-desk from being thrown out into the street.”

Luckily, the General drives in his son’s curricle; but even the agreeable conversation of Eleanor Tilney, the bliss of their destination, the glory of travelling in “a fashionable chaise and four, postilions handsomely liveried, rising so regularly in their stirrups,

and numerous outriders properly mounted,”^[31] sink a little under the tediousness of a two hours’ bait at Petty France.

The General, in his anxiety that Catherine may see the country, proposes to her to change places, and drive with his son for the rest of the way.

Catherine’s recent experiences of such driving have not been encouraging, and she recalls an unfavourable opinion delivered too late by Mr. Allen, on the presence of young ladies in young men’s open carriages. For I am glad to be able to show that Catherine, though extremely in love, has neither forgotten duty nor propriety in her love; but backed by the powerful sanction, even the recommendation, of such a judge of good manners as General Tilney, she feels she need have no scruple in giving the consent she longs to give.

Henry Tilney is as far removed from John Thorpe in driving as in everything else. The young clergyman drives so well, so quietly, without making any disturbance, without parading to her, or swearing at the[Pg 167] horses, “so different from the only gentleman-coachman whom it was in her power to compare him with! And then his hat sat so well, and the innumerable capes of his great-coat looked so becomingly important.^[32] To be driven by him was, next to dancing with him, certainly the greatest happiness in the world. In addition to every other delight, she had now that of listening to her own praise, of being thanked, at least on his sister’s account, for her kindness in thus becoming her visitor, of hearing it ranked as real friendship and described as creating real gratitude.”

It is a little drawback, certainly, to hear that Henry Tilney has an establishment at his parsonage at Woodston, nearly twenty miles off, where he has to spend some of his time,^[33] but what pleasure under the sun is without drawback?

Unfortunately, too, as it proves, Henry Tilney, with his propensity for chaffing, cannot resist making game of his companion with regard to her expectations of Northanger Abbey. He conjures up for her benefit a fac-simile of the abbeys and castles of her beloved romances, and pictures her like Emily in “Udolpho”—conducted by an ancient housekeeper along gloomy passages—standing by a bed with its dark velvet coverlet resembling a pall—inspecting broken lutes and cabinets of ebony, while peals of thunder rattle overhead, and the flame of her lamp sinks in the socket just as she has been impelled to unlock the folding-doors and search through every drawer of the cabinet, and has come upon a roll of manuscript.

In short, Jane Austen, speaking by Henry Tilney, in the most barefaced and liveliest manner, parodies and makes fun of Mrs. Radcliffe’s romances, which she has[Pg

168] praised so highly elsewhere;^[34] and this example of the humourist's satire shows how free it is ordinarily from illiberality and harshness. She laughs merrily here at what she really esteems, the merits of which in another light she is the first to acknowledge.

It is not in a thunderstorm, but under the more prosaic inconvenience of "a scud of rain," fixing all Catherine's attention on the welfare of her new straw bonnet, that she arrives at her destination, with only a dim apprehension—from the modern lodge-gates, the smooth gravel of the avenue, and the Rumford grate and ornaments of pretty English china on the chimney-piece of the drawing-room, to which she is hurried—that the Abbey, in one sense, may not come up to her dreams.

The hall has been large and lofty, and there is a broad staircase of shining oak, up which Catherine is taken to her room. But that comfortable room possesses papered walls and a carpeted floor, while the windows are neither less perfect nor dimmer^[35] than those of the drawing-room.

Catherine receives some consolation, as she is hastening to remove her riding-habit (the common travelling dress of the day), to dress for dinner, in time to suit the fiery punctuality of the General. Her eye falls on a large, high chest in a deep recess on one side of the fireplace. The chest, which is of cedar, curiously inlaid with some darker wood, and furnished with a tarnished silver lock, might have formed a treasure among the Queen Anne furniture and art curiosities of to-day; but it is not from premature æsthetic tastes that Catherine flies to it, entranced at the sight—it is because the chest looks like a realisation of her visions, a prelude to adventures in[Pg 169] her own person, such as those which her favourite heroines have encountered and surmounted triumphantly.

The incidents which follow the discovery of this chest would be impossible in the days of social science and board schools. They read like exaggerations, even in Jane Austen's usually temperate, as well as witty, pages.^[36]

Then we must keep in remembrance that Catherine Morland was, in age, but sweet, immature seventeen, while George III's reign was in many things removed from that of Queen Victoria.

Miss Tilney's maid, and later Miss Tilney herself, surprise Catherine in what looks like burglarious intentions, in her eager investigation of the chest. In the last instance, Catherine has just succeeded in throwing back the lid, and discovering—a nicely-folded white cotton counterpane!

This anti-climax does not prevent the infatuated Catherine, when she has retired for the night, during an appropriate storm of wind and rain, looking about her, at intervals,

in pursuit of more old furniture. And just as she is about to step into bed, her eyes light on an ebony and gold cabinet, such as her mischievous lover has described. To be sure the cabinet is not exactly of ebony and gold, but it is of the next thing to them—black and yellow Japan—with the yellow looking like gold. The key is in the door—wonderful to relate, as Henry has said! Catherine cannot sleep till she has turned it. Naturally, the lock tries her [Pg 170] trembling, unfamiliar fingers, but she overcomes its difficulties, only to open drawer after drawer with emptiness revealed. The middle cavity alone remains unexplored. She succeeds with the second lock as with the first, and meets her reward—a roll of paper, pushed far back for concealment, lies before her.

Catherine's heart flutters, her knees tremble, her cheeks grow pale. She seizes the precious MS. without a doubt as to her right to take possession of it. Has one of her heroines hesitated in similar circumstances? She glances round, as if by instinct, to detect the next accomplishment of Henry Tilney's predictions, in the waning of her light. It happens to be a half-burnt-down candle needing snuffing, instead of a lamp with the wick burnt to the socket. Sometimes modern prosaic substitutes prove convenient. Catherine has only to snuff her candle to restore its brightness. Alas! in her agitation she snuffs it out, and leaves herself at once in total darkness. Gas might not have served her any better, since gas runs the risk, in these circumstances, of being turned off.

Poor Catherine's plight has become lamentable, since, as a matter of course, she believes she distinguishes receding footsteps, and the closing of a distant door, the moment she has put out her light. A cold sweat stands on her forehead, the manuscript falls from her hand, and, groping her way to the bed, she jumps in, seeking some suspension of agony by creeping unheroically far underneath the clothes. Sleep must be impossible, and actually eludes Catherine's grasp till all the clocks about the place have struck three.

The housemaid's folding back her window-shutters at eight o'clock rouses Catherine to a bright morning and a cheerful fire. With revived spirits and curiosity, she waits only to be alone, in order to surrender herself to the absorbing interest and distinction of her discovery. She sees at once she must not expect a manuscript of equal length to those she is accustomed to read when printed. Here are only some small, unconnected sheets [Pg 171] of paper. "Her greedy eye glanced rapidly over a page. She started at its import. Could it be possible, or did not her senses play her false? An inventory of linen, in coarse and modern characters, seemed all that was before her! If the evidence of sight might be trusted, she held a washing-bill in her hand. She seized another sheet, and saw the same articles, with little variation; a third, a fourth, and a

fifth presented nothing new. Shirts, stockings, cravats, and waistcoats faced her in each. Two others, penned by the same hand, marked an expenditure scarcely more interesting in letters, hair-powder, shoe-strings, and breeches ball; and the larger sheet, which had enclosed the rest, seemed by its first cramped line—‘To poultice chesnut mare’—a farrier’s bill! Such was the collection of papers (left, perhaps, as she could then suppose, by the negligence of a servant, in the place whence she had taken them) which had filled her with expectation and alarm, and had robbed her of half her night’s rest! She felt humbled to the dust.”

Catherine fervently trusts that nobody—above all, not Henry Tilney, who is in some respects the originator of her misadventure, but whom, of course, she magnanimously forgives—will ever learn what she has been about.

She soon forgets her affronted discomfiture in a little conversation with Henry Tilney, in the breakfast-parlour, before the others come down. She is praising Miss Tilney’s hyacinths, and adds, “I have just learnt to love a hyacinth.”

“And how might you learn? By accident, or argument?”

“Your sister taught me: I cannot tell how. Mrs. Allen used to take pains, year after year, to make me like them; but I never could, till I saw them, the other day, in Milsom Street. I am naturally indifferent about flowers.”^[37]

[Pg 172]

Henry Tilney ends the conversation with the assertion, “At any rate, however, I am pleased that you have learnt to love a hyacinth. The mere habit of learning to love is the thing; and a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing. Has my sister a pleasant mode of instruction?”

I need not quote further than that Catherine is delightfully embarrassed, and that she has the happiness of being still more discomposed by a hint from the General when he appears, which does sound as if the formidable great man were deigning to rally the young couple on a sympathetic habit of early rising.

But Catherine is not yet quite cured of her romantic fancies.^[38] She has been forced to see that the Abbey, in spite of its indisputable pretensions to antiquity and grandeur, its fine situation, and the ostentatious display made by the present owner of his rank and fortune, in its gardens and hot-houses, is, according to her standard, a mere commonplace, handsome, country house. She has found out for herself that old chests and cabinets may be no better than humbugs; still, she must hanker after family secrets and terrible mysteries. She cannot like pompous, despotic General

Tilney, before whom his daughter trembles, and his sons grow silent—let him be ever so grandly polite to herself—not even though he seems to imply his gracious approbation, before it is asked, of his son Henry's suit, with the General's earnest desire that Catherine may accede to that suit.

Perverse Catherine takes it into her head that the General interferes to prevent her from being shown over the Abbey, and that he avoids certain parts of the grounds. Her rampant, over-stimulated imagination leaps to the conclusion, on the customary grounds, that [Pg 173] these suspicions peculiarities have to do with General Tilney's late wife, of whom her husband never speaks, who has died rather suddenly, during her daughter's absence from home.

Has Mrs. Tilney died a natural death? Catherine begins to question herself quakingly; or is she dead at all? Can her children have been imposed upon? May she not be secluded and imprisoned in some remote turret or dungeon, to serve an unknown purpose of her unworthy husband? In that case, Catherine must be destined to restore the unfortunate Mrs. Tilney to her children and the world. ^[39]

Catherine considers that she has a strong confirmation of her worst fears in what she is told of the General's habits of sitting up late, and walking up and down his room at night.

Before taking it upon her to act the part of a private detective in any more original or offensive manner, Catherine sets out one evening to enter secretly the closed room which Eleanor has pointed out to her as that in which her mother died.

Catherine goes into the Bluebeard chamber—which is certainly not kept locked—on tiptoe. “She beheld what fixed her to the spot, and agitated every feature. She saw a large, well-proportioned apartment, a handsome dimity bed unoccupied, arranged with a housemaid's care, a bright Bath stove, mahogany wardrobes and neatly-painted chairs, on which the warm beams of a western sun gaily poured through two sash-windows. Catherine had expected to have her feelings worked upon, and worked upon they were. Astonishment and doubt first seized them, and a shortly-succeeding ray of common sense added some bitter emotions of shame.”

She is endeavouring to retreat as quickly as she has [Pg 174] come. She has got as far as the gallery, when she hears footsteps approaching. It would be awkward for a servant, it would be dreadful for the General to meet her prowling about there.

Happily for Catherine, though she cannot think so at the time, it is Henry Tilney who comes running up the side stair.

“‘Mr. Tilney,’ she cries, taken by surprise, ‘how did you come here?’

“‘How did I come up that staircase?’ he echoes, as much astonished as she is; ‘because it is my nearest way from the stable-yard to my own chamber; and why should I not come up it?’

“Catherine recollected herself, blushed deeply, and could say no more. He seemed to be looking in her countenance for that explanation which her words did not afford. She moved on towards the gallery.

“‘And may I not, in my turn,’ said he, as he pushed back the folding doors, ‘ask how came *you* here? This passage is at least as extraordinary a road from the breakfast-parlour to your apartment as that staircase can be from the stables to mine.’

“‘I have been,’ said Catherine, looking down, ‘to see your mother’s room.’

“‘My mother’s room! Is there anything extraordinary to be seen there?’

“‘No, nothing at all. I thought you did not mean to come back till to-morrow.’”

But he will not be put off the subject, and a few more skilful questions enlighten him with regard to her preposterously uncharitable surmises. Though Henry Tilney is the gay deceiver who has played on her imagination not so long ago, he is considerably scandalised at the length to which she has gone. After gravely explaining to her all the simple, natural circumstances of his mother’s illness and death, and of his father’s sincere affliction for his loss—since, though his temper may have injured her in life, his judgment never did—the son takes Catherine to task very earnestly, [Pg 175] if tenderly, for her most unwarrantable flights of fancy. “Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians.”

Catherine is punished. In the retirement of her own room she cries bitterly. She hates herself for her folly, and becomes a more reasonable woman for all time to come. [\[40\]](#)

IV.

Catherine is recalled from her compunction and mortification, which unquestionably Henry Tilney soothes to the best of his power, by the trials of real life. After nine successive mornings of looking in vain for letters, Catherine receives one from James at Oxford. It is a short, manly letter, full of pain, but full also of self-command and forbearance, announcing the breaking off of his engagement with Miss Thorpe, and

hoping, for his sister's sake, that her visit to Northanger Abbey may be over before Captain Tilney makes known his engagement.

Catherine cannot conceal her sorrow for James, and is soon induced to tell what will not remain long concealed to her sympathising friends, Eleanor and Henry Tilney. Isabella Thorpe has given up Catherine's brother, and is to marry theirs. Both her listeners—Henry Tilney especially—are full of pity for Catherine's wondering sorrow that such fickleness and everything [Pg 176] which is bad can exist in the world and make her brother James their victim; but the Tilneys doubt that part of her information which relates to their brother. They do not dispute Frederick's share in the lovers' quarrel, but they are exceedingly sceptical with regard to Frederick's marrying Isabella Thorpe—a lawyer's daughter without any portion. Henry's incredulity is only shaken by the recollection of Frederick's former pretensions and confidence in himself, and by the fact that he, Henry, has too good an opinion of Miss Thorpe's prudence to suppose that she would part with one gentleman before another was secured.

Henry Tilney's humour asserts itself, as usual, through his vexation. He begs Eleanor to prepare for a sister-in-law open and guileless as the day. He heartily endorses Catherine's innocent argument—intended to be consolatory—that, perhaps, though Isabella has behaved so badly to the Morland family, she may behave better to the Tilneys—she may be constant to Captain Tilney.

“Indeed, I am afraid she will,” replied Henry Tilney, “unless a baronet should come in her way; that is Frederick's only chance. I will get the Bath paper and look over the arrivals.”

“You think it is all for ambition, then?” inquired Catherine, at length beginning to see there were some things which looked very like it. “I never was so deceived in any one's character in my life.”

“Among all the great variety you have known and studied,” Henry Tilney cannot resist saying.” And really the masterful young lover makes game of his simple mistress so habitually, that one is tempted to imagine he is purposely testing the sweetness of her temper, and her freedom from pride and vanity.

He is soon rallying her on the loss which she herself has sustained. Society must have become irksome—the very idea of such amusements as she has shared with Isabella Thorpe cannot but prove abhorrent to her. Catherine would not now, for instance, go to a ball for [Pg 177] the world. She must feel that she has no longer any friend to whom she can speak without reserve, on whose regard she can depend.

But Catherine answers him very sensibly, and with a charming sincerity that disarms his mocking mood. “No,” said Catherine, “ought I? To say the truth, though I am hurt and grieved that I cannot still love her, that I am never to hear from her, perhaps never to see her again, I do not feel so very much afflicted as one would have thought.”

“You feel as you always do, what is most to the credit of human nature. Such feelings ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves.”

We can easily understand how Catherine’s spirits revive under this conversation.

The happiest episode of Catherine’s visit to Northanger Abbey is her going with the Tilneys—the idea of the visit having originated with the General—to “eat their mutton” with Henry in his parsonage at Woodston. An abbey has become no more to Catherine than any other building. There is nothing now so alluring to her imagination as the unpretending comfort of a “well-connected parsonage”—something like Catherine’s home at Fullerton, but better. Fullerton has its faults, but Woodston probably has none.

Before the visit, it has seemed to Catherine that the Wednesday when she is to go to Woodston will never come. She dreads the arrival in the meantime of Captain Tilney to ask his father’s consent to his marriage. But no Captain Tilney makes his appearance, and all goes well. The day comes, proves fine, and Catherine treads on air. “By ten o’clock the chaise and four conveyed the party from the Abbey, and after an agreeable drive of almost twenty miles they entered Woodston, a large and populous village in a situation not unpleasant. Catherine was ashamed to say how pretty she thought it, as the General seemed to think an apology necessary for the flatness of the country and size of the village; but in her heart she preferred it to [Pg 178] any place she had ever been at, and looked with great admiration at every neat house above the rank of a cottage, and at all the little chandler’s shops which they passed. At the farther end of the village, and tolerably disengaged from the rest of it, stood the parsonage, a new-built, substantial, stone house, with its semi-circular sweep and green gates; and as they drove up to the door, Henry, with the friends of his solitude—a large Newfoundland puppy and two or three terriers—was ready to receive and make much of them.”

The General’s hints and allusions, with his requests for Catherine’s opinion and approval, which now become more conspicuous and significant than ever, may be embarrassing, but it is a delicious embarrassment.

Catherine thinks the house the most comfortable in England, and cannot hide her admiration of the prettily-shaped unfurnished drawing-room. ““Oh! why do you not fit

up this room, Mr. Tilney? What a pity not to have it fitted up. It is the prettiest room I ever saw; it is the prettiest room in the world!’

“‘I trust,’ said the General with a most satisfied smile, ‘that it will very speedily be furnished: it waits only for a lady’s taste.’

“‘Well, if it was my house, I should never sit anywhere else. Oh! what a sweet little cottage there is among the trees; apple-trees too! It is the prettiest cottage——’

“‘You like it? you approve of it as an object? It is enough. Henry, remember that Robinson is spoken to about it. The cottage remains.’

“Such a compliment recalled all Catherine’s consciousness and silenced her directly; and though pointedly applied to by the General for her choice of the prevailing colour of the paper and hangings, nothing like an opinion on the subject could be drawn from her. The influence of fresh objects and fresh air, however, was of great use in dissipating those embarrassing associations; and having reached the ornamental part of the premises, consisting of a walk round two sides of a meadow, on [Pg 179] which Henry’s genius had begun to act about half a year ago, she was sufficiently recovered to think it prettier than any pleasure-ground she had ever been in before, though there was not a shrub in it higher than the green branch in the corner.

“A saunter into other meadows, and through part of the village, with a visit to the stables to examine some improvements, and a charming game of play with a litter of puppies just able to roll about, brought them to four o’clock, when Catherine scarcely thought it could be three. At four they were to dine, and at six to set off on their return. Never had any day passed so quickly.”

Yet reflection might have suggested one drawback to the delights of Woodston. Catherine had already marvelled and even exclaimed when Henry Tilney proposed to go away from Northanger several days before the date of their visit, in order to make preparations for their entertainment at Woodston. How could he think so much trouble necessary for their dinner, when the General had particularly desired him not to put himself about, and had made a point of his providing nothing extraordinary? But Henry had only smiled, and started betimes for Woodston.

Now on the occasion of the visit, Catherine “could not but observe that the abundance of the dinner did not seem to create the smallest astonishment in the General; nay, that he was even looking at the side-table for cold meat which was not there. His son and daughter’s observations were of a different kind. They had seldom seen him eat so heartily at any table but his own; and never before known him so little disconcerted by the melted butter being oiled.”

Catherine might at least have foreseen that, however eager the General was to welcome her as a daughter-in-law, he would prove an alarming parent to visit Woodston in days to come.

The morning after the happy day at Woodston, Catherine is surprised by a letter from Isabella Thorpe,[Pg 180] which is so cleverly characteristic of that transparently designing and entertaining girl, I must give it all.

“Bath, April——.

“My Dearest Catherine,—I received your two kind letters with the greatest delight, and have a thousand apologies to make for not answering them sooner. I really am quite ashamed of my idleness; but in this horrid place one can find time for nothing. I have had my pen in my hand to begin a letter to you almost every day since you left Bath, but have always been prevented by some silly trifler or other. Pray write to me soon, and direct at my own home. Thank God! we leave this vile place to-morrow. Since you went away I have had no pleasure in it; the dust is beyond anything; and everybody one cares for is gone. I believe if I could see you I should not mind the rest, for you are dearer to me than anybody can conceive. I am quite uneasy about your dear brother, not having heard from him since he went to Oxford, and am fearful of some misunderstanding. Your kind offices will set all right. He is the only man I ever did or could love, and I trust you will convince him of it. The spring fashions are partly down, and the hats the most frightful you can imagine. I hope you spend your time pleasantly, but am afraid you never think of me. I will not say all that I could of the family you are with, because I would not be ungenerous, and set you against those you esteem; but it is very difficult to know whom to trust, and young men never know their minds two days together. I rejoice to say that the young man whom of all others I particularly abhor has left Bath. You will know from this description I must mean Captain Tilney, who, as you may remember, was amazingly disposed to follow and tease me, before you went away. Afterwards he got worse, and became quite my shadow. Many girls might have been taken in, for never were such attentions; but I knew the fickle sex too well. He went away to his regiment two days ago, and I trust[Pg 181] I shall never be plagued with him again. He is the greatest coxcomb I ever saw, and amazingly disagreeable. The last two days he was always by the side of Charlotte Davis. I pitied his taste, but took no notice of him. The last time we met was in Bath Street, and I turned directly into a shop that he might not speak to me; I would not even look at him. He went into the Pump-room afterwards, but I would not have followed for all the world. Such a contrast between him and your brother! Pray send me some news of the latter; I am quite unhappy about him; he seemed so uncomfortable when he went away, with a cold, or something that affected his spirits.

I would write to him myself, but have mislaid his direction; and as I hinted above, am afraid he took something in my conduct amiss. Pray explain everything to his satisfaction; or if he still harbours any doubt, a line from himself to me, or a call at Putney when next in town, might set all to rights. I have not been to the rooms this age, nor to the play, except going in last night with the Hodges, for a frolic, at half-price. They teased me into it; and I was determined they should not say I shut myself up because Tilney was gone. We happened to sit by the Mitchells, and they pretended to be quite surprised to see me out. I knew their spite: at one time they could not be civil to me, but now they are all friendship; but I am not such a fool as to be taken in by them. You know I have a pretty good spirit of my own. Anne Mitchell has tried to put on a turban like mine, as I wore it the week before at the concert, but made wretched work of it. It happened to become my odd face, I believe; at least Tilney told me so at the time, and said every eye was upon me; but he is the last man whose word I would take. I wear nothing but purple now; I know I look hideous in it, but no matter; it is your dear brother's favourite colour. Lose no time, my dearest, sweetest Catherine, in writing to him and to me,

"Who ever am, &c."

[Pg 182]

But the upright, unsuspecting young girl who thinks no evil, is not a fool, and in this respect she has a great advantage over such female characters as the Amelia of another great humourist, Thackeray. It is refreshing to learn that the inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehoods of that letter strike Catherine from the very first. "She was ashamed of Isabella, and ashamed of having ever loved her. The professions of attachment were now as disgusting, as her excuses were empty, and her demands impudent." "Write to James on her behalf! No, James should never hear Isabella's name mentioned by her again."

On Henry's arrival from Woodston, Catherine makes known to him and Eleanor their brother's safety, congratulating them with sincerity on it, and reading aloud the most material passages of her letter with strong indignation. When she has finished it, "So much for Isabella," she cries, "and for all our intimacy. She must think me an idiot, or she could not have written so; but perhaps this has served to make her character better known to me than mine is to her. I see what she has been about. She is a vain coquette, and her tricks have not answered. I do not believe she had ever any regard either for James or for me, and I wish I had never known her."

"It will soon be as if you never had," said Henry.

V.

The unpleasant sequel of Catherine Morland's visit to Northanger Abbey is, we trust, barely possible in our day. The unworthy resentment, unworthily vented on an innocent victim by an arrogant, worldly-minded man, foiled in his selfish schemes, and enraged at finding himself taken in by so shallow a conspirator as John Thorpe, may be common enough at all times; but, at [Pg 183] least, we live in a generation when men do not wear their tempers, any more than their vices, on their sleeves.

General Tilney has gone up to London, while Catherine's visit to Northanger Abbey is prolonged at Eleanor Tilney's request, with her father's full approval. The girls have been left alone one evening, by Henry's having found himself under the necessity of taking his curate's place at Woodston. They are about to separate at eleven o'clock at night, when they hear a carriage drive up to the door, followed by the loud noise of the door-bell.

Eleanor predicts the unexpected arrival of her elder brother Frederick, and Catherine retreats to her room in some discomposure. But her trepidation at the notion of encountering her brother's rival is nothing compared to her affright when, half an hour later, she discovers her friend Eleanor hovering about Catherine's door, in a state of extreme agitation. Eleanor is the reluctant, grieved, and affronted messenger from her father to the guest whom he has hitherto delighted to honour. General Tilney has recollected an engagement which will take the whole family away from Northanger Abbey on Monday (this day is Saturday). The Tilneys are all going to Lord Longtown's, near Hereford, for a fortnight. General Tilney has sent Eleanor, her heart swelling with sorrow and shame, to tell Catherine of a departure which, in the most unceremonious and unkind manner, compels her own.

Great and unpleasant as her surprise is, I am glad to say Catherine displays dawning dignity. She suppresses her feelings, speaks of a second engagement's yielding to a first, and declines to take offence. She will finish her visit to Northanger Abbey at some other time, and cannot Eleanor come to her? Happy thought! cannot Eleanor come to Fullerton on her way back from Herefordshire?

"It will not be in my power, Catherine," Eleanor answers briefly, in awkwardness and dejection.

Still Catherine continues resolutely cheerful. Let [Pg 184] Eleanor come when she can. Then Catherine betrays she is calculating on bidding another friend good-bye. She will be able to go when the rest set out on Monday, she says. It does not matter, though word has not been forwarded to her father and mother. The General, she hopes, will

send a servant with her half-way. She will soon be at Salisbury, and then she will only be nine miles from home.

My readers must remember that the inconveniences of young ladies travelling alone were multiplied indefinitely, and even magnified to dangers, when girls had to go in post-chaises, or by coaches, over rough roads, and in a very deliberate fashion—largely affected by the merits or defects of the inns on the route, the horses, and, above all, the weather—even granting that highwaymen had waxed scarce by the close of last century.

Poor Eleanor has the still harder task of dashing these modest expectations to the ground. The General has sent his daughter with the unconscionably insulting and unfeeling message that Catherine must leave early next morning. Even the choice of the hour is not left to her: the carriage is ordered at seven o'clock, and no servant will be offered to her.

I am fain to think such rude insolence, such an ungentlemanlike and unfatherly breach of hospitality to, and consideration for, a young girl—his invited guest, his daughter's friend—could seldom have been perpetrated by the most irresponsible member of the old "quality"—the most selfish tyrant who ever figured in an antiquated army list. I believe General Tilney's action on this occasion to be one of the few-and-far-between exaggerations to be found in Jane Austen's earlier novels.

Catherine sits down breathless and speechless under the outrage. She can scarcely listen to Eleanor's earnest, humble apologies, her faltering explanations that her father's temper is not happy, and something has occurred recently to ruffle it in an uncommon degree.

[Pg 185]

When Catherine speaks, after she has put the one wistful, fruitless question, "Have I offended the General?" it is to say, quietly and firmly, that she is very sorry if she has offended Eleanor's father; it is the last thing she would willingly have done. She bids Eleanor not be unhappy; a few days longer would not have made any great difference. The journey of seventy miles by post will be nothing. She can be ready at seven. She begs to be called in time.

In short, Catherine behaves at this crisis with a simple self-respect and an absence of either rancour or frenzy which brings her out in striking and agreeable contrast to the rampaging termagants of later fiction.

But when she is left alone, poor young Catherine cannot so much as attempt to persuade herself that she has not been very badly treated, and that she is not smarting under the sense of the unprovoked ill-usage in addition to her own little private stock of wretchedness. For not only has the polite, high-bred General Tilney, who had seemed so particularly fond of her, behaved to her with gross incivility, there is the crowning misery of the knowledge that the false and barbarous General is Henry Tilney's father, and that she will not even see Henry to hear what he thinks of the cruel injustice, and to bid him farewell. Besides, what will her father and mother, the Allens, and the world think of the disgraceful indignity which has been put upon her, the bitter mortification to which she has been subjected?

But there is no help for it, and though sleep is impossible, Catherine can be as punctual as her friend Eleanor, who is up to do all that the most sincere affection and hearty regret can contrive, to atone for her father's conduct. Catherine may be unable to swallow a mouthful when she thinks of the last breakfast in the same room: "Happy, happy breakfast! for Henry had been there; Henry had sat by her and helped her." But she is able to decline decidedly, though tenderly, to write to Eleanor when Catherine finds that correspondence has been prohibited between the girls, and the one[Pg 186] letter, announcing Catherine's safe arrival, for which Eleanor entreats, must be directed under cover to her maid Alice. It is only Eleanor's distress at her refusal which draws from Catherine a promise to commit this single infringement of the prohibition.

At the last moment, had it not been for Eleanor Tilney's anxious forethought in ascertaining whether Catherine's purse would meet the requirements of the journey, the inexperienced young girl would have found herself "turned from the house without even the means of getting home." The necessary loan is quickly offered and accepted, but this realisation of the situation so overwhelms the two girls that they exchange their parting embrace in silence. Catherine forces her quivering lips to leave "My kind remembrance for my absent friend," but the reference is too much for her, and she has to hide her face as she jumps into the chaise and is driven from the door.

The only solution which Catherine can think of, for the unaccountable change in the General's behaviour to her, is too dreadful for her to dwell upon, though it has a serio-comic effect, as Jane Austen no doubt intended, on the reader. Can General Tilney have found out, by any means short of a tremendous breach of faith on the part of Henry or Eleanor Tilney, that Catherine has been so foolish and wicked as to suspect him of being a murderer, and is he now revenging himself upon her, almost justifiably, by refusing to let her remain in the same house with him, or to hold any farther communication with his family?

The real explanation may as well be given here. Catherine's one great offence in the General's eyes is that she is less rich and prosperous in every way than he had believed her to be. The fine gentleman is capable of the most mercenary efforts for the aggrandisement of his family. His greed has caused him to fall an easy prey to so vulgar a schemer as John Thorpe. In the days when Isabella Thorpe and her brother were ready to hail the probability of a double family alliance[Pg 187] with James Morland and his sister. General Tilney had chanced to notice his son's attentions to Catherine in the theatre at Bath. Being on speaking terms with John Thorpe, the General had not disdained to fish for some information with regard to the young lady's circumstances.

John Thorpe, in his vanity and bluster, had bragged his very best. He was not content with representing the Morlands' prospects invested with the brilliance which his credulous imagination and that of Isabella, stimulated by self-interest, had already bestowed on them, but added twice as much to everything, for the grandeur of the moment. "By doubling what he chose to think the amount of Mr. Morland's preferment, trebling his private fortune, bestowing a rich aunt, and sinking half the children, he was able to represent the whole family to the General in a most respectable light. For Catherine, however, the peculiar object of the General's curiosity and his own speculations, he had yet something more in reserve; and the ten or fifteen thousand which her father could give her would be a pretty addition to Mr. Allen's estate. Her intimacy there had made him seriously determine on her being handsomely legacied hereafter, and to speak of her as the almost acknowledged future heiress of Fullerton naturally followed."

General Tilney had not doubted the authority of his informant, and had shaped his course accordingly. He had been enlightened as to his mistake by the very person who had deceived him. The General had encountered Thorpe in town, when under the influence of exactly opposite feelings—irritated by Catherine's refusal, and yet more by the failure of an endeavour to reconcile James Morland to Isabella—John Thorpe turned, and not only coolly contradicted every word he had ever said to the advantage of the Morlands, he went as far in lying to their disadvantage. Mr. Morland was not a man either of substance or credit. He had not been able to give his son even a decent maintenance in[Pg 188] the contemplation of his marriage. The whole Morland family were necessitous—numerous, too, almost beyond example; by no means respected in their own neighbourhood; aiming at a style of life to which they were not entitled; seeking to better themselves by wealthy connections; a forward, scheming race. (I hope my readers admire the accuracy with which, in slandering the Morlands, John

Thorpe describes himself and his sister, in fulfilment of the adage, that as we do ourselves we judge our neighbours.)

The horrified General pronounced the name of Allen.

Here, too, Thorpe had found out his error. The Allens had lived near the Morlands too long; besides, John Thorpe knew the young man on whom the Fullerton estate must devolve.

General Tilney had heard enough. He set off in a fury for the Abbey, to undo his own performance.

In the meantime Catherine is travelling home to Fullerton. “To return in such a manner was almost to destroy the pleasure of a meeting with those whom she loved best, even after an absence such as hers—an eleven weeks’ absence.”

“She rather dreaded than sought for the first view of that well-known spire, which would announce her within twenty miles of home. Salisbury she had known to be her point on leaving Northanger; but after the first stage, she had been indebted to the post-masters for the names of the places which were then to conduct her to it, so great had been her ignorance of her route. She met with nothing, however, to distress or frighten her. Her gentle, civil manners, and liberal pay, procured her all the attention that a traveller like herself could require; and stopping only to change horses, she travelled on for about eleven hours, ^[41] without accident or alarm; and between six and seven o’clock in the evening found herself entering Fullerton.”

[Pg 189]

VI.

Jane Austen has here an excellent opportunity for one of her ironical paragraphs. “A heroine returning at the close of her career to her native village in all the triumph of recovered reputation, and all the dignity of a countess, with a long train of noble relations in their several phaetons, and three waiting-maids in a travelling chaise-and-four behind her, is an event on which the pen of the contriver may well delight to dwell; it gives credit to every conclusion, and the author must share in the glory she so liberally bestows. But my affair is widely different: I bring back my heroine to her home in solitude and disgrace, and no sweet elation of spirits can lead me into minuteness. A heroine in a hack post-chaise is such a blow upon sentiment as no attempt at grandeur or pathos can withstand. Swiftly, therefore, shall her postboy drive through the village, amid the gaze of sundry groups, and speedy shall be her descent from it.”

But the very next sentences are full of the warm human kindness of the humourist in opposition to the cold cynicism of the mere satirist. “But whatever might be the distress of Catherine’s mind as she thus advanced towards the parsonage, and whatever the humiliation of her biographer in relating it, she was preparing enjoyment of no every-day nature for those to whom she went; first, in the appearance of her carriage, and secondly, in herself. The chaise of a traveller being a rare sight in Fullerton, the whole family were immediately at the window; and to have it stop at the sweep-gate was a pleasure to brighten every eye, and occupy every fancy—a pleasure quite unlooked-for by all but the two youngest children, a boy and a girl of six and four years old, who expected a brother and a sister in every carriage. Happy the glance that first distinguished Catherine! Happy the voice that proclaimed the discovery! But whether such happiness [Pg 190] were the lawful property of George or Harriet could never be exactly understood.

“Her father, mother, Sarah, George and Harriet, all assembled at the door to welcome her with affectionate eagerness, was a sight to awaken the best feelings of Catherine’s heart; and in the embrace of each, as she stepped from the carriage, she found herself soothed beyond anything that she had believed possible. So surrounded, so caressed, she was even happy. In the joyfulness of family love everything for a short time was subdued; and the pleasure of seeing her leaving them at first little leisure for calm curiosity, they were all seated round the tea-table, which Mrs. Morland had hurried for the comfort of the poor traveller, whose pale and jaded looks soon caught her notice, before any inquiry so direct as to demand a positive answer was addressed to her.”

Even the soreness of the explanation becomes bearable because of the true fellow-feeling with which it is heard. Besides, though the Morlands cannot but be hurt and angry on account of the insult to their daughter, they are not naturally irritable people, and do not dwell on the injury.

“It was a strange business, and he must be a very strange man,” soon become words enough to express their indignation and wonder. In fact, her father and mother are much too philosophic for Catherine’s feelings when she has to listen to such sentences as “Catherine is safe home, and our comfort does not depend on General Tilney;” “This has been a strange acquaintance, soon made and soon ended. And you were sadly out of luck, too, in your Isabella. Ah! poor James! well, we must live and learn; and the next new friends you make I hope will be better worth keeping.”

Catherine’s great comfort at this time is in walking over to the Allens, to talk with Mrs. Allen over their never-to-be-forgotten visit to Bath. If Mrs. Allen is neither very wise nor

very witty, nor possessed of any penetration to speak of—at least she mentions Henry[Pg 191] Tilney's name occasionally, and calls him a very agreeable young man.

For two days Mrs. Morland bears with her eldest daughter's restlessness and sadness, but on the third morning the mother remonstrates: "My dear Catherine, I am afraid you are growing quite a fine lady. I do not know when poor Richard's cravats would be done, if he had no friend but you, ^[42] your head runs too much upon Bath; but there is a time for everything—a time for balls and plays, and a time for work. You have had a long run of amusement, and now you must try to be useful."

Catherine took up her work directly, saying, in a dejected voice, that her head did not run upon Bath—much.

"Then you are fretting about General Tilney, and that is very simple of you; for ten to one whether you ever see him again. You should never fret about trifles." After a short silence, "I hope, my Catherine, you are not getting out of humour with home, because it is not so grand as Northanger; that would be turning your visit into an evil, indeed. Wherever you are, you should always be contented, but especially at home, because there you must spend the most of your time. I did not quite like, at breakfast, to hear you talk so much about the French bread at Northanger."

"I am sure I do not care about the bread. It is all the same to me what I eat."

"There is a very clever essay in one of the books upstairs upon much such a subject—about young girls who have been spoilt for home by great acquaintance—the 'Mirror,' I think—I will look it out for you some day or other, because I am sure it will do you good."

Do sensible, kindly mothers still select such essays as those in Henry Mackenzie's papers, and bring them for their daughters to read, with a sanguine expectation that[Pg 192] the essays will answer their purpose? If not, is it because girls are less docile than they were wont to be, or because they are apt to imagine that they are considerably better informed than their elders, who have been in the world twice as long?

Mrs. Morland goes to fetch the work in question, but household matters keep the busy mistress of the family absent for some time. When she returns, she is unaware that a visitor has been shown in while she was away, and is surprised on re-entering the room to find a young man there she has never seen before.

With a look of much respect he immediately rises, and is introduced to Mrs. Morland by her conscious daughter as "Mr. Henry Tilney."

With the embarrassment of real feeling he begins to apologise for his appearance there, “acknowledging that after what had passed he had little right to expect a welcome at Fullerton, and stating his impatience to be assured of Miss Morland’s having reached her home in safety as the cause of his intrusion.”

He does not address himself to an illiberal judge. Far from comprehending him and his sister in their father’s misconduct, Mrs. Morland has always been well disposed to both, and instantly pleased by his appearance, receives him with the simple professions of unaffected good-will, “thanking him for such an attention to her daughter, assuring him that the friends of her children were always welcome there, and entreating him to say not another word of the past.”

He is not disinclined to obey her request, trying as the situation is, while the agitated, happy Catherine sits perfectly silent in the conversation about the weather and the roads, which follows, “but her glowing cheek and brightened eye made her mother trust that this good-natured visit would, at least, set her heart at ease for a time; and gladly, therefore, did she lay aside the first volume of ‘The Mirror’ for a future hour.”

Then Henry Tilney, after a couple of minutes’ silence, and an inquiry whether the Allens are at [Pg 193] Fullerton, with a rising colour, asks Catherine whether she will have the goodness to show him the way to her friends’ house?

“You may see the house from this window, sir,” is a piece of most malapropos information volunteered by Catherine’s younger sister Sarah, which produces only a bow of acknowledgment from the gentleman.

But good-natured, considerate Mrs. Morland comes to his aid. She sincerely pities his painful position, and believes he may have something to say, on his father’s account, which will be more easily said to Catherine alone. She sends away the couple together to the Allens.

Mrs. Morland is not entirely mistaken. Henry Tilney has some explanations to give on his father’s behalf, but “his first purpose was to explain himself, and before they reached Mr. Allen’s grounds he had done it so well that Catherine did not think it could ever be repeated too often.”

Jane Austen thus coolly defines the lovers’ relations:—Catherine “was assured of his affections, and that heart in return was solicited which, perhaps, they pretty equally knew was already entirely his own; for, though Henry was now sincerely attached to her—though he felt and delighted in all the excellences of her character, and truly loved her society—I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude; or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the

only cause of his giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, dreadfully derogatory to a heroine's dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own."

It is only after the pair have, in the formal phraseology of the day, "waited on the Allens," when Henry Tilney talks at random, and Catherine Morland, wrapped in the contemplation of her unutterable happiness, scarcely opens her lips; that she hears, to her dismay, from her lover what has passed between him and his [Pg 194] father only two days before. On Henry's return from Woodston to Northanger, the General had told him angrily of Miss Morland's departure, and forbidden him to think of her any more.

But if ever a young man is justified in acting in defiance of such a command, it is Henry Tilney. He has not only been encouraged in cherishing and displaying an attachment for Catherine, his father has in every possible way compromised his son, and bound him, in honour no less than in affection, to the young girl from whom General Tilney now seeks all at once, in the most unjust and despotic manner, to separate Henry.

It can be no matter to a young fellow who has never shared the General's mercenary motives, and who is possessed of the sentiments of a man and a gentleman, that his father has been misled, and has committed himself to the course he has taken under an error.

The father and son, after their meeting and explanation, have parted in serious disagreement, and Henry Tilney has repaired, on his own responsibility, to Fullerton. But he has considerably saved Catherine from the obligation to a conscientious rejection of his addresses, by engaging her faith before telling her what had passed.

Luckily Mr. and Mrs. Morland, when they are appealed to, and have got over their surprise at being asked to give their consent to Henry Tilney's suit to their daughter, are inclined to be moderate and indulgent in their views. Their parental pride and affection are gratified; they have not a single objection to urge against the young man personally. They recognise his good manners and good sense, and they are ready to give him credit for his good character. "Catherine would make a sad, heedless young housekeeper, to be sure," was the mother's foreboding remark; but quick comes the consolation of there being nothing like practice.

The one obstacle is, that while Henry Tilney's father refuses his consent to the marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Morland [Pg 195] cannot formally sanction an engagement. Their tempers are mild, but their principles are steady. They do not demand a great show of regard, but a decent acquiescence must be given. The General's money may

go. Henry Tilney's present income is enough for independence and comfort, and he is entitled eventually, under his mother's marriage settlement, to a very considerable fortune. But he must at least have his father's countenance to his proposals.

The young people can neither be surprised nor can they complain, however much they may deplore the decision. They part for the time, hoping against hope for a speedy change in the General. "Henry returned to what was now his only home, to watch over his young plantations and extend his improvements for her sake, to whose share in them he looked anxiously forward; and Catherine remained at Fullerton to cry.

Whether the torments of absence were softened by a clandestine correspondence let us not inquire. Mr. and Mrs. Morland never did; they had been too kind to exact any promise, and whenever Catherine received a letter, as at that time happened pretty often, they always looked another way."

The probation ends much sooner than might have been expected, and the cause of the General's yielding is the marriage of his daughter, in the course of the summer, to a man of fortune and consequence. This accession of reflected dignity brings on such a fit of good humour, that General Tilney does not recover from it till after the good, kind Eleanor has procured his forgiveness of her brother, and their father's ungracious permission for Henry "to be a fool if he liked it."

What renders Eleanor Tilney's happiness more complete is, that it is the prosperous end of a course of true love which had not formerly run smooth; the lover having only recently and unexpectedly come into the title and fortune which so recommended the match to the General, that he had never "loved his daughter so well in all her hours of companionship, utility, and [Pg 196] patient endurance, as when he first hailed her 'your ladyship.'"

Jane Austen adds with joy for Eleanor's sake, that "her husband was really deserving of her, independent of his peerage, his wealth, and his attachment, being to a precision the most charming young man in the world."

I must here point out another instance of Miss Austen's thorough independence of precedent, and of the popular verdict in fiction. I think it is also a sign how true-hearted and unworldly she was herself in the main, under the class prejudices which she undoubtedly held, that she should, in the reasonableness which she so insisted upon, indicate how lightly within certain well-defined limits she valued the accidental advantages of rank and riches, in comparison with mutual affection, and mutual and moral affinity. To her, certainly,

"True hearts are more than coronets,

And simple faith than Norman blood,”

when she makes her heroine, whom she loves dearly, while she laughs at her from first to last, marry with all her will a simple country clergyman and younger son, while a secondary character in the story carries off the peer and charming fellow in one. [\[43\]](#)

I desire to call attention to this significant treatment of her heroine because, in dealing with General Tilney's hectoring, grasping misdemeanours, though we are perfectly sensible that Jane Austen cordially despises the man, we are also conscious that his rank and position are made to throw a respectable cloak over his infirmities.

Catherine is not caused to shrink from association with such a father-in-law, as she would have been represented shrinking from him, had he happened [Pg 197] to be a vulgar nobody, yet at the same time not more domineering, purse-proud, and mean than the well-born, well-educated General, with his oppressively artificial fine manners. Jane Austen was a born aristocrat, as she shows in many instances, but she was great enough to rise habitually above class weakness and narrowness.

The influence of the Viscount and Viscountess with General Tilney on the proscribed pair's behalf is assisted by that right understanding of Mr. Morland's circumstances which, as soon as the General will allow himself to be informed, they are qualified to give. "It taught him that he had been scarcely more misled by Thorpe's first boast of the family wealth than by his subsequent malicious overthrow of it; that in no sense of the word were they necessitous or poor; and that Catherine would have three thousand pounds."

This is a comfort, and so is the private intelligence which the calculating match-maker secures, that the Fullerton estate is at the disposal of the present proprietor, and therefore open to greedy speculation.

Accordingly, General Tilney permits his son to return to Northanger, "and thence made him the bearer of his consent, very courteously worded, in a page full of empty professions to Mr. Morland. The event which it authorised soon followed: Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang, and everybody smiled; and as this took place within a twelvemonth from the first day of their meeting, it will not appear, after all the dreadful delays occasioned by the General's cruelty, that they were essentially hurt by it."

Jane Austen ends "Northanger Abbey," as she began it, with a little paradoxical mocking comment, fitted to bewilder stupid people.

"To begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen is to do pretty well; and professing myself, moreover, convinced that the General's unjust

interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it,[Pg 198] by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny or reward filial disobedience.”^[44]

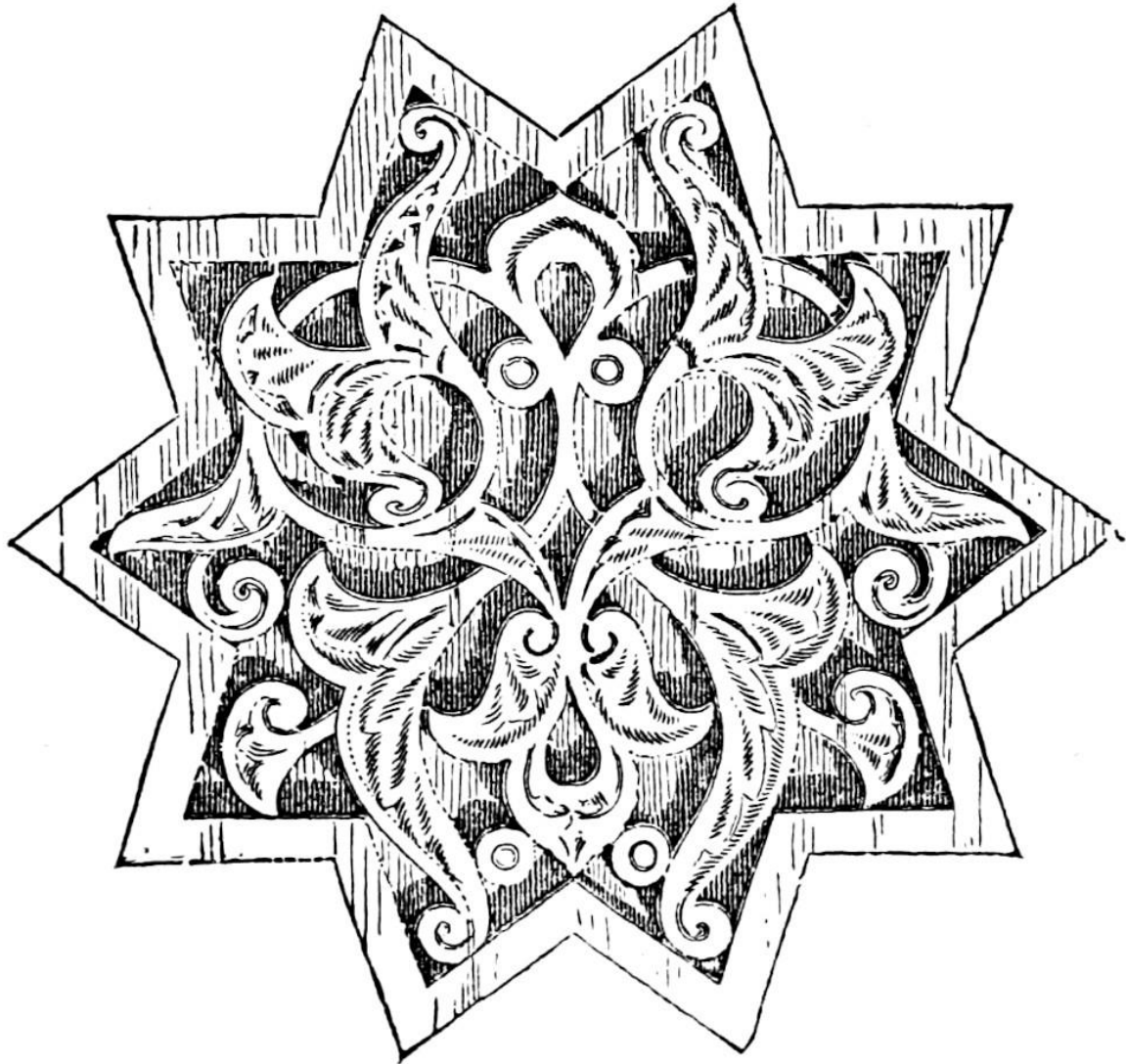
Among the last things which Miss Austen did was to flatter the great public—unless, indeed, one considers that she paid it the highest compliment of all—by assuming it was a clever public, and must enjoy being made game of, to its face. A stupid public was not, and has never been, Jane Austen’s public. On such her fine sense and abounding humour, pervaded by the true refinement in which neither the woman nor the gentlewoman is for a moment forgotten, fall absolutely flat. I cannot conceive such a public, which is ordinarily fond of coarse, crude mental stimulants, as appreciating and enjoying Jane Austen, though her consummate art as a story-teller may beguile it into dozing over her pages, or hurrying through them. But there is such a thing as having a good taste cultivated and not perverted, and budding intelligence may be drawn out, not stultified.

To those who are not by mental constitution impelled altogether into the abnormal school of fiction—to those who can read between the lines—reading Jane Austen will always be studying under a wise teacher, and keenly relishing an exquisite treat.

In some respects “Northanger Abbey” is among the author’s masterpieces. It contains two or three of her most finished portraits. Nowhere is her writing more incisive, her epigrams neater, her wit at once drier and more sparkling.

But “Northanger Abbey” has also blemishes which are absent from other works by the same novelist. It lacks unity; it does not grow out of itself in close sequence, like “Emma.” Its different parts are so far inconsistent with each other, for strong realism and airy[Pg 199] burlesque do not match quite well together. There are considerable improbabilities in “Northanger Abbey”—above all, there is not a trace of the lurking pathos and pensive charm which blend with and relieve the humour of “Persuasion.”

On the contrary, the almost incessant banter of “Northanger Abbey,” excellent as it is in its way, has a certain hardness in it—perhaps, in this instance, the result of the unripe youth of the author—and possesses a tendency to fatigue and vex the reader who wishes to be serious for a moment—who regards the best of life and art as that which, in one fashion or another, reflects both life and art as serious and earnest.



FOOTNOTES:

[18] Written in 1798. “Read Dickens’s ‘Hard Times,’ and another book of ‘Pliny’s Letters;’ read ‘Northanger Abbey,’ worth all Dickens and Pliny together, yet it was the work of a girl.”—*Macaulay*.

[19] Jane Austen may have had in her mind Mrs. Radcliffe’s heroines; to whom sketching from nature seems to have come by nature—who were all, as a matter of course, accomplished artists.

[20] Weymouth and Ramsgate, among sea-bathing places, seemed to rise most readily before her mind, though she alluded also to Southend and Cromer—not to say described Lyme—which she made her own.

[21]The fashion was a little absurd in its stateliness. Ladies were wont to wear nodding plumes of ostrich feathers, as at the Queen's drawing-rooms, standing upright on the head, till they added a foot, at least, to the fair amazons' height.

[22]Let us echo Henry Tilney's praise of muslin. Will its simple, elegant, once wide reign never return? The prevalence of calico balls is a poor substitute for its sway.

[23]The old-fashioned term "quiz" was freely applied last century. It was originally associated with the first specimen of eye-glass, through which the short-sighted were supposed to quiz their neighbours. I should suppose Jane Austen must have been called a quiz in her day. The accusation was half coveted, half dreaded, according to the temper of the individual who incurred it.

[24]The remonstrance is still needed.

[25]Since these words were written we have had the whole of the "Waverley Novels," not to mention more modern gains added to our wealth of excellent English works of fiction.

[26]There is this to be said for the sensational horrors which enchanted the girls of the last century, that these horrors, when founded on the model of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances, were well principled, and free from inherent moral coarseness and license of tone.

[27]Perhaps the number of jilts in the last century have to do with spontaneous combustion where hearts were concerned.

[28]Some of the beautiful portraits of the last century (one, if I recollect rightly, which represents Mrs. Sheridan and her sister) give an idea how daintily becoming, how perfectly elegant, these muslin costumes could be.

[29]Wood and water always figure largely in Jane Austen's landscapes.

[30]The *furor* about the "Mysteries of Udolpho," in its day, was, indeed, not confined to school-girls. It extended over the whole reading world. It was European, as well as English.

[31]Such was the style of travelling *en grand seigneur* last century.

[32]What a quaint, pretty picture the young man in his coachman's great-coat, the girl in her riding-habit and straw bonnet, which she is soon so anxious to protect from the rain, would make, taken as she stepped in or stepped out of Henry's "curricle!"

[33]Even a good clergyman measured his duties differently last century.

[34] Mrs. Radcliffe, who appears to have been unable to stand a joke on her romances, even from their admirers, and who was much hurt by a laughing reference of Sir Walter Scott's in "Waverley," would have looked aghast at this levity.

[35] Revived mediævalism in æsthetics has changed all this, and gone far to banish again the garish light of day from "modern antique" houses.

[36] My impression is that Jane Austen began "Northanger Abbey" with the simple intention of executing, in accordance with an early amusement of hers, a gay parody on romances in general, and on one romance in particular. But her genius proved too much for her; and though she never entirely lost sight of her original design, she departed so far from it, by prolonging the Bath portion of the tale, as to destroy its unity, and make somewhat of a jumble of the whole book. On the other hand, the exercise of her great gifts, in their proper field of real life and character-drawing, has produced for us, instead of a clever burlesque for the amusement of contemporaries, a disjointed work of genius for the edification and enjoyment of succeeding generations.

[37] What a candid admission from a heroine, or from any girl! But to love flowers was not obligatory last century.

[38] Withal, one must be struck by Catherine's unworldly disinterestedness. She has given her love to a son of the house; but in place of taking the opportunity to ascertain and exult over the Tilneys' wealth and position, she is occupied with foolish romancing on her own account.

[39] I am able to conjecture, by the help of my own early studies, that Jane Austen is not foreseeing, and casting mockery on some modern sensational novels in this passage. She is simply borrowing from, and holding up to ridicule, a leading incident in the once popular romance of "The Children of the Abbey," by Elizabeth Helme.

[40] If Jane Austen be right—and she was a great judge of human nature—in the implication that an eager, enthusiastic young reader is impelled to reproduce in personal experience what he or she reads, and if modern sensational novels come to be *lived* by our young men and women, where shall we look—how shall we answer for the wrong done by our idiotic, noxious, light literature?

[41] A period of time which would now suffice to take a traveller from London to Brussels with ease.

[42] The Morlands were "gentlefolks," but that did not prevent all the fine stitching required by the family being done as a matter of course by the ladies.

[43] Concerning this gentleman, Jane Austen says, with one of her merry gibes, “I have only to add (aware that the rules of composition forbid the introduction of a character not connected with my fable) that this was the very gentleman whose negligent servant left behind him that collection of washing bills, resulting from a long visit to Northanger, by which my heroine was involved in one of her most alarming adventures.”

[44] But “Northanger Abbey” has another moral—a warning against romance run mad.

[Pg 200]



EMMA. [45]

I.



Emma Woodhouse, whose Christian name supplies the title to the novel in which she figures as heroine, is one of Jane Austen’s lively, warm-hearted girls; but her personality is rendered quite distinct from that of Elizabeth Bennet by a thousand light yet significant touches. Emma’s circumstances alone would have sufficed, with the moulding power which such influences have in reality, and in the hands of a true artist, to shape her—always within certain limits—those of a well-principled, well-educated, essentially feminine girl, who is also a thorough lady, to different ends.

The novel of “Emma” is largely the record of the girl-heroine’s rash blunders and errors; but to me it is instructive and comforting to find the faults, with their impressive enough lessons, not only so girlish, but always within the region, I may say, of an innocent, upright, kindly, well-bred girl, whose many failings lean to virtue’s side. Emma Woodhouse is as incapable of deliberate undutifulness, dishonourable double-

dealing, heartless levity, or disgraceful imprudence, and the coarse, evil-minded rubbing shoulders with vice, as[Pg 201] I not only earnestly hope, but fervently believe, every God-fearing, virtuous, loving girl in any rank, in any nation, is to this day, however impudently and wickedly she may be travestied in the lower literature of her country.

Emma Woodhouse, at twenty-one years of age, is at the head of her father's comfortable, well-ordered establishment of Hartfield, in the village of Highbury, sixteen miles from London, where Emma's elder sister Isabella, who has been married for several years, is settled.

The two sisters are the sole children of Mr. Woodhouse, who has been a widower since Emma was a child. But her dead mother's place has been well supplied by an excellent governess, chaperon, and family friend. Miss Taylor, who marries and settles unexceptionably, with a worthy husband, in a country house at half a mile's distance from Hartfield.

Emma is introduced to the reader on the afternoon of Miss Taylor's wedding-day, left, for the first time in her life, to dine and spend a long evening with her father, a most amiable man, but a confirmed invalid, whose valetudinarian weaknesses and absurdities Jane Austen often makes irresistibly ridiculous—though all the time she treats him with larger-hearted, gentler consideration than is to be found in her manner of dealing with the foibles of the characters in “Pride and Prejudice,” and “Northanger Abbey;” for the very good reason that the authoress, when she wrote “Emma,” was no longer the brilliant, rather hard girl, but the mature merciful, woman. Between the writing of “Pride and Prejudice” and “Emma” she had learnt a grand lesson—the acquisition of which, though it cost the labour of a lifetime, would be well worth the time and trouble—that of tolerance: “to make allowance for us all,” which is not the mere result of a facile, careless temper, or a secret fellow-feeling with the offender in his offence, or a low moral standard, but is simply the widened sympathy and[Pg 202] deepened comprehension, both of the better Christian and the greater genius. Thus Mr. Woodhouse is respectable and lovable, in spite of his mild egotism and foolish hypochondria; while Miss Bates—one of the gems of the book—is still more winning in her singleness of heart and inexhaustible contentment and charity, along with her shallow simplicity, thorough humdrumness, and boundless garrulity.

While her father is taking his after-dinner nap Emma contemplates, a little ruefully, the prospect of many such *tête-à-tête* dinners and long evenings. Yet though Jane Austen tells us plainly that the real evils to which Emma is exposed consist of her having too much of her own way, and being slightly inclined to think too well of herself, she is full of tender reverence and care for her father, in deed even more than in word. All

through their history she considers his well-being as the first thing, never hesitates to make sacrifices to ensure it, and caters for his entertainment with the anxious, womanly forethought of a much older and wiser person. In the same way, though it is distinctly a disadvantage and stumbling-block to Emma Woodhouse—not only that the Woodhouses are the persons of greatest consequence in their social circle, but that the circle over which Emma reigns, far too entirely for her own good, is composed of the most commonplace narrow elements that can be found in any village or country neighbourhood—and though Emma wearies of it, becomes impatient of it, is guilty of girlish ebullitions of fretting and fuming where her engagements and acquaintances are concerned—still she never once behaves with the absolute insolence, hardly with the superciliousness, of underbred, ungenerous, self-engrossed youth, exulting in its passing advantages, spurning at what it can see of the defects and infirmities of an older, perhaps more incapable, and illiterate generation, while it is blind in its ignorance to indemnifying stores of homely wisdom and experience.

The claims of hospitality are sacred to the girl, and [Pg 203] she is always not only a good woman, but a gentlewoman. We are sure that such vulgar, mean words as “old frumps” and “old tabbies” have never soiled Emma Woodhouse’s lips. Once she so far forgets herself as to prove guilty of being noisy and conspicuous at a picnic, and in the course of that indiscretion of publicly taking off and laughing at an old friend; but Emma does not require the sharp rebuke of the hero to be bitterly sorry for the offence, very much ashamed of it, and eagerly desirous to atone for it by all the kindness in her power.

On the evening of Miss Taylor’s wedding-day, Emma is striving to chat cheerfully with her father, who, fond of everybody he is used to, hates to part with any one of them, hates changes of every kind, and matrimony as the cause of change, and keeps speaking of the fortunate bride with uncalled-for compassion. “Poor Miss Taylor! I wish she were here again. What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!”

“I cannot agree with you, papa;” Emma tries to arrest his lamentations, and to put the step which has been taken in the pleasantest light, by dwelling on the excellence of Mr. Weston’s character and temper (Jane Austen is apt to bring forward temper as of cardinal importance), on Miss Taylor’s natural satisfaction in having a house of her own—for how often they will be going to see her and she will be coming to see them. They must begin, they must go and pay their wedding visit very soon.

“My dear, how am I to get so far?” objects plaintive Mr. Woodhouse. “Randall’s is such a distance, I could not walk half so far.”

“No, papa! nobody thought of your walking. We must go in the carriage, to be sure.”

“The carriage! But James will not like to put the horses to, for such a little way; and where are the poor horses to be, while we are paying our visit?”^[46]

[Pg 204]

“They are to be put into Mr. Weston’s stables, papa. You know we have settled that already. We talked it all over with Mr. Weston last night. And as for James, you may be very sure he will always like going to Randalls, because of his daughter’s being housemaid there. I only doubt whether he will ever take us anywhere else. That was your doing, papa. You got Hannah that good place. Nobody thought of Hannah till you mentioned her—James is so obliged to you.”

Mr. Woodhouse’s kindness and innocent self-importance are equally gratified by being reminded of this good deed. He is enticed to expatiate on civil, pretty-spoken Hannah, for whom he has procured an advantageous place—not the least of its advantages in Mr. Woodhouse’s eyes being, that when James goes over to see his daughter, he will carry her news of the family at Hartfield.

Emma spares no exertions to encourage the happier train of thought, and by the help of backgammon is sanguine about getting her father tolerably through the evening, when a frequent visitor, another near neighbour, walks in, and renders the backgammon-table unnecessary.

“Mr. Knightley, a sensible man about seven or eight and thirty, was not only a very old and intimate friend of the family, but connected with it as the elder brother of Isabella Woodhouse’s husband.”

Did ever hero enter more unassumingly on the scene? Was ever even the merest walking gentleman more succinctly or prosaically described? And yet George Knightley is a very hero of heroes, far in advance of Darcy in “Pride and Prejudice” where the highest manliness and generosity of character are in question.

I shall only pause a moment to remark that Jane Austen, in depriving Mr. Knightley of the bloom of youth, goes in the teeth of contemporary standards of age to which she herself paid deference in “Sense and [Pg 205] Sensibility,” when she made Marianne Dashwood regard Colonel Brandon—a contemporary of Mr. Knightley’s—as quite an old man, fitted for flannel vests and rheumatism.

To Mr. Knightley Emma starts an idea which has taken possession of her susceptible imagination, and which has a considerable influence on her later conduct.

“I made the match, you know, four years ago,” she says triumphantly, in allusion to the topic of the day. “To have it take place, and be proved in the right when so many people said Mr. Weston would never marry again, may comfort me for anything.”

Mr. Knightley shakes his head at her. He has known her from infancy, seen her grow up with all that is charming in her, only slightly spoilt. He has more than an old friend’s regard for her, but he is also one of the few persons among her friends who sees her faults, and tells her of them—a process not particularly agreeable to Emma, and still more distasteful to her doting father; so that she has to assert stoutly, as if she liked the censure, “Mr. Knightley loves to find fault with me, you know, in a joke, only in a joke. We always say what we like to each other.”

In defiance of Mr. Knightley’s shake of the head—indeed, spurred on by it—Emma insists that she arranged the match from the day Mr. Weston gallantly went and borrowed two umbrellas from Farmer Mitchell’s, and brought them to her and Miss Taylor when it began to drizzle in Broadway Lane. Emma boasts of the success of her scheme, and laughingly announces herself a future match-maker.

She does not go unchallenged by Mr. Knightley.

“I do not know what you mean by ‘success,’” he says, and observes, with brotherly bluntness and irony, that her time has been properly and delicately spent if she has been endeavouring for the last four years to bring about a marriage—a worthy employment for a young lady’s mind. Then he treats her pretensions [Pg 206] with smiling scorn, and alleges she made a lucky guess, which is all that can be said.

Emma argues that she promoted Mr. Weston’s visits to Hartfield, and when her father begs in all sincerity that she will make no more matches, craves mischievously to be allowed one exception. “Only one more, papa, only for Mr. Elton. Poor Mr. Elton!—you like Mr. Elton, papa—I must look about for a wife for him. He has been here a whole year, and he has fitted up his house so comfortably that it would be a shame to have him single any longer; and I thought when he was joining their hands to-day, he looked so very much as if he would like to have the same kind office done for him! I think very well of Mr. Elton, and this is the only way of doing him service.”

“Invite him to dinner, Emma, and help him to the best of the fish and the chicken,” said Mr. Knightley, “but leave him to choose his own wife. Depend upon it, a man of six or seven and twenty can take care of himself.”

My readers will observe that Emma is as disengaged and disinterested in making matches for her friends as if she were a young matron. She has not a notion of the incumbency of marriage on herself, as even Jane and Elizabeth Bennet felt it, to a

certain extent, to be an obligation on them. There is no worldly necessity for it in Emma's case. She is the independent mistress of Hartfield, at the head of her indulgent father's establishment, and amply provided for in the future. Jane Austen's women, as a rule, are not too susceptible. Love and marriage for themselves are not the beginning, middle, and end of their dreams. They are quite willing to grant due prominence to other influences and interests. They would have blushed to have been engrossed by one passion, however lawful—even honourable. It is only because Catherine Morland is very young and simple that she is so entranced by Henry Tilney's attentions. As it is, had the couple been finally separated, she would have submitted to the inevitable,[Pg 207] and been content in time without him. Fanny Price's devotion to her cousin Edmund is the habit of many years, and is largely made up of gratitude for constant protection and kindness. When Edmund Bertram's marriage to Mary Crawford appears certain, and when Henry Crawford is wooing Fanny with manly ardour and tender consideration for her difficulties, she is in a fair way—Jane Austen does not conceal it—for transferring her gentle affections from Edmund to Henry. The author's older women are fine, sensible creatures, capable of being useful and happy in all the relations of life. They can love, with what unselfish fidelity after hope is gone, Anne Elliot shows; but they are always mistresses of themselves, never love-sick—the poor puppets and slaves of passion.

Mr. Weston, Miss Taylor's husband, has been a widower like Mr. Woodhouse, and his son by the first wife is destined to play a prominent part in the story. Frank Churchill has been early adopted by a wealthy, childless uncle and aunt—his mother's relations—who give him their name, and are to make him their heir. He has been seldom seen in Highbury, but his praises have gone before him, and it does not diminish his popularity that he writes “a very handsome letter” to his stepmother, though he is not able to pay her a visit.

Within the round of Hartfield visiting—abridged, as it is, by Mr. Woodhouse's delicate health and invalid habits—are Donwell Abbey,^[47] Mr. Knightley's seat; the vicarage occupied by the young bachelor clergyman, Mr. Elton; the houses in the village which belong respectively to Mr. and Mrs. Perry, the country doctor and his wife; Mrs. Bates, the widow of the late vicar, and her daughter; and Mrs. Goddard, who was the mistress of a school—not a seminary.

Jane Austen gives her view of the education of the period, which was in a transition state, in her definition of a school as distinguished from a seminary—not “an[Pg 208] establishment, or anything which professed, in long sentences of refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality, upon new principles and new systems, and where young ladies, for enormous pay, might be

screwed out of health and into vanity—but a real, honest, old-fashioned boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies.” These views were regarded as eminently sensible, moderate, and practical in their day; and no doubt there was, and is, some truth in them. At the same time, the general notion of education is narrow and prejudiced, to be held by so able a woman.

Mr. Woodhouse’s habits make him go abroad rarely, but he is fond of company in a quiet way at home, and Emma finds such company is best secured in the form of “tea visits” from such accommodating old neighbours as the Bateses and Mrs. Goddard. She is delighted to see her father look comfortable, and very much pleased with herself for contriving things so well; but the prosings of the elderly and homely guests do not prove very congenial entertainment for the bright, clever young girl. Therefore she welcomes Mrs. Goddard’s respectful request to be allowed to bring a parlour boarder,^[48] Miss Smith, with her.

Harriet Smith is a plump, blooming, blue-eyed, sweet-tempered girl, whose beauty delights Emma’s eye, while her innocent deference and gratitude, together with her unqualified admiration for everything at Hartfield—including its young mistress—touch Emma’s heart and flatter her vanity. She determines, in modern parlance, to “cultivate” Harriet Smith, who is to a great extent friendless, to improve her, to raise her into better society, and to make a companion of her.

[Pg 209]

Emma does not scruple to propose detaching the girl from the only friends she has—a farmer’s family named Martin. Some of the daughters had been school-fellows of Harriet’s at Mrs. Goddard’s, and they and their mother and brother had been kind to her. These Martins are tenants of Mr. Knightley at the Abbey Mill Farm, and Emma knows that he thinks highly of them; but in her youthful aristocratic fashion she leaps to the conclusion that, from their rank in life, they must be coarse and unpolished. She will be doing a good deed to separate Harriet from her former allies, to whom the girl is so superior. It will be a delightful and praise-worthy task to improve and introduce into Emma’s world this very pretty, modest young creature, who is, of course, to look up to her benefactress and attach herself closely to her.

There is a comical, often-quoted *contretemps* constantly occurring at these parties of Emma’s. They usually end with suppers,^[49] in which such little delicacies as minced chicken and scalloped oysters, carefully provided by the young hostess, are peculiarly acceptable to the guests, whose narrow incomes for the most part necessitate frugal

living. But though poor Mr. Woodhouse would have made his guests welcome to anything and everything, his care for their health, in an egotistical reflection of his own experience, causes him to grieve that they will eat. “He loved to have the cloth laid, because it had been the fashion of his youth, but his conviction of suppers being very unwholesome made him rather sorry to see anything put upon it. Such another small basin of thin gruel as his own was all that he could with thorough self-approbation recommend, though he might constrain himself, while the ladies were comfortably clearing away the nicer things, to say—

“Mrs. Bates, let me propose your venturing on one of these eggs? An egg boiled very soft is not unwholesome. Serle understands boiling an egg better[Pg 210] than anybody; I would not recommend an egg boiled by anybody else. But you need not be afraid; they are very small, you see; one of our small eggs will not hurt you. Miss Bates, let Emma help you to a *little* bit of tart—a *very* little bit. Ours are all apple-tarts. You need not be afraid of unwholesome preserves here. I do not advise the custard. Mrs. Goddard, what say you to *half* a glass of wine?—a small half-glass put into a tumbler of water? I do not think it could disagree with you.”

Imagine the dilemma of the poor, baulked ladies, with their healthy appetites and the little treats laid before them, while the guests could hardly refuse the well-meant advice of the host.

But Emma comes to the rescue, allows her father to talk, but supplies the wants of her company in a much more satisfactory style. She is never indifferent to doing the honours of her father’s house “well and attentively.” Well-bred girls of Emma Woodhouse’s era would in her position have felt ashamed to be found “mooning” and self-absorbed, destitute of any sense of responsibility and thought for others. Nobody then described selfishness with enthusiasm, as an irresistible charm and crowning merit.

Harriet Smith’s intimacy at Hartfield is soon a settled thing. Emma does nothing by halves. As for the simple, docile girl whom Emma has taken up, Harriet is only too proud and pleased to be thus distinguished by the beautiful, “elegant” Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield.

Emma amuses herself by encouraging Harriet’s prattle, which, when it forsakes school-life, runs persistently on the two months’ holiday she had spent with the Martins at Abbey Mill Farm. At first Harriet is in blissful ignorance of the social inferiority of the Farm, and talks with exultation of the two parlours—one of them quite as large as Mrs. Goddard’s drawing-room; the upper maid, who had lived five-and-twenty years with Mrs. Martin; the eight cows—one of[Pg 211] them a little Welsh cow,

a very pretty little Welsh cow, of which Harriet had been so fond Mrs. Martin had said it should be called *her* cow; and the handsome summer-house in the garden, in which, some day next year, they are all to drink tea. And Harriet, after a little encouragement, shows no dislike to talk of the young farmer who is the master of the house. He has shared in the moonlight walks and merry games of his sisters and their friend. "He had gone three miles round one day in order to bring her some walnuts because she had said how fond she was of them, and in everything else he was so very obliging. He had his shepherd's son into the parlour one night on purpose to sing to her. She was very fond of singing. He could sing a little himself. She believed he was very clever, and understood everything. He had a very fine flock, and while she was with them he had been bid more for his wool than anybody in the county. She believed everybody spoke well of him. His mother and sisters were very fond of him. Mrs. Martin had told her one day (there was a blush as she said it) that it was impossible for anybody to be a better son, and therefore she was sure whenever he married, he would make a good husband. Not that she *wanted* him to marry. She was in no hurry at all."

"Well done, Mrs. Martin," thought Emma; "you know what you are about."

"And when she had come away Mrs. Martin was so very kind as to send Mrs. Goddard a beautiful goose—the finest goose Mrs. Goddard had ever seen. Mrs. Goddard had dressed it on a Sunday, and asked all the three teachers—Miss Nash, and Miss Prince, and Miss Richardson—to sup with her."

"Mr. Martin, I suppose, is not a man of information beyond the line of his own business. He does not read?"

"Oh, yes—that is, no—I do not know, but I believe he has read a good deal, but not what you would think anything of. He reads the agricultural reports,[Pg 212] and some other books that lie in one of the window-seats, but he reads all *them* to himself. But sometimes of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of 'Elegant Extracts,' very entertaining. And I know he has read the 'Vicar of Wakefield.' He never read the 'Romance of the Forest,' nor 'The Children of the Abbey.' He had never heard of such books before I mentioned them, but he is determined to get them now, as soon as ever he can."

Emma sets herself to change all these cordial relations with the Martins, above all the appreciation of young Martin, in which she sees special danger for her *protégée*.

Emma begins by gently "setting down" Harriet as to the position of yeomen, and the improbability of her—Emma Woodhouse—having noticed one of them, since Harriet supposes Miss Woodhouse must have seen and known Robert Martin when he rode to

market. On the occasion of an accidental encounter between the young farmer and the two girls, Emma takes care to let Harriet perceive that she thinks the young man very plain and clownish in his air. Emma makes Harriet contrast his lack of “gentility”—which, by the way, was not so odious a word last century—with the well-bred manners of Mr. Elton, among others of their acquaintance.

In fact, it is for the young vicar that Emma destines her friend; and in order to bring about an attachment and marriage, which she considers will be advantageous to both, Emma encourages Mr. Elton to spend many of his disengaged evenings at Hartfield, where she has always Harriet Smith with her. The young mistress of the house is altogether oblivious of the fact that the gentleman who, though well enough disposed, is by no means without self-love, and a head which is liable to be turned, may altogether mistake her graciousness.

Mr. Knightley does not approve of the great intimacy between Emma and Harriet Smith. There is no [Pg 213] use in Mrs. Weston, Emma’s attached old friend, urging that it may induce Emma to read more; as she wishes to see Harriet better informed, the girls will read together.

“Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up, at various times, of books that she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were, very well chosen, and neatly arranged—sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen, I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit, that I preserved it some time, and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting a course of steady reading from Emma.”

Mr. Knightley adds his estimate of the pretty, popular girl. “Emma is spoiled by being the cleverest of her family. At ten years’ old she had the misfortune of being able to answer questions which puzzled her sister at seventeen. She was always quick and assured, Isabella slow and diffident. And ever since she was twelve, Emma has been mistress of the house, and of you all.”

He inveighs against the unsuitable friendship between Emma and Harriet Smith, as sure to be injurious to both. Harriet is an unconscious flatterer. Her ignorance is in itself hourly flattery. On the other hand, Hartfield will put Harriet out of conceit with her natural sphere. She will only grow refined enough to be uncomfortable among the people with whom her lot is cast.

In the middle of their argument, the two friends break off the dispute to agree in their affectionate admiration of Emma’s person. Here is a graphic and charming picture of

the heroine, which removes her attractions far out of the category of what is sickly and fantastic:—"Such an eye! the true hazel eye—and so brilliant! regular features, open countenance, with a complexion—oh, what a bloom of full health! and such a pretty height and size! such a firm and upright figure! There is health not merely in her bloom, but[Pg 214] in her air, her head, her glance. One hears something of a child's being 'the picture of health;' now, Emma always gives me the idea of being the complete picture of grown-up health."

Yes, indeed, that is what every girl—plain or handsome, should desire to be, for her own good and that of all connected with her. In a summary of the bountiful gifts bestowed on the late Catherine Tait, wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, what were reckoned as not the least were the health and strength, beyond those of ordinary women, which fitted her for the worthy performance of her many and arduous duties. Will girls never lay the lesson to heart in time, before they so often fritter and fling away, by culpable neglect and recklessness, one of God's greatest boons?

Mr. Knightley returns to the charge of the mischievous association of the girls, until he stirs up Mrs. Weston to protest, with regard to Emma: "Where shall we see a better daughter, a kinder sister, a truer friend?"

"Very well," he answers, "I will not plague you any more. Emma shall be an angel, and I will keep my spleen to myself till Christmas brings John and Isabella. John loves Emma with a reasonable and therefore not a blind affection; and Isabella always thinks as he does, except when he is not quite frightened enough about the children. I am sure of having their opinions with me."

"I have a very sincere interest in Emma," Mr. Knightley repeats. "Isabella does not seem more my sister; has never excited a greater interest; perhaps, hardly so great. There is an anxiety, a curiosity in what one feels for Emma. I wonder what will become of her?"

"So do I," said Mrs. Weston gently, "very much."

"She always declares she will never marry, which, of course, means just nothing at all. But I have no idea that she has yet ever seen a man she cared for. It would not be a bad thing for her to be very much in[Pg 215] love, with a proper object. I should like to see Emma in love, and in some doubt of a return; it would do her good. But there is nobody hereabouts to attract her; and she goes so seldom from home."

"There does, indeed, seem as little to tempt her to break her resolution at present," says Mrs. Weston, "as can well be."

The truth is, Mrs. Weston and her husband have a pet plan for their favourite Emma, which is not to be disclosed prematurely.

Emma paints Harriet's miniature, and Mr. Elton lends all the help of his advice, while complimenting Miss Woodhouse on her talent for drawing, which she regards as his gratitude on Harriet's account.

Emma takes care to fix upon Mr. Elton as the person with whom she can entrust her little picture to be conveyed to London and framed; while he shows a sufficient sense of her confidence. "He will suit Harriet exactly," reflects Emma, complacently; "but he does sigh, and languish, and study for compliments, rather more than I could endure as a principal."

In the meantime, Harriet receives a direct proposal of marriage from young Martin, couched in manly, unaffected terms.

Poor little Harriet, who is really as guileless and kind-hearted as she is simple and silly, is at first much and favourably impressed.

But Emma's influence, though she does not mean to exercise it unduly, causes Harriet, not without lingering regret, to resolve to decline the offer.

"I could not have visited Mrs. Robert Martin, of Abbey Mill Farm," says Emma, and Harriet is fixed in her resolve.

"That would have been too dreadful, dear Miss Woodhouse. I would not give up the pleasure and honour of being acquainted with you, for anything in the world."

Mr. Knightley comes in a happy mood to Hartfield, to tell Emma something that will please her about [Pg 216] her little friend, Harriet Smith. Though he has condemned the friendship, he can appreciate Harriet's girlish good qualities; he is even magnanimous enough to compliment Emma on having cured her companion of her school-girl giggle. Robert Martin has confided his attachment to his friend and landlord, who is eager to inform Emma that Harriet Smith will soon have an offer of marriage from a most unexceptionable quarter—Robert Martin is the man. Her visit to Abbey Mill in the summer has done his business, and he means to marry her.

"He is very obliging," said the well-informed Emma; "but is he sure that Harriet means to marry him?"

"Well, well—means to make her an offer, then; will that do?" Mr. Knightley, "who had nothing of ceremony about him," conceives that Emma is speaking from some scruple of womanly dignity as to his mode of expressing himself. He enlarges on the

advantages of the marriage, and his satisfaction with it. He ends with the laughing supposition that Martin may be detaining Harriet in Highbury at that very moment, and she may not be thinking him one of those “tiresome wretches”—as Emma has just styled the Highbury gossips.

“Pray, Mr. Knightley,” said Emma, who has been smiling to herself, “how do you know that Mr. Martin did not speak yesterday?”

Certainly he did not absolutely know, but he had understood Harriet Smith was with her all that day.

“Come,” said she, “I will tell you something in return for what you have told me. He did speak yesterday; that is, he wrote, and was refused.”

Mr. Knightley is incredulous and indignant. At last he accuses Emma, with reason, as the moving spirit in the step Harriet has taken. “You have been no friend to Harriet Smith, Emma,” he said; and with equal sense and sincerity he contrasts Harriet with Robert Martin, to the advantage of the latter, and [Pg 217] remarks how happy the girl had been among the Martins, till Emma’s injudicious interference.

In the hot argument which ensues, Mr. Knightley takes occasion to tell Emma that if she intends to make a match between Elton and Harriet, her labour will be in vain.

Emma laughs and disclaims.

But Mr. Knightley’s penetration is not to be baffled, and he goes on to assure her Elton will not do. He is a good sort of young man, and a respectable vicar of Highbury, but not at all likely to make an imprudent marriage.

It is Emma’s turn to be incredulous, though she will not admit her intentions.

The two part in mutual vexation, which causes a coolness between them for weeks.

Emma’s pride is now piqued to accomplish her design; her head gets so full of it, that she is ill-judged enough to let Harriet see what she wishes and expects, and actually talks the foolish girl—who is, at least, perfectly unassuming—into a persuasion that she has inspired Mr. Elton with a passion for her, the belief in which is more than sufficient to create an answering passion in Harriet’s soft, childish heart.

We have next an example of an old favourite employment with girls. Instead of the reading, which never went beyond a few chapters, the only literary pursuit which engages Harriet, and in which Emma, too, takes an interest, the only mental provision she is making for the evening of life, ^[50] is the collecting and transcribing all the riddles of every sort she can come across.

These were days when, in gatherings of young people even a little above Harriet in rank and education, the company in cropped hair and white frocks, in Brutuses and high-necked, short-waisted coats, played at such ingenious games as “The Traveller,” and circulated [Pg 218] riddles for the general entertainment. A new riddle was quite a precious possession to a girl, nearly as good as a new song.

Miss Nash, Mrs. Goddard’s head teacher, had written out as many as three hundred riddles, and Harriet hopes to have more.

Mr. Woodhouse is almost as much interested in the work as the girls, and tries in vain to revive old recollections of the excellent riddles of his youth, which always end in “Kitty, a fair but frozen maid.”

Mr. Elton, who is constantly with the girls, is induced to furnish a riddle of his own composition—though, with the bashfulness of incipient authorship, he passes it off as a charade which a friend of his has addressed to a young lady, the object of his admiration—and he is gone the next moment. The charade is as follows:—

“My first displays the wealth and pomp of kings,

Lords of the earth! their luxury and ease;

Another view of man my second brings,

Behold him there, the monarch of the seas!

“But, ah! united what reverse we have,

Man’s boasted power and freedom all are flown;

Lord of the earth and sea, he bends a slave,

And woman, lovely woman, reigns alone.

“Thy ready wit the word will soon supply,

May its approval beam in that soft eye!”

Emma reads, ponders, catches the meaning “courtship,” and happily confident that Mr. Elton, is coming to the point, hands the paper to Harriet.

“‘That soft eye’ can only refer to Harriet,” thinks Emma. “‘Thy ready wit.’ Humph! Harriet’s ready wit! All the better. A man must be very much in love to describe her so.”

Harriet’s ready wit exhibits itself in not having an idea of the answer. Can it be “Woman,” or “Neptune,” or “Trident?”

[Pg 219]

Emma is slightly exasperated; but she takes pains to explain the riddle in detail, and to draw the strongest inferences from its subject, while Harriet beams and blushes with joy and confusion.

Emma now becomes as assiduous as ever Mrs. Bennet, of Longbourn House, showed herself with regard to her daughter, Jane, and her lover Bingley, in making opportunities for Mr. Elton to propose to Harriet Smith.

But lovers are perverse, and will not always avail themselves of the best-planned assistance.

In the course of a walk which Emma and Harriet chance to take past the vicarage, in which the girls are overtaken by the vicar, Emma, having discovered that Harriet had never been inside the house, perpetrates a *ruse* to enable her friend to see her future home. Emma contrives to break her boot-lace, then announces the accident, and asks Mr. Elton to allow her to go into the vicarage and get a bit of riband or string from his housekeeper to keep the boot on.

Mr. Elton looks all happiness, and is as alert in conducting the ladies to his house as can be wished. But though Emma retires with the housekeeper, and stays as long away as she can manage, she finds on her return that the two standing together at one of the windows, however friendly, are not yet an engaged couple.

Christmas brings Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley and their children to enliven Hartfield.

Mrs. John Knightley is a pretty, elegant little woman, gentle and quiet, wrapt up in her family—a devoted wife, a doting mother, and so tenderly attached to her father and sister, that but for those higher ties, a warmer love might have seemed impossible. She has inherited her father's delicate constitution, is over-careful of her children, has many fears and nerves, and is as fond of her own doctor in town as her father can be of his Mr. Perry.

Mr. John Knightley is tall, gentlemanlike, very [Pg 220] clever, a rising barrister. He is domestic and estimable in private life. But he has a cold, dry manner, and he is capable of being sometimes out of humour. He has all the mental clearness and quickness his wife lacks, and he can on occasions act an ungracious, or say a severe thing. He is not a great favourite with his sister-in-law. She is quick in feeling the little injuries to Isabella which Isabella never feels for herself. Perhaps Emma might have passed over more, had his manners been more flattering to Isabella's sister; but they are only those of a calmly kind brother and friend. However, his chief offence is, now

and then, a want of forbearance with Mr. Woodhouse's peculiarities and fidgetiness. Mr. John Knightley has really a great regard for his father-in-law, but sometimes the younger man cannot resist delivering a rational remonstrance, or a sharp retort equally ill-bestowed. It does not often happen, but it occurs too frequently for Emma's charity.

Though such collisions do not usually take place early in the Knightleys' visits, one is brought about on the very evening of John Knightley and his wife's arrival.

Mr. Woodhouse and Isabella are very happy, expatiating on the merits of a basin of nice, smooth gruel—thin, but not too thin—and exchanging their little valetudinarian confidences, when, unfortunately, a reference is made to Mrs. Knightley's last sea-bathing experience at Southend, seeing that the two great medical authorities of the father and daughter—Perry and Wingfield—differ on the respective recommendations of Southend and Cromer.

"Southend is an unhealthy place," Mr. Woodhouse harps. "Perry was surprised to hear you had fixed on Southend."

"We had all our health perfectly well there," Isabella defends her side of the question. "Mr. Wingfield says it is entirely a mistake to suppose the place unhealthy. I am sure he may be depended upon, for he thoroughly understands the nature of the [Pg 221] air. His own brother and family have been there repeatedly."

"You should have gone to Cromer, my dear," insists Mr. Woodhouse. "Perry was a week at Cromer once, and he holds it to be the best of all the sea-bathing places. Better not move at all, better stay in London altogether, than travel forty miles to get into a worse air. That is just what Perry said. It seemed to him a very ill-judged measure."

John Knightley is able to stand this no longer. "Mr. Perry," he said, "would do well to keep his opinion till it is asked for. I may be allowed, I hope, the use of my judgment as well as Mr. Perry. I want his directions no more than his drugs." Then, more coolly, "If Mr. Perry can tell me how to convey a wife and five children a distance of a hundred and thirty miles, with no greater expense and inconvenience than a distance of forty, I should be as willing to prefer Cromer to Southend, as he could be himself."

"True, true," said George Knightley, hastily changing the subject, and warding off further danger, as Emma is accustomed to do. Still, Mr. Woodhouse is rather agitated by such harsh reflections on his friend Perry—to whom he has, in fact, though unconsciously, been attributing many of his own feelings and expressions, Jane Austen adds with a masterly touch—so that it requires all the soothing attentions of his daughters to set him at ease again.

Mr. Knightley of Donwell Abbey had joined the family at dinner. Emma had recognised his right to do so, and she had hoped that they might be friends again, for it was time their disagreement should end. She trusted their nephews and nieces would serve as a bond of union, and help in the peace-making. Accordingly, when he found her with the youngest, a child of eight months, in her arms, though he looked grave, and spoke shortly to begin with, he soon took the child out of her arms, with the unceremoniousness of restored amity.

[Pg 222]

The conviction gave Emma first satisfaction, and then a temptation to sauciness. It was a comfort they thought alike on their nephews and nieces, she said.

He was not unwilling to renew the old discussions half-banteringly, acquiescing in the mock humility of her assertion that, in their differences, she must always be in the wrong. Yes, and reason good, he said; he was sixteen years old when she was born, and he had the advantage of not being a pretty woman and a spoiled child. But “tell your aunt, little Emma, that she ought to set you a better example than to be renewing old grievances.”

“I only want to know,” said Emma, “that Mr. Martin is not very, very bitterly disappointed.”

“A man cannot be more so,” was his short, full answer.

“Ah! indeed, I am very sorry,” Emma made the penitent acknowledgment; “come, shake hands with me.”

This ceremony had just taken place with great cordiality, when John Knightley made his appearance, and “How d’ye do, George?” and “John, how are you?” succeeded in the true English style (which has not warmed much in the course of nearly another century), burying under a calmness that seemed all but indifference the real attachment which would have led either of them, if requisite, to do everything for the good of the other.

There could not be a happier creature than Mrs. John Knightley in her visit to Hartfield, going about every morning among her old acquaintances, with her five children, and talking every evening over what she had done with her father and sister.

The animation of the Knightleys’ visit nerves Mr. Woodhouse to the exertion of dining out with them at Randalls; where Mr. and Mrs. Weston consult his comfort in every respect, by fixing an early dinner-hour, and limiting their invited guests to his family and particular set, including the elder Mr. Knightley, Mr. Elton, and Harriet Smith.

[Pg 223]

The incidents in connection with this dinner-party furnish a strange and unwelcome revelation to Emma's mind. In the first place, Harriet is attacked by a feverish sore-throat, and cannot form one of the party. Emma considers that Mr. Elton ought to make an excuse to be absent also—in fact, she is so obliging as to furnish him with one. She complains of the coldness of the weather,—wonders how any one would dine out who could help it. She and her father cannot disappoint the Westons, but there is no such obligation on Mr. Elton. She detects some hoarseness in his voice already. With the duties of next day—Sunday—before him, she thinks it would be no more than common prudence in him to stay at home and take care of himself.

Mr. Elton looks as if he did not know what to answer. He is not accustomed to contradict a lady, especially when her anxiety for his welfare is of the most gratifying description. But the next moment, a little to her disgust, Emma hears him accept with alacrity an offer from John Knightley, to secure him from any exposure to the weather by giving him a seat in their carriage.

The second shock to Emma is John Knightley's hinting that Mr. Elton's exaggerated efforts to please ladies, culminate in his desire to oblige Emma.

She laughs the idea to scorn; still, as coming from a man of her brother-in-law's judgment and penetration, it annoys her.

There is additional discomposure in her drive in company with John Knightley and Mr. Elton, while her father and Isabella occupy the other carriage, to Randalls. Mr. Elton is in exasperatingly good spirits, in spite of the tidings which Emma takes care to convey to him, that there is no abatement in Harriet's indisposition. He outdoes himself in blandness. John Knightley, on the contrary, indulges in a fit of ill-humour at being dragged from the hearth-rug at Hartfield and his children's company at dessert, and[Pg 224] growls in the most approved fashion over the folly of dining out, the whole way between Hartfield and Randalls—Emma being unable to afford him the sedative of "Very true, my love!" which, no doubt, is administered by his usual travelling companion.

Mr. Elton's happy countenance and solicitous attentions haunt Emma all the evening, spoiling her pleasure, frightening her with the remembrance of John Knightley's view of the case, which she herself defines as "absurd and insufferable." In the drawing-room she is still farther offended by Mr. Elton's asking her to *promise him* not to expose herself to infection in visiting Harriet Smith, and calling upon Mrs. Weston to support him in his entreaty. "So scrupulous for others, so careless of herself. She

wanted me to nurse my cold by staying at home to-day, and yet will not promise to avoid the danger of catching an ulcerated sore-throat herself? Is that fair, Mrs. Weston? Judge between us." Well might Mrs. Weston look surprised, and Emma feel too much provoked to be able to answer him.

John Knightley comes into the room with a cool report that it is snowing hard, and a caustic congratulation of poor Mr. Woodhouse's spirit in venturing out with his carriage and horses in such weather.

Jolly Mr. Weston wishes that the roads may become impassable, to keep them all at Randalls.

Mr. Woodhouse and his elder daughter are in consternation. How can the chronic invalid face being overturned on the common, or the fond mother consent to be blocked up, for days and nights, from her children? (The country roads of last century were less trustworthy than those of to-day.)

Helpful George Knightley comes back from walking down the sweep and along Highbury Road, with the comforting assurance that matters are not nearly so bad as his brother and Mr. Weston have supposed. In some cases the ground is hardly white, and both of the coachmen agree there is no real difficulty.

[Pg 225]

Everybody is in a hurry to get off, and by John Knightley's forgetfulness in following his wife into her father's carriage, Emma finds herself, to her dismay, in the Knightleys' carriage, alone with Mr. Elton. She believes that he has drunk too much of the Westons' good wine,^[51] and will want to talk nonsense. To restrain him, she prepares to speak with exquisite calmness of the weather; but scarcely has she begun, scarcely have they passed the gate, when she finds Mr. Elton actually and unmistakably making violent love to her.

Emma clings to the refuge of thinking her companion half intoxicated; disgraceful as the excuse is—above all in a clergyman—it was not altogether unwarranted by the lax practices of the time.

But Mr. Elton has only drunk wine enough to elevate his spirits, not at all to confuse his intellect. Emma, in her trepidation and vexation, strives to parry his addresses and to recall him to his senses, by an attempt at playful reproach. "I am very much astonished, Mr. Elton. This to *me*! You take me for my friend. Any message to Miss Smith I shall be happy to deliver."

But Mr. Elton repeats, with undaunted assurance and a great show of amazement, “Message to Miss Smith!” what can she possibly mean?

“Mr. Elton, this is the most extraordinary conduct,” cries the distressed Emma. “You are not yourself; say no more, and I will endeavour to forget it.”

Far from it, Mr. Elton resumes the subject of his passion, and presses for a favourable answer.

As Emma’s notion of his inebriety yields to a conviction of his inconsistency and presumption, she speaks with fewer struggles for politeness; but her indignation is principally directed against what she declares is the contrast between his behaviour to Miss Smith during the last month—what she has herself witnessed, of his daily attentions,—and his present most unwarrantable [Pg 226] profession of love to herself, which is far, indeed, from affording her gratification.

“Good Heavens!” cries Mr. Elton, “what can be the meaning of this? Miss Smith—I never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence; never paid her any attentions but as your friend; never cared whether she were dead or alive but as your friend.”

This is plain speaking from the compliment-paying Mr. Elton; but worse is to come.

“Miss Smith, indeed! Oh! Miss Woodhouse, who can think of Miss Smith when Miss Woodhouse is near? No!” in accents meant to be insinuating, “I am sure you have seen and understood me.”

It has all been a miserable mistake, in the course of which Emma has not only grossly misled poor, foolish little Harriet, Emma has also fed with false hopes the conceit and interested motives—rather than the honest regard—of a vain, ambitious man, who has been seeking wealth and worldly position as the first recommendations in a wife.

Emma is struck dumb, and when she says nothing her silence is still farther misinterpreted.

“Charming Miss Woodhouse, allow me to interpret this interesting silence. It confesses that you have long understood me.”

Then Emma finds her voice: “No, sir, it confesses no such thing.”

She tells him again in no measured terms how completely she has misunderstood him. Shaken and staggered as she is by his behaviour, she still goes back to her persuasion of his attachment to Miss Smith. Does he mean to say he has never thought seriously of her?

“Never,” cries Elton, affronted in his turn. “I think seriously of Miss Smith! Miss Smith is a very good sort of girl, and I should be happy to see her respectably settled. I wish her extremely well, and, no doubt, there are men who would not object to—
Everybody has their own level; but as for myself, I am not, I think, quite so much at a loss, I need not so [Pg 227] totally despair of an equal alliance, as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith.”

The smallness of Mr. Elton’s nature is betrayed in his manner of speaking of Harriet at this time, as well as in many of his subsequent actions. He is not a fool—at least, not where men are concerned, like Mr. Collins in “Pride and Prejudice.” Mr. Elton is altogether a better-bred man. But in this last specimen of a clergyman who is at once a coxcomb and a fortune-hunter, Jane Austen deals another blow at parsonolatry. One must think of Henry Tilney, Edward Ferrars, and Edmund Bertram, to understand how heartily she respected her father’s cloth when it was worthily worn.

Mr. Elton is almost as obstinate as Emma, and hardly more flattering in reminding her of the encouragement he has received.

“Encouragement!” cries Emma, insulted by the word. “I gave you no encouragement, sir; you have been entirely mistaken in supposing it. I have seen you only as the admirer of my friend. In no other light could you have been more to me than a common acquaintance.”

“He was too angry to say another word, her manner too decided to invite supplication, and in this state of swelling resentment and mutually deep mortification they had to continue together a few minutes longer, for the fears of Mr. Woodhouse had confined them to a foot pace. If there had not been so much anger there would have been desperate awkwardness; but their straightforward emotions left no room for the little zigzags of embarrassment. Without knowing when the carriage turned into Vicarage Lane or when it stopped, they found themselves, all at once, at the door of his house; and he was out before another syllable passed. Emma then felt it indispensable to wish him a good night. The compliment was just returned, coldly and proudly; and under indescribable irritation of spirits she was then conveyed to Hartfield.”

It is a wretched business, Emma decides when she [Pg 228] has retired for the night, and her maid has curled her hair—in those days of curls—and she is left alone with full opportunity for the unpleasant operation of thinking. Such a blow for Harriet! That is the worst of all. Emma’s conscience and heart are in the right place, though her wilfulness and self-confidence may carry her away; so her first thought is, “If I had not persuaded Harriet into liking the man, I could have borne anything. He might have doubled his presumption to me—but poor Harriet!”

Emma cannot spare any pity for Mr. Elton's disappointment. She has never been personally vain, as George Knightley noted, and she is shrewd enough to comprehend the kind of attraction of Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, and her thirty thousand pounds, to Mr. Elton, the vicar of Highbury, without any connections to speak of, with only a moderate income, and nothing but his situation and civility to recommend him. She feels inclined at first to accuse him of double dealing in his manner towards Harriet and herself; and it is hard for her to be dislodged from the most sincere conviction that she has lent his forward advances to intimacy with herself, and his delusion as to her partiality to him, no encouragement.

But Emma's honesty is too great for her and her present peace. On looking back, she cannot help seeing how many incidents in connection with the miniature, his charade, &c., might have had a double significance. How far her own fancy had coloured looks and words; how much the wish had been father to the thought! Then, when she passes in review before her, her own constant invitations to Mr. Elton—the complaisance with which she treated all he said and did—her furbished-up apology for entering the vicarage, she blushes with shame at the misconstruction he might have put on such behaviour, and the sufficient though mistaken warrant she had afforded for such misconstruction. She heartily repents what she has done, wishes she had submitted to be warned by Mr. Knightley—almost [Pg 229] wishes she had consented to Harriet's marriage with Robert Martin.

It is a great relief to Emma when, by the time the snow-storm has ended, and Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley have returned to London, a ceremonious note comes from Mr. Elton to Mr. Woodhouse, announcing that he is about to comply with the pressing entreaties of some friends to pass a few weeks in Bath. His absence could not be better timed, and the unpleasant task of breaking to Harriet Smith his defection—or, rather, the worse explanation that he has never been her suitor—will be got over before he comes back. Emma is fain to trust that Harriet has not a retentive nature, and will soon forget her imaginary lover. But the match-maker is punished by Harriet's very meekness and uncomplainingness under the double injury—though it is some time before Emma recognises in her friend the weak tenacity of a nature which is feeble in its gentleness and guilelessness.

II.

Jane Fairfax enters presently on the scene. Jane is the grand-daughter of the old vicar, the daughter of a young officer who fell in action, and whose wife did not survive her loss. Their little child had been committed to the care of her affectionate grandmother and aunt, who, however, could only have afforded her the most slender advantages in

the way of education, had a compassionate fellow-officer of her late father not stepped forward, and taken the little girl to be educated with his own daughter. Jane's home from childhood to womanhood has, therefore, been with the family of Colonel Campbell, and she has only returned at intervals to visit her relatives, Mrs. and Miss Bates, at Highbury.

[Pg 230]

The intention had been that the unprovided-for girl should be trained to render herself independent by teaching. But her friends shrank from anticipating what Jane Austen calls "the evil of Jane Fairfax's going out into the world to earn her bread." Farther on in the book, the author expresses still more decidedly, through her heroine, her pity for a woman in Jane Fairfax's position. These were the settled opinions of gentlewomen in Jane Austen's generation. We cannot now regard them as either very liberal or very wholesome, in the light of what has been developed of womanly independence, usefulness, courage, and cheerfulness. Most people of native spirit and intelligence, whatever their grade, would now be disposed to regard Jane Fairfax's position, after she was grown up, in Colonel Campbell's family—however good and kind they might be—as more detrimental to Jane's self-respect, more disparaging in the eyes of others, more trying in every way, than encountering the ordeal of working for herself among comparative strangers.

Another—what I must call weakness and prejudice of the gifted writer, is visible here and elsewhere. In dwelling on the superior cultivation and refinement of the more intelligent and polished society which Jane Fairfax shared, while she resided in the London house of a man of good position and large income, to what she must have submitted to in the village of Highbury, in the house of her excellent but poorly-educated grandmother and aunt, whose narrow means are in keeping with their confined interests, I think Jane Austen's aristocratic bias carries her too far in the line of mere superficial advantages. True culture is not so dependent on rank and wealth; and culture, though something, is hardly of such importance as she makes it. A rough diamond is a great deal better worth than a polished pebble. But Jane Fairfax is the diamond, not the pebble; so that polish is not wasted on her. She has a very pleasing person, a good understanding, and, what is more to the purpose, an excellent heart,[Pg 231] which is not injured by her undesirable circumstances. She does not learn to despise and undervalue Highbury or her homely kindred, in London, among her influential friends. She is a sort of heroine in Highbury, when she comes there on her periodical visits.

Jane Austen gives Emma Woodhouse's impression of Jane Fairfax, when Emma sees Jane, after two years' absence. Jane is very elegant, remarkably elegant (an exploded term of commendation often used by Jane Austen, when she desires to impress on her readers somebody's special grace and refinement); and Emma has herself the highest value for elegance. "Her height was pretty, just such as almost everybody would think tall; her figure particularly graceful; her size a most becoming medium between fat and thin, though a slight appearance of ill-health seemed to point out the likeliest evil of the two. Emma could not but feel all this; and then her face, her features—there was more beauty in them altogether than she had remembered: it was not regular, but it was very pleasing beauty. Her eyes—a deep grey, with dark eyelashes and eyebrows—had never been denied their praise; but the skin, which she had been used to cavil at as wanting colour, had a clearness and delicacy which really needed no fuller bloom. It was a style of beauty of which elegance was the reigning character, and as such she must in honour, by all her principles, admire it; elegance of which, whether of person or mind, she saw so little in Highbury. There, not to be vulgar was distinction and merit."

Yet Emma has no inclination, or only the most fleeting disposition, to cultivate Jane's friendship. The fact is, the two girls, of the same age, have all their lives been held up to each other as most desirable companions and friends, until human nature, in its waywardness, has rebelled against the obligation.

George Knightley has told Emma very frankly that she does not like Jane Fairfax, because Emma sees in her the really accomplished young woman that Emma [Pg 232] wishes to be herself, but that she has not the self-denial and perseverance to become actually. Emma, in her best and most candid moments, is driven to own there is some truth in this accusation. At other times she defends her bad taste in preferring Harriet Smith as a friend, by asserting that she—Emma—can never get acquainted with Jane Fairfax. "She did not know how it was, but there was such coldness and reserve, such apparent indifference whether she pleased or not; and then her aunt was such an eternal talker! and she was made such a fuss with by everybody; and it was always imagined that they were to be so intimate; because their ages were the same, everybody had supposed they must be so fond of each other."

In the meantime Miss Campbell, with whom Jane had been brought up, though inferior to her friend both in beauty and accomplishments, has, as Jane Austen says, "by that luck which so often defies anticipation in matrimonial affairs," engaged the affections and married happily, after a short acquaintance, a Mr. Dixon, a young, agreeable, and rich man.

Jane Fairfax is one-and-twenty, the age at which she had fixed, in her own mind, on beginning her career as a governess. The following are the strong terms in which the author refers to the step about to be taken:—"With the fortitude of a devoted novice, she had resolved at one-and-twenty to complete the sacrifice, and retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever." Surely this is exaggerated language, even for the last century, and reflects painfully both on the footing which governesses occupied, and on the qualifications deemed essential to gentlewomen, among our mothers and grandmothers. There is also an inconsistency in it where this tale is concerned, and one perceives that Jane Austen's rooted class prejudices cause even so wise a woman to contradict herself; for in the beginning of the book we have an evident indication how much respected and [Pg 233] liked Mrs. Weston had been when, as Miss Taylor, she had filled the post of governess to Emma Woodhouse. No relations in the story are happier and pleasanter than those which are involved in the warm and lasting friendship between the two who had been formerly teacher and pupil. Why might not Jane Fairfax have looked forward to being another Miss Taylor?

Colonel and Mrs. Campbell's good sense had led them to acquiesce in Jane Fairfax's determination, loth as they were to lose her company, and it was only because she had not been quite well, or in equal spirits for some time, that they had used their influence to induce her not to enter immediately on her arduous duties, but to spend the last three months of her liberty with her fond grandmother and aunt in Janet's native air, while the Campbells paid their first visit to their married daughter settled in Ireland.

Emma heard the first, not very welcome news of Jane Fairfax's coming, as she sought to get rid of Harriet Smith's dolefulness, and at the same time to do an irksome duty by taking Harriet to call at the Bateses. Mrs. and Miss Bates loved to be called on, and Emma knew she was "considered by the very few who presumed ever to see imperfection in her, as rather negligent in that respect, and as not contributing what she ought to the stock of their scanty comforts."

"She had had many a hint from Mr. Knightley, and some from her own heart, as to her deficiency, but none were equal to counteract the persuasion of its being very disagreeable—a waste of time—tiresome women—and all the horror of being in danger of falling in with the second and third rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever, and therefore she seldom went near them." But now she made the sudden resolution of not passing their door without going in, observing, as she proposed it to Harriet, that as well as she could calculate, they were just now quite safe from any letter from Jane Fairfax.

“The house belonged to people in business; Mrs. and [Pg 234] Miss Bates occupied the drawing-room floor; and there, in the very moderate-sized apartment which was everything to them, the visitors were most cordially and even gratefully welcomed; the quiet, neat old lady, who, with her knitting, was seated in the warmest corner, wanting even to give up her place to Miss Woodhouse; and her more active, talking daughter almost ready to overpower them with care and kindness, thanks for their visit, solicitude for their shoes, anxious inquiries after Mr. Woodhouse’s health, cheerful communications about her mother’s, and sweet cake from the buffet.”

Emma had argued without her host, as she soon hears from Miss Bates, who prattles with the delightful *abandon* of the most innocent, unsuspecting heart, in company with the most honest thick head in the world. She rambles, breaks off, diverges right and left in her monologues, as only a very talkative, simple-minded, elderly woman—a Mrs. Nickleby or a Miss Bates—can wander, pull herself up, and start afresh in her conversation. Miss Bates has only just finished reading a letter from her niece to a previous visitor, and, of course, mentions what she has been about.

“Emma’s politeness was at hand directly, to say, with smiling interest, ‘Have you heard from Miss Fairfax so lately? I am extremely happy. I hope she is well?’”

“‘Thank you, you are so kind!’ replied the happily-deceived aunt, while eagerly hunting for the letter. ‘Oh, here it is! I was sure it could not be far off; but I had put my huswife upon it, you see, without being aware, and so it was quite hid, but I had it in my hand so very lately that I was almost sure it must be on the table. I was reading it to Mrs. Cole, and since she went away I was reading it again to my mother, for it is such a pleasure to her—a letter from Jane—that she can never hear it often enough; so I knew it could not be far off, and here it is, only put under my huswife; and since you are so kind as to wish to hear what she says——But first of all I really must, [Pg 235] in justice to Jane, apologise for her writing so short a letter, only two pages you see, hardly two, and in general she fills the whole paper and crosses half. My mother often wonders that I can make it out so well. She often says, when the letter is first opened, ‘Well, Hetty, now I think you will be put to it to make out all that checker-work’—don’t you, ma’am? And then I tell her I am sure she would contrive to make it out for herself, if she had nobody to do it for her, every word of it. I am sure she would pore over it till she had made out every word. And, indeed, though my mother’s eyes are not so good as they were, she can see amazingly well still, thank God! with the help of spectacles. It is such a blessing! My mother’s are really very good indeed. Jane often says when she is here, ‘I am sure, grandmamma, you must have had very strong eyes to see as you do, and so much fine work as you have done too! I only wish my eyes may last me as well.’”

“All this spoken extremely fast, obliged Miss Bates to stop for breath; and Emma said something civil about the excellence of Miss Fairfax’s handwriting.

“‘You are extremely kind,’ replied Miss Bates, highly gratified, ‘you who are such a judge, and write so beautifully yourself. I am sure there is nobody’s praise that could give us so much pleasure as Miss Woodhouse’s. My mother does not hear, she is a little deaf, you know. Ma’am,’ addressing her, ‘do you hear what Miss Woodhouse is so obliging as to say about Jane’s handwriting?’

“And Emma had the advantage of hearing her own silly compliment repeated twice over before the good old lady could comprehend it. She was pondering in the meanwhile upon the possibility, without seeming very rude, of making her escape from Jane Fairfax’s letter, and had almost resolved on hurrying away directly, under some slight excuse, when Miss Bates turned to her again and seized her attention.

“‘My mother’s deafness is very trifling, you see, [Pg 236] just nothing at all. By only raising my voice, and saying anything two or three times over, she is sure to hear; but then she is used to my voice. But it is very remarkable that she should always hear Jane better than she does me. Jane speaks so distinct! However, she will not find her grandmamma at all deafer than she was two years ago, which is saying a great deal at my mother’s time of life; and it really is full two years, you know, since she was here. We never were so long without seeing her before, and as I was telling Mrs. Cole, we shall hardly know how to make enough of her now.’

“‘Are you expecting Miss Fairfax here soon?’

“‘Oh, yes, next week.’

“‘Indeed! That must be a very great pleasure.’

“‘Thank you. You are very kind. Yes, next week. Everybody is so surprised; and everybody says the same obliging things. I am sure she will be as happy to see her friends at Highbury as they can be to see her. Yes, Friday or Saturday; she cannot say which, because Colonel Campbell will be wanting the carriage himself one of those days. So very good of him to send her the whole way. But they always do, you know. Oh, yes, Friday or Saturday next. That is what she writes about. That is the reason of her writing out of rule, as we call it; for, in the common course, we should not have heard from her before Tuesday or Wednesday.’

“‘Yes, so I imagined. I was afraid there could be little chance of my hearing anything of Miss Fairfax to-day.’^[52]

“So obliging of you!’ the kindly soul took the words in good faith, and surely smote Emma’s better nature. ‘No, we should not have heard, if it had not been for this particular circumstance, of her being to come here so soon. My mother is so delighted, for she is to be three months with us, at least. Three months, she says so positively, as I am going to have the pleasure[Pg 237] of reading to you. The case is, you see, that the Campbells are going to Ireland. Mrs. Dixon has persuaded her father and mother to come over and see her directly. They had not intended to go over till the summer, but she is so impatient to see them again; for, till she married last October, she was never away from them so much as a week, which must make it very strange to be—in different kingdoms, I was going to say, but, however, different countries; and so she wrote a very urgent letter to her mother, or her father—I declare I do not know which it was, but we shall see presently in Jane’s letter—wrote in Mr. Dixon’s name as well as her own, to press their coming over directly; and they would give them the meeting in Dublin, and take them back to their country-seat—Ballycraig—a beautiful place, I fancy. Jane has heard a great deal of its beauty—from Mr. Dixon, I mean; I do not know that she has ever heard about it from anybody else; but it was very natural, you know, that he should like to speak of his own place while he was paying his addresses, and as Jane used to be very often walking out with them—for Colonel and Mrs. Campbell were very particular about their daughter’s not walking out often with only Mr. Dixon, for which I do not at all blame them—of course she heard everything he might be telling Miss Campbell about his own home in Ireland; and I think she wrote us word that he had shown them some drawings of the place—views that he had taken himself. He is a most amiable, charming young man, I believe. Jane was quite longing to go to Ireland from his account of things.’

“At this moment an ingenious and animating idea entering Emma’s brain with regard to Jane Fairfax, this charming Mr. Dixon, and the not going to Ireland, she said, with the insidious design of further discovery—‘You must feel it very fortunate that Miss Fairfax should be allowed to come to you at such a time. Considering the very particular friendship between her and Mrs. Dixon, you could hardly have expected her[Pg 238] to be excused from accompanying Colonel and Mrs. Campbell.’

“Very true; very true, indeed. The very thing that we have always been rather afraid of; for we should not have liked to have her at such a distance from us for months together—not able to come if anything was to happen; but you see everything turns out for the best. They want her (Mr. and Mrs. Dixon) excessively to come over with Colonel and Mrs. Campbell; quite depend upon it; nothing can be more kind and pressing than their *joint* invitation, Jane says, as you will hear presently. Mr. Dixon does not seem in the least backward in any attention. He is a most charming young man.

Ever since the service he rendered Jane at Weymouth, when they were out in that party on the water, and she, by the sudden whirling round of something or other among the sails, would have been dashed into the sea at once, and actually was all but gone, if he had not, with the greatest presence of mind, caught hold of her habit—I can never think of it without trembling—but ever since we had the history of that day, I have been so fond of Mr. Dixon!’

“But in spite of all her friend’s urgency, and her own wish of seeing Ireland, Miss Fairfax prefers devoting her time to you and Mrs. Bates?’

“Yes—entirely her own doing, entirely her own choice; and Colonel and Mrs. Campbell think she does quite right, just what they should recommend; and, indeed, they particularly *wish* her to try her native air, as she has not been quite so well as usual lately.”

The idea which has entered into Emma’s idle, fertile brain, is that Mr. Dixon, while paying his addresses to the well-endowed Miss Campbell, may in his secret heart have preferred her portionless friend; that there may also have been an unfortunate hidden attachment on Jane Fairfax’s part—one result of which is her disinclination to visit the Dixons.

Altogether, Emma’s notion is neither very sensible nor charitable. But sensible and amiable conclusions [Pg 239] are not always to be expected from spoilt girls, who, with rather an overweening opinion of their own deserts, are not altogether indisposed to find fault with the alleged perfections of threatened rivals. My readers will long ago have discovered that caution and prudence are not Emma Woodhouse’s strong points. Emma guesses as much herself, and on that very account is the more tempted to take a naughty pleasure in detecting undreamt of follies in that model of discretion—Jane Fairfax. But it is only by degrees that Emma is led on to the serious offence against fairness and kindness, of attributing anything more dishonourable than a rash, ill-judged bestowal of her affections, to Jane Fairfax.

When Emma and Jane first meet again on the occasion of Jane’s three months’ visit to Highbury, Emma is shaken for a moment, in her unreasonable dislike and unjustifiable fancies, till the old influences begin anew to work. Miss Bates is more tiresome than ever in her anxiety about her niece’s health. It is affectation in Jane to praise Emma’s playing on the piano, ^[53] when her own is so superior; worst of all, Jane Fairfax is so cold and reserved in her perfect good breeding—if anything more reserved on the subject of Weymouth and the Dixons than on any other, and Emma believes she knows how to explain this caution.

But neither is Jane Fairfax communicative on another topic which is of the deepest interest to all Highbury, including even Emma Woodhouse, who considers herself above local gossip in general. Jane Fairfax had met Mr. Weston's son, Frank Churchill, at [Pg 240] Weymouth, but not a syllable of real information can Emma get from her as to what he is like. "Is he handsome?" She believes he is reckoned a very fine young man. "Is he agreeable?" "He is generally thought so." "Does he appear a sensible young man? a young man of information?" "At a watering-place, or in a common London acquaintance, it is difficult to decide on such points."

Emma cannot forgive Jane Fairfax.

For Emma Woodhouse has a double source of interest in Frank Churchill. He is her friend, Mrs. Weston's unknown step-son, who has indeed written her "a very handsome letter," on her marriage with his father, but has not yet shown her the attention of coming to Randalls. He is kept away, his friends agree, by the tyrannical whims of the aunt who adopted him.

Emma with her lively penetration has also seen, and that not with displeasure, in spite of her protest against marriage for herself, that Mr. and Mrs. Weston have fixed on her, as far as they can have any choice in the matter, for Frank's wife—nay, that all Highbury look on them as a predestined happy couple. Everything is so suitable—age, good looks, agreeable qualities, position, fortune. Emma does not deny these recommendations. No wonder she is curious to hear more of Frank Churchill.

Highbury is suddenly excited by the announcement of the approaching marriage of Mr. Elton, who has improved his time in Bath, and only returned to proclaim his happiness and prepare for his bride.

Emma is bent, as part of her atonement, on breaking the news to Harriet Smith, when Harriet comes in heated and agitated, crying "Oh, Miss Woodhouse, what do you think has happened?"

The blow has fallen already, Emma is sure, and prepares to bestow all the kindness that is due from her.

But the susceptible Harriet is occupied with quite another train of ideas. She has been shopping in Ford the [Pg 241] linendraper's, when who should come in but Elizabeth Martin and her brother, the first time Harriet has met them since she refused young Martin. She thought she would have fainted. The sister had seen her directly, and looked another way. When the brother found her out, there was a little whispering, and Harriet had guessed he was persuading his sister to go up to her and speak to her as usual. She had been in such a tremble; but she had seen that the Martins,

especially the brother, had tried to behave with the old kindness and friendliness. Poor little Harriet had been conscience-stricken, yet comforted by his good nature.

It is in the middle of this comical counter-current of distress, which at last swells high enough to provoke and alarm Emma, that in order to put the Martins out of Harriet's silly, vacillating head, her friend, in a hurry, and not at all with the tender care she had intended, tells the girl of Mr. Elton's prospects. And the shock revives Mr. Elton's supremacy.

The future Mrs. Elton is a Miss Hawkins, who is said to be handsome, elegant, highly accomplished, perfectly amiable, and the possessor of ten thousand pounds. No wonder Mr. Elton is triumphant in the abundant consolation which has come to him.

Emma, while satisfied that a Mrs. Elton will be a relief and an aid in renewing her intercourse with the vicar, and while too indifferent on the subject to think much of the lady, has this sop for her mortification on Harriet's account, that though, doubtless, good enough for Mr. Elton and Highbury, there is no superiority of connexion on Miss Hawkins' side. She brings no name, no blood, no alliance. She is the younger daughter of a Bristol merchant. "All the grandeur of the connexion seemed dependent on the elder sister, who was *very well married*, to a gentleman in a great way, near Bristol, who kept two carriages. That was the wind-up of the history; that was the glory of Miss Hawkins."

From these reflections, we may judge that Emma has more than a tinge of Mr. Darcy's pride and superciliousness. [Pg 242] Was Jane Austen herself entirely free from the same defects? We are all fallible mortals.

Harriet Smith, easily carried captive by public opinion, now hears so much of Mr. Elton in every house she enters, and is so impressed by the gifts, graces, and happiness of the bride, that she would have been in a fair way to break her heart over her disappointment, had it not been for the diversion caused by a slight revival of her intercourse with the Martins. Under the influence of Robert Martin's good feeling, his sister has called again for Harriet; and Emma is sufficiently shrewd to comprehend the danger of a heart's being caught on the rebound. She takes care to regulate Harriet's return of this civility. She herself carries Harriet in the Hartfield carriage to Abbey Mill Farm, [\[54\]](#) and pays a visit to an old servant while Harriet makes her call, which is thus abridged to a quarter of an hour's length. Harriet's account of it is rather a sad one. Mrs. Martin and the girls have been as uncomfortable as their visitor; and just when they were becoming more cordial, in consequence of somebody saying that Harriet was grown, when the whole party could not help looking at the wainscot by the window, where the different heights of all the girls stood as they had been noted

by *him* last summer, the Hartfield carriage was announced. That was enough; the style and the shortness of the visit could not be mistaken. Fourteen minutes to be given to those with whom Harriet had thankfully passed six weeks, not six months ago!

Though Emma has contrived it all, she has the [Pg 243] grace to feel it is a bad business, and would have given a great deal to have had the Martins in a higher rank of life.

It is some comfort to Emma to hear that Frank Churchill is at last coming to Randalls, to stay a whole fortnight. His father brings him at once to the Woodhouses; and the young man is, as nearly as possible, all that Emma's fancy had painted him—handsome, gentlemanlike, lively, eager to be pleased, and by no means unwilling to admire, and show that he admires, Emma Woodhouse.

After he has won her good-will by his warm praises of his stepmother, and contrived in complimenting Mrs. Weston to compliment Emma, she begins to wonder if he, too, is aware of what their friends expect from their knowing each other, and whether his merry compliments are signs of acquiescence or defiance. As for herself, she must wait and know him better before she has any opinion on the subject; but the first impression is greatly in his favour.

Mr. Weston has business at the Crown Inn, and his son asks carelessly if there is a family named Fairfax—no, he believes the name is Barnes, or Bates—living near, as he has a call to make on them. There had been that degree of acquaintance between him and one of the members of the family, when living at Weymouth, which requires such an attention, and it may be as well shown then as afterwards.

To be sure, his father knows the Bateses and Miss Fairfax; let Frank call upon her by all means.

Any day will do, the young man explains; there is no particular necessity for calling that morning.

But Mr. Weston decides promptly that the mark of respect ought to be shown at once. Frank had met Jane Fairfax at the Campbells, where she was everybody's equal; here she is with a poor old grandmother who has barely enough to live on. If he does not call early it will be a slight. And the young man allows himself to be convinced.

[Pg 244]

Mrs. Weston, in her turn, brings Frank Churchill—with whom she is on the happiest terms—the following day; and Emma walks and shops with them in Highbury. She is

on such an easy footing with the young fellow already as to inquire about his visit of the previous morning.

He thanks Emma for her preparatory hint about the talkative aunt, who would otherwise have been the death of him. As it was, she entangled him into a visit of three-quarters of an hour's length, when he had only meant to stay ten minutes.

Emma asks how he thinks Miss Fairfax is looking?

Ill, very ill, he tells her, that is, if a young lady can ever be allowed to look ill, and Miss Fairfax is naturally so pale as almost to give the appearance of bad health—a most deplorable want of complexion.

Emma defends Jane Fairfax's soft, delicate skin from the accusation of having a sickly hue; but her companion only makes the defence adroitly into an opportunity for professing his preference for "a fine glow of health."

Still Emma insists he must admire Miss Fairfax in spite of her complexion.

But he only shakes his head, laughs, and says he cannot separate Miss Fairfax and her complexion.

Emma is curious to know how much he had known of Jane Fairfax at Weymouth.

But when he first leaves the question unanswered, because he must go into a shop and show himself a citizen of Highbury by buying something, and then asserts it is always a lady's right to decide on the degree of acquaintance, she has to inform him he is as discreet as Miss Fairfax herself.

After all, he is not unwilling to return to the subject, and talk of Miss Fairfax and her piano-playing; and Emma is as foolishly elated as a child, by a chance admission of his, which seems to confirm her former conclusion. Frank Churchill has proclaimed his own inability to judge Miss Fairfax's musical powers, but [Pg 245] added that a gentleman who was a musical man would never ask the young lady to whom he was engaged to sit down to "the instrument," if Miss Fairfax could sit down instead. The next moment Frank has to admit that the gentleman was Mr. Dixon, and the lady, to whom he was on the point of marriage, Miss Campbell.

Emma, in her amusement at the corroboration of her suspicions, does not attempt to conceal her inference from what her companion has said. Poor Mrs. Dixon! As to Miss Fairfax, she must have felt the improper and dangerous distinction.

Frank Churchill hesitates a little. "There appeared such a perfectly good understanding among them;" but the next moment he owns that it is impossible for

him to tell how it might have been behind the scenes, and leaves Emma to suppose what she likes.

Emma's good opinion of Frank Churchill is in some danger of being nipped in the bud, when she hears that he has gone off to London merely to have his hair cut. A sudden freak seems to have seized him at breakfast, and he has sent for a chaise and set off, intending to return to dinner; but with no more important view that appeared than having his hair cut. There is no harm in his travelling sixteen miles on such an errand, but there is an air of foppery and nonsense in it which Emma cannot approve.

His father only calls him a coxcomb; but Mrs. Weston passes the matter over as quietly as possible, and Mr. Knightley, when informed of the expedition, is heard to mutter over his newspaper, "Hum! just the trifling, silly fellow I took him for."

Frank Churchill comes back punctually. He has got his hair cut, and he laughs at himself with a good grace, but without seeming really ashamed of what he has done.

At a dinner-party in the neighbourhood, Emma receives a very interesting addition to the little history she has made out for Jane Fairfax. A fine piano from [Pg 246] Broadwood's has arrived at the Bateses', to the great astonishment of the family, who have at length come to the conclusion that it is one of Colonel Campbell's kind gifts.

But why should Colonel Campbell present Jane Fairfax with a piano at this late date, and in this mysterious manner? Emma, on the first opportunity, taxes Frank Churchill with sharing her thoughts on the subject. The piano has not come from the Campbells; it might have come from the Dixons, from *Mr.* as well as *Mrs.* Dixon; and then Emma is so foolish and wrong as to repeat to Frank Churchill all her suspicions of Mr. Dixon's secret preference for Jane, and Jane's response to that preference, without, however, for a moment impugning the good intentions and principles of either.

He hears it all with the greatest gravity, and fully acknowledges the probability of her version of the gift. He is ready to be guided by her greater penetration. He did see in it at first only a mark of paternal kindness from Colonel Campbell; but when she mentioned Mrs. Dixon, he has felt how much more likely it is that the piano should be the tribute of warm female friendship; and now he can regard it in no other light than as an offering of love.

Oh! mischievous, thoughtless Frank, and credulous, confident Emma!

Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax, Harriet Smith, and other less important guests, join the party in the evening. Jane looks superior to all the others; still Emma can affectionately rejoice in the blooming sweetness and artless manner of her friend, with regard to whom it could never have been guessed how many tears she had been shedding lately. For “to be in company nicely dressed herself, and seeing others nicely dressed, to sit and smile, and look pretty, and say nothing, was enough for the happiness of the present hour.”

When the gentlemen join the ladies in the drawing-room, Frank Churchill immediately seeks out Emma, and [Pg 247] enters into an animated conversation with her, devoting himself to her.

Once, indeed, she notices him looking intently across the room at Miss Fairfax. “What is the matter?” Emma asks.

He starts. “Thank you for rousing me,” he replies; “I believe I have been very rude; but really, Miss Fairfax has done her hair in so odd a way that I cannot keep my eyes from her. I never saw anything so *outré*. Those curls! I see nobody else looking like her. I must go and ask whether it is an Irish fashion—shall I? Yes, I will; I declare I will, and you shall see how she likes it—whether she colours.”

He is gone immediately, and Emma soon sees him standing before Miss Fairfax and talking to her; but as to the effect of his conversation, he has placed himself inadvertently exactly between her and Emma, so that the latter can distinguish nothing.

Mrs. Weston tells Emma that Mr. Knightley’s carriage—for the use of which on this occasion, Emma, who stands up for proper dignity, had already complimented him—brought over Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax, and is to take them home again.

Both Mrs. Weston and her old pupil are agreed in their praise of Mr. Knightley’s consideration and kindness. But when Mrs. Weston suggests another motive, and says Emma has infected her, for she has made a match between Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax, the listener bursts forth into vehement opposition. How can Mrs. Weston think of such a thing! Mr. Knightley must not marry. Emma cannot have little Henry, her nephew, cut out of Donwell. Jane Fairfax mistress of the Abbey! No, no! Mr. Knightley does not want to marry. Mrs. Weston is not to put it in his head. He is as happy as possible by himself, with his farm, and his sheep, and his library, and all the parish to manage. And he is extremely fond of his brother’s children. He has no occasion to marry, either to fill up his time or his heart.

[Pg 248]

Mrs. Weston is accustomed to Emma's ebullitions. The elder lady contents herself with reminding her companion that if the gentleman really loves Jane Fairfax——

"Nonsense," Emma interrupts the speaker hotly. "He does not care about Jane Fairfax in the way of love; I am sure he does not."

Emma goes on to protest in extravagant terms that it would be a shameful, degrading connexion to have Miss Bates haunting the Abbey, thanking him all day long for his great kindness in marrying Jane, and then flying off through half a sentence to her mother's old petticoat, not that it was such a very old petticoat either.

"For shame, Emma!" Mrs. Weston cries out at being diverted against her conscience; and she will not resign her fancy. She has heard Mr. Knightley speak so very highly of Jane Fairfax. He is so concerned for her welfare. He is such an admirer of her music. What if he and not the Campbells prove the donor of the piano?

Emma, too, remains unconvinced, and as indignant as unconvinced. Mrs. Weston takes up ideas and runs away with them, as she has many a time reproached Emma for doing. She believes nothing of the kind of the piano. Only absolute proof will convince her that Mr. Knightley has any thought of marrying Jane Fairfax.

In the interest of the argument, Emma has lost sight of Frank Churchill, beyond the fact that he had found a seat next Miss Fairfax. Presently, however, he comes over to join their host in pressing Miss Woodhouse—the young lady of most consequence at the party—to play and sing.

Emma complies, only attempting what she can accomplish with credit. She is agreeably surprised by having Frank Churchill volunteer a pleasant second. He has all the praise usual on such occasions, and the two sing together again to their mutual satisfaction and that of the company.

[Pg 249]

Emma, conscious that she is to be far outstripped, resigns her place to Jane Fairfax. Frank Churchill sings with her also. It seems that they have sung together at Weymouth; but Emma cannot attend to them for the sight of Mr. Knightley among the most attentive of the listeners. Her objections to his marriage crowd into her mind and supersede every other thought. It would be a great disappointment to her brother, and consequently to her sister, a real injury to the children, a mortifying change to all. For herself she cannot endure the prospect. A Mrs. Knightley for them all to give way to! No, Mr. Knightley must never marry. Little Henry must remain the heir of Donwell.

Mr. Knightley looks round, and comes and sits by Emma. She tries him in various ways. His admiration of the music is warm, but except for Mrs. Weston's words would not have struck her. He cuts short her allusion to his kindness in reference to the carriage, but then he will never dwell on any kindness of his own. Above all he speaks with perfect calmness, and a shade of consolatory disapprobation, on the great topic of the evening, the gift of the piano. It was kindly given, but the Campbells would have done better to have announced their intention. Surprises are foolish things. He should have expected better judgment from Colonel Campbell.

From that moment Emma could have taken her oath Mr. Knightley had nothing to do with the present.

Jane Fairfax's voice grows husky.

"That will do," said Mr. Knightley, aloud. "You have sung quite enough for one evening."

The inconsiderate audience beg for another song; and Frank Churchill is heard saying, "I think you could manage this without effort."

Mr. Knightley now grows angry. "That fellow thinks of nothing but showing off his own voice. This must not be;" and he calls on Miss Bates to interfere.

[Pg 250]

The singing is put an end to, as there are no other young lady performers, but a dance is got up.

Mrs. Weston, capital in her country dances, takes her place at the piano.

Frank Churchill, with most becoming gallantry, secures Emma's hand, and takes her to her place at the top of the set.

Emma is nothing loth, but she cannot help watching Mr. Knightley. He is no dancer in general; if he is now alert in seeking Jane Fairfax as a partner, the sign will be ominous. But no, he continues talking to his hostess, and looks on unconcernedly while Jane is claimed by some other.

Emma has no longer any alarm for Henry; his interests are yet safe; and she leads off the dance with genuine spirit and enjoyment. Not more than five couples can be mustered; but the rarity and the suddenness of it make it very delightful, and she finds herself well matched in a partner. They are a couple worth looking at.

Two dances, unfortunately, are all that can be allowed. It is growing late, and Miss Bates becomes anxious to get home, on her mother's account. After some attempts,

therefore, to be permitted to begin again, they are obliged to thank Mrs. Weston, look sorrowful, and have done.

“Perhaps it is as well,” said Frank Churchill, as he attended Emma to her carriage. “I must have asked Miss Fairfax, and her languid dancing would not have agreed with me, after yours.”

Emma had gone next day to shop with Harriet Smith at the Highbury linendraper’s. Shopping with Harriet was no easy matter, when it involved convincing Harriet that if she wanted a plain muslin it was of no use to look at a figured; and that a blue riband, be it ever so beautiful, would still never match her yellow pattern.

Already the young ladies have encountered Frank Churchill and Mrs. Weston at the door of the Bateses’[Pg 251] house, opposite. Mrs. Weston is there, in performance of a promise she had forgotten, but of which her stepson had reminded her, that she should go and hear the newly-imported “instrument.”

Frank Churchill has attempted to get off from accompanying Mrs. Weston after he met Emma, and she refused to be one of the party. The matter has ended in Mrs. Weston’s carrying off Frank Churchill, according to their original intention, and the girls making their purchases at Ford’s. But in a few moments Miss Bates and Mrs. Weston come over together, and entreat Miss Woodhouse and Miss Smith to join the others, and give their opinion of the piano.

Miss Bates pours forth one of the most amusing of her effusions.

“I hope Mrs. Bates and Miss Fairfax are——” began Emma.

“Very well, I am much obliged to you. My mother is delightfully well; and Jane caught no cold last night. How is Mr. Woodhouse? I am so glad to hear such a good account. Mrs. Weston told me you were here. ‘Oh, then,’ said I, ‘I must run across. I am sure Miss Woodhouse will allow me just to run across, and entreat her to come in. My mother will be so very happy to see her; and now we are such a nice party, she cannot refuse.’ ‘Aye, pray do,’ said Mr. Frank Churchill, ‘Miss Woodhouse’s opinion of the instrument will be worth having.’ ‘But,’ said I, ‘I shall be more sure of succeeding if one of you will go with me.’ ‘Oh!’ said he, ‘wait half a minute, till I have finished my job,’ for, would you believe it, Miss Woodhouse, there he is, in the most obliging manner in the world, fastening in the rivet of my mother’s spectacles. The rivet came out, you know, this morning; so very obliging!—for my mother had no use of her spectacles, could not put them on, and, by-the-bye, everybody ought to have two pair of spectacles; they should, indeed, Jane said so. I meant to take them over to John Saunders, the first thing I did, but something or other hindered[Pg 252] me all the morning; first one thing,

and then another, there is no saying what, you know. At one time, Patty came to say she thought the kitchen-chimney wanted sweeping. 'Oh!' said I, 'Patty, do not come with your bad news to me. Here is the rivet of your mistress's spectacles out.' Then the baked apples came home. Mrs. Wallis sent them by her boy; they are extremely civil and obliging to us, the Wallises, always. I have heard some people say that Mrs. Wallis can be uncivil, and give a very rude answer; but we have never known anything but the greatest attention from them. And it cannot be for the value of our custom now, for what is our consumption of bread, you know? only three of us. Besides, dear Jane at present—and she really eats nothing—makes such a shocking breakfast, you would be quite frightened if you saw it. I dare not let my mother know how little she eats; so I say one thing, and then I say another, and it passes off. But about the middle of the day she gets hungry, and there is nothing she likes so well as these baked apples, and they are extremely wholesome, for I took the opportunity the other day of asking Mr. Perry; I happened to meet him in the street. Not that I had any doubt before. I have so often heard Mr. Woodhouse recommend a baked apple. I believe it is the only way Mr. Woodhouse thinks the fruit thoroughly wholesome. We have apple-dumplings, however, very often. Patty makes an excellent apple-dumpling. Well, Mrs. Weston, you have prevailed, I hope, and these ladies will oblige us."

Emma would be very happy to wait on Mrs. Bates; and they did at last move out of the shop, with no further delay from Miss Bates than "How do you do, Mrs. Ford? I beg your pardon; I did not see you before. I hear you have a charming collection of new ribands from town. Jane came back delighted yesterday. Thank ye! the gloves do very well, only a little too large about the wrist; but Jane is taking them in."

"What was I talking of?" said she, beginning again when they were all in the street.

[Pg 253]

Emma wondered on what, of all the medley, she would fix.

"I declare I cannot recollect what I was talking of. Oh, my mother's spectacles! So very obliging of Mr. Frank Churchill! 'Oh,' said he, 'I do think I can fasten the rivet; I like a job of this kind excessively;' which, you know, showed him to be so very—Indeed, I must say, that much as I have heard of him before, and much as I had expected, he far exceeds anything—I do congratulate you, Mrs. Weston, most warmly. He seems everything the fondest parent could—'Oh,' said he, 'I can fasten that rivet; I like a job of that kind excessively.' I never shall forget his manner; and when I brought out the baked apples from the closet, and hoped our friends would be so very obliging as to take some, 'Oh,' said he directly, 'there is nothing in the way of fruit half so good, and these are the finest-looking home-baked apples I ever saw in my life.' That, you know,

was so very—and I am sure, by his manner, it was no compliment. Indeed, they are very delightful apples, and Mrs. Wallis does them full justice, only we do not have them baked more than twice, and Mr. Woodhouse made us promise to have them done three times; but Miss Woodhouse will be so good as not to mention it. The apples themselves are the very finest sort for baking, beyond a doubt; all from Donwell—some of Mr. Knightley's most liberal supply. He sends us a sack every year, and certainly there never was such a keeping apple anywhere as one of his trees—I believe there are two of them. My mother says the orchard was always famous in her younger days. But I was really quite struck the other day, for Mr. Knightley called one morning, and Jane was eating these apples, and we talked about them, and said how much she enjoyed them, and he asked whether we were not got to the end of our stock. 'I am sure you must be,' said he, 'and I will send you another supply, for I have a great many more than I can ever use. William Larkins let me keep a larger quantity than usual this year. I will[Pg 254] send you some more before they get good for nothing.' So I begged he would not—for really, as to ours being gone, I could not absolutely say that we had a great many left—it was but half a dozen, indeed—but they should all be kept for Jane, and I could not at all bear that he should be sending us more, so liberal as he had been already, and Jane said the same; and when he was gone she almost quarrelled with me—no, I should not say quarrelled, for we never had a quarrel in our lives, but she was quite distressed that I had owned the apples were so nearly gone; she wished I had made him believe we had a great many left. 'Oh,' said I, 'my dear, I did say as much as I could.' However, the very same evening William Larkins came over with a large basket of apples, a bushel at least, and I was very much obliged, and went down and spoke to William Larkins, and said everything, as you may suppose. William Larkins is such an old acquaintance, I am always glad to see him. But, however, I found out afterwards from Patty that William said it was all the apples of that sort his master had; he had brought them all, and now his master had not one left to bake or boil. William did not seem to mind it himself, he was so pleased to think his master had sold so many—for William, you know, thinks more of his master's profit than anything—but Mrs. Hodges, he said, was quite displeased at their being all sent away. She could not bear that her master should not be able to have another apple-tart this spring. He told Patty this, but bid her not mind it, and be sure not to say anything to us about it, for Mrs. Hodges *would* be cross sometimes, and as long as so many sacks were sold, it did not signify who ate the remainder; and so Patty told me, and I was exceedingly shocked indeed! I would not have Mr. Knightley know anything about it for the world! He would be so very—I wanted to keep it from Jane's knowledge, but unluckily I had mentioned it before I was aware."

“Miss Bates had just done as Patty opened the door, and her visitors walked upstairs without having[Pg 255] any regular narration to attend to, pursued only by the sounds of her desultory good-will. ‘Pray take care, Mrs. Weston, there is a step at the turning. Pray take care, Miss Woodhouse, ours is rather a dark staircase; rather darker and narrower than one could wish. Miss Smith, pray take care. Miss Woodhouse, I am quite concerned; I am sure you have hurt your foot. Miss Smith, the step at the turning.’”^[55]

The scene which the opening of the door presents is often quoted for its perfection of quiet realism. “The appearance of the little sitting-room as they entered was tranquillity itself. Mrs. Bates, deprived of her usual employment, slumbering on one side of the fire; Frank Churchill, at a table near her, most deeply occupied about her spectacles; and Jane Fairfax, standing with her back to them, intent on her pianoforte.”

“What!” said Mrs. Weston, “have not you finished it yet? You would not earn a very good livelihood as a working silversmith at this rate.”

“I have not been working uninterruptedly,” he replied; “I have been assisting Miss Fairfax in trying to make her instrument stand steadily; it was not quite firm, an unevenness in the floor, I believe. You see we have been wedging one leg with paper. This was very kind of you to be persuaded to come. I was almost afraid you would be hurrying home.”

This last sentence is for Emma, as he immediately renews his marked attentions to her, contrives that she shall be seated by him, looks out the best roasted apple for her, and tries to make her advise him in his work, till Jane is ready to sit down to the piano.

There is no doubt Jane is agitated. Emma imagines that she has not possessed the instrument long enough to get accustomed to its associations. When the player[Pg 256] is able to do herself justice, everybody is loud in praise of the piano.

Frank Churchill, in the middle of an assertion that whoever Colonel Campbell had employed, the person has not chosen ill, introduces with a smile to Emma certain *doubles entendres* with regard to the musical taste of the old Weymouth party, and to the enjoyment which Miss Fairfax’s friends in Ireland must have in imagining what she will be doing, until even Emma tells him in a whisper it is not fair, hers has been a random guess.

Jane pretends not to hear, and answers with the briefest acknowledgment of his apparent meaning. He goes to her and urges her to play one of the waltzes they danced last night, exclaiming, “Let me hear them once again.”

As she plays, he exclaims on the felicity of hearing again a tune which has made one happy before, adding, "If I mistake not, that was danced at Weymouth."

She looks at him for a moment, colours deeply, and plays something else.

He brings over some music, including a new set of "The Irish Melodies," to show to Emma. The music had been selected and sent with the piano. Frank Churchill honours that part of the gift particularly. It has all been so thoughtful, so complete. True affection only could have prompted it.

Emma wishes he would not be so pointed in his remarks, but glancing at Jane, she catches the ghost of a smile hovering about her lips, and has less scruple in her amusement. This excellent Jane Fairfax indulges in very reprehensible feelings.

Mr. Knightley passes the window on horseback; and Miss Bates trots into the next room, and from an open window holds a colloquy with him, charmingly characteristic of both speakers, and perfectly audible to the visitors in the apartment she has just quitted.

"How d'ye do? How d'ye do? Very well, I thank you; so obliged to you for the carriage last night. We were just in time; my mother just ready for us. Pray [Pg 257] come in; do come in; you will find some friends here."

So began Miss Bates, and Mr. Knightley seemed determined to be heard in his turn, for most resolutely and commandingly did he say, "How is your niece, Miss Bates? I want to inquire after you all, but particularly your niece. How is Miss Fairfax? I hope she caught no cold last night. How is she to-day? Tell me how Miss Fairfax is!"

"And Miss Bates was obliged to give a direct answer before he would hear anything else. The listeners were amused, and Mrs. Weston gave Emma a look of particular meaning. But Emma still shook her head in steady scepticism.

"So obliged to you! So very much obliged to you for the carriage," resumed Miss Bates.

"He cut her short with, 'I am going to Kingston. Can I do anything for you?'"

"Oh, dear! Kingston, are you? Mrs. Cole was saying the other day she wanted something from Kingston."

"Mrs. Cole has servants to send. Can I do anything for *you*?"

"No, I thank you. But do come in. Who do you think is here? Miss Woodhouse and Miss Smith, so kind as to call to hear the new pianoforte. Do put up your horse at the Crown, and come in."

“Well,’ said he, in a deliberating manner, ‘for five minutes, perhaps.’

“And here is Mrs. Weston and Mr. Frank Churchill, too. Quite delightful, so many friends.’

“No, not now, I thank you. I could not stay two minutes. I must get on to Kingston as fast as I can.’

“Oh, do come in; they will be so very happy to see you.’

“No, no; your room is full enough. I will call another day and hear the pianoforte.’

“Well, I am so sorry. Oh, Mr. Knightley, what a delightful party last night; how extremely pleasant! [Pg 258] Did you ever see such dancing? Was not it delightful? Miss Woodhouse and Mr. Frank Churchill; I never saw anything equal to it.’

“Oh, very delightful indeed; I can say nothing less, for I suppose Miss Woodhouse and Mr. Frank Churchill are hearing everything that passes, and’ (raising his voice still more) ‘I do not see why Miss Fairfax should not be mentioned too. I think Miss Fairfax dances very well; and Mrs. Weston is the very best country dance player, without exception, in England. Now, if your friends have any gratitude, they will say something pretty loud about you and me in return; but I cannot stay to hear it.’

“Oh, Mr. Knightley, one moment more; something of consequence—so shocked! Jane and I are both so shocked about the apples!’

“What is the matter now?’

“To think of you sending us all your store apples. You said you had a great many, and now you have not one left. We really are so shocked. Mrs. Hodges may well be angry. William Larkins mentioned it here. You should not have done it, indeed you should not have done it. Ah, he is off.”

Frank Churchill easily induces his father to consent to give a ball the night before Frank is to leave Randalls. No room in the house is large enough to meet the hospitable gentleman’s views, and it is at last fixed to give the ball at the Crown Inn. Emma is engaged by the hero of the evening for the first two dances; and even the grave Jane Fairfax is sufficiently moved by the brilliant prospect to exclaim, “Oh! Miss Woodhouse, I hope nothing will happen to prevent the ball. I look forward to it, I own, with very great pleasure.”

But time and tide, and the humours of a tyrannical woman, accommodate themselves to no man. A summons arrives for Frank Churchill to return instantly to his uncle’s place at Enscombe, as his aunt is far too unwell to do without him.

[Pg 259]

Frank has no great belief in the illness, but he is forced to obey orders. The ball has to be deferred to the uncertain period of his next visit.

Extremely disconsolate, he pays his farewell calls, and when at Hartfield, while talking of other things—the length of time before he came to Highbury, his recent leave-taking at the Bateses, he seems suddenly on the point of a serious declaration, “In short,” said he, after getting up and walking to a window—“perhaps, Miss Woodhouse—I think you can hardly be without suspicion——”

But either Emma does not afford him sufficient encouragement, or some other obstacle occurs to hinder him, for he goes no further than a profession of warm regard for Hartfield.

To Emma the loss of the ball and her partner is a severe disappointment. She finds Jane Fairfax’s comparative composure on the misfortune odious. But she is a little softened by hearing of the bad headaches from which Jane has been suffering, and is willing to admit that her unbecoming indifference may proceed from the apathy engendered by bad health.

Emma has arrived at the point of believing she returns Frank Churchill’s love. At first, when she misses him and the ball most, she fancies she is very much in love; then the “very much” dwindles down to a “little,” since Emma, who is still quite capable of reasoning on her feelings, makes the acute observation, that though she admires and likes him, she continues to see faults in him; and she notices that in all the imaginary scenes and dialogues which she invents for herself and Frank Churchill, while he is to urge his suit with all the eloquence of passion and true affection, she is always to refuse him, in the tenderest and most delicate manner indeed, but still to refuse him. Their love is inevitably destined to subside into friendship.

Emma had long ago determined never to quit her father, but it strikes her now—that were she strongly [Pg 260] attached to Frank, there would be, even in anticipation, more struggle in the sacrifice.

Having come to this sage conclusion, Emma is a little sorry for Frank; the next thing is to provide him with a substitute for the wife he can never win from Hartfield. Her own partiality for her friend, and desire to atone to her for her former error, together with an accidental polite reference in one of his letters to his step-mother, puts Harriet Smith into Emma’s creative brain. For she is not cured of match-making, she is still inveterately possessed with what is most apt to be the clever, warm-hearted matron’s mania for arranging the matrimonial affairs of others.

In fact, Emma, with all her youthful pride and dignity, is in some danger of becoming a meddler and busybody in other people's business. Even the knowledge she might have had of how different are Mr. and Mrs. Weston's—not to say Mr. and Mrs. Churchill's—expectations for their son and nephew, does not serve to crush the foolish idea, though it only lurks in the background in the meantime.

III.

A new event stirs Highbury. Mr. Elton brings home his bride. She is first seen in her pew at church, and is ecstatically admired.

Emma withholds her judgment, even beyond the opportunity given by her first call at the vicarage, when she takes Harriet Smith with her. Emma will not pronounce an opinion yet, beyond the very modified admission that Mrs. Elton is “elegantly dressed,” while the meekly magnanimous little goose, Harriet, finds the bride “beautiful, very beautiful,” and adds, with a sigh, “Happy creature! He called her ‘Augusta;’ how delightful!”

[Pg 261]

On farther acquaintance, Emma discovers, with a certain severe satisfaction, that Mr. Elton, as she has learnt to know him, is fitly mated.

Mrs. Elton is one of Jane Austen's most cleverly and sharply-drawn characters. The pretentious, underbred woman, “pert and familiar,” without the faintest sense of her own deficiencies—on the contrary, with an overflowing self-satisfaction and self-conceit patronising everybody and everything—is hit to the life. We have all heard similar boasting to that of Mrs. Elton on the subject of her rich Bristol brother-in-law's house, “Maple Grove.” We have listened to like-minded proposals “to explore” with the Sucklings, when they bring over their barouche-landau, our own accessible, familiar neighbourhood, every step of which is intimately known to us. We have been recommended to watering-places, and offered introductions by those whom we were tempted to regard as little called upon or qualified to give us advice and assistance. We have been treated to the modern “doubles” of all Mrs. Elton's bridal airs and affectations; that sporting of the newly-acquired importance of the matron; that literal quoting, in the worst taste, of Mr. E. and the “*cara sposa*,” that free and easy manner of naming our own familiar friends by their surnames,^[56] as if the men were the new comer's special cronies; that vulgar superciliousness with regard to the supposed disadvantages and consequent inferiority of other people whom we have every reason to esteem and cherish. Have we not been in danger of crying out with Emma, “Insufferable woman! worse than I had supposed. Absolutely insupportable!

Knightley! I could not have believed it. Knightley! Never seen him in her life before, and call him Knightley! and discover that he is a gentleman! A little, upstart, vulgar being, with her Mr. E. and her *cara sposa*, and her resources, and all her airs [Pg 262] of pert pretension and underbred finery,^[57] actually to discover that Mr. Knightley is a gentleman! I doubt whether he will return the compliment, and discover her to be a lady. I could not have believed it! And to propose that she and I should unite to form a musical club! One would fancy we were bosom friends! And Mrs. Weston! Astonished that the person who brought me up should be a gentlewoman! Worse and worse! I never met with her equal. Much beyond my hopes! Harriet is disgraced by any comparison.”

Mr. Elton, fortunately or unfortunately, is more than satisfied with his choice. It is fortunate for his matrimonial felicity; it is unfortunate where the man’s mind and heart are concerned. It proves him hardly capable of appreciating any higher qualities than those with which his wife is endowed; and under her influence he is certain to deteriorate.

Mrs. Elton soon shows her resentment at Emma’s coldness. Her pique causes the vicar’s wife to behave to Harriet Smith with a sneering negligence, which convinces Emma that Harriet’s attachment, and her own share in it, have been “an offering to conjugal unreserve” which does little credit to Mr. Elton’s generosity and honour.

With the ready propensity to rivalry of a small, vain, and vindictive nature, Mrs. Elton puts herself, as she judges, at the head of an opposite faction. She conceives a violent fancy for Jane Fairfax, whom she oppresses with condescending notice and attention, accepted in grateful good faith by Jane’s relations, and by Jane herself, because no better friendship, as Mr. Knightley takes care to remind Emma, offers itself to the lonely girl.

One good thing comes to Emma as the result of her conversation with Mr. Knightley on the incongruity [Pg 263] of Jane Fairfax’s intimacy at the vicarage. Emma has the courage to hint to Mr. Knightley that the extent of his admiration for Jane Fairfax may take him by surprise some day.

“Mr. Knightley was hard at work upon the lower buttons of his thick leather gaiters, and either the exertion of getting them together, or some other cause, brought the colour into his face as he answered—

“‘Oh! are you there? But you are miserably behind-hand. Mr. Cole gave me a hint of it six weeks ago.’

“He stopped, Emma felt her foot pressed by Mrs. Weston, and did not herself know what to think. In a moment he went on—

“That will never be, however, I can assure you. Miss Fairfax, I daresay, would not have me if I were to ask her, and I am sure I shall never ask her.’

“Emma returned her friend’s pressure with interest, and was pleased enough to exclaim, ‘You are not vain, Mr. Knightley; I will say that for you.’

“He seemed hardly to hear her; he was thoughtful, and, in a manner which showed him not pleased, soon afterwards said, ‘So you have been settling that I should marry Jane Fairfax?’

“No, indeed, I have not. You have scolded me too much for match-making for me to presume to take such a liberty with you. Oh! no; upon my word I have not the smallest wish for your marrying Jane Fairfax, or Jane anybody. You would not come in and sit with us in this comfortable way if you were married.’

“Mr. Knightley was thoughtful again. The result of his reverie was—‘No, Emma, I do not think the extent of my admiration for her will ever take me by surprise. I never had a thought of her in that way, I assure you.’ And soon afterwards, ‘Jane Fairfax is a very charming young woman; but not even Jane Fairfax is perfect. She has a fault. She has not the open temper which a man would wish for in a wife.’

“Emma could not but rejoice to hear she had a fault.

[Pg 264]

“Well, Mrs. Weston,’ said Emma triumphantly, when he left them, ‘what do you say now to Mr. Knightley’s marrying Jane Fairfax?’

“Why, really, dear Emma, I say that he is so very much occupied by the idea of not being in love with her, that I should not wonder if it were to end in his being so at last. Do not beat me.’”

At a dinner-party given by the Woodhouses, to which John Knightley has come down by accident, Jane Fairfax is present by special invitation, her hostess being a little conscience-stricken for her sins of omission in that quarter.

John Knightley looks at Mrs. Elton in her lace and pearls, taking notes for Isabella’s edification; but he consents to talk to a quiet girl and old acquaintance like Jane Fairfax. In their conversation, it comes out that she goes every morning before breakfast to the post-office^[58] to fetch the letters. It is her daily errand when at Highbury.