

Jane Fairfax

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Cet extrait d'un roman basé sur la réécriture de "Emma" de Jane Austen, s'attache au personnage de Jane Fairfax, cette jeune femme timide, effacée dont la situation et le caractère en faisaient un agent de critique sociale selon Austen, ce que Emma, riche et gâtée ne peut pas faire. Jane Fairfax se sent obligée envers les Campbell qui l'ont hébergée et éduquée mais seulement « pour qu'elle éduque les autres » - elle sera gouvernante- alors que leur propre fille (sa meilleure amie) est un beau parti. Pendant ce temps, à Weymouth (avant qu'elle écrive «Emma »), Jane Austen et Frank Churchill étaient amoureux mais le fossé social et économique qui les séparait semble avoir rendu ce mariage impossible.

This is an excerpt of a novel, based on a re-telling of Jane Austen's *Emma*, that centres on the character of Jane Fairfax. Jane is a shadowy, background figure in *Emma*, but in fact her character and her situation act as the agent of Austen's social critique—which the privileged, wealthy Emma herself cannot do. Jane is bound by a sense of obligation to the kindly Campbells, who have brought her up, and educated her—but only to “educate others,” to be a governess—while their own daughter (her “best friend”) makes a splendid match.

While in Weymouth (before the actual opening of Austen's *Emma*), Jane and Frank Churchill meet and fall in love, but the vast social and economic gap between them would seem to make marriage impossible.

This is but one of many ironies with which Jane has to contend; the novel tracks her growing feminist awareness as she comes to recognize the powerlessness of so many of the women she encounters. Personally, she is caught in a web of complex emotions: anger at social injustice; loyalty towards the Campbells and her aunt and grandmother, Mrs. and Miss Bates; despair at the realization that equality and independence for most women are an

effective impossibility; frustration at the social gap that means she and Frank can never marry; jealousy as she must passively watch while he flirts with the handsome heiress, Emma; and humiliation as she is “taken up” by the insufferable Mrs. Elton who is determined to find the perfect governess position for her.

The Campbells had several reasons for their visit to Weymouth. Ostensibly, they were there in the hope that the warm baths might mitigate the Colonel's deafness, which got a little worse each year. It was generally understood that the Weymouth resort was at least as important a social centre as it was a spa, but their second, unacknowledged reason had to do with their daughter's recent engagement to the eminently eligible Anthony Dixon. The Campbells were not wealthy, and Amelia's portion was modest; clearly, it must be a love match, on his side at least. The parents were genuinely glad of their daughter's forthcoming marriage; but they were not so virtuous that they would not also enjoy, as the young lovers walked the Esplanade, the envious looks of the rivals who had tried to snare Anthony during the previous season. Finally, they wanted to spend this time together as a family, so soon to be dispersed—their daughter, as Mrs. Dixon, would be in Ireland; and her dear friend, Jane Fairfax, must find a position as a governess....

Weymouth, September 21, 1814
Journal

It's near midnight. I am alone, with the chance to write at last—and to face, once again, my old fears. As Amelia's wedding approaches, so does my destiny—to become a governess—a prospect I can hardly bear to contemplate—yet

I know I must try to resign myself, and to be grateful to the Campbells for all they've done.

We arrived at Weymouth late this afternoon, in time for our tea. Our apartment is pleasant, with a fine view of the bay. I have my own little room, and will be glad of the privacy. By candlelight I have set out on the side table my two treasures—mama's miniature of papa, so dashing in his lieutenant's uniform, and his copy of Cowper—his favourite poet....

Weymouth, September 22

Here I sit, alone with my solitary candle. I should be filled with joy for those whom I love. But I can't help but think of where I will be six months hence, an "exile in a far off land," alone, unloved. Is it wrong for me to wish that someone would cherish me as well?

I must work harder at accepting my fate. Amelia will be far away. My earnings may allow me to get as far as Highbury, but never Ireland ... so it may be that I will never see my dear friend again. How can I not grieve at such a prospect?

The fact is I must soon—as soon as Amelia marries—go into *service* ... there, now I've written (for the first time) that ugly word. I'm realizing that the Campbells have, however unwittingly, prepared me for what in all honesty can only be called a sort of slave trade. I am certain they have no understanding of this. They have saved me from the degradation of poverty, or from a slow starvation. They've done what they can, and I love them for it, though I fear the servitude I now face, the utter absence of rational, affectionate companionship, will be little better than death.

Weymouth, September 24

Anthony arrived last night and the joy with which he and Amelia greeted one other was enough to fill my heart with happiness. The Campbells fairly glowed. We had our tea by the fire, Anthony bringing news of his Irish estate, from whence he had just returned. He assured the Campbells that they must be sure to visit, that their arrival would be eagerly anticipated. He kindly asked how I was, hoped he would soon be able hear some of my music, asked if I was singing anything new. I said yes, a sweet love song, "Robin Adair," that I'd gladly play for him and Amelia.

We agreed that he would fetch us in the morning and that we would walk on the Esplanade, as the day promised to be fine. We parted in the highest of spirits.

Yet here I sit, alone with my solitary candle. I know I should be filled with joy for those whom I love. But I can't help but think of where I will be six months hence, an "exile in a far off land," alone, unloved. Is it wrong for

me to wish that someone would cherish me as well?

* * *

The day dawned glorious, and mid-morning found the three friends on Esplanade. Formerly, the lovers had required Jane's presence as a chaperone; since their engagement this was not *de rigueur*—but such was their affection for her that they continued to seek her presence.

The sun shone on the bay. Far to the east were the brilliant white cliffs; closer, the soft downs; and before them the golden sands, the soft lapping of the waves. Sailing

boats in the harbour flitted like gulls, fishing boats plied their trades. As they paused to admire nature's beauties, they heard a cry:

"Dixon!"

Anthony turned—and, evidently astonished, replied, "Churchill! Can it really be you? How can this be?"

What followed was an energetic exchange, with a firm handshake and much manly slapping of backs. Frank Churchill was here because his aunt was unwell, and it was hoped that the various waters of Weymouth would encourage her recovery. Frank and Anthony had been fellow students at Oxford, both in the same college, and were more than delighted to encounter one another again.

Together the four continued along the Esplanade. At first, as a matter of course, the two young men walked together, exchanging news of what had transpired since their last meeting.

Amelia and Jane were glad of the time together, speaking in their old confiding way. But between them was the unspoken knowledge of the great barrier that would soon come between them. This made their present closeness the more precious.

Anthony soon turned and reclaimed Amelia's willing arm.

"Enough of Churchill," he said, "now back to my darling. Frank and I have been talking," he said, turning to her, "and we've decided that we must meet at the Churchills' tonight." Arm-in-arm, the two lovers continued along the Esplanade. This left Frank and Jane together. There was a prolonged period of silence.

"The sands are looking particularly lovely today," said Frank.

"Yes, indeed," said Jane.

"But the cliffs are also splendid."

"Yes, they are."

“Have you enjoyed your time in Weymouth?” asked Frank.

“Yes,” said Jane.

“Have you been to the Assembly Rooms as yet?”

“No.”

Frank began to wonder whether he would ever be able to get as much as a full sentence out of Jane. He had never before had to coax a young lady into conversation.

“Miss Fairfax,” he said, racking his brain, “I believe I heard Amelia say that you have relatives in Surrey.”

“Yes,” replied Jane, her eyes downcast. As she spoke he looked at her, and the curve of her cheek, and decided not to give up quite yet.

“I wonder at that,” he said. She said nothing at all, and he thought about perhaps throwing himself into the sea. But at last she spoke.

“Why do you wonder?” was what she said. This seemed like something of an opening. Frank found that he was not insensible to her deep grey eyes, with their long lashes, and to her elegant carriage. On an impulse he decided to tell her what he’d shared with no one else: of his parents’ imprudent marriage, of his mother’s untimely death, when he was but two; how after her death he had lived for a time with his father, who had a small house in Surrey; how he had then been adopted by his mother’s relatives, the Churchills, and taken to their estate in Yorkshire, to be brought up as a “true” gentleman. As he spoke he had a strange experience of relief at being able to say of all this—so much of his time at college and after had been spent learning to be clever, and stylish—to fit in with the fashionable set, to conduct himself so as to please his uncle, but more particularly his difficult aunt ...

September 25

This morning’s events have been most surprising! Let me start at the beginning. The day began as planned. Anthony came to fetch us and we commenced our walk along the Esplanade. It was fine, as we’d hoped. We were the happy three, as of old, admiring the beauties of the harbour.

We were joined—to Anthony’s great surprise—by an old friend from Oxford, by the name of Frank Churchill. Well, I had heard about the famous F.C. in Highbury. I knew—everyone did—that he’d been there as a small child, that he’d been taken off to Yorkshire by a grand family. Still I thought this could hardly be the same person. But the more he spoke, the more I realized it could be no other. At last I contrived to discover that his true father was in fact our Mr. Weston, lately married to the Woodhouses’ governess, and told him that my relatives were also in Highbury. Seeing his reaction, there could be no further doubt ... a passing strange coincidence!

A link between us having at last been established, we then parted—to see one another again this evening at the redoubtable Churchills’. There are many ways in which we are different—his fortune, my indigence—yet others, perhaps more important, in which we are similar: the loss

of our mothers, our adoptions. The way he spoke of his loneliness as a child unexpectedly touched a nerve. I love the Campbells, and have loved living with them; but now, having listened to Frank, I realize that I too have always felt myself to be something of an outsider. This was the uncanny chord that he, however unwittingly, struck. He said that he felt he was playing a role with the Churchills; now I think, so might I at times have been, with the Campbells. It pains me to write this—but perhaps I too have been trying to be what they wanted me to be. Certainly I am not at heart as docile as I seem.

But now I must get ready for our visit.

I hope Mr. Churchill and I will have the chance for further talk.

The Churchills had taken a grand house near Gloucester Row—as close to royalty as possible. The Campbells, somewhat deficient in velvet and jewels, tried to make themselves comfortable for their daughter’s sake. Under no other circumstances would they have expected to consort with such fine people. Mr. and Mrs. Dixon, arriving somewhat later with Anthony, were somewhat less daunted. They could see, more clearly than the Campbells, for whom they already felt a great regard, the Churchills’ pretensions. They knew that their Irish Baly-craig, as an older seat, could easily hold its own with the Churchills’ Yorkshire Enscombe. And the Churchills knew that they knew.

On the other hand, Frank’s aunt could sense the Campbells’ uncertainty, which she knew made them vulnerable.

On the surface, the evening was charming. The visitors were duly cordial; enjoyed tea and cakes; sat around the fire—from which the invalid Mrs. Churchill was of course shielded by an elegant screen. But before long the aunt turned to Frank and said, in a clearly audible *sotto voce*, “It is unfortunate that you chose to receive your guests this evening—I rather wish you had consulted with me. The Dalrymples have just arrived in Weymouth, and perhaps may have called had we not been engaged.”

The Campbells could not but feel the slight. Mr. and Mrs. Dixon, being more worldly, were less perturbed, though Anthony flushed. Frank was between two stools, embarrassed for his friends, wanting to placate Mrs. Churchill.

“But—” to his aunt, “I thought you would want to meet my friend—”

To the company at large he added, “I’m so pleased for my aunt and uncle to meet with Anthony: I’d told them so much about him—” and recounted the story of how the two of them had overturned their boat in the Cherwell.

So Frank endeavoured, without much success, to counter Mrs. Churchill’s insult with his wit and charm.

His aunt coolly acknowledged hearing of his friend; but soon recurred to her preferred subject.

“The Dalrymples’ niece accompanies them, you know,” she said. “She is said to be quite elegant and, in addition,

to be in possession of a handsome fortune. We're hoping to receive them soon—and I count on you, Frank, to help us entertain them." The frost was on the rose.

To every one's relief, the time for music came at last. The Churchills had a splendid pianoforte. Miss Campbell was invited to play, which she did, with warmth, but not a great deal of skill.

As Amelia played, Frank moved to Jane's side, and leaning close, softly asked, did she feel a draught; could he perhaps fetch her wrap?

His actions did not go unnoticed.

Gripping her cane, Mrs. Churchill demanded, "Who is that girl?"

Mrs. Campbell obligingly replied—including details of Jane's background and prospects; and adding how sorry they would be to lose her.

"Oh," said Mrs. Churchill, archly; "I see—shades of *Pamela*—quite the thing these days. Now I suppose she will contrive for us to hear her play."

Amelia had just concluded a rather pedestrian sonata, and was more than ready to give way to Jane's superior talents. She and Anthony joined in calling on her to take Amelia's place at the pianoforte.

"Jane," cried Anthony, "you spoke of a new song—will you play it for us?"

Jane felt the icy chill of Mrs. Churchill. For a moment she hesitated, but for only a moment. She was angered by the slight to the Campbells, and understood that Frank's aunt thought her an obnoxious upstart; she found, only slightly to her surprise, that she was not inclined to defer to her ill-natured hostess.

In fact, she decided she *would* sing "Robin Adair," and rather hoped it might ruffle Mrs. Churchill's feathers.

Her playing was luminous, her voice rich and expressive.

If Mrs. Churchill had been worried about Jane's influence before she played, her fears were soon compounded. The song's warm words were in dramatic contrast to the frigid atmosphere of the Churchills' drawing room:

*He whom I wished to see,
Wished for to hear;* sang Jane,

*... all the joy and mirth that
Made life a heaven on earth?
O, they're all fled with thee...*

Mrs. Churchill stirred audibly in her chair, sitting bolt upright. With a smile, Jane went on.

*Welcome once more again...
I feel thy trembling hand;
Tears in thy eyelids stand...*

Mrs. Churchill coughed pointedly. The rest of the company was spellbound.

*Come to my heart again...
Never to part again,
Robin Adair;
And if thou still art true,
I will be constant too,
And will wed none but you,
Robin Adair!*

Frank sprang from his chair. "Splendid, Miss Fairfax, simply splendid! You must let me learn this song. Perhaps I may sing it with you? I've the music for an Italian duet. I could fetch it—you'd play it easily—we could sing that together."

Jane was about to reply but was cut short by Mrs. Churchill, who had suddenly discovered that she'd developed a terrible headache and was going to have to bid her guests goodnight.

Having it spelled out that clearly meant there was nothing but for the Dixons and the Campbells to depart.

Weymouth, September 26

It is very late—the others are asleep. Once again I am alone with my candle. We are recently returned from the Churchills'. The latter part of the day (evening) was more extraordinary than what went before. The elder Churchills are horrible. Most especially Mrs. C. She looks down her nose (her *ugly* nose) at the Campbells. She sees herself as doing them a great honour by receiving them. She sees me as an adventuress—on the lookout for any available husband. She makes me want to go live in a cave and eat roots and drink cold spring water. She *almost* makes me want to be a governess!

But then there is Mr. Frank Churchill.

I cannot deny the way he looks at me—as if into my heart. He brought me a shawl (he hardly knew how warm I felt as he placed it 'round my shoulders). He loved my music, and asked if he might sing with me. How I would love that!

Yet he cannot know my circumstances. I think it will be best to make sure he *does* know, as soon as I can. I expect that will bring an end to the admiration. We are all to meet at the Dixons' tomorrow. I think my wanting so much to see him again cannot be wise. But there seem to be a number of ways in which my heart is refusing to obey my reason. I should say "God help me" but am not at all sure I want to be helped.

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