

*Scale How Tuesdays.*¹

JANE AUSTEN.

By D. BROWNELL.

So little is known of the life of this quiet writer of the 19th century, that it is difficult to make the story of that life an interesting one, passed, as it was, in the greatest privacy and seclusion, and unchequered by any great crisis, or disturbed by the startling events which were taking place on the Continent at the time, where Bonaparte was endeavouring to carry out his plans for a conquest of the world. Of her life, as I have said before, little is known. She was born on the 16th December, 1775, at the Parsonage House of Steventon, a small village situated on the chalk hills of the north of Hampshire, of which place, together with the neighbouring village of Dean, her father was rector. Her mother was the daughter of the Rev. Thomas Leigh, of the Leighs of Warwickshire, and it was from her that Jane inherited much of her genius, for Cassandra Leigh was endowed, not only with strong common sense, but with a lively imagination and great conversational powers. The Rev. Geo. Austen was a remarkably good-looking man, and a good scholar, which is proved by the fact that he himself prepared two of his sons for the university; and, indeed, he took a lively interest in the education of all his children, and personally superintended their studies. After their marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Austen had charge of Warren Hastings's son, who was sent home from India to be educated, but unfortunately Jane Austen's biographer does not tell us whether he afterwards kept up any connection with the family.

The Austens themselves had seven children, of whom Jane was the youngest. The warmest affection bound the whole family together, but between the two sisters, Cassandra and Jane, there was a particularly devoted friendship, although their characters were not much alike. Jane's was a more demonstrative and sunny nature, Cassandra's was somewhat colder, more prudent and calm. They talked freely upon all subjects between themselves, and Jane especially loved to discuss her ideas for her novels with her sister, who was always an interested and sympathetic listener.

Jane Austen was well educated, but not highly accomplished. In childhood every opportunity of instruction was eagerly seized, and she was always fond of books, especially old periodicals and novels, and poetry—Scott, Cowper, and Crabbe being her favourite poets. Before she was eighteen she had already written a number of stories, mostly nonsense, but spirited nonsense, and however childish the matter, the language was always simple and free from extravagances.

In the spring of 1801, Mr. Austen resigned his living in favour of his eldest son James, and the family removed from Steventon to Bath, a change which was a real grief to Jane Austen, as she was very fond of the home of her childhood. It was during their stay at Bath that her father died, in February, 1805. After this sad event, Mrs. Austen and her two daughters left their house, and, after spending some months in lodgings, removed to Southampton.

In 1809, the second son, Edward, who had succeeded to the estates of a cousin, by whom he had been adopted, offered his mother the choice of two houses on his property, and Chawton Cottage, near his house in Hampshire, where he sometimes resided, was chosen, and

the family removed there, accompanied by Miss Lloyd, a near connection.

In 1816, the illness which ultimately caused her death began to be felt by Jane Austen, and in the May of the following year the two sisters went to Winchester, in order that Jane might have the medical advice of Mr. Lyford, a doctor of great reputation at that time. Although exceedingly weak, Jane Austen did not suffer much pain, and she was always cheerful and bright. Her sister was a most devoted and indefatigable nurse, and never left her from the commencement of her illness until her death. Her death was

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like her life—calm and peaceful. She passed away on the 18th July, 1817, and was buried in Winchester Cathedral, opposite to the tomb of William of Wykeham, a slab of black marble marking her last resting place.

Of Jane Austen's personal character we have ample knowledge through her works, for it is felt throughout them all; but apart from them her nephews and nieces agree in attributing to her the most excellent virtues, and she was looked upon by them all with the greatest affection in her rôle of maiden aunt. In appearance she has been described as a clear brunette, with a rich colour, large hazel eyes, a small well-formed nose, and a finely cut but thin mouth. Tall and elegant, she was graceful in all her movements, and her whole appearance was, until her illness, indicative of health and spirits. She played on the piano and harpsichord, and sang very sweetly, generally old-fashioned songs. Children she would amuse for hours together by telling them entrancing fairy tales, but though so fond of them, they are seldom introduced into her books. Attractive, clever and fond of pleasure, she moved in society in a quiet and unostentatious way, always studying the people among whom she found herself. She was curiously shy of being discovered in her literary pursuits, and if visitors called whilst she was writing—she worked in the common sitting room—she would cover up her work with a piece of blotting paper, and not allow anyone to know what she had been doing.

Of the romantic side of her life we know very little, but according to her sister, Jane received marked attentions from a most eligible gentleman whilst staying with her at the seaside, but he, unfortunately, died suddenly, before anything came of it. More than this we know very little, for it is shrouded in mist, but there seems to have been another admirer, who, however, failed to make Miss Austen return his feelings. That she could write in so realistic a manner of the tender passion is due, in all probability, not to personal experience, but to the way in which she studied and observed those around her. That her books are undergoing such a great revival at the present day is not to be wondered at, there being so much in them to make them valued among the standard works of our English literature. Her style is quiet and unaffected, her English is pure and simple, and

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few authors have excelled Jane Austen in the cleverness and reality with which she has drawn her characters, who are essentially natural and living. Jane Austen never exaggerated, and she possessed that rare gift of being able to put in her touch, and then leave it to make its own effect upon the reader's mind. Of what may be called her serious works, *Sense and Sensibility* was the first to be commenced, as it was eventually the first published. It was begun in 1792, under the title of *Elinor and Marianne*, and was written in an epistolary form, under the influence of Richardson's works, of which she was very fond. Five years later this was entirely recast, and written, this time, not in the form of letters. One of the cleverest pieces in it is the

discussion between Mr. John Dashwood and his wife as to what he must do for his step-mother and sisters in fulfilment of his father's last wish. Perhaps the cleverest character in the book is the "egregious amateur in toothpick cases," as Austin Dobson calls Mr. Robert Ferrars, and his opinion upon life in a cottage is most entertaining.

The first year at Chawton was spent in revising this book, and it was then published for £150, which her biographer tells us Jane Austen thought "a prodigious amount for that which had cost her nothing." In October, 1796, four years after beginning *Sense and Sensibility*, she set to work upon what is generally acknowledged to be her masterpiece—*Pride and Prejudice*. Like the former, this book was begun under a different name, that of *First Impressions*. In it we find not only one of the most charming characters, that of Elizabeth Bennett, but also the most amusing, Mr. Collins.

Jane Austen excelled in her bores, and of them all, and there is at least one in almost all her works, the inimitable Mr. Collins is the greatest, and her description of him is excellent. She says "Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society." We are quickly introduced to him when he comes to Longbourne in search of a wife. Some of his speeches are very amusing, particularly his conversation with Elizabeth at the Netherfield ball, on his discovering that Mr. Darcy is in the room. Having decided which cousin shall fill the honoured post of his wife, his proposal is truly characteristic. Mrs. Bennett is a terrible person, but

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very entertaining. The rapid change which her opinion of Mr. Darcy undergoes on learning that he was engaged to Elizabeth, is most amusing.

Very soon after finishing the revision of *Sense and Sensibility*, Miss Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey*, in imitation of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and with the object of ridiculing the Radcliffe School. It is consequently very different to her other books, and is certainly less pleasing.

Jane Austen's forte was character painting, and in *Northanger Abbey* less attention is given to the characters, and more to the incidents in the story itself. The book begins with a charming little hit at the style in which *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is written. The same happy sarcasm runs throughout the book, appearing sometimes with the greatest boldness, as in Chapter VI., where Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe discuss *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

In *Emma*, which was published after Jane Austen's slowly acquired reputation was beginning to grow, we have the amusing attempts of the heroine at matchmaking. In this book also we have the voluble Miss Bates, with her unending flow of conversation, a string of nothings, extending over a wide area, and generally ending miles away from the original subject, as when Emma and Harriet called in at her house as they passed it on their walk.

Emma was published in 1816, and was dedicated by special permission to the Prince Regent, who was a great admirer of Jane Austen's works, and who kept a set of her books in each of his palaces. Of *Emma* herself Miss Austen said, "I am going to make a heroine whom no one but myself will like," which is not exactly true, for one cannot help liking this girl who is such an excellent daughter, although a misguided friend.

In *Mansfield Park* the characters are less pleasing than in the other works of this authoress, but Henry Crawford and his sister are admirably drawn, and Fanny Price is very sweet. But Mrs. Norris, like all Jane Austen's bores, attracts a very large share of our attention.

She has such a happy way of doing charitable deeds at other people's expense, the most famous instance of which is her proposal to relieve her poorer sister of the burden of providing for one member of her numerous family.

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Both *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published after the author's death, and hence it is that being first issued together in 1818, they are still generally published in the same book [sic] The latter was finished only a few months before Jane Austen's death, and though so ill whilst engaged in writing it, her creative genius did not fail her, and *Persuasion* is one of the most delightful of her works. Of all Jane Austen's characters the heroine of this book is the most charming. In writing to a friend, Miss Austen said of her, "You may *perhaps* like her, as she is almost too good for me." This quiet and unaffected girl, who is so essentially an English gentlewoman, claims our hearts at the beginning of the book, and engrosses our attention throughout the story.

Her company has an almost magical effect upon Mary's spirits and health on her visit to Uppercross for the purpose of being of use to this sister while she was poorly.

It is curious how totally uninfluenced the writings of Jane Austen were by the stirring times in which she lived. She had, it is true, a distinct *penchant* for the navy, which was most probably due to her naval brothers, but the popular excitement which must have run high after the battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo, and the other important events of that period, seems to have passed by this quiet authoress without disturbing the even tenor of her life. Both Scott and Macaulay were great admirers of her works, and Trevelyan, in his life of the latter, gives the following quotation from his *Journal* of 1858, which shews us the extent of his admiration:—"If I could get the materials, I really would write a short life of that wonderful woman, and raise a little money to put up a monument to her in Winchester Cathedral."

¹ It is the "Tuesday" evening custom at the House of Education for one or another student to read an appreciation of some favourite author or composer, illustrated by extracts or compositions, read or performed by some of those present. The passages referred to in the notice of *Jane Austen* were read where mention of them occurs, the writer resuming her paper until the next quotation became *apropos*. We venture to think that this custom introduced into families would have happy results.—Ed.