

FANNY KNIGHT

by Joan Austen-Leigh

Fanny Knight was Jane Austen's favourite niece. "Almost another sister," Jane wrote to her sister, Cassandra.

Fanny was the eldest of the eleven children of Jane's brother, Edward. Edward had been adopted by wealthy relations and did not change his name from Austen to Knight until 1812 when Fanny was nineteen. Jane Austen wrote to Cassandra on the occasion, "I must learn to make a better 'K'." Fanny confided to her diary: "Papa changed his name about this time in compliance with the will of the late Mr. Knight and we are therefore all *Knights* instead of dear old *Austens*. How I hate it!!!!!!"

This is one of the fascinating details disclosed in Fanny Knight's diary. Deirdre Le Faye's dedication in persevering over the tiny spidery handwriting of volumes which have lain, long neglected, in a Kentish archive has resulted in this publication, a most welcome addition to our all-too-scanty knowledge of the life of Jane Austen.

Edward Knight became a very rich man; but he did not forget or neglect his family. From the Knights he inherited two country houses: Godmersham Park in Kent, where they chiefly lived—and which is often thought to be the model for Lady Catherine de Bourgh's house, Rosings, in *Pride and Prejudice*—and the Great House at Chawton. It was near the latter that Edward provided accommodation for his widowed mother and sisters. At Chawton Cottage Jane Austen wrote and prepared for publication all her novels. Today it is known to throngs of visitors as "Jane Austen's House."

Here in these diaries are documented many happy visits paid by the Austens to Godmersham. "French wine and ices," wrote Jane appreciatively. It was evidently a generous and hospitable household, and a luxurious contrast to the economical style of living at the Austens' cottage. Return visits were also made by the Knights to Chawton, sometimes to the Cottage, and sometimes to the Great House.

Jane did not go to Godmersham so often as Cassandra, but then Jane was busy manufacturing *Emma*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* and probably could not spare the time. Cassandra was evidently a much-beloved aunt, called upon to assist at many a Knight family crisis, whether it was the loss of a governess or one of the frequent lyings-in of her sister-in-law.

Thus it came about that Cassandra was staying at Godmersham when Edward's wife died shortly after the birth of her eleventh child—a not uncommon event in Regency times. Fanny, aged fifteen, was left to be mother to the younger children and companion to her father. Edward, unlike his brothers, Charles and Frank, whose wives (mentioned in these diaries) also died in childbirth, never married again.

Fanny was an eligible young lady. We follow her burgeoning interest in the young men she met at parties and those who came to visit. The intimacy which began to develop between Jane and Fanny (and which is the source of some of Jane's most delightful letters) had this subject of romance as its provenance. For these tender confidences, it seems, Fanny sought the advice of Aunt Jane rather than Cassandra. Presumably Fanny considered Jane an authority—the theme of the novels so often being the rightness of the choice a young woman should make in selecting the "companion of [her] future life." In return for these confidences, Jane wrote, "My dearest Fanny, You are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my life."

Fanny did not marry until 1820, three years after Jane Austen's death. She was then twenty-seven (one thinks of Charlotte Lucas). Her younger sister Lizzie (aged twenty) had already been married for two years, and her cousin Anna, James's daughter, her same age, for six. One wonders, did Fanny, like Mrs. Norris, find herself "obliged to be attached"? In the event she accepted a widower with six children, Sir Edward Knatchbull, whom she had known for some years. Fanny herself then added to the size of his family by nine. (An unusual circumstance here is that her eldest stepdaughter in 1826 married her own brother, Edward.) Fanny's own eldest son, also Edward, later Lord Brabourne, edited in 1884 the first edition ever to be published of Jane Austen's letters.

Lord Brabourne's great-great-grandson is John Brabourne, producer of such well-known films as *Passage to India* and *Death on the Nile*. He is married to Patricia, Countess Mountbatten, thereby forming a connection with the royal family.

At the end of her life Fanny, a snobbish Victorian matriarch, wrote to a sister a famous—no, infamous—letter about her Aunt Jane.* For that, some of us cannot forgive her.

Yes my love it is very true that Aunt Jane from various circumstances was not so *refined* as she ought to have been from her *talent*, & if she had lived 50 years later she would have been in many respects more suitable to *our* more refined tastes. They were not rich & the people around with whom they chiefly mixed, were not at all high bred, or in short anything more than *mediocre* & *they* of course tho' superior in *mental powers & cultivation*, were on the same level as far as *refinement* goes—but I think in later life their intercourse with Mrs Knight (who was very fond of & kind to them) improved them both & Aunt Jane was too clever not to put aside all possible signs of 'commonness' (if such an expression is allowable) & teach herself to be more refined, at least in intercourse with people in general. Both the Aunts (Cassandra & Jane) were brought up in the most complete ignorance of the World & its way (I mean as to fashion &c.) & if it had not been for Papa's marriage which brought them into Kent & the kindness of Mrs Knight, who often used to have one or other of the sisters staying with her, they would have been, tho' not less clever & agreeable in themselves, very much below par as to good society & its ways.

First published in *The Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. 163 (1947-49), pp. 72-3.

Persons Referred to in Fanny Knight's Diary

James (1765-1819) m. (1) Anne Mathew
 Anna (1793-1872)

m. (2) Mary Lloyd
 James Edward (1798-1874)
 Caroline Mary Craven (1805-1880)

Edward (Knight) (1767-1852) m. Elizabeth Bridges
 Fanny (1793-1882)*
 Edward (1794-1879)
 George (1795-1867)
 Henry (1797-1843)
 William (1798-1873)
 Elizabeth (1800-1884)
 Marianne (1801-1896)
 Charles (1803-1867)
 Louisa (1804-1889)
 Cassandra Jane (1806-1842)
 Brook John (1808-1878)

George Austen
 (1731-1805)
 m. 1764
Cassandra Leigh
 (1739-1827)

Henry (1771-1850)
 m. Eliza de Feuillide

Cassandra (1773-1845)

Francis (1774-1865)
 m. (1) Mary Gibson eleven children
 m. (2) Martha Lloyd

Jane (1775-1817)

Charles (1779-1852)
 m. (1) Frances Palmer four children
 m. (2) Harriet Palmer four children

*Fanny (1793-1882) m. 1820 Sir Edward Knatchbull - their son Edward first Lord
 Brabourne.