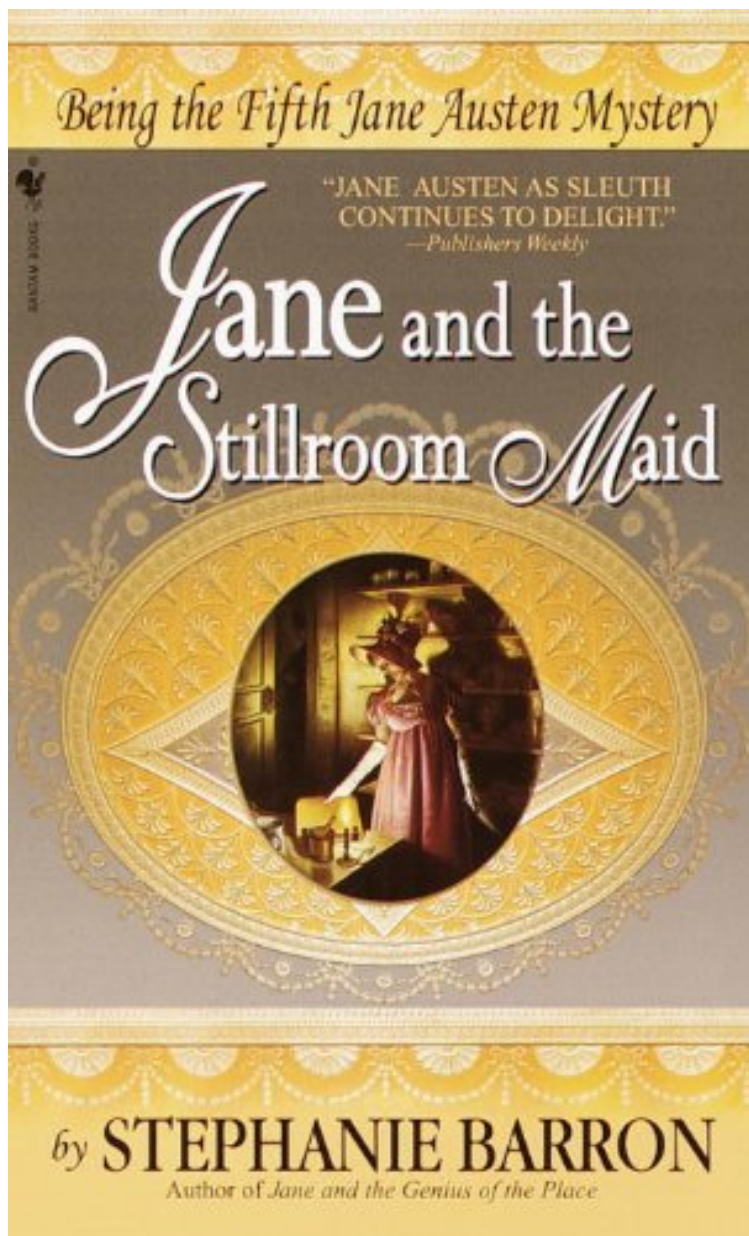


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Jane and the Stillroom Maid: Being the Fifth Jane Austen Mystery



Par Stephanie Barron
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJane Austen as sleuth continues to delight in her latest adventure (after Jane and the Genius of the Place), which sheds new light on the author's travels in 1806. While enjoying a ramble in the Derbyshire hills near Bakewell (a town Eliza Bennett visits in Pride and Prejudice), Jane discovers the mutilated body of a young man. Jane's suspicions are roused when her escort, Mr. George Hemming, prefers

to remove the unidentified corpse to Buxton, rather than Bakewell, and they increase when the body proves to be that of a woman dressed in men's clothing. Moreover, the corpse is identified as Tess Arnold, a servant at one of the area's great houses, whom Mr. Hemming should have recognized. As the compounder of stillroom remedies, Tess had a reputation as a healer, until accused of witchcraft. Rumors of ritual murder by Freemasons—who include most of the neighboring gentry—excite the local populace and jeopardize the investigation of the justice of the peace, himself a Mason. When Mr. Hemming disappears before the inquest, Jane and the justice turn for help to Lord Harold Trowbridge, a guest at the nearby ducal house of Chatsworth. Barron catches Austen's tone amazingly well. Details of early 19th-century country life of all classes ring true, while the story line is clear, yet full of surprises. The "editor's notes" that punctuate the text and old cures for various ills that open each chapter add to the charm. (Aug.)

From the Hardcover edition.

ExtraitChapter One: The Butterfly on the StoneTuesday 26 August 1806 The Rutland Arms, Bakewell, DerbyshireMr. Edward Cooper -- Rector of Hamstall Ridware, Staffordshire, Fellow of All Souls, devoted supplicant before his noble patron, Sir George Mumps, and my first cousin -- is possessed of a taste for hymns. He sings without the slightest encouragement or provocation, in a key entirely of his own choosing. Were he content to sing alone, in a subdued undertone befitting one of his dignity and station, all might be well. But Mr. Cooper has achieved a modest sort of fame as the composer of sacred music; and like the ardent shepherd of many a flock, must needs have company in his rejoicing. There are those who profess to admire my cousin's wistful baritone and remarkable lyrics -- Sir George Mumps himself is said to have presented the Staffordshire living on the strength of his esteem -- but Jane Austen is not among them. Were Mr. Cooper to sing airs in the Italian, before an audience of five hundred, I should still blush for his execution and taste. My cousin is a very good sort of man, his compassion and understanding quite equal to the duties of his parish; but his strains are not for the enduring, of an early hour of the morning. I was blushing now, as I rolled towards Miller's Dale in the heart of Derbyshire behind the horse of Mr. Cooper's excellent friend, Mr. George Hemming; and I foresaw a morning's-worth of mortification in store, did my cousin continue to sing as he had begun. I had borne with Mr. Cooper's hymns through his dawn ablutions; I had borne with a determined humming over our morning coffee. And as the pony trap rolled west through a remarkable spread of country, I now reflected that I had borne with a stream of liturgical ditty for nearly a fortnight. To say that I possessed an entire hymnal of Mr. Cooper's work writ large upon my brain was the merest understatement. I heard his powerful strains in my sleep. "Is it not a beautiful morning, Jane? Does not the heart leap in the human breast for the greater glorification of God?" Mr. Cooper cried. "Pray sing with me, Cousin, that the Lord might hear us and be glad!" Poor Mr. Hemming cast a troubled glance my way. He was but an instant from a similar application, and I read his distress in his looks. My cousin's talent, we may suspect, had progressed unnoticed by his friend during the long years that interceded between their first acquaintance, and this latest renewal; had Mr. Hemming known of the recital we were to receive during our journey to Miller's Dale, he might well have retracted his invitation. I had long ago learned the surest remedy for Mr. Cooper, however, and I now hastened to employ it. Even the least worldly of men may be prey to vanity. "Do not destroy all my pleasure in hearing you, Cousin, by requiring me to sing myself!" I cried. "My voice should never be joined with yours; it is not equal to the demands of the performance. Nor, I am certain, is Mr. Hemming's. Pray let us rest a little in your art, and be satisfied." Mr. Cooper beamed, and commenced a tedious five verses of "The Breath That Breathed O'er Eden." I endured it in silence; for I owed Mr. Cooper every measure of gratitude and respect. But for my cousin, I should never have set foot in Derbyshire at all. And Derbyshire -- with all its wild beauty and untamed peaks -- had long been the dearest object of my travels. What was a little singing, however off-key, to the grandeur of lakes and mountains? Mr. Cooper had long despaired of my mother's ever paying a visit to Staffordshire and her dearest nephew's rectory. It was many years, now, since he had first urged the scheme; his family had annually increased, his honours as a vicar and homilist multiplied; Mr. Cooper himself was approaching a complaisant middle-age -- and still the Austen ladies remained insensibly at home. But so lately as June my mother determined to quit the environs of Bath -- the town in which we have lived more than three years -- it being entirely unsuitable now that my beloved father is laid to rest. Being three women of modest means, and having endeavoured to live respectably on a pittance in the midst of a most expensive town, we at last declared defeat and determined to exchange Bath for anywhere else in England. An interval of rest and refreshment, in the form of an extended tour among our relations, was deemed suitable for the summer months; October should find us in Southampton, where we were to set up housekeeping with my dearest brother, Captain Francis Austen. We should serve as company for his new bride, Mary, when duty called Frank to sea. And so

it was decided -- we shook off the dust of Bath on the second of July, with what happy feelings of Escape! -- and bent all our energies to a summer of idleness. We travelled first to Clifton, and from thence to Adlestrop and my mother's cousin, the clergyman Mr. Thomas Leigh. We had not been settled in that gentleman's home five days, when the sudden death of a distant relation sent Mr. Leigh flying to Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire, with the intent of laying claim to a disputed inheritance. After a highly diverting week in the company of Mr. Leigh's solicitor, Mr. Hill, and the absurd Lady Saye and Sele, we parted from the intimates of Stoneleigh and turned our carriage north, towards Staffordshire. Hamstall Ridware is a prosperous little village lost in a depth of hedgerows, with a very fine Rectory and a finer church spire. Our cousin Mr. Cooper and his dutiful wife, Caroline, possess no less than eight children, the eldest of whom is but twelve and the youngest barely a year. Some little difficulty in the matter of bedchambers was apparent from the moment of our arrival. Cassandra and I were forced to shift together; my mother claimed a bed in the next room. The little boys were grouped in pallets on the nursery floor, and it was likewise with the little girls, while the baby was taken up in its parents' chamber. And so we contrived to be comfortable; and so we should have been, despite the heat of August and the closeness of such a populous house, had not the whooping cough presently put in an appearance. After three days of Christian endurance, of instruction from the apothecary and draughts that did little good, Mr. Cooper proposed a journey into Derbyshire, with the intent of touring Chatsworth and the principal beauties of the region. My mother acceded thankfully to the scheme. The harassed Caroline Cooper, beset with ailing children on every side, was relieved of the burden of guests, and the Austens of the fear of contagion. Having set out from the Rectory steps on the Saturday previous, we achieved Bakewell yesterday in the forenoon, very well satisfied with our progress north. But for one aspect of the journey -- my cousin's unsuspected ardour for the sport of angling, which has entirely determined our course through Derbyshire -- we should have found nothing in our prospects but delight. Bakewell is a bustling, if modest, collection of stone buildings and paved streets, of ancient bridges spanning the Wye and sheep-pens ranged along the banks of the river. The town is remarkable for enjoying the patronage of no less than two ducal houses -- that of the Duke of Rutland, who is a great landowner hereabouts, and of the Duke of Devonshire, whose principal seat of Chatsworth is but three miles to the east. A brush with nobility and Fashion has lent the town an air of importance unusual in this wild, high country. A few hours sufficed to reveal its charms, however; by dinner I was surfeited with commerce and linen-draping; I yearned for a landscape of disorder, for a riot of water and stone. Too little activity, and too great a period in the confines of a carriage, had conspired to render me peevish and melancholy. When Mr. George Hemming proffered his invitation to Miller's Dale over our evening tea, I accepted with alacrity. My mother could not be persuaded; and upon ascertaining that the intended equipage was a pony trap, Cassandra, too, declined. I should be left to all the luxury of solitude, once my cousin and his friend were established over their rods. Mr. Hemming is a solicitor in Bakewell: a prosperous and congenial gentleman, whose quiet manners must always make him amiable, though he should never be called handsome. He is confirmed in middle-age, being nearly twenty years my cousin's senior. He possesses no family, his wife having died in childhood a decade ago. Having found occasion to perform some little service for the Duke of Devonshire, he may claim an intimacy with so august an institution as Chatsworth; and this alone would ensure that he is regarded in Bakewell as a person of some respectability. To my cousin, he is chiefly valuable in being addicted to the sport of angling; to myself, he appears more in the guise of social saviour. Possessed of conversation, and not entirely ignorant of the world, Mr. Hemming must be regarded as a decided advantage -- particularly after too many days in the confines of a closed carriage, with a vigorous soloist for company. This morning Mr. Hemming came, at the reins of his admirable trap; he displayed no irritation at the company of a female; and his comments during the course of the hour's journey from Bakewell to Miller's Dale were always sensible, and sometimes droll. I quite liked him, for the amiability of spirit that urged the revival of a friendship of such ancient formation, as much as for the evenness of temper that marked all his conduct. The conversation of well-informed men falls but too rarely in my way, and I intended to profit from Mr. Hemming's company. "Are you Derbyshire born and bred, sir?" I enquired, when my cousin's five verses were done. "I am," he replied, "and have never found a cause to repine. Other than a brief period in the South, when I was so fortunate as to make Mr. Cooper's acquaintance, I have been happy to call Bakewell my home these thirty years and more. I should never exchange it for another." My cousin closed his eyes, as though lost in contemplation or prayer; I knew he should soon be asleep. The gig had not progressed another mile before the gentle sound of snoring fell upon my ear. "I think I should be content to live my whole life in Derbyshire, Mr. Hemming," I said. "Never have I seen a country so blest in the

marriage of the tame and the wild, so replete at once with romance and comfort." "You do not share the opinion of so many fine ladies, then, that these hills and rocks lack refinement?" "What is refinement," I cried, "when one has glimpsed the whole force of Nature? Who, having witnessed the Dove toiling amidst her course, could wish for the quieter banks of the Stour? If by refinement you would offer me the dull, Mr. Hemming -- if you presume that having spent my life in Hampshire, I know nothing of Beauty -- then I must assure you to the contrary." "What is it Cowper writes?" he mused. "That 'Nature is but a name for an effect, / Whose cause is God'?" Admirable fellow, to have looked into Cowper! "I have always supposed him to mean that true Beauty, true perfection -- which is the essence of God, is it not? -- may only be found in what is simple. A life of artifice and affectation must prove hollow, and incapable of granting happiness." "You shall not win an argument from me, Miss Austen," replied Hemming. "I have seen your life of artifice in my younger days; and I assure you it will break its victim as a butterfly on a stone." His words were heavy; they belied the sunshine of the morning. Abruptly Mr. Hemming fell silent. Some memory he had stirred, of bitterness or regret; it was not for me to probe the wound. I turned my energy to an enjoyment of the landscape beyond the gig, and found everything to delight. We travelled west for a time through a lovely passage of country, along the banks of the River Wye. The water gurgled in its bed, the horse's hooves clopped comfortably along the dusty August road, and the green Derbyshire hills rose up around us. It is a northern custom to divide the fields with stone walls, rather than the hedgerows so suitable to the flat meadows of the South. I found the practise charming, and longed for a hut among the rocks, where I might survey the entire country of a morning, and breathe the clear sweet air. We rolled on, through Ashford-in-the-Water, while my cousin Mr. Cooper was yet lost in slumber, and the sun climbed higher in the cup of sky. Near Blackwell, the road turns north and plunges into the Dale itself, a precipitous and winding drop among the crags towards the torrent of water below. I had grown accustomed to such a pitch in the course of our Derbyshire travels; and I prided myself upon a measure of complaisance. It should not be said that Jane Austen was so little familiar with the world, that a smart stretch of road might reduce her to hysterics. Upon reflection, however, it was greatly to be thanked that Cassandra had remained in Bakewell. I gripped the leather seat of Mr. Hemming's equipage more firmly, and trained my eyes upon his hands as they managed the reins. He spoke in a low voice to his horse, holding the animal in, and we descended by degrees to the Wye, and Miller's Dale itself. I had a moment for the drawing of breath, and a swift prayer of thanks, when Mr. Hemming brought the gig to rest under the shade of a venerable oak. He roused my cousin with a few jocular remarks, and the threat of a dose of river water to clear Mr. Cooper's head; then led our party to a secluded spot some distance downstream, where the limestone crags rose in harsh and fantastic shapes. An ancient mill stood beside a weir; and the picturesque was so delightful that I gasped with pleasure. "You must not neglect to form an acquaintance with the miller," Mr. Hemming informed me with a smile, "for he is the purveyor of an excellent cordial. We shall all be desirous of a glass before the day is out." The gentlemen disposed themselves with their rods and tackle, their figures quite charming amidst the willows and reeds. It was a bucolic scene that had grown quite familiar. Fishing, I will own, is one of the more healthful and least vicious of gentlemen's pursuits; but it is unfortunate that it should produce such a number of fish, that must be consumed or otherwise disposed of, before they rot. The rivers that spring from the High Peaks are justly celebrated for their quantities of trout; they have provided generations of gentlemen with sport, well before Mr. Izaak Walton wrote of their charms in *The Compleat Angler* over a century ago. Our progress through Derby had been marked by an assay of waters: the Trent, the Derwent, the Dove, and at last the Wye. It was through a tangle of line and tackle that I first espied Dove Dale; it was in the odour of fish that I descended upon Burghley House, and was granted permission to tour the estate. By the time we achieved Matlock, I was heartily sick of trout, and utterly refused it for dinner in Buxton. I set about the business of unpacking Mr. Hemming's commodious hamper, which contained a generous store of bread and cheese, a packet of sliced ham, and some peaches -- all of it warm and fragrant with the heat of the day. He had considered of cutlery and napkins, and a cloth to lay upon the ground; an admirable host in every respect. It was as I laid out the fruit knives that my cousin Mr. Cooper commenced to sing. "Hear us, oh hear us Lord; to thee A sinner is more music, when he prays Than spheres, or angels' praises be In panegyric alleluiaaas." Mr. Hemming was at a little remove, between my cousin and the bend in the river, where the mill was situated; he glanced over his shoulder as my cousin achieved a fulsome baritone, looked a trifle uneasy, and then glanced at me. I wagged a gloved hand in salutation. Mr. Hemming returned his gaze to his rod; but I observed that the set of his back was rather more rigid than before. "Do you always sing, Edward, when angling?" he enquired. "There are few pursuits, I suppose, that are not improved by a hymn," replied my

cousin gaily. "I may assure you, George, that a burst of song is highly beneficial to the lungs. My esteemed patron, Sir George Mumps, has condescended to follow my example -- and Sir George survived the whole of last winter without so much as a cold. You must attempt it." "I am unfamiliar with your tune," Mr. Hemming managed. My cousin's countenance was suffused with delight. "But the words themselves you certainly recognise. They are Donne's, from the Divine Poems. My ambition is to set all of his work to music, in the course of time." Mr. Hemming did not vouchsafe a reply. His brow was furrowed and his attention claimed by the tying of a fly. "As no doubt you comprehend," Mr. Cooper continued, in happy oblivion of his effect, "Donne is sometimes problematical. What is one to do with 'And through that bitter agony/Which is still the agony of pious wits/Disputing what distorted thee/And interrupted evenness, with fits'?" Mr. Hemming's rod twitched; so, too, did his jaw; and then the line broke free of the river and was swiftly reeled in. He was keeping a check on his temper, I perceived; but the excess of his feeling was visible in his handling of the rod. There would be few fish to catch, at this present rate. "Not to mention 'as wise as serpents, diversely/Most slipperiness, yet most entanglings hath,'" I murmured. "Exactly." My cousin wheeled about, jerking his line from the river with a spattering of drops. "I have been forced to abandon those for a time, Jane, until the Lord provides for their arrangement. But I have infinite faith in His devising." Mr. Hemming raised his rod in preparation for a cast, his gaze trained upon the coursing river. "If I might make a suggestion, Edward -- the counsel of an old friend--" "But I should be delighted, George!" "I believe your singing -- excellent though it may be in its way -- is driving off the trout." A look of the most extreme mortification clouded Mr. Cooper's countenance. "I had not the slightest notion the creatures possessed ears." "I am not convinced that ears are entirely necessary. The ... vigour of your performance--" "Perhaps the fish do not approve of Donne," I suggested. Mr. Hemming threw a glance my way. "It must be said that there are many who do not," he observed. My cousin looked from my serene countenance to the blacker one of his friend. "If I have offended you in any way, George, I humbly beg leave to apologise--" "Pray do not mention it," Mr. Hemming retorted abruptly. He cast, and the line tangled upon a tree branch. Mr. Hemming stifled an oath. The waters of the Wye lapped at our feet; a curlew called in the crags somewhere above; and off in the distance I caught the clatter of crows. It was a distinctly mournful sound, rife with dispute and acrimony; and for an instant, a shade was thrown over the brightness of the summer day. I lifted my head, and studied the heights. Nothing but a soaring of rock and green things among them, a footpath winding above. I was not yet seized with hunger, and now that my cousin was cowed to silence, the gentlemen were absorbed in their sport. It was time to attempt the heights of Miller's Dale. The way was gentle enough in its early stages, but steepened inexorably even as it narrowed, until with the passage of three-quarters of an hour, I felt myself to be a sort of sheep or mountain goat, clinging with my half-boots to the edge of the earth. All about me swung the green hills and stone walls of Derbyshire, with the river a bright ribbon below. I looked my fill upon this corner of the sceptre'd isle; saw, as with the eye of Heaven, the flocks of sheep like clouds against the pasturage, the rapid gallop of a distant horse, the tumbled stones of ancient habitation. Smoke curled from the miller's chimney. I felt as Henry, my brother, must once have done, marshalling toy soldiers. I commanded all that was at my feet. And then the crows rose up in a great black cloud and tore the peace of morning into fragments. I focused my gaze upon a massive crag of rock, some distance further up the path. The birds were gathered there, a darkling company. Small heaps of cloth -- the remnants of a pleasure party, perhaps -- were tossed about the crag's base. There would be crusts of bread amidst the refuse, enough sustenance for a crow to squabble over. I schooled my gaze to pierce the shadows thrown by the great rock, but the glitter of sunlight on limestone pained my eyes. The crows were settled on the limbs of a tree at the crag's foot. But surely a tree branch would have no use for a gentleman's shoe? And yet it was a gentleman's shoe I espied-- Without hesitation I hurried forward, the beauties of the day forgotten in a sudden access of anxiety. My breath came in tearing gasps, as though born of great exertion, and yet here the pitch of the slope was in my favour, and I might have flown the distance on winged feet. To reach him required but a few moments. He lay in the shelter of the great rock as though seeking relief from the sun, one hand serving as pillow under his head -- a young man, with a delicate countenance and golden curls, dressed entirely in black. He might almost have been asleep. But to my sorrow, I knew better. The stench of blood was heavy in my nostrils, and the raven tearing at the man's entrails did not suffer itself to move, even when I screamed. *Revue de presse* "Jane Austen as sleuth continues to delight." *Publishers Weekly* "This fifth Jane Austen detection gets ... my Best in Series vote." *Booknews from The Poisoned Pen* "Another first-rate addition to the series." *Christian Science Monitor* "Barron does a wonderful job of evoking the great British estates and the woes of spinsters living in that era ... often echoing the rhythms of the Austen novels with

uncanny ease."Entertainment Weekly