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opening extract from

I was Jane Austen's Best Friend

written by

Cora Harrison

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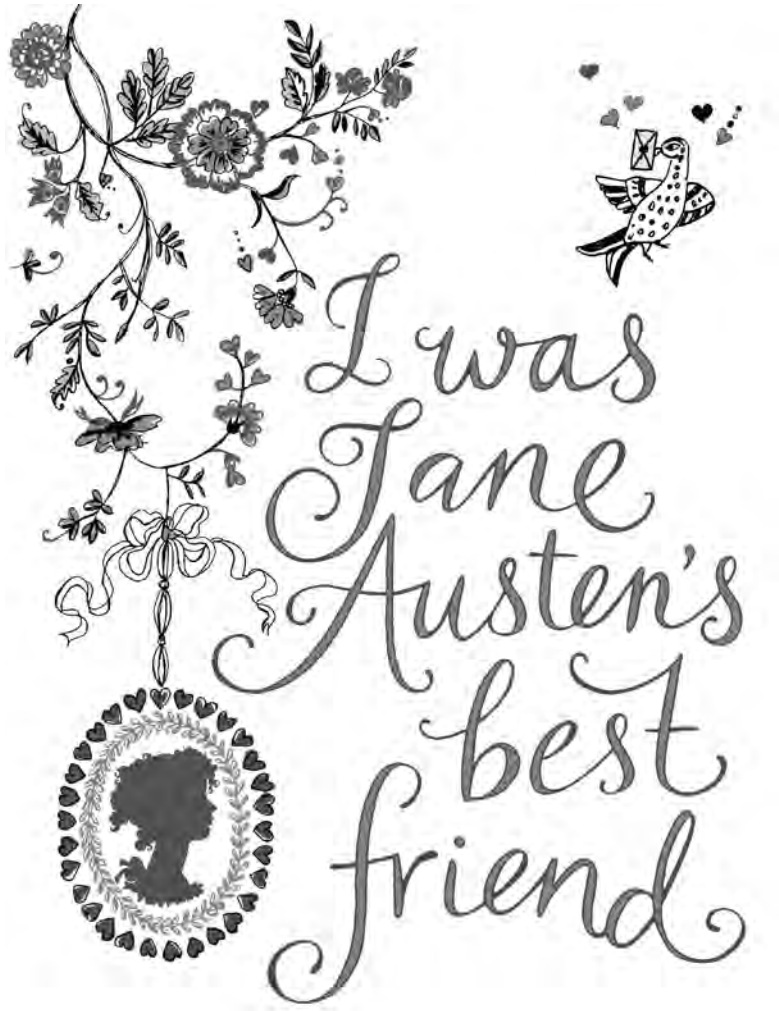
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Cora Harrison fell in love with Jane Austen when she first read *Pride and Prejudice* at the age of twelve. She has published many novels for children and adults. She and her husband live on a small farm in the west of Ireland with a very large and rather lunatic German shepherd dog called Oscar and a very small white cat called Polly.



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For my daughter, Ruth Mason, a fan of the Jane Austen novels since her early teens

Tuesday, 12 January 1796

Dearest Jane,

Yesterday I was up in the attic and discovered a bundle of my old journals - I spent half the night reading this one. I'm sending it to you because I think you will enjoy it, too.

I can't believe how much my life changed in that spring of 1791! It was like coming out of a dark room into bright sunlight. With you as a friend, I learned so much that year - about life, about love - and about how to have fun!

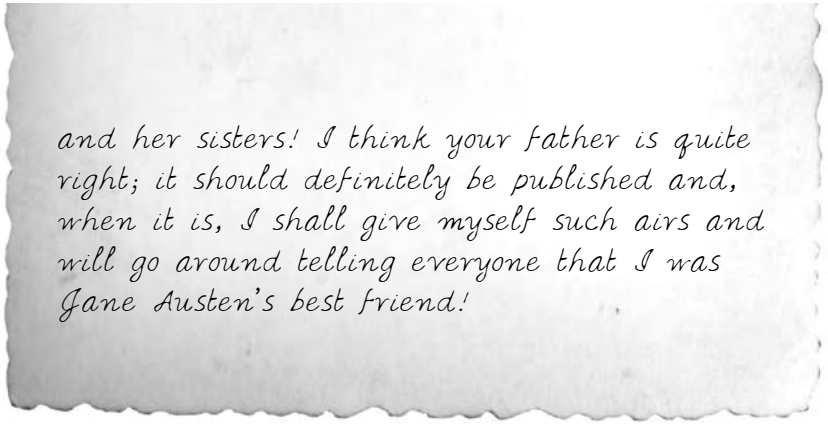
Do you remember our new sprigged muslin gowns for the ball at the Basingstoke Assembly Rooms? And getting ready for the ball? And how Eliza did our hair?

Well, it's all here in my journal so I hope you enjoying reading it. I'm looking forward to visiting you next month and then we can talk over old times.

Yours affectionately,

Jenny

PS I LOVED your book about Elizabeth Bennet


and her sisters! I think your father is quite right; it should definitely be published and, when it is, I shall give myself such airs and will go around telling everyone that I was Jane Austen's best friend!

MY JOURNAL
Monday, 7 February 1791

Jane looks like she could die

It's a terrible thing to write: *Jane looks like she could die* – but it's even worse to have the thought jumping into your mind every few minutes.

I'm just sitting here in this cold dormitory looking at Jane. The only light is the light that comes in from the street. It's enough though, as Jane's bed is next to the window. I can see her face. It is very red; it's been like that for the last few days. She's pushed off her nightcap and her dark curly hair is soaked in sweat. Her eyes are widely opened, but there is nothing of Jane in that gaze. She looks at me, but she doesn't know me, just carries on muttering through swollen, cracked lips. Her skin is burning hot when I touch her. She's burning with fever. Becky, the kitchen maid, had that fever last month, but she recovered after a few days.

But Jane is not recovering.

And I am frightened.

Mrs Cawley is the owner of the school. She's responsible for us all. Why doesn't she look after Jane?

But she doesn't want to talk about Jane and how ill she is. She wants to pretend the illness isn't happening.

She doesn't even come up to the dormitory.

She just sends Becky.

And Becky is frightened too. I saw it in her face tonight when she was trying to get Jane to swallow some of that medicine that the doctor left for her.

I know I must do something. It's no good just sitting here staring at Jane and writing a few sentences in my journal and then looking at her again. It's eleven o'clock of the evening. The house is quiet, of course, because Mrs Cawley makes everyone go to bed early in order to save on fires and on candles. All the girls in the dormitory are asleep except for me – Jane is still burning with fever and her breathing sounds like the watchman's rattle.

I'm scared. I've begged Mrs Cawley to send for Jane's mother and father. My Aunt Austen will know what to do; I remember my mother telling me how good her sister was at nursing – that she had shelves full of remedies in her pantry. I'm sure that Jane would improve if her mother were here. I don't trust that doctor that comes every day. His fingernails are dirty and he hardly comes near enough to Jane to know what is wrong with her. He just keeps leaving bottles of something that smells like tar water with a few bits of dried herbs floating in it.

Jane's mother must come. Jane's mother must come. Jane's mother must come.

So I have written to her. I managed to write the letter earlier today when we had silent study in our dormitories while the maids were cleaning the schoolroom. I even managed to steal some sealing wax from

Mrs Cawley's desk and use the candle to melt it without anyone's seeing. I turn the letter over and over in my hands. The neatly folded paper is beginning to look grubby, and the wax seal that keeps it fastened will break and fall off if I handle the sheet any more. Once again I read the address that I have written on the back of the sheet in my best handwriting:

Mrs J. Austen,
Steventon Parsonage,
Steventon,
Hampshire.

Earlier today I tried to bribe Becky to take it to the post inn for me, but she was too scared of Mrs Cawley to go. She had heard Mrs Cawley scream angrily at me when I mentioned writing to Jane's mother. There is only one thing to do . . .

I've just been over to the window for the third time since deciding on my plan. The streets are still full of light and noise. A young officer wearing a red coat, with a sword girded about his waist, has just passed. I think about Jane telling me that her brother wants to join the army. If only one of her family were here now! There are crowds out in the streets, but I know no one. I will have to do it. I could never forgive myself if Jane died here in this horrible dormitory in Southampton and her mother was not by her side during the last moments.

I owe Jane so much.

I don't know what would have happened to me in this terrible school if I didn't have Jane as a best friend.

The cold, the lack of food, the misery of it would have given me a wasting disease, I'm sure of it.

I'd have died or gone mad.

All sorts of pictures are going through my head:

Jane on the day we came here, making a joke of the terrible dormitory when I just felt like crying because my brother and his wife had sent me away. I can hear her voice declaring loudly that the place smelled of death and demanding to know where the vampire was and giggling about the enormous fungus in the corner of the room.



Jane mocking the teachers when they scolded and punished – '*You know, Jenny, Miss Nash is a woman of such elegance and beauty; except for the fact that she walks like a hen and has a face like a squashed potato . . .*'

Jane standing up for me when Lavinia made fun of my gown, pretending that she was a secret drinker . . .

Jane telling me stories of her family – her five brothers and her sister, Cassandra – to distract me from the hunger and the cold . . .

Jane coaxing the cook to fill a bottle with hot water to warm my bed when I had a bad cold . . .

Jane sneaking out of the kitchen door and running up the basement steps to buy a couple of hot pies from the pieman for the two of us . . .

Jane reading her stories of great romances aloud in the dormitory at night . . . about a girl whose face was her fortune . . .

Jane laughing at the expression on my face when we got just a tiny slice of bread and a cup of watery milk for our supper and telling me to think of it as a seven-course dinner for a cockroach.

What would I have done without her?

Just in case I never come back again, I am going to tuck this journal under Jane's pillow as soon as the ink dries. If I am still missing by morning, at least people will know where I went.

And they will know why.

Southampton at Midnight

Down the stairs . . .

Every stair creaks . . .

Every minute I think that I hear my name screamed by Mrs Cawley.

'Miss Cooper!' she will shriek at me.

I stop and listen, but there is nothing to hear. My hands are damp and I am shaking. My bonnet strings come undone and the bonnet falls off my head and rolls down to the bottom of the stairs, only stopping when it reaches the front door. And it makes a sound that I feel could wake the house. I leave it on the floor as I struggle with the bolt. Eventually it slides back with a rusty creak.

The cold damp air of the street rushes in. I pick up my bonnet by its blue ribbon, but I dare not stop to put it on. I close the door as carefully as I can and pray that no burglar tries the handle before I can get back, and then I am off running down the street, my bonnet swinging from one hand and my folded letter in the other.

Lights flash in my eyes: the watchman is ahead of me. I must not overtake him. He would want to know what I was doing out there on my own. I stop in a shadowed shop door and tie on my bonnet and then I go on, walking as fast as I can.

More lights now. Some runners with flaring torches,



and four men carrying a lady in a sedan chair – through its window I can just see her powdered hair piled very high *and* the low-cut frilled neck of her yellow gown. The sedan is painted in very fine colours of black and gold, but the poles in the men's hands are rough and look full of splinters. I shrink against a gateway with my back turned, and they pass me without breaking step. I can hear their trotting footsteps grow quieter and quieter.

And then a crowd of rough sailors laughing and shouting. Southampton is full of sailors. They're the ones that brought this fever; the kitchen maid told me that. The men are on the other side of the road so I slip quietly under a tree and stand there very still, my head down so that my bonnet hides my face. I will just have to wait until they pass, and then I will turn left, go through two small lanes and then into Bargate.

The post-inn is in Bargate. The mail coach will set out at midnight; I know that. I will be in plenty of time. I peep around to see whether the sailors have gone as I can't hear their voices.

And then something dreadful happens. The sailors have not gone. They are all drinking from flagons. That's why they've stopped talking. Another sedan passes and the torch held by one of the chairmen at the back casts a light over my face, making me blink. There is a shout, a sort of a cheer from across the road.

'Look what I see!' shouts one.

'A little beauty,' shouts another. He sounds quite

drunk.

'Come on, pretty girl. We'll give you a good time.' This sailor puts down his flagon and starts to cross the road. I shrink against the wall. My heart jumps and my mouth is dry. I open my mouth to shriek, but no sound comes out. I used to have nightmares like that sometimes, where I struggled to scream but could not. It's a cold night, but I feel sweat run down between my shoulder blades.

And then there is a clatter of hoofs. An open-topped barouche comes swiftly down the road, drawn by a pair of grey horses. Two young men are in it. I think by their uniforms that they are naval officers.

'Whoa,' shouts one of them, and the horses stop with a skidding of hoofs and a squeal. For a moment I think that I am completely lost, that they will drag me into the barouche like what happened to Clarissa in the novel Jane lent to me. I will be ruined.

But they are not looking at me.

They are shouting angrily, but not at me. They are scolding the sailors for drinking in the street, for disgracing their uniform and they are telling them to get back on board their ship.

Suddenly my courage comes back. My gown is well looped up over my petticoat, and my petticoat is quite short; it barely reaches my ankles. I start to run as fast as I can. The angry shouts continue as I continue up the High Street, but it is still the young naval officers shouting at the drunken sailors. No one has seen me.

And now I turn into the lane.

I had been afraid that it would be very dark, but there is an inn there, halfway up the lane, and the lights are on in every window. Even the door stands open and lets a pool of light come out on to the cobblestones. I tiptoe over their bumpy, uneven surface. I will be able to go quickly once I pass the inn, but I am scared of the rough voices that I hear from within.

Then there is a sudden silence from the inn. I'm afraid that someone has seen me and I step into a darkened doorway. I wish that my cloak were a dark colour, but it is a light blue, and my petticoat shows shockingly white below it. I reach inside and let my gown down to cover the petticoat, but the gown is also a pale blue; it will be easy to see against the darkness of the door.

Then there are a few notes from a fiddle and someone starts to sing, a horrible, rude song, but I don't care. The man sings so loudly and the noise as the others join in is so deafening that it means that no one could possibly hear the sound of my footsteps. I move on as quickly as I can go, but I don't run and I keep my face turned to the wall as I pass the inn.

Now I am at the top of the lane. There is a house there with a torch burning in the holder outside. All the windows are lit up. I can see an oil lamp burning in the parlour. The curtains are not closed so the light from the room spills out. I wait for a minute there. My heart is still thumping hard. I tell myself that I am just waiting for it to slow down, but I know that I am too scared to go on.

There is a young lady sitting at the piano. She turns her head and I can see that she is not much older than me. She looks about seventeen. She has lovely curling dark hair; some of it is piled up on top of her head, but other long curls hang down behind her neck and a few fringe her forehead. She is wearing a pale yellow gown and a string of pearls around her neck. Although the window is closed, I can hear the notes of the piano and the sound of a high, sweet voice singing a love song.

One more lane to go and then I will be in Bargate. In the distance I hear the watchman call out, 'Half past the hour of eleven o'clock and all is well.'

Only half past eleven o'clock. That's fine – still half an hour to go, and Bargate is not far now. I linger for a few minutes; somehow I feel safe there outside this well-lit house, but an elegant lady, her hair piled on top of her head and powdered in the old-fashioned way, comes to the window. Her hand is on the cord of the window blind and for a moment her eyes meet mine. Hers are full of curiosity and mine are probably filled with panic.

And so I turn away quickly and I go on. I go into the second lane. My eyes are getting used to the dim light and I don't need to touch the wall. I am clenching my fists so tightly that my nails are digging into the palms of my hands. I know all the reasons why I should not be out here alone at night-time. This town is rougher than Bristol, and Mama would never dream of walking after dark in Bristol.

But I also know that I must send this letter to Mrs



Austen – Jane's life may depend on it – so I cannot give up.

Now the street is less crowded. I am trying to see the post inn. It should be near. I had passed it one day, but I cannot see it now. I am straining my eyes so much to see it that I almost don't notice that a man with a sword is coming towards me. He's looking all around him, and his hand is on the hilt. He hasn't seen me yet, but he will do in a minute. I stop. There is nowhere to hide.

The man lifts the sword and shouts, '*En garde!*' Then he screams something. For a moment I am frozen, just standing there, watching the light of the street torches flash on the steel of the naked blade. He draws back the sword and then makes a stabbing motion. The sword is very near to me. I can't move. My mouth is dry and my legs have no strength in them. I feel paralysed. The man shouts again. He is staring straight at me, but I know from the strange look in his eyes that he doesn't see me. He doesn't see a sixteen-year-old girl, small for her age; he is seeing some enemy. I don't know the meaning of the words that he yells, but I know that I must get away quickly. Now the man points his sword at the ground and examines the blade carefully. He is talking to himself in an angry, loud voice. He lifts the sword again and it flashes in the torchlight. Suddenly the strength comes back to my legs. I turn around very quickly and start to run in the opposite direction. The railings in front of the houses and the bright rectangles of window light blur in front of my eyes. My feet in their soft shoes patter on

the cobblestones. My chest hurts. I can hardly draw a breath.

I turn back into the lane.

And I run straight into another man.

'What's the matter?' he says, and he sounds quite alarmed. 'Where are you off to, young lady?'

I stand very still. He has a tight hold on my arm and I don't struggle. I just wait, my heart racing. I think about resisting so that he has to let go my arm, but my legs are still so weak that I am quite glad to be held. And then the dangerous-looking man with the sword passes us, going straight along the well-lit street of Bargate. His face is terribly scarred by a puckered line that runs down one cheek from eye to chin. He takes no notice of us; he is too busy looking over his shoulder and muttering loudly to himself. His eyes are strange. I can see them quite clearly in the light of the flaring pitch torch that has been stuck into the gateway of a house by the roadside.

'Whew!' whistles the man, letting go my arm and giving a little bow. 'That fellow looks dangerous.' I look at him now and I'm not so scared of him. He is very tall and imposing, but quite young, and looks just like I imagine one of Jane's brothers to look. He catches my eye and smiles, and his smile is so warm and his eyes so kind that I begin to feel less frightened.

'You're too young to be out alone in the streets of Southampton at this hour,' he says. 'How old are you? Fifteen? What's your name?'

'My name is Jenny Cooper and I'm sixteen,' I say, and I try to sound annoyed and grown-up, but I can hear my voice shaking.

'Captain Thomas Williams, at your service, Miss Cooper.' He bows again and I manage to drop a curtsy. He is very handsome, with jet-black hair curling around his neck and very dark brown eyes. I would like to ask him how old he is, but I daren't. He's probably about the same age as Jane's brother James. It feels so strange, standing there in the street at night with a man that I haven't even been introduced to, a man that I've never seen in my life, and another man, a madman, walking up the street waving his sword, that I start to giggle and then I think about poor Jane lying on the bed muttering, her face red with the fever, and I feel so bad about giggling when my best friend is so ill that I start to cry.

'Are you running away?' He gives me a worried smile, and for a moment looks as though he might move to comfort me, though he can't, of course. It would be most improper. But for some reason I feel that I can rely on him, and I begin to feel better. I shake my head.

The watchman has got to the top of the High Street now. I see him turn around and start to march down towards us.

'Take my arm, keep your head bowed so that your bonnet hides your face and we'll just stroll along. Try to stop crying, or else I'll be in trouble with the watch.' Captain Thomas Williams has tucked my hand through his arm and he starts to saunter up the High Street, stopping from time to time to look in the shop windows. He

doesn't say any more until after the watchman has gone to check on the locked gates of the Assembly Rooms and then he stops and faces me.

'Seriously,' he says, 'I think you should go home. Running away isn't a good idea. I'll take you home now. Where do you live?'

'I'm not running away,' I nearly shout the words and then lower my voice in case the night watchman hears me.

'So where are you off to then?' He's smiling, but he looks a bit worried. I wonder if he's sorry he met me. He probably doesn't want the responsibility of deciding what to do with me.

'I'm going to the post inn. I want to send a letter?'

'A love letter?'

'No, to my aunt.' I hold up the letter so that he can see the address and he looks surprised.

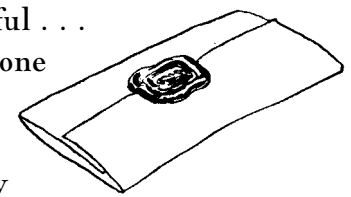
'Wouldn't the morning do?'

'No,' I say, and I tell him everything.

Tuesday, 8 February 1791

I've been sitting here for hours in the dormitory, thinking all about my midnight walk through the streets of Southampton as if it were still happening, living through it all again. I can't decide whether it was the most terrible hour in my life . . .

Or perhaps the most wonderful . . .



But anyway, the letter has gone to Mrs Austen, and Jane is beginning to seem a little better – almost as though she knew that her mother was coming. She has stopped muttering and tossing and turning and her eyes have closed. Her breathing is still very loud. It rattles in her chest and now it is like the sound of a tea-kettle boiling. I get into my bed and wrap myself in the two thin blankets.

But still I am scared to go to sleep in case when I wake I find that Jane has died. I have to keep awake and I will keep awake by writing.

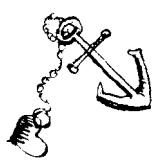
I can't help but think of what might have happened to me if I hadn't met Captain Williams last night. I know that I ran a terrible risk, but it will be worth it if Jane's mother arrives in time.

There's another thing in my mind, and it seems selfish to even think of it with Jane so ill, but I can't help it.

I know that if anyone recognized me out alone in the streets of Southampton at midnight I would be ruined forever. My brother, Edward-John, would be ill from shock if he ever heard of it, and his wife, Augusta, who was always so proper, would probably persuade him to cast me off and send me out to the East Indies or some such place.

I have a nightmare feeling that the next time Mrs Cawley takes us walking in Southampton that someone will come up her and point to me and then the whole story will become known . . .

Perhaps I shall write about Captain Thomas Williams. He told me the name of his ship, it is the *Bonaventure* and he has been out in the East Indies. It is strange, but I felt so at ease with him once we started talking that it was as if I had known him for a long time. He is an orphan, just like me, and that made a bond between us. When I told him that my father and mother were dead, he squeezed my arm just a little. I could feel the muscles of his arm through the wool jacket of his uniform. I suppose that life at sea must be very hard work – he was so big and strong that I felt very safe with him. I loved listening to him telling me about his life at sea and about his far-off cousin who died and left him a property on the Isle of Wight and about his uncle the admiral, and what a stern man he was, though he thought he had done his duty by his orphaned nephew and niece when he placed the boy



in the naval college and the girl in a boarding school. I think Captain Thomas must be a very good brother because he seemed so worried about his sister, Elinor, who he says looks a little like me, except that her hair is not quite so blonde and her eyes are green. He is so nice. He sounded angry when he told me how unhappy Elinor was at boarding school, where the owner used to tell the girls that they could eat the bread but only smell the cheese. The girls there were starving, he said. I could hear the anger in his voice when he told me about that. I liked him very much when he told me that the first thing he did when he heard of his inheritance was to take his sister away from that school where she was half starving and allow her to live at home, with a governess to teach her.

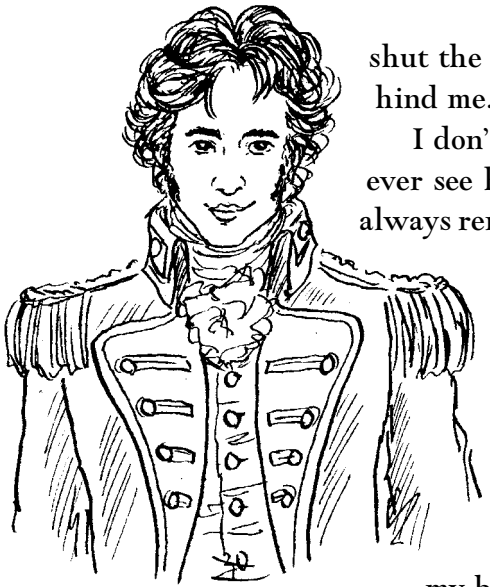
I couldn't help thinking about Edward-John. I don't think that if he had an inheritance he would want to spend it on me.

But I don't want to think about Edward-John or about Augusta.

I want to think about Captain Thomas . . .

That uniform of a captain in the navy suits him so well. The gold braid shows up his brown eyes, and the epaulettes on his jacket make his shoulders look even bigger. His voice is lovely, velvet-smooth like chocolate.

And when we had arrived back at the school, he escorted me up the steps, kissed my hand and then



shut the door very quietly behind me.

I don't suppose that I shall ever see him again, but I will always remember him and how handsome he looked in his uniform. I've tried to sketch a picture of him – it's not as handsome as he is but it's a fairly good likeness, I think. Drawing is my best subject.

Oh, and he told me that he can set his timepiece by the mail coaches and my letter to my aunt will be at Deane Gate Inn by daybreak. He got me to write 'URGENT' above the address so that the innkeeper will send the letter over to the parsonage at Steventon immediately.

He even waited until I could see with my own eyes the men loading the mail coach with the sacks of mail, including my precious letter. He told me that some of the mail had come from his ship, *Bonaventure*, from Southampton docks. He showed me how the sacks were stamped with the name of the ship.

I hope that Captain Williams is right that Mrs Austen will get the letter tomorrow morning. I hope

that she will be here soon. I was so frightened that Jane might die, but now I am more hopeful.

A minute ago, Jane cried out as if she were in pain, but when I bent over her there was no recognition in her eyes. She is still in a very high fever. It seems so strange to see her like this – Jane who is always so full of life. It's only a few days ago when she was bouncing on her bed, mimicking her mother:

'Jane, you are nothing but a hoodlum, that's what you are, madam, and don't you look at me in that saucy way or I'll box your ears. Henry, stop laughing at her; you make her even wilder. Frank, stop that; stop it, I tell you. Charles, I saw that! I shall get your father to deal with you if you're not careful. I declare to the heavens that no woman on earth has such a family! It's no wonder that my poor nerves are in such a state!'

Jane jokes about everything. I think had it not been for Jane and her jokes and her friendship I would never have survived the first few weeks here at this terrible school where we are half-starved most of the time.

Her mother will know what to do.