



THE

JANE

AUSTEN

SOCIETY

A Novel

NATALIE JENNER

The
Jane Austen
Society

Natalie Jenner



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For my husband

*Who shall inherit England? The business people who run her? Or the
people who understand her?*

—E. M. FORSTER

Chapter One

*Chawton, Hampshire
June 1932*

He lay back on the low stone wall, knees pulled up, and stretched out his spine against the rock. The birdsong pierced the early-morning air in little shrieks that hammered at his very skull. Lying there, still, face turned flat upwards to the sky, he could feel death all around him in the small church graveyard. He must have looked like an effigy himself, resting on top of the wall, as if carved into permanent silence, abreast a silent tomb. He had never left his small village to see the great cathedrals of his country, but he knew from books how the sculpted ancient rulers lay just like this, atop their elevated shrines, for lower men like himself to gaze at centuries later in awe.

It was haying season, and he had left his wagon in the lane, right where it met the kissing gate and the farm fields at the end of old Gosport Road. Huge bundles of hay had already been piled up high on the back of the wagon, waiting for transport to the horse and dairy farms that dotted the outer vicinity of the village, stretching in a row from Alton to East Tisted. As he lay there, he could feel the back of his shirt, damp from sweat, even though the sun was pale and barely trying; at just nine in the morning he had already been hard at work in the fields for several hours.

The multitude of finches, robins, and tits suddenly quieted down as if on command, and he closed his eyes. His dog had been on guard until that moment, looking out over the mossy stone wall at the sheep that dotted the fields below, just past the hidden ha-ha that marked the perimeter of the estate. But as the farmer's laboured breath became deep and rhythmic with sleep, the dog took his own cue and lay down beneath his master in the cool dirt of the graveyard.

"Excuse me."

He jolted awake at the voice now resonant above him. A lady's voice. An American voice.

Sitting up, he swung his legs down from the stone wall to stand before her. He looked at her face quickly, glanced at the rest of her, then just as quickly looked away.

She appeared to be quite young, no older than her early twenties. She wore a wide-brimmed straw hat with an indigo-blue ribbon tied about it that matched the deep blue of her tailored dress. She looked quite tall, almost the same height as him, until he realized she was wearing the highest pair of heels he had ever seen. In one hand she held a small pamphlet, in the other a black clutch purse—and around her neck hung a tiny cross on a short silver chain.

“I’m so sorry to disturb you, but you’re the first person I’ve met all morning. And I’m quite lost, you see.”

As a lifelong resident of Chawton, population 377, the man was not surprised. He was always one of the first villagers up and about in the morning, right behind the milkman, Dr. Gray on his more pressing rounds, and the postman doing his pickup from the local office.

“You see,” she repeated, starting to adjust to his natural reticence, “I came down for the day from London—I took the train out here from Winchester to see the home of the writer Jane Austen. But I can’t find it, and I saw this little parish church from the road and decided to have a look around. To find some trace of her if I could.”

The man looked behind his right shoulder at the church, the same church he had attended all his life, made of local flint and red sandstone and sheltered by beech and elm trees. It had been rebuilt a few generations ago—nothing notable was left inside of Jane Austen or her immediate family.

He turned and looked back now over his left shoulder, at the small stile at the rear of the churchyard, through which one could just glimpse towering yew hedges clipped into circular cones. Even as a boy they had looked to him like nothing so much as extremely large salt and pepper cellars. The hedges ran along the south terrace garden of an imposing Elizabethan house set on an incline, with a gabled tiled roof, red brickwork, and a three-story Tudor porch covered in vines.

“The big house is back there,” he said abruptly, “just past the church. The Great House, it’s called. Where the Knight family lives. Miss Austen’s mother and sister’s graves are right here—do you see, miss, alongside the church wall?”

Her face lit up in gratitude, both for the information and for his slow warming to the conversation.

“Oh my goodness, I had no idea....”

Then her eyes began to well up. She was the most striking human being he had ever met, like a model in a hair or soap advertisement in the papers. As the tears started, the colour of her eyes crystallized into something he had never before seen, a shade of blue almost like violet, while the tears caught on rows of inky-black lashes, blacker even than her hair.

Looking away, he tried to step around her carefully, his dog, Rider, now nipping about at his muddy boots. He walked over until he was standing next to the two large slabs of stone that stood upright in the ground. She followed him, the heels of her black pumps sticking a bit in the graveyard dirt, and he watched as she silently mouthed the words carved onto the twin tombstones.

Backing away, he fiddled about to find his cap from his pocket. Brushing back the lock of light blond hair that tended to fall across his brow as he worked, he tucked it up under the rim of the cap as he pulled it forward and down over his eyes. He wanted to be away from her now, from the strange emotion being stirred up in her by the unadorned graves of simple women dead these past one hundred years.

Off he wandered to wait with Rider by the main lych gate to the churchyard. After several minutes she finally appeared from around the corner of the church, this time stopping to read the inscription of every stone she passed, as if hoping to discover even more slumbering souls of note. Every so often she would teeter a bit as her heel caught the edge of a stone, and she would grimace just so slightly at her own clumsiness. But her eyes never left the graves below.

She stopped at the lych gate next to him and looked back with a contented sigh. She was smiling now and more composed—so composed that he finally picked up the whiff of money in both her poise and her manners.

“I’m so sorry about that, I just wasn’t prepared. You see, I came all this way to find the cottage, where she wrote the books—the little table, the creaking door,” she added, but to no visible reaction. “I couldn’t find out much about any of this while in London—thank you so much for telling me.”

He held the lych gate open for her and they started to walk back towards the main road together.

“I can take you to her house if you’d like—it’s barely a mile or so up the lane. I’ve done my morning haying for the farm, before it gets too hot, so I’ve time to spare.”

She smiled, a great big white winning smile, the kind of smile he could only imagine being American. “That is awfully kind of you, thank you. You know, I was assuming people came all the time, like this, like me—do they?”

He shrugged as he kept his pace slow to meet hers along the half-mile gravel drive that led down to the road from the Great House.

“Often enough, I guess. Nothing really much to see, though. It’s just workers’ flats now, at the cottage—tenants in all the rooms.”

He turned to see her face tighten in disappointment. As if to cheer her up, before he even knew what had come over him, he asked her about the books.

“I’m not even sure I can answer that,” she replied, as he pointed the way back down the country lane, opposite the end where his wagon sat with its load temporarily forgotten. “I just feel, when I read her, when I reread her—which I do, more than any other author—it’s as if she is inside my head. Like music. My father first read the books to me when I was very young—he died when I was twelve—and I hear his voice, too, when I read her. Nothing made him laugh out loud, nothing, the way those books did.”

He listened to her rambling on, then shook his head as if in disbelief.

“You haven’t read her then?” the woman asked, a disbelieving light in her own eyes meeting his.

“Can’t say I’ve too much interest. Stick to Haggard and the like. Adventure stories, you know. Suppose you might judge me for that.”

“I would never judge anyone for what they read.” She caught the ironic look on his face and added, with another broad smile, “Although I guess I just did.”

“All the same, I never understood how a bunch of books about girls looking for husbands could be on par with the great writers. Tolstoy and such.”

She looked at him with new interest. “You’ve read Tolstoy?”

“Used to—I was going to be sent up to study, during the war, but both my brothers got called to fight. I stayed back here, to help out.”

“Do you all work the farm together then?”

He looked away. “No, miss. They’re both dead now. The war.”

He liked to say the words like that, like a clean cut, sharp and deep and irrevocable. As if trying to stave off any further conversation. But he had the feeling that with her this approach might only invite more questions, so he quickly continued, “By the way, see those two roads, where they meet—you came in from Winchester, from the left, yeah? Well, stick along here to the right—that’s now the main road to London—and you come into Chawton proper. That there’s the cottage up ahead.”

“Oh, that’s really awfully kind of you. Thank you. But you must read the books. You must. I mean, you live here—how can you not?”

He wasn’t used to this kind of emotional persuasion—he just wanted to get back to his wagon of hay and be gone.

“Just promise me, please, Mr....?”

“Adam. The name’s Adam.”

“Mary Anne,” she replied, extending her hand to shake his goodbye. “Start with *Pride and Prejudice*, of course. And then *Emma*—she’s my favourite. So bold, yet so wonderfully oblivious. Please?”

He shrugged again, tipped his cap at her, and started to walk off down the lane. He dared to look back only once, from just past the pond where the two roads met. He saw her still standing there, tall and slender in her midnight blue, staring at the redbrick cottage, at its bricked-up window and the white front door opening straight onto the lane.

★ ★ ★

When Adam Berwick had finished up the rest of his day’s work, he left the now-empty wagon back by the kissing gate and trudged along the main road until he reached the tiny terrace cottage that had been his home for the past handful of years.

The family had once been much larger, his father and mother and all three boys, of whom he was by far the youngest. They had owned a small farm, proudly held on to through four generations of his father’s family. This legacy had required all the Berwick men to take on hard manual labour

starting very young. And he had loved it: the repetition, the unvarying cycle of the seasons, the going-straight-to-bed with no time to talk.

But Adam had also been an attentive and diligent student, teaching himself to read when barely five years old from the books his father left lying around the house, then reading every single thing he could get his hands on. He would visit the larger town of Alton with his mother every chance he could get. His favourite moment, even more than the sweets shop and the single large jawbreaker she would occasionally buy for him, was the chance to look at the children's books at the library and find something new to borrow. Because—and he still did not understand how people like his brothers could not see this—inside the pages of each and every book was a whole other world.

He could disappear inside that world whenever he needed to—whenever he felt the outside world, and other people, pressing in on him—a pressure from social contact and expectations that was surely routine for everyone else, but affected him much more intensely and inexplicably. But he could also experience things from other people's points of view and learn their lessons alongside them, and—most important to him—discover the key to living a happy life. He had a feeling that, outside his rough farming family, people were existing on a very different plane, with their emotions and their desires telegraphed along lines never-ending, vibrating in as-yet-unknown ears, creating little frictions and little sparks. His own life was full of little friction, and even fewer sparks.

Winning the scholarship to college had been the one exciting moment in his young life, only to be just as quickly taken away from him when his brothers were sent to war. He had been both too young to fight and, according to his mother, too grown-up now for what she called aimless study. The war had changed everything, and not just for his family—although everyone in the village acknowledged that the Berwicks had been harder hit than most, with both older boys killed in battle in the Aegean Sea in 1918 and the father less than a year later by the Spanish flu. There was a solicitude now, for his mother and for him, a deep community caring that had, at times, been all that had buoyed them from the deepest despair.

But as much as they were kept from falling into the abyss, they remained forever teetering on the brink. Neither he nor his mother, despite their different temperaments, seemed to possess energy for anything more

than submission to life—the idea that they might have to fight their way out of their lot was beyond them. So only a few years after the war, between the debts and the grief and his mother's constant complaining, they had sold the farm back to the Knight family at a significant discount. Over the generations various Berwicks had worked at the Knight estate as household staff or servants, his own mother and grandmother among them, and now Adam, too, would join their employment by gathering the hay each summer, and tilling the fields, and planting a few rotating crops of wheat and hops and barley.

Eventually the Knight family, like so many others in the village, began to suffer financial troubles of their own. Adam felt that they were all tied together, very much interdependent, and that the sale of the farm to the Knights, and the employment for him, were part of a larger community effort to sustain and survive.

He was surviving on the teetering brink—at least, he acted as if he were. But inside him, in the place that only books could touch, there remained both a deep unknowing and the deepest, most trenchant pain. Adam knew that part of his brain had shut down from all the pain, in a bizarre effort to protect itself, and his mother was even worse, for she appeared to be merely waiting to die, while constantly warning him how bad things would be without her. In the meantime she was simply going through the motions of mothering him—having his toast and tea ready in the morning, and then, as now, his supper kept warm for him at the end of the day.

They would sit there alone together at the kitchen table, just as they were doing now, and he would tell her about his work, and she would tell him about whom she had run into in the village, or in Alton if it was her midweek shopping day. They talked about anything and everything except the past.

But today he didn't tell her about the young woman from America. He wasn't sure what he wanted to say. For one thing, his mother was always on him to find a wife, and this stranger to town was so beyond him in her beauty as to be almost otherworldly. His mother was also one of the villagers for whom the connection to Jane Austen remained more an irritation than anything else. She saved her most bitter complaints for the tourists and gawkers who, often enough, did descend on the small village

demanding information, demanding to see something, demanding that life here be just like in the books. As if the villagers' little lives were somehow unreal, and the real thing—the only thing—that mattered, and the only thing that ever would, had happened over a hundred years ago.

★ ★ ★

He was becoming quite worried for Mr. Darcy.

It seemed to Adam that once a man notices a woman's eyes to be fine, and tries to eavesdrop on her conversations, and finds himself overly affected by her bad opinion of him, then such a man is on the path to something uncharted, whether he admits it to himself or not. Adam did not know much about women (although his mother kept telling him it did not take much), but he wondered if in the history of life, as well as in literature, a man had ever fallen into such obvious lust as fast as Mr. Darcy, and not done anything about it except to inadvertently, and so successfully, push it away.

He appreciated more than ever that their small two-up, two-down terrace cottage, which sat next to a lane-way leading back from the main Winchester road, gave him his own bedroom and space to read. In his sparse room with its gabled ceiling was the plain twin bed—one half of a set—that he had slept in since his boyhood. A single oak armoire and an antique dresser stood in opposite corners of the room. And he had his shelf of books that had once belonged to his father—adventure novels, the boys' treasury, and the greats like Conan Doyle and Alexandre Dumas and H. G. Wells. But now, next to his bed, lay a fairly thick hardcover book with a laminated cover, from the library, showing two women in bonnets whispering to each other, while a man in the background stood imperiously next to a garden urn.

He had discreetly slipped it across the counter at the lending library only two days earlier.

It was going fast.

But as much as it amused him, the book also confused him. For one thing, he wondered at the father character; he did not think it reflected well on Mr. Bennet to spend all his leisure time barricaded in his study or indulging his humour at the expense of everyone else. Mrs. Bennet was much more easily understood, but something about the Bennet household

was still amiss, in a way that he did not recall encountering before in literature. Not among a big family at least. He had read books about orphans, and treachery among friends, and fathers sent off to debtors' prison—but the biggest plots always turned on an act of revenge or greed or a missing will.

The Bennets, for all intents and purposes, simply didn't like each other. He had not been expecting this at all from a lady writer with a commitment to happy endings. Yet, sadly, it felt more real to him than anything else he had ever read.

Finishing the chapter where Darcy shows his estate to the woman who once so robustly spurned his marriage proposal, Adam finally started to drift off to sleep. He recalled the recent visitor to his own town, the tiny cross on a chain, the white winning smile: tokens of the faith and hope so sadly missing from his own life. He could not conceive of the willingness to travel so far for something so whimsical—yet an unguarded happiness had also radiated from within the visitor, real happiness, the kind he had always searched for in books.

Reading Jane Austen was making him identify with Darcy and the thunderclap power of physical attraction that flies in the face of one's usual judgment. It was helping him understand how even someone without much means or agency might demand to be treated. How we can act the fool and no one around us will necessarily clue us in.

He would surely never see the American woman again. But maybe reading Jane Austen could help him gain even a small degree of her contented state.

Maybe reading Austen could give him the key.