

Persuasion

J. Austen

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Persuasion is the last completed book by Austen. To be honest it does not measure up to her vintage work. For one thing it is shorter than the average. The plot too is also much simpler and there are few examples of her customary elegant wit and sarcastic observation. The heroine Anne Elliot and her one-time lover Captain Wentworth seem to be almost the only reasonable people, the rest are comic caricatures. Ms Elliot and Wentworth had had a relation some seven years earlier, but she had been forced to abort it on the advice of an elder lady and mentor, by name of lady Russell, of whom she had a very high opinion. What else could she have of her, when losing her mother at an early age, and her father being a vain and conceited fool, and her sisters not much better.

The story starts at a crisis. Sir Walter Elliot having lived above his means is strongly advised by his lawyer to rent out his estate and retire to more modest quarters at Bath. At first he resists the idea, but is easily persuaded, his obstinacy unsupported by any kind of arguments, soon wears thin. It is arranged that a retired admiral Croft with his wife is going to take over. Of course our Elliot is at first opposed to the idea of getting involved with sea-people. They are living a hard life and do prematurely age, but is once again overruled. For reasons that appear a bit far-fetched it is decided that Anne does not join her father and elder sister, and her companion Mrs Clay until the beginning of the next year, and instead becomes the guest of her younger married sister, whose husband Charles Musgrove once made Anne her suit but was turned down, and then made a more successful bid for the younger silly sister Mary with pronounced hypochondrical tendencies. The arrangements seems to have been suggested by Mary, wanting some help, and enthusiastically seconded by the elder sister Elizabeth, in view of the fact that Anne did no seem to care much for Bath, in fact having bad memories of it since three years of school following upon her mothers premature death, and thus would be liable to have a dampening effect.

The complication, on which the plot turns, is that the brother of the tenant Mrs Croft is no other than the above mentioned Wentworth, who in the interim has done very well at sea, and been able to retire with a minor fortune, thus being now a much better match than he had been previously. He is of course in want of a wife, and has decide to stay close to the estate. Thus he is brought into the social circle of the Musgroves, solidly landed farmers, whose fortunes do not lag behind those of Sir Walter himself. That family has two young lively daughters, whose society he finds fit to engage high-spiritedly, naturally rising up hopes as well as suspense. Whom will he choose, Henrietta, already attached to a suitor, if of too humble a station, according to her vain sister-in-law Mary; or the livelier Louisa. As to Anne herself, she does eventually run into her old lover, who views her coldly and disapprovingly. While seven years may have made no dent in his own good looks nor diminished his energy, the same seven years have not allowed Anne to fare as well, instead cruelly turning her into the sorry state of an old maid.

Life goes on. Anne has to administer to the whims and hypochondria of her younger sister supported by the kind brother-in-law, whose nieces regret that he did not marry her instead of the sister. The autumnal setting is gently evoked by the author, preparing for the dramatic twist of the story. The over-night trip to nearby Lyme Regis by the sea. By present standards the distance is trivial, but back then two hundred years ago or so, it was a minor adventure to get there by horse and wagon. In other words, the world was much larger then, and its exploration more adventurous. It takes them some time to arrive, and the present day reader can romantically envision the slow transport on muddy winding roads through a rural landscape unsullied by modern contraptions. When in Lyme, they behave like any modern tourists, human nature having undergone surprisingly little change in comparison with the environment it has deemed fit to change to its whims. There is of course an excuse beyond mere frivolity for this extended visit. Captain Wentworth has friends in Lyme, a former colleague at sea a Captain Harville and his wife, and a sad lodger another captain, by name of Benwick, who had been engaged to Harville's sister, who had tragically died. They live in modest circumstances and cannot afford to host them properly, thus the party had decided to stay at an Inn.

Two things happen in Lyme. One of major importance to the plot, one a merely heralding of one of its future main actors. The important thing is that Louise, while in play with her suitor Wentworth falls and hits her head on the stone pavement, suffering a serious concussion and brought lifeless to the lodgings of the Harvilles. In the inevitable commotion that follows, the men and woman of character prove their mettle, while everybody else go into hysterics. Apparently the excitement brings out the best in Anne, and her flushed cheeks and spirited eyes, catch the attention of a handsome stranger, who appears to stay at the same inn and whose identity becomes a source of speculation. This is the second thing that happens.

Louise is kept at the Harvilles for her slow recovery and convalescence, the children of the household are removed temporarily at the Musgroves, Wentworth leaves the seaside resort and eventually Anne returned to her sister continues to Bath.

At Bath she is appalled by the social obsequiousness of her father and elder sister Elizabeth, irritated by the continued presence of Mrs Clay, who is suspected of having designs on her father, comforted by the nearby residence of her mentor lady Russell, and doing good by visiting an old school-friend of her, a Mrs Smith, who has sought out Bath for medical, not social reasons, living very modestly as a widowed invalid, yet in good cheer. However, the great surprise is that of a distant cousin Walter Elliot, the closest male heir of the estate, who turns out not only to have been the mysterious handsome stranger down at Lyme, but also proving himself to be a most attentive and polite companion, making himself a constant guest to the household. This is so much more surprising in view of his behavior in the past, when he not only refused to marry Elizabeth, thus keeping the estate in the immediate family, but pointedly married another woman of low social standing, albeit with a comfortable fortune, and further snubbed all efforts of the Elliots to keep contact. Why this 'volte en face'? True his wife recently died, and the marriage seems not to have been a happy one, which inevitably taints him, at least in the eyes of Anne, who is, unlike her father and sister, unable to reconcile his old behavior with his new attentive one. She finds him charming and handsome, and his conversation many levels above that

of her siblings and father. In particular they both resent the presence of Mrs Clay. Maybe Anne does not really understand the base motive of her cousin for this aversion. Would Sir Walter marry her and sire a son, gone would be the claims of his nephew, who feels it incumbent on him to stay in constant contact the household and keep an eye on her. If he also would pay a successful suit to Anne, this certainly would not hurt matters.

Now Austen hurries to weave the threads of the plot to a speedy and successful conclusion. Is she getting impatient? The book is shorter than her other works, with the exception of the somewhat juvenile 'Northanger Abbey'. A more studied approach, certainly would have left plenty of room for further complications and digressions. We learn by letter, a standard device of older fiction, that Captain Wentworth had left Lyme and in his absence the sad and thoughtful Benwick had fallen in love with Louise resulting in an engagement. Clearly this is a case of love by circumstances, two people thrown into each others arms. What would thoughtful and educated Captain Benwick have in common with flighty Louise who had never read a serious book in her life? A thought that invariably enters Annes head, as it turns out earns the disapproval of Captain Wentworth. But of course it establishes the fact that Louise is no longer a rival and there are no longer any obstacles of that kind. Not only that, an entire delegation is coming to Bath, including the tenants the Crofts, and most significantly Captain Wentworth himself. It is inevitable that they will be thrown into each others paths. And what will ensue?

There are some further twists to the plot, somewhat artificial I would say. Through the unlikely venue of modest Mrs Smith, Anne learns of the true character of her cousin, abetted by documentary evidence in forms of letters. Meanwhile she encounters Captain Wentworth at a number of occasions. At a concert, where they for the first time start to have an intimate conversation, only to be rudely interrupted by her cousin Eliot, making Wentworth leave in suppressed rage of jealousy. Later on they accidentally meet at the Crofts' residence, where Elizabeth pointedly give Wentworth an invitation to a soiree at their place, he now being considered as socially acceptable, at least to the point of not being able to be ignored. The question of how to make Anne and Wentworth to come to a reconciliation is of course the whole point of the book, and to bring it about in an exciting and believable way, is the major problem of her craft. In fact she did rewrite the scene many times, at least one discarded attempt printed in the edition I read. Of course, as noted, the event might have been foreordained, but that would not have prevented an accomplished author to postpone the inevitable, keeping up the suspense and deepen the commitment of the reader to the tale. Anyway, in the final version, she lets Wentworth overhear a conversation Anne has with Captain Benwick, another worthy character conveniently brought onto the scene, in which Anne protests (maybe too much?) that the female heart is more constant than that of the male, contrary to the claims of the former that women are fickle creatures, while males never forget a love. An obvious referral to his own experience. Now this snippet convinces Wentworth that Anne still loves him, and as he himself have never been able to get her out of his mind, in spite of valiant efforts, such as the affair with Louise, the conclusion is foregone. All in all it is a bit too predictable and neat, and although we cannot refrain from congratulating both worthy parties, closing the book with some satisfaction that at least intermittently fate makes it rewards where they are due, it is somewhat anticlimactic. The destination may be up to our approval, but as in life, it

is the road that matters, not the end result, whose definitiveness is a source of regret not rejoicing.

Predictably the book ends with an epilogue, partly satisfying the curiosity of the devoted reader. This is an advantage of fiction above real life, we ourselves are never presented with epilogues of what happened after our death. We learn that the cousin eventually marries Mrs Clay, making her an offer not to be refused. But why? By so doing he can certainly prevent her from siring a son with silly Sir Walter, but what prevent that silly head to make his suit elsewhere, or more more likely be seized upon by another enterprising female? That Anne and her Captain will marry is of course obvious, and it is satisfying to learn that the letter will not bear any permanent grudge against lady Russell, who had prevented their first communion, just as he obviously does not bear any permanent grudge against his wife, for having allowed herself to be swayed. (But those you love you are able to forgive anything after all. This is conventionally sentimental wisdom, which makes loving somebody a forbiddingly demanding business.) As to poor Mrs Smith, he is able to secure for her the property of her former husband in the West-Indies, swindled by the heir and cousin (who still in spite of his duplicity remains both a heir and cousin) allowing her a life in modest economic security. Austen does not forget the neediest in true Christian spirit.

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