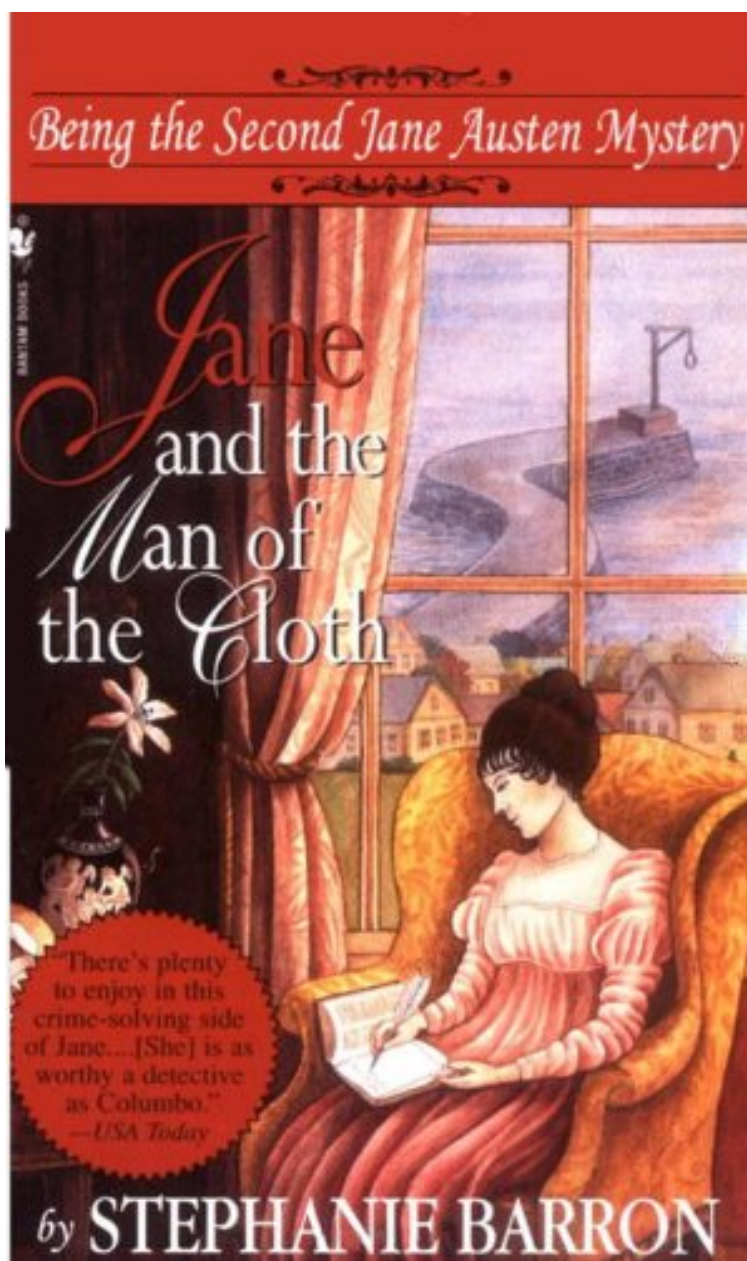


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# Jane and the Man of the Cloth: Being the Second Jane Austen Mystery



*Par Stephanie Barron*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFor everyone who loves Jane Austen...the second tantalizing mystery in a new series that transforms the beloved author into a dazzling sleuth!Jane and her family are looking forward to a peaceful holiday in the seaside village of Lyme Regis. Yet on the outskirts of town an overturned carriage

forces the shaken travelers to take refuge at a nearby manor house. And it is there that Jane meets the darkly forbidding yet strangely attractive Mr. Geoffrey Sidmouth. What murky secrets does the brooding Mr. Sidmouth seek to hide? Jane suspects the worst but her attention is swiftly diverted when a man is discovered hanged from a makeshift gibbet by the sea. The worthies of Lyme are certain his death is the work of "the Reverend," the ringleader of the midnight smuggling trade whose identity is the town's paramount mystery. Now, it falls to Jane to entrap and expose the notorious Reverend...even if the evidence points to the last person on earth she wants to suspect...a man who already may have won her heart.

From the Paperback edition. Extrait Bath being unbearably hot this August, and my father's health indifferent, we determined to exchange our rooms in town for more salubrious ones along the coast. We had little inclination to try the bustle and vulgarity of Ramsgate [1], though my brother Edward would take a large establishment there; Brighton was not even to be spoken of; and so to Dorsetshire we would go, and to Lyme Regis in particular, having made a several-weeks' trial of its delights the previous autumn. No coaching inn should be good enough accommodation on the present occasion, however; none of your Three Cups or Golden Lions would do for us--no, the Austens of Bath should travel in style, and take furnished lodgings. A cottage on the water, where my mother might gaze at the sea, and consider her Naval sons, and my father might indulge his passion for botany in walks along the shingle, should do very well. Cassandra and I meant to be happy with frequent turns about the Cobb [2], and even more frequent dances in the town's pretty little Assembly Rooms; our memories of the place were so cheerful, in fact, that the plan met with immediate approval. Bath was forgotten; Ramsgate consigned to those of little sense or taste; and Lyme become the object of all our fondest hopes. Being possessed of a fortune that no longer admits of a private carriage, but finding ourselves above the meaner conveyance of mail coach and stage--the former being adjudged too swift and precarious for my father's temper, and the latter too crowded and vulgar for my mother's--we were forced to adopt the only alternative, a post chaise initiating in Bath, with horses changed daily en route. Having descended towards the southern coast by way of Shepton Mallet, Somerton, and Crewkerne, as recommended by Paterson's [3], we were even yet embarked today upon the final stage of our journey, with a new postboy, hailing from Lyme, mounted before; when the appearance of a murkiness upon the horizon gave rise to general alarm. Our fears were rewarded, as such fears generally are, with the sudden convergence of a gale above our heads; and the fierceness of the wind and rain that then ensued was indescribable. Though it was not much beyond six o'clock, the light had failed utterly, leaving the interior of our coach in a gray dimness through which the faces of my sister and mother, seated opposite, shone palely. Cassandra, who is ever indisposed by the motion of a carriage, and who, after long days of travel, was at the last extremity of her endurance, was in very ill looks; and her temper could hardly be improved by the proximity of my mother, whose general alarm at the fearful neighs of the horses, as the storm built wrathfully above our heads, and the postboy's resultant curses, had taught her to seek comfort in a fierce pinching of Cassandra's hand within her own. I observed the whitened knuckles of her grip, and silently thanked the force of chance that had placed me beside my father. "We shall be overturned! I am sure of it! Overturned, Mr. Austen!" my mother cried. "Now, my dearest," my father said, in a tone of gentle reproof, "you must not give way to womanly fears. The Lord looks after His own." "Then He must be looking after them in town," my mother replied, in some exasperation, "for He is assuredly not along the Lyme road at present. We shall be overturned, and all of us killed, and I should like to know what you will say then, Mr. Austen! I am sure you shall be very sorry you did not listen to your wife!" "Now, my dear," my father said again, and took up once more his book. A fearsome jolt then occurring, I was thrown abruptly against the coach window, and seized my chance to gaze out upon a storm-tossed world. The pitted road, but poorly maintained in the best of times, was awash in muddy water; the adjacent trees lashed into silvery indistinctness by the combined effects of wind and rain; and no relief apparent in the lowering density of cloud. I drew back to the relative comfort of the coach's interior, and attempted to calculate the distance remaining. We were some hours removed from Crewkerne, where we had spent the previous day and evening, not being prone to Sunday travel; [4] and should even now be breasting the long hill into Up Lyme. Was not the carriage rising? But as this very thought struck, a yet more bone-rattling shudder seized the coach's frame, as though a great beast had taken us up in its jaws and tossed us about for sport. I cried out, and was rewarded with a look of terror from my mother and a squeak of pain from Cassandra, whose hand was no doubt suffering under the effects of her companion's anxiety. "Overturned, Mr. Austen!" the good woman cried, and half-stood as though to throw herself upon her husband's lap. A great crash from the road ahead, and a lurching of the carriage; then the screaming of horses, and a tumult that could only be due to chaos within the traces. For the world to revolve a hundred

degrees, was required but a moment; and when I found the courage to open my eyes, the floor was become the coach's ceiling. A most ludicrous position, particularly when viewed through a quantity of muslin, the result of one's skirts being tipped over one's head. I lay an instant in utter silence, feeling the rapid patter of my heart and the laboured nature of my breathing; and was relieved to find that both continued in force. A grunt from my father roused me. "Sir!" I cried, endeavouring to secure him amidst the murk and confusion, "May I be of assistance?" At that, the coach's nether door was seized and opened--by the postboy, no doubt--and my father, whose main support the door had been, tumbled from the vehicle. Hardly a dignified antic for a clergyman of three-and-seventy, but followed by the still less-seemly exit of his younger daughter, her skirts in a tangle about her knees. The relief, however, at being freed from such a world gone topsy-turvy, was beyond every indecorous attempt to achieve it; I drew a shaky breath and tested my limbs, heedless of the fierce rain that pelted my cap. My father, having been helped to his feet by the postboy (a burly fellow of some five-and-thirty, one Hibbs by name), was seized with a coughing fit. The poor man's senses were little assisted when Hibbs thought to pound upon his back, and I hastened to intervene. "Father," I said, taking him by the arm, "I trust you are not injured in any way?" "Only in complaisance, my dear," he replied, with the ghost of a smile, "and that has been decidedly shaken. I shall be forced to attend your mother's every warning, by and by--a triumph, I fear, that she shall not know how to sustain." My mother! I turned in an instant, and peered back within the carriage's depths--and oh! What a scene I then descried! My beloved sister lay wan and lifeless, in a heap of crushed muslin against the coach's farthest wall--the wall that had received all the force of impact in the conveyance's upheaval. My mother was attempting to shift Cassandra towards the open door--which, given the tossing of the coach, was well above her head; but the poor woman lacked the strength for it, and was reduced to tears as a consequence. "Stay, madam," I cried, and leapt for the postboy. The man Hibbs saw the necessity in a moment; and lifted Cassandra to safety so swiftly and gently that I was all but struck speechless; the condition of the poor sufferer being of paramount importance, however, I offered broken thanks and turned to her comfort, overcome by nameless dread. So much lively beauty, reduced to deathly silence! It was not to be borne. My beloved sister was carried to the shelter of a tree, and my father's cloak propped on a few sticks above her, in an ineffectual attempt to shield her from the rain. My mother's wails declared her incapable of use; my father was consigned to comfort her; and I turned to Cassandra to see what ill I might find. A great bruise o'erspread her temple, and in feeling about her scalp, I was rewarded by a grimace of pain flitting across her countenance, and a warm trickle of blood upon my fingertips. I chafed her wrists, and called her name; implored her, in desperation, to awake; but she continued insensible, lying at the verge of the road like so much cast-off clothing. The horror that seized me then! I shudder to recall it. I was the closest to despair I have been in all my life--and so resolved upon action. To do, when one is very nearly past hope, is the sole means of relief. I turned from Cassandra and looked for the postboy. "Hibbs!" I shouted. The tumult of the storm continued unabated, making all attempt at conversation a dubious affair. "Yes, miss," the man rejoined, turning from the wreckage of his rig. "My sister cannot remain here." "Don't know as she 'as much choice, beggin' yer pardon, miss. The horses be gone, and the coach a fair wreck. Then there's the matter of o' that there tree " he said, tossing a look over his shoulder. I regained my feet and peered ahead into the tempest. A massive trunk indeed lay full across the road, barring further passage. How unfortunate that it should be before us, rather than behind. But I comprehended, now, the reason for the horses' terror and flight. We were any of us fortunate to be alive. "We cannot hope to shift it?" Hibbs shook his head in reply, "And with the nags run off--" "Then we must fetch assistance from some neighbouring farm," I said with authority, and peered about me into the gloom. Misfortune could not have chosen a more desolate place to befall us. As far as the gaze might reach, the high downs rolled unimpeded to the sea. But wait--" "Is not that a light, away there in the distance?" The postboy shrugged, and his brows lowered. "Happen it is. But you'll not be finding help for the young lady at the Grange." "And why ever not?" "They're queer folk." "Queer or no, they cannot refuse to help a lady in such distress," I replied firmly, and turned to my father. Heedless of the rain that had completely soaked his hat, he stood at a little distance from my mother, who was bent over Cassandra in an attitude of despair. My sister's condition, I saw at a glance, was unchanged. With such burdens of infirmity and age parcelled out among them, they should none of them be left too long in darkness and storm. "Sir," I called, crossing to my father, "the postboy and I intend to seek aid from the farm whose lights you espy at a little distance. We shall hasten to return." "But, Jane--my dear--had not I better go?" my father enquired doubtfully, and when I would insist, he added in a lowered tone, "For it cannot be proper to send you off into the night in the company of such a man. A complete stranger, and a hapless one, I fear; only look to what an impasse he has

brought us!" "But thankfully, Father, he calls this country home; and may be of service in appealing to the inhabitants of the farm. And as to going yourself--would you leave three women alone and unprotected, on such a road, in such a state? Better that you should stand with my mother, and comfort her when you may." I

turned from him before he could reply--for, in truth, help should be long in coming, did my father go in search of it. He is an elderly gentleman whose pace is slow on the smoothest of roads, and in the best of light; and I paled to think of him attempting the downs in the present hour. "Come along, Hibbs," I called to the postboy, who stood muttering under his breath over the ruin of his harness. "To the Grange it is, as fast as our feet may carry us"

Editor's Notes: 1. The Austens had visited Ramsgate during the spring or summer of 1803 prior to their first visit to Lyme that September. Jane disliked Ramsgate intensely and when she wished to place a fictional character in a compromising position, she often sent her to Ramsgate. Georgiana

Darcy was nearly seduced by Wickham there, in *Pride and Prejudice*, while in *Mansfield Park*, Maria Bertram endured a loveless Ramsgate honeymoon before her adulterous affair with Henry Crawford. 2. Jane refers here to Lyme's Marine Parade, known in her day simply as The Walk; it ran along the beach fronting Lyme's harbor, and out along the ancient stone breakwater, both of which are called the Cobb. 3. Paterson's

British Itinerary was the road bible of the traveling gentry from 1785 to 1832. Written by Daniel Paterson and running to seventeen editions, it detailed stage and mail routes between major cities, as well as their tolls, bridges, landmarks, and notable country houses. 4 In Austen's time, traveling on Sunday was

considered disrespectful to the Sabbath. *Revue de presse* "Eat your heart out, Charlotte Bronte!... Jane's narrative voice stays coolly crisp and witty, never losing its clarity of style and authenticity of tone, even in nerve-racking moments of excitement... Captivating... Delightful... Ms. Barron's skillful rendering of Austen's style, attuned to picking up the most delicate fluctuations in social behavior, reveals it to be an ideal vehicle for the classic cozy murder mystery. Who knew?" *The New York Times Book* "The words, characters, and

references are so real it is a shock to find that the author is not Austen herself." *Arizona*

*Republic* "Delightful... captures the style and wit of Austen.... A real charmer." *San Francisco*

*Examiner* "There's plenty to enjoy in this crime-solving side of Jane.... [She] is as worthy a detective as Columbo." *USA Today*