

“SCALE HOW EVENING.” JANE AUSTEN.

BY MISS CHAPLIN.

Jane Austen was born at Steventon Rectory, in Hampshire, on December 16th, 1775. Her father, George Austen, was Rector of this and of the neighbouring Parish of Deane. Her mother was Cassandra Leigh, daughter of the Rev. Thomas Leigh, a Fellow of All Souls'. Her parents had seven children, five boys and two girls, and Jane therefore grew up with the companionship of a merry crew. There is very little else known of her childhood, and of her later life, there is not much to know. It was simple and home keeping. When she was 25, her father retired from the Parsonage in favour of his son, and Jane went with her parents to Bath. Upon her father's death in 1805, she and her mother went to live at Southampton, and from there to Chawton Cottage near Alton, and about 20 miles from Winchester. This is the bare outline of her life. She did not mix in the literary society of the day; she did not have a rapid success with her writings; she did not gather round her any admirers to qualify for the post of a Boswell, and all we do know of her comes through her immediate family, and through her letters, written without a suspicion that they would be treasured by a reading public, to her sister Cassandra. It is through these that we become really acquainted with Jane. As she herself says, "I have now attained the true art of letter-writing which we are always told is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth," and we may, therefore, look upon these letters as a reliable index to her character, just as we may be sure, they picture for us most accurately her daily doings.

Jane was intensely devoted to her sister, who was three years older, and when she was little, was sent to school with her only because she would not stay behind. Her mother said of this devotion that if Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, she would insist on sharing her fate. We need not suppose that going to school ranked as a beheading, but we are led to understand that she did not go for the sake of learning.

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To my mind another family saying throws considerable light upon the respective temperaments of the two sisters. Cassandra had the *merit* of having her temper always under command, whilst Jane had the *happiness* of a temper that never required to be commanded. It may easily be that this was the foundation of their love and admiration for one another.

By those people who will always be thinking, no matter how slight the provocation, it was thought that in *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen had chosen to represent herself and her sister. This is not likely, for granting that Cassandra may have suggested the wise restraint of Elinor, it is impossible that one prone to the failings of Marianne should so shrewdly have discerned them. It is notable that though her opportunities for copy were limited, no one ever discovered a likeness or a caricature of a mutual acquaintance. She considered that to attempt one, would be "an invasion of the social proprieties," and said that it was her desire to create, not to reproduce. "Besides," she added, "I am too proud of my gentlemen to admit that they were only Mr. A, or Colonel B. [sic]"

Her letters take one into a narrow world, but a novelist's world *is* narrow, and his skill is not in introducing the reader to a wealth of circumstance, but in creating a something from the little nothings which make up most people's lives. And so we may think that Jane Austen's was just such a position as would be favourable to novel-making. Where all are delightful for some

sentence or other it has been very difficult to choose amongst them, but this letter gives a good idea of her as manager of the household, always however, under her mother's supervision. Miss Mellis Smith will kindly read it.

STEVENTON,

Saturday, October 27th.

My dear Cassandra,—Your letter was a most agreeable surprise to me to-day, and I have taken a long sheet of paper to show my gratitude. We arrived here yesterday between 4 and 5, but I cannot send you quite so triumphant an account of our last day's journey as of the first and second. Soon after I had finished my letter from Staines, my mother began to suffer from the exercise or fatigue of travelling and she was a good deal indisposed. . . . We met with no adventures at all in our journey yesterday, except that our trunk had once nearly slipped off, and we were obliged to stop at Hartley to have our wheels greased.

Whilst my mother and Mr. Lyford were together, I went to Mrs. Ryder's and bought what I intended to buy, but not in much perfection. There were no narrow braces for children and scarcely any notting silk; but Miss Wood, as usual, is going to town very soon and will lay in a fresh stock. I gave 2/3 a yard for my flannel, and I fancy it is not very good, but it is so disgraceful

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and contemptible article in itself that its being comparatively good or bad is of little importance. I bought some Japan ink likewise, and next week shall begin my operations on my hat, on which you know my principal hopes of happiness depend. I am very grand indeed; I had the dignity of dropping out my mother's laudanum last night. I carry about the keys of the wine and closet, and twice since I began this letter have had orders to give in the kitchen. Our dinner was very good yesterday, and the chicken boiled perfectly tender; therefore, I shall not be obliged to dismiss Nancy on that account.

Almost everything was unpacked and put away last night. Nancy chose to do it, and I was not sorry to be busy. I have unpacked the gloves and placed yours in your drawer. Their colour is light and pretty, and I believe exactly what we fixed on. . . . I hear that Martha is in better looks and spirits than she has enjoyed for a long time, and I flatter myself she will now be able to jest openly about Mr. W. The spectacles which Molly found are my mother's and the scissors my father's. We are very glad to hear such a good account of your patients little and great. My dear "itty Dordy's" remembrance of me is very pleasing to me—foolishly pleasing, because I know it will be over so soon. My attachment to him will be more durable. . . . I am quite angry with myself for not writing closer; why is my alphabet so much more sprawly than yours? Dame Tilbury's daughter has lain in. Shall I give her any of your baby-clothes? The laceman was here only a few days ago. . . . Dame Bushell washes for us only one week more, as Sukey has got a place.

John Steevens' wife undertakes our purification. She does not look as if anything she touched would ever be clean, but who knows?

Earle and his wife are living in the most private manner imaginable at Portsmouth, without keeping a servant of any kind. What a prodigious inmate [sic] love

of virtue she must have, to marry under such circumstances! ... I have received my aunt's letter, and thank you for your scrap. It is really very kind of her to ask us to Bath again: a kindness that deserves a better return than to profit by it.

Yours ever,

J. A.

Miss Austen,
Godmersham Park,
Faversham, Kent.

There is in this, as in all her letters, a remarkable absence of any reference to public events. We hear nothing for instance of the terrible French Revolution, though one of her sisters-in-law, was the widow of a Frenchman who had been guillotined. I do not think the names of Wellington or Napoleon ever occur, and though she was interested in the navy through her brothers Charles and Francis, she might never have heard of Nelson.

Imagine how he would have figured in the letters, say of George Eliot! but then, we must remember that all these letters are written to one person, and according to our definition of a good letter, that must make a difference.

Cassandra was, perhaps naturally during absence, more interested to hear of her mother's health and the fate of the family wash, than of the nation's fortunes. Besides, she probably read the news to her father every morning, as her sister well knew. We read that in appearance Jane Austen was very comely; being dark, with a lively complexion, and a bright eye, not tall, but slight, and as Mr. Goldwin Smith [p 569]

engagingly puts it, she was not innocent of "the happiness that goes with good looks."

We hear a great deal in a bantering tone of the eligible young men of her acquaintance—of a certain Tom Lefroy, she says—"I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together. I *can* expose myself however *only once* more, because he leaves the country soon after next Friday." Dr. Helen Webb will kindly read a second letter.

Saturday, November 17th, 1798.

My dear Cassandra,— . . . Mrs. Lefroy did come last Wednesday . . . she did not once mention the name of her nephew to me, and I was too proud to make any enquiries; but on my father's afterwards asking where he was, I learnt that he was gone back to London. . . . She showed me a letter which she had received from her friend a few weeks ago . . . towards the end of which was a sentence to this effect, "I am very sorry to hear of Mrs. Austen's illness. It would give me peculiar pleasure to have an opportunity of improving my acquaintance with that family—with the hope of creating to myself a nearer interest. But at present I cannot indulge any expectation of it." This is rational enough; there is less love and more sense in it than appeared before, and I am very well satisfied. It will all go on exceedingly well, and decline away in a very reasonable manner. There seems no likelihood of his coming into Hampshire this Christmas, and it is therefore most probable that our indifference will soon be mutual,

unless his regard, which appeared to spring from knowing nothing of me at first, is best supported by never seeing me.

. . . Mrs. Portman is much admired in Dorsetshire; the good-natured world, as usual, extolled her beauty so highly, that all the neighbourhood have had the pleasure of being disappointed. My mother desires me to tell you that I am a very good housekeeper, which I have no reluctance in doing because I really think it my peculiar excellence and for this reason—I always take care to provide such things as please my own appetite. . . . We are to kill a pig soon. There is to be a ball at Basingstoke next Thursday. Our assemblies have very kindly declined ever since we laid down the carriage, so that inconvenience and disinclination to go have kept pace together. I went to Deane with my father two days ago to see Mary, who is still plagued with the rheumatism, which she would be very glad to get rid of, and still more glad to get rid of her child, of whom she is heartily tired. Her nurse is come, and has no particular charm either of person or manner; but as all Hurstbourne world [sic] pronounce her to be the best nurse that ever was, Mary expects her attachment to increase. What fine weather it is! Not very becoming perhaps early in the morning, but very pleasant out of doors at noon, and very wholesome—at least everybody fancies so, and imagination is everything. To Edward, however, I really think dry weather is of importance. I have not taken to fires yet. Mrs. Bramston's little moveable apartment was tolerably filled last night. I spent a very pleasant evening, chiefly among the Manydown party. There was the same kind of supper as last year, and the same want of chairs. There were more dancers than the room could conveniently hold, which is enough to constitute a good ball at any time. I do not think I was very much in request. People were rather apt not to ask me till they could not help it; one's consequence, you know, varies so much at times without any particular reason. There was one gentleman, an officer of the Cheshire, a very good-looking young man, who, I was told, wanted very much to be introduced to me, but as he did not want it quite enough to take much trouble in effecting it, we never could bring it about. One of my gayest actions was sitting down two dances in preference to having Lord Bolton's eldest son for my partner, who danced too ill to be [sic] endured!

J. A.

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The way in which Jane Austen looked upon marriage was of her own time. We may reasonably suppose that in the Austen household gossip and speculation upon the subject was cut down to the minimum, and yet, I think, there was a great deal more than we should consider enough. There seems an overpowering desire amongst her biographers to explain away the fact that Jane was never even in love, but I suspect she found all she wanted in the home circle. I think that in the perfect sympathy of Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters we get a reflection of the Austen household, which was never troubled by disagreements even in little matters, for it was not their habit to dispute or argue with each other. Jane Austen makes Emma her mouthpiece, when she says in answer to Harriet, who thinks it so dreadful to be an old maid, "Never mind, I shall not be a poor old maid, and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! ... A single woman of good fortune is always

respectable and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody. ... If I know myself, Harriet, mine is an active busy mind, with a great many independent resources; and I do not perceive why I should be more in want of employment at 40 or 50 than at one-and-twenty. And as for objects of interest, objects for the affections, which is in truth the great point of inferiority, the want of which is really the great evil to be avoided in *not* marrying, I shall be very well off with the children of a sister I love so much, to care about. My nephews and nieces, I shall often have a niece with me."

There can be no doubt that as an aunt she excelled; and Miss Henderson will kindly read a very pretty description of her, written by a niece.

As a very little girl I was always creeping up to Aunt Jane, and following her whenever I could in the house and out of it. I might not have remembered this, but for the recollection of my mother's telling me privately that I must not be troublesome to my Aunt. Her first charm to children was a great sweetness of manner. She seemed to love you, and you felt you loved her in return. This, as well as I can now recollect was what I felt in my early days before I was old enough to be amused by her cleverness. But soon came the delight of her playful talk. She could make everything amusing to a child. Then, as I got older, when cousins came to share the entertainment, she would tell us the most delightful stories, chiefly of fairyland, and her fairies had all characters of her own.

The tale was invented, I am sure, at the moment, and was continued for two or three days if occasion served.

We read in another letter to Cassandra, "Fanny desires her love to you, her love to grandpapa, her love to Anna and her

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love to Hannah; the latter is particularly to be remembered. Edward desires his love to you, to grandpapa, to Anna, to little Edward, to Aunt James and Uncle James, and he hopes all your turkeys and ducks and chickens and guinea fowls are very well; and he wishes you very much to send him a printed letter and so does Fanny. [sic] and they both rather think they shall answer it." We can well imagine the occasion described when she writes again, "The children were all delighted with your letters, as I fancy they will tell you themselves before this is concluded. Fanny expressed some surprise at the wetness of the wafers but it did not lead to any suspicion of the truth"—which I suppose was a mild deception suggesting that each letter had come separately and through the official post. She was not only fond of children, but of young people; her interest and affection grew as they grew, and she was real friends with her nephews and nieces. There are some amusing extracts from letters to Fanny, who was guilty of invading her aunt's province, and who sought advice and criticism on her first, only, and unpublished novel. Jane Austen writes, "Your Aunt C., does not like desultory novels and is rather fearful that yours will be too much so and that there will be too frequent a change from one set of people to another, and that circumstances will be sometimes introduced of apparent consequence which will lead to nothing. It will not be so great an objection to me. I allow much more latitude than she does, and think nature and spirit cover many sins of a wandering story." Again, "You are now collecting your people delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as

is the delight of my life. Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on, and I hope you will write a great deal more, and make full use of them while they are so very favourably arranged. Again, Devereux Foster being ruined by his vanity is very good, but I wish you would not let him plunge into a vortex of dissipation. I do not object to the thing, but cannot bear the expression; it is thorough novel slang, and so old that I dare say Adam met with it in the first novel that he opened. I have been far from finding your book an evil, I assure you. Indeed I think you get on very fast. I wish other people of my acquaintance could compose so rapidly. Juhan's history was quite a surprise to me. You had not very

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long known it yourself I suspect, but I have no objection to make to the circumstance. It is very well told, and his having been in love with the Aunt gives Cecilia an additional interest with him. I like the idea, a very proper compliment to an aunt. I rather imagine indeed, that nieces are seldom chosen but in compliment to some aunt or other. I daresay your husband was in love with me once, and would never have thought of you if he had not supposed me dead of a scarlet fever! [sic]

What charming encouragement to receive, and how perfectly delightful is the feeling and its expression.

In all Jane Austen's writings there is the charm of gentle irony. In her earlier letters and books it is less gentle, but never unkind. Her thoughts are kind; she is always willing to think the best, and if you notice, the faults of her characters usually arise from defective training in childhood. Indeed, she would have been a notable Member of this Union, for she pins her faith to the power of education. Darcy had an excellent disposition, he was *taught* to be proud. The Bertram sisters were neglected by their father and their mother was incapable. And here I must digress to say a word of her general treatment of children in her books. Fond though she was of children she does not make them appear attractive. And why? Because in all cases they are spoilt by a foolish parent. In *Persuasion* it appears that Mary Musgrove's children are a continual source of trouble and that by way of company, their mother says they are "so unmanageable that they do me more harm than good. Little Charles does not mind a word I say, and Walter is growing quite as bad." Yet we hear that the children "loved Anne nearly as well and respected her a great deal more than their mother," and she found in them "an object of interest, amusement, and wholesome exertion." And this is where Jane Austen's very P.N.E.U. Principles come in. She realizes that exertion is necessary, and that it is the lack of a real attempt to understand how to bring up children that is in fault. She does not show us one intentionally heartless mother, but they are mostly fools.

Passage from "Sense and Sensibility," Chapter XXI., kindly read by Miss J. R. Smith.

To return to herself, her days passed in a pleasant and useful monotony, for no one was bored to tears by having too little

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to do, and no one was rushed to death, by having too much. We read of her: "Jane Austen was successful in everything that she attempted with her fingers. None of us could throw spilikins in so perfect a circle, or take them off with so steady a hand. Her performances with the cup and ball were marvellous. Her hand-writing was clear and strong, but that was not the only part of her letters which showed superior handiwork. In those days there was the art of folding and sealing. No adhesive envelopes made all easy. Some people's letters always looked loose and

untidy, but her paper was sure to take the right folds and her sealing wax to drop into the right place.

“Her needlework was excellent, and she was considered especially great in ‘satin stitch.’ Some of her merriest talk was over clothes which she and her companions were making, sometimes for themselves and sometimes for the poor.”

Of her more intellectual pursuits, though I feel sure this assembly will not underrate the intellectual value of folding and sealing, we read that she was fond of music and performed tolerably. She read French easily and knew a little Italian. In those days German was as unnecessary to a lady’s education as Hindostance is to-day. She was fond of history and literature, and her favourite authors were Richardson, Johnson, Cowper and Crabbe, of whom she says, judging him by his work only, that should she marry, she could fancy being Mrs. Crabbe.

It is very certain that her talent was precocious, and from an early age she sought to express her ideas. When she was 12, there was a great fashion for private theatricals, taking place either in the barn or the dining room, and her earliest extant effort is an unfinished burlesque, in the approved style of the 18th century comedy.

Miss Allen will kindly read it.

THE MYSTERY. AN UNFINISHED COMEDY.

Dedication to the Rev. George Austen.

Sir,—I humbly solicit your patronage to the following Comedy, which, tho’ an unfinished one, is, I flatter myself, as complete a mystery as any of its kind.

I am, Sir,
Your most humble servant,
THE AUTHOR.

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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

Men.

COL. ELLIOTT

OLD HUMBUG

YOUNG HUMBUG

SIR EDWARD SPANGLE and
CORYDON.

Women.

FANNY ELLIOTT

MRS. HUMBUG and

DAPHNE

ACT I. Scene I: A Garden.

Enter CORYDON.

CORYDON. But hush; I am interrupted. (Exit CORYDON.)

Enter old HUMBUG and his Son, talking.

OLD HUM. It is for that reason that I wish you to follow my advice. Are you convinced of its propriety?

YOUNG HUM. I am, sir, and will certainly act in the manner you have pointed out to me.

OLD HUM. Then let us return to the house. (Exeunt.)

SCENE II.

A parlour in HUMBUG'S house. Mrs. HUMBUG and FANNY discovered at work.

MRS. HUM. You understand me, my love?

FANNY. Perfectly, ma'am; pray continue your narration.

MRS. HUM. Alas! it is nearly concluded, for I have nothing more to say on the subject.

FANNY. Ah! here is Daphne.

Enter Daphne.

DAPHNE. My dear Mrs. Humbug, how d'ye do? Ah, Fanny, it is all over!

FANNY. Is it indeed?

MRS. HUM. I'm very sorry to hear it.

FANNY. Then 'twas to no purpose that I—

DAPHNE. None upon earth.

MRS. HUM. And what is to become of ——?

DAPHNE. Oh! 'tis all settled (whispers Mrs. Humbug.)

FANNY. And how is it determined?

DAPHNE. I'll tell you (whispers Fanny).

MRS. HUM. And is he to ——?

DAPHNE. I'll tell you all I know of the matter (whispers Mrs. Humbug and Fanny).

FANNY. Well, now I know everything about it I'll go away. (Exit.)

MRS. HUM. AND DAPHNE. And so will I. (Exeunt.)

SCENE III.

The curtain rises and discovers SIR EDWARD SPANGLE reclined in an elegant attitude on a sofa fast asleep.

Enter COL. ELLIOTT.

COL. E. My daughter is not here, I see. There lies Sir Edward. Shall I tell him the secret?

No, he'll certainly blab it. But he's asleep and won't hear me, so I'll e'en venture.

(Goes up to Sir Edward, whispers him, and exit.)

End of the First Act. FINIS.

This appears to me extremely clever. It is utterly futile, and carried out with such a dash, that we are quite disappointed that we are never to have the mystery cleared up. And remember that she was not much more than 12 when she wrote it. It is [p 575]

interesting to see that she was attracted to the play-form, for though she never repeated it, there is distinct dramatic value in her novels. Some of the situations and dialogue could well be transferred direct to the stage, but her subjects of course, are not suitable. Though without exception, her plots hold the reader, and glide along without more than one or two heavy chapters amongst the six novels, the interest is not dramatic, in the sense of providing striking contrasts of circumstance and emotion.

Jane Austen's fame rests on the six novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, written when she was between 20 and 22; *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, written in order, when she was between 35 and 40.

She wrote quickly, and she used to say it was as easy for her to write a book as a letter, and she could not see why she should be praised for the one more than for the other. But if it cost her so little to produce these six novels, we ask why she wrote no more, for writing was a great interest to her for more than 20 years, and though she was not instantly and enormously popular, her success was sufficient to whet a normal appetite. The answer is—writing was not her first interest. Her career as authoress came second to her career as daughter, sister and aunt. It is notable that she never shut herself up in an impressive manner, but composing chiefly in her head, would write her stories on odd sheets of note paper whilst she sat in the living room with the family. When a visitor came, which I imagine to have been often, she would hide her half-sheets in her blotter, not with any intent to deceive—nothing could have been more unlike her—but because her extreme refinement made her unwilling to attract notice; and of course we must realize that, in spite of the example, and the popularity of Miss Edgeworth, Fanny Burney, and the Mrs. Radcliffe, of whom Catharine Morland was so fond, an authoress was a most unusual thing. There was still a lingering feeling that a woman in writing a book, rather overstepped the limitations of her sex.

She did not write for fame or for money, but because she enjoyed using her talent for the amusement of herself and her family, and, each of her books was the source of much merriment and discussion in her intimate circle.

Indeed, I am inclined to think that but for this affectionate
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interest in her gift, her energies might have been entirely devoted to *Satin Stitch* as being the most selfless thing she could do.

I do not mean, however, to suggest either a weak flame of the sacred fire, or a very strong spirit of self-sacrifice, for there is evidence that she thoroughly enjoyed her power of creating, and used to delight herself and her nephews and nieces by continuing for them the fortunes of her characters, clearing up doubtful issues, etc. For instance, we have it from her that Anne Steele never succeeded in catching the doctor, that Kitty Bennett was satisfactorily married to a clergyman near Pemberley, while Mary obtained nothing higher than one of her Uncle Philip's clerks, and was content to be considered a star in the society of Meryton; that the considerable sum given by Mr. Norris to William Price was £1, and that the letters placed by Frank Churchill before Jane Fairfax, which she swept away unread, made up the word Pardon. To show further how keenly real to her were the creations of her extracts from her letters, let me quote from her letters:—

In writing of a picture exhibition in London, she says, "It is not a very good collection, but I was very well pleased, particularly, tell Fanny, with a small portrait of Mrs. Bingley, excessively like her. I went in hopes of seeing one of her sisters, but there was no Mrs. Darcy. Perhaps, however, I may find her in the great exhibition. I have no chance of her in the collection of Sir Joshua Reynolds's paintings, which is now showing in Pall Mall, and which we are also to visit. Mrs. Bingley's is exactly like herself, size, shaped face features, and sweetness; there never was a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown with green ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed, that green was a favourite colour with her. I daresay Mrs. D. will be in yellow." And later, "We have been both to the exhibition (Royal Academy), and to Sir J. Reynolds, and I am much disappointed for there was nothing like Mrs. D. at either. I can only imagine that Mr. D. prizes any picture of her too much to like it should be

exposed to the public eye. I can imagine he would have that sort of feeling, that mixture of love, pride and delicacy.”

This visit to London, was, as far as we know, the only one she ever paid, and that was in order to nurse her brother Henry
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through a long and dangerous illness, she did not make it an opportunity to mix in literary society, or to take the place that her genius had earned for her. She refused all attempts to introduce her here and there, and would not be lionized, saying, “If I am a wild beast it is not my fault.” It was on this occasion that a Mr. Clarke, Private Secretary to Prince Leopold, being a great admirer of her books, suggested that “an historical romance illustrative of the august House of Coburg would just now be very interesting,” on account one may suppose of the impending marriage between Prince Leopold and Princess Charlotte. Jane Austen’s reply was “I could not sit down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up, and never relax into laughter at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter. No, I must keep to my own style, and go on in my own way; and though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other.”

This was only one of the many suggestions that she received, and of which she made an amusing sketch found in her blotter after her death.

Miss Pennythorne will kindly read it.

Heroine to be the daughter of a clergyman, who, after having lived much in the world, had retired from it, and settled on a curacy with a very small fortune of his own. The most excellent man that can be imagined, perfect in character, temper, and manner, without the smallest drawback or peculiarity to prevent his being the most delightful companion to his daughter from one year’s end to the other.

Heroine faultless in character, beautiful in person, and possessing every possible accomplishment. Book to open with father and daughter conversing in long speeches, elegant language, and a tone of high serious sentiment. The father induced, at his daughter’s earnest request, to relate to her the past events of his life.

Narrative to reach through the greater part of the first volume; as besides all the circumstances of his attachment to her mother, and their marriage, it will comprehend his going to sea as chaplain to a distinguished naval character about the court; and his going afterwards to court himself, which involved him in many interesting situations, concluding with his opinion of the benefits of titles being done away with.

. . . . From this outset the story will proceed, and contain a striking variety of adventures. Father an exemplary parish priest, and devoted to literature; but heroine and father never above a fortnight in one place: he being driven from his curacy by the vile arts of some totally unprincipled and heartless young man, desperately in love with the heroine, and pursuing her with unrelenting passion. No sooner settled in one country of Europe, than they are compelled to quit it, and retire to another, always making new acquaintance, and always obliged to leave them.

This will of course exhibit a wide variety of character. The scene will be for ever shifting from one set of people to another, but there will be no

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mixture, all the good will be unexceptionable in every respect. There will be no foibles or weaknesses but with the wicked, who will be completely depraved and infamous, hardly a resemblance of humanity left in them. Early in her career, the heroine must meet with the hero; all perfection, of course, and only prevented from paying his addresses to her by some excess of refinement. Wherever she goes, somebody falls in love with her, and she receives repeated offers of marriage, which she refers wholly to her father, exceedingly angry that *he* should not be the first applied to. Often carried away by the anti-hero, but rescued either by her father or the hero. Often reduced to support herself and her father by her talents, and work for her bread; continually cheated and defrauded of her hire; worn down to a skeleton, and now and then starved to death. At last, hunted out of civilized society, denied the poor shelter of the humblest cottage, they are compelled to retreat into Kanitschatka, where the poor father quite worn down, finding his end approaching, throws himself on the ground, and after four or five hours of tender advice and parental admonition to his miserable child, expires in a fine burst of literary enthusiasm, intermingled with invectives against the holders of titles. Heroine inconsolable for some time, but afterwards crawls back towards her former country, having at least 20 narrow escapes of falling into the hands of anti-hero; and at last, in the very nick of time, turning a corner to avoid him, runs into the arms of the hero himself, who, having just shaken off the scruples which fettered him before, was at the very moment setting off in pursuit of her. The tenderest and completest éclaircissement takes place and they are happily united. Throughout the whole work, heroine to be in the most elegant society and living in high style.

To return to her own estimate of her powers. It was a just one. She knew her limitations, and was too great an artist to exceed them.

Charlotte Brontë expresses that same sense, when she defends herself against the suggestion that she should emulate Miss Austen's tranquillity. She says, "When authors write best, or at least when they write most fluently, an influence seems to waken in them which becomes their master, which will have its way, putting out of view all behests but its own." In these two expressions of the same opinion, what a world of difference there is—just the difference of their two personalities. The one makes her plea with good-humoured irony; the other is intense and urgent.

In a book called *Charlotte Bronte [sic] and her Circle*, there is a letter from the author of *Jane Eyre* referring to the author of *Emma*, which, as an adverse criticism is useful. *Mrs. Daniell will kindly read it.*

"I have likewise read one of Miss Austen's works, *Emma*, read it with interest and with just the degree of admiration which Miss Austen herself would have thought sensible and suitable. Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heart-felt is utterly out of place in commending these works; all such demonstration the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as outré and extravagant. She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. There is a Chinese fidelity, a

miniature delicacy, in the painting. She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound. The passions are perfectly unknown to her; she

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rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood. Even to the feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition, too frequent converse with them would ruffle the smooth elegance of her progress. Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands, and feet. What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death—this Miss Austen ignores. She no more, with her mind's eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision, sees the heart in his heaving breast. Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (*not senseless*) woman. If this is heresy, I cannot help it."

I think that Miss Brontë is right, but I do not consider as she would have me do, that *Emma* is a less valuable contribution to literature because Jane Austen was a "complete and sensible lady." If such a person can make her point of view acceptable, I think her writings are a great asset to the National Library.

Especially to-day we are in need of her point of view, and one turns with relief to her simple code of morality in which the golden rule is "serve thyself last." Without attempting to drag us to a higher plane, she gives us clearly to understand the superiority of high over low principles, and of greatness over littleness of mind; but more than that, is her explicit distrust of any indulgence in emotion or imagination that is not strictly subservient to the resolve to do the right thing, however disagreeable or prosaic it may be. And according to the testimony of her popularity, I think one may say she is successful in proving that virtue, in whatever form, is not necessarily spiritless and depressing.

Nowadays, the tone of a novel is so often utterly unmoral, and the reading public, like the playgoer requires first and foremost to be amused, that one may reasonably suppose that Jane Austen will still be read, when Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot are put aside as too purposeful. Some people say they cannot read her because she presents 18th century fashions of feeling and conduct, and is so far limited. I do not think so. That is true of Fanny Burney; in reading *Evelina*, for instance, we feel all is explained by reminding ourselves of the period, but in any of the six novels we are considering, the accidentals of a Sedan chair and a quadrille might easily be exchanged for a taxi-cab and a one-step, and the spirit in the story remain the same.

Miss Davis kindly read part of Chapter XXXIX. from "Pride and Prejudice."

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Jane Austen had a great opinion of the place of the novel in literature, though she does not insist upon its educative value, and in one of her letters she says, "I have received a very civil note from Mrs. Martin requesting my name as a subscriber to her library, which opens January 14th, and my name or rather yours, is accordingly given. ... As an inducement to subscribe Mrs. Martin tells me that her collection is not to consist only of novels, but of every kind of literature, etc. She might have spared this pretension to *our* family, who are great novel

readers and not ashamed of being so; but it was necessary I suppose to the self-consequence of half her subscribers.”

Miss Thompson kindly read part of Chapter V. in “Northanger Abbey.”

In all her writings there is a certain shrewd touch that was eminently characteristic, and it is evident that from an early age, Jane Austen had an eye for the little foibles, illusions and self-contradictions of human nature. Especially in her letters we come across sharp sayings, such as “Charles Powlett has been very ill, but is getting well again. His wife is discovered to be everything the neighbourhood could wish her; silly and cross as well as extravagant.” “The Wylmots being robbed must be an amusing thing to their acquaintance, and I hope it is as much their pleasure as it is their avocation to be subjects of general entertainment.”

But these satires are directed against human nature generally, and in no sense against the person particularized. One feels that this attitude is the result of the complete harmony in the Austen family; they were inclined to regard strangers as amusing, just because they are strangers. They belonged to a different world, like the schoolboy and the cat. He will not necessarily grow into a brute because at 14 he cannot resist scaring it up a tree. In the same way one notices that Jane Austen outgrew this shrewish tendency. But in addition to a rather young pleasure in making a good story, in turning a sentence with point, she is the sworn foe of sentimentality and insincerity. When Emma is returning from a visit to a poor person, the only one by the way of which we hear, she says to Harriet, “I hope it may be allowed that if compassion has produced exertion and relief to the sufferers, it has done all that is truly important. If we feel for the wretched enough to

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do all we can for them, the rest is empty sympathy, only distressing to ourselves.”

About the beauty in Nature, of which Jane Austen was acutely sensible herself, she makes Marianne say, “Admiration of scenery is become a mere jargon. Everybody pretends to feel and tries to describe with the taste and elegance of him who first defined what picturesque beauty was. I detest jargon of every kind, and sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself, because I could find no language to describe them in, but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning.”

Although one could not say that Jane Austen belonged to the school headed by Wordsworth; the school that referred all to Nature, in wood and field, yet, we hear, from a Miss Hill who knew her well, “She loved the country and her delight in Natural scenery was such that she would sometimes say it must form one of the delights of Heaven.” From the same source we learn that when suddenly told of her father’s intention of leaving Steventon to live in Bath, she fainted away. She was then 25 years old, and not given to indulging in sensibility, nor was there any probable reason for this, but the shock of having to give up something so very dear.

It is a little difficult to place Jane Austen in the literary world. She was a contemporary of Wordsworth and Byron, both of whom led the way in two different styles, but she followed neither.

We know that she did not even concern herself with *elemental* Human Nature. As Mr. Bradley says, “she has no savages or outlaws.”

She must of course have known of the eternal existence of primeval passions, and it was not in ignorance that she ignored them. I do not agree with Miss Brontë that she was a very incomplete and rather insensible woman, but I do feel sure that her ideal was to get away from

the passions, rather than to sanction them even by recognition. By the same token her style is not romantic; and she did not feel herself capable of dealing with such circumstances, changes of scene, etc., etc., as would have been necessary.

Sir Walter Scott, a very great admirer of her work, writes in a review, "We bestow no mean compliment upon the author of *Emma*, when we say that in keeping close to common [p 582]

incidents and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life, she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality that we never miss the excitement which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events arising from the consideration of minds, manners and sentiments greatly above our own. ... The narrative of all her novels is composed of such common occurrences as may have fallen under the observation of most folks; and her dramatis personæ conduct themselves upon the motives and principles which the readers may recognize as ruling their own, and that of most of their acquaintance," and in his diary there is a note, "The big bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going, but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and sentiment is denied to me. What a pity so gifted a creature died so early."

To return to the charge of cynicism, I always feel that a cynic must be a pessimist, embittered by his observation of life; but Jane Austen was conspicuously happy. She is a kind critic and always regards her characters good humouredly, because they never see the situation as she sees it. This is the deeper source of our pleasure in reading her. We constantly *share* her point of view and are aware of the amusing difference between the fact, and its appearance to the actors. If we fail to perceive and enjoy this, we are not really reading Jane Austen. Some do not perceive it, and therefore fail to appreciate her; others perceive it without enjoying it, and they think her cynical. She is not cynical because she feels these absurdities to be good; not only ridiculous, but right. For instance, it is amusing when the immaculate Knightley who never fails in good sense and judgment, is yet unjust to Frank Churchill because he is unconsciously in love with Emma himself. And it is amusing where it might be painful, because Jane Austen presents it, not as a world-worn observation of life, partly unpleasant and inevitable, but as wholly delightful. To her mind Knightley's feelings are what a man's *should* be, not only what they *are*. Of all her novels, perhaps *Pride and Prejudice* makes us laugh most, but *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma* are the two in which this comedy point of view is most predominant. I mean where the author and the reader look on together at the play, and metaphorically poke each other in [p 583]

the ribs. In *Pride and Prejudice* we laugh at the side issues; the main plot is tolerably serious, but in *Northanger Abbey* the comic contrast of *reality*, with Catharine Morland's *illusions* is the nerve of the whole story, which culminates in the contrast between the romantic horror of General Tilney's imaginary behaviour to his dead wife, and the actual and exceedingly prosaic horror of his treatment of Catherine [sic] herself. This book is undoubtedly a "skit" on the style of the then popular Mrs. Radcliffe, author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; it is very short, and we feel that Miss Austen must have been in exceptionally high spirits whilst she wrote it. Indeed, in another letter from a niece we read how "Aunt Jane would sit quietly working beside the fire in the library, saying nothing for a good while, and then would suddenly burst out laughing, jump up and run across the room to a table where pens and paper were lying, write something down

and then come back to the fire and go on quietly working as before.”

Miss Kitching kindly read part of Chapters VI. and XX. of “Northanger Abbey.”

There is a charmingly humorous touch in choosing for the heroine of this adventure a girl than whom no one could be more ordinary, and less likely to meet with the various fates befitting a heroine.

And even her circumstances were against her, for “her father was a clergyman, without being neglected or poor, and a very respectable man though his name was Richard. He had a considerable independence . . . and was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense. She had three sons before Catharine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on—lived to have six children more. . . . to see them growing up around her and to enjoy excellent health herself.”

I greatly admire Catharine; she is so truly artless, and one is not forced to feel that her simple-mindedness, like Harriet Smith’s borders upon imbecility.

Of Emma’s shameful behaviour towards Harriet Smith, I am glad to say even she is forced to be ashamed as well she may, and when finally she is subdued into marrying Mr. Knightley, and we can almost forgive her many follies. It is impossible

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to go further into this delightful story, told with a restraint and vigour that do not admit of one dull chapter. But we will just choose a paragraph that shows Miss Austen’s power of detailed description, of a comprehension of scenes other than the elegances of the pump room at Bath. Then we must have a sample of the inimitable Miss Bates, of whom a critic says, “The hand which drew Miss Bates, though it could not have drawn Lady Macbeth, could have drawn Dame Quickly or the Nurse in “Romeo and Juliet.”

Miss Cruse kindly read these two passages.

Emma was Jane Austen’s fourth publication, written at Chawton, in 1815, and was of course sure of a welcome. She says of it “My great anxiety at present is that this fourth work should not disgrace what was good in the others. But on this point I will do myself the justice to declare that, whatever may be my wishes for its success, I am strongly haunted with the idea that to those readers who have preferred *Pride and Prejudice*, it will appear inferior in wit, and to those who have preferred *Mansfield Park*, inferior in good sense.”

Of *Mansfield Park*, I have little to say, for I am not familiar with it, but I read that she undertook this book in a serious spirit, determined to be more explicit than usual in her opinions of the importance of certain truths of conduct which are contained in the novel. Many people compare it with *Pride and Prejudice*, and chiefly from the point of view of the relative attractiveness of Fanny Price and Elizabeth Bennet.

Mr. Bradley says, “Jane Austen means us to care a great deal for Fanny. ‘My Fanny,’ she calls her; but though I know, not only from this, but from the whole tone of the narrative, what I am expected to feel for Fanny, and though I try to feel it, I make but a moderate success of the business. I pity, approve, respect and admire her, but I neither desire her company, nor am greatly concerned about her destiny, and she makes me impatient at moments when I doubt if she was meant to. But in reading of Elizabeth Bennet it is impossible for me to doubt either the author’s intentions or my own feelings. I was meant to fall in love with her, and I do. Besides, I like her father and elder sisters better than anyone in *Mansfield Park*.”

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It is this intimate kind of criticism that Jane Austen's novels compel at the minds of her readers and though the material is so similar, her wonderfully deft treatment makes each character a perfect entity in itself.

It is true she deals only with a few types; but each exponent of the type is a living person. For instance, Frank Churchill is of the race of Willoughby's and Wickham's. Some people say that much as they enjoy Jane Austen's novels while they are reading them, they cannot at a distance of time remember where so and so belongs, but they never fail to remember the details of the charm of so-and-so, or the exact degree of folly in some one else.

Mr. Bradley's contrast between the respective merits of Fanny Price and Elizabeth Bennet brings me to rather a dangerous point, but I must make it. I believe Jane Austen was a feminist. That is to say, she was distinctly partial to her own sex. I am sure she was not at all inclined to value a man because he was a man, but on his own merits, and she had a high standard. In her novels it is the heroine rather than the hero who claims her chief attention, therefore ours. *He* is often perfectly tolerable, because Jane Austen was too much of an artist and too fair-minded a woman, to draw him unfairly, but *she* is the most interesting and important of the two. There is very little of politics in her letters or her books, but when the choice is between old and new, she inclines to the old, and yet there is a flash of Radical sympathy, where for instance, Jane Fairfax speaks of a governess agency as a place for the sale "if not of human flesh, at least of human intellect."

There is no doubt however, that Jane Austen's men are of real flesh and blood; some people marvel at the insight enabling a woman to write of men, and vice versa. This seems to me to be the *sine qua non* of artistic genius. It supplies what is lacking through experience. One knows the story of Robert Browning, who said, when assumed to be an accomplished horseman as author of "How they brought the good news from Aix to Ghent," "My dear Madam, I was never on a horse in my life." And then there is Rudyard Kipling who appears to have an intimate knowledge of everything under the sun. It is sympathy, the sympathy of genius merely, the artistic touch which is perception, that enables him by a chance conversation,

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one visit to Brooklands, to write a story of such technical detail as that in *Actions and Re-Actions*.

The most skilled aviator we have, could not communicate a fraction of his knowledge. At all events, Jane Austen's grasp of naval matters was obtained in this vicarious manner through her brothers Charles and Francis.

Let us look for a moment at the different kinds of love we are shown, by one who we believe, never personally experienced any but a very equable family affection.

Elizabeth's love for Darcy grew out of esteem and gratitude. It is not romantic. If it had been thwarted, she would not, to quote Mr. Bradley, have become "autumnal at 27," like Anne.

Anne Elliott at 19 fell, as Jane Austen says with unusual warmth, "rapidly and deeply in love and experienced a short period of exquisite felicity." Though she renounced her *lover*, her love could not be renounced. It could only wither the bloom of her beauty and the joy in her heart. *Persuasion* was the last novel Jane Austen wrote, and, I think, the expansive sympathy given to Anne makes one think that if Jane Austen had lived longer she would have outgrown

her very keen sense of the absurdities of affection and mere sentiment. She would perhaps have softened towards Mrs. Musgrove's lenience towards a dead son; this was not affectation, or indeed sentiment, for naturally her memory treasured only the best in him, and she spoke as she remembered.

In *Sense and Sensibility* we have Jane Austen's first attempt, written as a correspondence between Elinor and Marianne. This form was given up and in 1811, the book was published in its present form. There are many delightful characters in it. Mrs. Jenkinson with her glass of old Constantia for an inward bruise; Mrs. Palmer her daughter, who finds it so drole that her husband is a boor, and that the geraniums are nipped by the frost; the Miss Steeles, a most sorded [sic] pair, and Sir John Middlemore who upon hearing of Willoughby's treachery vows he "could not speak another word to him meet him where he might, for all the world. No, not if it were to be by the side of Barton Covert, and they were kept waiting for two hours together."

Then Mr. Robert Ferrars of the tooth-pick case. He is, I very much fear, not at all exaggerated.

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I think the more serious purpose of Miss Austen is not to show that Marianne, as Sensibility [sic] was incapable of feeling sincerely, but that Sense, personified in Elinor, was as capable, though she exercised that self-restraint which was so dear to the author.

Pride and Prejudice, was originally entitled *First Impressions*, and was the work of a few months. Her father struck by the book, offered it to a Mr. Cadell, who declined it. It therefore remained on the shelf until 1813, about 15 years after it was written. It is a curious fact that her first three books, written at Steventon, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*, were not published until she was already preparing her three last, during the years 1811 and 1813. I should think no other author of such subsequent fame, ever made so little stir in the literary world; and it is very certain none was so little eager for recognition.

In conclusion, I should like to read you a part of a preface by Richardson, written for an edition of *Pamela*, published in 1742. No comment is necessary; and before I read it, I will say what is needful of Jane Austen's death.

Her health began to fail at the end of 1816, whilst the family were living at Chawton. In May, 1817, Cassandra took her to Winchester, to lodgings in the corner house of College Street, where for two months she nursed her with unflinching devotion. Others of her family were constantly with her, so that she was happy to the end, though, I believe she suffered great pain. She writes to a nephew, Edward, afterwards Lord Brabourne, such a letter as we would expect, full of gratitude, affection, true faith and resignation. She died in perfect peace on July 18th, 1817, and was buried at Winchester Cathedral, "near the centre of the north aisle, almost opposite to the beautiful chantry tomb of William of Wykeham. [sic] It is not necessary for me to tell you what is on the tomb, for everyone here has seen or will see it. On a brass in the north wall, inserted by Mr. Austen Leigh, there is an appropriate text, "She openeth her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue is the law of kindness."—*Prov.* xxxi. 26.

The aim of the novel—according to Richardson.

If to divert and entertain, and at the same time to instruct and improve, the minds of the youth of both sexes.

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If to inculcate Religion and Morality in so easy and agreeable a manner as shall render them equally delightful and profitable.

If to set forth, in the most exemplary lights, the Parental, the Filial and the Social duties.

If to paint vice in its proper colours, to make it deservedly odious, and to set virtue in its own amiable light and to make it look lovely.

If to draw characters with Justness, and to support them distinctly, and, after a few more “ifs” of the same sort.

If to effect all these good ends, in so probable, so natural, and so lively a manner as shall engage the Passions of every sensible reader and attach their regard to the story. If these be laudable or worthy recommendations, the Editor of the following letters ventures to assert that all these ends are obtained here, together, and though I may not be so well qualified to praise her work as Richardson was to praise his own, I will be bold and substitute for “letters,” those of Jane Austen’s novels that we have had under discussion to-night.

LIST OF PEOPLE WHO READ EXTRACTS.

Extract I. MISS MELLIS SMITH. Letter from J. A.

„ II. DR. HELEN WEBB. Letter from J. A.

„ III. MISS WINNIE HENDERSON. Description.

„ IV. MISS J. R. SMITH. Passage from *Sense and Sensibility*.

„ V. MISS ALLEN. Unfinished Comedy—written by J. A. at twelve years old.

„ VI. MISS PENNYTHORNE. Sketch of suggested plots.

„ VII. MRS. DANIELL. Letter from Charlotte Brontë.

„ VIII. MISS DAVIS. Passage from *Pride and Prejudice*.

„ IX. MISS M. THOMPSON. Passage from *Northanger Abbey*.

„ X. MISS KITCHING. Passages from *Northanger Abbey*.

„ XI. MISS CRUSE. Passage from *Emma*.