



**Jane and the Unpleasantness
at Scargrave Manor**

~Being the First Jane Austen Mystery~

Stephanie Barron

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Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor

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~Being the First Jane Austen Mystery~

by Stephanie Barron



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Editor's Foreword

In the spring of 1995, I visited my good friends Paul and Lucy Westmoreland. The Westmorelands are of old Baltimore stock, tracing their lineage to a founder of the state of Maryland, and their home, Dunready Manor, dates to the Georgian period. The Westmorelands had recently completed the renovation of an outbuilding on the estate, the former overseer's house, an extensive project of rebuilding and restoration.

Rescuing the solid stone foundation proved a formidable task. Used for decades—perhaps even more than a century—as a coal cellar, the enormous rock-lined room had to be emptied of its inky contents before being painstakingly sandblasted and lined with concrete. New support pillars were installed, new doors and stairways, and gradually the aged stone of the house's base assumed its former beauty and charm. But more important was the discovery made in the initial stages of the cellar's renovation. Beneath the hills of coal dust, rats' bones, discarded timbers, and unidentifiable rags were several boxes of old family records. The Westmorelands placed them in a storage shed on the property and promptly forgot about them in the flurry of installing the house's new kitchen. But when I visited them that spring, we spent a rainy afternoon in the storage shed, carefully leafing through the fragile yellowed papers, and came to the conclusion that a professional curator was the only solution.

For what we found that day was no less than an entire series of manuscripts we believed had been written by Jane Austen, a distant relative of the Westmoreland line. A daughter of Austen's brother James had married a man whose sister married a British Westmoreland—and by this circuitous route the manuscripts had made their way into the Westmoreland family and, eventually, to the branch of that family in the United States. There they were placed for safekeeping in the cellar, where later generations covered them with coal.

The Westmorelands delivered the manuscripts for restoration to a local rare-books curator of their acquaintance and debated donating them to the Johns Hopkins University Library. Other claims—Austen collections at Paul's alma mater, Williams College, and elsewhere in the country, not to mention Oxford's Bodleian Library—competed for the gift. In the meanwhile, however, as the manuscripts were restored, they turned them over to me.

The Westmorelands are possessed of an imaginative spirit and enjoyment of life that extends to the reading of detective fiction. And what so struck them about these manuscripts, apparently written by Austen herself, is that they

recount experiences heretofore unknown to Austen scholars. Narratives in the form of journal entries and letters to her sister, Cassandra, and intended for her nieces—which perhaps explains their eventual appearance in the Westmoreland family line, united as it is to the family of James Austen’s daughter—these manuscripts were never meant to be published. They are personal records of mysteries Jane Austen encountered and solved in the course of her short life.

I suggested that the best editor for such works would be an Austen scholar. The Westmorelands demurred. Knowing of my own interest in detective fiction and feeling that the manuscripts’ discovery was in part my own, they asked that I undertake the task of editing the notebooks for publication.

FOR A WOMAN WHOSE WORK HAS ENDURED NEARLY TWO centuries, Jane Austen remains in large part a mystery herself. What is known of her life comes principally from her surviving letters and the memoirs of family members written after her death, from which several scholars have drawn admirable biographies.¹ Since many of her letters were written to her sister, Cassandra, who destroyed them after Jane’s death,² whole passages of Austen’s life remain dark. The discovery of letters sent to Cassandra, along with the journal accounts I have edited here, must be considered a new window on the author’s experience.

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, half a year after the outbreak of hostilities in the British colonies of America and at the height of the reign of His Majesty George III. The daughter of an Oxford-educated clergyman of modest means, she grew up surrounded by her six brothers and one sister in the small parsonage at Steventon, in Hampshire. Through the course of her forty-two years, France would be convulsed by revolution; Napoleon would rise to power; George III would go slowly mad, and his rule give way to the Regency of his son, George IV. It was a turbulent time in British history, in which the Tory (conservative and royalist) Austens would play no small part. Jane Austen’s brother Frank, a seaman from his early adolescence, served under Horatio Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar and rose to become First Lord of the Admiralty at the age of eighty-nine; her younger brother, Charles, had a similarly distinguished, though less lofty, naval career. That Jane was aware of and compelled by questions of politics is evident in her letters to her family, and indeed in much of her more famous writing; for example, she addressed the moral turpitude of naval officers in *Mansfield Park*, the work she considered her most ambitious, where the themes of ecclesiastical reform and slaveholding in the Indies are also subjected to her caustic wit. That her fiction was drawn from events in her own life, or from her understanding of the experiences of others within her social set, is apparent from her reaction to events recounted in this memoir.

The bulk of her fiction was written in its initial form when Jane was in her late teens and early twenties; she refined and finally published it during the Regency, which officially began in 1810, nearly eight years following the

action of this manuscript. The Regency in England had as its counterpart the height of the Napoleonic Empire in France, and despite the ongoing state of war between the two nations, French fashions and political thought traveled across the Channel to powerfully influence English habits. Wealth and personal display were considered fashionable, and the social freedoms accorded women were somewhat greater than those they would enjoy during Victoria's reign later in the century. Dress was less modest, contact between the sexes less constrained, and the notion of a lady writing novels—or engaging in detection—was permissible according to the mores of Austen's time.

Austen was recognized by those in her circle as a highly intelligent woman. That she often felt frustrated by the limited experience and opportunity accorded women is evident in this manuscript and elsewhere. Her father had attempted to ignore her sex in one important aspect when he sent Cassandra and Jane, then seven, to Oxford for private instruction; but Austen professed herself to be only half-educated, because she was denied the knowledge of Greek and Latin offered her brothers.

I expect many to be shocked by the notion of Austen as detective; but it should not be surprising that a woman of her intellectual powers and perception of human nature would enjoy grappling with the puzzle presented by a criminal mind whenever it appeared in her way. Her genius for understanding the motives of others, her eye for detail, and her ear for self-expression—most of all her imaginative ability to see what *might* have been as well as what *was*—were her essential tools in exposing crime. Spending the bulk of her days in the country, where order was kept by a justice of the peace and more informally by the authority inherent in the local gentry, Austen would look first to her powerful acquaintances for assistance in securing punishment for the guilty and justice for the innocent. As a single woman of modest means, she was forced to rely at times on the men in her circle, whose access to the worlds of commerce, law, and politics afforded them greater power in the cause of justice than she could attain. That they availed themselves of her intellectual ability is a testament to their good judgment.

What follows is, as best we can judge, the first of Austen's detective adventures. It begins in December 1802, immediately following Jane's acceptance and rejection (within twenty-four hours) of Harris Bigg-Wither's proposal of marriage. She turned twenty-seven during the course of her narrative and, with her rejection of Bigg-Wither, must have faced the prospect of spinsterhood full in the face. Isobel Payne's invitation, coming at the height of what must surely have been a difficult period, provided Jane with a welcome avenue of escape. It would prove a painful time of self-reflection as well as diversion; but the narrative is remarkable for its blending of the criminal and the personal, the love of the chase and internal exploration of her own motives and dreams.

TO EDIT AUSTEN IS DAUNTING. I DO NOT PRETEND TO HER SKILL. I only hope that the essential spirit of the original manuscripts blazes forth from these new pages, with all the power of that remarkable mind.

STEPHANIE BARRON
EVERGREEN, COLORADO
JUNE 1995

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1. For further knowledge of Austen's life, I would recommend Park Honan's *Jane Austen: Her Life* (St. Martin's Press, 1987).
 2. Austen died in Winchester on July 18, 1817; the cause is the subject of much scholarly debate, but is believed to be due to adrenal failure, the result of Addison's disease, which may in turn have been caused by tuberculosis or cancer (Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life*).

Jane's Introduction

*17 March 1803
No. 4 Sydney Place, Bath*

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When a young lady of more fashion than means has the good sense to win the affection of an older gentleman, a widower of high estate and easy circumstances, it is generally observed that the match is an intelligent one on both sides. The lady attains that position in life for which her friends may envy and congratulate her, while the gentleman wins for his advancing years all that youth, high spirits, and beauty can offer. He is declared the best, and most generous, of men; she is generally acknowledged to be an angel fully deserving of her good fortune. His maturity and worldly experience may steady her lighter impulses; her wit and gentle charms should ease the cares attendant upon his station. With patience, good humour, and delicacy on both sides, a tolerable level of happiness may be achieved.

When, however, the older gentleman dies suddenly of a gastric complaint, leaving to his mistress of three months a considerable estate, divided between herself and his heir; and when the heir in question offends propriety with his attentions to the widow—!

The tone of social commentary may swiftly turn spiteful.

The deceased man's fortunes, once proclaimed as rivaling the gods', are now all struck down. He is become to all men a figure of melancholy, a poor benighted dotard, seduced by youth and flattery where probity and good sense should better have prevailed. The lady is turned an object of suspicion rather than general pity; her mourning weeds are reviled as a mockery of propriety; her presence is not desired at the select assemblies; the solicitors burdened with the management of her affairs are much to be pitied; and scurrilous rumour circulates among the *habitués* of the opera box and card room.

Her star is fallen, indeed.

Such has been the fate of my poor Isobel. That a lady gently bred, possessed of intelligence and a discerning nature, should be so embroiled in scandal, must sober us all. None can assume that the winds of fortune shall always blow fair; indeed, the better part of our lives is spent seeking some shelter from their caprice. Women, possessed of a frailty in their virtues not accorded the stronger sex, are more surely victims of the random blast. In considering all that occurred during the fading of the year, I might be moved to rail

against my Maker for suffering those least capable of bearing misfortune, to have found it so liberally bestowed. But that would be ungenerous in a clergyman's daughter, and too bitter for my spirit. I have determined instead to turn to the comforts of journal and pen, in the hope of understanding these events that marked the turning of my twenty-seventh year.

I NEVER FEEL THAT I HAVE COMPREHENDED AN EMOTION, or fully lived even the smallest of events, until I have reflected upon it in my journal; my pen is my truest confidant, holding in check the passions and disappointments that I dare not share even with my beloved sister Cassandra. Here, then, in my little book, I may parse my way to understanding all that I have survived in recent weeks. Indeed, I have gone so far as to walk into town for the express purpose of obtaining this fresh binding of paper, in the hopes that by setting the events apart—by giving them the narrative force and order of a novel, in fact—I might bring some order to the unwonted discomposure of my mind. This story will never be offered for the public reader, even were I to transform the names and disguise the places; for to so expose to the common traffic of drawing-room and milliner's stall what must be most painful in my dear friend Isobel's life, would be rank betrayal. Better to retrieve from Cassandra the letters¹ concerning these events that I sent to her from Scargrave, and insert them between the pages of this journal. It shall live in my clothespress, and be opened only for the edification of my dear nieces, that some knowledge of the forces which so disastrously shaped Isobel's fortune, may prove a moral guide for the conduct of their own.

What follows then, as my journal and letters so record it, is the history of the unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor. May that unhappy abode witness more congenial hours in the coming year than those I spent during the last.

1. Jane Austen's older sister, Cassandra, was the person she loved best and trusted most in the world. Austen scholars have long been frustrated by gaps in their surviving correspondence, and have imputed the missing letters to Cassandra's propensity to destroy those that were most personal. Many of what may be the missing letters have now been found in the Westmoreland manuscript holdings. —*Editor's note.*



Chapter 1

The Passing Bell

*Journal entry, 11 December 1802,
written in the small hours*

“What do you make of it, Jane?” The Countess of Scargrave asked. Her fingers gripped my elbow painfully.

I gazed at the recumbent form of her husband with dismay. Frederick, Lord Scargrave,¹ was decidedly unwell—so unwell that I had been called to his bedside an hour before dawn, an indiscretion the Earl would never have allowed while possessed of his senses. I pulled the collar of my dressing gown closer about my neck and placed my free hand over the Countess’s.

“I believe that your husband is dying, Isobel,” I told her.

Her fingers moved convulsively under my own, and then were still. “*Dying*. Were I to hear it so declared a thousand times, I still should not believe it possible.”

I surveyed my friend with silent pity, uncertain how to answer such distress. The transformation wrought upon her husband’s agonised countenance was indeed extraordinary—and had required but a few hours to effect. That very evening, the Earl had led his Countess down the dance in Scargrave’s ballroom, revelling in the midst of a company come to toast the fortunes of them both. Despite his eight-and-forty years, he shone as a man blessed with second youth, elegant and lively, the very charm of his race crying out from every limb. And tho’ he had complained of dyspepsia before, this illness came upon him of a sudden—and with a violence one may hardly credit to an overfondness for claret and pudding.

“Had he taken aught to eat or drink in the past few hours?” I asked.

My friend shook her head. “Only a milk toddy and some sweetmeats the maid brought to him upon retiring. But I do not believe he had long consumed them before the sickness laid him prostrate.”

The stench of the Earl’s illness rose from the fouled sheets the maids would not change for fear of paining him further. His breath was caught thick within

his throat, and his strength worn down by dizziness and a violence of puking such as one usually sees under the influence of a purgative. His eyes were rolled back in drowsy oblivion, his skin was pallid, and his features were bloated. It was a trial merely to observe such suffering; to endure it must have been fearsome.

As I watched with Isobel by his bedside, awaiting the doctor summoned in haste from London, the Earl gave forth a great moan, rose up shuddering from his sheets, and clutched his wife's hand. "Blackguards!" his shattered voice cried. "They would take me from within!" Then he fell back insensible upon his bed, and spoke no more.

Isobel was all efficiency; a compress she had in a moment, and ministered to her troubled lord, and the violence of feeling that had animated his poor body but an instant before, troubled him not again.

I am no stranger to death—I have sat watch over too many unlovely ends by the side of my clergyman father, who believes the company of a woman necessary to sustain him in the most mortal hours of his ministry—but this was a sort of dying I had never witnessed.

A chill draught wafted through the chamber door from the great hall below. I turned my head swiftly, in hope of the doctor, and saw only Marguerite, Isobel's maid.

"Milady," the Creole girl whispered, her eyes stealing from her mistress's face to the more dreadful one of the Earl, "the doctor is come." Her countenance was pale and frightened, and as I watched, she made the Papist sign of the cross hurriedly at her brow, and ducked back through the doorway.

I cannot find it in me to scold the maid for such foolishness. She is a simple girl from Isobel's native Barbadoes, who accompanied her mistress upon Isobel's removal to England two years ago. Marguerite has sorely missed her sleep tonight—it was she who fetched me hastily before dawn to the Countess's side. But even I, a child of coldblooded England less susceptible to horrified fancy, must confess to sleeplessness these several hours past. For the Earl has uttered such moans and cries that none may shut out his agony, and all within Scargrave's walls are robbed of peace this night.

"Lady Scargrave," the physician said, breaking into my thoughts. He clicked his heels together and bowed in Isobel's direction. A young man, with all his urgency upon his face.

"Dr. Pettigrew," the Countess replied faintly, her hand going to her throat, "thank God you are come."

How Isobel could bear it! Married but three months, and to lose a husband one has but lately acquired would seem the cruellest blow of Fate. Yet still she stood, composed and upright, and waited with the terrible fortitude of women for the result of so much misery.

Dr. Pettigrew glanced at me and nodded, brushing the snow from his greatcoat and handing it to Marguerite, who bobbed a frightened curtsy and ducked out of the chamber. As the physician hastened to the Earl's bedside, I

strove to read his thoughts; but his eyes were hidden behind spectacles, and his mouth held firmly in a line, and I could divine nothing from his youthful countenance. He reached for the Earl's wrist, and poor Lord Scargrave moaned and tossed upon his pillow.

"Leave us now, my dear Jane," Isobel said, her hand cool upon my cheek; "I will come to you when I may."

AND SO I MUST WAIT AS WELL, SHUT UP IN MY HIGH-ceilinged chamber with the massive mahogany bed, the walls hung with tapestries in the fashion of the last century. I draw my knees to my chest and pull my dressing gown tight to my toes, staring for the thousandth time at the face of some Scargrave ancestress, forever young and coquettish and consumptively pale, who peers at me from her place above the mantel. It is a solemn room, a room to terrify a child and sober a maid; a room well-suited to my present mood. The fire is burned low and glowing red; my candle casts but a dim light, flickering in the still air as though swept by sightless wings—the Angel of Death, perhaps, hovering over the great house. At my arrival, Isobel told me of the Scargrave legend: When any of the family is doomed to die, the shade of the First Earl walks the gallery beyond my door in evening dress and sombre carriage. The family spectre might well be pacing the boards tonight, however little I would believe in him.

And through the snowy dawn, a faint echo of pealing bells; they toll nine times as I listen, straining for the count—the passing bell from the church in Scargrave Close, calling out that the Earl is in his final hours. Nine peals for the dying of a man, and then a pause; the toll resumes, a total of forty-eight times, for every year of the Earl's life. I shiver of a sudden and reach for my paper and pen, the pot of ink I carry always among my things. Much has happened in the two days since my arrival here at Scargrave; much is surely to come. It may help to pass the small hours of morning if I record some memory of them here.

I AM COME TO SCARGRAVE MANOR IN THE LAST MONTH of the dying year at the invitation of its mistress, Isobel Payne, Countess of Scargrave, with whom I have been intimate these eighteen months. When I recall our first meeting—an introduction between ladies still unwed, in the Bath Pump Room—I cannot help but wonder at the present reversal of events. Isobel, with her gay humour and careless aspect, so early blessed by fortune in the form of the Earl, now to be made a creature of misery and loss! She, who is all goodness, all generosity! It is not to be borne. Though I have known her but a little while, I would do all in my power tonight to succour her in despair—so lovely, and so wounded, is she. I owe the Countess my gratitude as well as esteem. I know too well how little attention she need pay me in her present high estate. A watering place such as Bath encourages ready acquaintance—acquaintance as readily dropt, once the sojourn is done. But Isobel would

have it that I am a *singular personality*, and that once understood, I am not easily put aside. However that may be, she has spurned the ready affections of her husband's fashionable friends, and proved faithful to her own, more modest ones; many a letter have I written and received, and confidences shared, in the short time we two have called each other by our Christian names.²

The Countess is returned from her wedding trip but a fortnight, having married Frederick, Lord Scargrave, three months past and departed immediately for the Continent. Her husband, the Earl, being determined to give a ball in her honour, Isobel begged me to make another of the party—and that I had powerful reasons for finding comfort in her goodness I will not deny. A visit to Scargrave promised some welcome diversions—an agreeable partner or two, and in the frivolity of the dance, some measure of forgetfulness for the appalling social errors I had knowingly committed among friends not a fortnight before. Never mind that the Earl's Manor would be the third home I had visited in as many weeks; there are times when to be in the bosom of one's family is a burden too great to bear, and relative strangers may prove as balm.

Thus I went into Hertfordshire fleeing, in short, a broken engagement and the awkward pity of those dearest to me in the world. I hoped only to find a woman's light dissipation: to talk of millinery and the neighbours with equal parts savagery and indifference, to take my full measure of wintry walks, to see in the New Year in the company of a dear friend lately married. I had no hopes of brilliant conversation, or of being surrounded by those who might challenge my wits; I looked, in fact, for the reverse of what has always been strongest in my nature.

My journey from Bath in the Scargrave carriage was marked by no intimation of pending tragedy; no dark shadows menaced as the horses laboured through the snowy Park, pulling up with steaming breath before the Manor's massive oak doors. Only warmth and welcome shone from the many windows set in the house's broad stone façade—a cheerful aspect on a winter's twilight, offering rest and sustenance to all who came within its walls. I may fairly say that I descended from the carriage without the slightest flutter of misgiving.

Nor did I feel a presentiment of doom this evening as I readied myself for the Earl's celebratory ball. I had from Isobel the loan of her maid, Marguerite, who having seen to her mistress's toilette, would now attempt to do some good to mine. The disparity in form and finery between Isobel and myself is material, I assure you; and so, while Marguerite fussed and lamented over the creases in my gown, an inevitable result of travel, I took up my pen and wrote to my dear sister Cassandra. It is a letter I fear that I must discard without posting—for soon I shall be required to convey other news, against which last evening's note may only be declared frivolous.

My dear Cassandra—

I am safely arrived in Hertfordshire and more than ready to enjoy the ball the Earl of

Scargrave gives in his lady's honour. I must regard it as fortuitous that Isobel's invitation arrived so soon upon the heels of my own trouble. Pray forgive me my sudden flight; I could not stay with brother James—you know how little I enjoy the tedium of a *tête-à-tête* with Mary—in my present confused and downcast state. I will not say that our brother reproached me for refusing Mr. Bigg-Wither; but I did endure a grim half-hour on the fate of impoverished spinsters. I was made to understand that I owe my continued sustenance and respectability (on twenty pounds per annum!) to the good health of our father, and that without a husband, I shall be cast upon my brothers' slim resources once that worthy is dead. Having heard James out, I am more than ever determined to pursue the publication of my little book, for I must earn some independence; better to commerce in literature than in matrimony, for to marry from mercenary motives is to me of all things the most despicable.³

But let us leave brother James where he belongs, in the company of his unfortunate wife—I find I must break off, as the maid is come to dress my hair for the ball; though what can be done to improve it at nearly seven-and-twenty, that was not attempted at eighteen, I cannot think. You will be shocked to learn that I have traded my comfortable cap for the allurements of a feather, to be tucked into a beaded band drawn across the forehead; two bunches of curls hang like grapes before my ears, *à la* the huntress Diana. I appear quite ridiculous, I dare say, but the change is a welcome one for all that. And now, my dearest sister, I must bid you good-night and *adieu*. I remain,

Yours very affectionately,

J. A.

I wore my yellow patterned silk, the finest thing I own, though admittedly of a vanished season, and kept my head high as I entered the ballroom in Isobel's wake. The great room was ablaze with candles, grouped in their gilt holders against the pier glasses that line the walls, so that we seemed to move among tall trees and branches of leafy flame; and it was peopled with a glittering assemblage of gentlemen and ladies, some hundred at least, come from surrounding Hertfordshire and as far distant as London. It must be impossible for one of my means to rival the grandeur of Scargrave, much less of the Earl's circle of acquaintance; but I fortified myself with the knowledge of Isobel's kindness and thus braved the stares of my companions.

The Countess of Scargrave was magnificent in deep green silk, a gown she had recently acquired in Paris. That she has always possessed a certain style is indisputable; but now she also may claim the means to obtain it—and the Earl's great fortune could hardly be better spent. Isobel is a tall, well-formed woman, with a figure light and pleasing; it is generally agreed that her hair is her most extraordinary feature, it being thick and of a deep, lustrous red that cannot fail to command attention. For my own part, I must declare it is her eyes that appear to greatest advantage—being of the colour of sherry, and heavily fringed. The charms of her person would be as nothing, however, did she lack the sweet grace that customarily animates her countenance. Tonight, in the midst of her bridal ball, she was truly lovely, her head thrown back in laughter as she turned about the room.

That others were equally admiring of Isobel's beauty and great charm, I readily discerned, and briefly felt myself a pale shadow in her train. To lose

one's cares in the gaiety of a ball, one must, perforce, be able to *dance*; and this requires a partner. At the advanced age of nearly seven-and-twenty, I had begun to know the fear of younger women. I had been suffered to sit during several dances at the last Bath assembly, while chits of fifteen turned and twirled their hearts upon the floor, and an unaccustomed envy had poisoned my happiness. I quailed to think that my fate tonight at Scargrave might be the same; but Isobel was as good as I had come to expect, and made me immediately acquainted with several gentlemen in her circle.

First among them was Fitzroy, Viscount Payne, her husband's nephew. Lord Payne is the only son of the Earl's younger brother, these many years deceased; and if the Earl and Isobel are unblessed by sons of their own, Lord Payne will succeed to the title at the Earl's death. As a single man in possession of a good fortune, he must be in want of a wife; and so the eyes of many within Scargrave that night were turned to him in hope and calculation.

From what little I have seen of Fitzroy Payne thus far, however, I should judge him as likely to honour *me* with his attentions and his hand as any lady in the room. Indeed, his heart is not likely to be easily touched—and I suspect it already is given to another. Lord Payne is a grave gentleman of six-and-twenty, and though decidedly handsome, is possessed of such reserve that his notice was hardly calculated to improve my spirits. As Isobel pronounced my name, he kept his eyes a clear six inches above my head, clicked his heels smartly, and made a deep bow—offering not a word of salutation the while.

Next I was suffered to meet the eldest son of the Earl's deceased sister. Mr. George Hearst is a quiet gentleman of seven-and-twenty, charged with all the management of the home farm, which I understand from Isobel is not at all to that gentleman's liking. He wishes rather to take Holy Orders, with the view to obtaining one of the three livings⁴ at the Earl's disposal when it should next come vacant. Pale and gaunt, his eyes shadowed with a care that must be ecclesiastical, he bears the stamp of a man long in converse with his God. His melancholy aspect and glowering looks, in the midst of so much rejoicing, cast a pall over the immediate party that even I, a relative stranger to them all, must feel acutely. Mr. George Hearst gave me an indifferent nod, and then returned to his contemplation of the grave—or so I assumed, from his stony aspect.

Isobel hastened then to make me known to Lieutenant Thomas Hearst, the ecclesiastic's younger brother; and as different from him as two men formed of the same union may be.

Tom Hearst possesses a life commission in an excellent cavalry regiment, a face creased from laughing, unruly curls that bob when he bows low over a hand, and a charm that has undoubtedly reduced many a fashionable miss to tears and sighing. That the Lieutenant cuts a dashing figure in his dark blue uniform, and dances with more enthusiasm than skill, I may readily attest. When Isobel presented him, he bobbed in the aforesaid manner and immediately asked for my next dance; and so I instantly recovered from my fit of nerves and set out to determine something of the Lieutenant's character.

I did not have far to seek. At the glimpse of a blond head hovering over my shoulder and the scent of violets assailing my nose, I turned and surveyed Miss Fanny Delahoussaye, resplendent in a peacock-blue gown that displayed to excellent effect her ample bosom. Miss Delahoussaye laughed a little breathlessly—the result, no doubt, of too much activity and too little corset string—and reached a plump hand to her coiffure.

“And so you have met that rascal Tom Hearst,” she said, and actually winked in my direction. Miss Fanny is Isobel’s cousin from the Barbadoes, a well-grown girl of youthful and boisterous appearance, but sadly lacking in sense. “He has snatched you up for a dance or two, I warrant, and now I shall have to go begging for a partner. I am sure Tom should have monopolised my card,” she added, displaying that elegant slip attached to her fan, already overwritten with eager suitors, “but for his delicacy in appearing too forward.”

“Is Lieutenant Hearst a man of delicacy, then?” I enquired, with more interest in Miss Delahoussaye than I had heretofore felt.

“Oh, Lord, no!” she cried. “As rash a scapegrace as ever lived! But Tom is that afraid of Mamma”—at this, she tossed her blond curls in Madame Delahoussaye’s general direction—“as to be overcareful. I am sure that *I* should not fear her half so much. It is not as though I have a brother, you know, to fight with him and send him off.”

“Why should any fight with the Lieutenant?” I said, somewhat bewildered.

“Why, because he is in love with me, of course,” Fanny declared, rapping my shoulder with her fan; “and his fortune is hardly equal to my own. And if I *did* have a brother to fight him, it should be the worse for us; for you know Tom is come to Scargrave having killed a man in an affair of honour.”⁵

My distress at this intelligence being written upon my countenance, Miss Delahoussaye laughed aloud. “I wonder you had not heard of it. Lord, it is the talk of the entire room! He has left his regiment at St. James for a little until the scandal dies down; though I am sure he should not have engaged in such an affair had he not been cruelly insulted.” With this, Miss Delahoussaye attempted to look grave, but her blue eyes danced with approbation for the terrible Lieutenant.

“Undoubtedly,” I replied, “though we cannot know what it is about.”

“I mean to find out,” Miss Fanny said stoutly, “for the affairs of officers are to me the most romantic in the world! Do not you agree, Miss Austen? Is not an officer to be preferred above any man?”

“I had not thought them blessed with any *particular* merit—” I began, but was cut off in mid-sentence.

“Then you cannot appreciate Tom as I do, and I shall not fear your charms any longer. He is wild about me, Miss Austen; do you remember it when you are dancing with him.” And with a flounce of her peacock-hued gown, Fanny Delahoussaye left me to await the return of her heart’s delight.

It was but nine o’clock, and light refreshment was laid in a parlour at some remove from the great room; a crush of gentlemen and ladies circulated about

the long table, seeking ices and champagne, cold goose and sweetmeats, sent forth from Scargrave's kitchens with a breathtaking disregard for expense. I considered the swarm of the unknown, some of whom were very fine, indeed, and for an instant wished myself returned to the hearth in my room, with a good book for company; but Isobel had taken my arm, and I was not to be so easily released.

"This is what it means to be a married woman, Jane," my friend said, with an arch smile; "one is forever expected to forego refreshment so that others may dance. *You* may eat to your heart's content, but *I* must allow my husband to lead me to the floor, or suffer the contempt of my guests." Isobel then swept off on the arm of the Earl, and proceeded to the head of the room; others equally eager to join in the revels formed up in pairs alongside them, as the musicians laid bow to string.

I felt the absence of Tom Hearst, and knew not whether to wish for the return of such a man or no. But my confusion was to be of short duration. A parting of the crowd, a sight of a curly head, and a jaunty bow in my direction; and I found myself facing the Lieutenant not four couples removed from the Earl and his lady, in all the flushed excitement of a first dance.

The knowledge of Lieutenant Hearst's having killed a man put flight to every other thought in my head, but since it is impossible to move through the figures without *some* attempt at conversation, I cast about in desperation for the slightest word. I fear I blushed, and turned my eyes to the ground, and appeared in every way as *missish* as possible, giving the Lieutenant as inaccurate a picture of myself as perhaps Miss Delahoussaye had drawn of him. My wordless confusion made him hesitate to utter a syllable; and thus we laboured in profound stupidity, for fully half the dance's span. But of all things detestable, I most detest a silent partner—and thrusting aside my horror of pistols at dawn, I took refuge in a lady's light banter.

"I have profited from your absence, Lieutenant, to enquire of your character," I began.

A merry look, from under a lifted eyebrow. "And am I fit to touch your glove, Miss Austen?"

"I learned that you are everywhere regarded as a man of charm and intelligence; that you are an officer renowned for bravery and quick temper; that you are observed to spend a good deal of time on horseback in the Park; and that you prefer saddle of mutton to roast beef, in which you have been disappointed this evening."

"Nay!" he cried, his head thrown back in laughter, "and shall we have the size of my boot and my preference in tailors as well?"

"It was an intelligence I could not, with delicacy, gather," I replied, "but if you disappear with such alacrity again, I shall be certain to find it out."

With great good humour the Lieutenant then began to converse quite freely, enquiring of my life in Bath and the circumstances of my family with a becoming interest. For my part, I quickly learned that he is the son of Lord Scargrave's sister, Julia, dead these many years, and that his father was a

dissolute rogue. Having reduced the Lady Julia to penury (for so I interpreted the Lieutenant's more generous words), the elder Mr. Hearst had the good sense to abandon his sons to her brother and depart for the Continent, where he subsequently died in the arms of his mistress. Lord Scargrave has had the rearing of the Hearst boys these twenty years; and it would not be remarkable if they looked to him as a father.

The Lieutenant added that he had tired of schooling while still at Eton, and spurned Oxford for the more brilliant ranks of the military; that he is at present a member of the Royal Horse Guards, resident in St. James, and is at Scargrave on leave through the Christmas holidays; though he failed to intimate that it was an *enforced* leave, due to his having recently killed a man.

Indeed, having spent some time in Lieutenant Hearst's company, I must wonder whether Miss Delahoussaye's romantic notions have not run away with what little sense she commands. For the Lieutenant seems as unlikely to kill a man as my dear brother Henry.

Fond of jokes, liberal in his smiles, incapable of giving offence to anybody, Tom Hearst is a ray of sun; but like the sun, can scorch when least expected. We had been half an hour along in the dance, and were nearing its close, when he turned the subject to Isobel, with some impertinence of manner.

"I may rejoice that my uncle has married," he said, taking my hand as I exchanged places with my neighbour, "when my aunt's acquaintance proves so delightful."

"Did you not rejoice, then, before I came to Scargrave?"

An anxious look, as having betrayed too much, was my reward, and an affectation of laughter. "For my own part," the Lieutenant replied, "I take my uncle's happiness as the sole consideration. But others may feel a nearer interest."

"I do not pretend to understand you." I turned my back upon him in the dance and caught Isobel's eye as she made her way along the line.

"You must be aware, Miss Austen," said Tom Hearst, "that an elderly man without children of his own may disappoint his family when he goes in pursuit of heirs."

"With a father past seventy, I should not call eight-and-forty *elderly*," I replied, turning again to face him.

"Oh! To be sure! I spoke but as a matter of form. I do not doubt, however, that my cousin the Viscount"—this, with a glance at Lord Payne, who stood opposite Fanny Delahoussaye in the next couple but one—"may feel such a mixture of emotions more acutely than I. Though Lord Fitzroy Payne appears to rank the Countess as chief among his acquaintance, *even he* must acknowledge the blow to his fortunes. If my uncle gets an heir, Lord Payne's prospects are decidedly the worse."

"Your solicitude for your cousin's purse may disarm reproof," I told him, "but your uncle's happiness must be said to outweigh more material concerns." That I wondered at his imparting so much of a personal nature to a complete stranger I need not emphasise; but it hardly dissuaded me from