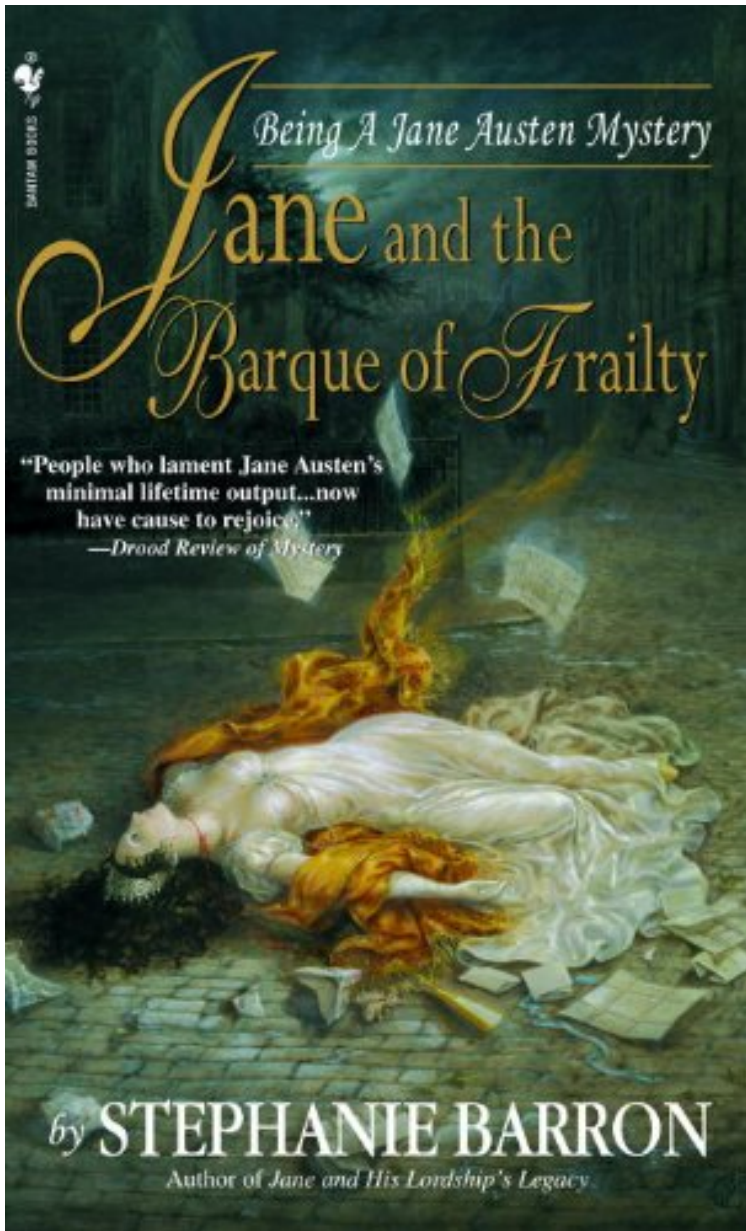


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Jane and the Barque of Frailty



Par Stephanie Barron
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn her latest spellbinding escapade, Jane Austen arrives in London to watch over the printing of her first novel, and finds herself embroiled in a crime that could end more than her career. For it is up to Jane to tease a murderer out of the ton, lest sheand her countrysuffer a dastardly demise.On the heels of completing Sense and Sensibility, Jane heads to Sloane Street for a monthlong visit with her brother Henry and his wife, Eliza. Hobnobbing with the Fashionable Great at the height of the Season, Jane is well aware of their secrets and peccadilloes. But even she is surprised when the intimate correspondence between

a Russian princess and a prominent Tory minister is published in the papers for all to see. More shocking, the disgraced beauty is soon found with her throat slit on Lord Castlereagh's very doorstep. Everyone who anyone in high society is certain the spurned princess committed the violence upon herself. But Jane is unconvinced. Nor does she believe the minister guilty of so grisly and public a crime. Jane, however, is willing to let someone else investigate until a quirk of fate thrusts her and Eliza into the heart of the case as prime suspects! Striking a bargain with the authorities, Jane secures seven days to save herself and Eliza from hanging. But as her quest to unmask a killer takes her from the halls of government to the drawing rooms of London's most celebrated courtesan, only one thing is sure: her failure will not only cut short her life. It could lead to England's downfall. A compulsively readable, uncommonly elegant novel of historical suspense, *Jane and the Barque of Frailty* once again proves Jane Austen a sleuth to be reckoned with. From the Hardcover edition.

Chapter One A Night Among the Ton
No. 64 Sloane Street, London Monday, 22 April 1811
CONCEIVE, IF YOU WILL, OF THE THEATRE ROYAL, COVENT Garden, on an evening such as this: the celebrated Mrs. Siddons being rumoured to appear, after too many months' absence from the stage; the play *Macbeth*, with all the hideous power of Shakespeare's verse and Sarah Siddons's art; and the Polite World of London brawling in the midst of Bow Street, in an effort to reach its place in the box before the curtain should rise. Such a welter of chairmen, link boys, fashionable carriages, street sweeps, porters, and coachmen! Such oaths, blasted into the ears of delicately-nurtured females, carried hurriedly to the paving lest their satin slippers should be soiled in the horses' dung! Such an array of silks and muslins, turbans and feathers, embroidered shawls and jewelled flounces! The scent of a thousand flowers on the air, the odour of tobacco and ripe oranges and fish from the markets in Covent Garden, the great theatre's windows thrown open against the warmth of the spring night and the heat of too many bodies filling the vast hall! The flickering of wax candles, a fortune's worth thrown up into the gleaming chandeliers; the rising pitch of conversation, the high screech of a woman's laughter, the impropriety of a chance remark, the hand of a gentleman resting where it should not, on the person of his lady—all this, like a prodigal feast spread out for my delectation. The vague shadow, too, of a Bow Street Runner lounging in the doorway of the magistrate's offices opposite which I chanced to glimpse as brother Henry swept me to the theatre door; lounging like an accusation as he surveyed the Fashionable Great, whose sins and peccadilloes only he may be privileged to know. It is a scene hardly out of the ordinary way for the majority of the ton, that select company of wealthy and wellborn who rule what is commonly called Society; but for a lady in the midst of her thirty-fifth year, denied a proper come-out or a breathless schoolgirl's first Season, a shabby-genteel lady long since on the shelf and at her last prayers it must be deemed a high treat. Add that I am a hardened enthusiast of the great Sarah Siddons, and have been disappointed before in my hopes of seeing her tread the boards and you will apprehend with what pleasurable anticipation I met the curtain's rise. "Jane," Eliza murmured behind her fan as the Theatre Royal fell silent, "there is Lord Moira, Henry's particular friend and an intimate of the Prince Regent. Next his box you will recognise Lord Castlereagh, I am sure was there ever anything so elegant as his lady's dress? It is as nothing, however, to the costume of the creature seated to our left—the extraordinarily handsome woman with the flashing dark eyes and the black curls. That is the great Harriette Wilson, my dear—the most celebrated Impure in London, with her sisters and intimate friends; do not observe her openly, I beg! Such gentlemen as have had her in keeping! I am sure our Harriette might bring down the Government, were she merely to speak too freely among her intimates. They do say that even Wellington!" The pressure of Henry's hand upon his wife's arm silenced Eliza, and I was allowed to disregard the men of government equally with the demimondaine in her rubies and paint, and sit in breathless apprehension as a cabal of witches plotted their ageless doom. I am come to London in the spring of this year 1811—the year of Regency and the poor old King's decline into madness, the year of Buonaparte's expected rout in the Peninsula, of straitened circumstances and immense want among the poor—to watch like an anxious parent over the printing of my first novel. Yes, my novel; or say rather the child of my heart, which is to be sent into the Great World without even the acknowledgement of its mother, being to be published by Mr. Thomas Egerton only as *By a Lady*. And what is the title and purport of this improving work, so ideally suited to the fancy of ladies both young and old? I have been used to call it *Elinor Marianne*, after the fashion of the great Madame d'Arblay, whose exemplary tales *Camilla*, *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, etc., have set the fashion in literature for ladies. Mr. Egerton, however, is of the opinion that such a title is no longer the mode, the style being for qualities akin to Mrs. Brunton's *Self-Controul*. I have debated the merits of *Worthiness and Self-Worth*, or *An Excellent Understanding*. Eliza, on the other hand, would hew to the sensational. "How do you like *The Bodice Rip'd from Side to Side*, Jane? Or perhaps I think now only of *Marianne The Maid Forsworn*

and All Forlorn?" "But what of Willoughby?" brother Henry objected. "Should he not be given pride of place? Call it then The Seducer, and have done." "It shall be Sense and Sensibility," I replied firmly, "for I am partial to sibilants; and besides, Cassandra approves the division: Elinor a creature of Reason, and Marianne entirely of Feeling. You must know I am in the habit of being guided by my sister. Insofar as my inclination allies with hers, of course." Henry and his wife cried out against this, abusing Cassandra for the excessive starch of her notions, and the quiet propriety which must always characterise my sister's views. I ought possibly to have paid more heed to their opinions it is Henry, after all, who has franked me in the publishing world, having paid Mr. Egerton to print my little book but I am tired of toying with titles. All my anxiety is for the pace of the printing, which is excessively slow. I am resident in London a full month, and yet we have arrived only at Chapter Nine, and Willoughby's first appearance. At this rate, the year will have turned before the novel is bound, tho' it was faithfully promised for Maya set of three volumes in blue boards, with gilt letters. "Jane," Eliza prompted as the curtain fell on Act I of Macbeth, "you are hardly attending. Here is the Comtesse d'Entraigues come to pay us a call. How delightful!" I roused myself quick enough to observe that lady's entrance into our box, with a headdress of feathers nearly sweeping the ceiling a quizzing-glass held to her eye an expanse of bony shoulder and excess of décolleté and schooled my countenance to amiability. There are many words I might chuse to apostrophise the French Countess one of Eliza's acquaintances from her previous marriage to a nobleman of Louis's reign but delightful is not one of them. The Comtesse d'Entraigues was used to be known as Anne de St.-Huberti, when she set up as an opera singer in the days of the Revolution; but by either name she is repugnant to me, being full of acid and spite. Eliza hints that her friend was the Comte's mistress before he was constrained to marry her and at full five-and-fifty, Anne de St.-Huberti must be grateful for the protection of d'Entraigues's name. She paints her pitted cheeks in the mode of thirty years since; is given to the excessive use of scent; affects a blond wig; and should undoubtedly be termed a Fright by the ruthless bucks of Town. "Eliza, mignon," she crooned as she presented one powdered cheek in all the appearance of affection; "how hagged you look this evening, to be sure! The years, they have never sat lightly upon you, bien sur! You have been fatigued, sans doute, by your visit to Surrey last evening it was a great deal too good of you to solace my exile!" We had indeed ventured into Surrey last night, despite all my doubts regarding Sunday travel, to enjoy an evening of music at the d'Entraigues abode. The old Count spoke nothing but French, and I understood but a fraction of the communication, tho' Henry admirably held up his end, and declared the gentleman to be a man of parts and considerable information. The son, young Count Julien, who appears everything an Exquisite of the Ton should be, with his excellent tailoring, his disordered locks, his shining boots, and his quantity of fobs and seals, delighted us with his superior performance upon the pianoforte. The Comtesse had deigned to sing. Taken all together, I should rather endure a full two hours of her ladyship's airs in the Italian than a few moments of her conversation; and as she and Eliza put their heads together, I considered instead how the Theatre Royal might serve in a novel: the comings and goings of great personages, a lady's chance encounter with an Unknown; or the appearance of a Rogue, for example, who might interpret the slight nothings and subtle displays of the ton with an understanding far more penetrating than my own. . . . It was impossible to be in London at the height of the Season without reverting in thought to Lord Harold Trowbridge. That late denizen of Brooks's Club, that consummate sportsman and intimate of princes, should certainly have graced one of these lofty boxes, and been in close converse even now with Lord Castlereagh, perhaps, however little he liked that Tory gentleman's conduct of war. He should have profited by the play's interval in dallying with a lady, or shown himself one of Harriette Wilson's favorites, his sleek frame displayed to advantage against the marble columns of the tier. But would he, in truth, have noticed Jane? The question arose with a pang. At five-and-thirty I cannot pretend to any beauty now. My evening dress of blue, the beaded band encircling my forehead, the flower tucked into my hair arranged with all the genius Eliza's French maid could command yet nothing to draw the eye. One must be possessed of extraordinary looks or a great deal of money to figure in London. Had his lordship lived, he might have called at No. 64 Sloane Street, as he condescended to do in Bath and Southampton and left his card as my Willoughby does for . . .

Revue de presse Satisfying right to the last revelation. The author excels at both period detail and modern verve. Sparkling. Publishers Weekly Barron's research is impeccable, bringing the sights and sounds of Austen's era to the page with detail and sparkle. . . . This is great fun for Austen fans who like a little mystery with their manners. Rocky Mountain News