

Space Chimps at Wellbeck Hall, by Jane Austen

or

Genocide and Gentility

‘Sir, I hope thou didst not bethink me that sort of flibberty-jibbet who was wont to caper and toy with the affections and intentions of a gentleman, as though some manner of spinning top or cinnamon sweetmeat, who had not three years hence been introduced to my own father by three of his cousins from this very county before that first disastrous battle against the space chimps!’

Anne Bentley’s eyes flashed with scorn, steely determination, and remarkable erudition for one who had never been formally educated but who had instead spent her entire life practising sitting daintily at the piano playing quadrilles and refusing cucumber sandwiches with such delicacy that it caused nearby chaffinches to swoon and fall from their perches.

‘Madam, no, I beseech you,’ gasped Captain Cutland, pausing briefly to fix Anne with his most earnest gaze, while the ricocheting laser cannon fire of the space chimp commando force crackled around his equilateral sideburns. Such was the force of Anne’s annoyance that they had stopped fleeing from their pursuers altogether. Calling himself suddenly back to his senses, Captain Cutland turned and unleashed a volley from the gun he had taken from a chimpanzee raider. Then he turned smartly, his raffish whiskers twitching and his firm manliness barely concealed now in his shredded regimental cherrypicker trousers, to usher Anne Bentley down the long gallery which led to the garden entrance to Wellbeck Hall and thence to the river on which they hoped to make their escape.

Captain Cutland, that brave military mind working overtime, took his opportunity to press his suit once more.

‘Madam, I no more thought to wound you with a display of indifference than I thought an attack force of four million chimpanzees from outer space would land again in Somersetshire on such a fine June morning as last Tuesday and obliterate the England that we know and love.’

‘No more, sir, than I would have thought a gentleman so ungallant as to parade – yes, parade, sir – up and down the main thoroughfares of Bath in season, when it was well known to all in society that he had been presented to my father by three of his cousins not three years since, and therefore that there was an understanding of impending matrimony between our families.’

‘Madam, had I known that you were in the Bath in season then I should have acted differently.’

Captain Cutland's attention to his precise wording of his remarks had wavered as he took another cannon shot to the right leg. He clenched his teeth the better to withstand the pain. Demurely, Anne decided to ignore the Captain's syntactical error.

Captain Cutland continued: 'That lady was, of course, my sister. That same sister who was only yesterday slaughtered by space chimps along with my entire family.'

'Sir, I hope you do not seek to sully the good name of your family and to exploit the spotless reputation of your excellent sister by praying them in aid to divert attention from your own calumnies and fault!' declaimed Anne Bentley, stopping completely so as to fix Captain Cutland with her gimlet eye.

This was a disastrous move because it enabled the space chimp commandoes to fix Anne's mother, whom the pair had still been carrying on an improvised stretcher, in their sights. They fired with deadly accuracy.

Captain Cutland twitched his whiskers almost imperceptibly as the cannon fire ripped into the prone form of Mrs Bentley, suggesting that he was about to tend to the self-evidently deceased matriarch or even worse that he was about to comfort Anne with a hand on her arm, but then he remembered himself and began instead to scratch out a card of condolence on a scrap of fallen plasterboard by his side. He then recalled that he had no male relative through whom he could have had such a missive sent to the Bentley family, in keeping with social convention, and so he put the notion temporarily from his mind.

Anne Bentley, however, saw the opportunity to continue with her train of argument. 'You knew that I had already eaten breakfast in the same village inn in the same week as an unmarried man (that is, Arthur Dangerley), and therefore that I was effectively betrothed to Arthur Dangerley when you began your initial bombardment of pleasant conversation with my father while you tended to his wounds at Blessingham Hall. There could not have been any crueller campaign of seduction ever waged by man on woman since the snake bethought itself to befuddle Eve in the Garden of Eden.'

By this time, the space chimps had stopped to gaze in wonder at the two English people slashing at one another so savagely with the rapier cuts afforded to them by the English language. Captain Cutland had turned a deep crimson on hearing the word 'seduction' pass from the mouth of a lady. Fortuitously, crimson was a holy colour to the space chimps and so they began to chant their chimpish devotions, thus giving the humans some brief respite. Miss Bentley and Captain Cutland were, however, otherwise engaged, and hardly noticed the change in attitude of the forty or so chimp commandoes in full battle dress, two of whom were mounted on a hover-cannon.

'Madam, frankly put, Mr Dangerley was a rogue who, even though he was a fourth cousin twice removed (and once replaced) to your own family solicitor, had in fact lived in Paris for a number of years and kept the company of prostitutes and opium fiends, catching so many diseases of the unmentionables that he offended even the French, and was therefore forced to flee to Somersetshire where he is wanted for rape, murder and being beastly to a Justice of the Peace. And I hate to disavail you of another pleasant misapprehension under which you have been labouring, but he was not in truth seeking your father's permission to ask for your hand in marriage because

he was so taken with the curve of the brim on your April hat that morning in the Pump Room in Bath. Rather he was attempting to rob your father when he stopped your carriage on the Wells road on that bright spring morning and then, in his own words, he intended to “help himself to the womenfolk”!’

Anne Bentley stared at the singed portrait of her great-grandfather which hung in that part of the long gallery as she fought back hot tears of anger. The villain. How dare he suggest that she looked anything other than the very picture of perfection in her April hat? She decided that she could not bear the bitter sting of this suggestion and that, much as she would have preferred not to give Captain Cutland the satisfaction of knowing quite how much she detested him for this hateful remark, she would rebuke him anyway.

‘Sir, you cut me to the quick. Am I not within twenty years of losing my right to live in this my childhood home because of the absurdly sexist English legal doctrine of *fee tail* by which my father’s estate passes to the eldest male heir, my second cousin Jasper? And yet you denigrate the pert prettiness of my April hat.’

‘Madam, I apologise,’ said Captain Cutland with a slight bow. Anne managed a thin smile. ‘But,’ continued the now emboldened Captain Cutland, ‘your second cousin Jasper is now dead: along with his entire family, thanks to the space chimps. He was discovered by my own eyes in the orangery at Balconley still in the embrace of his ... ahem ... constant companion, Roger, in no state to inherit this or any other English country home having been killed by a death ray. So, madam, you no longer need to affect a light disposition at county dances nor demurely to refuse cucumber sandwiches at the piano forte, because it is you who will inherit Wellbeck Hall from your father. Assuming, that is, madam, that the space chimps have not already encouraged him over the edge of this mortal coil in this their latest raid on rural England.’

Captain Cutland paused a moment to see how Anne Bentley had taken these remarks, before pressing on. Inwardly, Anne was coming to terms with finally having lifted from her shoulders the weight of having to contract a good marriage to somebody rich because she was too upper middle class to work for her own living. Instead she would now inherit Wellbeck Hall herself and be secure in her 500 pounds a year: until, that is, she married some appalling swine who would legally become the owner of all of her property on marriage and so would probably keep mistresses in the town, spend her money on his gambling debts, and abandon her to walk the empty corridors of her childhood home alone. Still, at least she would not have to attend any more of those dull county dances, nor would she have to tolerate being introduced to any more chinless potential suitors (all of them with less personality than a limp cabbage) as her mother let pass a veritable torrent of innuendo to the effect that Anne was as strong as an ox and could bear to have eight or nine children before she was thirty.

‘Madam,’ remarked a suddenly concerned Captain Cutland, breaking into Anne’s reverie, ‘if you would excuse my hastiness – I am a military man after all – for remarking at this juncture, before all other matters are properly ventilated between us and our family solicitors, and their croquet partners, and a vicar of the Church of Merry England, that there remains yet the somewhat vexed question of effecting our immediate – that is to say, rapid, velocitous and direct – extraction of our persons

(beg pardon for the reference to our physical beings) from this immediate locale, hemmed in as it is by the attentions of quite four thousand space chimp commandoes. That extra-muralisation to be effected albeit temporarily (but I must stress, nevertheless nearly instantly) so as to undo our involuntary proximity to this rampaging platoon of enemy aliens, lest your inheritance of this splendidly appointed house should be shorter and less substantial even than a Prussian's appreciation of iambic pentameter.'

'Beg pardon, Captain Cutland?'

'Run, Miss Bentley. Run. Do, please, effect as proximate a means of foot-based movement as you can to a greyhound in sight of a rabbit. I shall attempt to hold off these space chimps with my impeccable good manners and bristling moustache.'

The chimps had by this stage fallen to grooming one another. At the sight of Captain Cutland pulling himself up to his full six feet and one and half inches, twirling his moustachios as though an eagle opening its wings, asking after their good health, and straining against his improbably tight cherrypicker trousers, the entire space chimp platoon fell into a panic and began to fire their laser pistols randomly. In the smoke and noise, Captain Cutland was able to slip away satisfied that no matter what had befallen the human race in the last three weeks, no foreigner could withstand the glare of a true-born Englishman in full military attire with aggressively appointed facial hair.

In a moment he was down the long gallery, through the French doors at the end (which he chose to bang shut noisily due to their being of foreign design) and had set out across the rose garden towards the boat house. Anne was affecting to run without seeming to hurry, all the while ensuring that her skirts should not flick up so as to expose her ankles. The sound of the slamming French doors had brought the chimps to their senses and they set off in pursuit, hirpling across the garden in their familiar gait, weighed down by their silver space-suits and in the shadow of the flat, metallic disc of their mother ship. Anne and Captain Cutland made it to the boathouse in good time, having paused only to remark on the splendid stench of the honeysuckle in full bloom, and the Captain assisted Anne into the small rowing boat with all of the raffish good humour at his disposal. The chimps, even with their extremely hot and heavy spacesuits slowing them down, had by now come within sight of the boathouse and produced their fighting knives as they closed in for the kill. Captain Cutland pushed off from the bank and encouraged the rowing boat out into mid-stream.

The sight of the fast flowing river gave the space chimp platoon pause, however, and they called for air support instead. They knew that a wet spacesuit would take forever to dry properly, and that in the meantime the rough silver fabric of the fighting uniform of the Chimp Space Corps would really chafe. Victory over the humans was nearly complete, and they saw no reason to finish this final furlong in any sort of discomfort. By the time that chimp aircraft reached the scene, however, Anne Bentley and Captain Cutland were safely in that part of the river which was entirely covered by willow trees all of the way to the village of Repression-cum-Meston where they knew that they must marry, having occupied a rowing boat together in the month of June.

By great good chance, they met Anne Bentley's father at the river's edge where the churchyard of Repression-cum-Meston was tickled by the river at its broadest point. He was clutching onto a long stick the better to support his injured weight. His head was covered in blood and his tunic torn open to the waist. Anne hid her eyes from the sight of her father's chest hair. Behind him the church was a smouldering ruin and the dead lay scattered up and down the village's only street. The space chimps had clearly been here before they had reached Wellbeck Hall.

'Daughter, daughter! I thought you dead! What news of the rest of the family?' gasped the desperate old man.

When Mr Bentley had been updated on the massacre at Wellbeck Hall, he placed his hand on his daughter's arm, fixed Captain Cutland with a friendly eye, and said: 'I have had word that the British colonies and doughty old England herself were the last inhabited places on this Earth to withstand the space chimps. It seems that Somersetshire was the last place on Earth that the space chimps attacked. They planned, it is said, to summer in Bath at the end of their itinerary of world domination. Anne, my dear daughter, and you, Basil, my boy, are probably the last two human beings left alive. I am soon to die, my wounds are too severe. I hardly register in the great accounting ledger of the human race. It falls to you two, then, to repopulate the entire species. You must go to live in seclusion and secrecy as far away from Bath as you can, and you must rut determinedly, for the very future of humanity depends upon you both; even though your immortal souls will be damned in all eternity because you will be living in sin due to there being no vicars left alive to marry you.'

Captain Cutland could bear no more and so he ran the old man through the belly with his sword.

'Bravo, Captain,' trilled Anne. 'What a foul old blister he turned out to be after all. I never would have thought to hear papa talk so, and with his tunic open what's more. Let us never speak of this Captain Cutland.'

'Of course not ma'am. I should ask, however, what English bourgeois etiquette requires of the last two surviving human beings on Earth.'

'I should have thought it obvious,' said Anne calmly. 'We must return to the ballroom at Balconley, where doubtless the remains of the county set who danced there only last week are still frozen to their places by that beastly space chimp death ray, and there we shall exchange furtive and shy glances across a crowded room until two of our next of kin are introduced by a vicar of the Church of Yummy Old England, so that we can begin our twelve year courtship.'

'Capital, madam,' said Cutland, glad that the niceties were now sorted out to his satisfaction. 'But we can still have drunken sexual intercourse in the winter garden against the linden tree, can we not?'

'Of course, Captain,' agreed Anne with a sly smile. 'Although, you will have to oil me up with gin first, you dog.'

Cutland smiled. Or perhaps it was a grimace caused by the pain of being shot unexpectedly from behind by a previously invisible space chimp. The silver-suited assassin closed in on Miss Bentley, hooting wildly.

‘Good evening, sir,’ said Anne, with a straight back and steely glare, ‘I do not believe that we have been formally introduced.’
