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**David Taylor, Associate Professor, Faculty of English,
University of Oxford**

JANE AUSTEN INVESTIGATES

The
Abbey Mystery

Julia Golding



LION FICTION

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Jane Austen and her family were real people, though they appear in this book as imagined characters.

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Editor's Note

Notebooks containing details of Jane Austen's first investigations were recently found hidden in a trunk stored in the attics of Jane's family home.

There are signs that Jane expected her papers to be discovered, for they begin with a warning from young Jane herself.

Warning

Any resemblance to persons living or dead in these case notes is entirely intentional. Names of people and places have been changed to protect the wicked – but you know who you are!

J.A.



Chapter 1

1789

It had to be acknowledged that the life of a clergyman's daughter in deepest rural Hampshire was disappointingly full of duties. There were few things for an adventurous girl to do. That was why Jane always considered it fortunate to be in the carriage accident. Without that disaster, she would never have met the Abbey ghost.

Jane had not begun the day intending to be thrown from a coach – nor to go ghost-hunting. She had been striding along the Steventon Road behind her older sister, boots making a satisfying stomp on the ground. Cassandra swung her basket, knocking off the tops from the cow parsley. After calling on an elderly lady with a hacking cough FOR TWO HOURS, both Cassandra and Jane had to misbehave. There was nothing more annoying than a persistent cough – especially in someone else.

If only something exciting would happen! If it didn't come soon, Jane felt she might EXPLODE with frustration. Maybe she should disguise herself as a sailor and go on a voyage like those of Captain Cook – without his grisly end?

"Listening to Old Mrs Taylor is like being in the path of stampeding cattle," said Cassandra.

Jane plucked a fat blade of grass, held it between her thumbs, and hooted rudely.

“Imagine being that old! Fifty-six!” continued Cassandra.

Jane didn’t feel she need add anything. Her older sister was well able to chatter away for both of them. Words were Jane’s greatest treasure and she spent hers carefully.

“Did you hear what her son called us?” asked Cassandra.

“Interfering halfwits,” Jane replied. She thought for a moment. “Interfering I accept, but I’ve a whole wit at least.”

Cassandra walked backward a few steps. “What about me, Jane? Your older, more beautiful, more talented – and far more modest sister?”

Jane wrinkled her nose. “I’ll allow you a whole wit, but sadly it’s a dim one.”

Cassandra chuckled. “I’m the dimwit?” She loved it when Jane insulted her – their family was unique in that way, liking nothing better than a joke at their own expense.

The rhythmic thud of hooves alerted the sisters to the approach of a carriage. The lane was narrow and windy, so they climbed the bank. A four-wheeler appeared around the bend, paintwork in green and yellow, brass lamps gleaming. All told, a flash vehicle for a fashionable gentleman.

Jane’s heart sank.

As soon as Cassandra saw who was driving, her cheeks went pink and she rearranged the basket carefully on her arm so that no hint of her as Batterer of Blooms remained.

“It’s George Watson!” whispered Cassandra.

“I know,” said Jane. She had suffered all summer from her sister’s adoration for the local squire’s son. Her sister had rarely liked a stupider fellow.

George heaved on the horses’ reins in a move that must have hurt their poor mouths and drew the carriage to a juddering stop. He gave a flourish of his hat. “Ladies!” He then giggled.

George Watson was officially HOPELESS.

“Mr Watson,” said Cassandra in a breathy tone unlike her usual. At sixteen, she was in that delicate area between girl and lady. George had won her heart by treating her as grown-up.

“Miss Austen, Miss Jane, would you care for a ride in my new phaeton? I’ve taken delivery only this morning.”

“Why, Mr Watson, that is so kind of you. I’m sure my sister and I would be much obliged,” said Cassandra, taking his offered hand and stepping up beside him.

WHAT was her foolish sister doing? George Watson had only been driving the phaeton since the morning. He should at least have to pass a test with an experienced coachman, but sadly even fools like George were allowed out on the roads with no proof they knew one end of a horse from the other.

“Jane?” pleaded Cassandra. They had both promised their mother they would not separate.

The things she did for her sister.

Against her better judgment, Jane scrambled up beside Cassandra. Being only thirteen, she was not considered old enough to need a hand. Acquainted with Jane from her infancy, George probably still thought she rolled down the grassy slope behind the rectory.

Which she did – when no one was watching.

“Tally ho!” George called to his matched pair of horses and flicked the whip. Jane silently calculated how much the carriage would’ve cost him and came up with a sum that was more than her father earned in a year.

Surprisingly, the ride started well. George kept the horses to a steady pace and avoided the worst of the ruts. Jane began to enjoy herself. Sitting this high, she could see over the hedge to the wheat fields with their knee-high crop. Poppies wound among the stems as butterflies danced above. Maybe George had changed?

But then George had to prove he hadn’t changed one little bit. They reached the final approach to the rectory, a stretch of road shaded by elms.

“What say you to making a dashing entrance?” he asked Cassandra.

“Oh no,” said Jane. “NO!” she repeated.

“Mr Watson, that would be delightful,” agreed Cassandra, elbowing Jane.

With a bark of laughter, George flicked the whip and the phaeton surged forward.

“Cassie!” hissed Jane, clutching Cassandra’s arm. “Don’t you know your Greek myths?”

Cassandra tore her attention from George for a second. “What are you talking about, Jane?”

“We’re in a phaeton! Remember Phaeton: the hero who drove the sun’s chariot to disaster?”

“Oh, fiddlesticks.”

But even as Cassandra spoke, George gave another crack of the whip. The horses threw caution to the winds and careered around the corner – only to find a drover with his cows blocking the road. The girls screamed, the cows mooed, and George panicked. The carriage veered off the road. The front wheel hit a stone with a jolt that catapulted the passengers from the high seat.

Jane knew briefly, wondrously, what it was like to fly – then landed in a ditch.

OW!



Chapter 2

“Young ladies do not get thrown from phaetons!” declared Mrs Austen, bandaging Cassandra’s arm with angry turns of the material.

“I think you’ll find that they do,” said Jane, pointing to herself and Cassandra. “We just did.” Jane’s elbow was skinned and her hip bruised but otherwise she was mostly unscathed. The worst impact had been taken by her second-best gown. It was Cassandra who had broken her arm with a snap like a dry twig – though perhaps Jane had only imagined that.

“That’s quite enough from you, young lady.” Jane was Mrs Austen’s least favourite child, as Jane well knew. “Your wit will make you infamous one day.”

Jane was hoping for “famous” but infamy sounded exciting.

“And when I said young ladies don’t have carriage accidents, I meant that we must never, ever speak of this again. Do not put it in your letters, or your journals.” Mrs Austen pursed her lips, a little frown line appearing at the bridge of her Roman nose. “I’ll tell your father, of course, when he gets back, but as far as everyone else is concerned, Cassandra has a slight head cold.”

“Mama, I have a broken arm!” protested Cassandra.

“No, you do not. You will stay out of sight for the next six weeks while it mends...”

“Colds do not last six weeks!”

“Perhaps we can call it a fever? Yes, that is even better as no one will risk seeing you.” She fitted a sling so that Cassandra’s left arm was immobilized against her chest. “Because if they see you, they will ask how you broke your arm, and then I will have to admit that I have two daughters with less sense than a gnat – between them!”

Mrs Austen moved to dabbing the cut on Cassandra’s forehead. “Whatever possessed the pair of you to accept a drive with George Watson in the first place? If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times: the squire’s son is trouble!”

Jane agreed – in fact, she would capitalize the word in her notebook: TROUBLE. George had clearly been more worried about the damage to his new carriage than to her sister. He had a fit of vapours over mere scratches to the paintwork but showed little concern for the serious injury to Cassandra’s arm. For that alone he was now her ENEMY for life. Jane had been sick with concern for Cassandra. She was the dearest person in the world and the only one who understood Jane. Something bad happening to Cassandra was far worse than it happening to herself.

“Just because a young man wants to show off does not mean that you have to agree to be his audience,” continued their mother. “And what did we get? My two daughters flying like silly geese from the front seat and near breaking their necks!”

“I did not look like a goose,” said Cassandra.

“You did honk,” added Jane. “And I fairly flew. We may have looked a little like geese.”

“Whose side are you on?” muttered Cassandra.

Jane just smiled. Her sister would know that she was always on her side.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do,” sighed Mrs Austen.

“I rather thought it had already happened,” said Jane, rewinding the bandages that Mama had discarded.

“Hush, Jane!” After raising so many children, Mrs Austen had no patience left for her younger daughter. “I meant about the invitation.”

“What invitation, Mama?” asked Cassandra.

“I’ll mix you some willow bark tea to help with the pain.” Mrs Austen packed away her medical supplies.

“Who invited us, and where?” persisted Cassandra.

“You, Cassandra. Sir Charles Cromwell and Lady Cromwell have invited you to spend a week at Southmoor Abbey. You were to make yourself useful to Lady Cromwell while they celebrated their son’s coming-of-age. But how can you be useful with a broken arm?”

Mama would have been hoping that the favour done for one of the largest landowners in the county would bring advantages to her sons. Girls were useful as cheap tokens to be exchanged in this web of unspoken promises. That meant that Cassandra had dodged a very unattractive week as a slave to Lady Cromwell. Even carriage accidents had a silver lining.

“Jane will go in your place,” Mama decided.

WHAT?!

“They won’t care as long as one of you turns up the day after tomorrow. They probably won’t even notice the exchange.”

“Mama!” protested Jane.

“You’d better not fail me, Jane.” Mama fixed her with a stare that said she fully expected Jane would disappoint. Jane knew she could never be good enough for her mother – not like Cassandra and her brothers – and that really hurt.

“But I’ll need her to look after me!” said Cassandra.

“You have me for that,” said Mrs Austen, standing like the herd of cows in the road of Jane’s happiness. “Jane, see what you can do to make your third-best gown fit for decent society. You are going to Southmoor Abbey and that is my final word on the subject.”

A Page in Mourning

J.A. announces the DEATH of her SECOND-BEST muslin gown. A period of MOURNING will be observed in the Austen household. It will be interred Tuesday next in the rag bag with all due ceremony.

Furthermore, she announces the immediate promotion of her THIRD-BEST to SECOND place. It will immediately INHERIT all duties, responsibilities, etc. etc. of its predecessor. May God bless it, and all who wear it.

J.A.