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Opening extract from

Jane Austen Stole my Boyfriend

Written by

Cora Harrison

Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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Jane Austen stole my boyfriend



Also by Cora Harrison

I Was Jane Austen's Best Friend

Jane Austen stole my boyfriend



CORA HARRISON

Illustrated by Susan Hellard

MACMILLAN



First published 2011 by Macmillan Children's Books
a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-230-74353-3 (HB)
ISBN 978-0-230-75359-4 (TPB)

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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This book is dedicated to Rachel Petty,
editor, enthusiast, Jane Austen fan,
my companion and adviser through this
speculative excursion into the girlhood of
Jane and her cousin, Jenny (Jane) Cooper.

MY JOURNAL
Monday, 11 April 1791

'I hate Jane Austen! I really hate her!'

I stop. I know that voice.

'Oh, Lavinia, Mama says that Jane Austen is just a vulgar, husband-hunting, affected little minx. She says you are to take no notice of her.'



I know that voice too.

It's Lavinia and Caroline Thorpe. I remember them well from the time when Jane and I were at boarding school at Southampton. They made my life a misery there. I can still hear them chanting, 'Look at Jenny Cooper's muslin – it looks like a rag.' 'Jenny Cooper has the snub nose of a servant girl, she's such a little dwarf, isn't she?'; or else, to the owner of the school, 'Mrs Cawley, Jenny Cooper has broken a school rule!'

And now here they are at the Assembly Rooms at Basingstoke.

I hesitate at the door of the ladies' cloakroom. One curl has come loose from its knot at the back of my head during the hectic pace of the Boulanger dance, but it will have to stay like that. I can't go in there and face the two Misses Thorpe. I turn to go, but then

something stops me and I turn back. Before my courage ebbs away I burst through the door, say to them icily, 'Jane Austen is my best friend; I'll thank you not to gossip about her.'

I push past them and examine myself in the glass, trying to appear calm. I pretend to look at myself, but I can see them sneering, shrugging their shoulders as if I am not worth a reply. I carefully pin up the stray curl, and then decide to leave it lying there on my neck – it looks nice, I think. I half turn and with my head over my shoulder survey my gown, pure white and sprigged with dainty silver flowers. The train is beautiful. A hundred tiny deep blue beads have been sewn to it and they twinkle in the candlelight. I smooth my long white gloves, making sure that they fit snugly over the elbow, and then I sweep past the two Thorpe girls without another glance. As I close the door behind them I hear Caroline say, 'Anyway, we're going to Bath for the season; he's bound to be there.' She raises her voice a little and says, 'And the Austens and their beggarly cousin won't be there to interfere.'

When I get back to the Assembly Rooms the new dance has not yet been called, but Jane is already hand in hand with Newton. No wonder Lavinia is so upset. The Honourable Newton Wallop is the second son of the Earl of Portsmouth and it's rumoured that he will be the heir to the Portsmouth estates as the eldest son, John, is strange and, according to Jane, it

is feared that he is a lunatic. Newton has been a pupil at Mr Austen's house at Steventon, and he and Jane seem great friends, joking and laughing. They've been dancing together for most of the evening.

'Your very humble servant, ma'am,' says Newton, and Jane replies in very affected tones, 'La, sir, pray do not be such a tease.' And then she laughs as Newton reminds her of the time that she and he made an apple-pie bed for Jane's prim sister, Cassandra. Lavinia would be furious if she could hear how friendly they sound.

I don't waste any more thoughts on Lavinia. I can see Thomas coming towards me. I don't push my way through the crowd to join him. I just stand and look at him.

Captain Thomas Williams, the youngest captain in the navy – brave, handsome and noble . . . and in love with me! Tall – taller than most people at the ball; broad shoulders; black hair gleaming like a blackbird's wing under the candlelight from the chandeliers above; dark brown eyes, so piercing and yet . . . I think back to the little damp woodland and the bluebells and tiny forget-me-nots at our feet and how those eyes were so soft and pleading then. And still I can't believe that he has asked me to marry him.

He has reached me now.

'You look so beautiful,' he murmurs in my ear, and I smile and know that whether my curls are pinned up

tidily or escaping down the nape of my neck, it makes no difference to him. He loves me as I am and no matter what I do or say. We go and stand beside Newton and Jane.

'Oh la, sir, you make me blush,' she is saying to him, and Newton instantly responds with a deep bow and says loudly, 'Madam, your beauty overwhelms me. No poor words of mine are enough to describe you.'

'Dearest Newton . . .' Jane begins in a very lofty way, her voice so loud that several people turn to listen to her, and then she spoils it by hissing, 'You're on the wrong side, Newton. You are such a ninny. Go and stand beside Jenny. Quick, the music is starting.'

I smile at Newton as he joins me. He's quite handsome – not handsome in the same manly way as my Thomas, but he is large-eyed, curly-haired and fresh-faced. He stretches out his hand to Jane, and Thomas takes my hand and we whirl around as the last dance of the evening begins.

I can see Lavinia and Caroline Thorpe now. Neither is dancing. They are standing in front of their mama and Lavinia is half twisted towards her, saying something. I can guess what. When she turns back her face is full of rage, eyes narrowed as she looks at Jane.

'Jane,' I whisper, 'look at Lavinia Thorpe, over there by the fireplace. She's furious with you.'

Jane looks over her shoulder, a lightning look, but that is enough for someone with Jane's quick wits.

Newton dances back and Jane puts up her hand to hold his. She smiles sweetly into his face and drops a demure curtsy and then they are off dancing rather closer than is usual, both of them laughing as the two rows of dancers clap them energetically.

'Jane,' I say when we are back in our bedroom at Steventon, 'I think that you have made an enemy.'

'Don't care,' she says, carefully hanging up her ball gown.

'She'll gossip about you,' I say, hanging my gown beside hers.

'Who cares about Lavinia Thorpe?' Jane's voice is scornful as she sits on the stool in front of our little looking glass and begins to take the pins from her curls.

'Not me,' I say, taking up the hairbrush. I will brush her hair a hundred times and then she will do the same for me. I don't care about Lavinia Thorpe either. All I can think of now is that my uncle, Mr Austen, will be coming back from Oxford tomorrow and that Thomas will ask for my hand in marriage.

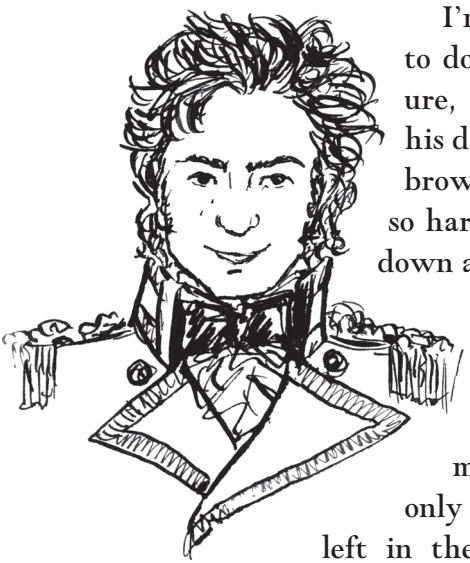
And then we will live happily forever after.

Wednesday, 13 April 1791

It's my birthday today. I'm seventeen years old.

And I am in love with the most wonderful man in the world.

And he is in love with me too – he wants to marry me.



I'm trying to draw him, to do justice to his tall figure, his broad shoulders, his dark hair and his lovely brown eyes, but I am crying so hard that my tears splash down and spoil my drawing.

Because we cannot be married. The match has been forbidden.

And to think that my own brother, the only near relation I have left in the world, should have done this to me. I know that it is his horrible wife, Augusta, who has prompted him, but he didn't have to obey her in that cowardly way that he always does. If only my mother were still alive, she would not have allowed it to happen.

I look across the room at the figure of my cousin and best friend, Jane; the curtains of her bed are drawn back, but she is still asleep. Not surprisingly

really, as it must be very early in the morning. There are no noises to show that anyone in the house is up. The birdsong sounds as if it's not much past dawn. Jane has a smile on her lips. Just before she fell asleep her last words were: 'I'm definitely going to put your dreadful sister-in-law into a book. People will laugh at her in the years to come. You just wait.'

No doubt she is now dreaming of the great novel she is going to write.

Or is she dreaming of the Honourable Newton Wallop and what fun it was to snatch him from Lavinia Thorpe?

No, it's probably her novel – writing is more important to Jane than anything.

I have to smile a bit at the memory of all the ridiculous things that Jane writes about this Augusta who is going to feature in her novel, but then my tears well up again. Soon I will run out of dry handkerchiefs, so I try hard to stop.

And I will stop!

I'm not going to allow this to happen.

Thomas and I will get married just as we planned.

I will go to live in his house on the Isle of Wight and walk through the forget-me-not woods with him.

It's good for me to get angry. It makes me feel that I can change things.

All I have to do to feel furious is think of what happened between Thomas and my stupid brother, Edward-John, and his wife, Augusta, who has hated

me from the moment that my mama died and she had to 'welcome' me into their house.

I must try to write down everything that was said, and not said . . .

Mr Austen, my very kind uncle, had suffered a heavy cold while staying with his eldest son, James, in Oxford and was still not very well, I think, when he arrived off the early-morning coach on Tuesday morning. He looked pale and tired, and when Thomas asked him for the favour of an interview in his study he seemed more resigned than curious. I saw my aunt, Mrs Austen, look up with an air of sharp interest, and now I wish so much that she had joined her husband from the start. If she had, perhaps Edward-John would not have been involved so quickly.

But she didn't, and Jane and I were left gripping hands under the table until Mrs Austen said abruptly, 'Come on, Jane; help your sister to clear off the breakfast things. Jenny, you look in a dream – a bit of housework will bring you down to earth, won't it, Cassandra?' But Mrs Austen did not look annoyed. She flashed an amused look at her eldest daughter to invite her to join in the joke and then patted me reassuringly on the arm when I went to take her plate.

At that moment Mr Austen's head popped around the door, looking flustered.

'Edward-John,' he said in his hesitant manner, 'perhaps you should come into my study and have a word with Captain Williams.'

'Certainly.' Edward-John got to his feet in a stately manner and Augusta immediately followed him from the room. Mr Austen shut the door firmly behind them without glancing at his wife, who compressed her lips angrily and then tried to smile reassuringly at me.

'Papa won't allow Edward-John to say no,' whispered Jane to me, but I said nothing in reply. I was very fond of Mr Austen, but if Edward-John and Augusta, especially Augusta, were against this marriage, I feared there was not much chance of Mr Austen changing their minds.

The three of us had finished clearing the table. Jane was vigorously sweeping the oak-boarded floor, while Mrs Austen, instead of going off to the dairy as usual, set about rubbing the copper kettle to a high shine. Mr Austen's pupils had been sent to the schoolroom to start on their lessons by themselves and I had begun, nervously, to polish the sideboard when Thomas came to the doorway.

'Jenny, could you come here for a minute?' he said. His voice was tight with anger. I went towards him, putting my hand in his. Suddenly I felt cold. Behind me I heard Mrs Austen get to her feet, dropping the copper kettle with a thud back on to the hob by the fireplace. She said nothing but followed us both, and Jane squeezed in beside her.

Mr Austen's study was a small one. He was seated behind the desk, with Edward-John standing beside him, and Augusta had arranged her lace flounces across

the only other chair in the room. Mrs Austen did not give her a glance as she placed herself on the window seat. Jane perched on her father's library steps, and Thomas, still keeping hold of my hand, drew my arm through his own and faced my uncle and brother across the desk.

'I don't see what this has to do with Jenny and Jane,' began Augusta. Even she did not have the courage to say it had nothing to do with Mrs Austen.

'I disagree with you, ma'am,' said Thomas. I had never heard his voice so hard. 'I think Jenny's future is very much her business.'

'Miss Cooper,' said Augusta, trying to make her reproof of his familiarity with my name sound jolly, but Thomas did not reply. He did not even look at her. He pressed my arm close to his ribs and turned to Edward-John.

'Perhaps, sir, you would be good enough to explain to your sister why you have refused my offer of marriage,' he said, and he sounded as though he spoke through gritted teeth.

Edward-John gulped a bit. He wasn't used to dealing with naval officers like Thomas, who had a note of authority in every word that he spoke.

'My sister,' he said with an attempt at bluster, 'doesn't need any explanation of an action that I, as her sole guardian, take for her good.'

'Jenny knows,' said Augusta sweetly, 'we just want the best for her.'

Thomas squeezed my arm again and this gave me courage to speak up for myself.

'The best thing for me,' I said boldly, 'is to be allowed to marry Captain Williams. That is what I want to do and that is what will make me happy.'

I saw with some compassion the slightly ashamed look that Mr Austen gave me. I understood and was sorry for him.

'Oh, Jenny dear . . .' Augusta affected a tone that I supposed was meant to be motherly, but still sounded spiteful. 'Believe me, we just want the best for you. You are so young, just sixteen years old!'

'She's seventeen tomorrow,' said Jane. 'And then she'll be in her eighteenth year,' she added, earning herself an angry glance from Augusta.

I took a deep breath. It was ridiculous, but I was so afraid of Edward-John and Augusta. I think that, between them both, they had broken my spirit after my mother died. While I lived in their house in Bristol, I had been like a little mouse, just whispering replies and silently agreeing to everything that was proposed. It was only when I had become best friends with Jane – when I had learned from her to be independent and to think for myself – that I had begun to question whether Edward-John and his wife Augusta really were devoted to my interests. Augusta hates me; I know that. She hates me and she doesn't want anything good to happen to me.

Suddenly I was angry.

'I want to marry Thomas.' It all came out in a bit of a rush, but I made sure that my voice sounded clear and strong. Thomas pressed my arm again. I almost felt as though we were one person, standing up there in front of the hostile presence of Edward-John and Augusta.

'Come now, let us be reasonable. What are Captain Williams's prospects?' Mrs Austen sounded unusually conciliatory. Usually she gave her opinion in a very forthright manner. She was my mother's only sister, and if she could not change Edward-John's mind, then no one could. However, in her usual alert fashion, she had sized up Augusta and there was a note of caution in her voice.

Thomas turned to her gratefully. 'My prospects are good, ma'am,' he said respectfully. 'As you know, I am a captain in the Royal Navy; my yearly salary is five hundred pounds. In addition I have been privileged by being entrusted with various commissions from the East India Trading Company, and these have proved very lucrative indeed to me.'

Even Augusta looked a little impressed at that. The Austens had remote connections with Warren Hastings, the director of the East India Company, and everyone knew that Warren Hastings was almost as rich as the King of England himself.

'And,' continued Thomas, pressing home his advantage, 'since I understand that Jenny's mother left her fifty pounds a year until she turns twenty-one, this

money can be invested for her in diamond mines in the East Indies and I can guarantee to double and treble its value within a few years.'

And that, as Jane said afterwards, was his mistake. He should never have mentioned the fifty pounds. Augusta hates me, but she quite likes having that extra fifty pounds a year – very little of which is spent on me!

'I could see those boiled-gooseberry eyes of hers pop out even further than usual,' said Jane when we were talking about it in our bedroom. 'It was obvious that she was thinking about how much she would lose if you were married. Edward-John would have to hand over your property to your husband then. That's the law.' Jane as usual knew everything about marriage.

'It will, of course, be put into a trust for Jenny, or for her children, if that is what she wants,' continued Thomas, a little puzzled by the silence in the room. 'And there will no doubt be another war with France any moment now . . .' He stopped.

Mrs Austen immediately chipped in. 'Of course, you have already won so many rich prizes in the last war, haven't you? My son Frank told me all about it. And I understand that you have a good property in the Isle of Wight, which has been handsomely furnished.'

I looked around the room. Edward-John was standing there, his mouth slightly open and a frown knitting his black eyebrows. I knew the expression on his face: it was envy. He didn't like to hear of another

man being richer than he was. Augusta had pursed her lips and was doing her best to look like a concerned mother. Mr Austen looked uncomfortable, but Mrs Austen just sat there beaming, a broad smile of approval lighting up her weather-beaten face.

Thomas noticed this as soon as I did and he immediately addressed himself to her. 'What do you think, ma'am?' he enquired. 'Do you think that your late sister, Jenny's mother, would have approved of this match for her daughter?'

'I'm certain that she would.' Mrs Austen's voice rose to its highest pitch to drown out something that Augusta was saying. 'My sister Jane would always want the best thing for her daughter's happiness.'

'My dear,' said Mr Austen tentatively, 'I don't feel that we can interfere. Edward-John—'

'Stuff and nonsense!' Mrs Austen interrupted, the light of battle in her faded blue eyes. 'As if I should not have the liberty of giving my opinion on this important matter for my only niece! Edward-John, I'm sure, will be guided by the experience of his aunt – as indeed his poor mother would have wished.'

'After all, there can be no reason for him to want to retain Jenny since she no longer lives with them . . .' put in Jane with an innocent air.

'Jane!' exclaimed Mrs Austen automatically, but not being a woman to disdain any weapon, she hastily added, 'Not that there isn't sense in what she says. You were happy to leave Jenny with us for the next few

years, so why do you now wish to prevent her making this very advantageous marriage, Edward-John? It wouldn't be anything to do with retaining her legacy for your own use for another four years, would it?'

Edward-John flushed an unpleasant blotchy shade of red, but Augusta was made of sterner stuff. She rose to her feet, her flounced gown sweeping around her.

'After that insult, I fear that we must leave this house immediately,' she said in her loud, bullying tone of voice. 'Pray, sir,' she addressed herself to Mr Austen, 'send a boy to summon a post-chaise; we will take the midday stagecoach back to Bristol.'

'Not so fast!' Thomas leaned across the desk, his face coming close to Edward-John who flinched, drew back and gave a sideways look at his wife. 'You haven't given me any sensible reason for turning down my suit. You haven't made any enquiry into my character or my prospects. You didn't even want to bother asking Jenny whether she would be happy with me. I cannot take this rejection. What if we waited another six months before announcing any engagement? Would that change your opinion?'

'Captain Williams,' said Augusta sweetly, 'I'm sure that you naval gentlemen are used to having your own way, but I must assure you that my husband and I are quite certain about this matter and nothing you can say will make any difference to us. Jenny is far too young to get engaged and certainly too young to get married. I don't feel that any girl of less than twenty-one should

be married, and I will not countenance a long engagement which would spoil her prospects for a better match. The answer is no, Captain Williams.'

She sounded quite certain as she said that final 'no'. My heart sank. Of course, Augusta herself was in her middle twenties when she married Edward-John, and since everything Augusta does is always perfect, then of course no other girls should be married earlier than that. A feeling of panic rose inside me and I turned back to Thomas, who had made an impatient movement.

'I wasn't speaking to you, ma'am.' Thomas dropped my hand and strode across the room to stand behind the desk, deliberately interposing his broad back between Augusta and her husband. Bending down a little, he gazed intently into Edward-John's eyes. His own, I could see, were black with anger, and I wasn't surprised when Edward-John, never the bravest of men, looked away. Thomas persisted though.

'Mr Cooper, please listen to me for a moment.' His voice had a note of heavy formality in it, and despite himself Edward-John looked back at him. 'I have asked you for the honour of your sister's hand. I am a man of good character, of a reasonable fortune and with good prospects. You can ask anyone. Ask the Earl of Portsmouth. Ask my uncle, Admiral Williams. I'm not demanding an immediate answer, though I would have hoped to get one this morning. What I am asking now is that you will consider the matter and let me

know what you think as soon as possible. I would like to have this matter settled before I embark on my next voyage to the East Indies.'

I'm not sure whether Edward-John really was considering the matter, or whether he was too afraid of Thomas to give a direct refusal, but he definitely looked ill at ease, trying to avoid everyone's eye and saying nothing.

Augusta, however, was not to be defeated. Now she boldly pushed her way past Mr Austen and took her husband's arm.

'Come, Edward-John,' she said coldly. 'I'm sure you feel that we have been insulted enough in this house. We will wait outside until the post-chaise is summoned. Pray, Mr Austen, ask a servant to fetch it and to bring down our travelling bags.'

She turned on Thomas.

'Believe me, Captain Williams, we are acting for the best for all concerned here. Jenny, poor girl, has problems and would not make a suitable wife for you. I speak only for your own good, Jenny, but I must say that you have no grace of manner, no true politeness, no accomplishments worth having – these perhaps could have been compensated for by good looks, if you possessed them, but alas!'

And then she escorted her husband from the room and left everyone staring at each other. Mrs Austen was looking furious and Mr Austen distressed, but Jane burst into a loud infectious laugh and Thomas

joined in. I laughed too and a broad grin creased Mrs Austen's face. Somehow at that moment I left the last vestige of my fear of Augusta behind and saw her for what she was: a concentrated ball of spite and malice.

Once they had gone, the day was not unhappy. Thomas was very certain that they would change their minds. He said immediately that he would get his uncle, the admiral, to write to them. And Lady Portsmouth . . . And Warren Hastings for good measure . . . He was so sure this would succeed that I began to cheer up a little and to forget all that I knew of Augusta's stubborn character. After church, Mrs Austen suggested that I take Captain Williams for a walk, and she gave Mr Austen a stern look when he tried to say something. I'm sure that my uncle felt that I should be chaperoned since no engagement was going to be allowed, but Mrs Austen, like Thomas, was determined that my story was going to have a happy ending.

'Hold my hand,' said Thomas softly as we passed through the gate and into the field beside Steventon parsonage. The sun was out and it lit up the pale yellow of the cowslips among the blades of new grass.

'If only you didn't have to go tomorrow,' I said as I boldly gave him my hand. I shouldn't have done really – we were not even properly engaged. Still, I didn't care. I turned a smiling face towards him. I would pretend that all was well and that my brother was pleased to hear of my engagement and that every-

thing was being planned for our marriage next year.

'Tell me about your ship,' I said, bending down and touching an early bluebell under the hazel bushes in the hedgerow.

'Have you ever been in a ship?' He asked the question with a smile and didn't seem surprised when I shook my head.

'One day you'll come on a voyage with me,' he promised. 'I'll make them fit up a snug little cabin for you just near the front mast and you can sit there and do your sewing.'

'I'd prefer to be out on deck with you,' I said boldly. 'I would love that. I've seen the sea at Bristol. That's just a port, but I can just imagine how wonderful it would be if there was nothing but sea and sky.'

Thomas looked at me and smiled. 'Wouldn't you be frightened of the sea?' he asked tenderly. 'Not even in a storm?'

I thought about that. But then I shook my head. 'No, I wouldn't, not if you were there.'

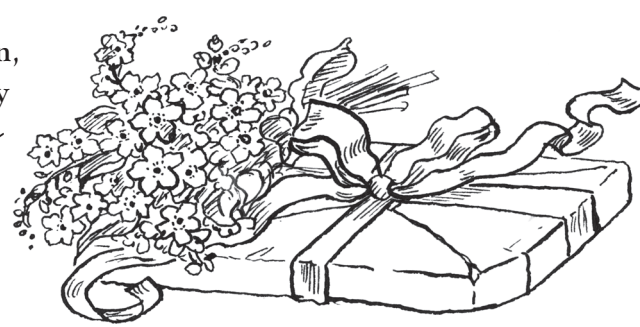
'Jenny,' he said, looking at me intently, 'I'll always be there, I'll always look after you and I'll never allow you to be scared again.'

'Not even of Augusta?' But I laughed as I said it. Somehow, standing there with him in the clear April sunshine with his arm around my waist and watching the young calves race up and down the field, it seemed as if not even Augusta could be a threat to our happiness.

'Certainly not of Augusta. She's just a low-bred piece of nonsense. What possessed your brother to marry her? We will count ourselves as engaged, won't we? Even if it has to be in secret . . .'

'A secret engagement,' I murmured. It seemed very romantic. I remember thinking that if only I could keep the way I felt in that moment within me, then I wouldn't care whether the engagement was secret or whether the whole world knew of my happiness.

Now it is time for breakfast. Before I dress and go downstairs there is just enough time to write of what happened this morning. I had already put my journal away when I heard a creak of the stairs and then a soft footstep outside the door. I put my wrapper around me and ran to the door. There was no one there, but lying on the ground was a lovely bunch of forget-me-nots and a small box wrapped in gold paper. I picked up the little forget-me-nots and tucked the bunch into the lace of my nightgown so that they would lie against my heart.



And then, without my even knowing what I was going to do, I ran down the stairs.

The front door had just closed cautiously. I flew down the hall, my bare feet making no noise, and opened the door. He had started to walk across the gravel when he saw me. In a moment he was back. He snatched me up from the cold, hard stone.

I was in his arms. Held against his broad chest.

And he was saying things . . .

Incoherent statements of love and endearment . . .

'My darling, my darling, my darling . . .' He must have said that forty times.

And I was trying to reply as he kissed the tears from my cheek as they fell.

It seemed only a second but yet almost like hours before he finally put me down.

The forget-me-nots fell out from the lace on my nightgown and on to the step. He snatched them up, put them to his lips and then gave them back to me, opened the door and gently put me inside.

And then he was gone and I was left holding the limp bunch of forget-me-nots that had been crushed between us when he kissed me.

And I have never been so happy or so miserable in my life, standing on the stone floor of the hall and remembering his last words, muttered in a hoarse whisper.

'Keep these, my darling; they will be the symbol of our love.'