



• CASSANDRA & JANE •

A Jane Austen Novel

"This delightful book offers
unique insight into the
Austen sisters' relationship."

— Janet Aylmer, author of
Darcy's Story



Jill Pitkeathley

*Cassandra
& Jane*

JILL PITKEATHLEY



HarperCollins e-books

*This book is dedicated to
my family and friends, who would not let me go*

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Such a Sister, Such a Friend

I have lost a treasure,
such a sister, such a friend
as never can have been surpassed.
She was the sun of my life,
the gilder of every pleasure,
the soother of every sorrow;
I had not a thought concealed from her,
and it is as if I had lost a part of myself.

LETTER WRITTEN BY CASSANDRA AUSTEN
TO HER NIECE FANNY KNIGHT ON 18 JULY 1817
AFTER THE DEATH OF HER SISTER JANE AUSTEN.



PROLOGUE

Chawton, October 1843

I have kept every one of the letters that Jane wrote to me. I have read them all now and sorted them into two piles. At first, I stored them in my lacquered box and later, after her death, I transferred them to her rosewood trunk.

It has always been easy to keep them neatly stored. Her folds were so precise, her seals so well placed, her directions and dates writ so clear. I used to tease her that she made other letter writers feel ashamed of their poor efforts. I have read and re-read them all over the years, although I have let no one else see them. But all the family know I have them and I dare say that brother Henry, excitable creature that he is and unable to keep a confidence, has even told her publisher.

When I am gone, perhaps before, they will want them, they will pore over them, examine them in detail and discuss them without limit. I must never forget my responsibility to her, to her memory.

"No private correspondence could bear the eye of others," as she said herself.

It is I, not Henry, appointed by her to do this, even though Henry now describes himself as co-owner of her property. So I cannot shirk this task, however painful it may be. At first I thought I would cut out only small parts but, as I re-read the letters, I now know it is better to destroy many of them. Am I doing it for her or for me, I must ask myself?

For us both, I suppose.

The world must see ours as the perfect sister relationship, always loving, always tranquil. She, like me, would not have wanted light to be shone upon the times we were estranged, my jealousies, her depressions. She most certainly would not have wanted her secret love, her fear of childbearing, her contempt for married women and her dislike of our mother, to be known and examined by anyone who cared to do so. Those privacies must be maintained and if others wonder about them in the future, at least they will never be able to find any proof for their speculations.

As I tie up the first bundles and write across them "to be burned," they feel so heavy that I am reminded of the weight of her dear head as I held it on my lap that last night in Winchester. I held it propped up on a cushion on my knee all night.

There are too many letters to be burned in the parlour fire, or even in the kitchen range. Tomorrow, I will make a fire in the garden and put them into the flames myself.

I shall tell no one.

"All families have secrets." How we laughed when Jane wrote that. In our old room at Steventon, she read the passage to me as we made ready for bed and we went through our own family secrets:

Poor dear George,
Aunt Leigh-Perrot's trial,
Who WAS Eliza's father?
My mother's imagined ill health.

And the many other things that we unmarried daughters were not supposed to know. This was, of course, before the tragedy surrounding her secret love and the depression which was to blight her life and mine too, for so long, but I know how concerned she was that no one should ever know about these things.

Again, I ask myself, is it Jane I seek to protect, or myself?

She always referred to me as her most devoted sister. She never condemned me for the times when I did not support her, for my occasional resentment of her success, or the way that I may have influenced her wrongly. That was between ourselves. We did not wish anyone else to know, even within our intimate circle, leave alone in the world at large.

We even thought then that no one would ever know who wrote the books. "By a Lady" is what we agreed would be on the title page. She was glad when the truth came out, even though she knew I was not. I wanted her wit, her talent, her skill, to be known in the family and among our friends, but was frightened lest wider fame would take her away from me. I suppose that I am glad that she knew the pleasure of recognition before she died, so cruelly young.

But now . . . if she should become more widely read, more widely known, what will happen then to her papers and letters? Sir Walter Scott has singled her out for high praise and Lord Macaulay has even likened her to Shakespeare.

Only last week, Henry wrote to say that all the books are to be reprinted again and I heard from Anna that, when she visited her aunt's grave in the Cathedral, there was a party of people standing beside it, reading the inscription aloud.

In Memory of Jane Austen,

youngest daughter of the late Revd George Austen, formerly Rector
of Steventon in this county.

She departed this life on the 18th of July 1817, aged 41, after a long illness supported with the patience and hopes of a Christian. The benevolence of her heart, the sweetness of her temper and the extraordinary endowments of her mind obtained the regard of all who

knew her and the warmest love of her intimate connections. Their grief is in proportion to their affection. They know their loss to be irreparable but in their deepest affliction they are consoled by a firm though humble hope that her charity, devotion, faith and purity have rendered her soul acceptable in the sight of her Redeemer.

That is how I want her to be remembered. Parties who visit her grave and everyone else are to think only good about her. If they know her as I did they may, they will, misjudge her. They may also misjudge me.

The other pile of letters, the ones to be kept, will show her only as I want her to be remembered and how I want to be remembered as her sister. No one is to know her innermost self as I did, no one is to judge too harshly the thoughts of her lively mind and no one is to know about the dark times between us. The secrets we shared will go with me to my grave.

It is a fine early autumn evening. It will be dry enough tomorrow for a large fire.



ONE

Our Early Years

How soon did you know her special qualities? That is the question I have always been asked ever since her fame spread beyond the family.

The fact is that I somehow always knew that she was different and the memories I have of her in our childhood are about those times when it was clear that she behaved in some way which was unusual or unexpected. As a child, and as an adult, she could be difficult and cause discomfort to me and to others.

They always told me that I could not possibly remember the first time I saw her. After all, I was not quite three and it was too much to expect that my memory was accurate. I knew what others told me about that first meeting in 1775 and had assumed that the memories were my own. But I know that is not true, I have a very clear memory of that very snowy day when Mrs. Littledown, my village mother, brought me to Steventon to meet my new sister.

The snow was very deep, too deep for me to walk, and Mother Littledown carried me all the way. I was so well wrapped up that I could scarcely see out from all the shawls and scarves but I caught a glimpse of the oak tree in the driveway, its branches so weighed with snow that they almost touched the ground. I laughed as my head touched the branches and flurries of snow fell on to my village mother's head. Though so cold, it was very sunny and the glare of

the sun on the snow hurt my eyes so that it was a relief to pass into the darkness of the passage and be set down.

My mother was in the bed, her cap crooked on her head, and held her hand out to me as I approached.

“Dear little Cassy—we have a sister for you to play with at last—come and look at her.”

There was a fire in the grate and the room was warm but still Jane was swaddled tightly as I bent over her. She lay in the wicker cradle that we later used for Charles and her eyes were open. They were the same light brown that I later drew and sparkled even then.

I can remember no more, but I have since been told that, shortly afterwards, Jane took my place with the village family and I returned to live at Steventon Rectory with my parents and four brothers.

My mother’s way of raising her brood caused some disquiet in the rest of the family, though I did not learn this until much later. She nursed us herself until we were able to be weaned. I was later to be most embarrassed by this practice, as it was more usual to employ a wet nurse.

All her life, my mother was to act rather strangely in some matters and this was certainly one. Normally, when a child was weaned, it would be brought back from its wet nurse and take its place with the family. In the Austen household, the babies were sent off after they were on to the spoon and only returned when they were what Mama called civilised. This happened to us all and I did not therefore see Jane for a long while after that first glimpse in the bedroom. She was sent to Cheesedown Farm after her christening, I later learned, and came home after Charles, the last baby, was born.

The next memory I have is of a very hot day when we all went to see my brother George. George was almost as old as James, my eldest brother,

and I could not understand why he had not come back home to live with the rest of us. When I asked, Mama would reply, "George is different, my love, as you will see when you meet him."

It must have been a Sunday I suppose, that first visit, as all the others were, after my father had finished his services. James was there and Edward and Henry too, but I cannot recall Frank.

When we reached Monk Sherborne, George came running out to meet us and he looked just like James, except that he was much smaller; he walked awkwardly, dragging one leg behind him. An older man was with him and I was told that this was my uncle Thomas, Mama's brother. He seemed more like a small boy himself. How long we stayed, I cannot rightly remember but, as we were to leave, I was very frightened to see George fall upon the ground and twitch in a most terrible manner, foaming at the mouth.

As we got back into the cart to be conveyed home, I saw that my mother was crying.

My father took her hand. "We are fortunate my dear that we have other, many other, healthy children. And we have this comfort, that he cannot be a bad or wicked child."

I knew that we should not respond to this but this was the first time I saw Jane show that determined, bold approach that I was to learn to expect of her.

"Why can he not be bad or wicked, Papa? Are other children bad or wicked?"

"Children are bad or wicked when they question their parents too much, Jenny."

"But why, Papa . . . ?"

I grasped her hand and squeezed it so she would stop. I had seen the sadness on my mother's face turn to anger and she folded her lips tightly as she looked at Jane.

"Hush my dear," said my father, "the child is naturally curious, that is all."

“She is too concerned for herself, with not enough consideration for others. Her high opinion of herself is not fitting for a girl child.”

That was I think the first time I was aware that my mother did not like Jane much. There was something in each of their characters that made them at odds with each other. Jane put her own interpretation on it in later years, but in these childhood days it was a sadness I could not explain and led me to be even more protective of Jane than I would have been as an elder sister.

Her boldness was always a puzzle to me. I partly admired and partly feared it. I often wished I had her spirit and I own that it made me feel wanting, as though my meekness were something to be ashamed of. There was a conflict in this for me, because my mother was forever telling us that meekness and humility were qualities for which every young girl should strive.

This sadness apart, it was a happy house. I was expected to be as Mama put it “*a little mother*” to my only sister and we always shared a room together.

I knew later that my parents had worries about monetary matters and were often in debt, but they never discussed this in our presence. When they decided to have boys staying with us for schooling, we saw it only as a source of company and amusement, not of income. Of course it was very noisy, but any house with seven children in it would have been so anyway. My mother seemed not to mind the extra work which the boarders entailed and continued to work in the garden and the dairy, as well as seeing to the sewing and the correspondence. I always think of her working in the dairy wearing her bright red riding coat.

It had been her attire when she and my father left Bath on their wedding journey and she often used it as an example of how “*good material can be turned and made over a dozen times if a woman is good*

with her needle." I seem to remember that the red coat was finally made into hunting jackets for Frank and Charles when they were old enough to ride.

As well as noise, there was much laughter in our childhood. If we did not always take part in the boys' activities, we were always aware of them.

Mama taught us our letters and our numbers and in the holidays Papa would sometimes give us lessons with the globe or even the microscope. Jane was a more eager learner than I and always more ready to engage in conversation with the boys. I was too shy, I suppose, and made to feel more so by Jane's outgoing ways.

In later years, she always protested that she was the shy one but that is not how I remember her. I remember only how hapless I felt when she was asking clever questions and learning texts so much more quickly than I. However, she always minded me and a warning look was all that was ever needed to remind her that she should be quiet. We were always together and I never resented this as I have heard some elder sisters do, even though she made me exasperated in many ways.

I suppose my parents may have worried that we would be too influenced by the boys and not grow up to be young ladies of gentility. We loved the rough games the boys played and I can see Jane now, rolling down the big grassy slope behind the house.

Frank was the leader of our younger group. We called him Fly because he was so agile and rather small for his age. He loved horses and somehow managed to buy himself a pony called Squirrel. I rather fancy that his godfather, one of our many uncles, gave him some money for his birthday. He loved the pony dearly and was always generous in letting us ride him. We had no side saddle, but we thought nothing of straddling the pony and racing him up and down the lane. Jane was a much more fearless rider than I, but I too

would take a turn on Squirrel and loved the sensation of speed. One morning, as my mother walked from her work in the dairy to talk to the laundress whose day it was, she saw us riding in the lane. I was mounted on Squirrel at the time.

"Cassandra!" she almost shouted at me, "young ladies do not ride astride. What are you about?"

I was taken aback by her anger, as she had never raised her voice to me before.

We always knew that my mother was more concerned about proper behaviour and being genteel than my father and perhaps it was this incident which made her consider the future of her daughters. At any rate, in 1784, when I was just about nine years old my father announced that I was to be sent away to school.

When we blew out the candle that night, I told Jane and shed a tear or two, for I did not wish to leave home and especially I was distressed at the thought of being parted from my dear sister. I feared that leaving her with Mama without my protection would be distressing for her and perhaps I feared too and was jealous of the greater attention she would receive as the only daughter at home. That our cousin Jane Cooper, who was about my age, was to go with me was no consolation to me.

"You cannot leave me, Cass," cried Jane "If you are to be sent away than I shall go too."

"But you are too young . . ."

"Can I not read as well as you? I shall tell Mama tomorrow that I must be allowed to go."

"You would do well to ask her, Jane, not tell her," I said cautiously.

I was not present when she asked—the first I knew was when Jane came running upstairs, bright eyed and smiling.

"I may go with you, I may go with you," she said excitedly.

Later I heard Mama explaining to her cousin Aunt Cooper, "If Cassandra's head had been going to be cut off, Jane would have hers cut off too."

For we country girls, used as we were to being outdoors whenever the weather permitted, it was strange to be in Oxford, confined in a house which had other houses close by. There were twelve girls there in all, with another two who were sixteen or so and sometimes helped with the teaching. Jane was the youngest by far and Mrs. Cawley, a friend of Mama's who kept the school, had I believe been persuaded to take her rather against her wishes.

"If she yearns too much for her mother, you must have the comforting of her, Cassandra, since she is your sister and I am too much occupied with my duties."

Mrs. Cawley's duties seemed to consist mainly of housekeeping matters, but she read to us from the Bible each morning and taught us French phrases each afternoon. A visiting gentleman taught arithmetic and we practised our handwriting with the older girls. I seem to recall that there were occasional geography and history lessons but, as we were accustomed to learning these things with our father, I do not know that they added much to the sum of our education. Our work did improve and Jane always said this was where she learned the small stitches of which she was rightly proud in later years.

The food we were given was a great contrast to what we were used to at home. We were never rich and food was always plain but there was never a shortage of it. At school we were always aware that there were strict amounts allotted and never any second helpings.

For breakfast there was porridge, toast and tea. Dinner was boiled beef or mutton with a plum duff to follow on Sundays. For supper there was bread, cheese and tea. We found the food wanting, but girls who had come from other schools assured us that compared

with other establishments, it was plentiful. They told us stories of near starvation . . . where bread was charged for, where there was only water to drink—tea was extra. One girl, also called Jane (there were four Janes in all in the school) told us fearful stories about her last school. There, the mistress who ran it made the girls sleep in the same room as the one in which they had their lessons and took all their meals. At night they simply cleared away the benches and tables and laid mattresses upon the floor.

We at least had a separate sleeping room. We shared beds, but Jane and I were used to that. Jane Cooper, though, had to share with a much bigger girl, who frequently pushed her out of bed in the night. She would crawl, shivering, in with me and Jane as the dawn broke. We did shed tears then, all three of us, remembering the warmth and comfort of home, but in the morning we tried to be cheerful, because we knew that was what was expected by our parents as well as by Mrs. Cawley.

“We want no long faces here, do we, young ladies?” she would say at breakfast.

“No, Ma’am, no long faces,” we would chorus obediently.

Why the school was suddenly moved to Southampton from Oxford was never clear to me and I do not know if any explanation was ever given to the parents of the girls, beyond a brief letter mentioning the change of address.

One Friday, we were told to pack all our belongings, as on the morrow we were to be conveyed by post to Southampton. We were so excited, Jane in particular, at the thought of seeing the sea for the first time in our lives that we insisted upon travelling on the roof of the coach, so that we might be the first to see the ocean.

We had forgot that it was a long journey from Oxford to Southampton and it was a cold March day. Though we started before

7 a.m., it was past dark when we arrived and we were chilled to the bone. Even had it been light, no sea would have been visible, as the new school was situated in a shabby house in a street so enclosed that the only indication of being near the sea was the smell of rotting cargoes from the docks.

Perhaps it was the fact that so many of the girls were so cold on that journey that made them vulnerable to infection, or perhaps it was that, being so near to a port, infections were rife, but before long we were taken seriously ill for the first time in our lives.

A dreadful illness overtook all the girls—a putrid sore throat. Mrs. Cawley was clearly alarmed by the spread of the infection, but told us that on no account were we to write to our parents about it, as they would be too much worried. We believed her, as she was a friend of Mama and Aunt Cooper, but were surprised that she was so adamant about us not sending letters that she removed all our writing materials and locked them away.

Jane, perhaps because she was the youngest, was the first of the three of us to fall ill. Her fever was so high that she did not know where she was and Jane Cooper and I begged to be allowed to tell our mothers. Still Mrs. Cawley refused. I, too, then caught the infection and was put to bed next to my sister. One night, during a lucid period, Jane told me that I must somehow get a message to our home.

“But how can I, when we have no pen and paper?”

“Steal some” she said in a fierce whisper, before lapsing again into a fever.

I was never so ill as she and, when Jane Cooper came to see us the next day, I told her what sister Jane had said.

“She is right,” she said determinedly, “and I have pen and ink in my locker which Mrs. Cawley missed in her search. I will get a letter sent somehow.”

I, to my lasting guilt, tried to stop her, as I feared the repercussions of disobeying. Luckily for us all, she did not heed me and just before she was taken with the fever herself, managed to smuggle a letter out with one of the maids.

No sooner was the letter received than Mama and Aunt Cooper came to Southampton and with their better nursing we recovered enough to be conveyed home. Sadly though, Aunt Cooper caught the infection herself and was not so fortunate. She died a few weeks later, leaving poor Jane motherless.

I have always wondered whether, without Jane's encouragement and cousin Jane's action, we should all three have died in that spartan place. How I have regretted and felt guilty about my lack of pluck which might have led to such an outcome and envied Jane's spirit.

As soon as we were better, though it may have been a few months later, we were sent to another school where this time no misfortune befell us.

The Abbey School in Reading was run by Madame La Tournelle and it was a cheerful place in 1786. We girls were fascinated to learn that Madame had a cork leg, but it certainly did not seem to impede her movements much. She even took part in dancing lessons.

Though she was known as Madame, there did not seem to be any sign of a husband, nor indeed was there any indication that she could speak French. She always wore the same style of dress, with a muslin kerchief and apron and cuffs and ruffles. Madame loved play acting and it was there that I first saw how good Jane was at taking a part, acting out a scene.

But then, Jane was good at everything. Her memory was so good that she had to be told a thing but once for it to be imprinted. This helped her greatly with the French and history we were taught and the lists of dates and vocabulary which we learned by rote caused her no difficulty at all. While I struggled with music, she was out-

standing. I could draw tolerably well and for this Jane always praised me extravagantly. She did the same with my handwriting, though I always thought hers very neat.

"I am quite angry with myself," she said to me once, "for not writing close. Why is my alphabet so much more sprawly than yours?"

All her life she continued the habit picked up at school of calling her handwriting "sprawl" and comparing it unfavourably with mine. Why did she always praise me so? Was it because she realised how much less a person I was and did not want me to be aware of it? But I was, Jane, I was and know that I envied her her cleverness.

We seemed to have a great deal of free time at school to amuse ourselves in the company of our friends. Jane was very much a favourite, partly because she was so young to be away at school and partly because she entertained us all. She loved the history of the school and told and re-told the story of Elizabeth Woodville, the first commoner Queen of England who had been presented to the people from the walls of the old Abbey, after Edward IV had married her in secret. Jane would act out the incident on the walls, using different voices, different airs, delighting in the applause which greeted her exertions.

"How wonderful it is, Cass, that a woman from a humble background could capture the heart of a king and become the Queen of England," she would say.

"Well, hardly humble, she came from a noble family."

"Oh, do not be so practical! Is it not the most romantic of stories? Perhaps one day you or I will marry a king or a nobleman."

One evening, our brother Edward and cousin Jane's brother, also called Edward, visited us and we were permitted to dine with them at an inn in the town. When we returned, Jane insisted on taking them to the Abbey walls and acting out the scene for them.

"There are Neds enough in the story," she said. "Let us perform it for our two Neds."

Of course, it was only she who performed. I would have been too shy and Jane Cooper would have had difficulty remembering the sequence of events.

It was at school too that Jane first grew so fond of the story of Mary Queen of Scots and developed because of that a violent hatred for Queen Elizabeth. Again it was the romance of the story which fired her. I did sometimes wonder if her hatred of Queen Elizabeth had a little to do with the fact that Mama had always proudly claimed a connection with that great Queen. We were always being told that her background was aristocratic and that she was descended from the Lord Mayor of London who had proclaimed Elizabeth Queen.

So we scrambled ourselves a little education and went back home after two years or so, able to play and draw, to embroider neatly, to speak a little French and to dance extremely well. I do not know if we were withdrawn from school because of the cost, or because our parents felt we now had quite enough learning. No explanation was given, but we were, I remember, quite content to return to Steventon.

We both welcomed the familiar smell of the parlour, which opened straight from the garden path—a smell of newly washed linen as my mother sat mending the boys' clothes and of the apple wood burning in the grate. I suppose the expectation of everyone, including ourselves, was that we should not leave home again, apart from on visits, until we were married.



TWO

Theatricals and Exciting Visitors

Things had changed at home by the time we got back. My brother James had gone to Oxford in 1779, to my father's old college of St. John's. He was only fourteen, but my father's friend had agreed to take him. He told us later how his country manners made him embarrassed in the company he kept at college, especially when he was asked to dine at Balliol with my father's old tutor, the Master. When he removed his gown before dinner, thinking that was the proper thing to do, he was told, "You need not strip, young man, we are not going to fight."

I suppose we did have country manners and, when we were back at home in that first year after school, other events made us more aware of our lack of sophistication.

Some years before, our cousins, the Thomas Knights, had come to visit us on their wedding journey. They took a great fancy to my brother Edward. Edward was not very handsome, but his manner was affable and engaging and he clearly endeared himself to our rich cousins. So much so in fact that they asked that he be allowed to accompany them on the rest of their journey. They continued to visit him and ask him to stay for a while each subsequent year.

I do not know when the idea of their adopting him was first put to my parents, or what their reaction was, but just before we went off to school we were told that Edward was to go to live permanently with the Knights and to become their son. I suppose that they had waited for a time, to see if they would produce a son of their own,

but when it became apparent that no children were to be born to them, they decided to adopt Edward. My father was, I fancy, more reluctant to agree to this arrangement than my mother, who said, "We had best let the boy go."

Of course they could see it would be a great advantage to him as indeed it proved to be. We missed him a great deal and I remember Jane being very angry.

"To parcel a child out like a piece of property—are you not shocked Cassandra? Are we too to be given away if some relative riding by should happen to take a fancy to us?"

For a while she had a fantasy that Mama had actually permitted Edward to be sold in return for some unspecified favour from the Knights. I chided her for such a disrespectful thought, but in truth I could see that there was advantage for my parents as well as for Edward in the arrangement.

"It does no harm," I heard my mother say to my father, "to please those who are rich and have the means of helping others. We have numerous children and must consider them all. Edward may find himself with the means of advancing the boys in years to come. As for the girls, having such connections may throw them into the paths of men who will make suitable husbands."

To me this seemed to make sense but for Jane it was, as ever, something for which to blame my parents.

"Well, one brother removed because of his sickness, one because a rich relative wishes it. Frank is now to go to naval school in hopes of being advanced by another uncle. Are we not like a family in a story? And if we add the story of cousin Eliza, why there are as many romantic stories in our family as anyone, even dear Miss Edgeworth, whose novels we enjoyed, would wish."

Our aunt Philadelphia and our cousin Betsy, or Eliza as she informed us she wished to be called, passed in and out of our lives like a whirlwind and a most romantic one at that. Jane in particular could not get enough of their stories when they visited and would listen wide-eyed to them.

Aunt Philla was my father's sister and she had gone out to India in the 1750s where she had married a Mr. Hancock. I believe it was quite the thing for young ladies who had not found a husband at home to be thus sent away. While there, however, she had become acquainted with the famous Warren Hastings. We later learned that many said she had become very intimately acquainted with him and he certainly took a very great interest in Eliza throughout her life. He settled enough money on her to make her an heiress—the only one we knew—and I once overheard my mother say of Aunt Philla that abandoning herself to Hastings had done her no harm when it came to her income, though I did not quite understand the meaning of this until long afterwards. My parents too had a connection with the great Mr. Hastings, though a rather unfortunate one.

His son, little George Hastings, had been sent as a pupil to Steventon from India upon the death of his mother when my father first opened the school. I suppose that Aunt and Uncle Hancock recommended my father to the grieving widower, as a place where young George would be cared for as well as educated. He made the long and arduous journey with only a nurse maid and to my parents' great distress, he died within a short time of his arrival. It was a terrible tragedy and my mother and father must have felt dreadful, even though I know that they received comforting letters from Mr. Hastings, not laying any blame. My aunt and uncle certainly did not find their friendship with him cooled as a result.

Through my aunt and Eliza, we had a glimpse of a life quite outside the narrow confines of Hampshire, a life of excitement and sophistication. Even my mother loved to hear their stories, though I often suspected that my father was rather embarrassed by them. They had a house in town and seemed to move in all the best circles, even attending Court sometimes.

Eliza was very beautiful and always wore lovely clothes and in the latest fashion. She would talk of gowns so heavy they were exhausting and of operas and drawing rooms and of many suitors. She was fourteen years older than Jane, but from the earliest times of them coming to visit when she was known as Betsy, Jane and she formed an intimate friendship. She was always kind to me, but I knew she preferred Jane.

They were alike in many ways—in their enthusiasms, in their passionate reactions to people and to situations, in their decided opinions. I know that I was often resentful about how well they got on together and would sulk in a most dreadful way until Jane tried to make up for her neglect by paying me more attention. I think Jane saw Eliza almost as a character in a story, a heroine certainly, but perhaps above all as someone in control of her own life as Jane and I could not hope to be. Partly this was about having her own money but it was also related to her strength of character.

“If I were to decide to be known as Elizabeth from now on, would you call me so?” asked Jane, when we heard that Eliza had decided to change her name.

“Of course I would, but I doubt our parents or our brothers would comply.”

“True, but Jane you know is such a plain name, you are luckier, Cassandra is so much more elegant, with its classical connections. Why, you may even be able to foretell the future.”

“Would you prefer the same name as Mama’s then, as I have?” I said slyly.

"I suppose not," she said, smiling slightly, "and she would certainly bestow it on me most reluctantly."

"What about Austen? Do you wish to be like Edward and take another surname?" For Edward had agreed to take the name of Knight when he came into his fortune.

"Well, women you know change their name in any case and one must be sure to judge a man by the elegance of his name, as well as by the handsomeness of his face."

"If we receive any proposals."

"Of course we shall receive proposals—does not Eliza tell us of the many young men who pursue her and she always says that girls as pretty as we are will not lack suitors?"

My mother came into the room and said, rather crossly, "You are too young to think of such things and Eliza should not put ideas into your heads. You may both have your new white muslins, but you are not grown yet."

That first Christmas after we came back from school, Aunt Philla and Eliza were to be our guests. We were particularly excited that Eliza, now Madame de Feuillide, was to bring her six month old baby named Hastings.

From the time she was about fifteen, my Eliza had spent a good deal of time in France with her mother. She always wrote us long letters telling us of her adventures and we awaited these eagerly, especially those in which she gave us detailed accounts of seeing Queen Marie Antoinette.

We knew that many young men pursued her and we were not surprised when my aunt wrote in 1781 to announce that she was to marry a French officer, when she was about nineteen.

We were surprised and Jane was delighted, that he was a count, so that Eliza was to be Madame La Comtesse. When she and Aunt Philla now came to stay, which they did frequently in the early years of her marriage, it was as though another world came with them—a world of silks

and satins and unusual smells; a world where we heard of operas and assemblies and theatricals. They settled easily into our home though and did not seem to miss the greater luxury they must have been used to. I, like Jane, loved to receive their letters, but when they were actually with us all my jealousies were inclined to return. They came often to stay at Christmas after that and we followed the pattern of that first one.

There was ample room for them, because the boys had departed for the holidays. James had gone to France to visit Eliza's husband, while Edward was away on his Grand Tour anyway. Henry, Frank and Charles were there as well as Jane and myself. I loved looking after little Hastings and at that point I do not think we had realized that he would fail to thrive. Being able to act as a "little mother" to Hastings was a comfort to me and I found that, thus occupied, I was less resentful of the intimacy between Jane and Eliza.

It must, I think, have been Eliza who suggested the theatricals. As the years went, we had many more plays performed in the barn just across the field from the house on, because our cousin was frequently with us, especially at Christmas. How we loved "The Wonder" and "Tom Thumb." How good Eliza was in the parts she took—she was always the heroine, of course, and spoke the parts which James and later Henry wrote for her. Jane always had a speaking part too, but I preferred to be one only of a crowd scene, or to help with the scenery or costumes.

As the years went by, my father permitted us to have more painted scenery and we had a store of costumes which we could draw upon. The house seemed alive with acting when we were planning a production. My father was amused by it all and my mother found time to help in spite of her household duties. Working together was the thing and helping each other. Occasionally Jane even drew praise from my mother for her interpretations and she in turn blossomed

and grew more confident. Oh yes, the theatricals were wonderful. If it was a hard winter, it was particularly unhappy for we girls, because if the lanes were dirty we could not venture out and the dark days were long without some amusement.

"How foolish it is," said Jane one day, "that suitable stout shoes are not made for young ladies, that we might take our exercise as usual in winter."

"Shoes would not be sufficient to save your petticoats from the mud," I replied, "and as it is three weeks yet before the laundress comes, you had best stay indoors."

But indoors in the barn, rehearsing, reading and performing was joyful indeed. We had a most appreciative audience in my parents and later from two families who moved into the neighbourhood—the Lloyds and the Biggs. Martha and Mary Lloyd and their widowed mother rented the parsonage at Deane. We already knew the Lloyds slightly, because they were cousins of the two Fowle boys who had been at school at Steventon for some years and had remained friends with James and Henry. I liked Mary well enough but she and Jane never got on that well—Jane preferred Martha.

"She may be ten years older than her sister but how much less serious she is—when we are together, we laugh till we die, as they used to say at school."

At about the same time, another family which was to play an important part in our lives inherited Manydown, a nearby estate. Their father, Mr. Bigg Wither, was quite well-to-do and the three daughters, Catherine, Elizabeth and Alethea were certainly richer than most young women we knew, with the exception of Eliza.

"How lucky we are," said Catherine to me, "to find such affable and gay society so conveniently near."

They became great friends almost as soon as they moved into Manydown. We often laughed at the confusion caused, because the

men in the family took the extra name of Wither while the girls remained only as Bigg. By the time we knew them, only three daughters remained at home. Elizabeth was the most beautiful and had many suitors, but Catherine and Alethea were attractive too.

Their enthusiasm for our theatricals and our readings really encouraged us and I remember particularly how they enjoyed "The Sultan" and "High Life below Stairs."

Generally, the families with whom we mixed were of a similar status in life to ourselves, but we did occasionally have contact with grander families. The Chutes, for example, who lived at the Vyne near Basingstoke, were rich enough; James was privileged to be invited to hunt with Tom Chute and to dine there frequently.

The father, William Chute, was a member of Parliament—the only one I think with whom we regularly came into contact and I remember once, when we attended a Ball at the Vyne, having to reprimand Jane for enquiring too closely of what his duties in Parliament consisted.

"But Cass, if he only attends and never speaks, why do the gentlemen of Hampshire continue to return him?" she said in that shrill voice which I came to dread on such occasions.

"Hush, Jane, these matters do not concern us."

"No indeed, so long as he is brave in the field, a good shot and generous with his claret, why should anyone be concerned?"

When Jane spoke like this, she angered me but I knew there was no point in reasoning with her and I contented myself only with trying to ensure that no one else could hear her, or that she might be in some way distracted. On this occasion, Mr. Chute himself asked her to dance and that, I was glad to see, silenced her. She knew herself that sometimes she overstepped the proper boundaries and could only do so safely with me. In later years, when she wrote something

particularly scandalous she would urge me, "*Take the scissors to this at once.*"

She was right to surmise that others might judge her comments more harshly, but with me she knew she could be frank and that I understood her turn of mind.

She often made sharp comments about the young married women of our acquaintance and the airs they sometimes adopted and this became a standing joke between us.

"Even dear Elizabeth Bigg was adamant that she must go first into dinner now that she is Mrs. Heathcote and that everyone else must go lower. Is getting a husband such an achievement that it must be rewarded at every turn by special visits, journeys and attentions? How many good dinners shall we expect when we are brides, Cass? And will they laugh at us in our turn? Still, it makes entertainment for our neighbours and for what else do we all exist?"

Much of our entertainment was provided by our plays and it was during the production of one of our these, I forget now which, that I realized that both James and Henry were growing fond of Eliza in rather more than a cousinly way.

To be more accurate, it was Jane who noticed it.

"Do you see, Cass, how the boys are vying for her attention, wanting her to indicate favour to one or other?"

"Surely not, she is a cousin after all and most important she is a married woman."

"You have no romance in your soul, Cass, she is also the most exciting and most beautiful young woman hereabouts. Believe me, they are both in love with her."

"Jane, you read too many romances—it cannot be so."

But I began to notice the communication between them, the looks, the laughter, the way they held her hand rather too long

when they handed up to the stage, the anxious looks they cast her when they read out a new page of dialogue they had written for her. James' was always better, but Henry had more success making her laugh.

I also began to notice that Mama was watching them too and not always with approval. Whether she said anything to Aunt Philla, I never knew, but they certainly departed quite abruptly that year, using the excuse that the pupils were returning and that there was no longer room for them.

"In any case," said Eliza, "we must return to France to see my poor husband. He misses us so and things are so unsettled there at present."

"Do you love him very much?" asked Jane. This was not all an improper question, as by now we were on extremely intimate terms.

"Love him?" Eliza looked surprised. "Why no, I do not love him, but he provides me with a comfortable means of living and he adores me, which is, you know, the most important thing. It is a bargain one makes. I perform my conjugal duties and he provides me with an agreeable way of life."

I was quite shocked by this response but later, as we lay in bed, Jane said, "Is it not desirable, Cass, to have a husband, two other men in love with you, the freedom to travel as you wish and the opportunity to pass pleasant times with your family in the intervals between journeys?"

I said that such a life did not appeal to me and I could not think it would appeal to her, once she had learned to love someone herself.

"Ah, you speak from your lofty experience of love, do you? Is it Master Fowle we refer to?"

I blushed in the dark, for it was true that I had begun to form an attachment even then to my Tom.

"For my part, I want more excitement, more adventure."

"What, do you envy Eliza?"

"Oh indeed I do."

I did not envy her, for I was quite content with the prospects that I now saw before me.

Tom was a good fellow. I had known him since he first came to the school and he formed a good friendship with James. As we grew older, I knew he began to look at me in a different way, with more interest, an interest that might ripen into love perhaps. He was destined to be a clergyman and I could see before me a life like my mother's. A contented life, not rich, but happy and where he and I might raise a large family together.

I could not envy Eliza her exciting life and, in particular, I could not imagine marrying without love, however much might be gained materially. No, I was content with the prospect before me, even though I might perhaps allow myself a little fantasy about a different kind of life which Jane and I sometimes discussed in our own room as she read me her latest stories. It might be thrilling to have an exceedingly rich suitor, to have gentlemen fighting duels about me, but such ideas on the whole gave me more anxiety than pleasure. My satisfaction was chiefly in hearing Jane's excitement, in hearing the heights to which her imagination could rise. I was concerned about how dull I might seem when compared with her but on the whole, how fortunate I was, I reflected, to have a sister with such talent for storytelling.



THREE

Jane's Early Scribblings

Of course, I did not really believe then that she could earn money from her writing, but I was never in doubt as to her talent. From her earliest years she “scribbled” as she put it so entertainingly. It was her habit to attribute talents to family members rather than to herself. She was always telling me what a brilliant artist I was, when in fact I have, and always had, a small talent.

Our brothers too fancied themselves writers, especially James and Henry. In 1789, James edited and wrote a magazine called “The Loiterer” while he was at Oxford. Henry wrote for it too and it was published regularly and sold for sixpence. How proud my parents were when the first edition came out, and Jane was extravagant in her praise. She continued to be generous in this way all her life. Even when she herself was established as a respected writer, she never failed to encourage our nieces and nephews in their attempts at writing. Why, she even praised my writing efforts, when the only things I have ever produced are letters and a poor little charade or two.

“You are indeed the finest comic writer of the present age,” she told me once and often told people that she admired my charades excessively. I know she did this to give me more confidence, but I did not usually welcome such praise, fearing that I might be called upon to produce a brilliant charade, when I knew full well I could do no such thing.

Naturally, in view of the strain in their relationship, Jane did not praise Mama and yet in all honesty I think that is where any writ-

ing talent in the family came from. I did wonder then and still do, whether writing talent, like some others, is inherited. Or perhaps it is just that an encouraging atmosphere can foster the talent. Equally important I should suppose must be the opportunity to hear the compositions of others and to be able to practice one's own writings. This was certainly provided by my mother. She had a style of writing which was easy, full of wit and mimicry. She used it cleverly to encourage us all to write charades and riddles and taught us to enjoy rhyming games and songs.

She sent one of her rhymes to Gilbert East, one of the pupils, when he failed to return to school after one summer holiday:

*Your Steventon friends
Are at their wits end
To know what is become of Squire East
They very much fear
He'll never come here
Having left then nine weeks at the least.
Then pray thee, dear Sir
No longer defer
Your return to the mansion of learning
For we study all day
(except when we play)
And eke when the candles are burning*

It is not fine literature, but this facility with words was important in our learning and so was my father's library.

We were given unrestricted access to it, which I know caused some of our neighbours, and even occasionally my mother, to be concerned about the suitability of some of the things we might find there for young ladies. My father always said that wide reading

would make us discerning in our taste and able to make our own judgements about the value of the books we read. And we did read everything. We read Shakespeare and Milton and Cowper and Dr Johnson. But there were many novels available to us also—Fielding, Richardson and the ladies who were so popular like Miss Lennox, Miss Burney and Miss Cowley.

From our earliest years, it was a family practice to read aloud to each other after dinner. My father or one of my brothers usually read while my mother and Jane and I worked, but occasionally one of us read and sometimes, especially on summer evenings when the light stayed longer, we would read plays aloud together or take parts out of a novel.

We liked best literature which was either very dramatic or very funny such as “Tom Thumb” and “Tristram Shandy.”

From the time we were away at school, Jane had loved taking centre stage and hearing her audience react with laughter. All her early writing was aimed at making the family laugh, either from the recognition of shared jokes, or by rather scandalous or wildly exaggerated scenes.

She dedicated all her early writings to members of the family. Her “History of England by a Partial, Prejudiced and Ignorant Historian” is dedicated to me.

To Miss Austen, eldest daughter of the Revd George Austen, this work is inscribed with due respect by The Author.

How she loved writing that—*The Author*—and it is such an amusing work. I take it out often even now and it always entertains me, as it did us all when she read it to us at the Christmas of 1791. I did the illustrations, for which she praised me exaggeratedly and said to me quietly, while the others were exclaiming over the manuscript, “You see, we SHALL make our fortunes.”

There were jokes for everyone in the “History.” She teased my father about Roman Catholics, James about his namesake, James the First, and of course referred to her well-known dislike of Queen Elizabeth.

When Frank went away to sea, she kept his spirits up by sending him compositions like “Jane and Alice.” There was so much reference in it to drunkenness and especially to females being addicted to drink and to cruelty and death, that I wondered if it was quite tactful to send it to a new midshipman, but Frank loved it.

About this time, Jane began to write some compositions in the form of letters between one character and another. “Lesley Castle,” which she sent to Henry, was in this form. Again, I found it a little “warm” when she read it to me—a young mother abandons her baby and has a scandalous relationship followed by an annulled marriage. Henry received this while he was at Oxford and told me later that he certainly would not have told his friends that his younger sister wrote it.

My father always encouraged Jane’s writing and never censured her for the content. She was very touched when he wrote in one of her notebooks, “*Effusions of fancy by a Very Young Lady Consisting of Tales in a Style entirely new.*”

She was delighted too when he gave her a small mahogany writing desk of her own.

She sat stroking the wood the first evening it arrived and said “One day, Cass, this desk may be famous for the secrets it carried of a famous lady writer. How good my father is to thus encourage me.”

As for my mother, she did not discourage, but she never lavished praise. I always felt that Jane was needing a reaction from her, but the most she got was “Very nice my dear, but another time I should try . . .” and she would make a suggestion for improvement in style, or for another topic. Her praise for Jane’s work, especially her small

seam stitches and neat satin stitch, was always more generous than her praise for her writing. Perhaps that was the reason that, as far as I can remember, Jane did not dedicate any of her compositions to Mama.

We were all a little surprised when she announced that she was to dedicate "Love and Freindship" (sic) to Eliza but, when she read it to us and we learned it was about the deceitful pleasures of the world, my mother said dryly that perhaps the dedication was appropriate. It WAS funny and the exaggerated style, especially the theme of Laura and Sophia fainting alternately upon the sofa, caused much merriment. There was particular amusement at the description of someone describing eavesdropping as "examining the keyhole for dust," because Mama had once had a servant who said this and I felt that Jane was including it in an attempt to please her.

Jane sent copies of her work to various family members, but she usually kept a copy for herself. In fact I often copied them for her and felt privileged to do so. Later, when Jane began to leave Steven-ton to stay with relatives or friends, she never left these manuscripts behind. She carried them with her always. Whether she did not like to be apart from them, or whether she was afraid that someone would read them in her absence, I never quite knew.

Jane soon developed the habit of reading any new writing to me first, before anyone else heard it. We would go to the room we shared, with its blue painted furniture and chocolate brown carpet, settle into the chairs which stood on either side of the fire and she would begin to read. I was very touched by this and relished the intimacy and trust which I felt that it showed. It did make me feel that I carried a great responsibility. I certainly did not feel as much confidence in my own judgement as she appeared to place in it. Once, when I had reacted less than enthusiastically to a particular story, she flung it immediately on the fire.

"No, Jane," I cried, horror struck, "you must not pay so much mind to my opinion. I have not read as widely as you, I cannot be a reliable judge of literature. Please, I beg you, take some other opinion before you destroy what you have laboured over."

"Your approbation is what I seek. You are level-headed, you have sensibility. If you do not like what I write, I can be sure that no one else would judge it worthy, however clever I might think it."

Had she maintained this view, I would have been too frightened to give any honest opinion of her work because if I did not warm to it, she might destroy it. But I was comforted to see that she grew in confidence as the years went by and she wrote more. We were gradually able to discuss openly what she had written and I was able to tell her honestly my views. I was also aware that this showed less dependency upon me and I had my by now familiar conflict about it. I was glad she was more confident, but feared her becoming more separated from me. I was always careful how I expressed myself because she did feel passion about her writing and soon began to call any story in progress "my own darling child"—a phrase I would use too when I asked if she had anything new to read to me.

One "darling child" which I found it very hard to like was "Lady Susan." This too was written in the letter form which she seemed to like, but I did not see how anyone could possibly be expected to like her main character. True, she had the dash and confidence which I knew Jane admired and which reminded me so much of Eliza, but Lady Susan was simply wicked. She was a shameless flirt, she was heartless, without morals, and seemed to relish causing pain and upset. She had power over her family, over her life and I could recognize that Jane longed for that herself but, as I told her, "A woman should use power only for good, surely not to make mischief and misery as does this lady."

I suggested that she at least change the ending so that Lady Susan would be seen to suffer for her wickedness, but she would have none of it.

“Indeed no, I wanted to see if I could make someone who is so wicked, with no redeeming features, an object of interest and you see, Cass, I have succeeded, as you may be horrified by her, but she holds your interest, does she not?”

I had to admit it with a smile and our conversation ended with good humour.

She showed the manuscript to Eliza and I heard them laugh over it on several occasions, but she never read it to the assembled family as far as I know. She kept it carefully and perhaps had the intention of returning to it one day. For my part, though, I am glad that other, more worthy compositions claimed her attention within a year or two.

I think I was still unaware that she had such a special talent, in spite of the prodigious size of her literary output at such a young age. I had never been in any doubt that she was a special person, but I could not have been sure then either that she would produce books for publication, or that those books would be so fine. I suppose I was still thinking of her as most young women of our age and station thought of themselves—as filling the time as productively as possible before marriage, learning skills which would make us good wives for a suitable gentleman and good mothers for a large number of children.

Though I know now how mistaken I was, I could not have been blamed at the time for thinking thus, for marriage and romance were all around us.



FOUR

Marriages and Romances, Happy and Unhappy

It was perhaps not surprising that Jane took a page of my father's parish register and tried out some suitable married names for herself. We teased her about the noble sounding ones—Henry Frederick Howard Fitzwilliam of London, Edmund Arthur William Mortimer of Liverpool—and even more about the plain one—Jack Smith—to be married to Jane Smith, late Austen. But it was certainly understandable, as weddings were all about us.

We were all delighted that Edward had married Elizabeth Bridges, a baronet's daughter, in 1791. She was pretty and elegant and my mother was particularly pleased that she was from such a good family. She was only eighteen, younger than I, which was a contrast to the wife chosen by James, who was now ordained. Although only a curate, he was destined to take over my father's parish in due course, so he was seen as a good prospect even for Anne Mathew, who was the daughter of a general and the granddaughter of a duke.

"I expect," said Jane to me privately, "that as she is two and thirty, she is prepared to settle for a curate and at least James is an amiable one."

We were both sad though that, as James was to become my father's curate at Deane, our friends the Lloyds must remove themselves to make way for the newlyweds. Fortunately, they settled at Ibthorpe which, while no longer within walking distance, was not

far away, otherwise we should have felt very deprived "by the propensity of married women to sweep all before them" as Jane put it.

The wedding which interested me most was that of cousin Jane Cooper. She had grown into a most beautiful young woman of whom we were all very fond. My mother in particular, still perhaps harbouring feelings of guilt about her mother's untimely death, was most affectionate to her.

"Of course she is pretty and not too clever, so no wonder Mama is content with her," said Jane sharply.

She was however clever enough to make an excellent match with Thomas Williams, a naval captain. It was something of a whirlwind romance, which was in the way of being spoiled by the sudden death of Jane's father. My mother had insisted that the marriage should go ahead from Steventon and she took over the arranging of it all.

My chief interest was not the bride and groom, however, but the young man who was to officiate. Tom Fowle was now ordained and the preparations for the wedding gave us much opportunity for walking and talking together. I thought I knew him well, since we had been friends for so long, but on our morning walks I grew to learn so much more about him. We would walk past the church, down the path which skirted the village pond, along the hedgerow, through the little pine wood, sometimes going as far as Dummer, the next village, talking endlessly as we walked. For him, becoming a clergyman was not just what he had always been expected to do by his family but a matter of great conviction.

"To be in charge of a parish, to have the responsibility for all the souls therein, is a fine thing and a task to which one might rise," he said. "I feel, Miss Cassandra, that I have been called to this task by the Almighty to do this work and I shall do it well. I shall not be just a Sunday sermon maker."

My heart swelled with joy to hear him talk so. I knew that too few clergymen felt this. Even my father and James, sincere men though they were, did not, I thought, feel called by such principles.

"Your Tom is so serious," said Jane to me one day, as we sat down to our cold meat after I had walked with Tom.

"Mr. Fowle is indeed a man of sincere conviction," I replied rather coldly.

"No, Cass, I do not mean to offend—I know him for a fine man. I only mean that, after you are married, there may perhaps be little laughter around your table."

"Unless you are there to cheer the company, dear sister, in which case there will be laughter, sparkling conversation and flirting, I suppose? Take care, Jane, for if you criticize Mr. Fowle in my presence, you may not be invited."

"So you are to be married—have I not always told you it would be so?"

"You are wrong in both your assumptions. He has not offered but we do laugh together."

It was true that we did find much to amuse together. He told me stories of his fellow students, the jokes they played upon each other, and he even read some of the novels which Jane and I admired though he did, it is true, prefer Fordyce's sermons.

In spite of Jane's teasing, I was in no doubt that I would accept Tom if he asked. By my parents raising no objection to us being so much together, I knew that they too would approve the match if it came.

As the days grew longer, we began to walk in the evenings after dinner too and it was on one of these walks two days after Jane Cooper's wedding that he turned to me and said, "When I joined together the hands of your cousin and her bridegroom, Miss Cassandra, I wished very much that at a future date you and I might see our hands similarly joined."

He turned to look at me, but I was so overcome with emotion that I could not meet his eyes. He took my hand.

“Could I venture to hope that you . . . ?”

“Yes,” was all I could manage. I could not even say his name. He put his hand under my chin and raised my face to his. He smiled into my eyes and suddenly I was not shy but only filled with happiness.

There was no shortage of smiles then, as we continued our walk and shared those thoughts that lovers must always ask about each other.

“When did you first . . . ?”

“When did you begin to think I might . . . ?”

As we returned to Steventon, he said that he would go to my father straight, but my father had seen us return with my arm through his and came out to greet us, his face also wreathed in smiles.

“I could only part with her to a man as fine as you, young Tom,” he said, “but you will make as fine a clergy couple as anyone might wish to see and do God’s work in a fortunate parish as soon as a good living may be found.”

Later, I related the incident of this to Jane, who burst out, “Made you an offer and you accepted—what are you about? I do not wish to know only that—I must know—where were you? How did he look? Did he kneel down? Did he take your hand? Did he kiss you? Come Cass, I must know everything.”

I could not bring myself to give her the details she sought—they were an intimacy I could share only with Tom.

“Well then, is this to be the way of it—I am to be excluded now that you love someone else more dearly?”

“No, no, you know I shall never love anyone as I love you and in any case we cannot be married for some years. His living, we are agreed, cannot support a family and we must wait for him to come into a bigger parish in Shropshire.”

"In Shropshire—what, are you to be so far away?"

"It is where his kinsman, the Earl, has his estate and a living will come vacant there in two or three years."

"Well then, I shall take heart since it will be two or three years before we must part and I shall expect to be invited to your rectory all the time, so that I may be introduced to other handsome clergymen."

It was like her to make light of what must have been a difficult moment and she did try hard to be pleased for Tom and me. She teased me a great deal about "conjugal duties" and instructed me that when I finally knew exactly what such duties comprised, I was to tell her in great detail so that she might decide whether to undertake them for herself.

She composed a poem for us, though it did dwell on disappointment in love rather than joy. I wondered later whether she had any sort of presentiment about how it would be. The poem was called "An Ode to Pity" and there are several references to disappointed love.

No sooner were the weddings over than we began to celebrate births. Our two greatly loved nieces were born close together, Fanny to Edward and Elizabeth and Anna to James and Anne. Mama walked a mile and a half in the middle of the night along muddy lanes to be present at Anna's birth, so worried was she by Anne's condition and there was great rejoicing when she was safely delivered. Her baby's christening was a grand occasion, as Anne's grandfather the Duke attended. Frank, who had been away in the East with his ship for some years, was able to be home just in time.

Other events were not so happy. Aunt Philadelphia was seriously ill with a terrible growth and dreadful fevers. Eliza nursed her most devotedly and I confess that I was surprised by this, as I

always thought her a rather heartless creature, more concerned with frivolous pastimes. She set an example of dedication and compassion throughout her mother's illness and managed to keep her spirits up while she suffered agonies of pain. Her death in 1792 was a blow to us all. No sooner did Eliza begin to recover from this bereavement than another, even worse, came hard upon its heels. Eliza's husband had always supported the Royalist cause. "What else is a Compte to do?" asked Eliza, "become a citizen overnight?"

He had opposed all the changes which the revolutionary government had brought in.

"Imagine," said Jane after reading a letter from Eliza, "not only have they imprisoned the King and Queen, but they have changed the calendar, so that one week now lasts ten days and there are to be ten months in the year, not twelve. How are such people to be taken seriously, the Compte asks?"

He did not take the threat to his lands in the south seriously enough, it seemed, and he was soon deprived of those. In spite of the loss, when he returned to Paris he seemed to believe that the threat to him and his kind was not serious. He tried to bribe one of the officials and was immediately arrested. I remember that, when we heard they had actually executed the King and Queen, we realized that there would be very little hope for the Compte and so it proved.

In 1794, we learned that the Compte de Feuillide had been guillotined. This was almost beyond belief, as we could scarcely imagine a situation where the King and Queen were beheaded and people were arrested because of their titles—indeed the Compte was executed on the same day as his so-called trial took place.

"Girls, this is the result, you see, of people changing from subjects to citizens," said my father. "Let us pray for the deliverance of the poor people in France and give thanks that the people of

England know that each person is born into his station in life and accepts it without question. I shall make a sermon on this next Sunday."

"Can people never change their station in life, Papa?" asked Jane. "Would you not say that Edward has changed his station by being adopted, or that Elizabeth Smith considerably altered her station by marrying a man as rich as Mr. Chute?"

"Of course," said my father tolerantly. "People change their station by marriage or by the acquisition of wealth. After all, we now dine with those who made their fortunes in trade. But that is not the same as what those wicked French aspire to. They say that the servant is the equal of his master and that no distinction of rank or class should be observed. Why, that is as though our scrub should think herself fit to marry your brother."

Put in those terms, it seemed stark indeed and my mother was immediately cross.

"Come, Mr. Austen, there is no call to talk thus, or to voice such shocking ideas before ladies. Let those French reap the rewards of what they are doing, for it is certain it will serve them ill in the long run. Meanwhile, I wish that this war might soon be concluded, that we may see Frank and Charles at home again."

Though Eliza had never pretended to love her husband deeply, his untimely and brutal murder was none the less a shocking occurrence and we all grieved with her and little Hastings, who was a very sickly boy. Even more sympathy was due to Eliza about this time on account of the trial of Hastings' namesake and Eliza's godfather, which was the talk of the country. His ordeal was to last in all nine years; that he was eventually found innocent of all the charges was scant consolation for the years of distress and the opprobrium which was poured on him from all sides.

The war with France now began to intrude upon us all. Henry put off his studies to become ordained in order to join the militia and James too was enlisted, though his military service did not seem to interfere very much with his parish duties. Frank had been promoted in the navy, thanks to the newly released Warren Hastings making recommendations on his behalf. Charles was with his ship in the Indies and we waited anxiously for news.

I soon learned that the war was to affect me very personally, for Tom was invited by Lord Craven to sail with him to the West Indies as private chaplain to his regiment, which was to put down a French rebellion. I wanted very much to beg Tom not to accept, but I knew that it was unwise to turn down such an invitation from one's patron. It could lead to greater preferment which would enable us to marry, so I knew he must go. When he told me he had made his will before sailing, I almost asked him to think again but I kept silent and even as things turned out, I know that was the right thing to do.

I felt that Jane admired Tom more for his acceptance of the commission and that it made him a little more exciting in her eyes. She was kind and affectionate towards Tom, but I knew she did not see him as someone who could stir hearts. I did not mind. He and I suited each other.

After Tom sailed, Jane told me she had started another story. "Something to divert my sister from pining—we shall read it together soon."

"What is it about?"

"It concerns two sisters, poor but most attractive. The elder is very prudent and measured in her emotions and wants nothing more than to be the wife of a clergyman. The younger is impatient and wild and most passionate in her feelings."

"Oh you sly creature," I replied, "and I suppose they are to be called Jane and Cassandra are they?"

"No, they are to be Marianne for the elder and Elinor for the wild one."

"I approve of the names," I said "but you know they would be better reversed. Elinor has more a feeling of serenity and Marianne fits a passionate nature better."

"Very well, it shall be as you say and since the story is told in letters to each other when they are apart, I can keep you informed of the progress while you are away staying with Tom's family in Berkshire."

To tell the truth, I was glad that Jane had a composition to divert her while I was away, because at that time she seemed to be developing some most unwelcome tendencies where young men were concerned.

She had always loved dancing and we were able to attend many balls in the neighbourhood—at Basingstoke, at Dummer and at the private houses of our friends.

"Am I not becoming the most prodigious flirt?" she asked me one evening on the way home from Manydown House. "Did you see how so many competed for a place in the line with me? I had not one but two invitations to walk in the conservatory."

I did not respond because I had noticed and had not been very pleased to overhear one of the older ladies who was chaperoning describe her as "*madly husband hunting*." I was concerned about her behaviour and feared that it might reflect upon me and all the family.

"Are you displeased with me?" she asked.

"I am only concerned that you behave well when you are in company and do not sit out with a gentleman, or do anything which might be seen as profligate."

"Because it is wrong, or because it will ruin my chances of making a good match?"

"Well, both you know are true for young ladies such as we are."

"As ever, you are right, dear sister, but if we had fortune oh! how ill I should behave!"

I do not know if she was fearful of being left alone with our parents, or just felt a little apart when many around her seemed to be settling, but I know that when I went to Kintbury to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Fowle, I left her with some misgiving.

I was myself feeling vastly concerned about how my visit to my future in laws might progress. I knew them already from all our contact over the years, but this was the first time we were to be together over a prolonged period and a visit expected to last four weeks or more was a test for a future daughter-in-law.

I looked forward very much to a correspondence with my sister which would enable me to impart my thoughts to her and which would give me, I knew, support and helpful advice. As I left, she promised to write frequently.

"As you know, I shall have nothing better to do unless some beautiful young man takes up all my attention."

"Jane . . ." I began . . . but the carriage moved off and she waved merrily.

The first letter I received from her seemed to justify my anxieties. She *told* me she had *met* a young Irishman named Tom Lefroy at Manydown and that she was almost afraid to tell me how she had behaved.

Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together.

It seemed they had danced together at three balls and that he was being teased about his interest in her by all his family and friends.

He called on her and she was so clearly overcome with excitement that she mentioned him in almost every sentence of her frequent letters.

It was soon obvious that my hopes about receiving comforting letters from her were sadly misplaced. Far from being concerned with my situation, I felt that she only took up her pen in order to tell me of the latest episode.

Oh, she made gentle fun of him—

his morning coat was a great deal too light, he admired “Tom Jones” too excessively

—how she knew that would distress me, because I could not approve of a young lady discussing such a novel, but I could tell from her tone that she was in love. In some ways, I was delighted for her yet I was nervous too. She was expecting a declaration, but I knew too much of the Lefroy’s situation to be hopeful.

Tom had five elder sisters and the family was not wealthy, although they had estates in Ireland. I had heard my father say that it was Tom’s duty to marry well in order to secure the future of the family and Jane could by no means be construed as a good match.

She told me there was to be another ball.

I rather expect to receive an offer from him in the course of the evening. I shall refuse him, however, unless he promises to give away his white coat.

No offer came and the letter she wrote the next morning was typical of the mocking tone with which Jane was wont to cover up feelings of pain or distress.

The day is come when I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy. When you receive this it will be over. My tears flow as I write at the melancholy idea. He is to leave for London on Saturday.

I waited for another letter in which she might impart her true feelings and it duly came. It was full of understanding for his position—for his duty to his family—but oh! so full too of the pain of rejection and the humiliation of having been seen to be rejected.

I am sure you have been waiting to hear more details about my Irish friend. I hope you have told no-one of my hopes which have turned out to be ill founded. Ill founded is too mild a term. My hopes were stupid. Oh how I should have realized that his family would not allow it. He needs to make a better match than I. Money is at the root of it. How lucky you are, my dear sister, to have found a young man whose family does not aspire to riches. What have wealth and grandeur to do with happiness?

I know that it is only how life must be. He has five sisters, the family is not comfortably off, he must therefore marry well. It is in truth what we must all expect. Of one thing I am certain—he does love me. Mrs. Lefroy told Mrs. Lloyd that she had packed him off to London—that is exactly how she put it—packed him off to London before more mischief was done. It seems that she thinks he was trifling with me which I assure you, Cass, he was not—his feelings were sincere and I did not mistake them. We thought so alike on so many things that it was as though we were made for each other. But I suppose his affection could not outweigh his fear of poverty and his obligations.

I find the solicitude of the others hard to bear—they mean to be kind but I fear they are laughing at me for having been taken in. But I assure you, Cass, that taken in I was not. I did not imagine myself to be in love, I was, I am in love and he is too. I did not mistake them.

I shall never feel for another man as I felt for him, but you know my disposition, I shall not pine openly and make myself ill with longing. I shall be dignified and light-hearted when broken hearts are spoken of. A consolation I find is that I can now feel for the heroines of my stories when they fall in love. I am sure you know though that I wish with all my heart that I could make a happy ending for myself.

Dear Cass, I long to see you again and wish you may soon return to your
Devoted sister.

How I felt for her! I knew she had brought it upon herself, but I was so distressed. Her agony was plain for me to see, though I knew she would be concealing it well enough from others. There was indeed to be no happy ending.

In fact, she never saw Tom Lefroy again and he went back to Ireland shortly afterwards. All the family were fond of Jane and concerned that Tom had made her unhappy, so they took care never to mention his name when she was present. It was, I believe, three years before she heard any more and then it was my father, visiting Ashe with Jane, who enquired after him. She wrote to me at my brother's:

I was too proud to make any enquiries, but afterwards on my father's asking where he was, I learn that he was gone back to London in his way to Ireland, where he is called to the bar and means to practice.

I knew how much she would have been hurt that he had again been in our neighborhood and had not called.

Considering our intimacy at Ashe, he must have gone out of his way to conceal his presence there from all of us—or do I mistake you,

Cass? Pray tell me if you of all people knew he was there and concealed it from me so that I might be spared. You know that I should have handled it well, with humour and dignity—I should not have caused embarrassment.

I was quick to assure her that I had certainly not known of his presence and neither had anyone else in the family so far as I was aware.

It would be Mrs. Lefroy's doing, you know, because she is so fond of you and would only have had your best interests at heart.

She replied,

That I can accept and as I am also fond of her I must hope that our connection can continue without constraint in spite of our Irish episode.

Shortly after this, when I was home again from Godmersham, I heard from Mrs. Lefroy that he was to be married to a young lady with a private fortune. She begged me to tell Jane, "at a moment when you perceive her to be able to bear it."

I did not wish to be the person who conveyed what I knew would be hurtful news, but I also knew that there was no one else who could do it better.

I told her that his wedding was planned one day as we walked out together and she interrupted me immediately. "Do not, pray, tell me he is to marry a poor lady—I will own jealousy if that is the case."

"No indeed, she is I believe an heiress."

She smiled. "Well then, I can make no objection can I? For to be sure, he has done his duty by his family as he had to and I wish him happy."

I drew her arm through mine as we walked along.

"Are you sure, my dear?"

"I am sure, but I am glad to have known what it is to love and glad that you, dear Cass, have known that joy too," for by that time I had had my own disappointment to bear.

We rarely spoke of Tom Lefroy in the years which followed, but occasionally it would be mentioned in our company that his wife had given birth again, for he raised a large family. His mother Mrs. Lefroy remained a good friend and her untimely death a few years later was a great distress to Jane.

I was aware that Jane was changed through the Irish incident. She was more cautious in her dealings with young men and had got over the unfortunate tendency to flirt so outrageously. This was a great relief to me. She was more wary of people who paid her attention and more inclined to give a sharp reply where she might have previously given a flirtatious one. She certainly returned to her writing with great devotion and we had many a happy evening reading her work as it was finished.

She always wrote on very small sheets of paper so that it looked as though she might be writing a letter. As she was a most diligent correspondent, it was easy to disguise from others the fact that she was composing even when she wrote in the dining parlour. When "Elinor and Marianne" was almost complete, she read it to Mama, Papa and Frank, who was home on leave. Their reaction was most gratifying to her and raised her spirits, which had been a little low since her Irish friend's rejection.

"It is a good story, Jane," said my father, "the best you have done yet I believe. A little more restrained and nearer to life than your others."

She looked anxious. "You do not mean dull, I hope, Papa?"

"Dull? No, indeed. It is a most diverting story and I am glad to

see that your writing desk has helped you be so productive,” he said with a smile.

“It is not the desk—it is her talent,” said my mother, most unexpectedly. This may I think be the first time she had praised Jane so directly and Jane later referred to it as we made ready for retiring.

“Did you note, Cass, that Mama referred to my talent—if even she can admire me, perhaps I may yet become a published author. But I feel that “Elinor and Marianne” wants something yet—it does not quite satisfy me and I shall work on it some more.”

“I do wonder, Jane, whether the letter form quite suits. It depends after all on the two girls being apart, when the story might proceed better if they were together on occasion.”

“That would require a great deal of re-working but I shall consider it—after all we have our best ideas when we are together, do we not? But the next thing I shall write will be a poem for your wedding, my dear, for Tom should be home by Easter and you will be a bride. It is time we had another wedding to lift our spirits.”



FIVE

Tragic News and First Impressions

Tom had been expected home at Easter and our wedding was to take place immediately. I had been working at my trousseau for some time. Jane often teased me about the care I put in to it. She told me that my nightgowns would last for twenty years.

“Unless of course your many lyings-in spoil them.”

“Jane, do not joke of it please.”

But we did joke of it, almost as a way of hiding our fears. Death in childbirth was something so common that it almost ceased to be remarked on. Our own mother, of course, had given birth to eight healthy children; well, seven if poor George was taken into account, but deaths of mothers and children were to be expected. Jane even joked of it in her letters.

Mrs. Hall of Sherbourne was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened to look unawares at her husband.

She did not mean to be hard hearted and would never have said any such thing in company.

Each time one of our sisters-in-law was brought to bed, we waited anxiously for news of the delivery. James’ wife, Anne, did not die in childbirth, but she never seemed to recover well after giving birth to Anna in her late thirties and suddenly died in 1795 when the dear child was but two years old. Little Anna came to live with

us and was much loved by us all. I think both Jane and I felt she was like a daughter to us rather than a niece and we delighted in the physical affection which she gave us. We were not on the whole a physical family. I scarcely remember my mother touching us; she would occasionally ruffle the hair of the boys.

The only family member with whom we routinely exchanged kisses was Eliza—"in the French fashion" as she put it—and though Jane and I would kiss each other when we parted before a journey, I do not think we could be called a family which showed its affection very much. Affectionate we undoubtedly were and there was simply no question when her mother died so suddenly, but that Anna should come to Steventon to be cared for by her grandmother and aunts.

It was a great comfort to James that his daughter was so well looked after. We all tried to help him in his grief. Before long he was accompanying us to dances and Jane reported that his dancing had very much improved. It was well understood that a young widower with a family must look round as soon as possible for another wife. Heartless perhaps but, especially if there were numerous children, how else was a man to manage?

"Tell me, Cass," said Jane one day when I was writing to Tom, "if you should die at your first lying in, will he immediately seek another to take your place?"

"I am sure it would not be immediate, Jane, but I should expect him to do so, you know."

"And the other way about. If he should die young, would you too seek another?"

I was sure of my answer. "I shall never love anyone but Tom."

"You do not approve of second attachments?"

I smiled, joining in the joke. "Our dear Marianne disapproved of all second attachments, whereas I think for a gentleman in James' position it is entirely reasonable that he seeks another wife for poor dear Anna's sake, as well as for his own."

"Tis a good thing that many widows seem to feel as you do or there would not be enough widowers to go round. Have you noticed how Mary Lloyd is making herself most agreeable to James?"

"I have but I think he is set upon a more exciting quarry."

"What, you mean Eliza?" Jane laughed. "No, she would never have him—Eliza settle for a country clergyman when she loves her 'dear freedom'? Never!"

"Nonetheless he means to ask—depend upon it."

She went over to her desk and showed me a letter she had lately received from Eliza.

"Now where is the passage? Ah, here it is. She says

*Independence and the homage of half a dozen are preferable to
subjugation and the attachment of a single individual.*

"She may love to flirt with James and with Henry too for that matter, but she prefers her freedom. She is always telling me of another conquest she has made."

Privately, I thought it most cruel of Eliza to toy with my brothers and no doubt others as she did, but I could see her behaviour exerted a fascination of a kind for my sister.

"She has independence, money and a host of admirers, she knows the joys of motherhood, but she is not constantly increasing as Elizabeth is. I would settle for such a life myself."

James did make an offer to Eliza but, as Jane had anticipated, she rejected him.

As she wrote,

*We did not quarrel but I could not make up my mind to give up dear
liberty and even dearer flirtation.*

For my part, I confess I was relieved. I did not relish the idea of Eliza as a sister-in-law and I thought she would not make a very suitable stepmother for little Anna.

Perhaps not by coincidence, my mother had invited Mary Lloyd to stay at Steventon at this time so that, when James returned rejected from London, Mary was on hand to comfort him. Before very long, he proposed and was accepted. My mother was delighted. Mary showed me the letter she had received from Mama.

Had the election been mine, you dear Mary are the person I should have chosen for James' wife, Anna's mother and my daughter, being as certain as I can be of anything in this uncertain world that you will greatly increase and promote the happiness of each of the three. I look forward to you as a real comfort in my old age, when Cassandra is gone into Shropshire and Jane—the Lord knows where.

I expect that Mama would have been very concerned about having Eliza living too close by, for fear of her influence on Jane.

Jane too was pleased that Eliza had rejected James, but for different reasons.

She said in a letter to me from Kent where she was staying with Edward and Elizabeth for the birth of another baby:

Surely she is not a woman who could be satisfied with a man who can so easily be persuaded to another—I wish Mary joy of him.

She also said that they were all thinking of me making my wedding clothes.

I did pass my time very profitably thus but, while Jane was away, I also found myself worrying, especially at night when I was alone in our room. I wondered how well I really knew Tom, how we would go on when we were together all the time, how competent I would be at managing a household and tending to a parish. My mother was a great example for me and I discussed some of my concerns with her. One day, when we were talking of my future life in Shropshire, I mentioned that I looked forward to giving Tom children.

“Yes,” she said, “children can be a great worry, but they are also a great consolation for conjugal duties.”

This was the first time I had ever heard her mention such a thing and I did not now quite how to respond. I kept my eyes averted and then she said, “You must remember, my dear, that it is a woman’s duty to submit to her husband and never to refuse his wishes, even if they may seem strange or disgusting.”

I could feel the colour rise in my face to hear her talk so and I just managed to say “Yes, Mama” very quietly, before my father entered the room and put an end to such a difficult conversation.

Of course I could not mention this to anyone and even had Jane been there I suppose it would not have been fitting to raise it with her since she was not engaged as I was. I worried about it and had many a sleepless night, pondering on Mama’s words and wondering what Tom could possibly wish which could be strange or disgusting.

That it was connected with childbirth I had no doubt but, though I had attended several confinements, no unmarried woman was ever allowed in the room while the birth took place. I knew that there was much pain associated with it, as I had heard my sisters-in-law cry out, and also blood, as I had seen the linen which was put out to be washed. I pondered on whether there was anyone whom I could ask for more information or for re-assurance and

came to the conclusion that the only possible confidante was Eliza and I certainly would not be prepared to show her either my need or my ignorance. In any case she was in London and I could never commit such a query to a letter.

Eventually I concluded that I loved and trusted Tom and that, whatever my duties turned out to be, I would carry them out to the best of my ability and make him as happy as any good wife could. I began to look forward to his return with eagerness.

The terrible news came at the end of April 1797. I was in the garden tending the bees. Mama had recently given to me the responsibility for the hives and I enjoyed getting to know the habits of the bees, then learning the best way to obtain the greatest yield of honey. I had read that the flavour of the honey could be enhanced by encouraging the bees to gather nectar from lavender and I was raising a bed of it near the hives.

The letter was from Lord Craven, dispatched immediately upon his ship's arrival at Southampton. My Tom was dead and dead these several months, perished and buried at sea. The crew had been afflicted with yellow fever and Tom had perished. Even as I sewed my wedding clothes, he had been dead for weeks.

My mother always told people that I fainted away but I have no recollection of that. I can recall only the great sense of emptiness and how unhappy I was that I was denied the opportunity to see his dear body. I cried, I remember, for the first time when Jane said how she felt for me that I would have no grave to visit to lay flowers upon.

My whole family was in deepest mourning and this was a comfort to me. Tom had been James' friend before he had been mine. He wrote a most touching poem in which he imagined dear Tom's body lying:

*Where Ocean ceaseless pours
His restless waves 'gainst Western India's shore
Friend of my soul and brother of my heart
Our friendship soon had known a dearer tie
Than friendship's self could ever yet supply
And I had lived with confidence to join
A much loved sister's trembling hand to thine.*

How I wept when I read that. But it was my sister who was the greatest strength to me in those dark days. She hardly left my side. She wrote all the letters which must be written on such occasions, replying and informing. She took over all my household duties, brought my meals upstairs and allowed me to talk endlessly of Tom. All her headstrong ways, her recent tendency to be self-centred, was nowhere in evidence at this time. She exclaimed over my stoicism, my lack of anger, and expressed anger on my behalf.

"No engaged man should have been sent on such a dangerous mission in such an inhospitable climate," she said, "but there is no consolation now, I know."

I was very touched by the note she left on my dinner tray one afternoon.

How I admire you, dear sister. Your resolution and propriety are beyond everything. In such a situation, no one can match you, least of all myself. I have learned so much from you of dignity in suffering. I shall try to remember your example all my life.

When she joined me that night, I told her that I could see no point or consolation in wailing and weeping, for it could change nothing.

"All I can do is to pray for acceptance and be thankful that I knew his love if only for a short time."

"But Cass, you will not let it stop you finding someone else to love will you? You will be such a matchless wife and mother that I cannot bear to think of you deprived forever of those opportunities. It will be no disrespect to Tom's memory if you fall in love again, you know. I know you cannot think of it now, but when some time has elapsed perhaps . . ."

I smiled and said nothing and that was enough for her just then. But I knew, I knew even then, that I had loved my last. I did not regret it, I was content. Tom was the love of my life and would remain the only one. I had no inclination for new attachments.

A few weeks later, I had further evidence of how particular a man I had lost. When his will was proved, I found he had left me £1000. This generosity was so typical of him and would give me an income of about £35 a year, so my father said.

"Oh Cass, imagine how good to have money of your own and be able to decide for yourself how it may be spent," said Jane.

I was pleased and grateful to have the sum, but I knew it would have been even more precious to Jane, because she found it much harder than I to ask Papa for money.

"Since I shall never have any money bequeathed to me, I have only two choices," said Jane, "I must either catch a rich husband, or earn for myself."

"Earn for yourself? With your writing? I thought you wrote only for fame—did you not tell me so?"

"Oh Cass, I am glad to have you tease me again—it shows you are feeling less sad."

I was indeed feeling better—somehow calmer and more resigned. I had had the experience of being loved and wanted, I now had a little money of my own and this satisfied my small ambitions. I was content to stay at home and become a maiden aunt as well as a duti-

ful daughter. I knew I was wanted and needed at home and at my brothers' homes. I had my household duties, my faith in God and I had Jane.

My bereavement drew us close again when she had, I think, been preparing herself for separation with her wild flirting and perhaps had felt driven rather desperately to seeking a husband because she knew I was about to leave her. Now that I was resigned to a life at home, did it make her more content herself? Now I knew that no one would ever know me as intimately, as fully, as she did and she must, I think, have felt the same.

Of course, she did not immediately lose her interest in balls and admirers, but I felt she viewed them a little more realistically, less romantically. For the first time, perhaps she began to think that she, like me, might never marry.

When I consider this now, so many years on, I wonder if I influenced her too much and brought her in some way against her inclinations, to feel that marriage was not for her.

Did I fear her leaving me, as I had been planning to leave her? Do I bear guilt for encouraging her to draw away from the prospect of marriage? My consolation is that her writing became her consolation and her expression as she withdrew somewhat from the social round on which she had been engaged. I may have influenced her unfairly but the outcome was to be one of the most fertile periods she ever had as a writer. This does not remove my guilt entirely but assuages it somewhat.

When she came back from visiting Edward and Elizabeth in Kent, she told me that she had started another composition.

"It is to be about how first impressions can be entirely wrong when we make judgements about others," she told me. "In fact that is its title, 'First Impressions.'"

"And are there two sisters in it?" I asked.

"Not two only but five, all unmarried and poor."

"Tis a sad tale then?" I teased.

"No, here is to be a happy ending."

"What, five poor unmarried sisters and a happy ending—surely this cannot be?"

"I cannot promise happiness for all of them but for the two eldest, those I like best, I shall surely contrive a happy ending, do not fear."

"And what names are they to have this time?"

"I have named one Eliza as a token to our cousin but you may decide the rest."

"I cannot until I have read something of the work, you know, because I need to be sure their names suit them."

"Well then we shall read some tonight with the names they have so far."

When it came to the reading the young women leapt off the page with names she had given them and I wished to change only one. She had called the eldest Fanny and I insisted that she should use her own name for this most beautiful and accomplished young woman.

It was without doubt the most diverting piece of writing I had ever heard from her, being clever, amusing, perceptive and I longed for her to read it to the family.

"I shall do so, but let me do more work on it yet, I have an idea for some scenes which will amuse them all."

As I have said, Jane did not give up her social life, but she seemed certainly to participate less eagerly in the balls and walks and outings which were a feature of our life at Steventon. My bereavement kept me for some time from these events and, when I went to Kent

to attend another lying in, Jane kept me up to date.

Mrs. Lefroy, perhaps because she still felt guilty over the Tom Lefroy incident, tried to make a match for Jane with the Reverend Samuel Blackall.

Jane wrote:

I do not know whether to be amused or humiliated by my friend's rather obvious plans. She has invited him to Ashe I feel with the express purpose of finding him a wife and I fear the person she is fixed on for that office is I. He is amiable enough but do not be too full of suspense awaiting an announcement.

In subsequent letters, she mocked the reverend gentleman and, though he called at Steventon and she played to him, it was clear she did not relish his 'sermonising' way of speaking to her.

Nor did she like his way of recommending things to her and Mama, such as the virtues of "cold veal pies and green tea." She wrote, as she mocked him with reference to Tom Lefroy:

He is tall. Somewhat thin and has a languid air—although I must confess his morning coat is dark enough.

I was sure that she did not care for him and yet she was perhaps hoping he would declare himself.

It would be interesting, you know, to be a young lady who has declined an offer.

In spite of Mrs. Lefroy's plans, it was clear that this one visit would not result in an offer to Jane. Mrs. Lefroy hoped that he might return for a visit in the near future, but he was not eager to do

so, had clearly divined Jane's lack of interest and perhaps was rather deterred by her unwillingness to flatter him.

As he told Mrs. Lefroy:

It would give me particular pleasure to have an opportunity of improving my acquaintance with that family [the Austens], with a hope of creating to myself a nearer interest. But at present I cannot indulge any expectation of it.

Jane found this letter very amusing, especially its tact.

This is rational enough, there is less love and more sense in it than sometimes 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.

We shared amusement about this unfortunate gentleman, but it was typical of Jane's reaction at this time—self deprecating—and with none of the confidence which had been so apparent at the time of the Tom Lefroy incident.

She wrote of her experience at a ball:

I do not think I am very much in request . . . people are rather apt not to ask me till they could not help it.

As far as her writing was concerned, though, her confidence was very different. She soon began to read "First Impressions" to the family, taking all the parts and relishing their amused reactions.

My father teased her by asking where she obtained the model for her ridiculous clergyman Mr. Collins and hoped it was not from near home!

"Indeed not, Papa, not at home at all," she said, glancing at me and smiling. For I could clearly see Mr. Blackall in Mr. Collins, especially his pomposity and his view that any young woman would be pleased to marry him.

If my parents too saw the resemblance, they kept their own counsel.

At the end of Darcy's first proposal scene, my mother said, "I hope she does not live to regret turning him down—one might put up with a great deal of arrogance for £10,000 a year."

Henry was with us on this occasion and, when Wickham's wickedness was revealed, he confided that he had met several like him in the militia but hoped his sisters had not encountered the like.

"I do not write from life, you know," said Jane, "only from my imagination."

Another evening, Jane read us the scene between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine. As she concluded, "I am most seriously displeased," the whole family broke into applause.

"Jane," said my father, "I have always thought of your writing as being chiefly an amusement for your family and friends, but this merits, nay deserves, publication. "I shall send it as soon as it is completed to Thomas Cadells."

He did not ask Jane's permission to send the manuscript away, but did show us the letter he wrote to accompany it.

I have in my possession a manuscript novel, comprised in three volumes, about the length of Miss Burney's *Evelina*. As I am well aware of what consequence it is that a work of this sort should make its first appearance under a respectable name, I apply to you. Shall be much obliged therefore if you inform me whether you chuse to be concerned

in it. What will be the expense of publishing at the author's risk and what will you venture to advance for the property of it, if on perusal it is approved of? Should your answer give me encouragement I will send you the work.

I think that Jane was touched that my father was willing to put up money for publication but perhaps rather more pleased that he was willing to endorse her work so publicly. The occasion did not arise, however, as the letter was returned almost immediately, marked "*Declined by return of post.*"

I thought that Jane would be very cast down but she was not. Instead it seemed to spur her to more production and she immediately took out "Elinor and Marianne" and began to work on it again.



SIX

Rich Connections and Challenging Friends

Because the revisions she was making to the manuscript were extensive, Jane had taken to working on it upstairs rather than in the dining parlour. I was able to help her a good deal because we would discuss how she could turn incidents which were reported in the letters between the sisters into events in which they both participated.

I think our response to “First Impressions” had given her more confidence to write what she called “simple narrative” rather than the letter form that she had previously used. When we had discussed how the story would proceed, I would copy the parts she was to keep, while she wrote the new parts.

We were thus employed in our dressing room when we heard the astonishing news of Henry’s marriage to Eliza. This took us all by surprise but, in truth, it should not have done so because, when we looked back, it was clear that Eliza had been considering the possibility for some while. We knew that Henry had loved her from his early years, although he was ten years younger than she. He had vied with James for her affections and had, we thought, proposed to her and been refused after she had turned James down.

“The lady is not at all calculated for sober matrimony,” said my mother.

Eliza would not for the sake of tact have said it to me, but I knew she had told Jane that she would never marry a clergyman, feeling herself to be quite unsuited to the parish life. She felt that too many

good men were “wasted on the church” as she put it. I was shocked by this, but then I was frequently shocked by Eliza.

Henry was not, however. He continued to be fascinated by her as a man as he had been as a boy and did not neglect to keep her fully informed about his involvement in the militia, especially when he became a captain and paymaster. I do not know when she actually began to consider him seriously, but I do know that she asked to see my father who was an official of the trust set up for her by Warren Hastings, with a view to dissolving it and giving her control. My brother Charles was present at the dinner and reported how she had no difficulty charming my father into agreeing that she was now quite capable of controlling her finances for herself. Her son, Hastings, was again unwell and her medical bills for him mounted. Her rent was rising and the costs of maintaining a carriage were increasing. And, as she no doubt said with lowered eyes, “A lady in my position must have a carriage.”

Charles was amused that my father agreed, even though he himself had just had to give up his carriage because of the cost! But Eliza could always get her own way. If my father was aware that at this time she was considering Henry, I do not know, but he was always in favour of the match because of her charm and Henry’s devotion over a long period. In any case, his agreement to dissolve the trust benefited Henry as it turned out because, upon their marriage, he of course became the owner of all her property. He also became responsible for her debts, which were no doubt extensive.

Henry announced their intention to marry in a letter to my father and my mother brought the news upstairs to us.

“Your father is diverted by the news,” she said, carefully not indicating how she herself felt about it. “In fact he is so diverted he intends to treat the regiment on the occasion of the marriage.”

We were surprised by this, especially as it was a most generous

gift of £40 but I suppose my father was pleased to see Henry settled and to have a former countess and a relation of the great Hastings in the family was no mean thing.

Jane, while glad that Henry, who was her favourite among our brothers, had found a bride, was mystified as to why Eliza had accepted him.

“What is she to gain by this marriage, Cass? She who had money, freedom and respect? I cannot understand it, though Henry is the sweetest of fellows and will make a fine stepfather to poor little Hastings.”

I knew she was thinking of the disappointment we all felt in Mary as a stepmother to our dear little Anna. Unlike Mama and myself, Jane had never liked Mary very much, always preferring her sister Martha, but even she had not expected “Mrs. JA,” as Jane always called her, to behave so ill to the child. I suppose it is difficult to understand that someone came first in your husband’s affections and to have a child there as constant proof of it, but her meanness of spirit to the child, her continuing criticism and her apparent delight when she upset Anna, were distressing to see.

Mama sternly forbade us to mention it to James and Mary was careful never to be at her worst with Anna when he was there, but Jane and I attempted to help by frequently taking Anna away from Deane and bringing her to stay with us. There she was her old cheerful self but when it was time to return home we could see her spirits lower and her mood become sad.

“How can a woman treat a child so?” said Jane, “and how must the child feel, removed from us whom she had come to regard as her family?” I knew Jane would write about an ill-treated child one day and when I first read the story of Fanny Price, I immediately thought of our dear little Anna reluctantly holding her stepmother’s hand as they trudged off to Deane. But that was a long way ahead.

For the present we were enjoying very much our contact with a way of life remarkably different from the one we enjoyed at home.

In Jane's books many rich people appear and there are descriptions of how they live which are interesting and authentic. Jane, as she constantly reminded us, did not write from life but from her imagination. However, she would never have been able to write such scenes if we had lived only the rather enclosed life we enjoyed at Steventon.

We were not rich. Although the earlier financial problems my parents faced in the early part of their married life were overcome by the success of the school and by the good offices of relations who gave preferment to some of our brothers, we always knew that money was scarce. The carriage which we kept for a year had to go and we did not expect to have more than one new dress each season. From our earliest years we made over our dresses and patched and mended our stockings. Our food was plain though plentiful and much of it was produced at home. Of course as the daughters of a parson we occupied a respectable position in our village and we dined with most of the middle ranking families who lived nearby.

We were expected to visit my father's poor parishioners and take them food and clothing. We did this gladly, well, without really thinking, as it was a habit we learned from my mother at a very early age. She would take us with her on her visits to the poor and encourage us to amuse the children—usually numerous—in the cottages while she ministered to the mothers. She was most knowledgeable about sickness and made her own physics with which she dosed the mothers and children and the elderly parishioners.

As we grew older and our mother's health was less robust, the task of visiting the sick fell more to Jane and me and on perhaps two

days each week we would spend the period before our dinner hour on this work. We were always greeted respectfully and I enjoyed the visits we made. Jane was not as willing as I to make the visits, especially in winter when the ways were often dirty and the cottages offered little comfort. "People get so horridly poor and economical in this part of the world," she wrote to me once, "that I have no patience with them. Kent is the only place for happiness. Everyone is rich there."

Of course everyone in Kent was not rich but the people we knew there certainly were. Principally these were my brother Edward and his adopted family the Knights.

When they were first married, Edward and Elizabeth lived at Rowlings, a fine house, though not unduly large; Jane and I and visited them there both separately and together on several occasions. Our visits tended to last several weeks and, as their family increased—five children were born in the first six years—we fell into the habit of either Jane or I spending the period immediately before and after the confinement at their home, so that we might help with the care of the children and the running of the household. It was not a question of taking too much responsibility because several servants were employed, together with a housekeeper.

Old Mrs. Knight, Edward's adopted mother, lived at a house which was altogether more grand—Godmersham—a modern mansion with a large park, a lake and a fine estate.

When she became a widow, she decided almost immediately to allow Edward and his growing family to move into Godmersham while she herself took on a smaller house in Canterbury.

I was staying with them at Rowlings when this offer was made and Edward, far from wanting to encourage Mrs. Knight in this generous gesture, was rather reluctant to take up her offer. He told

me that he had often heard her say that her whole happiness was centred on that dear place and that he could never be content at the thought of her living in a smaller and less comfortable house. She responded with a most charming letter, in which she told him that it was the fondest wish of her heart to see him take possession of Godmersham and that she knew he would be a good landowner and be aware of the responsibilities which were attached to large landed possessions.

I told Jane about Mrs. Knight's response and joked with her how much more gracious it was than Mrs. John Dashwood's about Norland. She responded with one of her sharp reactions, telling me that as Mrs. Knight was to keep an income of £2000 a year it was scarcely a hardship to relinquish one great house for another almost as fine. Dear Jane always had the ability to make me feel foolish, as though I had not seen all sides of a situation as she had.

When we all went to visit Godmersham for the first time, Edward was so proud to show us the house, which included two new wings and the beautiful grounds. There was a lake, a stream with trout, a Greek temple and two shrubberies for our morning walks. There was even an icehouse to keep the house supplied and no end of carriages and chaises.

"Oh Jane, is it not like a fairy tale?" I said to her as we walked out on our own on the second day.

"A fairy tale indeed," she replied. "Did I not say so when the Knights first adopted our brother?"

"But will it not make our lives so much more interesting, that we can visit here and live for a while like rich people?"

She was in one of her bitter moods.

"To be sure, we may live the life of the rich as long as our sister-in-law perceives us to be helpful at her endless confinements and we make ourselves useful sewing my brother's shirts."

“Jane, do not be ungracious—Edward and Elizabeth are generous hosts and do not make us feel in any way condescended to as you very well know.”

“They may not make you feel so, Cass, but as you know I am easily put out and too sensitive to any proffered slight, even if the slight is my imagination.”

I could not but agree with her and felt on that occasion, as I did often on future ones, that her consciousness of being as she put it “but a poor aunt” did prevent her from enjoying the beauties of Godmersham as she might have done. I never felt condescension from either Edward or Elizabeth, but I must own that Edward was always my favourite among our brothers and he could do no wrong in my eyes. So I was always glad to receive an invitation to attend them at Godmersham and quickly understood the rhythms of their life and their social calendar.

Twice a year, there was a rent day when Edward dined with his tenants and there was music in the servants hall. Christmas was a great celebration and I spent many happy ones there. Twelfth Night saw a large party too, with a feast and two of the children chosen as King and Queen. In summer, there were boating trips and in the autumn large shooting parties for the gentlemen.

Edward was, as I have said a most generous host and, though Jane and I were usually invited for the lyings-in, James and his family, Henry (usually without his wife Eliza) and Frank and Charles when they were on leave were all welcome guests. Of course it was true, as Jane pointed out, that it was easy to be a good host when both money and servants were plentiful, but I would not be swayed from my view that Edward inheriting Godmersham was a fine thing for all the Austens; I would not be put off enjoying my stays there.

Jane often teased me about this in her letters when she wrote to

me there from Steventon. We were accustomed at home to dine at 3.30, specially in the winter months when candles were required so early, whereas at Godmersham the dinner hour was as late as 6 p.m. She wrote:

We dine now at half past three and have done dinner I suppose before you begin. We drink tea at half past six. I am afraid you will despise us.

Once when I wrote to her about a lively party, she reminded me of the comparative calm of most of our evenings there.

I guess Elizabeth works, you read to her and Edward sleeps.

After our first visit, we were rarely at Godmersham together and Jane was invited alone, as I was, to attend the confinements, which were numerous. Jane wrote to me frequently from these visits and I always felt her letters were necessary to help her feel tolerably content in an atmosphere which was useful to her as a writer, but in which she did not feel entirely comfortable. I really cannot attribute this feeling of discomfort to any lack of welcome on the part of Edward and Elizabeth but rather to Jane finding that her own poverty and lack of independence was more sharply pointed up there than when she was at home.

She was expected to sew my brother's shirts, of course, but so were all the ladies present. It was what the women did while the men hunted or shot. I am sure she never mentioned it to the assembled company but once she wrote to me that she too had a mind to go out with the guns. How I laughed at the thought of her in a shooting jacket and carrying a gun!

There are a prodigious number of birds hereabouts so perhaps I might go out with a gun.

On one occasion she wrote to ask my advice about tipping the servants before her departure.

Pray tell me the correct form for this, because I am you know a poor parson's daughter.

I would have asked Elizabeth and indeed had done when I was there previously, but I understood that for Jane such a question would have been intolerable—she would have been unable to admit that she did not already know “the correct form.” It is possible that she did have more reason than I admitted at the time for feeling like this. We were perhaps seen as the poor relations, but the difference between us was that I did not mind being thought so. Jane wrote on one occasion about the visit of a hairdresser before a ball.

Imagine my humiliation when the man charged me less than the other ladies for his service. Is it so apparent that I am poor? Worse, had Elizabeth asked him to reduce his price for me? How I should love to have been able to pay him double with a great flourish but of course I accepted his offer so meekly that you would have been most admiring of me!

I did not tell her, but I too had had this experience with the hairdresser but had only been grateful for the offer. Once again, I was left feeling foolish and insensitive.

It was Elizabeth's practice to invite other young ladies to call on her at Godmersham when we and sometimes her own sisters were

staying and I enjoyed their visits. Jane as might perhaps be expected was less than enthusiastic about some of these visits.

"They called, they came and they sat and they went," she said of one group and she was at her most amusing, though rather shocking, self when she described others to me whom I had met myself. "Caroline is not grown at all coarser than she was, nor Harriet at all more delicate."

A Miss Fletcher was recommended by me to Jane and I told her to discuss novels with her, as she was a great reader. Jane admitted that she had read "Camilla" and that was in her favour, but could find little else.

I am sure she did not share her feelings about the people she encountered at Godmersham with anyone but me. She sat and sewed shirts dutifully and was proud that her stitches were neater than any of the other ladies. The space which we enjoyed there she found conducive to her composing. She relished the library, which was extensive, and once wrote to me of the joys

*of being alone in a room with five tables, twenty eight chairs and two
fires all to myself!*

She had begun on a new story which she called "Susan" during our first visit to Godmersham and seemed to spend part of each day engaged upon it in our rooms. We actually had our own apartments at Godmersham with a bedroom, sitting room and dressing room.

*How delightful, Cass, to be able to leave my work out so that I may
come back to it as I wish, rather than having to put it away each day so
that the servants will not move it or read it.*

I wondered that she was not nervous of the Godmersham ser-

vants reading her work or spreading rumours about her occupation, for she continued to be sensitive about this.

These servants know their place more than ours at home do, it is as a result you know of the distinctions of rank being more observed here. Ours are country folk who know us almost as family and as country folk just a little more genteel than they. Here we have ladies' maids and parlour maids and butlers who would never dream to question the behaviours of the master's sisters.

I always wondered if Jane expected through our visits to Godmersham to be introduced to potential suitors. I did not ask her directly, but I remembered Mrs. Bennet in "First Impressions" pointing out that one daughter well married would put the other sisters in the way of rich men. If this had been the case she was to be disappointed for I can remember no single occasion when such a situation was considered. Often at balls in fact she sat out for want of a partner and she seemed as happy to play with the small children as she had only recently been to anticipate a ball.

She did however make two friends who became important to her through her visits to Godmersham. One, unexpectedly, was old Mrs. Knight.

Although Jane had never liked her much and had always been resentful of her adopting Edward, it was clear from those first visits that they now found a vast deal in common. Mrs. Knight was a great reader and they discussed their favourites together—Cowper of course and Miss Burney for example. To my surprise, Jane told Mrs. Knight that she was herself a writer and received great encouragement from her. I believe she even read her the beginnings she had made on "Susan."

Jane did not actually tell me this. I expect she feared I might feel

displaced, which of course I duly did when I found out from Mrs. Knight herself. Mrs. Knight's form of encouragement had a material side too. She began to make Jane the occasional gift of money. I believe she was first moved to do this by discovering that Jane had not even enough money to take out a library subscription. The subscription was taken out in my name as I had my own income from Tom's bequest and my mother paid the first year.

She tells me she will make me a gift now and then, but it is to be a secret between us and we must be entirely discreet. You may wonder dear sister that I am prepared to accept what some may see as charity, but in furtherance of my aim to be an author, I shall overlook my pride. As we know,

she added slyly, knowing that I would catch the inference,

Pride is a much over rated virtue! and I shall put the £10 away for winter clothes.

For my part I was, upon the whole, glad that she was taken up by Mrs. Knight and realised that now that Mrs. Knight was widowed, Jane found her less the grand lady than hitherto and herself more able to respect her intelligence and her opinions.

Jane also made another friend at Godmersham, about whom I had more misgivings. This was Miss Sharpe, the governess to the children. She quickly became "My dearest Anne" to Jane. If I am to be honest, I suppose I was jealous if Jane ever found someone with whom to be intimate but I think there was more than this in my anxiety about their friendship. For a start, she was a servant in the house and therefore it was hardly fitting that the master's sister should be on intimate terms with her.

“She is not a servant—she is, I grant, an employee, but she is well bred, a gentleman’s daughter who is forced to earn her living because her family have fallen on hard times. Do you not realize, sister, that the same fate may befall us if our father should die?”

I was shocked.

“Of course it would not—our brothers would surely care for us.”

It was the first time I had realized that she felt so vulnerable. I myself was confident in the safety of our future and it was not only because of my inheritance but because I knew Edward at least would always have enough money to support us.

“Elizabeth likes you best, so you may feel safe perhaps, but for my part I am interested in how Miss Sharpe earns a living and enjoy her company. She is by far the most intelligent lady we ever encounter in this house.”

That, at least, I could not deny. Miss Sharpe was certainly well educated and clever, even something of a writer in a small way—she wrote a play for the children to perform.

I did worry though about the ideas which she and Jane discussed. These ideas were not new to Jane, but this was I think the first time that she had found someone with whom she could talk of them freely. It worried me considerably lest these improper thoughts should influence her behaviour.

The subject of the position of women in society had sometimes been alluded to in our home because my father owned a copy of Miss Wollstonecraft’s book “Vindication of the Rights of Woman”; in his liberal way he had encouraged my mother, Jane and I to read it. Of course, we read it to disagree with the ideas that the author put forward. Anything else could hardly have been expected when one considers its content.

My father was inclined to be amused by her attacks on the clergy. He would often quote her accusations about “the servile dependent

gait of a poor curate" to his curates and I often heard him refer to the "blind submission" which he expected always to be part of their demeanour. My mother was very angry at Miss W's portrayal of naval gentlemen as having gross vices as she saw it as an insult to Frank and Charles. We certainly did not see Henry or Edward, in their militia service, as "*servile parasites or vile panders*." So we did not take these parts of her work seriously but rather mocked her ideas.

I read the book at Jane's insistence only, as I was not particularly interested in such ideas, but Jane wanted to discuss the work with me and was impatient at the slow progress I made with it.

When I had finally finished the book she said "Come now, Cass, what think you of her ideas about better education for women? Is it not refreshing to read the thoughts of someone who believes that women, far from being inferior, are innately just as clever as men?"

I was not convinced.

"What is a lady to do with such an education? Surely we need nothing more than to be able to make a suitable wife—or failing that," I caught her sharp look, "to be useful to her family and sufficiently accomplished to raise her children or run a household?"

"But why should a woman not use her education to earn her living? Could we too not take up the law or banking?"

She knew that I found it impossible to discuss or even imagine such ideas, but I could very soon see that there was no such reluctance on the part of Miss Sharpe. Even the first time they met, they took to each other and found a good deal to gossip about while they worked after dinner. Miss Sharpe was invited to spend the evening with the family although she dined alone upstairs. They were often the most animated talkers in the room and we often heard them laughing together, though the rest of us were usually excluded from their conversations.

I was glad that Miss Sharpe's presence made life at Godmer-

sham more congenial for Jane, even that they kept up a frequent correspondence, though I continued to feel that she encouraged aspirations in Jane which could never be fulfilled and were therefore unhelpful to her. I suppose I was merely jealous of this intimacy with another woman. As I feared losing her to marriage, I feared too being displaced in her affections by someone more clever and more bold than I.

In spite of Miss Sharpe and of her enjoyment of the children, Jane was always glad to return home and occasionally wrote to me of her frustration that she was never able to decide for herself the time of her departure because an escort always had to be arranged.

She enjoyed the luxury she could have there but looked for the comfort of home too.

When it can be arranged . . . I shall happily exchange the comforts of a large fire and orange wine for the more familiar comforts of home.

I was so relieved to receive this letter and to know that the attractions of Godmersham, including Miss Sharpe, were not so strong as to keep her away from me.

There was no doubt though that our contact with Godmersham and with a life which was above our own station was extremely useful to her when it came to the families about whom she wrote. Her descriptions of Pemberley and later of Mansfield Park and Hartfield owed much to the position of Godmersham and Jane would freely acknowledge this to Edward and our other brothers in later years.



SEVEN

Our Mother and Jane—Difficult Relationships

Another place which had an influence on Jane was our brother Henry's home in London. Now that he was married to Eliza, they were delighted to invite visitors. As Edward had always been my favourite brother, so Henry was Jane's favourite and, as I was always more welcome than she at Godmersham, she was always more welcome than I at Upper Berkeley Street.

I suppose the sisters-in-law were a great deal to do with this. Eliza had always preferred Jane; it was exactly that liveliness and independence of spirit which made Elizabeth wary which Eliza embraced and encouraged. In the early days of their marriage, Eliza and Henry lived in Surrey, or rather she and Hastings lived there while Henry pursued his career in the militia. We knew from her letters that this life of an army widow did not suit Eliza at all, with its lack of gaiety and frequent separation from her husband. I did not think this would have bothered her very much if there had been amusements enough, but these were sparse in Surrey at a time of war.

When Henry resigned his commission in 1801 to become a banker in London, Eliza was delighted. We were somewhat at a loss to understand what skills Henry possessed to make him a successful banker, but we were assured that he had an excellent partner and that his future prosperity was assured. They took a house in Upper Berkeley Street and it was there that we were first invited. Jane loved

being in London, with the opportunities it furnished for visits to the theatre and the opera house. They kept a French chef and soon Eliza was the centre of a lively set, just as she needed to be. She renewed all her old acquaintances from when she had lived in London before and their life seemed to us to be all elegance and pleasure.

On my first visit, I was concerned that neither Hastings nor Henry seemed in very good health. Hastings' fits were more frequent and he appeared very frail, while Henry seemed to have a cough which persisted for months. But there was no doubt of their welcome and of their genuine pleasure in seeing both Jane and me when we could visit them.

It was the same when they moved later to Brompton. Even though I knew that Eliza had more pleasure in Jane's company than in mine, I cannot say that she ever made me feel second to Jane in any way. Henry too had become more affectionate to all his family since his marriage. This made us all considerably more pleased with his match than we might have been when we first learned of it.

Jane did a good deal of work on "Susan" while she was in London and read it to me and to our parents when she returned home. (This was the work which eventually became "Northanger Abbey." We knew it as "Susan" for some years, then as "Catherine" and it was renamed "Northanger Abbey" only after Jane's death.)

I was aware that, while I was usually the first to hear her work, on this occasion it had first been read to Eliza and Henry. I thought it surprising at first, for I felt it resembled more her earlier creations than the style she had adopted more recently. That is, it was mocking and satirical in its tone and I thought perhaps she had exaggerated this in order to suit the taste of Henry and Eliza.

We all relished the family jokes as she read to us. We loved, for instance, the references to "*novel reading families*," which we are proud to be, and how we laughed when she mentioned Richard as

a Christian name. We had a family joke about the name because of the differing views we held about King Richard the Third. Papa thought him a good and wise king who had been wronged by history. Mama and I believed Shakespeare's version of him, while Jane could never make up her mind, as she had made clear in her History.

As she read out, "*She had not been brought up to know to how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead,*" Jane cast me a sly glance, because was my mother not always telling us that to be vain was a capital sin?

Susan, or Catherine as she later became, the heroine, was not as clever or accomplished as the Bennets or the Dashwoods—she is quite ordinary and to my mind not as attractive. She manages to get a fine husband and the whole is most amusing, especially the way in which Jane includes herself as the author who comments on the plot.

I kept to myself my feeling that had I, not Eliza and Henry heard the work first, the book would have had a more serious tone. Jane seemed as usual pleased by our reactions and set herself to finish the work over the winter.

Unfortunately my mother's health took a turn for the worse and took our attention away from anything else.

I find myself in some difficulty in writing of my mother's health. I must admit that she had a tendency to hypochondria as she grew older, which was a cause of vast irritation to Jane. I do not know why she found this so insupportable. Edward too was always imagining himself ill and Jane simply teased him about it. She wrote to me once:

Do not pray, tell our brother that there is a putrid sore throat in our neighbourhood lest he find himself sickening and dying before all his birds are shot.

When we were children, I cannot recall that Mama was ever ill but when we were grown, I could never guarantee the state of her health. Once on the way home from Godmersham she was taken ill with heat in her throat and a bout of sickness which caused her to be confined to her room and dosed with laudanum for several weeks. I cannot deny that she very much enjoyed the attention which came from this illness and perhaps it is true that, as Jane thought, she developed a taste for the power which an invalid could exert over daughters who were living under the same roof. I did not believe that her periods of illness were entirely imagined as Jane did but I must confess that her health quickly became the subject of much mirth between us. Almost every letter we exchanged had some reference to it and we were careful to put our reactions in such a way that others would have interpreted them as concerned rather than mocking.

It began to occur to me that I had been somewhat silent as to my mother's health for some time, but I thought you could have no difficulty in divining its exact states—you who have guessed at much stranger things—she is tolerably well.

Jane wrote:

Once, when I enquired if my mother was showing any interesting symptoms, she had a habit of developing a new symptom whenever an explanation was found for an existing one.

She complains sometimes of an Asthma, a Dropsy, water in her chest and a liver disorder, as well as unsettled bowels.

She did seem to be prone to having a sick day on a Sunday, but whether it was to avoid church, or the supervision of the dinner, we

could not rightly judge. It became a joke as to whether we should see her downstairs on a Sunday.

Though Sunday, my mother begins it without any ailment.

I do not think that many knew that we took this view of my mother's health. Our brothers would have been shocked and if my father knew, he chose not to confront us. We were both, Jane as much as I, conscious of the duty we owed to both our parents and would not have attempted to shirk such a duty.

I have often felt in later years that Jane pokes cruel fun at those who imagine themselves ill in her books—Lady Bertram and Mary Musgrove for example—and I wonder if my mother ever made any connection.

Jane was impatient with illness altogether, in fact; she had little sympathy for anyone who was less than robust and made it quite clear when she thought someone was making rather too much of a little sickness. She applied the same standards to herself and until her final illness, I hardly heard her complain of being unwell throughout her life.

My mother had been a most robust young woman in her youth—all the stories we heard of her confirmed this. She rode, she worked in the dairy and the garden, gave birth to all her children with what seemed comparatively little discomfort and, of course, was much engaged with the school and all the pupils. Later in life too, it was as though some of that robustness returned, for she lived to the grand age of eighty-seven and was travelling to visit her sons almost to the end.

It was just in the middle period of her life, as she came to middle age, that her health seemed to concern, even to obsess her; it became the source of great irritation to Jane, as well as providing us with

amusement. I do not wish to give the impression that Jane was disrespectful to our mother. She was not. This would have been unacceptable in our family. Only to me I am sure and only in the confines of our room did she let her anger with Mama show.

Though I did not myself feel angry, I could sympathise with Jane's feelings because, right from her earliest years, it was apparent to me, as I have said, that Mama did not really feel for Jane the affection which one expects from a mother. Perhaps she always recognized Jane's special qualities but did not know how to deal with them. She would have disapproved of the rebellious side of Jane's nature, the way she always questioned, the way she tended to express herself very decidedly and Jane soon learned to curb her tongue in Mama's presence.

I think she admired Jane's writing abilities as they began to be apparent, but distrusted them too. Perhaps she feared that Jane would be indiscreet about our family life, or perhaps it was merely that she did not feel that writing was an entirely respectable occupation for a young lady. Yet she was herself able to express her thoughts in writing very well, to dash off verses, charades and riddles when the opportunity arose.

I cannot tell the reasons for the difficulties between Jane and Mama, but they were there. They were particularly acute at the period when Mama was passing into middle age and Jane had not yet come to terms with her own future, but was perhaps just beginning to accept that she may not marry but might find another way of life.

Was my mother disappointed that neither of her daughters married? We never knew, but she certainly made it clear that she thought it every woman's duty to marry if she could.

She often pointed out to us that she herself had "married down."

Her own family, the Leighs, were a family with aristocracy in their background and her marriage to a country clergyman would hardly have fitted her romantic dreams, however kind a man my father was. But she was practical and knew that she had not dowry enough for an aspiring man. That she and my father were happy together we never doubted and he tried, I believe, to make up for the coldness which she often showed to Jane by being even kinder and more indulgent to her than to the rest of us.

I always remember his smile when Jane read out from "First Impressions" that "*daughters are never of much consequence to a father*" and his insistence that "that is not true in this family."

I have puzzled much over the strain between Jane and Mama and the best conclusion I can reach is that they were in fact too alike in character to be close to each other in their emotions. They were each decided in their opinions, quick witted and impatient with those who were not, direct in their presentation and accomplished as writers.

That Jane had the opportunity to develop this last talent very much more than Mama was perhaps a result of their different positions in life. If Jane had married and raised a large family, perhaps her writing too would have been limited to riddles and rhymes.

I am only thankful to the dear Lord that Mama was spared to see some of Jane's success and that, as she recognised it, some reconciliation took place between them. Mama never praised to excess, but she did not in later years ask Jane to take on much in the way of household duties and that was, I believe, her way of indicating that Jane had more important work to do.

I have since learned from my nieces that many in our family thought that Jane and I both took on the role of maiden aunt too early and perhaps slipped into middle age too eagerly. For my part I was content to do so. I felt comfortable that I would not leave home and would care for our parents when the time came that they needed it.

I had a little money of my own so that I could have some treats

occasionally and I enjoyed greatly the visits I made to Godmersham, to London, to Ibthorpe to stay with the Lloyds, to Deane and to Shropshire where I continued to be invited in spite of the death of Tom. So I felt that my life had sufficient diversion, amusement and use for both myself and others.

As my mother's health deteriorated, I took over many of her duties and of course I helped Jane with her writing whenever required, not just as a listener but also with copying and correcting. It was a full life and a useful one and the only regrets I had were centred around Tom and the happiness which his untimely death had denied us.

Jane had no such consolation and I know that she struggled with accepting the life which seemed to stretch before us. True, she loved the visits to London and to our other friends, to Bath and even to Godmersham but there was always a restlessness about her, an air of discontent, an air perhaps of waiting. I could not fathom what she was waiting for. It no longer seemed to be for a husband.

There were occasionally sparks of the old Jane as she prepared for a ball or mentioned some possible suitor, but these were almost invariably succeeded by disappointment or disillusion.

There was one gentleman, an officer of the Cheshire, a very good looking young man, who I was told very much wanted to be introduced to me—but as he did not want it quite enough to take much trouble in effecting it, we could never bring it about.

Somehow I did not really feel her heart was in these minor flirtations. I think it was a time when she was seeking the possibility of a different kind of life and trying out for herself what that might be like. I could see this conflict in the work in progress. In "Susan" she said, "A woman especially if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can."

Although she wrote it of the heroine, was she not really saying of herself,

She had reached the age of seventeen, without having seen one amiable youth who could call forth her sensibility; without having inspired one real passion and without having excited even any admiration but what was very moderate and transient.

The work also made fun of the gothic novels which we used to admire so much and mocked the social life which we experienced both in London and Bath. Though I laughed with the rest of the family at the experiences and misjudgements of Susan or Catherine, I felt too that Jane was expressing somehow her sense of disillusion with her own life at the time.

I did not discuss this with her at the time. As Jane herself said, *"In families we only know of others what they choose to tell us."*

Although we enjoyed the most intimate contact, we did not talk of such matters. I would have been unable to put my thoughts into words and she would have been unwilling to do so. It is only since I have looked back on our lives together with the benefit of hindsight and of knowing how it all developed, that I have been making these assessments of her. I have talked of these thoughts to no one, not even to Henry.

Our brothers have an image of our dear sister which is of someone clever, quick witted, a little sharp in her tone sometimes but a loving, warm, daughter and aunt who was on the whole content with her life. If they sometimes saw, as I did, the low spirits, the anger, even the bitterness in her, they have forgotten it now in revering her memory. I am content with that.

I enjoy holding to myself the real Jane and I know that it was

I who encouraged her to hide from others what I thought of as her dark side. Though I was sometimes impatient with her bitterness, in another way I knew it gave me a reassurance of intimacy only with me. Was I right to guide her thus? Would she have been happier if she had been more open about her feelings? I know there was selfishness in my motives and I regret it. I encouraged her to write to me of light subjects, of dress patterns and bonnet trimmings. We teased each other in letters and face to face but, because we knew each other's minds so well, we could read in such messages the mood of the other and a short description of a newly encountered person was enough to ensure that we each knew precisely our opinions.

I do not want people to be very agreeable as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal.

Here she was probably continuing a conversation we had had in our room, when she pointed out that the main difference in our characters was that I always liked people when initially meeting them, generally thought well of everyone, whereas she started the other way. "I do not much care for people on the whole and they must make great efforts to receive my approbation."

She admitted that, sometimes, she was obliged to submit to being pleased in spite of her inclination. Jane was able to present herself as happy even when her spirits were low and only the odd reproach to me showed me that she was feeling neglected.

She was always cross with me when I was slow to reply to her letters. Once, in 1798 when she wrote to me to tell me of the birth of a son, James Edward, to James and Mary, I did what seemed perfectly reasonable to me—I wrote to congratulate them. I received as a result an angry letter from Jane. Though I was cross with her unreasonable reaction, I own that I found her need of me reassuring.

I shall not take the trouble of announcing to you any more of Mary's children if, instead of thanking for the intelligence, you always sit down and write to James. I am sure that nobody can desire your letters as I do and I don't think anyone deserves them so well.

When either Jane or I were away from Steventon, I was always concerned when a letter arrived about what its tone might be, lest it might show that her spirits were very low. On most occasions, I was relieved when I read them and usually amused by their contents. She knew well enough that I would read to others the amusing parts and keep anything more sensitive to myself. She rarely spoke openly about her feelings either in letters or in person, but we communicated with each other in concealed, unacknowledged ways.

I think that no married couple can have known each other as well as we did. I value this so much now, but at the time I think she and I were both unaware of how intimate our connection was and how it excluded all others. It is only with the distance of years that I can say these things. As Jane finished "Susan" and seemed to grow in confidence as a writer, I began to grow tolerably certain that she, like me, would settle to a life where we found contentment with our situation.

I do not think anyone, even my father or Henry and certainly not myself, thought of a situation where she would become an established writer. I certainly saw that her writing was important to her as an occupation, as a means perhaps one day of earning a little money of her own, certainly as a means of applying her lively mind. After all, at barely five and twenty she had three novels complete—a rare achievement surely. With visits to our brothers and friends, it would provide a full life and, if we were destined after all to spend the rest of it together, we might look to the future with confidence and pleasant anticipation.

How wrong this estimation would turn out to be.



EIGHT

The Move to Bath—Misery and Depression

The beginning of the new century should have been such a good time. My thoughts no longer turned to dear Tom and Jane seemed tolerably content. Our parents often chided us about the gales of laughter that came from our room when we had retired. We talked about her writings, what she might include, characters she might draw, scenes which would be comic, or sad or her favourite thought, satirical. How she loved satirical. Her writings were by now extensive. Three books were complete: "Susan," "Elinor and Marianne" and "First Impressions." The characters were real to us.

"She manages her husband as Charlotte does."

"As headstrong as Marianne."

"How like dear Susan."

was all we needed by way of description to be instantly in accord, to catch each others' eyes across a ballroom, or in a murmured word amongst a party.

Of course Jane read them to the family too. After dinner or after tea, it was everyone's treat to hear new scenes read. How well she did it, taking each character and, by means of changed voices, changed inflections, or a new way of sitting, she made them live for us and we admired her skill prodigiously. We had all been disappointed when "First Impressions" was "*declined by return of post.*" I sometimes returned to this experience and asked her again if she was downcast by it.

"You know that I write for our amusement in the main," she replied. "Still to gain some income, even a little income, would be welcome."

She looked wistful and I knew she was thinking about her experience with the hairdresser at Godmersham. As usual she quickly recovered. "How much more comfortable, my dear Cass, to be a scribbler with you in our sweet blue room than to be an authoress like Miss Burney."

Good times there were aplenty and how I looked forward to repeating them when I returned to Steventon after attending Elizabeth's sixth lying-in.

Instead, I received a most distressing letter from Jane, written immediately upon her return home after her latest visit to Ibthorpe. My sister was not given to fainting. Indeed she was most impatient with those ladies who, as she put it, "*tended to the vapours.*"

But she fell into a dead faint when she walked into the breakfast parlour with Martha, who had accompanied her home from Ibthorpe, to be greeted by my mother with, "Well girls, it is all settled, we have decided to leave Steventon and go to Bath."

To receive such news, with no prior warning, was she said "*the worst and greatest distress of my life.*" Never did I hear her express such anger with our parents—as two children—selfish beyond imagining—never considering the effects of this decision on us—the frustration of feeling so powerless, that our feelings are not to be considered. Bath of all places.

We both dislike it so and one thing more, dear Cass, which I can express only to you. Are we to be paraded as prospective wives for the citizens and visitors of that sad town? Are we to be observed and judged in the Pump Room, for our looks, our carriage, our accomplishments?

We both knew that Bath, although less fashionable than it had been some years before, was yet looked upon as a place for making marriages. We had visited there often enough, with my mother's brother and sister-in-law, Uncle and Aunt Leigh-Perrot, as well as with our parents for whom it had particular associations because they had been married there.

In Aunt Phylla's day, they shipped young ladies off to India in search of husbands but India you know is too far and too expensive when Bath is to hand.

And another thing, her letter continued:

Are our would-be suitors to be then disappointed when they discover how inadequate are our dowries? Are our parents in despair about our unmarried state? Does our mother fancy herself Mrs. Bennet? She herself of course found a husband at Bath and does she now humiliate us by expecting the same of her daughters?

Another letter followed in which she implored my return and told me of yet more "outrages." James was to take over my father's parish and he and Mary could scarcely wait to move into the Parsonage.

They surely show too much and unseemly eagerness—do you recall Mrs. John Dashwood? I never thought to be thus ignored by my own family, that my feelings and yours would be so little regarded by those we love. There is so little attempt at civility and consideration that I can scarce credit it.

I was shocked myself to hear that all our pictures were to be given to James and that even the brown mare was to go to James on the departure for Bath. But knowing that we could not change our parents' minds, I begged her to accept the inevitable and, to my shame, asked her to accept my mother's suggestion that she give her cabinet to Anna. How wrong I was and how she rebuffed me:

As I do not chuse to have generosity dictated to me, I shall not resolve on giving my Cabinet to Anna till the first thoughts of it have been my own.

Her books were sold with my father's and they fetched a paltry price too—no consolation of even a little income.

How I now wish I had returned home to be with her at this terrible time. Her subsequent ten long years of misery and low spirits might have been averted had I felt able to insist upon return but there was no brother available to escort me and Elizabeth and my nephews and nieces were in need of me. How guilty I now feel that I should have put those needs before those of my dearest sister.

Instead I believed her spirits improved when she began to write more cheerfully

We have lived long enough in this neighbourhood—the Basingstoke balls are certainly on the decline.

We plan having a steady cook and a young giddy housemaid, with a sedate middle aged man who is to undertake the double office of husband to the former and sweet heart to the latter. No children of course to be allowed on either side.

How was I to know that she was doing only what must be done—complying with the wishes of our parents and of those who had

powers to make decisions over us? But I was aware really, I knew she was putting on a brave face. Was it not I who had always encouraged her to do so to others? Now she was doing it to me and I should have faced this.

I should have been more sensible to what she really suffered—I, who knew, as no one else did, the mocking tone she adopted in order to avoid showing her true feelings. Yet with no power to change the situation what alternative was there but to accept it? It was impossible to say “No, I will not go, I wish to stay here.” Equally impossible to suggest some other alternative. Had Tom only lived and I had an establishment of my own, she could have come to me. If one of my brothers had been at that time widowed, she might have kept house for him but in the situation as it was, we could do nothing but follow my parents to Bath.

I suggested to Jane that perhaps one of the attractions of Bath for my mother was the proximity of her brother and his wife. She wrote back very sharply:

So my mother wishes to keep her eye on a possible inheritance does she? Of what concern is that to us? It would of course make our parents' lives more comfortable but the chief benefits would be to our brothers who are already well provided for. It is you and I, Cass, who need the benefit of an inheritance and pray tell me if you have any good news about that, from whence we may expect it.

There had been a recent scandal concerning our uncle and aunt, when my aunt, entirely mistakenly, had been accused of stealing a piece of lace. She had been imprisoned and threatened with transportation to Australia for fourteen years because the piece of lace in question was worth more than one shilling.

Most loyally, my uncle had remained with her throughout this

terrible ordeal and my mother even offered that Jane and I might also go with her to prison to give her comfort and support. When she discovered that this offer had been made, Jane was very angry that my mother should presume that we would be willing to stay in the dreadful conditions in the Somerset County Gaol. She wrote to me at the time:

So, our mother is so concerned about what she might be given by our only rich relative that she is willing to sacrifice her daughters to the rigours of a gaol. And pray, if my aunt is sentenced, are we to be transported too? That at least would ensure we were no further trouble to my mother.

I did not respond to this, as I knew my aunt was too good a person to permit young ladies, “elegant young ladies” as she called us, to share in her misery. After several months, she was acquitted of all blame for which we all rejoiced, but the matter was never mentioned in the family again.

Now, however, Jane put it forward as another reason for the proposed move to Bath.

So now that my aunt and uncle have their reputations restored, are we to offer further proof of how they are loved and admired by their families by showing ourselves with them at the Pump Room?

For my part, I thought that being near to her brother and his wife was indeed an added attraction of Bath for my mother. It was true that she did expect to inherit, but I am sure what was more important was that she began to find company of her own age and background wanting in Hampshire. Her friends were dying, as must be expected when you reach her age; she was almost seventy. I was glad that she

and my father retained enough vigour and interest in life to seek new surroundings and amusements, but I did not try to tell Jane this.

I read her letters and understood her anguish but, if truth be told, I tried to stay apart from it. I can admit now what I concealed from myself for so long. I did not give her the comfort and succour she needed at this terrible time. Knowing now what was to be the outcome, the unhappiness my dear sister would suffer as a result of the move to Bath, I feel shame and disgust with the manner in which I tried to pretend it was not going to happen. I stayed away as long as I could.

I did not even accompany them on the move, in May 1801 when they found a house to rent, the first of many we were to live in for the next few years.

How I wish now that I had been able to leave Godmersham and accompany them in their search for a suitable house. I could not because there was no one to accompany me, it is true, but I know I did not insist, did not pursue the idea of a return home as I might have done. I confess that I tried to put the idea of losing Steven-ton out of my mind as much as possible. We had known no other home and felt the loss of it keenly. Even Frank and Charles, both long absent from home, and Edward, with his own splendid home at Godmersham, were affected by the loss and separately told me that they would miss being able to return to the scenes of childhood.

I know too that I tried to avoid the discord which it was clear existed between James and Mary and Jane at this time. Jane's letters to me were filled with examples of what she called "*Mrs. J.A's latest outrage.*"

My piano is to go—have you heard? But of course I have no need of it. We are not to entertain like the JAs with their parish position to

maintain. After all, they dine at the Vyne with the Chutes on so regular a basis that to be without a piano would be insupportable.

They seize everything as though it was their due. Even the brown mare has not the courtesy to await our departure.

James and Mary invited her to join them at an evening party to celebrate their anniversary, but she declined. I dreaded receiving a letter from them complaining about this but I did not. Perhaps they had some sympathy with her feelings. I found it difficult to understand them. I did not question my parents' right to make the decision, nor James' right, as the eldest son, to inherit my father's parish. To me this was the natural order of things, what we must expect, but I did feel that perhaps they relished the prospect of their advancement a little too much. For Jane, there was no acceptance, only resentment and anger.

When I read those letters now, the signs are there for me to see and yet I deliberately avoided seeing them. Only I knew, only I could possibly know, how important her surroundings were to her writing, but I did not then make the connection that her writing was important, no, essential, to her well being. When denied the opportunity to write, her spirits declined sharply and depression, even despair, was the result. For almost ten years, living as we did in different lodgings or spending long periods with our relatives, she had no settled pattern for her writing and the promise and the harvest of those years simply disappeared.

Though I reproach myself now, I could not have known then how great a blow to her spirits this move was to be. She did not reproach me that I stayed away, or only very occasionally. She warned me in one letter:

For three months absence, I can be a very loving relation and a very excellent correspondent, but beyond that I degenerate into negligence and indifference.

But often she made a good pretence of being her old self and even seemed to be looking forward to holidays by the sea and to visits to our relations. But the letters from this time contain passages so sharp, so bitter, that her unhappiness is manifest.

I tried by all means I knew to cheer her. I praised her writing, her work, her dancing. As ever, I endeavoured to minimize the friction between her and my mother and there were occasions when we talked and laughed together as in previous times.

But our rooms in all those rented houses through those years never felt as though they were our own. We often lacked a fire to enable us to sit comfortably and there was no new writing from her to share with me. I even encouraged her to take out her completed work and rework it a little, as a means of engaging her interest once again.

But so often this made her sad.

"I can no longer do it, Cass," she would say. And she would grow critical too. "It wants shade—the ending is too contrived."

Worse, it made her bitter. She wrote to me when I was once more at Godmersham.

How unreal is the fate of the Bennet sisters. Poor women do not make such fine matches—only the Mr. Collins of the world are for us. We should consider ourselves fortunate if we have received one proposal—how stupidly confident Elizabeth is to turn down two.

She seemed to be preoccupied with money too. Always conscious of her lack of any money of her own, she now took on worries about the cost of housekeeping in Bath, contrasting her situation with that of other women in the family.

I do not suppose that Mrs. JA or Elizabeth have to concern themselves with meat at 8d a pound or cheese at 91/2d. No doubt, they may even afford salmon at 2s and 9d a pound.

We had recently heard that both Frank and Charles had received some share of the prize money from ships they had captured. We had been delighted with this news and touched that Charles had chosen to spend his £40 on topaz crosses and chains for Jane and me. Even in her pleasure, Jane's response was perhaps tinged with bitterness that he could choose to spend such a large sum in this way.

"What avail is it to take prizes, if he lays out the produce on presents for his sisters? He must be well scolded—we shall be unbearably fine."

Our first lodgings in Bath were at 4, Sydney Place.

The house overlooked the Sydney Gardens and that was pleasant enough. It was very near Pulteney Street, which Jane had made the lodging place of "Susan," but not nearly as grand. We walked frequently in the gardens and sometimes sat a while in the little pavilion on fine days.

But we contrived to be away from Bath as frequently as possible, on visits to our relations and to some of the coastal resorts, such as Sidmouth and Weymouth.

I encouraged and sought these visits and excursions as a means of raising Jane's spirits. She took up sea bathing at Weymouth and this, together with her long walks, did seem to have a favourable affect upon her.

At the beginning of 1802, less than a year after we had moved to Bath, we were planning to spend a short holiday in Lyme—Jane, my parents and myself. My mother was unfortunately taken ill with a severe infection of the lungs and the visit was postponed. When she recovered, the doctors felt she was still not strong enough for the journey, but my father insisted that we should not be disappointed.

“No, girls, you must take the air and enjoy the sunshine of Lyme,” he insisted.

Though we never discussed it, I knew that he too was concerned about Jane’s low spirits. Martha Lloyd was invited to accompany us and Charles, who was home on leave, would escort us there. I could never have imagined how important this visit was to be to Jane, staying at a resort of which we had received such favourable reports and had long looked forward to seeing for ourselves.

Had I known what its outcome would be, my heart would have been heavy as we set off on our journey.



NINE

Joy and Despair at Lyme

The beautiful scenery surrounding Charmouth had been much admired by all of us as we passed by in the carriage. Charles had a shipmate who lived at Uplyme and had visited there before. He pointed out the inn where he had dined with his friend, Captain Jennings and his sister. We enquired whether he would call on his way home, but he told us sadly that it would not be appropriate as Miss Jennings had recently died and the family was in deep mourning.

I was surprised when we reached Lyme to find how steep the streets of the old town were. It seemed to be squeezed into such a small place on the side of the cliff. Our lodgings were in one of the houses perched on the slope from the town, so that it almost seemed to be built into the hill itself. The downstairs rooms were quite comfortable with a good view of the sea, though our bedrooms were small and somewhat dark. We were quite close to the Cobb of which we had heard so many people talk and, as soon we arrived, Jane could not wait to walk out upon it.

“As you all know, I am a desperate walker and can take no refreshment until I have at least walked the length of the Cobb,” she said.

It was a day of sunshine and high winds and I begged her to be careful as she neared the sea. “My dear Cass, a wet cloak is a small price to pay for the sun in my face and the wind in my hair,” she declared as she left.

Martha and I began to fret when she had not returned after an hour and a half. I was about to send a servant in search of her when I spied her walking back along the foreshore but not alone. A tall man walked along side, his head bent attentively towards her. As they came up the steep hill and approached the entrance to our lodgings, he doffed his hat and gave a slight bow, before he walked on down the street.

When she entered her cheeks were becomingly pink and her air was animated.

"Did the walk do you good?" I asked.

"Indeed it did," she replied but volunteered no more information.

We waited for her to mention the gentleman again as we sat at our work before dinner. I kept looking at her expectantly, but it was plain that she did not wish to be asked and once, when she was out of the room and Martha told me she was going to ask her directly, I told her sharply to refrain, as Jane would tell us in her own good time.

Not till we discussed our plans for the morrow did she mention her encounter and then only to tell me that she had arranged to meet the gentleman again the next morning.

"But my dear, it is surely improper because you have not been properly introduced. What do we know of this man?"

"He is a gentleman and a clergyman," she replied curtly "and he was at Oxford with my brother."

"Is his living nearby?" I asked.

"Yes, in Devonshire and it is a small one only so I doubt he has more than £1000 a year, Cass, in case you were about to ask me about his prospects."

I must have looked reproachful for she quickly added, "No, no, Cass, forgive me. I know you are only concerned for my reputation

and my happiness. But allow me please do a small adventure—how can a writer write if she has not even one small adventure on which to draw? Why, he may be an adventurer in disguise, but he may also be the younger son of a lord. He may also be a poor and respectable clergyman who fell wildly in love with me as we passed each other on the steps down from the Upper Cobb.”

“Be sensible—how did you come to speak to each other?”

“Well, the steps were wet and I almost lost my footing and stumbled into him. I confess, dearest, that I did it on purpose, since I had seen him walking towards me and decided I liked the look of him. Surely you of all people will approve of my liking a clergyman?”

I could not bear to chide her, as it was so long since I had seen her spirits as lively as this. We agreed that when he called on her the next day, Martha and I would be present. I was nervous about the encounter, I confess. I had no idea what manner of gentleman he might be and both Martha and I were shy with strangers. I could see how taken Jane was with him and that made me even more anxious. I could not imagine what we would find to say to him and I hoped he would not think us dull and uninteresting.

I was most pleasantly impressed with the Reverend Mr. George Atkins, as I learnt the next day that he was called. I judged from his acquaintance with James that he was about thirty-five years old, but his countenance was of a man younger. We learned that he had been a widower for five years and was come to Lyme for a short time while on a visit to his brother in Sidmouth following the death of their mother. They had often visited the place together and he spoke of her most warmly and touchingly so that we were impressed by his sincerity. He admired Jane’s work as she sat with us and I could not resist telling him of her other accomplishments—the piano, her dancing. I saw Jane shoot me a warning look, but I knew better than to mention her writing and Martha would certainly not have thought of doing so.

They walked out together and we invited him to join us for dinner at 4 p.m. He was already engaged to dine with a former parishioner, but we made the invitation a firm one for the next day.

How happy and excited Jane was. Her face took on a look which was as I had never seen—both lively and serene. Her conversation reminded me of her letters from Ashe when she flirted so outrageously with Tom Lefroy. But she did not flirt with the Reverend Mr. Atkins. Well, perhaps a little. They seemed to have a deep understanding of each other after only two or three days.

For the few days of our stay, our activities followed a similar pattern. He would call after we had breakfasted and the four of us would take our walk together. He and Jane would go ahead at a brisker pace while Martha and I followed behind. She and I maintained our usual comfortable silence, while their conversation, to judge from their movements and the laughter we could hear, was exceedingly animated. He was a good deal taller than Jane and had to bend his head towards her to hear her words, especially when we walked along the Cobb when the wind was often strong. Our walk would follow the same path—along the Cobb, on the high part if the weather and the height of the sea permitted.

We would then descend by the precarious steps which were known locally as “Granny’s Teeth.” Mr. Atkins would wait most courteously to help Martha and me negotiate the steps. Then we would walk back in the same two-and-two formation. At the door of our lodgings he would leave us, after the next meeting had been arranged.

He dined with us sometimes, three times in all I think, but if he did not join us for dinner, he would call again in the late afternoon and he and Jane would walk out again as it grew dusk, returning to sit with us when the tea things came in.

Occasionally, while they were out, Martha and I would make a

table for whist with another family staying in our lodgings, but Mr. Atkins did not express any wish to join in at cards and Jane rarely played anyway. I was sometimes unsure as to whether I should permit her to have so much unsupervised contact with him, as I was in the role of chaperone, but to tell the truth, I was so delighted to see her looking animated, with colour in her cheeks, that I had not the heart to contain her.

"He was due to return to Sidmouth tomorrow, but he has delayed his departure again," she said to me one evening.

"Again? Has he delayed already?"

"Why, to be sure he was to leave the day after we met, you know, but could not tear himself away from such company as mine!"

"You seem to be excessively diverted by each other, that is certain," I replied.

She clasped her hands together.

"Oh Cass, is he not a fine gentleman, is not his mind, his character, something so very out of the ordinary? You look doubtful, Cass—but then you do not know him as intimately as I do. You cannot imagine the things we talk of."

Martha had retired and Jane and I were in our room preparing for bed.

"Tell me of him, Jane—for if he means so much to you, I do want to know him."

She paused in taking the pins out of her hair.

"He knows so much, he understands so much."

"Of what do you speak on your walks?"

"Of books and poetry of course—we love the same authors."

"Dear Cowper, I suppose?" I asked.

"Yes indeed, but we speak also of good and evil, of duty and responsibility, of government, of royalty—oh you cannot imagine . . ."

"Great subjects indeed."

"And we agree on everything," she interrupted.

"Well to be sure it is hard to disagree about good and evil," I teased her.

She laughed.

"Yes, I put it too simply. He tells me of London society—did I tell you that he was a curate in London before he took up the living in Devonshire? I did not know that there was such shocking behaviour accepted by great folks in town. Adultery is ignored, even accepted, and the most reprehensible conduct is condoned, even by the King himself. Why, his own son has fathered a child by his sister."

I rose from my chair, horrified.

"Jane, you surely do not allow him to talk of such things? I must stop you being alone with him if that is the case."

"No, pray, do not misunderstand me, Cass, he does not tell me these things to shock, merely to illustrate the struggle it is to keep high moral standards when such corruption is all around and not condemned even by the highest in the land, who should set an example."

I was silent, but she could see my concern and moved to another subject.

"He tells me too of the dreadful cruelty of the slave trade and what an abhorrence it must be to the Almighty."

"He is an abolitionist?" I asked.

Again I was concerned, for I had heard that those who opposed slavery often took part in violent meetings and protests.

"He says that no God-fearing man can be anything other. Oh Cass, he talks so well, expresses such fine feelings—you will see, you will hear when he dines with us tomorrow. I shall have the maid iron my new sprig and wear my prettiest cap in his honour. Now make sure you look your best dear sister, for once I am concerned to look more than tolerably tidy!"

Of course I would not for the world have brought up the topics she had mentioned with a gentleman and neither would Martha, but our conversation next day was, I have to admit, a fascinating one. It began with us explaining just how many gentlemen in our family were clergymen—our father, brother, many uncles and cousins.”

“A prodigious number indeed, Miss Austen,” he commented gravely, “and is ordination the choice of all your relatives or merely their expectation?”

I could not rightly understand his meaning and must have looked puzzled.

“What Mr. Atkins means, Cass,” intervened Jane, “is that many gentlemen may enter the profession without full consideration of its implications.”

“Yes,” he added with a smile, “so that ordination is an alternative career to say, the army, the navy or the law.”

I was concerned for a moment that he meant to have a fling at our sailor brothers but he reassured me.

“You see, Miss Austen, although your father is a committed man of the church and your brother James was brought up from a boy to follow in his father’s footsteps, too many young men enter the church simply because a living is available. Without moral conviction, the inner guide which a clergyman should heed, it is hard when temptation strikes to set an example to those you should lead.”

“And we all have that inner guide do we not, Mr. Atkins?” Jane said, her eyes fixed upon his face.

“If we will listen to it,” he replied smiling back at her, “if we will listen to it and be constant to it.”

I was at a loss to know how this conversation might be continued, it was so unlike the exchanges in which we usually engaged with

gentlemen. Yet I could hear somewhere an echo of the conversations which Tom and I had enjoyed in those summer evenings long ago. To my great discomfort, I found my eyes filling with tears.

Jane, ever alert to my feelings, rose from the table and said, "Since Mr. Atkins is the only gentleman present, we cannot withdraw and leave him to his wine, so perhaps we may prevail on him to read to us after dinner?"

"I will gladly do so when you have played to us, Miss Jane," he said, offering me his arm to escort me from the room.

There was a piano in the front sitting room on which Jane had practiced and she rendered us two songs in her sweetest voice. Mr. Atkins could scarcely keep his eyes from her as she played, although he was polite enough to enquire of Martha about the fire screen she was working and to compliment me on the fine stitching of the pocket handkerchief I was working for Mama.

"Now, Mr. Atkins," said Jane as she left the instrument "Pray read us some Shakespeare. I have marked the speech which we discussed yesterday."

She handed him the volume and he read a fine speech of Cardinal Wolsey from "Henry the Eighth," not one of the plays we read much at home, with such passion and accomplishment that we all stopped work and listened with rapt attention. His rather long face became animated as she read and his eyes shone. He seemed to know the speech well, for he did not consult the volume very much, but was able to look from one to the other as he delivered the speech, his gaze resting most frequently upon Jane.

When he took leave of us, I told Jane that I could understand why he held such a strong attraction for her.

"He must leave the day after tomorrow," she sighed, "but we shall have all day tomorrow to talk more."

On the last night before he was to leave Lyme, she told him of

her writing and even that she was hoping one day to have a novel published.

"I told him with trepidation as you may imagine," she told me when she returned from taking leave of him.

"Why? In case you should not after all be published?"

"Indeed no," she burst out, "that he may not consider a female scribbler for a wife as it is, you know, a profession which is barely respectable."

"You have discussed matrimony?" I could not keep the surprise from my voice.

"Not formally, but we can waste no time, you know, he comes here only twice a year."

"Is he to visit you at Steventon?"

"Perhaps, but we shall meet here next October."

"But how can you guarantee such a visit?"

"Fear not, by that time I shall have received some small amount from Mrs. Knight and one of my brothers or even my father will be sure to escort me."

Me, not us. I felt a pang; did my anxiety show in my face?

"My dear, you have you know spent very little time with him. Can you be sure of your feelings sufficiently to commit yourself to a life together? Yes, yes, I know you will remind me that I spent very little time alone with Tom before we were engaged, but Jane, he had been at school at Steventon, we knew his family and his background. I was sure we were like-minded in what we wanted and were capable of being to each other. Do you know Mr. Atkins sufficiently well to spend your whole life with him and to bear his children?"

A flicker of alarm passed over her face and she walked over to look out of the window at the sea, just visible from our window in the gathering dusk. She did not look at me as she spoke.

"As you trusted Tom in those matters, I feel I could trust him. I cannot imagine that he would do anything which is repulsive to me. Besides, he had no children by his dead wife, so perhaps these things are not important to him."

She was silent for a minute or so and then her worried look passed and was replaced with that mischievous smile I loved.

"All that is in the future. For the moment, Joseph Hill and Mary Unwin will be in contact by letter and we shall see what comes from that."

"Joseph Hill and Mary Unwin? Of whom are you speaking?"

"I shall tell you that another time, dear sister—for a lady in love likes, as we know, to keep a little mystery about her. I may wish to keep a secret even from you."

I did not quiz her more, though I was hurt at the idea of her having secrets from me.

I heard the quiet confidence in her voice—the first, indeed the only, time that I ever heard her speak thus about a man. I tried to be glad for her, I tried to rejoice that she might have found the man to give her what she so much craved—a home of her own. But all I could think of was that she would go away from me.

I got up and stood beside her. As always she understood my mood. "Oh do not be afraid, my sweet sister. If we marry, you shall be a most welcome addition to our household and if we do not, at least we can discuss our clergyman betrotheds together in happy reminiscence as we grow to be old maids."

How unfortunate that prophesy would turn out to be.

When they parted and we returned to Bath, they corresponded regularly, but his letters were not sent to our home. Instead she would collect them from the post office. Each morning when one was expected, on Tuesdays and Fridays I think, she would rise early and go out even before she had made the tea. I knew that, if a letter

came, she read it on the way back and her face would be the revealer of her happy thoughts.

I never asked if a letter came and she never offered the information. She mentioned his name to me only twice—once to remark that he was as fond of his brother as she herself was of her own dear sister. Another time, she remarked that Mr. Atkins had used a suggestion from her about a sermon by Fordyce in his service the previous Sunday.

As the summer progressed, she continued to receive letters regularly as far as I could see, but then I began to notice that she would go out early more frequently and would come home looking distressed. I heard her enquire from a neighbour whether they had experienced any difficulties with the post lately.

Had he stopped writing? I felt I could not ask her but, as her distress increased and her visits to the post became more frequent, I resolved to gather my courage and ask her directly what was the cause of her unhappiness.

One morning, going into our room when she had not yet returned from her early morning walk to the post, I saw that the lid of her writing desk had been left open. Inside I could immediately see a small pile of letters—perhaps five or six, in Jane's hand and with her neat folds.

My heart leapt. Had Mr. Atkins returned her letters? My thoughts immediately went to Marianne and the letters returned to her by Willoughby. Surely Mr. Atkins would not do such a thing? Unless Jane had asked for their return? If so, was the connection between them at an end? My heart ached for the distress this would cause her. But as I approached closer, I saw that these letters had not been returned, they had been written by Jane but not dispatched. What could it mean? Had their correspondence ceased? If so, what could be the cause? Certainly, up to a week or two before, her plans to see Mr. Atkins again were being finalized.

In September, she was to go with me on a visit to Godmersham and I knew that she planned to ask Edward to convey her in his carriage to Lyme in October. I knew too that she had asked Henry and Eliza to accompany her to Lyme, but without telling them why. If I was hurt that she had asked them and not me, I reasoned that I had met Mr. Atkins and she was bound to want another member of the family to meet him too. She had seemed so happy, so confident about these plans. I was at a loss even to speculate what these latest events might mean, but I knew that I must ask her as soon as she returned and sat down in my chair to await her.

She was usually away at the post only half an hour, but she had now been gone for much longer. As the time passed I grew more and more anxious. What could have happened? She would not just have met someone and gone walking or visiting. We knew each other's habits too well, were too sensible of each other's feelings for her to have entertained doing so.

Could she have received something in the post which alarmed her? Had Mr. Atkins perhaps changed his mind about his regard for her? My mind went again to Marianne and her disappointment regarding Willoughby. But no, Jane could not have been so mistaken and I too knew Mr. Atkins. For all I could not quite understand him, he was a sincere and most respectable gentleman. There was nothing of the Willoughby or the Wickham about him I was sure.

It was a very hot day and I was beginning to be afraid that she had been overcome by the heat when I heard her come in. She came upstairs with a slow and heavy tread and pushed the door open tentatively. I was shocked by her air. Her carriage, usually so sprightly, was drooped, her face contorted with grief. I expected to see her carrying a letter which contained some bad news, but her hands were empty.

She sat down on the bed and undid the strings of her bonnet.

"Well, Cass, I must no longer delude myself. Mr. Atkins has abandoned me—all my hopes were false."

"My dear, what can you mean?"

"I have received no word from him these two weeks."

"But there could be many reasons for that—he could be ill or . . ."

She interrupted "No, you do not understand, some distance had grown between us in our letters and, in trying to repair the breach, depend upon it, I have mortally offended him."

"But he would not have just stopped writing for reasons of a little misunderstanding surely? Remember I have met him—he is a decent and a thoughtful gentleman."

"It was more than a little misunderstanding, I fear. 'Twas more like a major falling out."

She began to cry. "And about something which could have so easily been avoided had I been better in my judgement."

"Can you tell me, dear? It may help to speak of it."

"That much is true—I feel I may burst with pain of how foolish I have been, but when you hear, you will only be able to agree that it is all my fault."

So she began. It seemed that, at the beginning, their correspondence was about the usual topics; their activities, the weather, the books they were reading. But later, they began to have by letter similar exchanges to those that they had previously enjoyed face to face.

"You know how we talked of anything without restraint in Lyme, Cass? I felt we could do so by letter also."

"And did it prove difficult?"

"Not at first. But I had forgot that writing is different from talking. You have no immediate response and worse, you can read and re-read, perhaps interpreting a phrase in a way which was never intended."

"But Mr. Atkins will be sensible of that surely?"

"I might have hoped so, but is any gentleman in truth tolerant when one questions his view of the respective worth of men and women?"

"Oh Jane, is that what you disagreed about?" I could scarcely believe that she would have been so foolish as to discuss some of her ideas about such things with a gentlemen, even one as thoughtful as Mr. Atkins.

"Well, you see, I did tell him about some of the conversations I have had with Miss Sharpe and ask his views about women being able to engage in the professions. I did not think that so very shocking."

"And he did?"

"Perhaps—he was certainly a little cold in his response and reminded me of the Bible and the words of the marriage service. He had not, I think, considered such ideas before, which I told him I found strange in a man who thought so deeply about society."

"Jane, you know full well that gentlemen do not think of such things—you would do well to confine such exchanges to Miss Sharpe."

"Do you not think I am regretting my openness now?" she cried out. "Yet surely I must be able to write and think as I wish? Must I even with him curb my tongue and discipline my thoughts?"

"That is what all wives do and most other women besides."

"I know, I know and I tried in that last letter to make it right, but I fear it is that very letter which has ensured his silence. Oh, if only I had not sent it!"

"But what did you write, Jane? Did you challenge him further? Has he become fearful of your decided opinions? Surely not, it seemed to me that he admired your spirit and would not want to suppress it."

"I thought that too and it was why I felt easy in sharing my views with him—at least at first. But when I found he reacted coldly, I tried to reassure him that I would not cross him, but would be a dutiful and obedient wife."

"I did not realise that you had definitely decided on marriage."

She looked out of the window for a few minutes, narrowing her eyes against the brightness of the sun.

"We had not."

"You referred to marriage before he had made you an offer?" I could not keep the surprise and shock from my voice.

"Yes, I know, can you imagine how ashamed it makes me to tell you this? Yet it is not as bad as it seems—at least I did not at first think so. He had not formally made me an offer, but it seemed inherent somehow in all the admiration he expressed. He often told me that he had never met anyone like me and that he could not imagine his life without me."

"To be sure, that sounds like a man in love, surely you were not mistaken, my love."

"And I did not exactly in my letter assume we were to marry, at least I thought I had not, I simply tried to let him know that, if we were together, some of what he called my "more unusual views" would not be too often expressed or too forcefully, or in any way which might cause him distress."

"Well then . . ."

"No, Cass, since that letter he has been no more in touch—I know that he has become frightened by me and offended by my boldness. He must be congratulating himself on a lucky escape from someone who would be so unsuitable as a clergy wife."

"Jane, be reasonable. There are any number of reasons why he might have stopped writing. He could be ill as I said, or he could have some difficulties within his parish or his family."

"He was perfectly well the last time he wrote and has mentioned no such problems. Beside, in truth, that was not the last letter I sent. I know you will think me shameless, like Marianne, but I did write again asking why I had not heard from him and apologizing if I gave offence."

She saw my look of disapproval. "I know I was not wise to do that but, as he did not reply, I have since then confined myself to writing but not dispatching the letters." She gestured to the desk. "As you have seen."

"So Cass, I must now accept that I have once again, as I did with Tom Lefroy, mistaken interest and attraction for love." Her voice grew hard. "I should have realized before this that I am destined always to be a lady disappointed in love and find solace in having had the experience."

I dreaded the effect this new disappointment would have on her spirits, low as they already were from the move from Steventon. I tried to give her some consolation.

"But Jane, there may also be use to be made of this experience in your writing and after all, Mr. Atkins may yet renew his correspondence."

"No, I shall not live in hope of that. I have made my last walk to the post office. Nor will I ever tell anyone but you about this new rejection—you know how hard I found it that the Tom Lefroy incident was so widely known. I will not be pitied. That is almost more painful to me than the event itself. As to my writing, we shall see. At present, I cannot imagine ever taking up my pen again. I need your word on the matter of silence and you are to instruct Martha similarly."

She rose and kissed me on the cheek. "I thank the dear Lord for a sister like you at least." I was near tears myself as she squared her shoulders and went downstairs.

I agreed to keep silence and kept my word. I am certain that Martha too never mentioned Mr. Atkins to anyone. Only very rarely did Jane and I ever talk about Mr. Atkins and then only when she herself mentioned his name.

The next time was in the December of that year, as I will shortly relate. I knew that she would be reproaching herself for her misjudgements about the man she had loved and feeling angry with herself that her openness had caused the relationship to end. Her refusal to allow her disappointment to be made public or even to acknowledge it to me caused a little gulf between us—a coldness, a misunderstanding of that difficult time. I believe that the distance between us was the reason that what we later always described as the “Manydown incident” came about.

Had we been as close as we had previously been, had I known her mind more intimately, we should have discussed it all much earlier and she would not have been panicked into a decision she was instantly to regret.

These two incidents, following so quickly one upon another, caused rifts between us in a way we had never experienced. Though Jane was generous about it in later years, I have never really forgiven myself for my part in the first, Manydown, incident.



TEN

The Distressing Incident at Manydown

Early in December 1802 we left Bath to go on a visit to old friends. How glad we were to be away from the draughty rooms of Sydney Place, where the chill winds whistled through the ill-fitting windows.

How glad too I was to have Jane and my mother apart. Since we returned from Godmersham where we had made our planned visit in the autumn following her terrible disappointment, Jane had found it more and more difficult to be patient with Mama. Her supposed illnesses, her frequent indispositions, were a constant source of irritation to Jane, especially as they were interspersed with bouts of exertion such as working in the garden.

At one point in October, she insisted on buying a flock of geese, which she said would provide us with eggs now and meat at Christmas time. She then became indisposed, with an ailment which I cannot now name, but something which required her to be upon the sofa for several hours each day; thus the tending of the geese fell to me. They were fierce creatures and I was nervous to go near them. This made Jane angry.

"To be sure," she said, "if my mother insists upon geese then we should insist upon her tending them. Just refuse to do it, Cass, and when the poor creatures are starving, she needs must rise from her sick bed."

But of course I did not do this, I concurred with my mother's

wishes as we always did, but as Jane did with increasing ill grace.

So our journey to Manydown Park to meet again with the Bigg Withers, especially dear Catherine and Alethea, was undertaken eagerly by us, particularly as Manydown is situated so close to Steventon and we would be able to spend time with James and Mary also.

We looked forward to two weeks of "*candour and comfort and coffee and cribbage*," as Jane put it, with our old friends and then to spending Jane's birthday at Steventon before returning to Bath for Christmas.

Manydown was a fine house built around a square courtyard and there was ample space for guests. The apartment which Jane and I shared was not as large as the one we were afforded at Godmersham, but we had a good bedroom and a small dressing room on the first floor, next to the apartments now occupied, since Elizabeth's marriage, only by Catherine and Alethea. They made their maid available to us for our stay—a great luxury for us.

The chief pleasure for Jane at Manydown was the park of cedars and beech. She loved to walk there and would frequently do so even before breakfast. Mr. Bigg Wither was a man for whom philanthropy was important and he had founded a poor house in a neighbouring village in memory of his wife who had died some years previously. He had also lost his eldest son in a hunting accident, leaving his younger son, Harris as the heir. The Bigg girls told us "No, we are only Bigg—the gentlemen alone are Bigg Withers." They still often reminded people of that—were very intimate with each other and most demonstrative in their affections. Jane teased me in a letter when she last stayed there,

There is no denying they are very capricious. For they like to enjoy
their elder sisters' company when they can.

How warmly we were greeted when we arrived; we were surprised to find among the company Harris Bigg Wither, recently returned from Oxford. I had not seen him for some time, but Jane had spent time at Manydown only a year or two before and had met him again then, but I do not recall her telling me much about that visit. When he was younger, we had always thought him a rather odd young man and now at twenty-one he was no less so. He had a strange shambling gate and was shy and awkward in his bearing. The last time I had seen him, his speech was very hesitant with a severe stutter. This had somewhat improved, but he still had a tendency to colour and stammer whenever anyone paid him attention.

I was most surprised to find him seated next to Jane at dinner and even more when Alethea whispered to me that this was at his request. When Jane played the piano after tea, Harris was most attentive and turned her music for her. To my amazement, she laughed immoderately when he related a story which I thought showed him in a very bad light. He was talking about his friends at Worcester College and how they were forever arguing among themselves.

"So, Miss Jane, one night I had the butler serve them a punch of very ill assorted wines which tasted foul. I rose and told them 'Gentlemen, my punch is like you. In your individual capacity, you are all very good fellows but in your corporate capacity you are very disagreeable.'" This evidently seemed to him to be a witty remark.

When we retired, I teased her gently about the conquest that she had made of this young man.

"Yes, my dear, it is indeed strange. Never forget that I am to be seven and twenty within a sennight. As Marianne said, "A woman of seven and twenty can never hope to feel or inspire affection again. It quite disturbs me and I must confess that not only has he asked me for the first two dances tomorrow but I have accepted. We must remember after all that Charlotte Lucas is seven and twenty also and

in his favour I must say he is tall and well built. Indeed, if he were not, he might be exceedingly ignorant."

It was good to share her amusement and I never imagined that there was more to it than a brief flirtation which would cheer her up and give an awkward young man a little practice in conversing with an intelligent lady.

I did notice that both Catherine and Alethea seemed to be determined to ensure that their brother and Jane were often thrown together and that they exchanged glances when he and Jane sat together, or appeared to be laughing and enjoying each other's company.

Mrs. Compton, one of their near neighbours, played country dances by the hour the next day and although, as ever, we wanted enough young men for partners, it was a pleasant evening. I was glad to spend time with James and Mary, who were of the party, and was content to dance only twice—with the Reverend Mr. Brown and with Harris Bigg Wither himself.

He was quite composed as we walked through the set, but I cannot say he had any elegance about him. I was also aware that, not to be too explicit, he wanted not only air but also intelligence. I noticed that he took Jane into supper and later once again stood near her as she played. He made rather a fool of himself, I felt, and though I would not for the world have shown my amusement in public, I was very much looking forward to sharing laughter with Jane about him as we made ready for bed.

The party broke up and we saw the visitors off into the frosty night, promising to see James and Mary when we left Manydown in two days' time. They reminded us that we were to spend Jane's birthday there before returning to Bath for Christmas.

I was tired and wanted to retire immediately but, rather to my surprise, Harris and the girls invited us to return to the library for

a cordial. Jane's response also took me by surprise, for she accepted and said "My poor sister you know is easily fatigued, but I could stay up for ever if the company is agreeable."

With that she went into the library with them while I, feeling dismissed, went upstairs alone.

I took a long time to prepare for bed and was occasionally made to feel very isolated and apart by sounds of laughter from below. I was almost ready for bed before Jane joined me and I was astonished by her first words as she rushed into the bedroom, "Well Cass, congratulate me, for I am to be Mistress of Manydown."

I could not at first comprehend her meaning. "Mistress of where?"

"Why, of this fine house, of course. I am to marry Mr. Bigg Wither."

Her eyes were shining, she was breathless and to confess the truth, she looked nineteen again.

I took care not to show my surprise and dismay.

"Sit down my love and tell me the scene"; the words I always used when she was to read from her work.

"Well, after we had sat in the library for some time, Catherine said she must go to bid goodnight to her father. After a few minutes she returned and asked Alethea to join her. I knew some plot was afoot, because the sly thing could scarce keep from laughing. No sooner was she out of the room than he declared himself. He is, you know, like all single men of good fortune in want of a wife and has chosen me!"

"But why you?" I regretted such ungracious words immediately.

But she was not offended.

"Why not? I am available, he knows me, he admires my accomplishments. He may just as well marry me as any one else. I believe I am the first he has asked and he now need ask no further."

I could see she was in no mood to be reasoned with, so I determined to remain calm.

"I can see just why he wishes to marry you dearest, but what puzzles me more is why you should wish to marry him."

"Well, you know it will be agreeable to have a good house like this. To be mistress here might be something. Moreover, his mother and sisters are tolerable and will not cross me when I wish to have my Cass living here permanently. To be sure he is not very clever, but he is docile and will be managed well enough. I am sure I can contrive it that we spend only a little time together and the advantages of matrimony are considerable, as you and I have often discussed. Remember Charlotte Lucas, I beg you. He may, of course, hold my lack of dowry against me but his temperament is by no means vicious and he professes himself delighted with my acceptance."

"You have then definitely decided to accept?"

"Indeed yes and we thought to marry in the spring."

I was again silent and she said somewhat defensively and not meeting my eye, "It is something for a woman to be assured in her eight and twentieth year that she has not lost the charm of earlier youth, especially one with my experience."

"Is he to ask Papa?"

"Ask Papa? What need of that? I am of age and so is he. Beside you know well that they will be glad to get us both off hand and my marriage will provide the opportunity for that."

"Jane, you know I could not leave Mama with her health so uncertain and Papa too is growing daily more frail. Besides, you know a young man might not wish to have a sister-in-law too much present when he brings home a bride."

"Why ever not?"

"Well, he will no doubt wish to be busy raising a family of his own. He has five sisters and the older ones have all had several children within but a few years of their marriages."

"We too come from a large family," she replied, "but that surely does not mean we must all follow the pattern. I certainly have no idea of following Elizabeth and producing a babe a year."

"But my dear, how will you arrange it otherwise?"

She hesitated, "As I have said, I shall so contrive it that we spend little time together and we shall pursue our own interests."

"He has no interests, as you know, beyond hunting and shooting in the season."

"Well, after all he did not expect to be heir until his brother died and perhaps he is still finding a proper sort of occupation. His father is a magistrate and respectable and worthy. Why should not Harris grow to be like him in years to come?"

"But does he ever read? Has he any opinions? I have never seen him take up a book or read anything but the 'Farming Review.'"

"I know, but the books in their library are hardly inviting—all those treatises on law and military strategy. I could change that."

She fell silent while I considered if I might indeed say what was in my mind. It seemed too plain, too blunt. But it must be said. "You cannot contrive to sleep anywhere other than in your shared room and from that . . ."

I left the words hanging in the air. Such a thought had never passed between us before.

There was a long silence. Her voice when it came was low and hesitant. "Did you, with your Tom, did you consider that matter?"

"A little," I admitted, "but of course we never spoke of it."

"No, no. I had not expected that you would. Sharing rooms was not, I confess, at the top of my mind when I accepted him. To be sure he is not a young man of great beauty—have you noticed how he splutters when he speaks?"

I did not reply but was glad I had at least begun to make her see the consequences of her decision.

Her face had begun to lose its look of animation. She looked

pale, fearful perhaps, as she walked about the room, picking things up and putting them down, looking for her hairbrush, folding her chemise, rolling her stockings.

I felt I must say more, that I must at all costs save her from what I felt certain was a disastrous course of action. I truly believe that what I meant by this was disastrous for her. I hope and pray I was not influenced by thoughts of myself, or fear of losing her to the Bigg Wither family. I have tortured myself over the years with the thoughts that I may have been motivated only by my own selfishness and asked God to forgive me if I was.

There was something more I wished to bring up, but scarcely dared. I thought back to my conversation with Mama that day, before we knew that Tom was dead—could I possibly raise such a subject, would she take my meaning or despise me for indecency?

I waited until she had put on her night-gown and had seated herself for me to brush out her hair. I gathered my courage to mention Mr. Atkins but before I could speak she had done so herself.

"My other friend—Mr. Atkins—he was handsome and gentle. He understood my disposition. Beside he had no children with his dead wife and I thought . . . Well, you understand, Cass."

"Ask yourself, Jane, if you like Harris above all other men you have met, indeed if you can say that you love him?"

She burst out almost violently.

"Of course I do not love him, he is hardly loveable or even tolerable, you can see that."

"Then why . . . ?"

"Why? Why does any woman who has another choice marry at all? To have a home of her own, to be away from her parents, to be anything other than a poor old maid?"

Her voice had risen and I feared lest the household might hear her.

I put my hand on her shoulder as I stood behind her and ceased brushing her hair.

She caught my eye in the mirror.

"Oh Cass, you know me too well—you see my real feelings. What am I to do?"

"If you care for him and think you will be happy together, there is no reason why you should not accept him."

"It may surely be my duty to accept him—have we not discussed often enough that every woman has a duty to marry well if she can? And I would be marrying well, you must surely admit."

"I do gladly admit it in material terms—a comfortable home and the status of marriage—not always going last in to dinner."

"You know too well, Cass, that a single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid. To be old and poor and laughed at, I cannot bear it . . ."

"But to be tied to such an immature man, to be forever an unhappy married woman . . .?"

She got up and began to walk about the room.

"Are you not worried what will become of us when my father dies? Are we to be forever dependent on our brothers for the very food we eat? Are we to know nothing of comfort and security? I confess, Cass, that when I was at Godmersham this autumn, I longed to have that comfort continue. They do not have to worry there if they have only one entrée, nor do they turn their caps or re-trim their gowns."

I knew that what she also envied was the settled life at Godmersham of our brother and sister-in-law—especially as it reminded her again that she had hoped so much to be conveyed from Godmersham to Lyme to meet Mr. Atkins again, with the prospect of a settled life herself, instead of the somewhat nomadic existence that we had been leading ever since we went to Bath. Visits were well and good, but to

have a calm and settled life was perhaps what we needed more than we knew. For Jane, to have such a life in surroundings of luxury was even more desirable. But, with Harris Bigg Wither?

I decided again to be blunt. "And how many times has Elizabeth given birth? Are you to follow that example too?"

She walked over to the fire and began to stoke it.

"Shall we call the maid to do that?" I asked.

"No, indeed I am quite able to do some domestic things, even if you doubt my capacity to be mistress of a household."

I sat down near the fire, for the room was growing cold.

"It is not your capacity I doubt, but your desire."

We were silent a long time.

"Oh, Cass," she said at length "What am I about? I assume a proposal from one man which does not materialise and accept one from another which I could wish had not happened. Did you ever encounter such an incompetent in matters of the heart? I am embarked upon this course now and cannot change it. I have accepted him, the whole household knows it and has retired happy in the knowledge of it. Even the servants have congratulated him. How would I face him or his sisters if I changed my mind?"

"They would respect your decision and continue to like you."

"Oh no, you think too well of people . . . they would despise me for making a fool of him and after they had contrived the proposal so well."

"Did we despise Eliza when she refused Henry and then James? Of course we did not. We continued to love her as a cousin. We felt for our brothers, but did not take their side against her."

"And when she finally accepted Henry, we did not point out the age difference between them and see it as an obstacle, so why are you doing so now, Cass?"

"My dear, it is not his age which concerns me, it is his character."

"I can think no more tonight. Perhaps by morning my mind will be clearer."

"No, Jane, if you are to change your mind you must do so at once before the news is generally known. Harris will no doubt ride out early tomorrow to spread the word."

"But I cannot make a proper decision while I am in this state, you must allow me a little rest."

"Come, let us lie upon the bed and talk in our old way. Let us weigh the considerations and help you come to a rational solution."

I blew out all the candles but the one beside the bed and we lay down. I determined not to press her further but to rely upon her own good judgement.

Her breathing grew deeper and more regular and we were silent for a long time.

I tried to understand what she might be feeling. To me the answer was clear. If she did not love Harris Bigg Wither, she should not marry him. That was simple for me, but we were so different in character. I was content with my lot. I had loved and been loved in return—I asked no more and I had a comfortable home with parents and a sister I dearly loved.

Jane was still seeking something—I knew not quite what. Moreover she had seen, as long ago as those conversations with Eliza and in her early writings, that marriages without love did take place, endured and apparently provided satisfaction to both sides. Charlotte Lucas was not the only example she had in mind—there was cousin Eliza herself and others of our acquaintance.

We could be certain that the reaction of family and friends if she married Harris would be very positive. Everyone would see that it was a match suitable for both parties—fortunate for her in the material sense and for him in securing a wife perhaps more intelligent than he deserved, who was liked by his family and came with a good

pedigree as far as breeding was concerned. I smiled to myself in the dark, thinking that last notion was sharp enough for Jane herself. She must have detected my smile because she said, "I do not know what you find so amusing. I have made fair pickle for myself, have I not?"

Then she whispered, "Reason demands that I accept him, but emotion demands that I do not . . . what am I to do? It is the old dilemma and I feel as though I am in one of my stories."

I could not help smiling again. "Let us forget for a moment the convenience and advantage of the match and think of the young man himself. What has he to recommend him?"

"Well he is a fine big man." I was glad to hear the amusement in her voice. "And beyond his size, I dare say he will go through life quite respectably as a country gentleman."

"And are you content to go through life as a country gentleman's wife?"

"Were you content, if Tom had not died, to go through life as a country clergyman's wife?"

"Well yes, I was quite content, but you are not like me, Jane. You lack interest in domesticity, you do not care for children, you have a distaste for lying in. Your mind is so quick that you know you have little patience with those who are not so clever as you. I fear that you would be made miserable and that no amount of wealth and comfort could make up for that. A compact of convenience is for a Cassandra or a Charlotte Lucas, not for a Jane."

"You may be right," she murmured, "but oh, how good to be taken care of—to have the books one wanted, to have a carriage for visits, to be respected not pitied, not to pass into early middle age and face the prospect of growing yearly poorer."

Her voice trailed off and I decided to say no more until we had at least taken some rest.

I could feel her dilemma. She wanted the comfort and security of marriage, but the price—was it too much? I allowed my mind to dwell for a moment on the prospect of sharing a room with Harris Bigg Wither. I did not feel I could endure it and I was sure Jane found the idea abhorrent. Consideration was surely not something which could be expected from him, if his blundering and insensitive manners were anything to judge by. There was no reason to suppose that his manners in the bedchamber would be different.

When Mama had spoken of disgust all those years ago, I had not in truth been able to imagine feeling disgust for Tom, but for Bigg Wither? I wondered if that was what Jane was feeling now, but found it impossible to ask such a question. I put my arm around her waist to try to convey that I felt for her dilemma and drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke, I heard the clock in the hall below striking 4 a.m. Jane, wrapped in a shawl, was moving quietly around the room.

“What are you about?”

“Packing,” she said.

Rising, I saw that our trunk was partly filled and that the small portmanteau in which she always carried her manuscripts was already fastened.

“But Jane . . .”

“We are to leave as soon as it is light, Cass. That is, if you wish to come with me. I am resolved to refuse him and if you wish not to be part of the shameful scene which must ensue, I shall understand.”

“What nonsense. Of course I shall come with you but please, sit a moment and tell me your thoughts. You are shivering, let me stoke the fire.”

As I did so, she told me in a quiet, level and confident voice that she realized she could not possibly marry Harris and could not now imagine what had possessed her to think that she could.

"It was your phrase 'a compact of convenience' which convinced me, Cass. I cannot ignore my feelings. I cannot subdue them. I feel, it is not too much to say, a kind of revulsion for him which I could never overcome. Comparing my feelings for him with those I had and, if I am honest, still have for Mr. Atkins or even the excitement and energy I felt for Tom Lefroy, I know it will not do. However hard it is to do what I must do now, it will be as nothing compared with the misery which would await me if I proceeded."

"My dear, are you sure . . . ?"

"What do you now doubt me?" I was surprised by the vehemence of her reaction. "You who were so sure that my first decision was misguided?"

"No, I do not doubt you and will help you in any way that I can. You know that, surely?"

"Then help me finish packing and, as soon as we hear the servants about, seek out Catherine and tell her I must see Harris before breakfast. If this is to be done, you were right, it must be done immediately. Ask her too to arrange that the carriage must be ready to take us to Steventon as soon as the mortifying interview is at an end."

It was done as she wished. I saw Harris, pale and trembling, his coat still unbuttoned, follow her into the small drawing room and emerge a few minutes later to be embraced by his weeping sisters.

I will never forget the kindness of Catherine and Alethea. They would not hear of Jane facing their father and promised to break the news to him themselves. They even accompanied us to Steventon, wrapping us in rugs in the icy carriage, the horses' breath steamy in the frosty morning air and Jane, white faced, sitting upright in the corner.

They wept as they bade us farewell at Steventon and, to the muttered enquiries of an astonished James and Mary, said that they were to see we were breakfasted before any explanation was given.

Jane however would take only a dish of tea and, after a private word with James, insisted that the trunk was to remain in the hall, as we must return to Bath immediately.

In vain did Mary and then James insist that we must stay with them as arranged, but Jane was intransigent and I was so concerned for her spirits that I felt unable to do anything but support her wishes. She would offer no explanation but, when she was out of the room, I was able to give James and Mary a brief account of the business of the previous evening and the morning's consequence.

I was most touched that Mary, with whom Jane's relations were never easy, was very understanding.

"A great many would have taken him without love," she said, "but your sister could not. She knows that the place and fortune cannot alter the man."

By eleven o'clock we were on the road, knowing that we would arrive in Bath late and have to account for our sudden change of location to our parents. I offered to make the explanation on her behalf, at which she looked at me with such gratitude that it touched my heart.

"Oh Cass, you are too good. What would I do without you? How could I ever find a husband as kind as my sister?"

For the first time in this sad affair, she began to cry. I took her hand and resolved to let her 'cry it out' as we used to say as children.

I looked out of the window and, as the frost covered countryside slid pass, reflected on my role in the recent events.

Had I acted right? Had I persuaded her wrongly? And If I had, was it for her sake or my own?

What Jane said to Mr. Bigg Wither in what she called the mortifying interview I never knew, but I am sure she was as kind as possible. Future events were soon to show that he suffered no lasting damage, but it was many years before I could say the same for Jane.

As for me, many times over the next few years I agonized over my part in her refusal of him and pondered on her unhappy state and depressed spirits. Worse, I wondered if I had permanently damaged our intimacy as sisters by depriving her of the comforts of marriage which had been on offer to her. I still, even at the distance of so many years, can give no positive answer to the question of whether I acted in my interests or hers. If her readers knew, I hope they would forgive me, as they have been able to see her talents, but my forgiving myself is another matter.



ELEVEN

Hopes of Publication Raised and Dashed

W e spent a sad Christmas in 1802. Jane did not tell our parents about the Manydown incident and had sworn me to secrecy. Naturally however we knew that such an event could not be kept secret for long. In a Christmas letter to us all James expressed the hope that Jane had recovered from "*the unfortunate occurrences at Manydown.*"

This required an explanation and, with Jane out of the room, I gave a brief account of the business to Papa. He was kind and understanding as I would have expected and I begged him to ensure that Mama make no tactless remarks to Jane.

I need not have worried. They both acted with discretion, apportioned no blame and once, in response to a discussion about the future of little Anna, my father said to Mama, "Let her marry for love when the time comes, my dear, as we did. Better by far to stay at home than marry where there is no love." Neither looked at Jane but we knew this reassurance was meant for her ears and I saw her eyes fill with tears.

Later, as we walked along the Royal Crescent arm in arm, I ventured to ask her for her thoughts on her recent distress. She stopped and looked from the broad sweep of the magnificent terrace across the fields which sloped down to the river.

"The decision was right, of that I have no doubt, but I cannot say the prospects before me are inviting. Are we to live forever in this town, looking at the white glare of the sun on the buildings and taking tea in the Pump Room while attending Mama and Papa?"

"Perhaps you might find some consolation in your compositions?"

"No, Cass, I fear I have lost the facility, I can find no spur for it somehow. And have you heard that another move is being discussed? Papa is looking for a house nearer the Pump Room, it seems. Our convenience and wishes will not be considered and once again I will be without a proper place to encourage my thoughts of composition. Come, if you are not fagged, let us walk the long way home, so that we may enjoy this winter sun a while longer."

For her birthday, just before Christmas, I had worked her a little lace collar, but now I determined to give her something else, something that might encourage her back to composition, as I was sure this was the only means by which she would recover her former spirits.

In a shop in Milsom Street I found what I was looking for—a leather bound notebook with blank sheets inside of about the size she always used for her writing.

I gave it to her on the first day of 1803 with a note which said:

My dearest sister, My greatest friend:

Last year was not one we would wish to revisit. Please accept this book as a token of my belief in your talent as a writer and may it help you commit to paper those thoughts which may produce another work of the stature of "Elinor and Marianne" or "First Impressions."

Jane received my gift graciously enough, but her reaction was typical of her mood at the time. "What, do you exclude "Susan"? Is it not too worth your approbation?"

I assured her that it was, but in truth "First Impressions" found more favour with me.

She did not respond, but took the notebook and put it in her writing desk. She came over to me and, most unusually, kissed my cheek.

"How do you bear me, dear Cass, I am so ill humoured, do you not despair of me?"

I did not despair, but I did confide my worries about her health to Henry.

He, dear brother as he always was, determined to try to remedy her situation. He persuaded Jane to copy out "Susan" again. She was reluctant, but I helped her and we did it remarkably quickly.

Henry then asked one of his business partners, a Mr. Seymour to approach a London publisher whom he knew—Crosby's was the name of the firm. "Susan" was dispatched to them at their request. A few weeks after, a letter came for Jane, marked on the outside with their name. I ran to take it up to her where she was sitting with Mama at her work. I did not want to mention the letter in front of Mama and kept trying to find an excuse to ask Jane to leave the room with me. Finally, when Papa called her away on an errand, I was able to give her the letter and to watch in great suspense as she opened it. But, without reading, she passed it to me.

"I cannot, Cass, pray read it for me."

I glanced at the short letter and grasped her arm in my excitement.

"What, Cass, will they publish?" I saw the flicker of joy in her eyes.

"Yes," I said, "and pay you for it!"

Another flicker.

"When?"

"It does not say, but soon, it must surely be soon."

"Oh, I cannot believe it, it is quite wonderful but, until we know more, I pray you, Cass, tell no one. We must wait until it is an established thing, with a date for the event before we tell anyone else."

I agreed reluctantly, but I was confident that this would now be a turning point, that this was the thing which she had been seek-

ing, waiting for all this time. Now surely she would find renewed energy and happiness. I had high hopes but, in the event, this only contrived to make things worse. I kept my promise of secrecy, realizing that Jane's experience with the rejection of "First Impressions" had made her cautious about any idea of publication. Henry however had never been able to be discreet and spread the news of imminent publication around the family and his London circle. As time went on and nothing happened, as the only response to enquiries could be "No, there is no news as yet" or "We still await a date."

This became yet another source of unhappiness. Her hopes had been raised again and dashed again and I feared for the outcome of this further disappointment on her fragile spirits.

During the following summer, I suspected that she might be active again. At first I thought I was only wishing it to be so—that I was wanting to know she was composing again, as proof that her spirits were finally lifting and that she was coming to terms with her situation. There was but one sitting room at Sydney Place and our bed chamber was extraordinarily noisy, so she rarely sat there long. I noticed however that she began to sit in the dining parlour after the breakfast was cleared for, as she put it, "correspondence purposes." She wrote frequently, I knew, to Charles and Frank, though their replies were as erratic as their itineraries.

"I must I suppose blame Bonaparte for the continued lack of response from my brother," she said once, dryly.

At first, I thought she was revising an earlier draft of something written before but, as the summer progressed, I realised it might be a new work. Her habit of writing on small sheets of paper made it difficult to distinguish a letter from a story, but there was something about her absorption, about her new tolerance with my mother, that made me believe she might have rediscovered her creative mood.

I was most careful not to mention my suspicions to her or anyone. Whenever she was ready to read something to me in the past, she had always offered. Whether she would do so this time or not I could not tell. There was a distance between us since the Manydown incident which distressed me, but which I felt unable to discuss. I could not tell if she was angry with me, resenting my interference, or with herself for refusing an opportunity which she must have been aware was unlikely to come again. My own contentment with my single state might be insupportable to her if it contrasted with her own discontent.

One morning in September, she decided not to accompany my mother and me on our walk—an unusual occurrence, as she was so eager to take exercise whenever possible. When we returned she said to me quietly while we prepared Mama's work, "I have put my new composition in order while you were out, Cass. Shall you wish to hear it tonight?"

She looked at me eagerly and smiled as I replied that I would. "Then let us retire early because there are five chapters to be read."

How shall I describe my feelings when I first heard what she called "The Watsons"—disappointment, dismay, guilt? Unlike all her other compositions, the tone was almost completely bleak and depressed. When I first heard that there were four sisters, I suppose that I expected another Bennet family, but the Watsons were very different.

To begin with, their station in life was decidedly below that of the Bennets or the Dashwoods or the Morlands. Their father was a clergyman who was in very poor health and the chief of the story concerned the daughters' anxieties about what will become of them when he dies. Since their home goes with the parish, they will be homeless and penniless, as their mother is dead and in any case had no fortune of her own. It is not too much to say that the

daughters are desperate to marry in order to find some way out of their situation.

"But you know," says one, "we must marry, as my father cannot provide for us and it is very bad to be old and poor and laughed at." When she read that, my heart sank, for it was the very phrase I had heard her use at Manydown.

One of the daughters, the one I perceived to be the heroine of the story, has been brought up by a rich aunt and as a consequence has an unrealistic view: "To pursue a man merely for the sake of a situation is a sort of thing that shocks me. I cannot understand it. Poverty is a great evil, but to a woman of education and feeling it ought not to be, it cannot be, the greatest."

She goes on to say that she would rather be a teacher in school than marry without love, to which her sister Elizabeth responds harshly that she would rather "do anything than be a teacher in school."

Only the previous week I had heard my sister discussing with a visitor the life of a school teacher and I knew, though she never said it to me, that she feared after the death of my father that she might herself be forced by poverty to become a teacher or a governess.

I tried to compose my expression so that she would not see my dismay when she finished the reading and I asked her eagerly what was to happen.

"Why, there will of course be a happy ending and Emma will marry Lord Osborne and live contentedly as people do in stories, if not in real life. Well, what think you of my Watsons?"

"I could not rightly give an opinion yet, my love," I said "but let us perhaps have a little more cheer in their lives."

"What cheer is there for the unmarried daughters of a poor clergyman?" she replied sharply, putting away the manuscript and rising abruptly.

I could not reply for I was shocked by the bitterness in her voice.

"Oh Cass, if I can write only from my own experience, how can I write anything which people would want to read?"

Yes, that was it, I had not at first understood. All her other writings were far removed from her own situation, but this one . . .

"Do not abandon it, Jane, I beg you, continue and do as you always do—have some light and shade, some warm characters who are likeable."

"Perhaps," she said, and began to undress.

She read no more to me for some months, though I knew she returned to the work from time to time. We had many visitors that autumn and my mind was much taken up with housekeeping matters.

Eliza and Henry stayed for some weeks, much afflicted by the recent death of Hastings at the tender age of fifteen. He had been a sickly child since birth, subject to frequent fits like our brother George and our uncle Thomas. They lived to become adults but I remember the first time I saw Hastings, I felt he would not make old bones.

I remember that Eliza saw my look and said, "Dear Cassandra, aptly named as you are, I believe you see my little one's fate and it is not good is it?"

We were at the time rehearsing one of our Christmas plays and I did not wish to appear gloomy, so I replied, "Why, not at all, cousin, he is learning to speak, is he not, and is a great favourite with us all."

But it was clear that he did not thrive, although he bore his suffering bravely; no child could have been more doted upon by his Mama and later by his stepfather.

His death was by no means unexpected and in some ways we all rejoiced that the poor boy was at last free of suffering, while feeling

for Eliza. To lose her mother, then her son, was hard indeed. I was hurt when Jane assumed in me feelings I truly did not have.

I suppose you feel that this is Eliza's punishment for marrying without love and for being a reprehensible flirt.

I knew by now that such phrases, either spoken or written, might be instantly regretted and had developed the practice of not responding. Somehow, I knew Jane was driven to say such hurtful things to me simply because I was the person closest to her, the one who best knew her thoughts, who best understood her. It was not always easy to keep silent but I did so, knowing by now that her sharpest comments were so often followed by the sweetest expressions of love and gratitude.

Hastings was buried in London and his bereaved mother set out on a round of visits, to Bath, to Godmersham, to Steventon. She was even able to pay a brief visit to France with Henry, as a peace was declared, although it was to be only temporary. Eliza and Henry clearly comforted each other in their grief, though they spent a good deal of time apart.

Jane once declared, "Henry and Eliza scarcely meet it seems. We can, I suppose, expect no more nieces and nephews from that direction. She orders things better than Elizabeth, who I hear is in the increasing way yet again."

Both Henry and Eliza seemed to feel that though married they might pursue lives which were separate to some degree. Henry was frequently at Godmersham alone, especially in the shooting season and he had recently established a branch of his bank in Alton, requiring visits there.

Eliza bore his absences well and she was never alone anyway because Hastings' nurse, Madame Bigeon, stayed on after the death

of the boy. She and her daughter, Madame Perigord, remained with the HAs (as we now called them to distinguish them from the JAs) in London and became friends as well as servants. Madame Bigeon was much liked by Jane, though I sometimes found it difficult to understand her speech, as her French accent was rather pronounced.

As she admired Miss Sharpe at Godmersham, so Jane made another friend in Madame Bigeon in Upper Berkeley Street and later when the HAs moved to Brompton, from where she wrote to me.

How I enjoy talking to a woman who has had to make her own way in the world. The situation of this house is delightful—much preferable to being in Town. Madame and I roam the fields each morning before Eliza rises and we are never done talking.

She came with us to the Opera last evening where Henry has his own box now. Can you fathom how Henry and Eliza afford such luxuries? There is no shortage of fine dinners or French wine here, yet Henry seems uncomfortable in the world of business. He speaks with no authority and seems to rely on Mr. Seymour.

However extensive Eliza's fortune, I cannot feel it will last for ever if they live at such a rate. Meantime, I will enjoy being a fine lady and return with reluctance to considering the cost of sugar when I come home. I do not know yet when that will be, much as I long, dear sister, to see you again.

Henry has business in Alton soon but cannot come as far as Bath on that occasion. He could convey me to Steventon at that time but since I do not know how James is placed to escort me further and do not wish to ask him to put himself out for me again I must remain here.

Until I have a travelling purse of my own, I must submit to such things.

The tone of her letters from Town was cheerful but, when she returned, her spirits were again lowered because we were to move house again—this time to Green Park Buildings.

My mind was too taken up with this and other housekeeping matters to concern myself overmuch with Jane and her depressed spirits. I must own, too, that I was growing impatient with her depression and ill temper and the distance between us which there had been since the Lyme encounter was at it's worst. I knew she had had a major disappointment with Mr. Atkins, but had I not had an even worse one with the death of an intended husband? I learned to bear my grief silently and find consolation in other things. I hope that I did not contrive to spread gloom and despair to my family. Jane could barely smile at all now and her misery weighed upon us all.

It was apparent through these Bath years that, though my father's health was failing, he and my mother had found a happy life in the town, even if I and especially Jane had not. We moved from Sydney Place to Green Park Buildings so that they might be nearer the Pump Room, where they liked to go every day.

Number 3 had much the same accommodation as Sydney Place and the sitting room had a fine view over the river, but the room which Jane and I shared was at the back and somewhat damp.

Papa and Mama would walk arm in arm down James Street and across Kingsmead Square each morning, greeting friends as they took the air. They arrived at the Pump Room at about the same hour each day, where his erect carriage and noble bearing were much admired and their company was sought after. They had their silhouettes taken and I teased my mother that she had made sure that her handsome Leigh nose was in profile!

While moving house was a disturbance to Jane and to me, they regarded it as a game to be enjoyed. They praised the location of our

new dwelling with its “fine views across the Gorge” excessively and apparently did not notice that there was a dreadful smell from the drains and that the room which Jane and I were to occupy had no fireplace and only one small window.



T W E L V E

Consolation at Lyme but More Sad News Follows

I n the summer of 1804, we all visited Lyme again and I was most concerned that this would revive old and painful memories for Jane. For this reason, I was particularly reluctant to leave her alone with my parents in Lyme in September, while I went to Weymouth with Henry and Eliza.

To my surprise and relief, her letters to me were cheerful and even contained her usual mischievous allusions to my mother's less than refined habits and to my liking people too easily:

I called yesterday morning on Miss Armstrong and was introduced to her father and mother. Like other young ladies she is considerably genteeler than her parents. Mrs. Armstrong sat darning a pair of stockings the whole of my visit. But do not mention this at home lest a warning may act as an example. We after—wards walked for an hour on the Cobb . . . her manners are very engaging. She seems to like people rather too easily.

She wrote several times about how much she enjoyed the sea bathing. "It is delightful to splash about" and, in spite of being alone with our parents, her spirits seemed to be improving. She wrote only once of her memories thus:

I looked today at the little portrait you drew of me this spring, sitting on the Avon bank—the one from the back. It reminds me of happy sunny days. You alone will appreciate that I have other memories here but I am glad to say they are good ones upon the whole.

I was surprised and pleased to hear that she seemed tolerably content, but it was not until I received another, much longer, letter that I understood why. It is perhaps the most extraordinary letter I ever received from her.

My dear Cassandra

Some days ago, a most extraordinary incident occurred here in Lyme. I have needed a little time before I have quite understood it and I was at first resolved to keep it entirely to myself. But dear sister I know that you will be glad to hear about it and will understand the great mixture of feelings it has evoked in me. They are of anger, of sorrow, of bitterness but also of joy and relief. Are you filled with dread at what your most profligate sister has been about? Let me set your mind at rest by relating the following event.

I find sitting with Mama and Papa on these long summer evenings makes me even more melancholy than I am as a rule. So I have added an evening walk to the one we take together in the mornings. I usually climb the hill to watch the sunset but this particular evening I determined to take courage and to walk along the Cobb. You will know that sad memories often intrude upon me here but as it turned out my bravery was amply rewarded. As I walked out along the upper part, I noticed a couple standing looking out to the west. The man was tall and there was something about the turn of his head as he bent to talk to the lady which reminded me so much of another tall man with whom I had walked so often in this place. As I passed by, I heard him speak to the lady I presumed to be his wife and his voice was so very like the

one I remember so well that I felt faint. I stumbled and felt frightened I might fall because as you well know there is no balustrade or anything indeed which one might use to steady oneself. The lady and gentleman had seen my plight and moved swiftly to stand on either side of me to steady me.

"Are you ill, my dear? Pray lean on my husband's arm, for you are quite white."

"Come, Louisa, let us help her to the lower level where we may find a bench for her to sit a while."

"She cannot manage the ladder in this state, Henry, we must retrace our steps to the bigger staircase."

They supported me as we made our way back and when I was sitting between them on a nearby bench, the lady passed me her smelling salts.

"Now, may we fetch someone to escort you home? Are you a resident of Lyme or a visitor, as we are?"

"A visitor only and our lodgings are nearby only I would prefer not to worry my parents, who are rather frail and elderly," I said.

"Then we shall sit with you until you are feeling strong enough and then escort you home."

"Oh, but pray do not let me interrupt your evening walk."

He smiled and again I had that intense feeling of recognition.

"It is no bother—it is pleasure to be of assistance to such a charming lady and strangely enough, my wife and I were here remembering another lady in this place."

"In fact," said his wife, "we were remembering my husband's brother. We try to come here each year at this time, near the anniversary of his death."

"Why do you come here? Did he die in Lyme?"

"No, in his parish in Devon but he had spent a holiday with us in Sidmouth earlier in the year and had spent some days here which he

described as the happiest of his life and it is for that reason that we come here to remember him."

I did not think I could find the breath to speak but when my voice came out it was quite steady.

"Did he say why he way so happy?"

"Why yes, because while walking on the Cobb he met a young lady and fell in love."

"Is it not a romantic notion my dear?" said the lady. "But depend upon it, it was so and he intended to marry her. When he returned to us, he could scarce stop telling us of her beauty, her intelligence and her accomplishments."

"Intended? The marriage then did not come about?"

The gentleman took up the story—his voice trembling a little.

"Later that year my brother had a seizure and died within two days of taking to his bed. He never regained his senses after the initial attack and I arrived at his bedside only in time to close his eyes."

This time my voice too trembled a little.

"And the young lady—what happened to her?"

"Sad to say—we do not know. He never told us her name as he felt it would be improper until things were more settled between them."

"But were there no letters among his effects?"

"Business called me back to Sidmouth immediately after the funeral and I had to leaving the sorting of his possessions to his parishioners. They sent me some personal mementoes in a small trunk some months later but I confess it was many months more before I could bring myself to go through them."

His wife intervened again. "My husband and his brother were very close and to confess the truth, he could not at first come to terms with his death, let alone dispose of his effects. We eventually found a bundle of letters from the lady but there was no address of any kind—they

merely said "the post office" at the top of the sheet. We thought the franking was from Bath but we could not be sure and without a name, there was no possibility of getting in touch. If only we had known her name but we think they must have used false names because her letters were addressed to Joseph Hill and signed from Mary Unwin."

The gentleman took up the story again:

"My brother was a devotee of Cowper you see and they must have . . ."

I interrupted him. "Yes, I am familiar with the names."

"You too are perhaps a devotee?"

"I am indeed. 'Tis a sad story and worthy perhaps of the poet himself. It is to be hoped that the lady has found happiness and that your brother rests in peace. Thank you for the story of your brother and for your care. I am quite recovered enough now to go back to my lodgings."

"You will not go without our escort, Miss?"

"Austen," I said, "and your name?"

Of course his reply was no surprise.

"Atkins," he said.

How shall I describe my feelings, Cass? Can you imagine how this has affected me? I am in turn angry, despairing, joyful. He loved me! I was not mistaken! He did not reject me! But if only I had known—what misery I might have been spared. Yet there would have been misery too in knowing of his death. I do not know whether to be glad or sorry that we agreed on the names we would use in our correspondence after reading some Cowper together before we left Lyme. I did not tell you did I of this? I suppose I thought you would judge it as a foolish affectation. He was to be Joseph Hill, who was such a faithful friend, and I Mary Unwin because she was a great walker and Cowper never left her without "feeling the better for her company." It pleased us to use these names and it seemed so romantic. I never

dreamed that it would prevent me hearing the reason for his letters ceasing.

I know you will be wondering that I did not feel compelled to reveal my identity to his brother and sister-in-law. But what good would it have done? Would they have offered me then a brooch or a ring with a lock of his hair? Would I have wanted such a badge of having been loved? To be accorded the status of a semi-widow without the advantages of matrimony? No, I do not want the world to think of me thus. I would sooner mourn in secret and maintain my dignity. Forgive me dear sister if you think I mean to have a fling at you own grieving. I do not. Your mourning for Tom is understandable to all who know you, but I do not like to receive sympathy or to be pitied. I know you will guard my secret forever and that is how I wish it. We shall perhaps talk of it together in the future but I charge you to ensure that no one else will ever know.

You are so patient with this most difficult of sisters. I hope that I may now find more ease in my spirits and be less irksome to you and my family when we are once again together.

I was more astonished by this letter than I can rightly express and needed to read it several times before I could truly make sense of this extraordinary encounter. My first thought had been that Mr. Atkins had been overtaken by some illness and I had been right. Jane, never one to accept the easy explanation when a more complex one was possible, had contrived to take the blame upon herself and had caused herself and indirectly others, much misery as a result. I was delighted that she had chanced to walk upon the Cobb that evening and hoped fervently that when we were once again in Bath it would lead to better spirits.

My hopes were false and when she returned she seemed permanently tired, impatient with us all and silent for many hours

at a time. The visit to Lyme had, as I feared it might, brought back too many painful memories. It was clear that in spite of the consolation she had now received from knowing that Mr. Atkins did not reject her as she had imagined, it needed more than this to restore Jane to the person I loved and admired.

I thought very little about the Watson family for a year or more when quite suddenly, one evening after tea while my mother and father took their evening walk, I determined to ask her if she had worked on the Watsons any more.

"Why yes and I am determined to kill off Mr. Watson directly and leave those girls destitute."

"Come then, let me hear it."

I was at first enchanted by one scene she read, concerning a small boy with whom Emma dances. It so reminded me of the dancing we had had as children when our brothers were home from school, or from the navy—the boy is even called Charles—when we used to jump about together and discuss our lessons and the riding and be so carefree together.

As she read on, though, I grew more dismayed. And my dismay was centred on the relationship between the sisters. They really dislike each other. There is no trust between them—indeed there is treachery and betrayal. There is a sister-in-law who is condescending and insincere.

"Stop, I cannot bear it—surely, Jane, this is not how you think of us all, of you family who loves you?"

"Cass, it is a story, these characters are not us."

She was angry, I could see, and I was glad that the entry of my parents saved us from having to continue the exchange.

I never heard her mention "The Watsons" again and, until I found the work among her papers after her death, I thought that she had destroyed it. I wish now that I had done so, for the thought that

she judged any sister so is painful to me; it fills me with remorse that perhaps she felt I had treated her ill, or persuaded her against her will to any course of action.

But Henry of course has the manuscript now and will do with it as he will. I have always been afraid of what would be made of my feelings for Jane and hers for me if this part work were ever to be published. I know that in some way her anger and sadness about the outcome of the Lyme events were turned against herself and her family, but it does not make it easier for me to face.

I have always supposed that she never finished this work because the planned death of Mr. Watson was overtaken by the actual death of our dear father.

On Jane's twenty-ninth birthday in December, my father suffered one of the feverish attacks with which he had been plagued in recent weeks. We put him to bed and the next day we were relieved that his symptoms seemed much reduced.

My mother remained in the room with him all day and Jane and I were taking our tea together downstairs when we were startled by the arrival of an express from James. I ran to retrieve a coin from father's purse to pay and, by the time I returned, Jane had torn open the letter and said, "On no, not my old friend and on my birthday too."

Mrs. Lefroy was dead of a riding accident. James wrote that he had met her by chance in the village the previous day, and she complained of the laziness of her horse. On the way home, it seemed that the horse bolted and the servant who was with her could do nothing. She was thrown in the road, injuring her head most severely, and within a few hours she was dead.

I knew that Jane looked upon Mrs. Lefroy with some ambivalence, since she inevitably blamed her somewhat for her part in separating her from Tom. Perhaps she also resented Mrs. Lefroy trying

to matchmake her with the Reverend Mr. Blackall, though I know Jane would have concealed her feelings about that from all but me. But her untimely death in such violent fashion was a great shock to us both. We resolved to keep the news from our mother and father until his health was improved. Sadly, though, it did not.

Just after Christmas in 1804, he had another seizure and this time I knew he would not recover. Mr. Bowen the apothecary was hopeful but I told Jane that we must prepare ourselves.

"Oh Cass, is this another of your prophesies?" said Jane, I pray God that this time you are wrong, for what is to become of us if he dies?"

A few days later, Mr. Bowen professed himself alarmed and called in his friend Dr. Gibb. After he examined my father, he took my mother's hand and told her, in a most kindly fashion, that only a miracle could save him. Father died at ten o'clock the next morning.

To my great relief, because I was fully taken up with my mother, Jane offered to write to our brothers. Her letter to Frank, which she read to me before sealing it, was most touching and made me aware of her warm regard for Papa. Because she had such a poor relationship with Mama and often spoke disrespectfully, even contemptuously of her, I tended to think she felt the same about both our parents. Now I realized, perhaps for the first time, that her love for our father was deep and sincere. She wrote to Frank:

He died almost as free from suffering as his children could wish.

The loss of such a parent must be felt or we should be brutes. Yet the heavy feelings are considerably softened by the thousand comforts of knowing, comparatively speaking, nothing.

I had been most surprised when Jane had offered to sit with me to watch over him through the night, as she was not one to dwell on death or even feel easy with it as some do, as I do myself. Yet this too she found a comfort. As she wrote to Frank:

The serenity of the corpse is most delightful. It preserves the sweet benevolent smile which always distinguished him.

James and Henry were soon with us to make the arrangements and my mother bore up well considering his death was unexpected. She was especially thankful that he was spared too much suffering.

I was concerned though about the disagreements which quickly developed between Jane and James.

"My father is scarcely cold," she stormed to me in our room, the day before the funeral, "and James is trying to persuade my mother to return with him to Steventon. There are three months yet on the lease of this house, can we not be allowed a little time to consider our position and make plans?"

"My mother would hardly relish returning as a guest to a house of which she was once mistress, surely?" I asked.

"Cass, you surely miss the point. Our brothers do not consider her feelings in the matter—they consider only the finances. And if they ignore our mother, how much more do they ignore us? Do you expect or hope that anyone, anyone at all will ask us what we care to do, how we choose to live our lives?"

I opened my mouth to speak but she interrupted.

"Yes, yes, you will say, of course, that our wishes are of small importance when we have no money of our own and no power to bargain. Why, after all, should anyone imagine that our wishes should be taken into account? I do not suppose they think we have any wishes of our own."

"But Jane—the reality is . . ."

"The reality is that we are entirely dependent on them."

"Well, not quite entirely."

"Not entirely for you and Mama perhaps. She has a little and you have Tom's £1000, but I? I cannot even pay for the laundress without my brothers enabling it and what can we rely upon? James has a decent living, but his wife is so ill humoured and surely will not wish to be generous. Henry's finances are always parlous, though I dare say he will mean well enough. And have you noticed that Edward does not even see fit to attend his father's funeral, no doubt lest he is pressed to make too great a contribution. As for Frank and Charles, is our standard of living to be determined by their prize money? Oh, it is not to be borne!"

She did not speak again until my brothers returned from Walcot church. We had decided that Papa should be buried where they had married those forty years ago.

Immediately upon their return, James offered to provide my mother with £50 a year in recognition of our precarious financial state. I think that Jane had realized long before I did that our father's main income would cease upon his death and that my mother's assured income, together with the interest on my legacy, would bring in total only £210 a year. Henry also offered £50 and ventured to commit Frank in his absence to the same amount. As for Edward—surely the Master of Godmersham could and would contribute £100?

"Why, Mama, with £450 per annum your situation will be easy, especially as when you move to smaller furnished lodgings, your household can be reduced to one female domestic and you will of course expect to spend your summers staying with your children, at little or no expense."

"To be sure you are right, James" said Mama. "Your offers are magnificent and I am sure no mother ever had children as good as mine."

I warned Jane with my eyes but I could see she would not be stopped.

"Children, Mama? Do not you mean sons? Daughters as we know are never of any consequence. They are indeed merely a burden unless they marry well. And you have had the misfortune to rear two who have not. I am sorry for that but still do not see that this gives you the right to plan the future with so little regard to what Cass and I might want." She left the room abruptly.

I could see that Henry and James were shocked by her outburst. My mother was of course more used to her bouts of ill temper, but I had never before known her show it in front of them. Muttering an excuse about her distress at my father's death, I followed her upstairs.

As I entered the room, she said, "My mind is made up, Cass, I shall become a school teacher."



THIRTEEN

A Settled Home at Last Helps Jane's Spirits Improve

It was settled. We were to go to Southampton, to set up home with Frank and Mary, his new bride. How did I feel about this? I can remember only that I thought it would be a relief to be settled anywhere. It seemed that since the death of my father we had been constantly on the move.

From Green Park to Trim Street to Gay Street in Bath and always a feeling of impermanence and perching, only to move on again before many weeks or at most, months, had past. My mother was content with the round of visits which widows customarily made; she was warmly received at Steventon, Godmersham and later at Manydown. Jane and I went with her, except when I was called away to Ibthorpe to nurse old Mrs. Lloyd, who was failing fast.

While I was at Ibthorpe, Jane wrote me a most disturbing letter, saying that she had talked at length to a Miss Colbourne who kept a school in the Upper Crescent about the prospect of becoming a teacher. She assured me that only a tolerable temper was required and that employment was assured for one who had our level of education and rationality.

Though the situation of a governess can be compared to that of a slave—she has no free will to decide her fate—it may yet be tolerable

if a good family can be found. I have much experience of amusing my nephews and nieces. I can play and sing. I have enough education to impart to fine young ladies as much knowledge as they require. Indeed I could ensure they did acquire too much, thus grooming them into fine marriage prospects.

Of course I would have to curb my sharp tongue. I can hear you saying, Cass—and learn not to express my opinions so decidedly but all this might be done for the prospect of £20 a year and my own sitting room with a fire.

Was she seriously proposing this? I could not tell but I knew that at all costs I must dissuade her. I saw that I might turn her desire for independence into a spur to her writing.

I replied that, if she had so much desire to have some financial independence, she must rather look to her pen to earn it for her. I urged her to return to her writing, rather than make any rash decision about teaching. I felt that the idea was only a response to the depression induced by the recent changes in our situations. Moreover, I knew that our brothers would be horrified by the prospect of their sister as a teacher, reckoning it to be an indictment of their inability to support us.

Her letters to me subsequently seem to strike a more cheerful note and even at Manydown she wrote that she was glad to acknowledge that my prophesy about maintaining a good relationship with the Bigg Withers “in spite of the awkwardnesses of the past” had been quite right. She was still very concerned that there was no news of the publication of the work accepted by Crosbys and speculated as to whether she should write to remind them of their undertaking. I advised her that she should leave such an approach to Henry, as it was unfitting for a lady to do such a thing.

The spring that year was particularly warm and balmy and that as usual affected her spirits. She seemed to seek company almost constantly and her letters were full of new names and acquaintances.

Here is a day for you. Did Bath or Ibthorpe ever see a finer 10th of April? We do nothing but walk about. We did not walk long in the Crescent yesterday, it was hot and not crouded [sic] enough.

Each letter I received, and it was always easy to tell her hers even before I saw the direction by the neat folds and seals, was an anxiety to me lest it contain details of the school teacher plans. But as time passed I began to hope that she had put all thoughts of it from her and I in turn vowed never to bring the subject up unless she did so first.

In one letter she recalled the changes in our lives which had taken place in the seven years since we had been at Ibthorpe together.

Seven years I suppose are enough to change every pore of one's skin and every feeling of one's mind.

How I longed to be with her when I read that, for I could not rightly tell whether she was regretting the changes or coming to terms with them. When she wrote thus, I was always so conscious of the differences in our temperaments. I was always accepting, docile she might even put it. She, constantly restless, seeking new experience and railing against our condition. I wanted very much to give her peace and often prayed for it. She rarely prayed. She wrote once:

We went as usual to Walcot this morning. The congregation prayed and I observed them. Some, though not most, of the young ladies were

too busy with their devotions to notice the melodious verse of the clergyman and his fine brown eyes.

She knew such thoughts were shocking to me, but teased me by them, understanding that I knew she was not entirely serious. She even joked about her mourning attire when I had reminded her that she should still be wearing black.

You were right in supposing I wore my crape sleeves to the concert.
On my head I wore crape and flowers but I did not think I looked particularly well.

When Mrs. Lloyd died, she wrote a verse which might have offended poor Martha had we not known her so well.

*Some yards of black ploughman's gauze
To be made up directly, because
Miss Lloyd must in mourning appear
For the death of a relative dear.*

Now that Martha was alone, Mama and I were assuming that she must make her home with us. Jane expressed her reservations to me in two letters. I was surprised that she felt so as Martha had always, as far as I was concerned, been an easy and welcome addition to our household. Jane almost seemed jealous of her.

"And will you, Cass, sit and talk with her after tea, as she is so much less given to mood swings than I? Will you forsake me, will you even wish to share your room with her?"

I reassured her, of course, but also pointed out that Martha would be a great help with Mama and even save Jane from too much contact. She responded:

How well you know me; to be free of concern as to what ailment my mother finds herself with this morning, to have someone else to fetch the salts, arrange her work. And will you guarantee that if Martha is to make her home with us, I am never to be left alone with Mama again? It is not, you know, that I object so very much but that once again, no one thinks to ask my opinion of a proposal which is, after all, to affect my life as well as Mama's and yours.

So, when the proposal to live in Southampton finally came, it was for the four of us to join Frank and Mary. How Mary felt about sharing her home with us all was not discussed, but I must say that she made us all welcome in spite of being ill with the expectation of her first lying-in.

But at the first Christmas in 1806, Jane resented greatly being left alone, "as you had promised me I would not be—with Mama and Mary," as Frank was gone to sea again, while Martha went to her sister and I to Godmersham for Elizabeth's tenth lying-in. James and Mary invited themselves too, which we had not expected.

Her letters were very disgruntled.

Mary has frequent fainting fits, which are usually brought on by eating a hearty dinner and my mother is always upon the sofa.

She longed for them to leave.

When you receive this, our guests will be gone or going and I shall be left to the comfortable disposal of my time, to ease of mind from the

torments of rice puddings and apple dumplings and probably to regret that I did not take more pains to please them all.

She liked the house which Frank had taken in Castle Square though—it was commodious, if a little old-fashioned, and was conveniently situated just inside the old city walls. Our previous memories of Southampton were unpleasant ones from our first school, but now it had become a tolerably fashionable watering place and Jane, with her admiration for the navy, was pleased to be in a place so conspicuously associated with that great profession.

She delighted especially in the garden. “Our garden is the best in town,” she wrote. She would plant roses and a syringa because dear Cowper described one and even talked of currants, gooseberries and raspberries. Her interest in planting and planning the seeding was a sign of hope to me—could it be that she may once again become interested in her other creations?

Mary gave birth in April, but was so ill as to alarm us all. We thought that she would die, but she mercifully recovered. Jane confided to me that childbirth was a source of great fear to her and that she was glad to have escaped its dangers.

“You and I, Cass,” she said “can settle now into the role of maiden aunts and be safe.”

There was no sign of her settling into the role I knew she so desired for herself. Her confidence was growing stronger, but there was still a marked difference in her attitude to her writing from those first years at Steventon.

We were visited in September by Edward, whose attentions to us since the death of my father had been less than satisfactory in view of his own situation. I little thought that this visit would start a train of events which would lead to my sister becoming the writer she always wished to be.

Edward owned not only Godmersham, but also an estate at Chawton. The tenant had recently left and he invited us to join him and his family for a short holiday. We enjoyed it very much, as I was especially fond of his now ten children, many of whom I had known since birth, having been the most frequent attender at Elizabeth's many confinements.

Jane enjoyed very much the company of Fanny, the eldest girl, and loved playing games with the younger ones. I could see that they found her easier, more carefree, than I and was glad of it because I could see a lifting of her spirits when she spent time with them. She loved too the freedom of the countryside, the walks to Alton, the paths across the recently harvested fields.

Elizabeth was once again great with child. There was an awkwardness between her and Jane. Did she find her too clever? Was Jane too obvious in her the ambivalence of her feelings to this sister-in-law? On the one hand, Jane certainly envied her comfort and wealth, on the other she found the endless confinements distasteful and made no secret of it.

Nonetheless our stay was a pleasant one and it was arranged that, when Jane returned to Southampton, I should go to Godmersham to await the expected birth. When Elizabeth suddenly collapsed and died in 1808 following the safe delivery of her son, young Brook John, we were all devastated.

I was very grateful to Jane for stepping in and taking care of two of the boys while they were temporarily released from school. It was one of the few times when she had charge of her nephews and nieces, free from the plans and expectations of others.

Edward had been concerned lest the boys would be too much for her, but he did not know her as I did. She loved being able to decide

for herself what they would do. She took them boating and played endless games of spillikins, while helping them come to terms with the loss of a most beloved mother. She wrote letters of great comfort to Fanny who, at barely sixteen, was plunged into the responsibilities of not only being in charge of the house, but of attempting to be a mother to her bereaved brothers and sisters. This terrible time for the family brought out the best in Jane, her strengths, her abilities in a crisis, and made me realize what a mother she might have made had our lives turned out differently.

As for our brother Edward, he was very distressed but I suppose there was some truth in what Jane pointed out to me in a letter:

a man who has fathered so many children must expect to be a widower
at least once in his life.

Of course, we already had had the experience of James losing his wife after childbirth and marrying Mary to start another family, so I suppose that is what we expected of Edward.

It was not to be, however, and in fact Edward was the only one of our brothers not to marry twice. Instead, he turned his mind to his estates, to reviewing their current state and management.

Out of this review came a most advantageous situation for us, because he found two vacant homes which he offered to us. One was near Godmersham in Kent, the other at Chawton in Hampshire, a cottage we knew well from our previous visit.

We had no hesitation in choosing Chawton, because it was in easy reach of James and Mary at Steventon and because we knew that Henry frequently came to Alton on business. I say we, but the decision was as usual Mama's. When Jane first heard about the offer of a house for us, her response was not grateful but angry.

"Pray tell me how long has Edward had these dwellings in his gift? Ten years perhaps. It is full three years since my father died. Has he never thought of it till now? He has allowed us, his mother and sisters, to wander about the countryside like displaced beggars, with no settled abode, while all the time he could have offered us the safety of one of his tenancies."

"Hush, Jane," I said, fearful of my mother overhearing and perhaps telling Edward of our ingratitude. "Perhaps his numerous family and his estate responsibilities prevented him from thinking of it. And then you know perhaps Elizabeth . . ." I let my voice trail off.

"Yes, indeed, Elizabeth would not easily have donated anything to us, or anyway to me. She preferred to keep us at a distance, only to be made use of when she was yet again lying in. A settled home might have given us too much independence and you might not have been so available to her."

"There is no use in thinking so now, Jane, let us at least view the cottage and see if it will suit us."

We knew the house from outside of course, from our previous visit to Chawton House, but I never imagined it to be so commodious.

From the moment we entered it, Jane's attitude seemed to change and her mood improved as if by magic. True, the front door opened directly onto the sitting room and the road was very close by, but it had about it a warm and friendly atmosphere—such as had been missing from all our lodgings since we had quitted Steventon.

To my surprise Jane found the proximity of the road to be an advantage. "We shall see all the coaches passing and it will keep us in touch with the world, Cass, while you and I can walk to Alton as we wish."

There were six bedrooms so, with one for Mama, one for Martha and one for guests, Jane and I could have slept separately. I was

touched and pleased when she declared her wish to share “as we have always done.” I was even more delighted when she said, “And perhaps we shall have readings as we used to.”

Did she perhaps know already that this was where she would write her most admired works? For the moment, she seemed happy enough that she would at long last have a piano again.

When we were once again in Southampton, with the matter of moving settled, Jane told me that she was determined to take up the matter of the delay in publication of “Susan.” Again I advised her to leave such negotiations to Henry, but she was resolute.

“No, I wrote the book and I shall negotiate its publication.” It was as though the thought of a settled home gave her renewed confidence.

“You will not, I hope, use your own name?” I was concerned to keep her anonymity as we had long ago agreed would be proper.

“Of course, I shall assume a name and you and I shall be the only persons who know the truth,” she said.

The next evening, she showed me the letter she intended to write. I read it with mixed emotions. I was astounded by its cleverness and admiring of the authoritative tone of it. Yet I worried that it might give offence and cause the publisher to abandon any intention they might have had to publish the work.

“Intention to publish? What are you thinking about. It is six years since they said they intended to publish. Six years! No, Cass, they must either publish now, or send the manuscript back and I shall try my luck elsewhere. I have done with waiting on anyone’s convenience.”

I copied the letter myself before she dispatched it.

Wednesday 5 April 1809

Gentlemen

In the spring of the year 1803 a MS novel in 2 vol. entitled "Susan" was sold to you by a gentleman by the name of Seymour and the purchase money of £10 received at the same time. Six years have passed and this work, of which I avow myself to be the authoress, has never to the best of my knowledge, appeared in print, tho' an early publication was stipulated at the time of the sale. I can only account for such an extraordinary circumstance by supposing the MS by some carelessness to have been lost. and if that was the case, am willing to supply you with another copy if you are disposed to avail yourselves of it and will engage for no further delay when it comes into your hands.

It will not be in my power from particular circumstances to command this copy before the month of August, but then, if you will accept my proposal, you may depend on receiving it.

Be so good as to send me a line in answer as soon as possible, as my stay in this place may not exceed a few days. Should no notice be taken of this address, I shall feel myself at liberty to secure the publication of my work, by applying elsewhere.

I am Gentlemen etc etc.

M.A.D.

DIRECT TO MRS. ASHTON DENNIS
POST OFFICE, SOUTHAMPTON.

How we laughed at those initials.

"Will they fear, Cass, that I am indeed a mad woman and hurry the publication lest I present myself at their offices?"

Each day, when the letters were collected, we looked eagerly for a reply. We even began to speculate what Jane might do with the monies from the first printing. For, of course, the first was to be followed by a second and even a third. Moreover, the publishers would be so satisfied that they would urge her to write more.

“Then, Cass, we can tell them that two more completed works exist and that they must pay at least £20 apiece to have sight of them.”

When the reply came, I was cast down by its dismissive tone. There had not, they said, been any immediate promise of publication and they would use legal means to block any thought of another publisher. Cruellest of all to me was that they offered to sell the manuscript back for £10.

Knowing that it might as well have been £100 for all the hope she had of finding it, I expected to find Jane thrown immediately into another depression. But she was not.

“Very well then, that is the situation for now, but on two things I am resolved. First, I shall make them regret their reaction and second, I shall never give them another chance.”



FOURTEEN

First Publication and Its Consequences

The transformation brought about in Jane by our move was extraordinary. Almost immediately, her letters began to show a new lightness, even before Mama and Martha had taken up residence and while I was away in Godmersham, where I was needed to help Fanny with the demands of housekeeping which now fell upon her.

Jane was altogether different from the somewhat forced gaiety of some of her correspondence in recent years. It was as though all the gloom, all the uncertainty of the past had suddenly lifted. I calculated that it was almost ten years, before the move to Bath was announced, since she had sounded so positive.

She described the house to me in detail.

Our room is not large I know, but adequate for our purposes, with room for our workboxes and my desk, for which you will see, I will have some use.

How I rejoiced to read that—did she intend to devote herself to writing once more? For the present she confined herself to letters and to a poem celebrating our new abode:

*Our Chawton home—how much we find
Already in it to our mind,
And how convinced that when complete,*

*It will all other houses beat,
That ever have been made or mended
With rooms concise or rooms distended.*

But I thought any composition a good sign. When I returned to the cottage, she barely gave me time to remove my cloak before insisting that we walk into Alton “*by a path I have lately discovered.*”

The weather was fine and the paths dry so we were able to walk the mile or so into the town quite quickly. She kept pointing up items of interest on our way—the fine linden trees, the old yew.

“And here is where Miss Benn lives, you will meet her soon. She is a poor old maid, the sister and daughter of clergymen, but kind enough and we shall not laugh at her you know,” giving me a sly look.

We passed the French Horn, a coaching inn which stood on the edge of the Butts, the wide open space where archers practiced in former times.

“And here is where they had a bonfire to celebrate the victory at Trafalgar,” she said, pointing to a space near the horse trough where the grass was still damaged. “We must remember not to show that to Frank when he comes to visit.”

Our brother Frank had missed the Trafalgar action by being posted elsewhere and did not like to be reminded of this unfortunate event. When the whole world praised the heroes of the battle, Frank had been engaged in dull escort duties and constantly regretted this sad turn of events.

We walked on into the High Street and turned into Cross and Pillory Lane. In the Market Square all was bustle and activity, as the Town Hall was in the process of being built and there was much dust and dirt and confusion.

“Let us walk as far as the church,” she invited, “if you are not too fagged.”

To tell the truth I was fatigued, moreover I had seen all the sights she pointed out on earlier visits to Chawton. But not for the world would I have attempted to stifle her enthusiasm, her energy. She was like my old Jane, animated and lively and when she showed me the bullet holes in the flint walls of the church which Cromwell's men had made during the Civil War and said, "Oh, what a story there is to be made of that!" I dared to hope that here in our Chawton home we would see more evidence of her writing talent. As we returned to the cottage she showed me Prowtings, an old manor house which stood next door.

"Here lives Miss Prowting, a tolerably attractive lady of about our age of whom I am determined to make a friend that we may walk in her shrubbery when the weather is inclement, since her gravel is much more extensive than our own."

"Does Miss Prowting know this?" I teased.

"Indeed yes and she has already shown me how we may use the stile between our properties so that we may be as intimate as possible. She helps to teach the village children and is delighted to know we have experience of doing so from Steventon. We shall see so many children taught to read, there will be a shortage of workers for our brother's farms!"

As we returned to our cottage, which stood hard by the road, we heard in the distance the sound of horses' hooves.

"It is the coach to Gosport and Portsmouth—it comes by each day at this hour. Let us wave to its passengers."

"Jane, be careful lest they think us too familiar," I chided.

"Familiar? We are only giving them a friendly wave and bidding them remember us to the sea," she laughed.

I can find no words to describe adequately my joy at seeing my old Jane return. She seemed excited by the prospect of all the family who might visit, renewing old friendships now that we

were in Hampshire again and above all “being settled,” as she described it.

However, there was something more which contributed to her cheerful disposition. It was more than being settled as to our dwelling. I felt that it was also to do with being more settled in her life. I do not know whether she had foreseen the great works she would produce, but I felt reassured that she was no longer yearning to be married or feeling she had failed because she had no husband. Perhaps she was seeing that a useful and important life might yet be open to her, but by another means. How glad I am that she did not anticipate the future to know how cruelly short was to be her time to enjoy such a life.

There were other factors too in her new contentment. I believe that, from about this time, there was a new acceptance in the family that Jane was a writer and that this was her occupation, even her profession.

This was reflected by none of us expecting her to take a major share of household duties. She rose early and helped the cook prepare breakfast but, beyond that, the day was hers and she was free from other responsibilities. After her morning walk, she took to using the small front sitting room, with its view of the road, and would sit at her small table, doing what we called “her correspondence” but what we all knew was in fact her composition.

I am sure that even the servants knew, but we all maintained the fiction and she took care to cover her work whenever anyone entered. In this she was helped by the creaking door between the hall and the sitting room, which gave warning of anyone approaching. One day, William Littleworth, the footman, offered to put oil on the hinge to silence this annoying noise.

“Good gracious no,” protested Jane, “leave it, I pray you, that creak is my dear friend.”

It was not only Jane who seemed to find happiness in our new location. Mama too relished our home and took particular delight in the garden. She even began to take on some of the heavy work again, as she used to at Steventon when she was much younger. She planted potatoes in the kitchen garden and cabbages too, though no one except her was especially partial to cabbage. She kept hens and helped me with the bees and, perhaps as a result of this outdoor activity, her health was better than it had been for some years.

There was more ease in her relations with Jane too and I found it a great relief that they were no longer so much at odds with each other. Certainly this was partly due to our mother no longer having so many illnesses, or as Jane would have put it, "imagined ailments." It was also due partly to my mother herself being more respectful and accepting of Jane's determination to be a writer. In previous times, she would have heaped criticism upon her for not taking her full share of household duties, or reminded Jane of what she considered suitable work for a gentlewoman.

Now she did none of these things. Jane was permitted to arrange her days as she pleased and when she took out "Elinor and Marianne" again and announced that she would revise it further, Mama was as pleased as I was.

I also noticed that sometimes Jane would now bring the leather notebook I had given her some years before downstairs to her writing table and inscribe something, or consult what she had previously written in it. I took hope from this that she was planning another work when this present revision was completed.

I suppose that the final re-working of "Sense and Sensibility," the name she now gave to "Elinor and Marianne," took a year or so, bearing in mind the time it took us to settle into our new surroundings and the large number of visitors we received, all eager to pass judgement on our new abode.

When the book was finally complete in 1811, Jane read the first two volumes to us over three evenings. Henry was staying with us at the time and at the end of the third reading, he said, "Jane, this work deserves and must have a wider audience than your family. May I undertake the sale of it?"

I almost stopped him from proceeding, because this would now be the third time that Jane's hopes had been raised and I could scarce bear the thought of putting her in the way of yet another disappointment. I feared so much that a further rejection would set back all the lifting of her spirits which had lately taken place and cast her into depression again. Jane however seemed only too ready to agree and an encouraging nod from my mother set the seal on Henry's proposal.

Once again, we waited anxiously, or at least I did. Jane seemed calm, almost confident, and sure enough, we heard from Henry after a few weeks that publication had been arranged with Thomas Egerton. He was to publish on commission, which I did not understand, but which Jane explained meant at the author's own expense.

"But Jane, how will you. . . ?"

"My dear brother and Eliza are to meet the cost. How good they are and how I am indebted to them! My darling child will be launched upon the world next summer."

How shall I describe my feelings at this news?

I was at once delighted and fearful. I could see the joy it brought to the person who was dearest in the world to me, but I could see too that it might be the means of separating us. When she began to talk of "paying a visit to London to correct my proofs," I felt as though she was another person, a lady more worldly, more accomplished, than I had ever known.

I did not express these feelings to her or anyone. Not for the

world would I have wanted to mar the well-deserved joy she had in seeing her work in print after so long and arduous a journey.

But she knew and, with her usual sensibility to my feelings, she sought to reassure me, especially in the letters she sent when she was staying in London with Henry and Eliza to correct the manuscript. Sometimes she wrote as an author:

No indeed, I am never too busy to forget "Sense and Sensibility." I can no more forget it than a mother can forget her sucking child.

But often she wrote only as my own dear sister:

Only consider how we shall contrive to spend the great riches "Sense and Sensibility" will earn for us. You shall have caps in silk and damask and when I return we shall dine on guinea fowl instead of mutton.

She also knew that I was concerned about the possibility of her name being known, as it could lead to her being harshly judged as some lady novelists were.

Fear not my dear that I shall become a scandalous literary lady; the frontispiece says only 'By a Lady'—our secret is safe and shall remain so.

I did believe this, as I think she did, but when I heard that the book earned her £140, I knew that some things at least would change in our lives. Jane had a degree of financial independence at last; this in turn gave her some of the control over her life which she had so long craved.

I was happy for her, but I suppose I knew that it would inevi-

tably affect the intimacy and dependency which we had so long shared.

I did not wish it otherwise, nor did I really grudge her in any way her success, but there was a sense of loss for me which I could not expect her to share, as new opportunities opened up for her.



FIFTEEN

“The Lady’s” Identity Revealed and the Loss of a Friend

W e soon began to receive reports that “Elinor and Marianne”—I always thought of it thus, though it was now known as “Sense and Sensibility”—was finding favour in fashionable society. Eliza kept us informed about this when she wrote:

Your sister’s work is quite taken up. The reviews are most flattering. I enclose two of the most pleasing for you and Aunt Cassandra to delight in.

What pleased Mama most was undoubtedly the report that Princess Charlotte, the heir to the throne, was most interested in the work and made it clear that she felt “Me and Marianne are very alike.” Jane asked me to be sure to tell Mama of this as

With her aristocratic connections she will be pleased to see any Austen recognized by royalty at last.

Egerton realized that he had found a popular author and was surprised and delighted to learn there was another completed manuscript almost ready. He and Jane, with advice from Henry, who was becoming a little too full of himself as the brother of a successful writer, sought a title which would remind readers of “Sense & Sensibility” and agreed upon “Pride and Prejudice.” I thought

“First Impressions” a better title, but it seemed that it had been used already.

This time, Henry did not have to advance the cost of printing, as Egertons were to buy the copyright for £110. Jane had already repaid Henry and Eliza for their outlay on “Sense and Sensibility” and was relieved that no further expense would fall to them. Henry’s bank appeared to be in trouble and it was clear that money at the HAs was something of a worry. In spite of this, there did not appear to be any economies made in their household, judging by Jane’s account of operas and musical parties when she was there.

“Pride and Prejudice” was advertised as being “*by the author of Sense and Sensibility*” and I began to wonder how much longer it might be expected that Jane’s anonymity would be preserved. I also began to question how sincere was my sister’s desire to remain anonymous. I remembered her words “*I write only for fame*” all those years ago. How could she ignore the chance of fame if it were offered? It was surely natural to seek recognition and, as things stood, she was not even acknowledged within the family as the author of “Sense and Sensibility.” “Pride and Prejudice” had long been the favourite of so many family members, including me, so that I thought it inevitable that eventually her identity would be revealed.

When “Pride and Prejudice” came out in 1813, I was away from Chawton, staying at Steventon with the JAs, as was Martha. Jane was therefore at home alone with Mama as her work was being feted throughout what Eliza called “the beau monde” for the glorious creation of Elizabeth Bennet, for Mr. Darcy and for the cleverness and wit of her plot.

Miss Benn joined them for a reading, but even I could see from her letters that this was hardly the kind of recognition a successful writer might expect.

I walk alone and ponder upon how I could have made the work finer, more understandable. How frustrating it is to behave with decorum to my mother's dull visitors. I am considering shouting at them. Do you not know to whom you speak? I am the Lady of whom all London is talking!

Fear not, dear Cass, I shall not. I know the perils of becoming well known. I will maintain the silence. I confess only to you that I crave the recognition, I need the praise. Yes, I hear you say and shall I similarly desire the criticism which will inevitably follow? Allow me my little fit, I pray you. My silence IS assured. Mama and I work a quilt together and I try to be content.

In the end, she told the truth of the matter to our niece Anna, but I believe the real blame for revealing the secret, if blame there be, must lie with Henry.

Anna was a headstrong girl. At barely sixteen, she flirted outrageously with a young clergyman from Dummer, a Mr. Terry, and had become engaged to him. James, her father, was most reluctant to agree to the match, but Mary, who had produced her own children, James Edward and Caroline, was still unfavourably disposed to Anna and I think wished to see her leave Steventon as soon as possible. She encouraged the match and, as soon as we knew this, Jane and I privately agreed that this would ensure that Anna changed her mind. Jane wrote:

For be assured that puss Anna will not scruple to cross her stepmother even if it means the loss of Mr. Terry. In truth a poor clergyman in his thirties is not much of a catch for dear Anna anyway.

Our predications proved to be true. Anna rejected her suitor and

was sent to spend the summer with us at Chawton to save the family embarrassment. No sooner had she returned to Steventon than we heard she was being courted by Benjamin Lefroy, cousin to Jane's first love. Jane expressed great concern about this on account of what she described as "*Anna's unsteadiness of character and Mr. Lefroy's queerness of temper.*"

I privately wondered if this concern arose from a certain jealousy about Anna being encouraged to make a match with a Lefroy which Jane had been denied. I felt guilty at attributing to my sister such a mean spirited response, but I did feel that her reaction to the proposed marriage was excessively cautious.

"Not at all, Cass," she said, when I questioned her gently. "It is not the fact that she is to marry a Lefroy which concerns me, but that her motives for marrying are wrong. Depend upon it, she wants only to leave her father's, or more accurately her stepmother's, house." (Jane had always believed that James was too much influenced by Mrs. JA). "That is not sufficient reason for matrimony. This applies to anyone, you know, not just to dear Anna."

We were upstairs, about to descend for dinner, and she urged me to go down while she made a note. To my surprise, as she rarely did this in my presence, she took out her notebook and began to write. I was even more surprised when she read to me as she wrote, "*The wish to leave the influence of a parent behind is not a good reason to marry.*" She looked up at me and said with a smile, "We shall see more of this."

She hoped, I think, to divert Anna by suggesting that she try some writing herself. In order to encourage her, she told her of her own success with "Sense and Sensibility" and "Pride and Prejudice." She swore her to secrecy, of course, and I believe that Anna would have kept silent, but we all then began to receive

news that Henry and Eliza were in the habit of openly discussing their connection with the famous “Lady.” Naturally Anna felt that the need for secrecy was no more and fell to discussing her aunt’s success with neighbours and friends. I was not surprised to hear from Jane when she was once more enjoying the HA’s hospitality at Brompton.

So, the secret is out.

I confess I did enjoy being introduced as a famous lady at Eliza’s musical party last evening. I know your starchy ways and that you will not approve, but allow me my little indulgences and weaknesses. When I return, I promise to be your well behaved and modest sister once again.

I had told her that Anna had spoken of her famous aunt at the Lefroys and she now asked:

Do we suppose that the secret of my success has been shared throughout the Lefroy family, even its Irish branch? I think we might safely assume it has.

Any lady who has been disappointed might take satisfaction in achieving fame and success about which her former suitor might hear and I could not grudge her that.

Whenever Jane returned from London, she would tell me shocking stories of the society there—of profligacy and adultery, even at the level of the royal family. Jane sympathized with the Princess of Wales in the undignified dispute she was having with her husband. I urged her to keep silent about this as, much as I disapproved of his putting his wife aside, I did not wish her words to be misinterpreted

as a slight on the future King now that he was at last the official Regent.

These stories reminded me of the views of the Reverend Mr. Atkins which we had heard some years earlier and I wondered if Jane herself made the connection. I did not ask her directly, but judged she had begun a new composition about which she frequently consulted her notebook.

Because she was now an established author, I feared she might not be as prepared to share her work with me, or worse, might prefer to consult her more sophisticated relations, Henry and Eliza. I was relieved when one day she brought me my bonnet, the one which matched hers and said, "Come, Cass, let us take our walk to Alton together, there is something I wish to talk to you about."

As we passed under the walnut tree beyond the forge, she linked her arm through mine.

"I have started another book and this time it is to be about ordination."

"Ordination?" I could not have been more surprised, for in truth I had supposed that the theme would be the wickedness of society or some such.

She laughed when I told her this. "Well, to be sure, if you consider ordination, you must consider what makes men good and evil—and women too, for there will be wicked women aplenty in this book—no, do not look alarmed Cass, for good will triumph, I promise you."

The name of Mr. Atkins had not passed between us for many years but she now said, in a low voice, "It is I think the book that HE would have wished me to write, Cass. It will be my tribute to him, but only you and I will ever know that."

"No, dearest," I said, "putting my hand over hers as it rested on my arm, "he will know and be proud of you from the hereafter."

"Oh, how I wish I had your faith. But that thought will inspire me as I set about my work. Before I do, though, let us call upon Miss Prowting—she is sure to offer us orange wine and cake and to have some gossip for us about which young lady the curate is in love with today."

As ever, her mood could change from intensely serious to light-hearted in a matter of seconds, but the exchange stayed with me and gave me a different view of what was to become "Mansfield Park" than I might otherwise have had.

With Jane's previous three books, we were accustomed to hear passages read frequently as they were completed. They were first read to me and then to the rest of the family.

The pattern with "Mansfield Park" was different. This was after all the first major new work she had undertaken since the death of Papa and I think she was more reluctant to seek Mama's opinion, because it was more likely to be critical, or Martha's, because she did not value it. I think too that I was less appreciative of the first reading that she gave me than I might have been.

After Elizabeth Bennet, I found Fanny Price an unappealing heroine, lacking in spirit and too timid. I was concerned too, as I had been in "The Watsons," at the lack of sisterly affection between the characters. I recognized Mr. Atkins in Edmund Bertram and, of course, our sailor brothers in William Price. She told me she intended to include a present of a cross from William to his sister and I told her I thought Charles would be delighted.

"Yes, after being at sea for seven years and soon to bring home a wife and daughters we have never seen, I hope he will appreciate the recognition," she said. "But, Cass, do give me your opinion of my Fanny—is she not the perfect embodiment of piety and goodness?"

I hesitated . . .

"Yes and pictures of perfection are not so entertaining, are they?"

"Well," I hesitated again, "Miss Crawford is far from perfect and she is most entertaining it is true . . ."

"What, you! Cass, you of all people prefer wickedness to goodness—this cannot be true surely?" she mocked.

"I did not quite say that, you know, but for reading about, rather than experiencing, we like to see characters with some faults, do we not?"

"Yes and there are faulty characters in plenty in 'Mansfield Park,' but my Fanny will remain faultless till the end."

"Pray tell me, Jane, is she to redeem the Crawfords? Are they to renounce their vices?"

"Wait and see, Cass, wait and see . . ."

I was struck by how much more confident about her writing she was now—so far removed from the days when she destroyed her work because I had ventured to criticize it. Again, I experienced that conflict in myself, rejoicing in her confidence but regretting that she needed me less.

Frequently now she would cover many sheets of paper, either at her small table in the sitting room or at her desk in our room, with no offer of reading to me and I did not feel I could ask to hear the work until she offered.

We had other preoccupations at this time too, which contributed to us hearing less of the work in progress. Eliza was taken ill and when I saw her on a visit she made with Henry to Alton, I thought immediately that her illness might be fatal.

I told Jane of my fears. "She is grown thin and pale and seems to be in constant pain with her right arm—do you not see the resemblance with Aunt Phyllis's last ailment?" I asked her.

"Oh no, I pray you are wrong. To see someone like her suffer such prolonged agonies as my aunt—I cannot bear it. Surely it is

only an infection of the chest which seems to be difficult to overcome?"

"I hope you are right," I said. But it was clear to me that Eliza would die in the same manner as her mother and, looking into her eyes, I knew that she was aware of it.

She continued to be cheerful and brave throughout her illness and she and Henry seemed to be enjoying new prosperity as his bank thrived and his reputation increased—so much so that he was appointed Receiver General of Taxes for Oxford.

As they journeyed back and forth between London and Oxford, they stayed with us frequently and this allowed us to see the progress of Eliza's condition. Sometimes she seemed very well and we would have readings of "Mansfield Park" after dinner—Eliza's reactions enlivening the reading. We had a particularly pleasant party when we heard Jane read the scene of the theatricals, which prompted many good memories of our performances at Steventon. I saw Henry reach over and take Eliza's hand as we recalled those Christmases, remembering when their attraction to each other first became apparent.

On another occasion, we heard Jane read a scene in which Mr. Crawford gives the speech of Cardinal Wolsey which Mr. Atkins had delivered so memorably at Lyme all those years ago. I found myself trembling at this, but when I met Jane's eyes they were clear and confident. She smiled at me as we remembered the secret we alone shared.

"Jane," said Henry, "the problem with these characters is that the wicked ones are altogether more appealing than those who are good."

"Yes, indeed," said Eliza with her trilling laugh, which was so infrequently heard nowadays, "I should rather dine with the Crawfords than with Edmund and Fanny."

"That is what will make the talking point of the book, is it not?" responded Jane. "Is evil more appealing than good?"

"Perhaps you should do as Cass suggests," said Henry, "and allow Fanny and Edmund to marry the Crawfords, so that we can all enjoy the prospect of a little lightness in their lives."

"You will not think so when you see how they are to turn out," she replied. "I have already told Cass that I have set my face against any redemption for the Crawfords."

"And what of Mrs. Norris? There is a wicked character who is certainly devoid of any attraction."

"Be assured she will have no reward," said Jane, delighting in the attention her characters were receiving.

"And Mr. Grant—will he die of over indulgence?"

"And Tom, will he die too, leaving Edmund as the heir? Miss Crawford would like that."

"Enough," said Jane, putting away her manuscript. "We shall have tea and talk of other things."

What a merry party we were that evening, but it was to be the last with dear Eliza. In April, she became suddenly worse and Henry hurried to fetch Jane, who willingly put aside her manuscript to bring comfort in her last days to the woman who had been such a friend to her. Eliza died in terrible pain so that the end came as a relief and was buried in Hampstead next to her son Hastings.

When she returned home, Jane brought with her one of the household, Madame Perigord, and if anyone heard the first readings of the conclusion of "Mansfield Park," it was her and not I.

When the work was completed, Jane herself wrote to offer it to Egerton. I questioned this and suggested that she leave it to Henry once again, but she would have none of it.

"He will accept for certain—he will need no persuading—and Henry has his own preoccupations at present. After all, 'Pride and Prejudice' is going to a second edition and 'Sense and Sensibility' is sold out."

When Egerton replied that he would publish "Mansfield Park" only on commission once again, she confessed herself disappointed.

So he believes, although, he does not say so, that "Mansfield Park" will not be so popular as "Pride and Prejudice." So be it—I must be known as something other than a writer of comic novels and as you know, though only you know it, I have particular reasons for ensuring that this book is published.

She wrote to me from London, where she now spent a good deal of time with Henry to console him in his bereavement and to help him with the move he was planning to live above his offices in Henrietta Street. Madame Bigeon and Madame Perigord kept house for him and afforded company to Jane when Henry was engaged on business.

The reception of "Mansfield Park" by all Jane's family and friends was mixed. Most of us, including me, preferred "Pride and Prejudice," but acknowledged the cleverness and complexity of the plot and characters.

I know that Jane was anxious about how her friends viewed it and made a point of collecting their impressions. Miss Sharpe and the nieces' reactions were noted and I felt she was disappointed that she had not made "her Fanny" more likeable to us all and was worried no doubt about how her public might receive the book.



SIXTEEN

Our Estrangement and Reconciliation

Our two eldest nieces, Anna and Fanny, were now grown up and a source of great interest to us both. Anna was married in the autumn of 1814 to Ben Lefroy but we did not attend, to Mama's great distress. Arrangements could have been made for us to go to Steventon and Mama certainly wished it. Jane was in London, but I could have accompanied Mama.

Jane wrote to me angrily:

I dare say Mrs. JA was so anxious to get Anna off hand as she has always seen her as so troublesome, that she could not stir herself to make an event of it. Mama at least should have been invited. I shall visit her soon at Hendon [where they were to settle] and take her all our best wishes. I am sure she knows that she is Mama's most loved granddaughter of all the many that she has. I dare say Frank's brood are all over you at present.

Frank and Mary now had five children and were at Chawton Manor at this time.

I knew that the visit Jane would pay to Anna and her new husband at Hendon would be a strain. Of course, as far as we knew, they were both unaware of Jane's earlier flirtation with Ben Lefroy's cousin and we had had no news of him since Mrs. Lefroy's death, but they were bound to mention Tom because the family were very proud of him. I expected that Jane would find this difficult, but I

did not expect her to refer to it in her letters. Nor did she in the first letter I received about the Hendon visit—only complaining about Anna's extravagance in purchasing a piano instead of linen for her new home, but in another letter later in the week she said:

I hear my Irish friend does very well for himself. He has been a member of Parliament [a Tory I am glad to hear] these several years and is become a most sought after lawyer. I always thought he had possibilities you will recall—but I am less impressed to hear he has fathered seven children. I heard them speak of him without disturbance.

She knew I would be glad of this reassurance.

In any case, there was much merriment at Henry's at this time. Now that he was again a bachelor, it pleased him to invite our brothers, nephews and nieces to stay with him at Henrietta Street and later in the year at Hans Place, where he moved after Eliza's death, to sample the pleasures of the capital.

Jane told me often how pleased she was with Fanny, what a lively addition she was to any party and what a true friend she was, becoming "almost a sister" she called her once. I was glad of this because, since the age of fifteen, Fanny had been much overburdened with being a mother to her brothers and sisters and a companion to Edward. It was good to know that they were enjoying themselves together.

I did occasionally feel a little melancholy and had flashes of my old jealousy, when I heard of yet another visit to Covent Garden, but I did not really begrudge them the gaiety. I only felt concerned, as I always did, that Jane might find a more congenial companion and helpmate than I was. Jane herself was always quick to reassure me.

Henry continues to spread the word about his authoress sister whenever he can but I will not be paraded. I count the days to returning to our comfortable cozes, for the company of nieces, though gay and enlivening, does not compare with that of sisters.

She was so considerate to me in her letters and quick to show me that I was her only true confidante. When she was taken to see an exhibition of pictures by Mr. Romney, she told me:

Be sure to tell Mama that there was a picture there of the Leigh family, who were very fine and whose noses were equally as aristocratic as hers!

Of course she knew I would not relate this to Mama, but it was her way of indicating the intimacy we shared.

On the same occasion she saw Romney's portrait of William Cowper, she wrote:

How low in spirits the poor man looked. I am glad that my writing raises mine—it clearly does the opposite for him. Was much reminded of a person you will remember.

Jane was still away in London when we received the sad news of the death of yet another sister-in-law, Charles' wife Fanny, following the birth of her fourth daughter, who followed her to the grave a few weeks later.

Oh Cass, what a burden to woman childbirth is. We must be glad that we "formidables" have escaped its dangers. Have you heard that Anna is already in the increasing way?—Let us hope it does not set a pattern.

When Jane returned home before Christmas she told me that she brought back a notebook “filled with ideas.” She had only just completed “Mansfield Park” and it was not even in print, yet she was eager to start another book. I was surprised, as I had expected her to enjoy a period of rest, especially as we were now very much engaged with our ever increasing family.

“No, Cass—I must get on—we must use time well, you know—when I think of those years I wasted when I might have been producing . . .”

“But dearest,” I replied, “you have so many years before you yet—there is surely no need of a hurry.”

Her face darkened for a moment, but then she smiled and said, “No doubt you are right as usual, but while I have ideas I must write them down and I have a heroine in mind whom no one will like but myself. An intelligent creature who behaves with great stupidity—is not that a good idea?”

“If it is your idea, it will be good I have no doubt,” I assured her, “but please allow yourself an enjoyment of the Christmas festivities before you begin.”

“Of course and we begin today, do we not, with a dinner at the manor? Is Mr. Papillon to be of the party, for you know that he is always likely to propose to me, according to Miss Prowting!”

Mr. Papillon was the curate of Chawton about whom we always teased Jane and she responded good humouredly.

“I believe Miss Prowting is mistaken if she thinks he has his eye on me, for she has £30,000 and my earnings as a famous authoress will never match that—was I not glad of a gift of £5 from Edward when I was in London?”

Once she would have been resentful of receiving money from Edward. Now, with her independence assured, she took it graciously and I was glad of it.

Her notebook shows that she began "Emma" on January 21, 1814, and finished it on March 29, 1815. That was by far the fastest progress she had ever made on a work. As I look back on this now and on that conversation just before Christmas, I wonder if she already had some suspicion that her life might not be long and that it was this which spurred her on. I have thought so much about this in the intervening years and, though I can find no real indication that this was so, I still have the impression that she was driven in some way which had not been apparent before.

It was not just that she had more confidence in herself, it was also some feeling that she had no time to waste. She still read her creations to me and we shared intimacies about the characters. That winter was particularly harsh and we enjoyed some cozy times together laughing over Miss Bates and Mrs. Elton when we were unable to leave the house on account of the deep snow. Mama and Martha also enjoyed the readings and considered Frank Churchill "an obvious rogue," while Harriet was of course a foolish girl to be flattered into believing she could so change her station in life.

We had a vast bonfire on the Butts in the spring when Bonaparte was defeated and sent off to Elba. Henry teased Jane that we should have another, even larger one, to celebrate the appearance of "Mansfield Park." However, when it did appear, the reaction of the public was much like that of the family; no lavish praise was heaped upon the author as had happened with the two previous books.

I was worried about how Jane would react to this, but it did not seem to cast her down as might have been expected. I think she felt content that the book was done and, if she was disappointed that the controversy she had hoped for did not materialize, she did not say so to me, or as far as I am aware, to anyone. The lack of praise

for "Mansfield Park" did however made it more difficult for Henry when he began the negotiations with Egerton for the purchase of "Emma."

When I look back upon this particular time, it is with some sadness. From all these years' distance, it is quite clear to me now that I did not feel as intimately connected with Jane or her work as I had been hitherto. She had withdrawn into herself much more in those days than when she was writing "Sense and Sensibility," "Pride and Prejudice" or "Susan."

The withdrawal certainly did not resemble the depression of the Bath years. Rather, her greater reserve was more a sense of ease with herself, an inner confidence in her abilities. She no longer seemed to need reassurance from me or to seek my approval and, though I mentioned it to no one at the time, indeed did not even admit it to myself, at this distance I can own that I was hurt. The hurt came from feeling that I was less important to her, less involved with this dear sister who was the sun of my life. In truth, I was feeling less important not just to Jane but to everyone; it was a low period in my life.

Mama was now in a tolerably healthy state. She still worked in the garden occasionally and for a lady of seventy-five, she was remarkably strong. She spent a good deal of time reading and I was sometimes required to take her spectacles for repair, but beyond that she seemed to have no need of me. Martha it was who usually put her work in order or read to her from Scott, of whom they were both particularly fond. For my part, I disliked hearing any novels save Jane's praised excessively and did not hesitate to tell them so.

Jane and I still shared secret amusement at the way Mama conducted herself, but she was less inclined to mention it in her letters now. In fact when I once wrote what I thought was an amusing account of our mother, who had begun the day upon the sofa after

a bilious attack, rising to tie on pattens and an apron to assist the laundress, she responded dismissively:

Pray do not remind me of the interest Mama finds in the soda solutions for bleaching the kerchiefs. I am glad to be in London and free from such domestic burdens.

She went on immediately to tell me about the difficulties there seemed to be with her publisher. It seemed that Egerton would not print a second edition of "Mansfield Park."

It has sold out, you know, and yet he still resists. Unless he shows a proper respect for my next offering, I shall look elsewhere. I cannot believe that another house would not be more accommodating.

The contrast between her attitude now, which I thought was tinged with pride and arrogance, and the sheer joy and gratitude she had felt about "Sense and Sensibility" and "Pride and Prejudice," was very marked; I did not find it attractive. I urged her, as I had done many times before, to leave all the negotiations to Henry, as it seemed so unfitting for a lady to engage in matters of business. Her reply to me was sharp.

Henry is a dear soul and a most affectionate brother, but he cannot judge the worth of a work as well as the author herself. Why, he still prefers "Pride and Prejudice" when I know full well that "Emma" is a finer composition.

I agreed with Henry, but acknowledged that this was because Emma made me impatient by her arrogance and by her presumption that her judgement was always right. When I said this to Jane,

she laughed. "Did I not tell you that no one would like her but myself?"

"Mr. Knightley likes her well enough though, does he not?" I said in one of the conversations we had had during the snowy period when we had been together.

"But with him, you see, as with no one else, she is able to acknowledge her faults."

"And will they be happy together forever like Mr. and Mrs. Darcy?"

"I think Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse are both too clever to be happy forever. They both want the contentment of spirit which is required for perfect happiness."

It pleased me when we could discuss the future of her characters in our old way, but this happened only rarely now. This was partly because we were often apart as she spent so much time in London, but it was also because she now had others with whom she could talk about such matters.

Our nieces, especially Fanny and Anna, had now become Jane's intimates and I was aware that their feelings for me were becoming more distant. Whereas I had once been indispensable at Godmersham, at Steventon, it was now Aunt Jane, not Aunt Cassandra, who was in demand. They all began to fancy themselves authors and Jane was generous in her advice to them. I never knew in truth what she thought of their efforts, because she was always encouraging to them; I was glad that they appreciated this.

Once, at Steventon, I heard James Edward tell his father that Aunt Jane had praised him for the breadth and sweep of his work. "'So different,' she says, 'from the two inch piece of ivory on which I work with such a fine brush.'"

His father, James, looked a little discomposd I thought and it

occurred to me that perhaps it would have pleased him if his son had asked him for advice rather than his aunt Jane, given that James had always been considered the writer in the family in the early days. I tried to talk to James Edward about his father's success with the "Loiterer," but he was uninterested. Aunt Jane as the Austen writer swept all before her now.

Anna and Ben Lefroy had recently come to live at Wyards, a farm very near us at Chawton, and once when Fanny was staying with me Anna called. They were both supposed to be giving attention to Grandmama, but they could talk of nothing but Aunt Jane. In fact, they spent the whole morning discussing the merits of "Emma" as opposed to "Mansfield Park."

"I am so flattered that my aunt used my name," said Fanny, "and I could not have borne it if "Emma" had been named for you, dear cousin, for I cannot bear her."

"Oh, I quite dote upon Emma, I think she is the most attractive of all Aunt Jane's ladies," replied Anna.

Mama joined in the conversation to say that she found "Emma" more entertaining than "Mansfield Park," but no one saw fit to ask my opinion.

"And have you heard that Aunt Jane and Uncle Henry are to refuse publication to Egerton's?" asked Fanny. "They are to go to Murray's instead."

"Oh, to be sure, Murray's will serve her better," answered Anna. "I should myself prefer Murray's."

Neither Mama nor I knew of this plan and I thought it silly and presumptuous of these two nieces to be talking of London publishers as though they were established writers themselves. I could not help saying, "Well, as you are to be confined again, Anna, I dare say it will put an end to your scribbling ambitions for the present."

I left the room to help Martha, who was overseeing the cleaning

of the bread oven and, as I did so, I saw Anna and Fanny exchange glances. I know they were thinking that I was sour and ungracious and perhaps I was. If so, I had other reasons than their obvious preference for their now famous aunt above me.

I had reason to think that Jane was carrying on a correspondence with Fanny and her younger sister Elizabeth Bridges from which I was deliberately excluded. I heard Fanny tell others that Aunt Jane was worried about the reception that "Emma" would receive. According to Fanny, she was afraid that those who liked "Pride and Prejudice" would think it inferior in wit and those who liked "Mansfield Park" would think it inferior in good sense. I had never heard such sentiments from Jane and realized that it was as I always feared—Fanny was replacing me in Jane's confidence. Why, they even shared a bedroom when they were at Henry's.

In addition, I overheard Elizabeth tell one of her brothers that Fanny had received advice from Aunt Jane that she must not marry without love. "Aunt Jane advises never to contract an engagement without proper proof of enduring love," she went on.

Again, I could not help myself. "And what, pray, does your aunt Jane know of contracting engagements or enduring love? She has never actually experienced either."

I could have wished the words unsaid immediately, because I knew they made me sound like a jealous and embittered old maid. I just could not bear them to ignore my own experience of love, as though Tom Fowle had never existed. I wanted the young ones to confide in me. I could understand that, because Jane wrote of love, they considered her an expert on the subject, but that did not make it easy to accept. So far as they knew, she had never been loved by any man, for of course I had never mentioned Mr. Atkins to anyone.

Before very long, I had another reason for feeling overlooked and ignored by the family. Jane was once more staying with Henry in Hans Place when he was suddenly taken ill with a fever. It seems that he and Jane were on their way home from Murray's, where they had negotiated the printing of "Emma," together with a reprinting of "Mansfield Park," when he suddenly began to feel faint. He took to his bed, and Jane took on the nursing, a task for which she was not suited; she had no patience with sickness, as we had seen many times with Mama. Doctors were called, but Henry grew worse.

At the time, I knew nothing of this, as Jane did not see fit to write to me. Henry seemed near death, so she sent urgently for James and Edward. The first I knew was when James' man brought a message to tell me to be ready to leave for London within the hour, as brother Henry was dangerously ill. I could not bring myself to tell James that this was my first intimation of the grave news and, when he arrived to collect me, I merely warned him not to alarm Mama.

If Jane was surprised to see me when we arrived in London, she did not show it—she only greeted James and me with a cry. "Thank the dear Lord you are here, for I swear he is soon to breathe his last."

We hurried to the sick room where Edward was already at his station beside Henry. The room was dark and fetid and I longed to open the windows, but knew well that doctors forbade this. Henry lay senseless, his breathing quick and shallow. Jane came into the room behind me and laid her head upon my shoulder.

"Oh, what a comfort it is to have you here, dear sister."

"Why did you not send for me?" I whispered.

"I cannot say, I thought only of the need to have gentlemen present if the worse occurs. But I thank God you are come."

It was settled that James and I would rest briefly from our journey and then relieve Jane and Edward in attending our brother.

Madame Bignon enquired of Jane which room I was to have and Jane replied, "My sister will join me of course."

I was so relieved to hear her say this, for I feared she had grown used to her own room, shared only on occasion with Fanny. When I rose from my rest, the doctor had called, bled Henry again and declared himself more optimistic about his condition, although as yet we could see little improvement.

That night, all four of us took turns to sit at the bedside and, when Jane came in to replace me as dawn broke, I was able to tell her that I thought his fever less and his breathing easier. To the great relief of us all, by the next evening he had opened his eyes, taken some nourishment and the doctors said he was out of immediate danger.

His ailment vanished as quickly as it had come. I did not wish him ill, but I could be glad he had been taken so, since it had provided an occasion for reconciliation between Jane and me. When I told her this in the bedchamber which had been Eliza's, she was indignant.

"Reconciliation? What need had we of reconciliation? You are always my dear, my very dear, my most dear sister."

"But Jane, you have seemed so preoccupied, so taken up of late with your other life and interests, that I thought that you . . ."

"Thought what? I had forgot you? Oh Cass, how could you think that? But if I am plain with myself, I do know how, for I am sometimes vain and self-important, I know. 'Tis only my weakness that makes me so, that makes me have my head turned by fame and flattery. You must promise in future to scold me seriously when you perceive me behaving ill again. Will you promise?"

"Yes," I smiled, but we both knew I would not.

Henry recovered slowly and Edward and James were able to leave within three weeks, knowing that Jane would follow shortly,

bringing Henry to Chawton as soon as he was strong enough to travel.

Before this happened, another fortunate occurrence came about as a result of Henry's illness. One of his doctors was a court physician and told Jane that the Prince Regent himself admired her work. She told me:

I did not know whether to be flattered or distressed by the interest of that gentleman, who is not a favourite with me, as you know.

I am invited to visit Carlton House next Thursday, to talk with the Prince's librarian.

When I conveyed this news to Mama and Martha, they were delighted and we waited eagerly to hear about the visit, but she merely said that she was invited to consider dedicating "Emma" to the Prince.

"What is the girl about?" exclaimed Mama. "She must not just consider it, she must do it and be glad."

When Jane returned home, she confirmed that her publisher had explained that a royal request was in truth a royal command and showed us what was to be printed at the front of "Emma."

To His Royal Highness

The Prince Regent

This work is

By His Royal Highness's permission

Most respectfully

Dedicated

By His Royal Highness's

Dutiful
And Obedient
Humble Servant
The Author

"How well it sounds," said Martha.

"And how proud we shall all be," said Mama, unexpectedly.

"Let us hope it helps to sell the work," said Jane dryly, but I could see she was pleased by Mama's reaction.

"Well, Cass, if it takes a Royal recognition to win Mama's pride, I must accept it and be thankful," she said to me later. "Perhaps even those who dislike my Emma may be induced to follow where His Royal Highness leads."

Henry had been too weak to be the chief negotiator with Murray, so it fell to Jane to make the agreements in 1815. Two thousand copies were to be printed and sold at twenty-one shillings for the three volumes. Jane brought me home some material for gowns and instructed me that I was not to refuse any gifts from her, as she was very rich!

With Henry recovered, we were in high spirits when we all made our way to the Butts for another bonfire celebrating the final vanquishing of Bonaparte. As I walked home, arm in arm with my dear sister and so happy that we were once more close and intimate, I could never have believed that almost two years to the day after that joyous evening, she would be cruelly taken from me.



SEVENTEEN

Our Happiness Is Short-Lived but Persuasion Is Completed

We all knew that the peace following Waterloo would see a change in the fortunes of our sailor brothers, but 1816 was to be a year of trouble for our whole family.

Just after the turn of the year, we heard that Charles' ship had been wrecked in the Mediterranean. He, thank the Dear Lord, was safe, but he was penniless. His motherless daughters had been cared for by his late wife's family, the Palmers, but we now offered to take little Cassy to stay with us, to relieve him of at least one worry. We were delighted to do this, but she was a demanding child and I had to work hard to amuse her enough to keep her from bothering her aunt Jane, who I could see was engaged in composing once more.

Charles could no longer continue his contribution of £50 a year to our household, but this would not have been too serious if the finances of Frank and Henry had remained healthy. Frank was now on half pay and already had six children with a seventh expected, but he had become a partner in Henry's bank, with the expectation that he would supplement his income by this means.

I do not know what contributed to the failure of the bank—perhaps Henry's illness had meant he was not as engaged with its affairs as he should have been, perhaps it was the changes brought about by the ending of the war. We had no prior warning at all.

The first we knew was when Jane and I were walking in the Market Square in Alton and admiring the façade of the newly com-

pleted Town Hall. We noticed that labourers were nailing boards across the door and windows of the bank. We hurried home and dispatched a letter immediately to Henry. This crossed with one which arrived from him, telling us that not only the Alton branch but all the other branches of the bank had closed and that he himself was declared bankrupt. Many Austens lost money by this sad turn of events—Frank, Edward, James, Uncle Leigh-Perrot and even Jane, as she had invested some of her small profit from “Mansfield Park” in the bank.

Henry had immediately to relinquish Hans Place and Henrietta Street and, though I was sorry for him and indeed for the whole family, I did derive some comfort from knowing that Jane would go no more to London for prolonged stays. Jane’s principal concern when Henry arrived to stay, inevitably he made a temporary home with us, was that his health should not be once more at risk by the worry of it all. Henry seemed to be in remarkably good spirits however and to my astonishment announced that he would become a clergyman. I was even more astonished that both Jane and Mama encouraged him in this aim.

I could scarce wait until we had reached our room that evening before bursting out to Jane.

“How does it come about that you encourage him to enter the church as a last resort, you who have always seemed to feel so strongly that a man must have the highest motives for ordination?”

“Have I always thought that? I do not remember that the motives of Mr. Collins or Mr. Elton were of the highest—or even dear James’ for that matter. The church is what a man does when he can think of nothing else, is it not?”

“That is not what you discussed with Mr. Atkins,” I said, almost not daring to mention his name.

"Oh, Mr. Atkins was a fine man with such great thoughts. But that was in my salad days . . . we must be practical, Cass, how else is Henry to keep himself? He cannot, you know, become a governess." She smiled and I was glad I had not angered her by my mention of Mr. Atkins.

She went on. "Besides, was it not Henry's first ambition to be the curate at Chawton before banking and Bonaparte intervened?"

I remembered that Henry had considered the living at Chawton long ago and so was not surprised that, when he applied, the Bishop of Winchester agreed to support him. He would have only fifty-two guineas a year, so his help to us would have to end. Frank, too, withdrew his contribution because of his financial losses and, though Edward continued to make us an allowance, we were once more thrown back into the worry about housekeeping expenses. At least Jane now had a little money, but to me it seemed cruel and unfair that she must use what small amounts she earned for the benefit of us all, instead of having more of the luxuries I knew she craved.

"What matter if we spend it on mutton rather than on satins and laces?" she said. "At least we need ask no one and that is a relief to me. Besides, I have another idea which may bring in a few more guineas when it is completed."

In spite of these new financial strictures though, she did finally buy back from Crosby's the manuscript of "Susan," for the £10 which had been impossible to find in 1809.

"We shall change the heroine's name, Cass, and perhaps that will bring better luck this time. You may go through it and change Susan to Catherine everywhere you see it. Then we shall tell Murray it has been re-worked and sell it on for a fine profit!"

We sat companionably together in the mornings when our family and household duties permitted it, with me going through the

somewhat tattered manuscript of "Susan" and Jane working on her new composition, which she said she would call "The Elliots."

Sitting with her thus, I noticed for the first time that she seemed to have some discomfort with her left arm. She would often stretch it or change her position and sometimes her face showed she was in pain.

One afternoon, we walked out to visit Anna, who was again unfit for walking herself. "Poor animal," said Jane, "she will be worn out by the time she is thirty."

I hoped that Jane would discuss her new work with me. I knew that I must not ask and that she would tell me when the time was right for her. I took her arm as we went by the lane to the farm and, as I did so, saw her wince with pain.

"My love, what is it? You are unwell . . ."

"'Tis nothing. Come on my other side, this one aches a little."

I was alarmed. "Should you not consult the apothecary?"

"No, it is probably rheumatism, now that I have turned forty, and will improve with the spring weather."

I could not help remembering Aunt Philla and Eliza, whose fatal illnesses had started similarly, but I pushed the thought from my mind as we approached Wyards and saw Anna walking slowly down the path to meet us.

Anna, perhaps to take her mind from her approaching confinement, for she could not help knowing that Aunt Jane disapproved, was more bold than I in asking if she was composing again. When Jane replied that she was, she clapped her hands and said, "Oh Aunt, how wonderful you are, your ideas flow so fast. No sooner is one book complete than another is begun. And what is the subject of this one?"

I looked at Jane, expecting that she would deflect Anna's question in some way, but she did not.

"It is about second chances," she said.

The sun was growing warm as we walked home and we sought the shady side of the lane.

"You see, it is not only the young who are provided with a shady lane," she quoted with a smile.

I was careful to take her right arm and, emboldened by her response to Anna, I asked her to tell me more about the book.

"Of which second chances do we speak?"

"The sort that were denied to us. Second chances which are rarely offered, but must be seized upon when they come."

That was all she would say then, but I was shortly to have the opportunity to hear her read several chapters.

This would scarcely have been possible if we had remained at Chawton, because we had many visitors that spring, but one by one the relatives who came began to notice that Jane was not herself, something was clearly amiss with her health. By now it was worse than the rheumatism in her arm. She was growing thin and was very easily knocked up; her energy was clearing diminishing. Her usual healthy appetite was gone and when Edward and Fanny came they were shocked by her pallor. Henry and Edward insisted that she be sent to take the waters at Cheltenham. Mrs. JA had also heard that the waters were most efficacious and it was she I believe who first suggested it.

At first Jane refused to consider the idea.

"We have little Cassy to consider and cannot leave her with Mama," she said.

But Mrs. JA, with unaccustomed consideration, offered to look after her while we were away. So Jane and I travelled to Cheltenham and it was there that I first became acquainted with the Elliots. I cannot say I grew to like them, for in truth they were not likeable people, with the exception of Anne. I had been very concerned when

Jane told me that the work contained a family with three daughters that she had returned to "The Watsons."

"No, Cass," she laughed, "do not be alarmed, I have discarded the Watsons. You will like the Elliots much more." She put the manuscript back into its travelling case. "Well, what do you think of them on first acquaintance?"

"Well, to be sure they are much better placed than the Watsons, almost aristocratic indeed and Sir Walter is a fine creation—I can see what amusement you are going to have with him."

"And Anne?"

"She is most agreeable. You must assure me now that she will achieve her heart's desire."

"You know I will not do that," she teased, "but I knew you could not fail to like my Anne as she is so like you."

"Like me?"

"Why yes, gentle, helpful to everyone and above all constant in her lost love."

"Is that like me?"

"Of course and if I had it at my pen's end to give you happiness I would do so."

"But dear Jane, you do give me happiness—all my happiness is in you and to be here like this with you, hearing your work as we always used to, is all that I should ever desire."

She leaned over to kiss my cheek and, as she did so, I saw the involuntary change in her face which showed her discomfort. She saw my glance and shook her head. "I am much better, Cass, the waters really do me good."

Our days in Cheltenham fell into a pattern. We walked from our lodgings to the spa before breakfast where Jane drank a pint or, if she could, two pints of the water. After breakfast, I walked or visited the shops while she wrote. We rested, visited the spa again and after a four o'clock dinner, she read to me.

She seemed to be producing a prodigious amount as she had done with "Emma" and once again I had the notion that she felt that she was in some way working against time. We often discussed the characters as we ate, much to the mystification of the other diners, I am sure, because we often laughed immoderately. When she told me one afternoon that we should shortly read of a dreadful accident to befall one of the characters, I could scarcely wait to return to our room to find out who it was to be so injured. I had feared it might be Anne, so was rather relieved to hear it was Louisa Musgrove. I sought reassurance too that she did not think me Lady Russell, for the part I had played in persuading her to reject Harris Bigg Wither.

"No indeed, Cass, I was not persuaded by you, but by my own feelings, which you helped me to acknowledge. In any case, even if you had persuaded me against my will, how glad I should be now that I have only books to my credit not a brood of seven children which might put my life in danger and a husband whose only interest outside hunting is shooting."

I found Admiral and Mrs. Croft most appealing.

"Ah yes, if Frank should become an admiral, which I expect he will," she said, "I fancy he would be like him. I cannot imagine Mrs. FA as Mrs. Croft though—there would scarce be room aboard the largest ship for her brood!"

I was so pleased when she spoke sharply like this, because to me it was proof that she was recovering. When we returned to Chawton, her colour and her strength were so much improved that I felt justified in hoping my fears about her health were groundless. She was in fact so much better that I was confident enough to leave her alone while I accompanied Mary on a further visit to Cheltenham for her bile condition. I should never have gone.

While I was away, I received a letter from Jane which alarmed me. On the surface, it was only her usual complaint about being

too taken up with household duties to be able to turn her mind to writing.

Composition seems to me impossible, with a head full of joints of mutton and doses of rhubarb . . .

But she also referred to needing

a few days' quiet and exemption from the thought and contrivances which any sort of company gives.

I thought that this showed that her tiredness has returned and I did not like that. At first, I tried to tell myself that she was probably feeling a little low, because such reviews as there had been of "Emma" were not as admiring as we might have wished. I know that she was disappointed in this, as she was in the reactions of her family and friends. Charles loved "Emma," but most of the family and even Anne Sharpe, whose opinion she always valued, liked "Emma" better than "Mansfield Park," but not so well as "Pride and Prejudice."

She had told me firmly before I left that she was not concerned about the reception of "Emma."

"Surely, Cass, you see that if I were, I would not immediately be embarking upon another work."

"But how hard it must be to spend a year or more immersed in a creation, to wait with eager anticipation for its launch upon the world, then for those who have nothing approaching your talent to feel free to criticize and compare as though they had a right to do so."

Jane laughed at my concern.

"But they do have a right—that is the consequence of being known. Had I been concerned about criticism I had better have remained anonymous, as you always wished."

“And do you wish you had remained so?”

“No, I cannot wish that. I like the recognition, even if it has unwanted consequences and then, you know, one can always hope that one’s next work will receive unlimited acclaim.”

When I returned home, I could see immediately that the reason for her low spirits was more than disappointment. When you are with someone all the time, it is difficult to see changes which happen gradually but, after two weeks away, I was shocked by Jane’s appearance and by how tired she was. She was knocked up by the least exertion and had even given up her morning walk, which was always so dear to her. I determined that I should now devote all my time to building up her strength.

Martha and I took to devising special dishes to tempt her appetite and we found a means to give her air and exercise by using the donkey which pulled my mother’s little cart. Each morning we would walk out, with Jane on the donkey and me walking alongside. In this way, we were able to have the private conversation we had always enjoyed. We made a strange picture, I dare say, but we did not mind and we received respectful greetings from Edward’s tenants as we passed by.

Some of the children that we had taught to read when we first came to Chawton were now grown and they would sometimes walk alongside us for a short while. Their chatter about their families was a source of interest and amusement to Jane. These attentions appeared to have good results, because Jane seemed to have more energy and said that the pain in her arm and back was much improved.

She had completed “The Elliots” while I was away with Mary, but she did not seem to wish to tell Henry or the publisher that she had yet another book available. Thinking that this would be an incentive to get better, I tried to encourage her to proceed with it.

"No, Cass, it is not yet right. I am dissatisfied with it. It is the ending. Let us read again this evening and see how it can be improved, but first I will lie down a while upon my special sofa."

She often lay down now before dinner, but would never take the sofa. Instead, she had three chairs put together and lay across them, with the support of a small pillow for her head. It never looked comfortable and I often begged her to use the sofa. She would not do so in case Mama wanted it.

"If she ever found me upon the sofa she would always be leaving it for me and that is not right. At her age she has a right to her own sofa."

I privately thought that Jane's need was clearly greater and that if it were made known to Mama, she would gladly leave the sofa for her, but I understood Jane's wish for there to be as little attention as possible given to her feeling unwell.

She had always been impatient with others' preoccupation with their health and now that impatience was applied to herself. "Sickness is a dangerous indulgence at my time of life," she often repeated.

We retired early that day and she read me the final chapters of "The Elliots." I could see what she meant. The ending was somehow too contrived, it depended too much on coincidence and we did not hear enough from Anne herself. I knew I could be of no help to her in devising a new ending, as that had to come from her own talent and cleverness, but I did think the work needed a new title.

"Calling it 'The Elliots' tells us nothing about the content, does it? Might you not give it a name which invites the reader in some way?"

"Oh yes, that is a splendid idea, let us consider new names."

"Have you thought of 'Second Chances'?"

"What about 'Three Sisters'?"

"Or A 'Story from Bath'? Anne certainly hates the place as much as you did."

“Or ‘Kellinge Hall’?”

“Or ‘A Fall from the Cobb’?”

We were so merry in shouting out these ideas that Martha knocked on the door to ask us to be a little quieter, as Mama was retiring.

“Jane, let us be serious. What is the novel about? It concerns a decision taken at one time of life which turns out to be wrong in hindsight, does it not?”

“More about Anne not knowing her own mind as a young lady and being persuaded to a course of action which . . .”

“There is your title. ‘Persuasion’.”

Her expression was more animated than I had seen it for weeks.

“Oh, how well it sounds, ‘Persuasion’. That is what we shall decide, but if I cannot find a better ending, I fear no one but you and I will ever hear it.”

However, the next day I saw that she settled at her table early, so busily employed with crossing out and writing new sentences on the manuscript that she did not even look up when the London coach passed the window. The next day followed the same pattern and, as we dressed for dinner, she told me the ending was now to her satisfaction.

“You shall hear it later.”

Even had I known then that this was to be the last completed work that I should hear Jane read, I could not have been more moved when hearing the scene between Anne and Captain Wentworth—when he overhears her conversation and her protestations that women’s love lasts longer “when all hope is gone.” What echoes that had for both of us! All the disappointments of our lives seemed to be in that scene and I rejoiced, as I knew all readers would, at the declaration from Captain Wentworth.

“Well, Cass?” she asked as she came to the end.

“My dear, it is magnificent—your best yet. Shall you get Henry to sell it for you?”

"Perhaps, but I am tired after my exertion with it. I shall put it aside till I am better and you do not have to be such an assiduous nurse to me."

She had developed some strange marks upon her face and arms about which she was very conscious and which I had been treating with ointments. Apart from that, though, she did seem a little better and was always cheerful in her letters to the rest of the family. I think I knew then that her sickness was fatal, but I confided this to no one. Her very positive letters were sometimes a cause of misunderstanding, because they often gave the recipients too hopeful a view of her condition, so that when they saw her they were disappointed. They even sometimes upbraided me for not making them sufficiently aware of her situation. I bore this as well as I could, as I knew that the last thing Jane wanted was too much emphasis on her health. She would have had a horror of being considered an invalid; had we not always laughed at my mother? Had not hypochondria been always a subject for merriment?

I knew she was in pain and that she had a discharge, as I saw the soiled linen, but we had a tolerably happy Christmas period with many family visits. Jane was not even able to walk the short distance to the church, but rode there on the donkey, led by Henry.

The house seemed rather empty when everyone had departed and I was glad of the distraction which Jane's latest composition afforded. I could scarcely believe that she was able to concentrate on writing with her health so poor; when she began to read to me from "The Brothers," which was what she called her working title, I was even more surprised, because its subject seemed to be hypochondria! Whereas her normal pattern was to write and then read to me, that winter we seemed to discuss her ideas together before she wrote them down.

The theme was more comic than any she had attempted before,

certainly more satirical. She seemed to be poking fun at everything, at England, at the aristocracy, at the foolishness of those who imagined themselves ill. We tried to have the sort of conversations which some of the characters would have.

We laughed particularly about Mrs. Parker and her illnesses and I can scarce think of that time even now without tears, thinking of the bravery of my dear sister in what were to be the last months of her life. I do not know if I thought that she would ever complete this "last work," as we called it later, but I knew that she must be encouraged, as it gave her something else to think about and gave us both amusement.

Although she began to suffer fever and bilious attacks, she might perhaps have written more if, in March 1817, we had not received the news from Bath that Uncle Leigh-Perrot was dead at last.



EIGHTEEN

Jane's Untimely Death in Winchester

Though we were of course sad to hear that Uncle Leigh-Perrot had died, he was eighty-two and had been ill for some time, so the melancholy news was not unexpected. Our real concern, never stated, was the expectations we might have from his will.

He had very often indicated that he would be generous to our family and, as things stood at the present, any inheritance would be most welcome. We felt it necessary therefore that as many of us as possible should attend the funeral at his home at Scarletts in Berkshire. I must go and James, who was a trustee, would go also. Jane assured me that she would bear my absence well, even though she had recently put aside her writing, as she felt she had insufficient strength for it.

"You must be there to ensure that our family gets its due from our uncle," she said.

The funeral passed off tolerably well but, when the will was read, there was cruel disappointment for us all. My uncle, contrary to all the promises he had made, had left all his estate to his wife. This was considerable—the Berkshire house, the house in Bath and the sum of £10,000—far beyond what we had ever thought—was all to go to my aunt. We nephews and nieces were to receive £1000 each, but only after her death. Most cruel of all, there was nothing for my mother, or even a consideration for the care of old uncle Thomas, still being looked after with our brother George at Monk Sherborne.

Jane was more disappointed than anyone at this gloomy news and it had a marked effect on her health. I was most alarmed to receive a letter from her begging my return. The letter told me that the news of the will had brought on a relapse and that she had suffered a severe bilious attack. It was so unlike her to dwell on her condition, especially to ask me to come home, that I packed my things immediately and set off alone, leaving James to follow on and report the proceedings to Mama, who was doing her best to pretend that she had had no expectations from her brother.

When I reached Chawton, I was further alarmed to find that Jane was neither dressed nor downstairs. When I entered our room, I found her there in her dressing gown, engaged at her writing desk. For a moment, alarmed though I was by how thin she seemed to have grown in the brief time I had been away, I allowed myself a moment's hope that she was composing. But as I bent to kiss her, I noticed that it was only a letter to Miss Sharpe.

"Oh dearest Cass, how glad I am to see you," she cried and I was shocked to hear that her voice, usually so firm and strong, had a tremor within it. "Let me put my letter aside now and you must come and tell me everything. Does my aunt posture much as a rich woman? Is there bitterness throughout? Oh how I long to hear about the paling of the faces, the clutching of the hearts when the document was read!"

I rejoiced to hear a touch of her old spirit and promised to sit with her as soon as I had seen Martha about the dinner.

"We must ensure your favourite dishes are provided, my love, you have grown quite thin."

"I try to eat, Cass, but I have no heart for it. Now that you are here, though, I shall try harder. Martha is the kindest of people, but I missed the best sister any soul could have."

I went slowly downstairs and, when I met Martha's eyes, I knew that we both now acknowledged what I had scarce even allowed myself to think before. Jane was dying. She would not recover.

"Shall we tell Mrs. Austen?" asked Martha.

"We will tell no one," I said fiercely. "Until Jane herself wishes to speak of it, we will continue to act as though we expect a full recovery."

I knew that Jane, who had fought for so long to gain some control of her life, would want most of all to keep control of how the last of it was to be spent.

So we continued for the next few weeks. Jane rarely dressed and never came downstairs; the effort just seemed to be too much for her. She received visitors occasionally, though she was easily tired. Anna and Caroline came to see her one morning and, within a quarter of an hour, I had to show them out, as I could see that she was exhausted. She continued to write letters and I was most touched when she allowed me to read part of one she was sending to Miss Sharpe.

As for my sister! Words fail me in any attempt to describe what a nurse she has been to me. Thank God, she does not seem the worse for it yet! If I live to be an old woman, I must expect to wish I had died now, blessed in the tenderness of such a family.

My eyes filled with tears and I turned away to try to hide them. She reached out her hand to me, so thin as it was and still showing the marks which so distressed her.

"We shall not talk of death, though, shall we? Let us consider how I am improving. I am quite equal to being out of bed now. Elizabeth and Alethea are urging me to take up residence in Winchester, where I might have access to better doctors. Shall we make a visit there, you and I?"

I, too, had received a letter from Mrs. Heathcote making the same suggestion. She was now widowed and living in the Cathedral Close in Winchester with her sister Alethea. Mr. Curtis, the Alton apothecary who saw Jane regularly, was of the opinion that a Mr. Lyford who was based in Winchester had had remarkable results with cases like hers and Henry had arranged for him to visit the following week.

"If Mr. Lyford thinks it wise, we shall take lodgings there and have a fine time," I said.

"We may even meet a handsome clergyman or two," she joked with something like her old spirit. "We shall seek widowers now, but only those without family may be considered!"

I managed to smile as I left the room to write to my brothers about our plans.

Henry and James arranged to be present when Mr. Lyford called and we were all relieved to hear his optimistic view that Jane's condition might yield to treatment; he would see her several times a week if she could be in Winchester. My brothers immediately decided that we should go to Winchester as soon as it could be arranged and James undertook to write to Elizabeth, asking her to seek us lodgings as near to Mr. Lyford's establishment as possible.

Jane's spirits seemed quite lifted as we discussed these arrangements, which in turn made me feel hopeful. I asked her, rather tentatively, if she wanted to take her manuscript case with her to the Winchester lodgings.

"Have I ever travelled without it? Of course it must go with us. We shall take the new work also and "Persuasion" shall go too in case we want to read aloud. When we return, we shall pass it to Henry for negotiation. He shall have "Catherine" too—what a deal he will make, with two to bargain with."

So I packed manuscripts in the case and Jane handed me another document to go in also. She did not tell me what it was but said, "This is for you, Cass, if the worst should befall."

I knew it was her will, but I took it without a word.

The day at the end of May which was arranged for our transfer to Winchester was cold and rainy.

"I am a very portable sort of invalid, am I not?" said Jane, as Henry and our nephew William Knight carried her to the carriage. "How good of James and Mary to lend their carriage to us, but if only it were bigger, for I fear Henry and William will be very wet by the time we have covered sixteen miles."

Mama had bade her farewell upstairs and had spoken to her with more tender words than I had ever hear her speak to Jane. As we drew away from the cottage and saw Mama waving from an upstairs window, Jane remarked, "How kindly Mama spoke to me. I really begin to believe she cares for me a little."

"She cares for you a great deal, Jane, but her way is not to show it."

"Well," she said with a faint smile, "I shall not speculate on the circumstance which makes her willing to show it now."

She bore the journey well, though concerned all the way for Henry and William, as the rain did not cease the whole day. She said that she was only a little fatigued when we arrived at College Street and was delighted with the lodgings which Elizabeth had found for us.

We had a comfortable sitting room on the first floor and two bedrooms behind. I was a little concerned about the stairs, but Jane managed them very well and was soon settled upon the sofa.

It would have been perhaps a melancholy evening after Henry and William left, but dear Elizabeth and her sister called and cheered us with gossip and with fond memories of Manydown. They also told

us that, as the Dean of Winchester was a great friend of theirs, they had arranged for us to have access to the Deanery garden, which was a very short distance away from our lodgings, where Jane might walk and enjoy the beautiful surroundings. Jane thanked them for this kind thought and expressed the hope that she might soon be strong enough to take advantage of the offer.

Once again, as at Cheltenham, our days fell into a pattern. On the days when Jane felt strong enough we would go out in the mornings to take the air. Sometimes she was able, leaning on my arm, to go as far as the little bridge which crossed the stream and the water meadows and led into the grounds of Winchester College. But this required her to be able to walk back again without a rest, so we preferred to go into the Deanery garden, especially on sunny days. This was a great delight to Jane, for the plants and trees were very fine and the gardens well tended. There was a beautiful oak, which we were told had been planted in the time of William the Conqueror, and a kitchen garden which produced the finest raspberries and strawberries. Best of all, there was a pretty bower with magnificent views of the cathedral, where Jane could rest before attempting the short walk back to College Street.

One day as we sat there, the gardener brought over to us a basket filled with strawberries he had just picked. They were still warm from the sun and I was delighted to see Jane eat them with relish, for her appetite was very fickle.

"Only think, Jane, of the strawberry gathering at Donwell Abbey," I said. "Do you suppose that Mr. and Mrs. Knightley will move back there from Hartfield?"

"Of course, but not, you know, until Mr. Woodhouse is dead. Then I dare say that Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley would take up residence at Hartfield, having decided that London is unhealthy for their growing brood. Then Isabella is on hand as a proper friend

for Emma, since there is no friend like a sister, as I have reason to know. Thank you, my dear, for your devotion to me. I know I am not always the easiest of invalids."

"Oh Jane, there is nowhere I had sooner be than here with you, I could live like this forever."

"I doubt that forever will be possible," she replied, "but we can enjoy it for now. Come dearest, we must return to College Street or we shall miss Mr. Lyford."

The physician called most days about noon and examined Jane. If he prescribed physic, I would fetch it while Jane rested. Then we would read and talk until dinner. Jane usually retired immediately afterwards and I would often sit beside her with my work, sometimes speaking, but often in comfortable silence. It was true that she had not always been an easy invalid, quite understandably, because she was unused to being restricted. Her quick mind did not easily take to having to give attention to her health and, of course, she had always been impatient with sick people, even with herself.

At this time, though, her spirits seemed tranquil, almost resigned, and we enjoyed calm and pleasant times together.

On the days when Jane was not well enough to go out, we entertained a string of visitors. Our brothers called regularly, even Charles, who was home on leave. We were fortunate that young Charles, Edward's boy, was at school at the college and able to call frequently. Elizabeth Heathcote was tireless in her attention to us and found us a nurse to help us with the night duties, which quickly became necessary, as Jane had frequent attacks of either pain or sickness at that time.

"How kind everyone is, Cass," said Jane as she sat at the bow window in the sitting room from where she had a good view of the street. "I do not deserve such goodness, why, even Mrs. JA is to join

us to help you. I pray God may give me forbearance to try to be nice to her when she arrives.”

I was glad to see that flash of her old sharpness but, when Mary arrived, she was gracious and even loving to her; rightly so, for Mary was a great strength to me at this time. We took turns to sit up with Jane, because neither of us felt that the nurse was entirely to be trusted. We had each found her asleep on occasion when she had been supposed to be watching our dear invalid.

Jane's condition varied from day to day. By the end of June she was no longer able to walk out, but enjoyed being taken in a sedan chair on a fine day. There were not many sunny days in a poor summer and she was more often content just to walk from her bed to the window, watching the passers by and especially the boys when they passed between their lodgings and the school. Jane managed to write a short letter occasionally, to Mama, who wrote often most anxious about Jane, to Fanny and to Miss Sharpe.

She spoke frequently of being better, but I could see her strength diminishing by the day. She did not seem ready to discuss her imminent demise and I began to be afraid that she would pass away without us being able to exchange the final thoughts which I longed to share with her.

Henry and James came together one day and she went with them in the sedan chair to the Cathedral to receive Holy Communion. I thought this might be an occasion for her to talk about her approaching death, but she spoke determinedly about growing stronger, so that I could see they went away feeling more hopeful. When I told them it would not be long, I felt they did not believe me.

On St. Swithins' day, July 15, to my great surprise and delight she said that she would dictate to me a comic verse about the unfortunate onset of heavy rain. She said that the saint was laying a curse

on the town for organizing a race meeting in the town without his permission.

*Oh! Subjects rebellious! Oh Venta depraved
When once we are buried you think we are gone
But behold me immortal! By vice you're enslaved
You have sinned and must suffer, then farther he said
These races and revels and dissolute measures
With which you're debasing a neighbouring plain
Let them stand—You shall meet with your curse in your pleasures
Set off for your course, I'll pursue with my rain.*

How we laughed at this and how pleased I was that her composition capability was still with her. I knew that the last word of the second line should be *dead*, for the rhyme, but she did not want to say it and I would have had difficulty writing it down. Worn out with the effort, she lay back upon the sofa and closed her eyes. I thought she had fallen asleep but suddenly she said in a low voice, "Cass, there are things we must discuss."

I held my breath. Much though I wanted to have a last intimacy with her, I was still reluctant to bring the subject of death into the open and from her refusal to say the word I thought that she felt the same. But now she made a great effort.

"My will, it is in the case with my manuscripts."

"Yes dearest, I thought as much."

"Everything is for you, Cass, except for a token to Henry and . . ."

Her voice trailed off.

"I have no more strength now, but tomorrow . . ."

I could see a change in her. She slept more, in fact she was more

asleep than awake. The next evening, though, she rallied when we were alone and said, "I must ask you to perform me one last service, Cass."

"Anything my dear. You must know that I will never reveal any of the matters about which I have kept silent all these years."

"No, it does not concern that—I have absolute trust in you. It is my will. It is not witnessed so I fear it is not legal."

"Rest assured, Jane, you cannot imagine that anyone in the family will make any difficulty about your wishes."

"But I must ensure, Cass, that you, who know my thoughts as well as I do myself, have total charge of my writings, there are two more books remember, to be sold and only you can know what I want. They are to be published together as by the author of "Emma" and "Pride and Prejudice" and you may decide the title of "Catherine," for I fear that neither Catherine nor Susan is entirely right, you know."

"It shall be as you ask, my dear, now pray do not tire yourself."

"No. There is something more. I have left a small sum to Henry in acknowledgement of his help to me with my publishers and his present poverty. Jane, no one will object to that either. But to my other bequest they may and I charge you, Cass, to ensure it is done as I wish."

"Of course. What is it?"

"Madame Bignon is to receive £50 and to ask for further help whenever she may need it."

I could not hide my surprise.

"Yes, Cass, I know it is unusual to remember a servant, but you know what a friend she has always been to me as well as to Henry. It pleases me to be able to help a woman who has had to make her own way in the world. It was my intention to help Miss Sharpe also, but she tells me that she is currently well placed, for her school is doing

well. But I have told her that she must apply to you at any time in future, if she finds herself on hard times. Will you do this for me, Cass?"

"My dear, you know I will. It shall be as you ask. But we should perhaps have the matter taken in hand by a notary or a solicitor to ensure that your wishes will be carried out even if I myself should die."

"Oh, let us speak no more of dying, I beg you, but you are right and I leave it to you to arrange. Meantime, we shall write now to Madame and to Anne to tell them of the arrangements I have made. I will have to ask you to write, Cass, but I shall sign the letters when they are done."

I thought both her bequests and her desire to tell the ladies of her wishes so urgently rather strange, but my only concern was for her to have peace in her mind, so I wrote the letters at her dictation and held them for her to sign. Her hand was weak and her writing shaky but I could see that she was relieved when it was done.

"They shall be posted tomorrow," I promised.

July 17 was fine until the late afternoon. I had almost forgot the letters, but when Jane roused herself from sleep, she asked me about them and appeared so distressed that I put on my cloak and went out immediately on the errand.

While at the post, I thought that I would walk a little farther to the office of Mr. Jenkins the notary to enquire about the legality of Jane's will. The office was closed when I got there, as I had not realized how late it had become.

How much I regretted taking this extra time, because when I reached College Street Mary told me that Jane had had a seizure and she had sent for Mr. Lyford. I rushed into the bedroom, fearful that she was gone without my being able to say goodbye. But to my great relief she came to and told me in a quiet voice about the pain of the seizure.

When Mr. Lyford came, he gave her laudanum and, as he left, told me that she was close to death. When I came back into the room, I could see that she too knew that death was very near. Her dear face showed how she suffered, but she did not complain, only begged me to stay near her.

"I shall stay with you always, dear sister," I said, "Is there anything you want?"

"Nothing but death," she replied.

I held her close and listened to her breathing, which became calmer, no doubt as a result of the laudanum, but she did not ramble and her words always made sense.

She thanked me and Mary for our nursing and begged us to commend her to her nephews and nieces.

When she seemed to be slipping into unconsciousness, I knelt beside the bed and began to pray. She rallied again and looked directly at me.

"God grant me patience," she said. "Pray for me, oh pray for me."

These were her last words.

Her last struggle had left her head unsupported and half off the bed. I took a pillow on my lap and settled her head upon it. Mary kept asking me to take some rest, but I feared so much that she would slip away without me. I grew so cramped at about two in the morning that I allowed Mary to take my place for a short while. I resumed my place at about half past three and Jane died an hour later.

I closed her eyes and felt privileged to be able to perform these last services for this most remarkable of women.



NINETEEN

Jane's Will and Its Aftermath

No one could say that my family were in any way unfeeling to me in the terrible days which followed the death of my beloved sister. They were caring and kind, referring constantly to the fact that "Cass' loss is the worst of all." I make no accusation towards them at all. It is just that no one, no one save Jane herself, could have possibly understood the depth of my loss.

When I wrote to Fanny:

I have lost such a sister, such a friend,

She was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow. I had not a thought concealed from her and it is as if I had lost a part of myself.

that was simply how it felt.

Fanny later told Grandmama that I had found beautiful words to express my feelings. But to me they were not words of beauty—those I always left to Jane—they were words which expressed the yawning emptiness of my life as I contemplated it without her.

The coffin was kept open at College Street until the funeral, so that the visitors might see Jane, but I sat with her alone many times, trying to find words to express gratitude for the life we had shared and the promises that I vowed to keep for her memory. I poured out apologies too for the jealousy and resentment I had sometimes

shown and asked her forgiveness again if I had acted against her interests. Her countenance in death was sweet and serene, bearing no trace of the pain she had suffered in those last weeks. No one was with me when I cut some locks of hair to send to those I knew would cherish them—Fanny, Anna and Miss Sharpe. Remembering how she had always been concerned to look “*tolerably tidy*,” I was careful to take the locks from the back, so that her appearance might not be spoiled. I cut a lock for Charles too, as I knew he would be unable to attend the funeral, but I expected that all my other brothers would be at Chawton for the ceremony.

As soon as Henry arrived, in the evening of the day she passed away, I asked him how long it would take to arrange to take her body home for burial in the churchyard adjacent to Chawton Manor.

“At Chawton? My dear Cass, we cannot have our dear sister in an obscure churchyard, she must be buried in the Cathedral surely?”

I was astonished. Such a thing had never occurred to me and I was certain it had never occurred to Jane either.

“But Henry, Jane and I often spoke of lying side by side in that churchyard—I am sure that is what she wished.”

He looked at me with kind eyes.

“Cass, we must realize that our sister is, was, a person of stature, admired by the greatest in the land, she deserves honour in death.”

I could not remember ever feeling so angry with one of my brothers before.

“Honour in death? I shall honour her forever, no matter where she is buried. It is surely right that she should lie near her family, near the house where she was so happy and where she wrote her finest works. I cannot agree to this and she would . . .”

He interrupted me. “No, Cassandra, on this I must insist. We have a duty to her public as well as to her family.”

"My only duty is to carry out her wishes and I tell you she would not have wanted a public tomb, it would have been distasteful to her. I knew her wishes better than anyone, that you cannot deny."

"Indeed I would not, dear Cass, but in this you must be overruled. And I myself feel that Jane herself would have been vastly diverted by the thought of people visiting her grave in a fine cathedral instead of an obscure churchyard."

"Visiting her grave? You expect pilgrimages then? Perhaps, Henry, you may find a way of charging visitors in order to help you in your current straitened circumstances?"

I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth, for they were the cruellest I had ever spoken to him. To my surprise, he smiled.

"Cass, that was a remark worthy of Jane herself, how we shall miss that sharp wit of hers!"

"Forgive me, Henry, I meant only . . ."

"I know how great the loss is for you, my dear, greater than for anyone. That is why you are perhaps not the best person to make decisions about arrangements, you had best leave it to me. And I am sure that when Edward and Frank arrive, they will be of the same mind as I. Now let us compose a notice for the newspaper. I have already set down some words for your approval."

What could I do?

I was not used to disagreeing with my brothers, or indeed with any man, and I could see there was some merit in what he was saying. Jane did belong to a wider circle than her family, however reluctant I was to admit it. I knew too that she enjoyed her fame, in spite of protesting that she did not. I only resented her success for the distance it had created between us.

Perhaps it was true that she would prefer a public grave to what Henry called the obscurity of Chawton churchyard. But, oh! the

thought of us not being together at the end, the thought of not being able to visit the grave on my morning walk, to spend time with her, to talk with her in my mind . . . I could not bear it.

"You must see the Dean for permission if you seek burial in the Cathedral," I said shortly. "We shall consider the notice when you return."

And, I reflected, nothing could take her away from me now. But, sitting beside her on that Friday morning, touching her cold hand, I vowed that her memory would be sacred not just to me but to everyone. To the outside world, Jane and our relationship as sisters would always be seen as what she herself had called "*a picture of perfection*."

No one was ever to know about the dark side of her, about the sharpness of her wit, about the unkind view she often took of human beings. She was to be revered as a Christian, as a devoted daughter, a kind sister, a much loved aunt. If she was to be publicly remembered, it would be on my terms. I resolved to give her the control in death that she lacked in life.

I do not think I quite believed at that time that there would be much interest in our dear sister now that she was gone, although the thought of the two unpublished novels weighed heavily upon me. I would think of that later, perhaps. For the moment I would hope that Henry might be refused permission for the Cathedral burial and so her privacy would be assured.

Of course my hopes were false.

The Dean, who knew Henry from his recent ordination, was only too glad to offer burial in the Cathedral and Elizabeth Heathcote, also well known to him and willing to persuade him if necessary, did not even have to add her voice to do so. The only stipulation he made was that the ceremony was to take place early in the morning before services began.

When Edward and Frank arrived two days later, it was they who agreed the to notice for the "Salisbury and Winchester Journal." I did not see it until it appeared. They did not show it to me before it was placed, but I did not have the energy to point that out to them and they seemed prodigiously delighted with their composition:

On Friday the 18th inst. Died in this city, Miss Jane Austen, youngest daughter of the late Rev. George Austen, Rector of Steventon, in the county and authoress of Emma, Mansfield Park, Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility. Her manners were gentle, her affections ardent, her candour not to be surpassed and she lived and died as became a humble Christian.

I would not myself have mentioned her candour lest people mistook the meaning for malice but, that apart, it was acceptable.

The funeral took place on the following Thursday, July 24. It was a brilliantly sunny day, the kind Jane loved and, in the early morning at least, not oppressively hot. I was most disappointed that James was not well enough to attend but dear James Edward, always so devoted to his aunt, rose early and rode from Steventon to join the small party.

For me, the closing of the coffin was the worst. To look my last on that dear face, to know that finally we were to part was almost beyond bearing. They put the coffin on a kind of low cart and wheeled it along the quiet street.

I watched them go, Henry at the front with his hand resting on the coffin under the pall which covered it, Edward, Frank and James Edward behind, and thought my heart would break.

As ever I found solace in practical matters, as breakfast was to be prepared for my brothers and nephew and for the Precentor, Mr. Watkins, who read the service.

I wished that I too could have been present, but no woman ever attended a funeral, so I had to be content with the account of the solemn service which James Edward was kind enough to give me when they returned.

I could see that my brothers were most affected, Henry in particular, and this was a comfort to me. They could not miss her as I did but they loved her too, I knew.

After breakfast, there was some awkwardness as we had agreed that the will was to be read, but James Edward did not seem prepared to depart. So we sat about making conversation, mostly memories of Jane, until Henry took James Edward aside and told him the situation. He then made his departure, promising to call at Chawton on his way home to give Grandmama and Martha an account of the event.

We settled in the sitting room overlooking the street to read the will. Henry read it out. I had read it earlier, on the day after her death; it was after all addressed to Miss Austen and I knew that my brothers might be surprised by its contents.

"To my dearest sister Cassandra Elizabeth, I bequeath everything of which I die possessed or which may be hereafter due to me."

This I knew would not surprise them as it might have been expected, but I could see they were shocked that it was I and not Henry, or James as eldest brother, who was to be executrix and have charge of all her works. The sums involved were very small. She had left a note of her income from writing with the will and, apart from £600 in navy Fives, there was but £84.13s.

"I cannot believe that there is so little," said Edward. "After all the success of her novels, it seems an extraordinarily small sum."

"Well, you know that she contributed to the household and bought a present or two—do you begrudge her that?"

"Cass, do not take on, I beg you, I meant no disrespect to our dear Jane. It is only that one expects a successful novelist . . ."

"Forgive me, Edward, I know I am perhaps a little over sensitive on her behalf at present . . ."

"To be sure, my dear," said Henry, "it is only to be expected. You must let us take all the worry of this task from you. Jane would never have intended you to be distressed."

"Henry, I am not distressed, only determined to carry out Jane's wishes to the best of my ability. Please read on."

"To my dear brother Henry, the sum of £50."

"Dear Jane, she recognizes my current poverty."

"It is in respect of the help you gave her with publication—she told me so before she died."

He smiled with tears in his eyes and Frank and Edward nodded their agreement.

"Now though," Henry went on, "we come to something rather strange and I think we should consider whether dear Jane quite understood what she was doing . . . £50 to *Madame Bigeon*? It is most odd surely?"

"Who on earth is Madame Bigeon?" asked Frank.

"My servant, the former nanny to little Hastings," replied Henry.

"£50 to a servant? Surely she must have been wandering?" This from Edward and, as I expected one of them to do, Frank pointed out that the will was unwitnessed and that there was therefore no obligation to honour its contents.

"Jane wished it so and I shall honour her wishes. I assume you do not question her bequest to Henry?"

"Of course we do not," said Edward. "It is right and proper that Henry's part in helping her with publication is recognized but to make a bequest to a servant is hardly fitting for the daughter of a gentleman."

"I only know that Jane and I discussed her wishes on the day before she died and she sent two letters to ladies telling them that they should never want while any of her estate remained. They know already what she intended. I am sure you would not like it to be known that you ignored the wishes of your famous sister."

"Two ladies? But only one is mentioned here. Who is the other?"

"You will not like the answer, Edward, for the other lady is a former servant of yours, Miss Sharpe."

I could see he was astonished.

"Miss Sharpe? Our governess? But why should Jane wish to help her? I hear she makes a pretty penny from her school anyway."

"That is why Jane made no specific bequest now, but she instructed me to ensure Miss Sharpe might submit a claim at any time in the future should she find herself in need."

I was conscious of speaking to my brothers more firmly than I had ever done and I saw them exchange glances. They were probably thinking that I was being as sharp as Jane herself and I was delighted if they thought so. I could not behave so firmly for myself but, on her behalf, I was finding it came quite naturally to me.

"But do you not find it strange, Cass, that Jane should remember servants rather than her own family? We might have expected a bequest to Fanny and Anna at least."

"Edward, that simply shows you did not know your sister as I did. Anna has a husband and Fanny is comfortably situated. Jane admired and sympathized with women who had to shift for themselves and that is what her will shows. It shall be carried out as she intended, with or without your permission."

"Very well—it is of little consequence," said Henry, "but we must make plans about her remaining work. I believe there are two completed manuscripts?"

"Yes, there is 'Susan,' which is now to be called 'Catherine,' and 'Persuasion' and there are five chapters of the last work also—but that is not available, of course."

"Why, that is a prodigious amount for you to negotiate with, Henry," said Frank. "You must approach Murray immediately."

"And I wonder if we could complete the last work? Five chapters you say? Perhaps young James Edward might attempt it?"

I got up, so angry I could scarcely speak.

"Someone else complete her work? Have you taken leave of your senses? Is the work she laboured over when she knew herself to be dying to be so treated, offered for completion by an amateur writer whom, however high his opinion of himself, she did not value?"

"Come, Cass, it was only a suggestion. Jane was you know always most encouraging to James Edward."

"She was encouraging to me about my drawing, but that does not mean I could fill her shoes. You know that her sweetness of temper was such that she was always kind to others."

"Whatever our dear sister was, she was not always kind as all of her family knows. I loved her dearly too, Cass, but I am not blind to her faults."

"Henry, I am determined that her memory will be sacred. Only the best parts of her will be remembered publicly. Would not we all like to be assured of the same when we are gone?"

"Let us leave this conversation until tomorrow, when we may all discuss matters more temperately," said Frank with a meaningful glance at the others.

"Meantime, Cass, may we all read the manuscripts she left, that we might have an idea of how to approach the matter of publication?"

I could think of no better way to spend the afternoon of the funeral than in perusal of her work, so I fetched the two works from

their travelling case and, having seen my brothers settle to their reading, went to order the dinner.

Frank had never heard “Susan,” or “Catherine” as it was now called, though Henry was quite familiar with it because of his earlier efforts to get it published and Edward was too because he had heard Jane read it at Godmersham in the early days. So Frank began on that manuscript while Henry began “Persuasion.” Edward went briefly to call on Elizabeth Heathcote in the Close to give her an account of the morning’s business. When he returned he took up the pages which Henry had finished reading and all three were thus engaged until dinner.

After the meal was over, and it was not prolonged as we had little appetite either for food or conversation, Frank took up the first pages of “Persuasion,” as Henry and Edward read to the end, the end which Jane had re-drafted when she was so ill.

As the tea was brought in I said to them, “Well?”

“It is magnificent—her best I believe,” said Henry, always the first with an opinion and always wanting to be the authority on her work. “It must be published and soon, do you not agree, Edward?”

“Of course it must and I believe that if you were to negotiate the publication of the two books together, we might command a larger price, especially when the world knows there will be no more from dear Jane.”

Frank put down the pages he was reading. “‘Catherine’ is altogether a lighter, less assured work but in company with this one . . . why any publisher would be foolish to pass up the opportunity—I do not altogether think that the title is an apt one though. If it carries the name of the heroine I fear readers will expect another ‘Emma’, which this is not. ‘Emma’ was always my favourite as you know. I believe we should find another name for the work.”

“As we talk of titles, I am not at all sure that ‘Persuasion’ is a

good one," said Henry. "It wants style. I believe we should rename that one too."

I could not believe that in the space of less than one day they had so forgot Jane's wish that I was to be the sole owner of her work. Already they were speaking of "we" as though they all had equal value in the discussion.

"Those were the titles Jane chose and those shall be the titles the works carry, so let us have no more talk of changes," I said, my voice trembling with emotion.

"Cass dear, I am not sure you quite understand . . ."

"Henry, I understand only too well that most gentlemen think themselves superior to a poor spinster in most things. Perhaps you are in many things—I know that I frequently urged Jane to leave all details about publication to you, as I thought it unfitting for her to be involved in business matters. But in this I will not be moved. I am charged to carry out Jane's wishes and that is what I shall do. It is not after all as if any of the three of you have a blameless record so far as business is concerned. Your bank failed, Henry, with consequences for both Frank and Edward, I believe."

That was unkind I knew, but somehow I felt Jane with me and it gave me strength to say things which did not come easily to me. They evidently saw my passion and that I would not be moved, so we agreed, as we drank our tea, to speak no more of business that evening, but to read together a scene from "Persuasion." We read the final two chapters, taking parts as we did when we were young but so aware, all of us, of the voice that was missing. Yet in a way it was not, she was there with us in every line. We laughed and cried together with love and admiration for our dear sister, content in the knowledge that, though she had left us, this part of her would always be available not only to us, but to all her readers.

Of course I did not quite get my own, or rather Jane's, way. As the world knows now, "Persuasion" was retained as a title but "Catherine," or "Susan," as we had known it for so long, became "Northanger Abbey." Henry came to see me at Chawton to discuss the publisher's suggestion. He was rather apologetic.

"You see, Cass, Murray says that as the work is in the Gothic style, the name of the Abbey would better set the tone."

I was touched by his attitude and understood that he was taking account of my feelings and not riding roughshod over them as he once might have done. Moreover, there was no more mention from anyone about completion of the last work.

I felt that Jane would be pleased and gave my consent.

"They are to publish both works together and consider they will sell very well, with a handsome profit for you, Cass."

"And I hope it may be soon, we do not wish to wait the length of time dear Jane had to endure sometimes."

"No, indeed. They expect to be ready by Christmas and out in the New Year, I am pleased to say," he replied, "but there is something more I want you to consider, my dear."

I looked at him warily and he smiled.

"I think you will like this. We have the opportunity to add a biographical note about our dear sister to accompany the volumes and we may say whatever we wish about her."

"And shall we have, what do they call it, 'editor's control' over what is said?"

"We may write it ourselves and they will publish it complete—perhaps you would like to write it?"

"No, Henry, you know I could do no such thing. I have no talent in that direction but, if you write it, I might perhaps approve it?"

"I would think of nothing else," he said. "I shall draft some lines for your perusal this very evening."

It was very much Henry. As I read it, I could hear Jane's hearty laugh. "Faultless? Oh, Henry, how can you?"

Faultless herself, as nearly as human nature can be, she always sought, in the faults of others, something to excuse, to forgive or forget.

"Take your scissors to those wicked letters, Cass," I knew she would be saying, "and oh, how modest he makes me out to be!"

For, though in composition she was equally rapid and correct, yet an invincible distrust of her own judgement induced her to withhold her work from the public, till time and many perusals had satisfied her that the charm of recent composition was dissolved.

"Oh and of course the rejections from publishers had nothing to do with this, had it, Cass?" she was saying to me.

I had thought that I should find the reading of this memoir a melancholy business but, in truth, I found myself sharing the amusement that she would have found in it.

How she would have laughed at dear Henry's opinion:

Though the frailties, foibles and follies of others could not escape her immediate detection, yet even on their vices did she never trust herself to comment with unkindness.

It was not Jane, of course, but Henry understood that this was how she was to be remembered. Hers was such a complex nature that it was not possible to explain to those who did not love her that

she could be cruel and kind, disparaging and compassionate, bitter and hopeful, almost in the same breath. We must paint a simple picture—a life by “*no means of event*” as Henry put it—and the real Jane would remain known only to me.

I was content with that.



TWENTY

My Life After Jane

Returning to Chawton was harder, far harder, than I could possibly have imagined. As long as I was in Winchester—and I stayed a week or so more—I could imagine that she was not gone, that the time since that rainy May day when we arrived had been some kind of terrible dream. Elizabeth Heathcote and the Dean called each day and were very kind. They both accompanied me when I walked on my last evening to see the vault in the north aisle of the nave of the cathedral where she lay.

There was no plaque yet, but Henry had this matter in hand and we were to agree on the wording when I reached home. Elizabeth had arranged for us to visit the Deanery garden on our way to the church. We picked a small posy of sweet peas and stock to lay beside the vault. I knelt beside it and said a prayer of thankfulness for her life and asked for God's strength in facing life without her.

James had recovered enough to come in his carriage to fetch me and I paid a last visit to the vault with him before we quit the city.

"Be assured, my dear," he said, as he handed me into the carriage, "we shall arrange for you to visit the tomb whenever you wish. Henry has told me that you would have preferred her near you at Chawton."

"I think she would have preferred it too, James, but it is a great honour to be there in such a fine place. Too much honour can never be paid her as far as I am concerned, as you know."

"You have had too much grief in your life, dear Cass. I remember still the loss of Tom, who would have made you such a fine husband."

"Yes, he would, but then I should not have enjoyed the privilege of being so close to Jane."

"You have been a most devoted sister, not only to her but to us all. We are all grateful for what you have done, for Anna, for Edward's children, for Mama, sometimes I think at the expense of your own happiness."

"No, James, helping you all has been my happiness and, now that Jane is gone, I must find consolation in continuing to be a good aunt."

"You will always be welcome at Steventon, though I know that Mary may not always be . . ." He paused.

"Mary has been a good sister to me and was so helpful these last few weeks. Jane was most grateful . . ."

He raised his eyebrows.

"No, really, and Jane told her so, told her that she had always been a kind sister to her."

"She lied," he said laconically and we smiled together at the memory.

I had rarely seen Mama cry but, when she met me at the cottage door, both she and Martha were in tears. We held each other.

"No one is more sincerely mourned than our dear Jane," I said. "But she will be greeted with joy in Heaven."

"That at least is a comfort," said my mother, "and I am a fortunate woman, I must remember that. Most mothers have to bury a child, but for me this is my first loss, not that that makes it any easier to bear."

Martha offered to share the room with me that night, but I assured her I would be well enough alone. I know it was kindly

meant, but having our room to myself gave me no anxiety. It was filled with memories, mostly good ones and there on my own I could dwell on them and relish them.

If I had known then that I was to spend, what is it now? the next twenty six years cherishing those memories, I would not have believed it possible. As the older sister, I had always expected that I would be the first to die; I was simply unable to imagine that I could live without her. I tried to remember if I had felt like that after Tom died, but though then my grief was terrible to bear, I had Jane to comfort me, Jane to talk to, Jane even to make me laugh a little.

In truth, though I am sure that Tom and I should have been happy together, the life I had shared with Jane was to me infinitely superior to that which any marriage could have provided, judging at least by all the marriages I had observed. No woman of my acquaintance had enjoyed the level of intimacy which had been vouchsafed to my sister and me. There was always a level of reserve between husband and wife, always a deference which a wife must show to her husband, always some subduing of her wishes to his. Jane and I were free of those expectations and knew each other so well that we shared our most intimate thoughts.

We had, it is true, had some periods of being somewhat estranged—no, that is too strong a word—we were sometimes a little distant from each other, through the years of her depressed spirits, especially when her fame as an author might have turned her head a little. But I was so thankful that her last illness had given us the opportunity to regain our old intimacy, at the last we were closer than we had ever been.

This is what helped me to be strong on her behalf now, to be determined to preserve her memory as I wanted it to be, to protect it from too much examination, to ensure that only the sweetest side of her nature was known to the outside world. I did not believe then

and do not believe now that I have misrepresented her. The sweet side of her nature was strong and she showed it often. The sour part of her was shown within the family occasionally, but mostly only to me and I felt no responsibility to share that with what Henry was pleased to call “her public.”

As for her secrets, they were sacred to me when she was alive and even more so now that she was dead.

The first few months after her death were filled by those activities which are so necessary at such a time, with correspondence and the distribution of some of her possessions. I remembered Marianne’s words *“My plans shall keep me busy, with no time for regrets.”*

I had always found that activity was a solace and it pleased me to keep busy. In sorting out her things, I found some memorandums in which she indicated how she wanted them distributed. She wished a gold chain to be sent to Louisa, her goddaughter, and a lock of hair to Fanny. As I told her, *“every request of your beloved aunt will be sacred to me,”* and asked her to tell me if she preferred it to be set in a brooch or a ring.

She asked for a brooch inscribed with her aunt’s name which pleased me but, when I sent it to her, I could not help remembering how Jane had been so adamant that she herself would never have wanted such a thing from Mr. Atkins. I kept that to myself though. Many years later, I did mention Jane’s meeting with Mr. Atkins to Fanny, but I never passed on any details about him, never spoke of him to anyone else, so I am confident that no one will know or be able to find out about the tragedy. I myself had a lock of hair set into a pearl ring and I have worn it constantly ever since. It is to go to Anna when I die.

I sent a lock of hair to Miss Sharpe, reminding her of Jane’s undertaking to give her help if she ever needed it. I also sent her a

pair of clasps which Jane had worn when we used to attend balls and a small bodkin, as I knew she would treasure these even though to others they might seem trifling. I gave Martha Jane's topaz ring, for she had been a loyal friend to both of us.

"But, Cass," she protested, "it should rightly be yours."

"No indeed, I have her hair in a ring and that is all I want."

I felt so pleased that I was able to make decisions of this kind, because Jane had left me all her possessions. I knew she had done so in order to give me this authority and I was honoured that she had trusted me to carry out her wishes. Even where she had not stated her wishes, I felt I knew them anyway. If I was in doubt, I would go into what I always called "our" room and talk to her in my thoughts. I would emerge with my mind easy and confident in what I had to do.

Her will was proved in December of the year she died. After payment of the funeral expenses and the two legacies, I received £561. That seemed like the closing of a chapter and we spent a sad Christmas with James and Mary at Steventon. James' appearance gave me cause for anxiety, as he looked tired and pale. We all looked forward to the publication of the last two books, which was due at the beginning of 1818.

The dual edition sold well and I was surprised to receive another £500 before the end of the year. I did not see reviews, but Henry told me they were favourable and that our sister would soon be hailed as a great writer.

"Perhaps one of the greatest ever," he said.

To me she had always been a great writer, but I was pleased when Egerton agreed with Henry that "Pride and Prejudice" would be reissued, as it had always been the family favourite.

I was very surprised when Henry told me some time later that all six books were to be translated into French and published there.

“How amused Jane would have been and dear Eliza would have been delighted,” he said.

I did not try to influence Henry very much with these negotiations. I realised that he was much more capable than I of carrying them out and I trusted him. As long as nothing was published about Jane herself without my consent, I was content.

In any case, domestic duties were beginning to become onerous again. I was often needed at Steventon, as James’ health continued to deteriorate. He resisted taking to his bed but, when I saw him return from parish visits, scarcely able to dismount from his horse, I knew that Mary was right to be concerned.

“If he should die, Cass,” she said to me one day when he was resting after some visits, “we shall, as you know, have to leave the rectory and where shall we go?”

“Why to Bath,” I said, “as we had to.” I regretted immediately speaking so unsympathetically and added, “Forgive me, Mary, I did not mean to be unkind.”

She smiled. “I heard dear Jane in that remark—and you have every right to speak so, for I fear we were not as considerate to you as we might have been all those years ago.”

“It is how it must be, Mary, and I dare say Henry may take the living, so that it will stay in the family as it did when my father gave it up. But let us hope dear James will recover. He is only fifty-four after all, a young man. My father kept the living until seventy.”

But James did not recover and it happened as I predicted.

When he passed away, Henry took over the living and Mary, with James Edward and Caroline, had to move to Bath as we had done twenty or so years before, at the start of that dreadful unsettled period. I spent many an hour reading Jane’s letters from that time, remembering how her spirits were so cast down and the flame of her genius extinguished for so long following the move.

I cautioned Henry not to try to hurry them out, remembering our own distress, but he was about to marry again. He was betrothed to Mr. Papillon's niece Eleanor Jackson and impatient to settle. I heard such an echo of Jane in a letter I received from Caroline.

Uncle paid my mother every due attention, but his own spirits he could not repress and it is not pleasant to witness the elation of your successor in gaining what you have lost.

"Yes," I could hear Jane say, "now you know how it feels."

So how have I passed these long years since the sun of my life died?

I have been very concerned with the usual family matters and seem to have kept busy. At first, I felt I could not live without her, as all do who lose a much loved one; I certainly did not imagine that I would live so many years more. My life without her was, as Henry had put it in referring to hers, "not by any means a life of event," but I have become content enough. Mama and Martha and I lived tranquilly together, dining at 3.30 and retiring early.

I never passed through the front sitting room without seeing Jane there in my mind's eye. When one day I came upon William Littleworth oiling the creaking door, I broke down in tears, hurrying upstairs to my room and hearing my mother in the room across the corridor crying also. I had no doubt it was for the same cause, but we did not speak of it. That was our way. We did talk of Jane sometimes in the evening, as we sat over our work. We talked of the good times, of her talent, of her quick wit and laughed often at the memory of it. We did not speak of the difficult times, especially not of the strain between her and Mama.

Sometimes when I heard Mama speak of her with such pride to visitors, I had a moment's sadness that she had been unable to say such things to Jane herself. But then, I reasoned, many families are like that; I felt certain that by the end Jane had known that Mama admired her, even though it took a long time for them to come to terms with each other. I have sometimes wondered remorsefully whether I might have been more helpful in helping them to understand that it was their likeness to each other that caused the difficulties. Although I read Jane's work constantly in the privacy of "*our*" room, it was some years before I could bring myself to participate in reading her work aloud to the family as we always used to.

However, one Christmas at Godmersham, Fanny prevailed on us all to read a scene from "Emma." She had recently visited our distant cousins who lived in Surrey and had been taken to Box Hill. So we chose the picnic scene, which made us laugh and cry.

It was a special pleasure to me to see my younger nephews and nieces hear her work for the first time; to observe how they enjoyed it and asked Fanny and Elizabeth and Edward for "*more stories of Aunt Jane*." We read the Christmas Eve scene with Emma and Mr. Elton finally being conveyed home in the carriage and laughed immoderately as we always used to.

Mama continued in good health for some years until her eyesight began to fail and she developed a good deal of pain in her limbs. She told me often in that last year that she wished for death. I remember her telling James Edward one day when he called to see her.

"I sometimes think that God Almighty must have forgotten me but I dare say he will come for me in his own good time."

Some family events were a source of joy to her—to see her grandsons James Edward and William ordained, for example.

William took over the living at Steventon when Henry gave it up and Mama was able to hear him give his first sermon from the pulpit where my father had preached for so long. But there were sad events too—the death of James of course in 1819 and Frank’s wife Mary died, just like dear Elizabeth, giving birth to her eleventh child.

“Oh, the poor animal,” I could hear Jane say.

Mama, though sorry to lose yet another daughter-in-law, made her displeasure at so many children plain.

“Hardly fair, from one who produced eight herself,” was the comment I imagined from Jane.

Charles remarried in 1820, which I thought would please Mama, but he chose his dead wife’s sister Harriet, whom we had never liked and, when she began to produce yet more children, Mama did not hesitate to express her disapproval. She did not do so directly, except by a certain coldness on the rare occasions they came to stay at Chawton Manor.

Once they had gone, though, she would complain endlessly about the poor manners of the children, how foolish Harriet was to be in the increasing way again and how Charles might have had his pick of older widows who would have made him a more suitable wife. I missed Jane so much at times like this, missed the wicked comments she would have made about Mama and Harriet in the privacy of our room. But I would content myself with reading some of her sharper letters and smile to myself at the memories.

Mama bore her increasing infirmity and the virtual loss of her sight tolerably well but, as she was so helpless, caring for her took up a great deal of my time and that of Martha. Because of these duties, I never did manage to visit Winchester and dear Jane’s tomb.

In the last year, Mama had to be dressed, fed and tended to almost like a child, though thankfully her mind retained its sharp-

ness. She still enjoyed the novels of Sir Walter Scott, but her greatest pleasure was to hear Jane's work. I spent many an afternoon reading the books aloud to her, sometimes in fine weather sitting in the shade of the yew tree in the garden, but usually in the front parlour where the books had been written.

Just once in those last few months did Mama mention Jane as her daughter, not as the writer. "I was not always as kind to her as I might have been," she said as I came to the end of "Emma." "I did not rightly understand her and I judged her too harshly," she said almost to herself. "I hope she knows I am sorry."

I took her hand. "She knows, Mama, and did before she was taken from us."

"I hope so," she said quietly, "oh! I do hope so."

It was very sad that Mama died in January 1827, just before Frank became an admiral, because that would certainly have redeemed him in her eyes, concerned as she always was with rank. Charles became an admiral too, but that was long after we lost Mama. She lived until she was eighty-seven and, as we laid her to rest in Chawton churchyard where I had thought to bury Jane, I heard her voice whispering to me, "Well, Cass, for a lady of such indifferent health, our mother has lasted tolerably well, has she not?"

I had been quite taken aback, when Frank came to visit Chawton during Mama's last illness, to see that he was taking an interest in Martha. I teased her about it gently when we were alone sometimes and was amazed to see her, a woman of sixty-two, blush like a young girl. I suppose I was not surprised therefore when, a few months later, they announced that they wished to marry and would like to offer me a home with them.

"What, leave Chawton? I could not leave the memories of Jane. No, I could not consider it."

"But shall you not be lonely? Can you manage here alone?" said Frank, quite concerned.

"I shall not be alone. She is here with me everywhere. I can read her works and her letters and relive all the things we did together. Besides, I shall always I hope be welcome in my brothers' houses, as I have been hitherto."

"With so large a family to take care of, Cass, I shall be in need of you," said Martha.

"At least, as he has chosen such an old woman for a wife, we can be assured that we shall have no more nephews or nieces in that direction. His eleven must suffice," I could hear Jane say.

What I said to them was true. I was never lonely.

Now that I was free to travel as I chose, I continued to spend a large part of the year at Godmersham, almost always for Christmas and for the July rent day. Fanny had married about three years after her dear aunt Jane's death but I fear her choice of husband would not have pleased Jane. I did not find it surprising, given that she was so used to caring for a family ever since the untimely death of her mother, that she chose a widower with six children, Sir Edward Knatchbull.

"Well, he is rich to be sure and titled, so she has done tolerably well for herself," would have been Jane's comment I expect. However, she most certainly would not have been pleased that dear Fanny was almost immediately in the increasing way and continued so almost every year until her own nine children were added to the six stepchildren she had acquired upon her marriage.

She was an excellent and devoted mother, most welcoming to me when I accepted one of her frequent invitations to visit. Her husband went into Parliament and, during his absences in London, I would spend time with her and one of her sisters, usually Marianne, at her

splendid establishment near Ashford. With so large a family, it was not very peaceful and as I left I often felt as Jane had, thankful for our single blessedness.

I was always welcome too with Frank and Martha at Portsmouth. Martha made a fine stepmother and it was a pleasure to see how happy she made Frank. She could have gone to sea with him when he became an Admiral, but chose to stay at home to oversee the household. Her recent death was a great blow to me as well as to Frank and her stepchildren, whose love she had earned, as she had earned mine, by her devoted service to other people.

When I was at Chawton, Anna was a frequent visitor, with her ever increasing brood, and my nephew Edward came to live at Chawton Manor, so there was always company available. One place I never visited again was Lyme—I could not have borne it.

With my sewing and my correspondence and the garden I was well content.

I read some of Jane's letters almost every day when I was at home, but I never took them with me when I travelled. I suppose I had a fear that I might die suddenly and their care would then fall to others. It was, I think, always in my mind that I must be sure somehow that the letters would not fall into the wrong hands. By the wrong hands, I meant someone who might see that they would be of interest to a publisher.

This was not a concern to me in the early years after Jane's death, because it did not cross my mind at first that anyone would wish to write anything about her. I was encouraged in this view by the fact that, for fifteen years or so, no one showed any interest in Jane's work and indeed all the novels went out of print.

But dear Henry, of course, would not let the matter rest. I expect he was motivated by wishing to obtain for Jane the fame that he

always thought was due, but he was also once again in straitened circumstances, so perhaps he hoped that there might be some financial gain for himself. He did, I remember, describe himself as joint proprietor of her work when he approached a new publisher, but he said that Mr. Bentley would not take the offer seriously if he did not have some claim on the work.

Bentley agreed to re-issue all the novels, after buying "Pride and Prejudice" back from Egerton, but he wanted something more in the way of a biographical note than Henry had produced in 1818. He pressed Henry very hard for sight of a diary or notebooks or any letters he had kept from his sister. I held my breath when Henry told me this, but was very glad when he said he had kept none of the letters either he or Eliza had received. He did not ask me what had happened to my letters, as he knew well enough that I would never consent to any one else seeing them.

Bentley was adamant that the new editions must carry a portrait of Jane and asked me for my sketch of her, the only portrait in existence apart from the back view water-colour that I had made just before Papa's death.

I refused.

I was horrified at the thought of my only picture of her passing out of my hands and to his credit he did not ask again. I took the sketch out often and looked at her bright sparkling eyes, her pretty curls. There was no picture of me with which to compare it and as I grew older and my nose, like Mama's, became more pronounced, I did not like consulting the looking glass. The new editions appeared without a portrait. I do not believe Jane would have wanted her likeness to be thus used.

Her wishes, or what I imagined to be her wishes, were always paramount with me. With the income which I now had from

her publications and the legacy I received eventually when Aunt Leigh-Perrot died in 1836, I was tolerably well off and able to live quite comfortably. I always wore black in her memory, but could have a new gown when I wished, or make a gift to my nieces if the fancy took me. I could have dresses of satin too if I had wanted and cloaks of velvet and caps of lace as Jane had promised. As I dressed each morning, I often thought of the descriptions she had given of sprigs and muslins and newly trimmed caps in her letters to me. I am sure that she would be pleased to see me looking at least "*tolerably tidy*."

On Jane's birthday each December, I tried to arrange a dinner or a gathering of some kind and was touched when the family took to making a very special event of this. I was usually at Godmersham or Ashford and sufficient of my nieces and nephews contrived to be present to make a merry party which we always concluded with a reading of one of the most comic scenes. Mr. Collins' proposal was a favourite and Mr. Elton's too.

Very little of unpleasantness disturbed my life, but I was rather displeased when Madame Bigeon, having received a legacy from Jane, seemed to feel that she could ask for a further advance on a regular basis. When she died some five years after Jane, I thought that would be the end of the arrangement but, to my astonishment, her daughter Madame Perigord approached me, as she had fallen on hard times. I asked Henry's advice about whether I should advance her any money and he told me I was under no obligation to do so. I gave some thought to it and tried to imagine what Jane would have done. "Is she not a woman who shifts for herself? Of course I shall help her."

I did not want to continue direct contact, so I arranged for a regular sum to be paid directly to her for the term of her natural life. I was content with this arrangement and felt Jane approved of it too.

When I was at Chawton, I took my morning walk each day, either to Alton or upon the gravel if the weather was not fine. I still visited some of the poor, now young William's parishioners, and occasionally village children came to me to learn their letters.

I was especially pleased to receive the daughters or sons of the children that Jane and I had taught. I suppose I always hoped that I could persuade them to enjoy Jane's work, but had to be content with most to enable them to follow the prayer book and read the "Farming Review." One young woman pleased me greatly by describing the scene from "Emma" where Emma contrives not to have Jane Fairfax's letter read to her by Miss Bates as "the most exciting piece I ever did hear!"

My own copies of the books are covered with notes scribbled in the margins, as I remembered the time a scene was written or first read to me, or something which touched me particularly. My dear, dear, Jane is so clever that each re-reading brings a new pleasure and a new insight.

I had enough to occupy me but as the years went by, I spent more and more time reading and re-reading her dear letters, laughing over them, crying over them and cherishing the memories they brought back to me.



EPILOGUE

Chawton, October 1843

The fire is burning well now. I fed the letters on to the flames in small amounts to be sure they would catch. I made sure that the letters she wrote about Tom Lefroy and Mr. Atkins were amongst the first to be destroyed. As I threw each bundle into the fire, I kissed it.

I did not mind if the servants saw me and thought my behaviour strange. I am glad to be doing this even though I shall miss my regular reading of all the letters. Enough remain to give me and others pleasure, but none I hope which show Jane as she once described herself, "If I am a wild beast, I cannot help it. It is not my own fault."

Indeed it was not her fault and no one will ever be allowed to think so. No one will ever be allowed either to see anything other than the perfection of our relationship as sisters. I am seventy years old now and my life may not be very much longer. I should not like to be suddenly taken ill and unable to make the arrangements for the disposal of Jane's personal effects. Burning the letters is only part of what I have to do and as soon as they are all destroyed I shall begin the rest.

There are three notebooks: I had intended to put those in the fire, but when I looked at them I could not. They contain too many of Jane's precious thoughts. So later today I shall write out my will and ensure that they go to those who will care for them well. Charles shall have one, Frank another; the last shall go to James Edward.

Henry may be disappointed, but I cannot forget that he destroyed all the letters he received from Jane. Anna shall have the deleted chapters of "Persuasion" and Fanny the manuscript of "Lady Susan." Oh! and I shall also give Anna the last work, as I could not trust any of the others to ensure that no one is engaged to complete it.

I shall also send a gift to Anne Sharpe. Unlike Madame Bigeon and her daughter, she has never asked for anything, but I feel Jane would like me to ensure that some part of her estate at least goes to her. £30 will be the right sum, I think.

When I have done all this, I shall settle with a copy of "Persuasion" and re-live those happy days we spent together in Cheltenham, with our intimacy restored and, perhaps, made even stronger by us both knowing that our remaining time together would be short.

I shall be ready to join the sun of my life, the soother of every sorrow, my own dear Jane when my time comes.

Cassandra Austen died in 1845, probably of a stroke, while staying with her brother Frank at Portsmouth.

She was taken home to Chawton, where she lies in the churchyard next to her mother.

Though their graves are separated by sixteen miles, there is surely no doubt that Cassandra is reunited in spirit with her beloved Jane.

About the Author

JILL PITKEATHLEY was born on the Channel Islands of the United Kingdom. She has had a long career in social work, serving as Chief Executive of the Carers National Association (now Carers UK), then becoming a Life Peer in 1997 in the House of Lords. She has twice recovered from cancer, most recently in 2001, when she spent six months in the hospital. A long-standing enthusiast for the works of Jane Austen, she resolved at that time, if and when she recovered from her illness, to write a book about the novelist. *Cassandra and Jane* is the result. Jill now enjoys good health, living in London and combining her role as a working peer with continued groundbreaking work in the field of social services.

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Cover design by Mary Schuck

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Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader August 2008
ISBN 978-0-06-170162-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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