

**HG WELLS HAS HIS REGRETS**

**Episode 15: Jane Austen**

**INT. CHAWTON COTTAGE, HAMPSHIRE - FRONT ROOM**

With a stutter, the recording begins.

**JANE**

Good morning! This is *Jane* Wells.  
I'm not quite sure how my husband  
usually carries these out, but this  
is log set S2, log 15. And in front  
of me is the charming Miss Jane  
Austen!

THEME PLAYS

**JANE**

It really is a pleasure to meet you,  
Miss Austen.

**AUSTEN**

A pleasure to meet you, too. A  
fellow Jane is always a welcome  
acquaintance.

**JANE**

Indeed! I've always been such a fan  
of the name. It isn't my *real* name,  
you see - my Christian name is Amy  
Catherine - but I've never thought  
that it much suits me. "Jane" is  
much nicer.

**AUSTEN**

I'm glad you think so. I do like to use it in my own works occasionally - it feels a little like a secret note to myself. More tea?

**JANE**

Oh, yes please. Using the Time Machine really takes it out of me. How my husband keeps this up is beyond me.

Tea pours. The clink of a china cup.

**AUSTEN**

I must admit that I was deeply disturbed when you first arrived on that contraption.

**JANE**

I really am sorry about the vase, I'm happy to pay for it -

**AUSTEN**

No need. In any case, it was rather an ugly one that I am glad to see the back of. Since it was first presented to me I have been contriving ways to dispose of it in an agreeable manner that will not offend the giver of the gift; you appear to have saved me the trouble.

**JANE**

Oh! Well, no harm done, then.

**AUSTEN**

Mrs Wells, if I may ask: how did you acquire the name Jane? Did you name yourself?

**JANE**

My husband, Herbert, gave it to me as a nickname. I'm dreadfully fond of him, even though he's not always... quite there.

**AUSTEN**

My dear Mrs Wells, one would usually hope, I think, that anyone in possession of a husband would want him to be entirely there.

**JANE**

He's a wonderful man, truly! It's just... well, he's terribly intelligent, but his common sense skills leave an awful lot to be desired. Normally, he would be the one interviewing you, but he's at home in bed at the moment with a simply dreadful cold.

**AUSTEN**

You know, I'm sure that being married must be truly fulfilling for some women, but personally, I've never felt the need. I am quite content being a spinster.

**JANE**

Of course, you make quite a tidy income of your own, without need of one.

**AUSTEN**

Never under my own name, Mrs Wells!  
I have only ever been credited in  
print as "A Lady".

**JANE**

In my time, every schoolchild knows  
your name. Your books must be some  
of the most well-read in England.

**AUSTEN**

I am glad to know that one day, my  
accomplishments will be known. I'm  
also relieved that it won't happen  
in my lifetime. I fear that the  
attention would drive me to  
distraction. I have a... limited  
tolerance for human interaction.

**JANE**

Why did you choose to publish under  
an assumed title? Was it to avoid  
the attention?

**AUSTEN**

I thought it would have been  
obvious, dear - I couldn't possibly  
have signed my own contract! As a  
woman, I would need a husband to  
sign it for me - and of course, I am  
distinctly lacking one. Not to  
mention, of course, that most of  
society likes to maintain the  
illusion that women write as a  
hobby, rather than for a living.

**AUSTEN**

Would you like some more tea? We get the sugar from my brother Edward. He lives up the lane at Chawton House.

Tea is poured as Jane continues.

**JANE**

*(stunned)*

I know I often find myself complaining about the role of women in my time, but I must confess that I didn't know how much worse it was in the past. Things have certainly improved in the years since!

**AUSTEN**

Well, it's true that we often find ourselves in precarious positions as women - so often that I have made my living writing about it - but in a way, I have been able to use this to my advantage.

Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony, I suppose. I find people are fascinated by the wretched state some women find themselves in, and so I am at least never short of material to write about.

**AUSTEN**

Cassandra and I are fortunate enough to be lent this cottage by Edward. With the money from my books to supplement it, we are usually quite well off, unlike some poor souls.

**JANE**

How did your brother come to own Chawton House?

**AUSTEN**

It used to be owned by the Knight family, who unofficially adopted Edward when we were younger. They made him their heir. I cannot begrudge him the place, because he looks after us very generously.

Still, I much prefer living with my sister. In my opinion, few women are truly inclined towards intelligent conversation, and the number of men disposed to it are even fewer. Fortunately, I would say that you are one of those rare few.

**JANE**

You know, I've always been fascinated by the notion that you never include a single conversation between two men alone in all of your works. It makes a pleasant change to some books, where the men talk so much that the women can't get a word in edgeways.

**JANE**

(a thought occurs to her)  
Speaking of men talking  
constantly... In my copy of *Emma*,  
there's a dedication to Prince  
George...?

**AUSTEN**

Oh, lord, the dedication! How I  
struggled to get out of that!

**JANE**

Didn't you want to?

**AUSTEN**

Want to? I despise the man! Poor  
Princess Caroline... her marriage  
must be simply unbearable.

**JANE**

Is he really that awful?

**AUSTEN**

Mrs Wells, I have met the Prince  
Regent, and I must make it plain  
that I found him a thoroughly  
dislikeable and disreputable  
gentleman. Drinking, gambling...  
*womanising*... If he had not been  
Prince Regent, I would never have  
agreed to meet him. Really, it's  
scandalous.

Regrettably, he's a great fan of my  
work - I hear he keeps copies at all  
of his estates - and so when he  
requested my presence in London and  
a dedication in *Emma*, I could hardly  
refuse him.

**JANE**

Goodness, Herbert *will* be surprised to hear this one...

**AUSTEN**

And that's not even starting on his librarian.

**JANE**

What on earth is wrong with his librarian? Who is he?

**AUSTEN**

(grimly, with gravitas)  
*Reverend James Stainer Clarke.*

A BEAT to let that sink in.

**JANE**

I... see.

**AUSTEN**

I see his reputation has not preceded him. What can I - oh! Let me demonstrate!

A drawer opens. Papers rustle.

**AUSTEN**

(to herself)  
Cassandra is still out, I think, which should mean that we have the cottage to ourselves... Ah hah!

She plonks a pile of paper, books, etc. on the table.

**JANE**

Er... what's this?



**AUSTEN**

My letters from Reverend Clarke, my current unfinished projects, a letter to my sister... it's not important. I would not, of course, ever dream of showing you this if you were not a mysterious time traveller from the future. As it is, I must ask you to keep this an absolute secret.

**JANE**

*(thrilled)*

I'd be glad to!

*(she spots something)*

Is that... is that a draft of *Persuasion* I can see there...?

**AUSTEN**

*(sternly)*

Mrs Wells, please don't pry too deeply into my work. I very rarely allow my early drafts to be seen by anyone at all; I am affording you a great privilege. Besides, I'm afraid that it is all dross and that at this rate, I will be unable to ever publish it.

**JANE**

Of course. I do apologise.

**AUSTEN**

Think nothing of it. Now, listen to this: he sent me this letter after we met in London.

Paper rustles. Austen clears her throat.

**AUSTEN**

"Perhaps you might delineate in some future work the habits of life, and character, and enthusiasm of a clergyman, who should pass his time between the metropolis and the country."

**JANE**

*(this is excellent gossip)*

No! He didn't!

**AUSTEN**

He did, I assure you!

**JANE**

He wanted you to write him into a book?!

**AUSTEN**

Oh, more than that. Listen to his next suggestion. "A historical romance illustrative of the august House of Cobourg -"

Outside the room, a door hinge loudly creaks.

**AUSTEN**

The hinge - the hinge! Quick - back into the drawer!

We hear papers being stuffed back into the drawer and the drawer slammed shut.

**JANE**

What on earth...?

Austen hurriedly shushes her. The door to the room opens.

**CASSANDRA**

Jane, dear, I've just been to see the - oh! I didn't realise you had company. How do you do, Miss...?

**JANE**

Mrs Jane Wells. And you are...?

**CASSANDRA**

Jane's sister, Cassandra.

*(to Austen)*

Jane, you didn't tell me that you had company!

**AUSTEN**

*(firmly)*

I didn't know I was receiving it.  
You can go now, Cassandra.

**CASSANDRA**

Without even properly greeting our guest?

Austen pointedly clears her throat.

**CASSANDRA**

Very well. It was a pleasure, Mrs Wells.

She leaves.

Austen opens the drawer again and pulls out the papers.

**AUSTEN**

My apologies, Mrs Wells. I keep my work an utmost secret - I'm sure you understand.

Jane is beginning to understand why HG seems so traumatised after his time-travel visits.

**JANE**

Do you do that... every single time?

**AUSTEN**

Oh, yes.

**JANE**

But... why not get the hinge fixed?

**AUSTEN**

I couldn't possibly do that, Mrs Wells! It warns me whenever someone is approaching!

**JANE**

But what if someone is simply retrieving some small object? Or cleaning? Or bringing you tea?

**AUSTEN**

No exceptions.

**JANE**

Even if they have no intention of looking at your work?

(beat)

Even tea???

**AUSTEN**

Even then.

**JANE**

*(delicately)*

Doesn't that seem a little... excessive?

**AUSTEN**

Not at all. Even if they do not *intend* to look at my work, it is all too easy to do something you do not intend to. To look at my work without permission would be tantamount to looking inside my head.

**JANE**

I suppose I can understand that. I can get rather protective over my own writings, and I am certainly nowhere near ready to show them to the world. I think it really is extraordinarily brave of you to publish your work.

**AUSTEN**

Thank you. I must say that it is less bravery and more my own vanity than anything else; I am proud of what I write, and I like to know that others are reading it.

**JANE**

Oh, you do remind me of Herbert. He's exactly the same. Are you working on *Persuasion* at the moment, then?

**AUSTEN**

I am, although so far in its short life it has done nothing but give me grief. I have just completed the first draft. I take it that it is a complete work in the future?

**JANE**

Absolutely, it's one of my favourites!

**AUSTEN**

*(hesitantly)*

If I may ask... what is it about it that you particularly enjoy? What should I refine in my next draft?

**JANE**

Well, above everything I have always loved the maturity you bring to it. Anne, the lead, is an older character than your usual heroines, and the passion, the hesitant denial of her true feelings towards Wentworth... ah, the suspense!

*(dramatically)*

"I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives."

**AUSTEN**

Gracious, Mrs Wells, I had no idea you felt so strongly about it!

**JANE**

Oh, I do - I greatly admire all your works. In fact -

Door hinge creaks.

**JANE**

Oh, lord.

Austen opens the drawer again and shoves the papers back inside as she speaks.

**AUSTEN**

Into the drawer again! Quick, quick!

The door opens.

**CASSANDRA**

Sorry to interrupt, just getting my pen!

She picks it up.

**CASSANDRA**

Can I bring you two anything...?

**AUSTEN**

*No thank you, Cassandra.*

Cassandra leaves.

Austen gives a sigh of relief and opens the drawer again, pulling out the papers.

**JANE**

Oh, you don't have to - never mind.

**AUSTEN**

Where were we?

**JANE**

Er, we were talking about your current writing projects... but I'm actually more interested in hearing about you. Have you always lived in Hampshire?

**AUSTEN**

All my life, except when I lived in Bath and Oxford. There was a tremendous atmosphere for writing in Bath, but I'm afraid that the constant bustle and busyness grated on my nerves.

I felt the same about Southampton, before I had to depart after contracting typhus. I have little time for the constant demands and expectations of high society.

**JANE**

But you write about it so well!

**AUSTEN**

That's kind of you to say so, dear. I'm afraid my neighbours don't have quite the same taste for literature that you do.

**JANE**

*(trying not to sound too interested)*

Oh?

**AUSTEN**

Yes, I like to keep notes of all the "encouragements" my neighbours give me. Let's see...

Papers rustle.



**AUSTEN**

*(with relish)*

Mrs Bramston, of Oakley Hall, told me that she thought *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were both "downright nonsense"...

**JANE**

Goodness! *Really!*

Papers rustle again.

**AUSTEN**

This one is rather good: dear Mrs Digweed said that "if she had not known the author, she could hardly have got through *Emma*".

**JANE**

I can't believe she actually said that! Why do you keep a record of such abysmal reviews? I think I should cry into my pillow if someone were to say such awful things about my own work.

**AUSTEN**

To tell you the truth, Mrs Wells, I do not want people to be very agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal.

**JANE**

Miss Austen, I must confess that you are much stranger than I thought you would be.

**AUSTEN**

Well, in turn I must confess that you are *exactly* as strange as I thought a time-traveller would be.

Jane laughs.

**JANE**

I'll take that as a compliment. Before I go, may I ask you one last question?

**AUSTEN**

By all means. This has been a most diverting afternoon.

**JANE**

What inspired you to begin writing in your distinctive style? Your recurring themes of society, financial insecurity, the landed gentry... it sets itself apart from the other works being published around this time.

Austen takes in a deep breath, and then announces, matter-of-factly:

**AUSTEN**

Truth be told, I find that most novels published nowadays are paltry, poorly-written tripe.

**JANE**

*(holy sh\*t)*

*Oh!*

**AUSTEN**

I wanted to reject these ridiculous notions of "gothic" literature that's being pumped out. Everything being published is escapist, fantastical nonsense; I wanted to write novels set in the real world, regarding real people, real relationships, real scenarios. I wanted to bring people back to earth.

**JANE**

You certainly produced some tremendously witty satire.

**AUSTEN**

Why, thank you. It brings me some comfort to know that my works are still bringing you amusement, however far into the future.

Will you have some more tea before you go?

**JANE**

No, thank you, I should probably be off. Oh - before I go -

**AUSTEN**

Yes?

**JANE**

(in a rush)

Would you please sign the time machine?

**AUSTEN**

(laughing)  
Of course.

She signs it as Jane continues to talk.

**JANE**

I just wanted to say that meeting  
you in person has been such an  
incredible experience.

I know they say that you should  
never meet your heroes - Herbert  
says it all the time - but in this  
case, I really do believe that-

Door hinge creaks. Austen launches into action, opening the drawer  
and jamming her papers into it while she speaks.

**AUSTEN**

The drawer! The drawer! I am a slave  
to these interruptions...

(Overlapping) the door opens.

**CASSANDRA**

Jane, dear, I was wondering if  
you've seen my shawl around here...?

**AUSTEN**

Cassandra, please, you know I'm  
busy!

The next two lines fade as Jane talks into the phonograph.

**CASSANDRA**

(background)  
Ooh, is that a new novel draft I see  
there?

**AUSTEN**

(background)

Don't you dare look at it!

**JANE**

Well, er, on that note, I think I  
had better sign off.

I am Jane Wells, this was the  
legendary Jane Austen, and I think I  
am beginning to understand why  
Herbert seemed so full of regret  
after meeting Victor Hugo.

Recording cuts off.

*END RECORDING*

**CREDITS**

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This episode of H.G. Wells Has His Regrets was written and produced by Francesca Mylod-Ford, with assistance from Emily Hancock, and historical knowledge from John Feltham.

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Jane Austen was voiced by Helen Fullerton  
Cassandra Austen was voiced by Lucien Spooner

This podcast is fictitious, and all characters within are merely fictional interpretations of the people they're based on and are not to be taken as serious or accurate portrayals.

We'll end the episode with a quote from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*: "The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid."

Thanks for listening.