

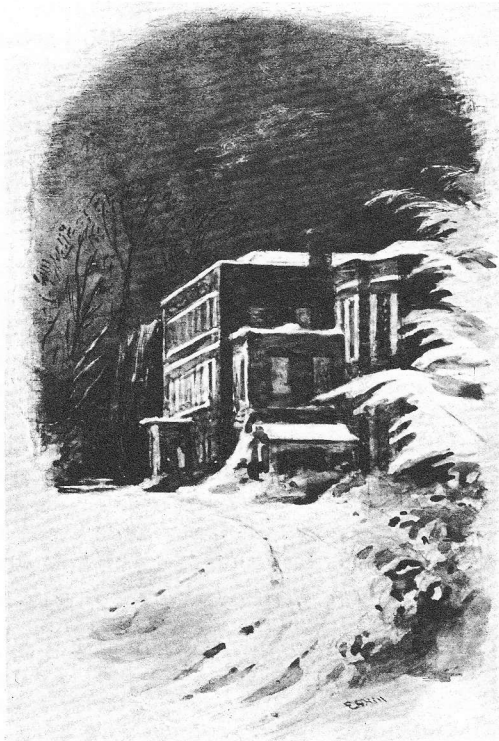
New Light Thrown on JA's Refusal of Harris Bigg-Wither

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Jane Austen's refusal at Manydown Park of Harris Bigg-Wither's proposal of marriage is touched on in the *Memoir* and described more fully in the *Life and Letters* but without giving any name. It was Miss Hill in *Jane Austen: Her Homes and Her Friends*, 1904, who dared to mention it in print. Chapman writes that the "anonymity of the story is explained" by the fact that descendants of the Bigg-Withers were still living in the neighbourhood. (*Facts and Problems*, Oxford, 1949)

Seventy-three years after the publication of the *Life and Letters*, 1913, I think I might scruple to print verbatim what neither my great grandfather (James Edward Austen-Leigh) nor my great uncle (William Austen-Leigh) cared to do. Caroline Austen helped her brother with his *Memoir* and this letter from her to his daughter, Amy (Emma Austen-Leigh) was written in 1870 when he was preparing the second edition. It provides a



Manydown Park

more valid explanation of JA's refusal than the *Life's* somewhat Victorian one that Harris Bigg-Wither had not "the subtle power of touching her heart" (93).

Manydown Park is described by Constance Hill as a "fine old mansion" and by W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh as "a substantial old manor-house." Possibly Jane, on again seeing Manydown after Bath, felt that "to be mistress of [it] might be something!" Then one seems to sense adumbrations of Lord Osborne—"a very fine young man; but [with] an air of coldness, of carelessness, even of awkwardness about him"—in Caroline's description of Harris Bigg-Wither. At all events, it is gratifying to be able to record here that JA in her own life adhered to the same principles which Emma expressed in *The Watsons*:—"To be so bent on Marriage—to pursue a Man merely for the sake of situation—is a sort of thing that shocks me; I cannot understand it. Poverty is a great Evil, but to a woman of Education & feeling it ought not, it cannot be the greatest" (318).

Frog Firle [Sussex]
June 17th [1870]

My dear Amy,

I will proceed to answer your letter to the best of my ability—I can give, I believe¹ the *exact* date of Mr Wither's proposal to my Aunt from some entries in an old pocket book which make *no* allusion to anything of the sort—but some peculiar comings & goings coinciding exactly with what my Mother more than once told me of *that* affair, leave me in no doubt that the offer was made, & accepted at Manydown on Thursday the 2d of Dec—1802 & *refused* the next morning, Friday, Dec. 3d, it had scarcely grown to be an engagement, Aunt Jane was then nearly 27—they had left Steventon about a year & half—in the Spring of 1801 I do *not* know the date of the Seaside gentleman—Mr. Blackall I *suppose* was his name—on Mr. Hubback's authority—but I should *imagine* it to have been later—It was from Bath that they made the summer excursions which brought him to their acquaintance—Probably they did not begin their wandering the first summer—1801 & in August 1802 it is *entered* that "Mr & Mrs & Charles Austen came [to Steventon] from Wales" — I know they once went to Barmouth—and it was not *there* that they found him—I cannot say for *certain*— only my *belief* is, that his life or death had nothing to do with the Manydown story— Mr. Wither was very plain in person— awkward, & even uncouth in manner— nothing but his size to recommend him — he was a fine big man — but one need not look about for secret reason to account for a young lady's *not* loving him— a great many would have taken him *without* love — & I believe the wife he did get was very fond of him, & that they were a happy couple — He had sense in plenty & went through life very respectably, as a country gentleman— I *conjecture* that the advantages he could offer, & her gratitude for his love, & her long friendship with his family, induced my Aunt to decide that she would marry him *when* he should ask her— but that having accepted him she found she was miserable & that the place & fortune which would certainly be *his*, could not alter the *man* — She was staying in his *Father's*

house — old Mr. Wither was then alive — To be sure she should not have said yes — over night — but I have always respected her for the courage in cancelling that yes— the next morning — All worldly advantages would have been to her —& she was of an age to know *this* quite well — My Aunts had very small fortunes & on their Father's death they & their Mother would be, they were aware, but poorly off — I beleive most young women so circumstanced would have taken Mr. W. & trust to love after marriage —as I do *not* beleive any affection for another man stood then in the Way — nor have I any belief that Anne Elliott's conversation with Capn Harville was *imagined* merely from personal experience — everybody knows her estimate of man & woman's feelings to be true — it is the taste & refinement of the writing which has made *that* conversation so famous —not the novelty of the idea—I am sorry to knock down Fanny's² theories — & having *no* proof to offer, they may rise up again, as before — we shall never know for certain!—Now, dear Amy, for the other part of your letter. . . .

NOTES

- ¹ It is amusing to note Caroline's erratic and inconsistent spelling of "believe." Evidently a family failing handed on from one generation to another.
- ² Probably Fanny Lefroy

[If one wonders what Caroline, herself, was like as a person, here is Mary Austen-Leigh's description of her in her own *Memoir of J. E. Austen-Leigh* (Privately printed, 1911): "All the nephews and nieces, as they grew older, found her not less agreeable as a companion than she was kind as an aunt. She joined an excellent memory, and an original and cultivated mind to a sweet, gentle manner, and, having gifts both of humour and pathos she could make everything she related interesting or amusing to her hearers. These powers, and the unselfishness of her nature, made her greatly beloved, and a most welcome guest. . . ."]

