

A Letter

Inspired by a tour of JA country in the summer of 1986

MURIEL MANUEL

Morgan City, Louisiana

My dear Cassandra,

I know your surprise must be great, to receive another letter from me so soon. Let me hasten to assure you that no harm has come to any of us here at Steventon. As the kind Mr. Digweed was travelling to Ithorpe, I prevailed upon his courtesy to convey this to you.

I must tell you, dear Cassandra, of a very strange occurrence which befell me just Saturday last. Being on the footpath from Ashe, whence I had walked on an errand for my mother, I was startled to hear the sound of many horses. And there drove up a very large coach, much larger than even that of Aunt Leigh-Perrot, filled with ladies and gentlemen. I surmised they were on holiday as they laughed and talked most excessively, and so very loudly that I was nearly overcome! Alighting from the coach, they darted here and there examining the trees, flowers and even rocks in great excitement. They seemed to have difficulty seeing, as many used spectacles, and some even had to hold small black boxes up to their eyes, in order, I presume, to see more clearly.

I know that my dear sister will not disbelieve my next words, for I must tell of the peculiar mode of dress affected by these strangers. I know not why I named them ladies and gentlemen, as the men were clad in workmen's clothes, and the dresses of the females were shockingly short, perhaps to facilitate working in the fields, and, Cassandra, some of them so far forgot their sex as to appear in a trouser-like garment. One female wore what they called a 'tea-shirt', which I comprehend is worn while drinking tea. There was a picture on it which brought to mind the dear sketch you made of me. Is this all not passing strange?

They appeared to have lost their way, and want directions but, dear sister, I found that I could not comprehend their words. By good fortune, a gentlewoman stepped forward, introduced herself as Lady Hermione Gregory, and addressed me in language clear and courteous asking to be directed to Chawton. Can you puzzle out why they should desire to journey to an obscure village, with naught to recommend it to fame?

If those at Ithorpe have news of these visitors, I beg you to contrive to send word to me, lest I be consumed by curiosity.

I remain, your devoted sister,
J. Austen