

Two Queries Concerning *Emma*: Did Jane Austen forget Mr. Knightley? Who wrote Frank Churchill's "handsome letter"?

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Let us take Mr. Knightley first. Yes, I think she did. Quite forgot about him at the Westons' Christmas Eve dinner party.

This scene in *Emma* is my favourite in all of Jane Austen. A great deal of work and thought must have gone into the writing to make the occasion so vividly alive. It is my belief that JA was, so to speak, so busy juggling all the many balls in the air, so intent on making each character speak and behave as he ought and so concerned with forwarding the plot, that she quite overlooked Mr. Knightley.

Let us consider all that is going on: she has to show us Mr. Elton's unwelcome attentions to Emma, so that *we* are aware of what he is up to even if *she* is not. Then there is the cold evening to be described and Mr. John Knightley's ill-humour to be conveyed, and Mr. Woodhouse to be cosseted and fussed over, and the affection to be expressed between Emma and Mrs. Weston, and Mr. Weston in his cheery way to be chattering about his son, and the situation at Enscombe to be brought into the conversation, and Mrs. Weston's private belief that the visit of Frank will be postponed yet again. With all this to be accomplished, is it to be wondered that Mr. Knightley, that Rock of Gibraltar, always there when wanted, always to be counted on in any emergency, went missing?

Well, technically, of course, we are supposed to know he was present, or invited at least. "Harriet, Mr. Elton, and Mr. Knightley, their own especial set, were the only persons invited to meet them" (108). "Them" is the family party from Hartfield: Mr. Woodhouse, his two daughters, and Mr. John Knightley. With the Westons themselves, this makes a party of nine. (We know that on less festive occasions eight at table were as many as Mr. Woodhouse's nerves could bear.)

But I must present my case in sequence. Let us take first the manner of their all getting to Randalls. Jane Austen tells us a good bit. "How they were all to be conveyed . . . [Mr. Woodhouse] was not able to make more than a simple question . . . nor did it occupy Emma long to convince him that they might in one of the [two] carriages find room for Harriet also" (108).

Then Harriet has a bad cold and cannot come. But Mr. Elton, her supposed lover, is nonetheless determined not to relinquish the party, and while Emma is trying to persuade him to stay home and rest his

voice before the fatigues of the morrow "she found her brother was civilly offering a seat in his carriage" (110).

There will now be six guests at Randalls. In the words of Mr. John Knightley "five idle, shivering creatures" are transported by four horses and four servants. But what about the sixth person? What about Mr. Knightley?

Why was he not offered a seat by his own brother in his carriage? Here is the point at which the geography of Highbury must come under consideration. Unfortunately, this is not clear. As R. W. Chapman remarks, "many attempts have been made to construct a map. I have not found it possible to do this with certainty;" (521). Where, then, was Donwell situated in relation to Randalls and Hartfield? We know that when Emma is waiting at Ford's for Harriet to make up her mind, she descries Mrs. Weston and Frank Churchill advancing towards her on the "Randalls road." No mention is made of its being also the *Donwell* road, which surely she would have called it if Donwell was *beyond* Randalls. If, on the other hand, Donwell was *beyond Hartfield*, and Mr. Knightley had therefore to pass it on his way to Randalls, why was he not invited to ride in either of the two carriages? Was it not rather unfriendly to have him make his own way out to dinner, presumably on foot, *and* on Christmas Eve *and* with "a few flakes already falling"? Of course it was. But we must not blame the family at Hartfield. They would not have been so unthinking if Jane Austen had not failed to give them directions.

Next I want to consider Emma's entrance at Randalls. We hear how Mr. Woodhouse is already seated when she walks in. We learn of her determination to enjoy herself in spite of Mr. Elton's odd behaviour. If Mr. Knightley has already arrived, is it not strange that he does not come forward to greet either Emma or his brother? Why does he take no part in the subsequent conversation? Perhaps he has been held up by William Larkins and comes in late, but if he does, there is no declaration of the fact. Then there is the dinner itself. At the table, Emma is "happily released" from Mr. Elton, and can listen with pleasure to Mr. Weston's anticipation of his son's visit. Now Mr. Knightley has not shown himself very well-disposed to Frank Churchill, yet it is inconceivable that he should have sat silent throughout the meal. We know he is most truly the gentleman. Surely his good manners would have impelled him to make some civil comment or pleasantry on a subject so dear to the heart of his host.

After dinner the ladies retire to the drawing room. The gentlemen are left alone. But Mr. Woodhouse soon enters to be with "those with whom he is always comfortable" (122). There his three companions must "entertain away his notice of the lateness of the hour" (124) before the other gentlemen join them and Mr. Elton "in very good spirits" inserts himself unbidden between Mrs. Weston and Emma on

the sofa, and asks Emma to “*promise him*” not to venture into Harriet’s sick chamber. Emma sees “Mrs. Weston’s surprise.” She herself is so much “provoked and offended” that she moves to sit beside Isabella. One would think that Mr. Knightley would be rather struck by this circumstance, that he might indeed have drawn Mr. Elton off in some manner or other, perhaps by engaging him in a conversation about parish business, or Emma might have noticed him exchanging a quizzical glance with his brother, who had perhaps confided his suspicions concerning Mr. Elton. But no. Mr. Knightley is silent. He says not a single word until there is an alarm about snow and we are told he “left the room immediately” (but we have not been told that he was ever in it!). When he returns it is to “answer for there not being the smallest difficulty in their getting home, whenever they liked it” (127). Also “he had seen the coachmen and they both agreed with him” (128). Both! Only two coachmen, so he did not bring his own carriage. Poor fellow, I hope he did not get his feet wet.

But it is no matter. It is as we expect, while the others are flapping and fussing to no purpose, Mr. Knightley takes charge. He and Emma settle it all between them, which is entirely satisfactory and exactly what we have counted upon their doing. For this purpose and no other was he present at Randalls.

I rest my case.



Then there is the question of who wrote Frank Churchill’s handsome letter to Mrs. Weston? Frank Churchill, of course, do I hear you say? That is what I have always thought myself, until recently. One of the joys of reading JA so often is that one makes discoveries.

I believe she has played a little joke on us, a concealed joke. For example, it was over a century before it was determined that Jane Fairfax’s piano was sent on Valentine’s Day. I am sure that Jane Austen enjoyed devising these little puzzles for the “dull elves,” and I think Frank Churchill’s letter is another such author’s tease.

Let us listen more carefully than we usually do to what Mr. Woodhouse has to say. Mr. Woodhouse is perhaps not so absolutely silly as one has been accustomed to think. He tells us that the letter Frank wrote on his father’s marriage was “a very proper handsome letter . . . I thought it very well done of him indeed. *Whether it was his own idea you know, one cannot tell.*” (96, italics mine).

Times without number have my eyes glided over that sentence and I have taken it as part of the old gentleman’s nonsense. He is astonished that Frank Churchill should be as old as twenty-three. He is surprised he is capable of writing a handsome letter. Indeed, to anticipate, the letter Frank ultimately writes at the end of the novel to Mrs. Weston to explain his engagement is quite a monument of dullness. Certainly not what you might call a handsome letter.

Let us consider further: Frank Churchill is not exactly known to be one to spring to his duty. He did not come to Highbury as he should have done to pay a wedding visit to his father, yet, as Mr. Knightley so justly observed, he was perfectly able to go to Weymouth. Let us listen to Mr. Woodhouse again talking of the famous letter: "I remember it was *written from Weymouth* and dated Sept. 28th" (italics mine). Written from Weymouth! I suggest it was Jane Fairfax who wrote that letter. Jane Fairfax who had a conscience and who wanted to be sure Frank Churchill did the right thing, not only because she was that sort of young woman, but because Mrs. Weston would be her future mother-in-law. I submit that Jane Fairfax dictated the letter, even as Emma did Harriet's refusal of Robert Martin.

SOLUTIONS TO CRYPTOGRAMS

1. The last time I saw her, she had a red nose, but I hope that may not happen every day.—Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*. 2. But, my dear, pray do not make any more matches, they are silly things and break up one's family circle grievously.—Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*. 3. The cruelty, the impolitic cruelty of dividing, or attempting to divide, two young people long attached to each other, is terrible.—Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility*. 4. Let me only have the girl I like, say I, with a comfortable house over my head, and what care I for the rest?—John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*. 5. And if you had not told me she was eighteen, I should have thought her as much as twenty-two. I do not mean by her looks but by her prudence.—Sir Charles Grandison in *Sir Charles Grandison or the Happy Man*. 6. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents.—Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. 7. Every five years, one hears of some new place or other starting up by the Sea, and growing the fashion, how they can half of them be filled, is the wonder! Where People can be found with Money or Time to go to them!—Mr. Heywood in *Sanditon*. 8. Perhaps his observations may have extended to the existence of nabobs, gold mohrs, and palanquins.—Mr. Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*. 9. Do not say he is not gentleman-like, considering; but you should tell your father he is not above five feet eight, or he will be expecting a well-looking man.—Mr. Rushworth in *Mansfield Park*.