
Cause and Consequence

by Mary Soon Lee

Fictionwise Contemporary - Science Fiction



Fictionwise Publications
www.fictionwise.com

Copyright (C)1998 Mary Soon Lee

First published in Interzone Magazine #136

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines.

If you did not obtain this ebook directly from Fictionwise or an authorized Fictionwise affiliate then you are in violation of copyright law and are denying the author of this work their fair royalty. Please visit www.fictionwise.com to purchase a legitimate copy.

Fictionwise offers a reward of up to \$500 for information leading to the conviction of any person violating the copyright of a Fictionwise ebook.

I CAME to Miss Jane Austen as a thief, a hunter after secrets that were not mine to take. A prudent man or an honorable one would never have attempted it. Being sadly deficient in both qualities, I seized the opportunity without a moment's hesitation. Knowing that she would be at the Upper Rooms in Bath on the evening of the tenth of May 1801, I fixed my own arrival for that morning.

The intervening hours passed in a plethora of details: selling one of my diamonds for less conspicuous coinage, securing rooms at the White Hart Hotel, finding a tailor who could conjure me a passable outfit in the scant time available. At length it was evening. I hastened to the Upper Rooms, and stood waiting impatiently for her party to arrive. The ballroom was crowded, the air thick with the perfumes of an

hundred females, bedecked in bright muslin frocks and feathered caps, their male companions gay in green and yellow waistcoats. Yet I was assured that this was nothing compared to the height of the Season, when the press of bodies grew almost intolerable.

I paced the room, trying to contain my impatience, searching every face against the portrait of Miss Austen that her sister drew. None seemed to fit. I fought to keep my gaze from the clock: a quarter of nine. Miss Austen's letter declared that she arrived before nine o'clock. Was I in error? Had the letter referred to another evening?

There was a bustle near the entrance. A formidable older lady entered, accompanied by her husband and two young women. A mutter behind me confirmed what I had already guessed: the lady was the redoubtable Mrs. Leigh-Perrot, and the slender figure beside her must be Miss Jane Austen. She was prettier than her portrait suggested, her brown hair falling from her cap in natural curls, her eyes a bright hazel, her face expressive, taking in the scene with lively intelligence.

Lacking any connections who might introduce me to the Leigh-Perrots and thence to Miss Austen, I was reduced to standing nearby in the hope that when the company retired to tea, I might take a seat by their party. I will take Miss Austen's word for it that there was but a single dance before tea was announced. My own attention was so fixed upon the young woman herself that I was oblivious to my surroundings.

To stand within a dozen feet of a woman you have idolized and yet not be allowed to speak to her! The paradox of time that had brought me to this place wrought an intimacy between us that defied natural law. I had delighted in Miss Austen's novels, rekindled that original fascination when I later read the collection of her letters. Yet I could not voice one word of what I knew. No one else in the room, save perhaps Miss Austen herself, had any inkling that she would be honored centuries later. Of the novels which would bring her such renown, none would be published for a decade.

The crowd moved around me, surging as one toward the tea-room. I slipped in behind Miss Austen's group, close enough to study the tiny blue sprigged pattern on the back of her frock. We arrived at the tea-room. I sat down to the left of Mrs. Leigh-Perrot, diagonally opposite to Miss Austen herself. Neither lady spared me more than a passing glance, until a fortuitous opening allowed me to offer tea to Mrs. Leigh-Perrot.

In a minute we were introduced; I gave my name as Mr. Radley, son of Viscount Radley of Worcestershire. Mrs. Leigh-Perrot focused on me sharply as soon as I mentioned the title. I could see her trying to gauge my clothing more closely, estimating whether such a cravat would belong to the heir or merely a younger son of the Viscount.

She moved one hand upward to command her niece's attention. ?Jane, let me introduce to you the Honorable Mr. Radley, son of Viscount Radley. Mr. Radley, this is my niece, Miss Jane Austen.?

Miss Austen looked at me for the first time, a straight, honest look, neither impressed nor intimidated. She nodded. I nodded back. Her uncle, delayed by an acquaintance, arrived just then, and took his seat beside Miss Austen. He was full of talk of his friend, who by all accounts suffered abysmally from the gout. I could have wished his friend dead that his gout might not intrude between Miss Austen and myself. But the moment was past; gout ruled the day, and I took the rest of my tea in silence.

* * * *

That night the traveler came to me in my hotel room. He stepped out of nothingness like a demon, an icy cold brimming the room at the same instant. ?It's over. I've come to take you back.?

The traveler's words struck as thunder, shaking me and firing me both together. The blood surged in my face, curled my fingers into fists. "Sir, my task is barely underway. I have yet to uncover those facts about Miss Austen that you seek."

"You fool. You've already ruined it, disturbed the balance enough that the police have noticed. They're on my trail, and my buyer doesn't exist any more—he wasn't even born."

He held out his arm to me, as he had a night ago, a century ahead. The traveler's paradoxes leave me without a reference point to clarify my meaning. He glowered at me. "We need to go. Now."

I thought of what the traveler had said that other night, of how my actions in the past might destroy both the future I belonged to, and the still more remote future that claimed him. Of how he had examined a thousand men before me, seeking one whose *resonance* might be aligned with this era's. He himself could move freely in the 1930s where he found me, yet was powerless here in the 1800s. If he moved so much as the three steps across the carpet to touch me, the unseen machine that held him here would lose its grasp and he would be wrenched back to his own time.

I thought of Miss Austen, and knew then that I cared not one whit for any other future. I held my ground. "Sir, I would stay."

"Don't you understand what you're doing? Are you insane? The balance is collapsing. If you don't come now, you'll be trapped here."

His bluster told me what I needed; he had no power to snatch me back unless I crossed over to him. I laughed. I took the long route round him where he stood, as helpless as a fly in honey. I opened the door. "Good night, sir."

I shut the door behind me. When I returned to my room an hour later, the traveler was gone.

* * * *

By the next day my confidence had vanished. I alternated between imagining that I would be thrust into the future without warning, and picturing myself unmasked by the very acuity of Miss Austen's intellect. The traveler had provided me with a family name and a pouch of diamonds; he had said that Viscount Radley was a participant in this scheme, that the Viscount's real son was spirited away. But even supposing the Viscount kept to his part, a thousand things could trip me up. I might see a carriage in the street and accidentally name it as a gig when any child would know it for a curricule. I might take the wrong step on the dance floor or mistake the rules of cribbage or speculation.

I need not have feared Miss Austen's keen perceptions in those first days. Eager to see her again, I searched the crowds in the Upper and Lower Rooms every evening, walked past her uncle's house half a dozen times a day, loitered in the Pump Room lest Miss Austen was persuaded into sampling the curative waters. But though I glimpsed her occasionally—walking briskly out of the milliner's, seated across the room at a concert—there was no opportunity to renew my introduction.

A week passed, then a fortnight. Miss Austen's father and her elder sister Cassandra arrived in Bath. The family took their leave of the Leigh-Perrots and set up residence in a comfortable terraced house in Sydney Place. My urgency redoubled. I knew the Austens would shortly leave Bath for a summer holiday and that their journeys would include a stay in Sidmouth. But I must ascertain the details: when they would depart, where else they would travel.

At last one day I entered the Pump Room while Mr. Austen and his two daughters were present. The

sisters were taking a turn about the room, displaying their fine spotted muslins and their fine figures to equal advantage. The eligible bachelors, however, evinced no conspicuous interest. At twenty-five, Miss Jane Austen was no longer quite young, her sister two years further on the path to spinsterhood. And yet Cassandra's features were fully as regular as the prettiest chit of eighteen, while Miss Jane Austen's less classical face was rendered the more fascinating by the animated play of her emotions and the sweetness of the smiles she gave to her sister.

Passing by me, Miss Jane Austen inclined her head, enough to show that she remembered our meeting at the Upper Rooms. I bowed back. When the Austens moved to leave, I followed close behind. Outside an unexpected shower threatened to thwart them. Mr. Austen put up his umbrella, but it could scarcely shelter himself and his two daughters. The group were on the point of retreating indoors in some consternation, when I stepped forward.

"Sir, if you would let me be of assistance?" I bowed and proffered my umbrella. "My name is Mr. Radley; I had the pleasure of being introduced to Miss Jane Austen by Mrs. Leigh-Perrot some while ago."

Surely it was not my imagination that Miss Jane Austen's cheeks were tinged a deeper pink? I held my breath, wondering if I had been too forward for Mr. Austen's tastes.

The retired clergyman evidently decided to view my offer as a gesture more rooted in Christian goodwill than impudence. He nodded. "Thank you, sir. Normally we would not impose on you, but I promised my wife we would be back soon. I am Mr. Austen." He gave his arm to Cassandra, the usual courtesies hastened by the worsening weather. "Cassandra, meet Mr. Radley. Mr. Radley, this is my eldest daughter, Miss Austen."

A moment more, and I was following behind Cassandra and Mr. Austen, holding my umbrella over Miss Jane Austen as I walked between her and the street. Water ran muddy in the gutters, spraying up whenever a carriage clattered past.

"I fear your courtesy will gain you nothing but a badly soaked coat," said Miss Jane Austen, after a passing phaeton splattered me.

"I fear my habits are less elegant than your concern presumes. At home I frequently earn the displeasure of my servants by insisting on walking abroad in the filthiest of weather."

"The place of elegance as a virtue may perhaps be overrated. But I fancy you would not walk in the rain so often did not those same servants remove the burdens of cleaning up afterwards?"

"Alas, in the length of a single street you have exposed two flaws in my personality. My want of elegance and inadequate consideration of those it most inconveniences. We must turn the conversation before you discover worse." I looked at her sideways, and caught her likewise looking at me. I might have missed my footing, so lost was I in the interest of this view, had not Miss Jane Austen turned her head away.

"Well then," she declared. "I shall turn the conversation for you. Let me see, I shall begin with the question, How long have you been in Bath?"

"Nearly three weeks. And you?"

"Four. Have you been to the theater at all?"

?Yes, once to the Theater Royal.? Somewhat guiltily, recalling from my perusal of her letters that she admired the abilities of Robert William Elliston, I added, ?I was particularly impressed by Elliston's performance.?

?Indeed! I have only seen him once, but he brought a lighthearted naturalness to the role that one rarely finds. On the strength of a single night, I already believe him quite the finest actor in these parts.?

Once, she had only seen Elliston perform once. I had remembered reading that she admired him, but of course that knowledge came from the future. It was only now that her family had moved to Bath that Miss Jane Austen would have occasion to frequent the plays at Orchard Street. Agitated by my mistake, thankful that it would not be apparent to anyone else, I gracelessly asked the question that weighed on my mind. ?Will your family be spending the summer in Bath, Miss Austen??

?No, sir.? Faint disapproval sounded in her voice.

?Then I need not fear that leaving this city will deprive me of your company. Should I have stayed, I would only have suffered the same disappointment by another means.?

She took a dozen steps before replying. This time there was no denying the flush that stained her cheeks. ?Sir, you do not know my family well enough to warrant any regret at our departure.?

Her quiet level tone rebuked me as effectively as her words. I could not press her for more information. Though for the remainder of the walk I confined my remarks to the weather and the state of the roads, still Miss Austen answered only in monosyllables. Each undecorated `Yes? or `No? confirmed her disapproval.

We reached Sydney Place in equal ill humor. I escorted Miss Austen to the front door of the Austen's house. Mr. Austen thanked me; I made some vacuous reply.

Miss Jane Austen paused at the threshold. She turned to look at me, and some confusion or regret showed in her face. ?Thank you.?

Her tone was warm, cordial. So simply she displaced my bad mood, so simply she stepped indoors before I could answer. I walked outside another hour, and still when I returned to the hotel my thoughts were full of Miss Jane Austen.

* * * *

A prolific letter-writer, the larger part of Miss Austen's correspondence was burned after her death by her sister Cassandra, who sought to preserve her sister's reputation. To this end, Cassandra destroyed every letter that was too personal or too caustic. Some one hundred and forty letters survived this pruning, but not a single one from the summer of 1801 until the autumn of 1804.

The traveler had sent me to spy on Miss Austen in an effort to unravel the secrets of those silent years. And though the traveler had vanished, I had my own reasons for continuing to seek out Miss Austen.

So I moved to Sidmouth, and waited impatiently for the Austens to arrive. I spent my days pacing along the promenade, across the windswept commons, down to the harbor where the fishing boats rocked in the water, the briny smell soaking into everything.

One afternoon while I strode in the sea-air, I saw three people head toward me, an elder woman framed by two younger ones. My breath caught as I recognized the Austen daughters. The threesome

approached, both daughters nodded to me, I tipped my hat in return.

‘Mama,’ said Cassandra Austen, ‘let me introduce to you the Honorable Mr. Radley, the gentleman who escorted us back from the Pump Room when it rained. Mr. Radley, this is my mother, Mrs. Austen.’

We began the usual round of courtesies. Had I been to Sidmouth before? No, but I liked its situation, between the rolling hills and the seashore. Did Mrs. Austen come here often?

Cassandra Austen was politely encouraging, her mother more so. Miss Jane Austen herself said rather less, but her eyes and the brief agitation of her fingers smoothing down her frock spoke for her.

I matched my steps to theirs, and together we strolled along agreeably. Mrs. Austen paused to watch the sea, and Cassandra stopped close by her. A little gap separated myself and Miss Jane Austen from the others. ‘Sir,’ she said just loud enough for me to catch her words over the crash of the waves. ‘I wish to apologize for my rudeness the other day. I thought, perhaps incorrectly, that your flattery was idle and insincere. And yet I was not certain. . . .?’

She ended on a questioning note. Elegant speeches fled me as I turned to see the salt breeze lift her brown curls to lie against her white bonnet. ‘The fault was mine. Never believe that I think too little of you, madam, but rather too much. My tongue cannot express, civility does not permit me, to say what I would wish to.’

Above us a seagull glided, mated to the wind's current. Miss Austen smiled at me properly for the first time, and the sweetness of that scene is with me now, the curve of her lips, the sea-damp air tugging at her muslin frock. One perfect moment stolen before Mrs. Austen crossed over to us.

That night I woke abruptly, jarred from nightmare by a bitter cold. I thought the window must have been blown open, but the curtains were still, nothing stirred. I lay awake for some hours, unable to shake a vague uneasiness.

The next day I again met the Austens near the shore, and the day after that, and the day after that, until it settled into a ritual, accepted but never formalized. I refused to consider history. I refused to consider consequences.

Sometimes either Mrs. Austen or Cassandra would be absent. On one occasion Mr. Austen joined us. Miss Jane Austen came every day.

She was quiet but never timid. She gave her opinions forthrightly, with a keen wit that sometimes crossed into sarcasm. Without foreknowledge I would never have guessed her to be one of the great English authors. On the one hand, she didn't seem introverted enough to nourish hidden genius. On the other hand, she lacked the simplicity that would bespeak an unalloyed virtue. Beneath what she said, I heard her resentment of the family's move from the shire where she grew up, from the friends she loved, to Bath. There was no doubt she was conscious of her own uncertain position as a woman with no fortune who finds herself several years past the best age to seek a husband.

But my expectations were redundant beside the woman herself. She was intelligent, thoughtful, her hazel eyes eloquent, her hand so strangely precious the first time I pressed it in mine. We were facing the sea, Mrs. Austen and Cassandra sitting at a comfortable distance.

‘I have written to my father, Miss Austen, to advise him I am in danger of becoming irretrievably

entangled with a woman of uncommon charm. If I have advanced too rapidly, tell me now.?

?I cannot lie to you. You have leapt ahead of both propriety and rationality, yet I would wish you quicker still.?

?Then will you do me the honor, Miss Austen, of accepting my proposal of marriage??

?Mr. Radley,? she said with a stern expression, ?I accept.?

And then she smiled, and the sun reflected in a thousand glamors of light from the waves, and the seagulls hung rapt in the deep, deep blue above.

?I shall speak to your father when he returns from London this weekend.? I took her hand. She pressed her fingers against mine, the sweetest warmth I ever felt.

* * * *

Two days later, the day before Mr. Austen was expected to return, I received a note. The paper was folded over and over into a tiny square. When I opened it up a slip fell out, cut from the page of a book. At the top someone had added in red: ?Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th edition, 1929.?

?Austen, Jane,? the entry read, ?born Dec. 16, 1775, Steventon, Hampshire, England, died July 30, 1805, Kidderminster, Worcester. Minor English writer who had completed one novel and left early drafts of two others upon her death at age 29. The finished novel, *Northanger Abbey*, is a burlesque parody of the Gothic style, enriched by a timeless mastery of the prose medium, that touches on the broader social issues of her age. Married Henry Radley, later Viscount Radley, in 1802; died in childbirth.?

I crumpled the entry without reading further, cast it into the embers of last night's fire?to say she died in childbirth in 1805, barely four years from now?I could not believe it?I *would* not believe it. The traveler must have faked the note to suit his purpose. The paper crinkled in front of me. The blackened edges fell inward to join the ashes.

Even if the entry were accurate, it only described a possible future, not a necessary one?if history were so fragile, I could change it again. And yet, of all the things that I might risk, this one, this woman's life, I could not chance.

Another line of red handwriting turned in the heat. I pulled the paper out with my bare hand, stamped the sparks down, spread the sheet out with my good hand.

?If you would restore the balance of history, go to the harbor at one o'clock tonight.?

* * * *

The traveler came in silence, bringing an icy cold that has never left me since that night. He snatched me back to my world and out of hers. He told me that he dropped a body into the salt water that night, a body that resembled mine in shape and form, created by some infernal machine.

I pray to God that she did not miss me long, that she has found her peace in the better world that she deserves.

As for myself, I have not earned that rest. I went to her as a thief, a hunter after secrets that were not mine to take, and I will forever be haunted by the memory of a woman with hazel eyes.

The End

Endnote:

Cassandra Austen did indeed censor the majority of Jane Austen's letters, and though almost 150 have survived, none date from the period between June 1801 and September 1804. Reports from family members strongly suggest that Jane Austen formed an attachment to a gentleman sometime during this period, but that it ended tragically when the gentleman died. During this interval, Jane Austen also received a marriage proposal from another gentleman, a Mr. Harris Bigg-Wither, which she first accepted then declined the very next morning; there is no indication, however, that she was ever romantically attached to Mr. Bigg-Wither.

The End

At www.fictionwise.com you can:

- Rate this story
- Find more stories by this author
- Read the author's notes for this story
- Get story recommendations