

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Godmersham Family

EDWARD AUSTEN, third son of Rev. and Mrs George Austen and Master of Godmersham

ELIZABETH AUSTEN, née Bridges, his wife and mother of:

FRANCES AUSTEN, known as Fanny, the eldest child of the family,

and eight younger siblings

The Godmersham Household

MR JOHNCOCK, the Butler

MRS SALKELD, the Housekeeper

SACKREE, known to the children as 'CAKEY', the
Head Nurse

NURSE, the Under Nurse

COOK, the Cook

DANIEL, the Coachman

SALLY and REBECCA, the Maids

ANNE SHARP, the Governess

and ten others

The Visitors

HARRIOT BRIDGES, younger sister of Elizabeth
Austen

HENRY AUSTEN, younger brother of Edward Austen

CASSANDRA, MRS GEORGE AUSTEN, widow of
the Rev. George Austen

CASSANDRA AUSTEN, eldest daughter of the Rev.
and Mrs George Austen

JANE AUSTEN, her younger sister



ACT ONE



CHAPTER I



At half past six, in the bleak, icy evening of 21 January in the year 1804, Anne Sharp arrived on the threshold of Godmersham Park.

She was not afraid. Though an urban creature suddenly transplanted in Kent, an indulged only child forced to earn her own living, she felt almost nothing. It is not that she was fearless by nature, nor, it must be said, a stranger to that evil: self-pity. But by then, so much had occurred, so altered were her circumstances and sudden her decline, that there was naught left to fear.

The footman admitted her, and then vanished. A maid appeared, muttered that she would find Madam but did not take Anne's cloak. She was neither a guest deserving of especial courtesy, nor a servant to be treated as a friend. Left alone, in that impressive square hall – bathed

at that hour in extravagant candlelight – she considered drawing nearer to the excellent fire, but resisted. One must not appear forward or impertinent or grasping. First impressions are wont to linger and, as yet, she knew nothing of these people and what might offend them. So she stood still and patient upon the black-and-white chequered floor, like a small pawn on a fine chessboard.

She looked at the great, grand doors beyond which, she must assume, lay equally grand rooms. What a perfect house for private theatricals! She wondered if the family already put on such evenings and, if not, whether she might ever enjoy the power to suggest such a thing. And then, to her left, one set was opened, and there came the tap of silk slipper and crackle of taffeta.

‘You must be Miss Sharp.’

Elizabeth Austen, Anne’s first-ever mistress, came floating across the floor’s gleam and extended a pale, elegant hand. By her side trotted her likeness, in childish form. Both were fair of complexion, slender and conventionally handsome – with the glow of those benefits accrued through a life of pure privilege, though without the quirks and exceptions that make for real beauty. Their blue eyes followed Anne as she dipped into a curtsy and returned to their level.

‘How do you do, madam.’ Anne caught two flickers of satisfaction with her poise and the manner of her speaking.

Mrs Austen politely enquired after the journey.

Politely, Miss Sharp gave the briefest reply. She was loath to appear dull, and quite well aware that the journeys of others are inherently tedious. Only had she been waylaid by highwaymen and tied to a tree might then she have mentioned it.

‘And this is Fanny.’ The new charge stepped forward and bobbed, her eyes drinking in every inch of this stranger. The new governess studied her in her turn. The child seemed tall – was she not but twelve years of age? Anne had once been the same. Her father had taught her to attack it with confidence: stand up, he would urge. Inhabit your own frame. Never feel shame for the woman you are destined to be.

‘Good evening.’ Anne reached both hands for Fanny’s, in a gesture she hoped was warm and yet not too familiar. ‘I am delighted to meet you.’

‘And we are delighted to have you here, at last.’ Mrs Austen guided Miss Sharp towards the stairs sweeping up at the rear of the hall. ‘There has been much excitement about your arrival.’ She stopped at the foot and bade Anne upwards. ‘You must be tired. Fanny will show you to your room and we will send up some supper. Let us save our interview for the morrow. Shall we say before breakfast? Nine o’clock in the parlour.’

As they went up, Fanny chattered while Anne took in her surroundings. Godmersham did not disappoint. It was – still is, no doubt will forever be – a beauty of a house. With a pang, Anne thought of her dear Agnes,

and the maid's dark thoughts on country folk. 'You don't know where you'll fetch up . . . They'll have you in a pie there . . . Drown you for a witch, you mark my words . . . Believe me, I had a cousin . . .' Agnes *always* had a cousin.

It seemed that Anne had fetched up in a place of great spaciousness, with intricately carved plasterwork and the finest silk drapes. There was nothing in the air of the ancestors whose portraits queued up the walls to suggest a fondness for witch-drowning. She would write to Agnes that very evening and reassure her.

They came out on the first floor. Across the passage, in front of them, she spied a chamber of perfect proportions, with long windows that must look over the park. It seemed unoccupied. Might that be . . . ? But Fanny had turned left, they took more stairs up to the attic and Anne was reminded of her station.

The atmosphere below had been tranquil. Up here, though, everything changed. A baby cried; a nurse rushed through a door. Boys – Anne assumed they were boys: war was being waged and the French roundly abused – made an unholy row at the end of the corridor. Anne was used to a quiet house – a roost she alone ruled. But that was behind her. She must now adapt.

'And how many brothers and sisters do you have, Fanny?' The volume was such that the quantity not easy to estimate.

'There are eight of us at the moment.' Fanny led Anne

along. 'Mama won't stop there, though. There is sure to be another along soon. We can generally expect one every eighteen months or so.' As if, Anne thought, Mrs Austen were some champion breeder kept out in the farmyard.

'How splendid! And are they all brothers?' Anne's tone was casual, but this was a matter of some consequence. She did not yet know for how long she might be expected to earn her own living. But if this position were to last only until Fanny's sixteenth year, then she could hope for no long-term security at Godmersham Park.

'Four boys after me, then two little sisters and another baby boy. But they are still in the nursery.' Anne felt a lurch of disappointment. It was unlikely that the education of *sons* would be entrusted to a mere governess. 'They are perfectly adorable,' Fanny continued. 'You will meet them in the morning.' She opened the door at the end of the corridor. 'Here we are.'

This room – her new home, her refuge – seemed pleasant enough to Anne at first sight. It did not, of course, compare to the suite of rooms to which she was accustomed, but she had no more need for space and its freedoms. Her old life – those days once so large, rich and colourful – was behind her, for now. A small corner would be all she required, into which she could shrink and think and reflect. Where her intellect might hope to flourish, though her body and her time must henceforth be enslaved.

It was longer than it was wide, with a window set high in the wall. Anne crossed over, lifted the curtain to study the view and her eyes met with the deepest night she had ever beheld. The cry of a solitary owl pierced though the silence. She shivered. A view with no neighbours, no lovers, no great commerce that never dared sleep: where was its beauty? The county of Kent was a mystery to her. Why would one live here, so far from the world?

Anne turned back to the interior and found it, on the whole, reassuring. There was no dressing room, of course, but a small, shelved alcove for her meagre new wardrobe and one set of drawers. The walls were papered with a trellis pattern of a powdery blue which she judged inoffensive. Though it glowed rather than roared, the modest fire dealt with the worst of the wintry chill. Above its plain, white surround hung the room's only ornament. Moving in closer, Anne at once recognised the depiction of Christ sharing his Parable of the Lamp. She reached into her memory and retrieved the concluding words of the text: *For nothing is secret that shall not be made manifest; neither anything hid that shall not be known and come abroad.* She shivered again.

The presence of a small bureau cheered her, though. She would have somewhere to write on her long, solitary evenings. There was a small bookcase which she would very soon fill. And, one on each side of the window, there were two beds! Her spirits rose at the prospect that

she might, on occasion, be permitted a guest. And they soared at the thought of Agnes beside her one day.

She looked at Fanny and smiled. 'Thank you, my dear. It is a charming room.'

'I am so pleased you think it so.' The child beamed in return. 'I do hope we will be happy here.' She moved to the bed on the right and sat down on it. And then came disappointment-the-second. 'Mama has said you should have a week or two, to recover from your journey, and only then shall I start sleeping with you. Would you mind if this one is mine?'

At length, Fanny went down to the library to be with her parents. A silent footman delivered Anne's trunk; a silent maid brought supper and then dealt with her things. Anne thought of Agnes, packing her possessions with loving care. She watched this nameless young girl – Anne made several attempts, but the maid would not engage – taking them out again, and eyeing them covetously. Of course, she handled the plain, simple dark gowns with contempt. One could not blame her. The one good silk – rosy pink, Brussels lace trim; Agnes, convinced Anne's fortunes must change, had insisted on packing it – did attract notice. The silver brush and combs, AS engraved upon them, brought a lift to both brows. And her best handkerchief, embroidered so beautifully by her devoted mama, seemed to come in for particular scrutiny. Anne resolved to launder that item herself. Small things were prone to go missing in larger households.

And then she was alone: weak with exhaustion from the events of her day, yet tormented by sleeplessness. The shock of this new situation hit her with force and, in its wake, emotion engulfed her at last. The Kentish silence roared in her ears; her guts twisted with sickness for a home which no longer existed. She buried her wet face in her pillow and questions raced through her mind.

How did she get here, so alone and among strangers?

CHAPTER II



Anne had first heard of the position the previous summer.

The sun had been bright then, and the air was clear. Though dressed in mourning and with a heart still heavy from the loss of her mother, masculine heads turned as she stepped into the office in Mount Street. Anne paid them no heed. She thought only of the difficult interview ahead.

The clerk gave her the coolest of welcomes and ushered her into the chamber.

‘Miss Sharp.’ Mr Jameson bowed stiffly and sat down at his desk. Agnes – Anne’s maid and, on this day, her chaperone – he ignored altogether. She took a seat at the back of the room.

‘Thank you for seeing me, Mr Jameson.’ Though he had long been her family’s man of business, Anne had

never had occasion to meet with him herself. She sat down and faced him, determined to appear poised and in control. ‘First of all, if I may, I *must* ask—’

He at once interrupted. ‘A Mr and Mrs Edward Austen of Godmersham Park, in Kent, are seeking a governess for their eldest daughter.’ Mr Jameson leaned back in his large leather chair and contemplated his equally large stomach. ‘An associate of mine, connected to the family, has asked if I know of a suitable candidate.’

This unexpected beginning left Anne quite baffled. They had much to discuss, and of a most pressing nature. Why must men waste one’s valuable time on mere gossip? And, it went without saying, there was no possible *governess* in her circle of acquaintance.

Mr Jameson shuffled some papers. ‘And you could start at once which would solve the imminent problem of your accommodation.’

Despite the July warmth of the chamber, Anne felt suddenly cold. ‘Sir, I do not quite understand you. I am not seeking *employment*. Moreover, we have a house – a home, indeed – in which we are perfectly content. I fear you have been most horribly misled. We plan to go on as we are, thank you.’

‘I am afraid, madam, that arrangement will no longer be possible.’ He studied the ceiling and avoided Anne’s eye. ‘The lease will close at the end of the year. It requires vacant new possession.’

Agnes gasped.

‘Mr Jameson! What can you mean?’ Anne’s voice was rising; her poise slipped away. ‘This is the most ridiculous notion which I must condemn in the strongest of terms.’ Were there financial problems of which she was not yet aware? Surely not. These past few years, her dear father had worked so very hard that he was away almost constantly. ‘Perhaps I might accept that, in future, something smaller would be more manageable. But to be rushed out like this, in a manner unseemly—’ An impartial listener might think Anne rather grand at this point – even pompous, indeed. In her defence, she had been raised to believe herself a woman of some privilege and was yet to acquire and command the required mannerisms of a woman who had none.

She took a deep breath, gathered her wits and endeavoured to steer the conversation back on to the course she had planned. ‘I am come here this morning to ask if you have had any communication with my father. I have heard nothing since the day after my dear mother’s funeral and, naturally, my concern is acute.’ Her voice cracked. ‘I fear his letters to me are somehow going astray. And if his business in Brussels is to delay his return, then I must now discuss my annual allowance and its best possible investment.’

Mr Jameson held up his hand and looked her full in the face. ‘I speak on instruction.’ The tone was now firm. ‘You will move out by Christmas. From January forward, you may expect an annual allowance of thirty-five pounds.’

The shocked silence was broken by a cry of 'No!' from the back of the room, followed by Agnes's weeping.

'*Thirty-five—*' The might of that insignificant sum crashed through her defences. 'But – are you asking me to believe that *I* am being cast off? By *my own father*? Mr Jameson!' Such was the strength of her security in her father's devotion, she laughed at the very idea. 'What is this game you are playing? When Mr Sharp hears of it, I can assure you, he will be *greatly* offended. Take this as my warning: I intend to write and tell him at once.'

But Jameson was grave: he raised both bushy brows, protruded his fat bottom lip. And in that moment, Anne felt the shield of her comfortable life break into fragments and crumble to dust. They sat in silence for some minutes, and then Anne cleared her throat. "Surely, I am, at the very least, due some explanation? I am struggling to understand what lies behind such a *change . . .*'

'You are indeed. Unfortunately, I am not at liberty to provide one.' He hesitated then and ran one swollen finger along the bevelled edge of his desk. 'My client has asked that you be gently reminded of the alternatives which you have, in the past, been so *obstinate* as to refuse.' When he smiled, he appeared more reptile than human. 'Indeed, I myself am – am – still *available*.'

'*There's a surprise.*' This came from the back of the room. Agnes had never mastered the art of the *sotto voce*.

Jameson ignored her. 'I would like here to mention that I am not entirely averse to the idea of . . .' He

paused here, eyes flicking to the insubordinate chaperone, and restarted: 'Though you may no longer be in what we might call your *prime*, I am, nevertheless, willing to overlook—' He stopped again, took a damp cough. 'Perhaps, Miss Sharp, you might like to reconsider our earlier—'

How dare he? 'No!' Anne spoke too much in anger, but was sorely provoked. 'Forgive me' – she lowered her voice again – 'but that is out of the question. *I would rather teach.*'

'Then that settles the matter.'

And at once, Anne regretted her words. Of course she would not be a governess! The thought was fantastical. But for the first time in its life, Anne's pretty nose sensed the acrid fumes of true danger. Her body remained perfectly still, while her mind wrestled the options.

She would simply . . . But – *thirty-five pounds per annum!* What *could* she do while her father's strange mood persisted? She would not be reduced to begging from this villain Jameson. She could not be a burden upon her dearest friends . . . And yet there were things, Anne had to admit, of which she had become unreasonably fond: the odd, comfortable conveyance; decent food in her stomach; a sound roof over her head. Oh, the shame! The shame of it all. Why would her darling papa inflict such a cruelty?

Yet still, she could not accept that she faced true disaster. After all, she had not been cast off with nothing. There was not enough to form her own establishment,

certainly. But, then again, nor would she starve. It seemed the amount had been perfectly calculated to both protect her from harm, while forcing her into employment . . . Surely, this was some ploy, or a challenge? Yes! It must be a challenge: a testing of her mettle. In which case, Anne would meet it. And so, her manner now quite business-like, she announced: 'I quite agree.'

Agnes let out a low moan.

'Very well.' Jameson looked satisfied. 'There will be no further appeal. The gentleman in question considers his offer most generous. And there will be no other provisions, beyond your mother's possessions.' He inflicted the last wound with relish. 'Lastly, I would like you to know that the discovery of the position was my own work entirely. My client has not been involved.'

'And, please, permit *me* to remind *you*, sir, that I am all that remains of my dear father's family.' Anne stood. 'I cannot know what provoked this bizarre situation but have faith that it will prove only temporary. He will change his mind, Mr Jameson. He must. For I am all that he has.'

CHAPTER III



On her first morning in Godmersham, Anne dressed with particular care: she washed with plain soap – the scented would not be appropriate; brushed her hair fifty times, rather than the customary one hundred – it would not do to gleam – and buried its rich brown under a workaday cap. Her dress was a cambric in a dull grey which had never much suited her. On top, she tied a white apron and then studied herself in the glass.

She had known little of the qualities required in a governess until the moment she found she was to become one. Once the die had been cast, the hot tears shed and dried and the bitter fate accepted, she and Agnes began to research the subject. Anne was a determined creature, unaccustomed to failure, and, once committed, then determined it must be done well. Their greatest

aid, it turned out, was *The Lady's Magazine* and its sisters. Anne had always eschewed these feminine periodicals, preferring a political treatise or diverting novel. She had presumed them to be trite, pandering as they did to women whose focus was home and the menfolk. But, suddenly – apparently – this was her world. The regular features on the travails of home education taught her all she now knew.

She and Agnes had pored over them, and made lists of requirements. Naturally, they included gentility and a sound education. Anne satisfied on that score. Equal importance was given to the woman's appearance. One wanted, they learned, a governess who was clean and well presented. That, too, was no challenge – Anne had been brought up to elegance. However – and this was the point that caused Agnes alarm – one should always opt for the plain. Of course, not so ugly as to frighten the children; that would be regrettable. But stern warnings were issued: a good-looking woman under one's roof led to all sorts of trouble. The men could never be safe with them! Those poor, vulnerable creatures – that is, the menfolk – would be left with no option but to be led meekly astray.

'Oh, Anny!' Agnes wailed. 'It's no good, what with your beauty. She'll send you packing at once.'

Anne now looked at herself and wondered if dear Agnes would be pleased or dismayed by her new, indifferent looks. Recent trials had left her much thinner than she had been in happier times. The dress fit badly and

hung off her figure without showing its shape. Her eyes were dull. She was too pale. Anne's features were still even and prettily positioned – eyes on the large side, nose on the small; lips that fell naturally into a neat little bow. There was little to be done about them. But, at least, new lines were scored across her forehead and her skin had lost that dimpled softness which others had once so admired.

Of course, Anne's age helped rather than hindered. It was almost wonderful to behold how, at thirty-one years of age, the mere withdrawal of effort could lead to such a collapse – like a well-tended garden that runs quickly to seed at the first hint of negligence. It was not for nothing that these were called the Years of Great Danger.

She angled her face this way and that, spun her trim body from one side to the other and admired her new self. Her past beauty had brought her nothing but trouble and she did not mourn it. Indeed, she rejoiced. The reflection in the glass was of the most perfect candidate. No small child would be provoked into screaming; no adult male tempted toward the high road to ruin. She was delighted to declare herself all but invisible. With confidence, Anne went downstairs.

Once in the hall, though, that confidence wavered. Behind which of these many grand doors was the parlour? There was no way of knowing. She could hardly just pick one and open it: what if she were to disturb the Master, or see something she should not?

At last came a woman whom Anne surmised was the housekeeper, Mrs Salkeld. Anne smiled, introduced herself and, with a small, modest laugh, explained her predicament. The woman was as friendly as the servants, which is to say not friendly at all. There was no smile in return – indeed, no facial expression. The only animation was provided by the cat fussing at her feet, pressing into her skirts and, at last, raising its fur and its back in hostility to Anne.

Seemingly satisfied that the correct tone had been set, Mrs Salkeld gestured towards the room nearest the front door. Anne knocked and entered. The interview began.

‘And I gather this is your first such position, Miss Sharp? May I ask why it is that you now seek employment?’ This being a Sunday, Mrs Austen’s morning dress was a sober claret.

‘Yes, of course. I lost my mother last spring.’ By the tilt of Mrs Austen’s head, Anne deduced her employer sought more information. ‘Consumption, sadly. A most horrible affliction. She had borne it well for several years and we had hopes that she might continue to do so. The decline came on suddenly.’ Yet more? The popular fascination with *Sickness and Death* never ceased to amaze Anne, though she was not minded to provide further detail. ‘The end, when it came, was merciful. And her death has resulted in something of a change in my circumstances.’

‘I am sorry for that. I am told your background is one

of unimpeachable respectability. Some Church connection, I believe?’

Anne was taken aback. How could Mrs Austen have got that idea? They had lived *near* a church, certainly; Anne could see the spire from her window. Though, as far as she could remember, neither she nor her mother had ever been through its door.

‘My mother was an excellent woman,’ she said vaguely.

‘And your father?’

This was an unnecessary question, and Mrs Austen should have known better than to ask it, for behind every well-bred governess there was an absence of man: be he dead, be he cruel or, simply, feckless. If it were not for the casual dereliction of the odd gentleman’s duty, there would be no women to teach well-bred daughters at all.

Avoiding Mrs Austen’s gaze, Anne spoke the words into her lap. ‘I fear I never really knew him.’ And as she spoke, it dawned that the words were not entirely untrue.

‘Indeed.’ Mrs Austen seemed to find comfort in Anne’s sorry situation. The ideal governess has as few ties as possible. ‘And so to the matter in hand. I must first tell you that I take a serious interest in the education of all of my children – the boys *and* the girls. Now, my sons are all, or soon will be, off at school, so dear Fanny will be your sole pupil.’

It was as Anne had already suspected. She took a deep breath. ‘If I may, madam, I would like to confirm my commitment to the task.’ This seemed to please Mrs Austen.

‘Though I did not expect to find myself in this position – and fate has, somewhat, forced my hand – I must reassure you that I now embrace the idea of it with whole-hearted enthusiasm. I would go so far as to say: *passion*.’

Perhaps that last, powerful word might be considered a trifle out of place in the context of their interview. Certainly, it caused Mrs Austen to flinch. But Anne would not retract it. She was simply a creature of the most passionate nature. She felt intensely; where she loved, there she loved absolutely. This had already caused her some conflict and drama. She fully accepted that, one day, it might bring on her undoing. Yet she would not change it, could not see why one would even live in this world without ecstasy or misery or genuine feeling. Insentience, in Anne’s view, belonged in the grave.

‘Teaching is, I see now, the most delightful of all prospects. And, from what I learned of Fanny yesterday evening, there is a lively intellect there with which to engage. To train the young mind, cause it to grow and to flourish! What greater privilege—’ She broke off; had gone too far. The Mistress appeared now to be highly alarmed.

‘Miss Sharp!’ Mrs Austen’s eyebrows were raised and her smile sharp and brittle. ‘You are *not* here to turn my daughter into a *bluestocking*.’

‘Oh, but of course—’ Though Anne could think of little else finer.

‘A smattering of knowledge for the stuff of good

conversation . . . Passable French . . . Your French is good, I take it? Well, that is something. Fanny's mind must be developed to the point at which she can demonstrate a sound understanding of any subject that might arise when she is out in society. And, in the future, she will need to oversee the education of her own family with confidence. An aptitude for music would be pleasing . . . Then etiquette, deportment and regular dance classes will give her that *finish*.' Here, Mrs Austen laughed prettily. 'No man wants a *professor*, after all!'

'But—' How, Anne wanted to say, could Fanny's future be impaired by a sound education? And what if events came not as predicted? Then Fanny would need all the independence of thought that her mind could allow.

Instead, Anne shrank down into her seat. 'Of course, I understand perfectly well what is required.'

The conversation moved on to the grubby particulars. Anne would receive thirty-five pounds per annum – that sum again! It seemed to be the universal valuation of her worth. Her food was included, her laundry was not – that was to be arranged between herself and the laundress. The cost of materials for lessons would be met by the family. Ink, paper, books &c. for her personal use would come from Anne's own pocket. All meals would be taken up in the schoolroom, although in some instances she *might* be invited to join the family downstairs. These occasions were not likely to be frequent. Lessons would begin on the morrow.

Anne smiled her acceptance and prepared to rise out of her seat, but Mrs Austen had not yet finished.

Anne would also be expected to be available to look after the boys or the babies whenever required, on all days of the week. She would not enjoy set hours of freedom, though when the household had no demands of her, she might enjoy liberal use both of the grounds and the attic. Mrs Austen very much hoped that, at all times, Anne would present with a cheerful good nature. She then concluded: 'No doubt today, Miss Sharp, you are still tired from your journey, so we do not expect you to join us at church. You may say your own prayers in your room, after which Fanny will show you the park.'

Mrs Austen stood then and smiled, and Anne did the same. They felt equal relief to have that behind them. It was Anne's first time in such a situation, so naturally it was awkward to her, but, she felt, for her mistress, too. For, however often one does it – however diligently one is prepared for it – dealing with staff is an uncomfortable business.

'It remains only for me to say that I do hope you will be happy with us, Miss Sharp.' That should have been enough. But Mrs Austen was, at heart, a very kind woman and, though she had gone to great lengths to suppress it, her natural kindness could not help but break through: 'You must consider yourself part of our family.'

CHAPTER IV



‘Do you like it, Miss Sharp? We think it the *dearest* old place in the world.’

Fanny and Anne were standing together out on the drive, their backs to the park and gazing up and along the Great House. She having arrived in the darkness, this was Anne’s first clear view of it.

‘It is lovely, of course. Am I right in thinking much of it modern?’ Certainly, the pavilions which stretched out to either side – graceful arms in extension – seemed a recent addition. Anne took comfort in that. It suggested the family’s social and financial journey was set fair in an upwards direction. Since she was to work for them, this was more preferable than down.

‘The middle section is the original.’

Anne studied the high, solid, red-brick façade and

judged it as handsome – approved the quantity of generously large windows, with their dressings of white stone relief – but could no longer bear to stand still in rapt admiration. Was it always so cold out here? She burrowed into her cloak, and they began to walk along the front, straight into a wind fierce and determined on biting.

She peered around her hood at the panorama to her right. Although no expert on country estates – she had never ventured beyond Chelsea – even Anne could see that Godmersham Park was a fine one. There was something about its confident air, the way it spread, rolled out and took up the whole of the view, that informed her Godmersham thought itself excellent. And she would have been happy to take it at its own estimation, return to her books and her fire – perhaps venture out again sometime in the spring? But her charge was insistent that she should see everything.

First, Fanny decreed, they *must* take in the kitchen garden, so Anne meekly followed along. Not that she could pretend any interest in the provenance of, say, a turnip – only caring that the turnip should arrive, preferably cooked, on her plate – but, as she was soon to understand, that was not the way with true country people, nor even wealthy gentlemen like Mr Edward Austen. Their lives and their calendars revolved around their crops. Their roots were in the earth, just like their vegetables – always one foot in the clod.

In short, Anne had landed in alien country, among people with quite alien ways. But she was doing her best, affecting enthusiasm – ‘Oh yes, *charming*’; ‘Most *fetching*, indeed’ – when, suddenly, the alienation was taken to extremes. She stopped in alarm. ‘Fanny! My goodness!’ Although they were still on the path, within reach of the house and domesticity, a large herd of deer bore down upon them. ‘Should we not *run*?’

‘Poor Miss Sharp!’ Fanny laughed. ‘Do not be afraid.’

It was not the does that had disturbed her – at once, Anne trusted them to be sweet and harmonious creatures. But among them, charging the atmosphere with his very presence, stood one huge and long-antlered buck. He stared, with a menace quite open; revelled in his size and superior strength. Snorted his threat – or was it, perhaps, his anticipation of triumph? He was all too aware that, in any battle between them, he would assuredly win.

‘You are perfectly safe here. There *is* a ha-ha, it is just very discreet. See the ditch there between us and them? Papa says a fence would be a block on the view. This way, we are more part of nature.’

Anne adopted the relaxed air of one who also – but of course! – viewed nature as friend and not mortal enemy. ‘Ah, yes. Indeed.’ Before scuttling through the gate in the wall of the garden, and taking a moment to recompose. ‘Tell me, Fanny, have you been here all of your short life? You were born here?’

‘We moved here six years ago, when Papa inherited the house and the parklands.’ They had crossed the lawn and were now in the sheltered enclosure of a formal walled garden. Fanny gestured at rows of brown stumps. ‘This is Mama’s rose garden.’ The housekeeper’s cat peered out from a bed and narrowed his mean, yellow eyes.

‘So your father inherited on the death of his father?’ People, families, held more interest for Anne than plants out of their season.

‘Oh no! My grandfather on Papa’s side is just a retired rector from Hampshire. Papa was adopted, in a way, by the Knights. They had no children, you see, so they sort of borrowed my father and Mrs Knight handed all this to Papa when her own husband died. We are all quite *devoted* to Mrs Knight, you know.’

Understandably so, thought Anne; churlish to be otherwise on receipt of such grand generosity.

‘She is part of our family. And, Miss Sharp, soon you will see that our family is *very* large,’ Fanny cheerfully continued. They were now, as promised, among what might be the turnips, and Anne found them as captivating as she had expected. ‘Mama is herself one of *twelve*! And they all live here in Kent, so we tend to see *them* rather often. Sadly, we see *less* of the Austens, though there are *lots* of them, too – five uncles, two aunts and two grandparents. And of those, it is my Uncle *Henry* who visits us *regularly* – to our *very* great pleasure. No doubt he will be joining us soon, and *then*, Miss Sharp, you *too* will have

the pleasure of meeting him!’ She smiled, as might a noble in the act of some great benefaction.

They were now arrived at the stables, which apparently demanded a full tour and, as personal introductions were required for each beast within, seemed to take some considerable time. As was only natural, a particular fuss, involving a carrot and much petting, had to be made of Fanny’s own pony. On inspecting the stalls, Anne noticed them all to be more spacious than the average London poor dwelling. The family coach and the chair, which had carried her from the stage stop the previous evening, were modern and grand. The horses shone with good health, the vehicles with polish: everything gleamed. Anne had been much impressed, so far, with what she had seen of the mansion, but the luxury of these quarters left her quite stunned.

At last, they emerged on to the formal gardens to the west of the house. ‘And what about you, Miss Sharp?’ They were crossing more lawn, made glassy with cold. ‘Tell me of your family. Or am I being too inquisitive?’

From here, the whole estate was spread out before them; all the tropes of the pastoral landscape contained in one sweep.

‘I am here to teach you, Fanny, and broaden your interests,’ replied Anne, with her gaze on the vista. ‘Please, never stifle your curiosity when you are with *me*. A mind which enquires is a mind that can grow.’

She saw hills to both north and south, dotted with

coppicing. One boasted a small Gothic seat; the other was adorned by – was that a temple, or folly? She could not quite make it out. It was the sort of thing, certainly, created in an idle moment by one with more money than pressing expenditure.

A Norman church steeple peered out over the brow of a long and brick wall. There was a string of picturesque cottages, housing, no doubt, the less picturesque poor, and a small river, spanned by a stone hump-backed bridge. In short, it was much like one of those more amateur watercolours at which Anne had once glanced, then dismissed at the Summer Exhibition.

‘But you and I are quite different.’ Her voice started to falter. ‘I am all alone in the world now. Apart from Agnes, that is.’

Suddenly, she was struck by the blow of the contrast between them. And – oh! – what a contrast it was. Anne’s small, solitary self against this huge tribe of Austens.

‘I have no siblings, no parents. No relations, even – or not that I know of.’

And as for their patriarch . . . Born the son of a parson, and now master of this whole estate? Mr Edward Austen was as a boy from a fairy tale. And she could not help but feel that they were travelling along the same road, he and Anne, but in quite opposite directions.

‘Oh dear!’ She held out her hand. Yes – it had started to rain.

CHAPTER V



‘I was eleven or twelve years of age.’ Mr Austen was in full and confident flow at the head of the table. ‘And there arrived at our rectory the newly married Mr and Mrs Knight. Now’ – while his tone was conversational, the content inclined more to the monologue – ‘why ’twas *I* upon whom they alighted, out of *all* of my family, I shall never quite know –’

‘I *believe* it was your great personal beauty, Papa,’ Fanny kindly reminded him.

‘Oh,’ Mr Austen demurred, with great modesty. ‘I do not know about *that*.’

‘But it was, Papa!’ Fanny wriggled in her seat, beyond delighted to be able to help out the recall of a superior grown-up. ‘Truly. You have told me so, often, yourself!’

‘Well – er . . .’ Mr Austen was momentarily discomfited; his wife smiling into her soup. ‘Nevertheless. To continue . . .’

This was the evening of Anne’s first full day of employment, and yet already she was seated at the family dinner. The occasion was Fanny’s thirteenth birthday. It was not a grand affair – just the parents, the four eldest children and a young local aunt. And, thus far, the entertainment appeared to be Mr Austen’s recitation of anecdotes they all already knew well.

‘– and, in a quite remarkable turn of events, they took me away with them.’

Fanny turned towards Anne, and whispered: ‘We think it rather funny: to select a small boy as your honeymoon companion.’

Anne, too, thought it odd, but was wary of showing any sort of reaction. She had no doubt Mrs Austen thought the privilege of a family dinner had been granted far too soon for comfort. It was clear from the anxious glances in Anne’s direction – judging her manners, checking her behaviour. Much better that Anne endure a solitary few weeks at least, dining in her room, contemplating the depth and extent of the boundaries between them. But it had been Fanny’s express wish that her new governess should be included.

‘It was some years later when the dear Knights returned with the idea of formal adoption. Sadly, not blessed with their *own* progeny, they asked my dear