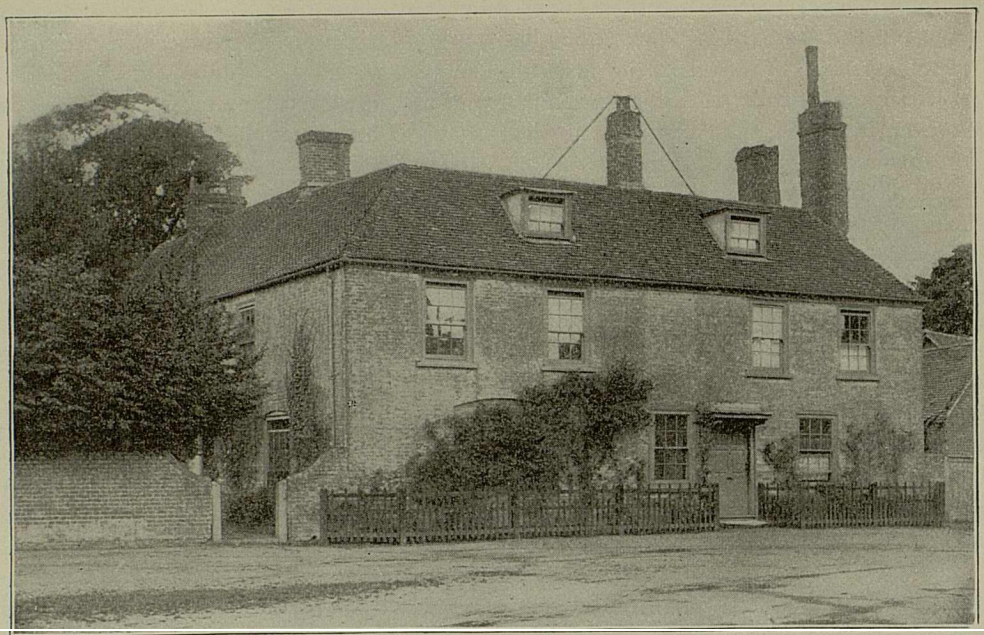

From "The Story of Jane Austen's Life." Lee & Shepard.

CHAWTON COTTAGE FROM THE ROAD

JANE AUSTEN'S LIFE

THE effort to bring all phenomena under natural laws is a feature of the age. Every time a book or paper appears or reappears on Jane Austen, it indicates a specific attempt of this sort. That a girl in the heart of a rural village, dreaming of balls and thinking of caps, should have made a new departure in fiction, and have anticipated the literary tendencies of a period of which Balzac and Zola are as much a part as electricity and the germ theory, is a phenomenon in the same sense that hypnotism and talking through copper wire are phenomena.

The Bibliography which Mr. Oscar Fay Adams appends to the edition just issued of his *Story of Jane Austen's Life*, shows how numerous and unsatisfactory have been these attempts. Much was reasonably hoped from Mr. Adams himself, who has followed with an enthusiasm almost romantic the trail of Jane Austen's life from rural Steventon to worldly Bath, from Southampton again to rural Chawton. His method, except so far as it is modified by individual temperament, is that from which the most is to be hoped. He sets forth the ancestry, family, and surroundings of Jane Austen, and all the circumstances of her life as these are studied from her letters and to be found in the neighborhood traditions. His accumulation of facts is exhaustive.

The most potent influence in Jane Austen's life, from all accounts, was her sister Cassandra. "Cassandra had the merit of having her temper always under com-

THE STORY OF JANE AUSTEN'S LIFE. By Oscar Fay Adams. A new edition, with 18 full-page illustrations. Lee & Shepard, 8vo, $2.00.

mand ; Jane had the happiness of a temper that never needed to be commanded." And Mr. Adams comments : "In other words, the amiability of the younger was constitutional, the serenity of the older the result of the exercise of self-discipline. Mrs. Austen used sometimes to say, 'If Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist upon sharing her fate.' It was in all respects a strong, self-reliant nature of which such a remark could be made, however lightly, but one which nevertheless was capable of intense feeling and boundless self-abnegation," he concludes.

Somehow, analysis and elucidation of this sort do not seem to take us any further ahead. However, on one point he is authoritative. He gives the burden of evidence toward proving that Jane Austen was *not* a prim old maid. He shows her conclusively a joyous creature who could dance for a week. She wore caps, doubtless because they were becoming. Her letters are filled with finery and beaux. Catherine Morland, who preferred cricket to balls, was not more skilful at games, nor Elizabeth Bennet more apt at repartee.

Yet he has not solved that perennial question—why a woman who wrote so exclusively of love in view of marriage, and whose personal charms are attested, never married. The case of Mr. Tom Lefroy everyone disposes of as an admirable example of flirtation without tears. Curiously enough, Mr. Adams quotes from a letter of Jane to Cassandra, two years later, alluding to a visit from Tom's aunt, and overlooks a more serious affair implied in the next sentence. These absent lines it is pardonable to add :

"She showed me a letter which she had received from her friend a few weeks ago . . . towards the end of which was a sentence to this effect :

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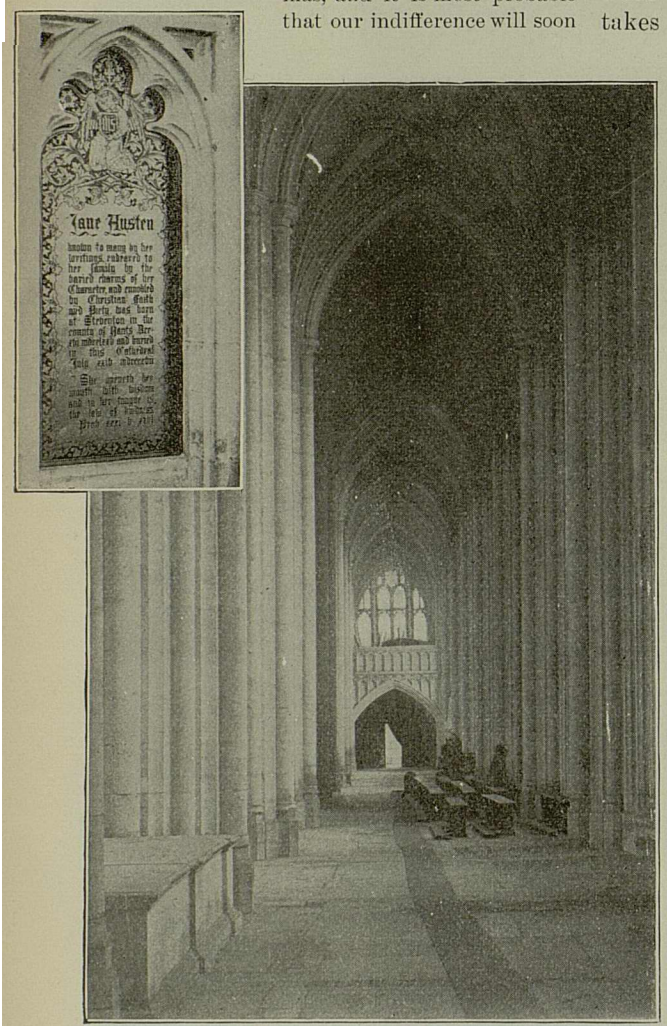
JANE AUSTEN AT FIFTEEN

[From a painting in possession of the Rev. Morland Rice, of Bramber]

'I am sorry to hear of Mrs. Austen's illness. It would give me particular pleasure to have an opportunity of improving my acquaintance with that family—with a hope of creating to myself a nearer interest. But at present I cannot indulge any expectation of it.' Jane then proceeds to comment: 'This is rational enough; there is less love and more sense in it than sometimes appeared before, and I am very well satisfied. It will all go on exceedingly well, and decline away in a very reasonable manner. There seems no likelihood of his coming into Hampshire this Christmas, and it is most probable that our indifference will soon be mutual, unless his regard, which appeared to spring from knowing nothing of me at first, is best supported by never seeing me. Mrs. Lefroy made no remarks in the letter, nor indeed did she say anything about him as relative to me. Perhaps she thinks she has said too much already.'"

This is a different note from the gay whistling down the wind of Tom Lefroy. In her correspondence Jane Austen mentions names with a temerity that fairly takes the breath away. But from the "Colonel's Lady to Judy O'Grady," "Him" and "Her" have more meaning than any Christian name in the Calendar of Saints.

There is another romance to which Mr. Adams does not allude. Once, when stopping at a seaside place in Devonshire, the sisters met a clergyman, who fell in love with Jane, and who Cassandra believed had that "subtle power of touching the heart" on which Jane had insisted. They parted, he with the intention of soon seeing them again, when the news came of his sudden death. Jane's feelings were confided only to her sister, and Cassandra never mentioned the attachment until after her death. This she regarded as the one real romance of Jane's life. However this may be, there is no evidence, as Mr. Adams shows, that these matters affected her happiness in life; and the transition from her own merry girlhood into the beloved aunt, ready for spillikins, bilbocatch, paper ships with the boys, or offering literary advice and sympathy to her niece, affords one of the pleasantest glimpses of her life. Moreover, she is as much interested in her "lilac sarsnet," and is ruining



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WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL, NORTH AISLE, LOOKING WEST

[The slab above the grave of Miss Austen is at the end of the matting shown in the illustration]

herself in "black ribbons with a pearl edge." She describes the bugle headdress with flower which calls forth "A very pleasing young woman" from a desirable male, adding: "One cannot pretend to anything better now; thankful to have it continued a few years longer."

Yet whether under the blue of the sky over the Hampshire downs, on the cliffs at Bath, or among the syringas of the Southampton garden, we get no more in touch with Jane Austen's literary life than she herself permits in her incomparable letters. Unquestionably she derived amusement from a contemplation of the vanities and small frailties of the men and women of her Hampshire and Kentish world, as Mr. Adams makes clear. But why, in the centre of a beloved domestic circle, does she find family relations but a favorable mark for her satirical humor? In an age when reverence for one's elders was not a tradition, how is it that the fathers and mothers are so weak-minded and ridiculous? Young men and women are not more prone to fall in love in Jane Austen's novels than for fathers and mothers to be absurd through, as she would express it, "their mean understandings." Against all the men and women, in Miss Austen's novels, who have presumed to give themselves posterity, Mr. Bennet stands out in relief as the creditable father of the darling of her heart, Elizabeth.

Her father and brother are clergymen, yet the cloth is an incident scarcely remarked, as Mr. Adams notices in the persons of Henry Tylney, Edmond Bertram, Mr. Elton, Edward Ferrars; or else it is made contemptible (as he does not mention), as in the person of Mr. Collins, the chaplain of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. When the Librarian of the Prince Regent requests Miss Austen to draw an English clergyman in one of her novels, she makes plea that "a classical education, or at any rate a very extensive acquaintance with English literature, ancient and modern, appears to be quite indispensable for the person who would do justice to your cler-

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gyman." In consideration of the dialogue in "Mansfield Park" on the subject of clergymen and their duties, this response sounds much like the gentle satire of a lady, mistress of the art. In contrast, Mr. Adams alludes to the enthusiasm with which she paints the young midshipman, William Price, and it is to be remembered that her favorite brothers, Francis and Charles, were in the navy, while her ne'er-do-well brother Henry, after many failures, tried his hand at writing sermons. Jane herself speaks with some sense of patronage of their value.

Mr. Adams has the last word; he has told us everything of Jane Austen's life that we are likely ever to know. Thus she remains discovered and undiscoverable. "The greatest artist that has ever written," said George Eliot.—"Next to Shakespeare!" exclaims Lord Tennyson.

Mary Gay Humphreys.