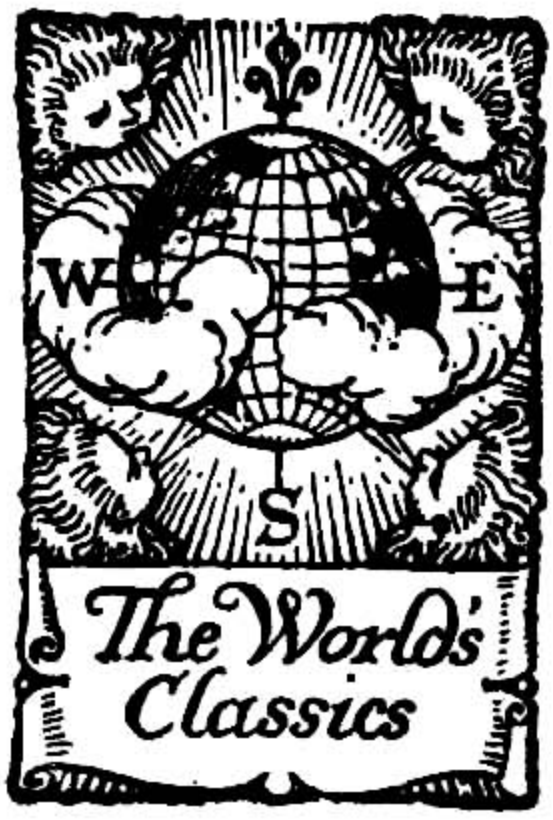
PERSUASION

By JANE AUSTEN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

FORREST REID



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INTRODUCTION

JANE AUSTEN'S novels fall into two groups, the first containing *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey*; the second containing *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. Separating these periods of activity were a few years apparently unproductive; and in each group we find a masterpiece—in the first *Pride and Prejudice*, in the second *Emma*. *Persuasion* cannot, I think, quite be classed with these, but it has the peculiar interest of being her last completed tale, and gives us, in Anne Elliot, the most lovable of all her heroines. Nor is there, even in its less felicitous moments, anything to suggest declining powers. The story never drags, as *Mansfield Park* occasionally drags, its comedy shows no sign of flagging spirits, and its love passages are more intimate and tender than any others Jane Austen ever wrote.

The book was begun in the summer or autumn of 1815, and at the commencement of 1816 symptoms of the mysterious disease to which Miss Austen was eventually to succumb had already declared themselves. Mysterious—because we do not know what that malady was, beyond the vague description of it as a kind of wasting-away or decline. She had seemed to be in perfect health when in 1815 she had gone to London for the publication of *Emma*. Early in 1816 there had been family worries connected with her brother Henry, who in March was declared bankrupt, but these, though they must have caused anxiety, quite fail to account for the physical weakness which from now on gradually gained upon her. In May 1816

she and her sister Cassandra spent three weeks at Cheltenham, and Jane then was far from well. As the year advanced she grew worse, though still she has nothing more definite to complain of than a 'want of strength', and as late as January 1817 we find her writing optimistically of her improving health. At all events, the feebleness of her body did not affect her mind, and on the 18th of July 1816 the first draft of *Persuasion* was completed. In August she revised it. The penultimate chapter failed to satisfy her; she thought it, as her nephew Mr. J. E. Austen Leigh tells us in his *Memoir*, 'tame and flat, and was desirous of producing something better. This weighed upon her mind, the more so probably on account of the weak state of her health; so that one night she retired to rest in very low spirits. But such depression was little in accordance with her nature, and was soon shaken off. The next morning she awoke to more cheerful views and brighter inspirations: the sense of power revived; and imagination resumed its course. She cancelled the condemned chapter, and wrote two others, entirely different, in its stead.'

This last statement, however, requires modification. As it stands it is misleading, for much of the conclusion of the cancelled chapter was retained in the revised draft. On the other hand, all that is most important is new—the scenes of the Musgroves' visit to Bath and of Anne's reconciliation with her lover. In the original version the reconciliation takes place in Admiral Croft's lodgings and is much less ingeniously contrived. The Admiral, under the impression that Anne has engaged herself to her cousin Mr. Elliot, deputes Captain Wentworth to tell her that he will have his lease of Kellynch Hall cancelled so that she and her

husband may occupy the house. This is not very satisfactory, since quite apart from the Admiral's own share in it, it is most unlikely that Wentworth would have consented to perform such a task. The incident in fact strikes us as a rather clumsy piece of machinery, though with the actual reconciliation there is no fault to be found.

'No, Sir,' said Anne, 'there is no message. You are misin—— the Admiral is misinformed. I do justice to the kindness of his intentions, but he is quite mistaken. There is no truth in any such report.'

He was a moment silent. She turned her eyes towards him for the first time since his re-entering the room. His colour was varying, and he was looking at her with all the power and keenness which she believed no other eyes than his possessed.

'No truth in any such report?' he repeated. 'No truth in any *part* of it?'

'None.'

He had been standing by a chair, enjoying the relief of leaning on it, or of playing with it. He now sat down, drew it a little nearer to her, and looked with an expression which had something more than penetration in it—something softer. Her countenance did not discourage. It was a silent but a very powerful dialogue; on his side supplication, on hers acceptance. Still a little nearer, and a hand taken and pressed; and 'Anne, my own dear Anne!' bursting forth in all the fulness of exquisite feeling,—and all suspense and indecision were over. They were reunited.

This certainly is not a poor scene, but the scene substituted for it is better and is brought about with far more plausibility. Readers curious to compare the two versions can easily do so, for the cancelled chapter has been printed both as a separate book and in the *Memoir*.

Jane Austen had never been in a hurry to publish. When her tales were finished and revised she liked still to keep them by her in manuscript for a later revision when she should have had time to forget them a little and the ardours of creation were cooled. The dates on the title-pages of her novels, though following one another fairly closely, by no means coincide with the dates of composition. Writing to Fanny Knight on the 13th of March 1817 she says, 'I have a something ready for publication, which may perhaps appear about a twelvemonth hence. It is short—about the length of *Catherine*.' And she is doubtful whether Fanny will care for it: 'You may perhaps like the heroine, as she is almost too good for me.'

This 'something' is, of course, *Persuasion*, and *Catherine* is *Northanger Abbey*, which was issued with it though written long before. *Northanger Abbey* had indeed undergone more than one transformation. As *Susan*, it was first sold to Messrs. Crosby of London for £10, but never published by them. The manuscript was bought back for the sum given for it, and in 1816, when finally preparing it for the press, Jane supplied the following note. 'This little work was finished in 1803, and intended for immediate publication. It was disposed of to a bookseller, it was even advertised, and why the business proceeded no further, the author has never been able to learn.'

As it turned out, she was never to see it published. At the end of the first draft of *Persuasion* she had written—'Finis, July 18, 1816', and exactly a year later, on the morning of the 18th of July 1817, she died at Winchester, whither she had journeyed to receive medical treatment from a Mr. Lyford, a physician of considerable reputation. Both *Northanger*

Abbey and *Persuasion* were issued posthumously in 1818 by John Murray, as a single work in four volumes, at the price of 24*s*., and prefaced with a brief biographical notice of the author.

Three years later *Persuasion* was translated into French., *La Famille Elliot, ou l'ancienne Inclination* strikes us as an odd and singularly old-fashioned title in comparison with Jane's. *Persuasion* is modern—as modern as *Chance*, *Suspense*, or *Victory*. If an alteration were desirable, it would have been better to have called the book simply *Anne Elliot*, for it is not really a family chronicle, it is Anne's story all through. The other Elliots, Sir Walter, Mary, and Elizabeth (Jane was fond of repeating her christian names), are frankly minor characters, we know nothing more about them than we might gather from contemporary gossip or from a casual meeting in the Octagon Room at Bath. They are done from the outside, and what brings them to life is the light of ironical humour in which they are shown. One might almost add that where minor characters are concerned there is nothing nearly so vitalizing as this mode of presentation, and Jane was a dab at it. She creates Admiral Croft in a single remark: 'And very nice young ladies they both are; I hardly know one from the other': and the elder Mrs. Musgrove in her mere silence concerning Bermuda or Bahama:

> 'But I never went beyond the Streights, and never was in the West Indies. We do not call Bermuda or Bahama, you know, the West Indies.'
>
> Mrs. Musgrove had not a word to say in dissent; she could not accuse herself of having ever called them anything in the whole course of her life.

This playfulness, this vividly personal note, is by far the most endearing quality in Jane Austen's work; her

instinct as to where and when to use it practically never fails her. In her novels I recall only one instance where it seems out of place, and that is in relation to this same Mrs. Musgrove, whose stoutness is supposed to make the expression of maternal grief absurd. Even here we must remember that the good lady's affection for her son had only come into existence after his death; during his brief career as schoolboy and young sailor he had been by no means beloved. Still, there is a hint of callousness in the passage, a failure of sympathy, of imagination, and we find in the letters a similar lapse when she writes, 'Mrs. Hall, of Sherborne, was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband.'

On the other hand it is possible, and I myself think probable, that *Persuasion* would have been subjected to further touches of revision had its author lived, and in spite of the fact that she had already started on a new novel, the fragment now called *Sanditon*. *Persuasion*, as we possess it, does not show the perfect mastery of *Emma*. In much of it we have Jane Austen at her best, but as a whole it is uneven. Of her limitations nobody was more aware than Jane herself. She knew what she *could* do, and was utterly determined not to attempt what she couldn't. She left behind her a delightful plan of a novel which was to embody all the suggestions of her friends, and we can see from it what value she placed on their opinions. The 'moving accident' was not for her: even the very attenuated specimen of it she gives us in the scene of Louisa Musgrove's fall from the steps at Lyme (the main incident in *Persuasion*) suffices to prove its uncon-

geniality. It is the worst thing in the book. Its dramatic emotion is fatally pumped up, and we breathe a sigh of relief when, after an interlude of swooning ladies and passionately agitated gentlemen 'staggering against the wall for support', the true Jane returns with the workmen and boatmen. *They* are collected 'to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report.'

Jane Austen had no gift for treating an adventure (even one so domestic as poor Louisa's), she had no gift for poetry, no sense of mystery, no knowledge of the heights and depths of passion, and if she had a more than superficial feeling for nature she kept it severely under restraint. There is not a lyrical moment in all the novels, she rarely attempts a landscape, and the passage in which she gives a description of Lyme has been absurdly overpraised. 'It has been copied', says Francis Warre Cornish, 'into every Dorsetshire guide-book, and has not lost beauty and freshness'; but to an impartial eye it reveals neither more nor less sensitiveness than one is accustomed to expect from guide-books.

And all this she knew, and being among the most delicate and fastidious of artists, she worked accordingly, on her 'little bit (two inches wide) of ivory', with results more clear and cool and quietly brilliant than any we shall find till we reach certain little masterpieces by the author of *The Reverberator* and *Washington Square*. Not the later Henry James; with the problems that interested *him* she would have had nothing whatever to do. 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery', she writes in the last chapter of *Mansfield Park*. 'I quit such odious subjects as soon as

I can.' And in truth the sinner is as remote from her world as the saint. *Her* subject is an eternal courtship, and her novels are as filled with love-twitterings as the woods in spring. The mothers and daughters alike have no thoughts but for young bachelors. The entire action is concerned with the vicissitudes attendant on getting engaged to be married, and as soon as Elizabeth Bennet becomes Mrs. Darcy, or Emma Woodhouse Mrs. Knightley, or Anne Elliot Mrs. Wentworth, their potentiality as heroines ceases, in any *new* fiction they might figure in they would infallibly be thrust into the background.

And of all these love tales none is so tenderly intimate as *Persuasion*. Anne Elliot has neither Emma's strength of character nor Elizabeth's brilliance, but she has a sweetness and gentleness that never become insipid: she has charm. Moreover, she really is in love; we feel it in every thought she thinks and every word she utters. Wentworth is less realized, but is sufficiently there to justify Anne's affection, a gallant fellow, rather serious, and regarded with a naïve veneration which one trusts he deserves. Anne alone is presented from the inside; her simple heart is revealed to us; she is a creation touching and beautiful, all delicacy and fragrance. And in her simplicity she must have been more difficult to do than either Elizabeth or Emma. She is so far from showy. She never says witty things; she is intelligent, but not strikingly clever; she has passed her first youth; she is self-effacing and, as Lady Russell says, her 'spirits are not high.' But she *is* extremely lovable. All Anne's share in the story is perfectly handled, and leaves behind it a beautiful impression of affection, unselfishness, and fidelity.

The comedy is reserved for the minor characters, and it is good, even if here and there there may be a tendency to over-emphasis. This slight exaggeration is visible in the portrait of Mary, whose 'sore throats, you know, were always worse than anybody's', though her letter to Anne is one of the joys of the book. We see it also in Sir Walter. Both suggest the older comedy of humours. Their foibles are too constantly in evidence, their speeches too invariably in character for truth. Yet who would sacrifice such things as Sir Walter's complaint about the number of plain women in Bath?—'once, as he had stood in a shop in Bond Street, he had counted eighty-seven go by, one after another, without there being a tolerable face among them.' The elder Mrs. Musgrove is really a more living creation than either her daughter-in-law or Sir Walter. Both Jane and Anne, I feel, under-estimate her: they certainly over-estimate the colourless Lady Russell. Mrs. Musgrove is worth a hundred Lady Russells: she is a singularly pleasant person, the soul of good-natured motherliness, as she sits among the children she has brought 'to improve the noise at Uppercross.'

Of the villains of the piece we have but sketches. Neither Mr. Elliot nor Mrs. Clay is much in Jane's line, for they are not sympathetic nor can she extract entertainment from them. Mr. Elliot, it is true, before the penultimate chapter was revised had a rather more important part to play in the plot than he has now, and Mrs. Clay possesses distinct possibilities which have not been worked out. Still, neither is among Jane's happier conceptions.

This, then, is *Persuasion*, a novel with the slightest of plots and only one fully-drawn character, but of which

Jane Austen has made a thing that moves us alternately to laughter and sympathy. The delicate love reveries of Anne Elliot possess a perennial freshness; the colour has not faded nor the salt lost its savour. There is no strangeness in *Persuasion*, there are no surprises; we feel perfectly assured that it will 'end like an old play', that the evil-doers will be confounded and Jack will have Jill. But there is a mind in it, tenderness, humour, irony, the charm of a delightful personality, and above all there is life.

FORREST REID.

CHAPTER I

SIR WALTER ELLIOT, of Kellynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt, as he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century—and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed—this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened:

'ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH-HALL.

'Walter Elliot, born March 1, 1760, married, July 15, 1784, Elizabeth, daughter of James Stevenson, Esq. of South Park, in the county of Gloucester; by which lady (who died 1800) he has issue Elizabeth, born June 1, 1785; Anne, born August 9, 1787; a still-born son, Nov. 5, 1789; Mary, born Nov. 20, 1791.'

Precisely such had the paragraph originally stood from the printer's hands; but Sir Walter had improved it by adding, for the information of himself and his family, these words, after the date of Mary's birth—'married, Dec. 16, 1810, Charles, son and heir of Charles Musgrove, Esq. of Uppercross, in the county of Somerset,'—and by inserting most accurately the day of the month on which he had lost his wife.

Then followed the history and rise of the ancient and respectable family, in the usual terms: how it had

been first settled in Cheshire; how mentioned in Dugdale—serving the office of High Sheriff, representing a borough in three successive parliaments, exertions of loyalty, and dignity of baronet, in the first year of Charles II., with all the Marys and Elizabeths they had married; forming altogether two handsome duodecimo pages, and concluding with the arms and motto: 'Principal seat, Kellynch hall, in the county of Somerset,' and Sir Walter's hand-writing again in this finale:

'Heir presumptive, William Walter Elliot, Esq., great grandson of the second Sir Walter.'

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did; nor could the valet of any new made lord be more delighted with the place he held in society. He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion.

His good looks and his rank had one fair claim on his attachment; since to them he must have owed a wife of very superior character to any thing deserved by his own. Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable; whose judgment and conduct, if they might be pardoned the youthful infatuation which made her Lady Elliot, had never required indulgence afterwards.—She had humoured, or softened, or concealed his failings, and promoted his real respectability for seventeen years; and though not the very happiest being in the world herself, had found enough

in her duties, her friends, and her children, to attach her to life, and make it no matter of indifference to her when she was called on to quit them.—Three girls, the two eldest sixteen and fourteen, was an awful legacy for a mother to bequeath; an awful charge rather, to confide to the authority and guidance of a conceited, silly father. She had, however, one very intimate friend, a sensible, deserving woman, who had been brought, by strong attachment to herself, to settle close by her, in the village of Kellynch; and on her kindness and advice, Lady Elliot mainly relied for the best help and maintenance of the good principles and instruction which she had been anxiously giving her daughters.

This friend, and Sir Walter, did *not* marry, whatever might have been anticipated on that head by their acquaintance.—Thirteen years had passed away since Lady Elliot's death, and they were still near neighbours and intimate friends; and one remained a widower, the other a widow.

That Lady Russell, of steady age and character, and extremely well provided for, should have no thought of a second marriage, needs no apology to the public, which is rather apt to be unreasonably discontented when a woman *does* marry again, than when she does *not*; but Sir Walter's continuing in singleness requires explanation.—Be it known then, that Sir Walter, like a good father, (having met with one or two private disappointments in very unreasonable applications) prided himself on remaining single for his dear daughter's sake. For one daughter, his eldest, he would really have given up any thing, which he had not been very much tempted to do. Elizabeth had succeeded, at sixteen, to all that was possible, of

her mother's rights and consequence; and being very handsome, and very like himself, her influence had always been great, and they had gone on together most happily. His two other children were of very inferior value. Mary had acquired a little artificial importance, by becoming Mrs. Charles Musgrove; but Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne.

To Lady Russell, indeed, she was a most dear and highly valued god-daughter, favourite and friend. Lady Russell loved them all; but it was only in Anne that she could fancy the mother to revive again.

A few years before, Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and as even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her, (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own); there could be nothing in them now that she was faded and thin, to excite his esteem. He had never indulged much hope, he had now none, of ever reading her name in any other page of his favourite work. All equality of alliance must rest with Elizabeth; for Mary had merely connected herself with an old country family of respectability and large fortune, and had therefore *given* all the honour, and received none: Elizabeth would, one day or other, marry suitably.

It sometimes happens, that a woman is handsomer at twenty-nine than she was ten years before; and, generally speaking, if there has been neither ill health nor anxiety, it is a time of life at which scarcely any

charm is lost. It was so with Elizabeth; still the same handsome Miss Elliot that she had begun to be thirteen years ago; and Sir Walter might be excused, therefore, in forgetting her age, or, at least, be deemed only half a fool, for thinking himself and Elizabeth as blooming as ever, amidst the wreck of the good looks of every body else; for he could plainly see how old all the rest of his family and acquaintance were growing. Anne haggard, Mary coarse, every face in the neighbourhood worsting; and the rapid increase of the crow's foot about Lady Russell's temples had long been a distress to him.

Elizabeth did not quite equal her father in personal contentment. Thirteen years had seen her mistress of Kellynch Hall, presiding and directing with a self-possession and decision which could never have given the idea of her being younger than she was. For thirteen years had she been doing the honours, and laying down the domestic law at home, and leading the way to the chaise and four, and walking immediately after Lady Russell out of all the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms in the country. Thirteen winters' revolving frosts had seen her opening every ball of credit which a scanty neighbourhood afforded; and thirteen springs shewn their blossoms, as she travelled up to London with her father, for a few weeks annual enjoyment of the great world. She had the remembrance of all this; she had the consciousness of being nine-and-twenty, to give her some regrets and some apprehensions. She was fully satisfied of being still quite as handsome as ever; but she felt her approach to the years of danger, and would have rejoiced to be certain of being properly solicited by baronet-blood within the next twelvemonth or two. Then might she

again take up the book of books with as much enjoyment as in her early youth; but now she liked it not. Always to be presented with the date of her own birth, and see no marriage follow but that of a youngest sister, made the book an evil; and more than once, when her father had left it open on the table near her, had she closed it, with averted eyes, and pushed it away.

She had had a disappointment, moreover, which that book, and especially the history of her own family, must ever present the remembrance of. The heir presumptive, the very William Walter Elliot, Esq. whose rights had been so generously supported by her father, had disappointed her.

She had, while a very young girl, as soon as she had known him to be, in the event of her having no brother, the future baronet, meant to marry him; and her father had always meant that she should. He had not been known to them as a boy, but soon after Lady Elliot's death Sir Walter had sought the acquaintance, and though his overtures had not been met with any warmth, he had persevered in seeking it, making allowance for the modest drawing back of youth; and in one of their spring excursions to London, when Elizabeth was in her first bloom, Mr. Elliot had been forced into the introduction.

He was at that time a very young man, just engaged in the study of the law; and Elizabeth found him extremely agreeable, and every plan in his favour was confirmed. He was invited to Kellynch Hall; he was talked of and expected all the rest of the year; but he never came. The following spring he was seen again in town, found equally agreeable, again encouraged, invited and expected, and again he did not come; and