

VARIOUS

THE ARGOSY. VOL. 51,
NO. 2, FEBRUARY, 1891

Various

**The Argosy. Vol. 51,
No. 2, February, 1891**

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THE FATE OF THE HARA DIAMOND

CHAPTER V

AT ROSE COTTAGE

On regaining my senses I found myself in a cozy little bed in a cozy little room, with an old gentleman sitting by my side gently chafing one of my hands—a gentleman with white hair and a white moustache, with a ruddy face and a smile that made me all in love with him at first sight.

"Did I not say that she would do famously in a little while?" he cried, in a cheery voice that it did one good to listen to. "I believe the Poppetina has only been hoaxing us all this time: pretending to be half-drowned just to find out whether anyone would make a fuss about her. Is not that the truth, little one?"

"If you please, sir, where am I? And are you a doctor?" I asked, faintly.

"I am not a doctor, either of medicine or law," answered the white-haired gentleman. "I am Major Strickland, and this place is Rose Cottage—the magnificent mansion which I call my own. But you had better not talk, my dear—at least not just yet: not till the doctor himself has seen you."

"But how did I get here?" I pleaded. "Do tell me that, please."

"Simply thus. My nephew Geordie was out mooning on the bridge when he heard a cry for help. Next minute he saw you and your boat go over the weir. He rushed down to the quiet water at the foot of the falls, plunged in, and fished you out before you had time to get more than half-drowned. My housekeeper, Deborah, put you to bed, and here you are. But I am afraid that you have hurt yourself among those ugly stones that line the weir; so Geordie has gone off for the doctor, and we shall soon know how you really are. One question I must ask you, in order that I may send word to your friends. What is your name? and where do you live?"

Before I could reply, the village doctor came bounding up the stairs three at a time. Five minutes sufficed him for my case. A good night's rest and a bottle of his mixture were all that was required. A few hours would see me as well as ever. Then he went.

"And now for the name and address, Poppetina," said the smiling Major. "We must send word to papa and mamma without a moment's delay."

"I have neither papa nor mamma," I answered. "My name is Janet Hope, and I come from Deepley Walls."

"From Deepley Walls!" exclaimed the Major. "I thought I knew everybody under Lady Chillington's roof, but I never heard of you before to-night, my dear."

Then I told him that I had been only two days with Lady Chillington, and that all of my previous life that I could remember had been spent at Park Hill Seminary.

The Major was evidently puzzled by what I had told him. He mused for several moments without speaking. Hitherto my face had been in half-shadow, the candle having been placed behind the curtain that fell round the head of the bed, so as not to dazzle my eyes. This candle the Major now took, and held it about a yard above my head, so that its full light fell on my upturned face. I was swathed in a

blanket, and while addressing the Major had raised myself on my elbow in bed. My long black hair, still damp, fell wildly round my shoulders.

The moment Major Strickland's eyes rested on my face, on which the full light of the candle was now shining, his ruddy cheek paled; he started back in amazement, and was obliged to replace the candlestick on the table.

"Great Heavens! what a marvellous resemblance!" he exclaimed. "It cannot arise from accident merely. There must be a hidden link somewhere."

Then taking the candle for the second time, he scanned my face again with eyes that seemed to pierce me through and through. "It is as if one had come to me suddenly from the dead," I heard him say in a low voice. Then with down-bent head and folded arms he took several turns across the room.

"Sir, of whom do I remind you?" I timidly asked.

"Of someone, child, whom I knew when I was young—of someone who died long years before you were born." There was a ring of pathos in his voice that seemed like the echo of some sorrowful story.

"Are you sure that you have no other name than Janet Hope?" he asked, presently.

"None, sir, that I know of. I have been called Janet Hope ever since I can remember."

"But about your parents? What were they called, and where did they live?"

"I know nothing whatever about them except what Sister Agnes told me yesterday."

"And she said—what?"

"That my father was drowned abroad several years ago, and that my mother died a year later."

"Poverina! But it is strange that Sister Agnes should have known your parents. Perhaps she can supply the missing link. The mention of her name reminds me that I have not yet sent word to Deepley Walls that you are safe and sound at Rose Cottage. Geordie must start without a moment's delay. I am an old friend of Lady Chillington, my dear, so that she will be quite satisfied when she learns that you are under my roof."

"But, sir, when shall I see the gentleman who got me out of the water?" I asked.

"What, Geordie? Oh, you'll see Geordie in the morning, never fear! A good boy! a fine boy! though it's his old uncle who says it."

Then he rang the bell, and when Deborah, his only servant, came up, he committed me with many injunctions into her charge. Then taking my head gently between his hands, he kissed me tenderly on the forehead, and wished me "Good-night, and happy dreams."

Deborah was very kind. She brought me up a delicious little supper, and decided that there was no need for me to take the doctor's nauseous mixture. She took it herself instead, but merely as a sop to her conscience and my own; "for, after all, you know, there's very little difference in physic—it's all nasty; and I daresay this mixture will do my lumbago no harm."

The effects of the accident had almost entirely passed away by next morning, and I was dressed and downstairs by seven o'clock. I found the Major hard at work digging up the garden for his winter crops. "Ah, Poppetina, down so early!" he cried. "And how do we feel this morning, eh? None the worse for our ducking, I hope."

I assured him that I was quite well, and that I had never felt better in my life.

"That will be good news for her ladyship," he replied, "and will prove to her that Miss Hope has not fallen among Philistines. In any case, she cannot be more pleased than I am to find that you have sustained no harm from your accident. There is something, Poverina, in that face of yours that brings back the past to me strangely. But here comes Master Geordie."

I turned and saw a young man sauntering slowly down the pathway. He was very fair, and, to me, seemed very handsome. He had blue eyes, and his hair was a mass of short, crisp flaxen curls. From the way in which the Major regarded him as he came lounging up, I could see that the old soldier was very proud of his young Adonis of a nephew. The latter lifted his hat as he opened the wicket, and bade his uncle good-morning. Me he did not for the moment see.

"Miss Hope is not up yet, I suppose?" he said. "I trust she is none the worse for her tumble over the weir."

"Our little water-nymph is here to answer for herself," said the Major. "The roses in her cheeks seem all the brighter for their wetting."

George Strickland turned smilingly towards me, and held out his hand. "I am very glad to find that you have suffered so little from your accident," he said. "When I fished you out of the river last night you looked so death-like that I was afraid we should not be able to bring you round without difficulty."

Tears stood in my eyes as I took his hand. "Oh, sir, how brave, how noble it was of you to act as you did! You saved my life at the risk of your own; and how can I ever thank you enough?"

A bright colour came into his cheek as I spoke. "My dear child, you must not speak in that way," he said. "What I did was a very ordinary thing. Anyone else in my place would have done precisely the same. I must not claim more merit than is due for an action so simple."

"To you it may seem a simple thing to do, but I cannot forget that it was my life that you saved."

"What an old-fashioned princess it is!" said the Major. "Why, it must have been born a hundred years ago, and have had a fairy for its godmother. But here comes Deborah to tell us that breakfast is ready. Toasted bacon is better than pretty speeches; so come along with you, and make believe that you have known each other for a twelvemonth at least."

Rose Cottage was a tiny place, and there were not wanting proofs that the Major's income was commensurate with the scale of his establishment. A wise economy had to be a guiding rule in Major Strickland's life, otherwise Mr. George's college expenses would never have been met, and that young gentleman would not have had a proper start in life. Deborah was the only servant that the little household could afford; but then the Major himself was gardener, butler, valet and page in one. Thus—he cleaned the knives in a machine of his own invention; he brushed his own clothes; he lacquered his own boots, and at a pinch could mend them. He dug and planted his own garden, and grew enough potatoes and greenstuff to serve his little family the year round. In a little paddock behind his garden the Major kept a cow; in the garden itself he had half-a-dozen hives; while not far away was a fowl-house that supplied him with more eggs than he could dispose of, except by sale. The Major's maxim was, that the humblest offices of labour could be dignified by a gentleman, and by his own example he proved the rule. What few leisure hours he allowed himself were chiefly spent with rod and line on the banks of the Adair.

George Strickland was an orphan, and had been adopted and brought up by his uncle since he was six years old. So far, the uncle had been able to supply the means for having him educated in accordance with his wishes. For the last three years George had been at one of the public schools, and now he was at home for a few weeks' holiday previously to going to Cambridge.

It will of course be understood that but a very small portion of what is here set down respecting Rose Cottage and its inmates was patent to me at that first visit; much of it, indeed, did not come within my cognizance till several years afterwards.

When breakfast was over, the Major lighted an immense meerschaum, and then invited me to accompany him over his little demesne. To a girl whose life had been spent within the four bare walls of a school-room, everything was fresh and everything was delightful. First to the fowl-house, then to the hives, and after that to see the brindled calf in the paddock, whose gambols and general mode of conducting himself were so utterly absurd that I laughed more in ten minutes after seeing him than I had done in ten years previously.

When we got back to the cottage, George was ready to take me on the river. The Major went down with us and saw us safely on board the *Water Lily*, bade us good-bye for an hour, and then went about his morning's business. I was rather frightened at first, the *Water Lily* was such a tiny craft, so long and narrow that it seemed to me as if the least movement on one side must upset it. But George showed me exactly where to sit, and gave me the tiller-ropes, with instructions how to manage them,

and was himself so full of quiet confidence that my fears quickly died a natural death, and a sweet sense of enjoyment took their place.

We were on that part of the river which was below the weir, and as we put out from shore the scene of my last night's adventure was clearly visible. There, spanning the river just above the weir, was the open-work timber bridge on which George was standing when my cry for help struck his ears. There was the weir itself, a sheet of foaming, frothing water, that as it fell dashed itself in white-lipped passion against the rounded boulders that seemed striving in vain to turn it from its course. And here, a little way from the bottom of the weir, was the pool of quiet water over which our little boat was now cleaving its way, and out of which the handsome young man now sitting opposite to me had plucked me, bruised and senseless, only a few short hours ago. I shuddered and could feel myself turn pale as I looked. George seemed to read my thoughts; he smiled, but said nothing. Then bending all his strength to the oars, he sent the *Water Lily* spinning on her course. All my skill and attention were needed for the proper management of the tiller, and for a little while all morbid musings were banished from my mind.

Scarcely a word passed between us during the next half-hour, but I was too happy to care much for conversation. When we had gone a couple of miles or more, George pointed out a ruinous old house that stood on a dreary flat about a quarter of a mile from the river. Many years ago, he told me, that house had been the scene of a terrible murder, and was said to have been haunted ever since. Nobody would live in it; it was shunned as a place accursed, and was now falling slowly into decay and ruin. I listened to the story with breathless interest, and the telling of it seemed to make us quite old friends. After this there seemed no lack of subjects for conversation. George shipped his oars, and the boat was allowed to float lazily down the stream. He told about his schooldays, and I told about mine. The height of his ambition, he said, was to go into the army, and become a soldier like his dear old uncle. But Major Strickland wanted him to become a lawyer; and, owing everything to his uncle as he did, it was impossible for him not to accede to his wishes. "Besides which," added George, with a sigh, "a commission is an expensive thing to buy, and dear old uncle is anything but rich."

When we first set out that morning I think that George, from the summit of his eighteen years, had been inclined to look down upon me as a little school miss, whom he might patronise in a kindly sort of way, but whose conversation could not possibly interest a man of his sense and knowledge of the world. But whether it arose from that "old-fashioned" quality of which Major Strickland had made mention, which caused me to seem so much older than my years; or whether it arose from the genuine interest I showed in all he had to say; certain it is that long before we got back to Rose Cottage we were talking as equals in years and understanding; but that by no means prevented me from looking up to him in my own mind as to a being superior, not only to myself, but to the common run of humanity. I was sorry when we got back in sight of the weir, and as I stepped ashore I thought that this morning and the one I had spent with Sister Agnes in Charke Forest were the two happiest of my life. I had no prevision that the fair-haired young man with whom I had passed three such pleasant hours would, in after years, influence my life in a way that just now I was far too much a child even to dream of.

CHAPTER VI

THE GROWTH OF A MYSTERY

We started at five o'clock to walk back to Deepley Walls, the Major, and I, and George. It was only two miles away across the fields. I was quite proud to be seen in the company of so stately a gentleman as Major Strickland, who was dressed this afternoon as for a visit of ceremony. He had on a blue frock-coat, tightly buttoned, to which the builder had imparted an intangible something that smacked undeniably of the old soldier. He wore a hat rather wide in the brim; a high stiff checked cravat; a white vest; and lacquered military boots, over which his tightly-strapped trousers fell without a crease. He had white buckskin gloves, a stout silver-headed malacca cane, and carried a choice geranium in his button-hole.

There was not much conversation among us by the way. The Major's usual flow of talk seemed to have deserted him this afternoon, and his mood seemed unconsciously to influence both George and me. Lady Chillington's threat to send me to a French school weighed down my spirits. I had found dear friends—Sister Agnes, the kind-hearted Major, and his nephew, only to be torn from them—to be plunged back into the cold, cheerless monotony of school-girl life, where there would be no one to love me, but many to find fault.

We went back by way of the plantation. George would not go any farther than the wicket at its edge, and it was agreed that he should there await the Major's return from the Hall. "I hope, Miss Janet, that we shall see you at Rose Cottage again before many days are over," he said, as he took my hand to bid me farewell. "Uncle has promised to ask her ladyship to spare you for a few days."

"I shall be very, very glad to come, Mr. George. As long as I live I shall be in your debt, for I cannot forget that I owe you my life."

"The fairy godmother is whispering in her ear," said the Major in a loud aside. "She talks like a woman of forty."

While still some distance away we could see Lady Chillington sunning herself on the western terrace. With a pang of regret I saw that Sister Agnes was not with her. The Major quickened his pace; I clung to his hand, and felt without seeing that her ladyship's eyes were fixed upon me severely.

"I have brought back your wandering princess," said the Major, in his cheery way, as he lifted his hat. Then, as he took her proffered hand, "I hope your ladyship is in perfect health."

"No princess, Major Strickland, but a base beggar brat," said Lady Chillington, without heeding his last words. "From the first moment of my seeing her I had a presentiment that she would cause me nothing but trouble and annoyance. That presentiment has been borne out by facts—by facts!" She nodded her head at the Major, and rubbed one lean hand viciously within the other.

"Your ladyship forgets that the child herself is here. Pray consider her feelings."

"Were my feelings considered by those who sent her to Deepley Walls? I ought to have been consulted in the matter—to have had time given me to make fresh arrangements. It was enough to be burdened with the cost of her maintenance, without the added nuisance of having her before me as a continual eyesore. But I have arranged. Next week she leaves Deepley Walls for the Continent, and if I never see her face again, so much the better for both of us."

"With all due respect to your ladyship, it seems to me that your tone is far more bitter than the occasion demands. What may be the relationship between Miss Hope and yourself it is quite impossible for me to say; but that there is a tie of some sort between you I cannot for a moment doubt."

"And pray, Major Strickland, what reason may you have for believing that a tie of any kind exists between this young person and the mistress of Deepley Walls?"

"I will take my stand on one point: on the extraordinary resemblance which this child bears to—"

"To whom, Major Strickland?"

"To one who lies buried in Elvedon churchyard. You know whom I mean. Such a likeness is far too remarkable to be the result of accident."

"I deny the existence of any such likeness," said Lady Chillington, vehemently. "I deny it utterly. You are the victim of your own disordered imagination. Likeness, forsooth!" She laughed a bitter, contemptuous laugh, and seemed to think that she had disposed of the question for ever.

"Come here, child," said the Major, taking me kindly by the hand, and leading me close up to her ladyship. "Look at her, Lady Chillington," he added; "scan her features thoroughly, and tell me then that the likeness of which I speak is nothing more than a figment of my own brain."

Lady Chillington drew herself up haughtily. "To please you in a whim, Major Strickland, which I cannot characterise as anything but ridiculous, I will try to discover this fancied resemblance." Speaking thus, her ladyship carried her glass to her eye, and favoured me with a cold, critical stare, under which I felt my blood boil with grief and indignation.

"Pshaw! Major Strickland, you are growing old and foolish. I cannot perceive the faintest trace of such a likeness as you mention. Besides, if it really did exist it would prove nothing. It would merely serve to show that there may be certain secrets within Deepley Walls which not even Major Strickland's well-known acumen can fathom."

"After that, of course I can only bid your ladyship farewell," said the offended Major, with a ceremonious bow. Then turning to me: "Good-bye, my dear Miss Janet, for the present. Even at this, the eleventh hour, I must intercede with Lady Chillington to grant you permission to come and spend part of next week with us at Rose Cottage."

"Oh! take her, and welcome; I have no wish to keep her here. But you will stop to dinner, Major, when we will talk of these things further. And now, Miss Pest, you had better run away. You have heard too much already."

I was glad enough to get away; so after a hasty kiss to Major Strickland, I hurried indoors; and once in my own bed-room, I burst into an uncontrollable fit of crying. How cruel had been Lady Chillington's words! and her looks had been more cruel than they.

I was still weeping when Sister Agnes came into the room. She had but just returned from Eastbury. She knelt beside me, and took me in her arms and kissed me, and wiped away my tears. "Why was I crying?" she asked. I told her of all that Lady Chillington had said.

"Oh! cruel, cruel of her to treat you thus!" she said. "Can nothing move her—nothing melt that heart of adamant? But, Janet, dear, you must not let her sharp words wound you so deeply. Would that my love could shield you from such trials in future. But that cannot always be. You must strive to regard such things as part of that stern discipline of life which is designed to tutor our wayward hearts and rebellious spirits, and bring them into harmony with a will superior to our own. And now you must tell me all about your voyage down the Adair, and your rescue by that brave George Strickland. Ah! how grieved I was, when the news was brought to Deepley Walls, that I could not hasten to you, and see with my own eyes that you had come to no harm! But I was chained to my post, and could not stir."

Scarcely had Sister Agnes done speaking when the air was filled with a strain of music that seemed to be more sweet and solemn than anything I had ever heard before. All the soreness melted out of my heart as I listened; all my troubles seemed to take to themselves wings, and life to put on an altogether different aspect from any it had ever worn to me before. I saw clearly that I had not been so good a girl in many ways as I might have been. I would try my best not to be so inattentive at church in future, and I would never, no, not even on the coldest night in winter, neglect to say my prayers before getting into bed.

"What is it? Where does it come from?" I whispered into the ear of Sister Agnes.

"It is Father Spiridion playing the organ in the west gallery."

"And who is Father Spiridion?"

"A good man and my friend. Presently you shall be introduced to him."

No word more was spoken till the playing ceased. Then Sister Agnes took me by the hand and we went towards the west gallery. Father Spiridion saw us, and paused on the top of the stairs.

"This is the child, holy father, of whom I have spoken to you once or twice; the child, Janet Hope."

The father's shrewd blue eyes took me in from head to foot at a glance. He was a tall, thin and slightly cadaverous-looking man, with high aquiline features; and with an indefinable something about him that made me recognise him on the spot as a gentleman. He wore a coarse brown robe that reached nearly to his feet, the cowl of which was drawn over his head. When Sister Agnes had spoken he laid his hand gently on my head, and said something I could not understand. Then placing his hand under my chin, he said, "Look me straight in the face, child."

I lifted my eyes and looked him fairly in the face, till his blue eyes lighted up with a smile. Then patting me on the cheek, he said, addressing Sister Agnes, "Nothing shifty there, at any rate. It is a face full of candour, and of that innocent fearlessness which childhood should always have, but too often loses in an evil world. I dare be bound now, little Janet, that thou art fond of sweetmeats?"

"Oh, yes, sir, if you please."

"By some strange accident I find here in my *soutane* a tiny box of bonbons. They might have been put there expressly for a little sweet tooth of a Janet. Nothing could be more opportune. Take them, my child, with Father Spiridion's blessing; and sometimes remember his name in thy prayers."

I did not see Father Spiridion again before I was sent away to school, but in after years our threads of life crossed and re-crossed each other strangely, in a way that neither he nor I even dreamed of at that first interview.

My life at Deepley Walls lengthened out from day to day, and in many ways I was exceedingly happy. My chief happiness lay in the love of dear Sister Agnes, with whom I spent at least one or two hours every day. Then I was very fond of Major Strickland, who, I felt sure, liked me in return—liked me for myself, and liked me still more, perhaps, for the strange resemblance which he said I bore to some dear one whom he had lost many years before. Of George Strickland, too, I was very fond, but with a shy and diffident sort of liking. I held him as so superior to me in every way that I could only worship him from a distance. The Major fetched me over to Rose Cottage several times. Such events were for me holidays in the true sense of the word. Another source of happiness arose from the fact that I saw very little of Lady Chillington. The indifference with which she had at first regarded me seemed to have deepened into absolute dislike. I was forbidden to enter her apartments, and I took care not to be seen by her when she was walking or riding out. I was sorry for her dislike, and yet glad that she dispensed with my presence. I was far happier in the housekeeper's room, where I was treated like a little queen. Dance and I soon learned to love each other very heartily.

Those who have accompanied me thus far may not have forgotten the account of my first night at Deepley Walls, nor how frightened I was by the sound of certain mysterious footsteps in the room over mine. The matter was explained simply enough by Dance next day as a whim of Lady Chillington, who, for some reason best known to herself, chose that room out of all the big old house as the scene of her midnight perambulations. When, therefore, on one or two subsequent occasions, I was disturbed in a similar way, I was no longer frightened, but only rendered sleepless and uncomfortable for the time being. I felt at such times, so profound was the surrounding silence, as if every living creature in the world, save Lady Chillington and myself, were asleep.

But before long that room over mine acquired for itself in my mind a new and dread significance. A consciousness gradually grew upon me that there was about it something quite out of the common way; that its four walls held within themselves some grim secret, the rites appertaining to which were gone through when I and the rest of the uninitiated were supposed to be in bed and asleep. I cannot tell what it was that first made me suspect the existence of this secret. Certainly not

the midnight walks of Lady Chillington. Perhaps a certain impalpable atmosphere of mystery, which, striking keenly on the sensitive nerves of a child, strung by recent events to a higher pitch than usual, broke down the first fine barrier that separates things common and of the earth earthy, from those dim intuitions which even the dullest of us feel at times of things spiritual and unseen. But however that may be, it so fell out that I, who at school had been one of the soundest of sleepers, had now become one of the worst. It often happened that I would awake in the middle of the night, even when there was no Lady Chillington to disturb me, and would so lie, sleepless, with wide-staring eyes, for hours, while all sorts of weird pictures would paint themselves idly in the waste nooks and corners of my brain. One fancy I had, and for many nights I thought it nothing more than fancy, that I could hear soft and muffled footsteps passing up and down the staircase just outside my door; and that at times I could even faintly distinguish them in the room over mine, where, however, they never stayed for more than a few minutes at any one time.

In one of my daylight explorations about the old house I ventured up the flight of stairs that led from the landing outside my door to the upper rooms. At the top of these stairs I found a door that differed from every other door I had seen at Deeply Walls. In colour it was a dull dead black, and it was studded with large square-headed nails. It was without a handle of any kind, but was pierced by one tiny keyhole. To what strange chamber did this terrible door give access? and who was the mysterious visitor who came here night after night with hushed footsteps and alone? These were two questions that weighed heavily on my mind, that troubled me persistently when I lay awake in the dark, and even refused by day to be put entirely on one side.

By-and-by the mystery deepened. In a recess close to the top of the flight of stairs that led to the black door was an old-fashioned case clock. When this clock struck the hour, two small mechanical figures dressed like German burghers of the sixteenth century came out of two little turrets, bowed gravely to each other, and then retired, like court functionaries, backwards. It was a source of great pleasure to me to watch these figures go through their hourly pantomime. But after a time it came into my head to wonder whether they did their duty by night as well as by day; whether they came out and bowed to each other in the dark, or waited quietly in their turrets till morning. In pursuance of this inquiry, I got out of bed one night after Dance had left me, and relighted my candle. I knew that it was just on the stroke of eleven, and here was a capital opportunity for studying the customs of my little burghers by night. I stole up the staircase with my candle, and waited for the clock to strike. It struck, and out came the little figures as usual.

"Perhaps they only came because they saw my light," I said to myself. I felt that the question as to their mode of procedure in the dark was still an unsettled one.

But scarcely had the clock finished striking when I was disturbed by the shutting of a door downstairs. Fearing that someone was coming, and that the light might betray me, I blew out my candle and waited to hear more. But all was silent in the house. I turned to go down, but as I did so, I saw with astonishment that a thin streak of light shone from under the black door. I stood like one petrified. Was there anyone inside the room? Listening intently, I waited for full five minutes without stirring a limb. Silence the most profound upstairs and down. Stepping on tiptoe, I went back to my room, shut myself in, and crept gladly into bed.

Next night my curiosity overmastered my fear. As soon as Dance was gone I crept upstairs in the dark. One peep was enough. As on the previous night, a thin streak of light shone from under the black door—evidence that it was lighted up inside. Next night, and for several nights afterwards, I put the same plan in operation with precisely the same result. The light was always there.

Having my attention thus concentrated as it were upon this one room, and lying awake so many hours when I ought to have been asleep, my suspicions gradually merged into certainty that it was visited every midnight by someone who came and went so lightly and quietly that only by intently listening could I distinguish the exact moment of their passing my door. Who was this visitor that came and went so mysteriously? To discover this, without being myself discovered, was a matter that

required both tact and courage, but it was one on which I was almost as much a monomaniac as a child well can be. To have opened my door when the landing was perfectly dark would have been to see nothing. To have opened the door with a candle in my hand would have been to betray myself. I must wait for a moonlight night, which would light up the landing sufficiently for my purpose. I waited. My opportunity came. With my doorway in deep shadow, my door just sufficiently open for me to peer through, and with the staircase lighted up by rays of the moon, I saw and recognised the mysterious midnight visitor to the room over mine. I saw and recognised Sister Agnes.

CHAPTER VII

EXIT JANET HOPE

The effect upon me of the discovery that Sister Agnes was the midnight visitor of the room over mine was at once to stifle that brood of morbid fancies with which of late both room and visitor had become associated in my mind. I loved her so thoroughly, she was to me so complete an embodiment of all that was noble and beautiful in womanhood, that however unsatisfying to my curiosity such visits might be, I could not doubt that she must have excellent reasons for making them. One thing was quite evident, that since she herself had said nothing respecting the room and her visits to it, it was impossible for me to question her on the matter. Such being the case, I felt that it would be a poor return for all her goodness to me to question Dance or any other person respecting what she herself wished to keep concealed. Besides, it was doubtful whether Dance would tell me anything, even if I were to ask her. She had warned me a few hours after my arrival at Deepley Walls that there were many things under that roof respecting which I must seek no explanation; and with no one of the other domestics was I in any way intimate.

Still my curiosity remained unsatisfied; still over the room itself hung a veil of mystery which I would fain have lifted. All my visits to the room to see whether the light shone under the door had hitherto been made previously to the midnight visits of Sister Agnes. The question that now arose in my mind was whether the mysterious thread of light was or was not visible after Sister Agnes's customary visit—whether, in fact, it shone there all the night through. In order to solve this doubt, I lay awake the night following that of my discovery of Sister Agnes. Listening intently, with my bedroom door ajar, I heard her go upstairs, and ten minutes later I could just distinguish her smothered footfall as she came down. I heard the door at the bottom of the corridor shut behind her, and then I knew that I was safe.

Slipping out of bed, I stole, barefooted as I was, out of my bed-room and up the flight of stairs which led to the black door. Of ghosts in the ordinary meaning of that word—in the meaning which it has for five children out of six—I had no fear; my fears, such as they were, ran in quite another groove. I went upstairs slowly, with shut eyes, counting each stair as I put my feet on it from one up to ten. I knew that from the tenth stair the streak of light, if there, would be visible. On the tenth stair I opened my eyes. There was the thread of light shining clear and steady under the black door. For a minute I stood looking at it. In the intense silence the beating of my heart was painfully audible. Grasping the banister with one hand, I went downstairs backwards, step by step, and so regained the sanctuary of my own room.

I scarcely know in what terms to describe, or how to make sufficiently clear, the strange sort of fascination there was for me in those nightly rambles—in living perpetually on the edge of a mystery. While daylight lasted the feeling slumbered within me; I could even take myself to task for wanting to pry into a secret that evidently in nowise concerned me. But as soon as twilight set in, and night's shadows began to creep timidly out of their corners, so surely could I feel the spell working within me, the desire creeping over me to pluck out the heart of the mystery that lay hidden behind the black nail-studded door upstairs. Sometimes I climbed the staircase at one hour, sometimes at another; but there was no real sleep for me, nothing but fitful uneasy dozes, till the brief journey had been made. After climbing to the tenth stair, and satisfying myself that the light was there, I would creep back noiselessly to bed, and fall at once into a deep dreamless sleep that was often prolonged till late in the forenoon.

At length there came a night when the secret was laid bare, and the spell broken for ever. I had been in bed for two hours and a half, lying in that half-dreamy state in which facts and fancies are so

inextricably jumbled together that it is too much labour to disintegrate the two, when the clock struck one. Next moment I was out of bed, standing with the handle of the half-opened door in my hand, listening to the silence. I had heard Sister Agnes come down some time ago, and I felt secure from interruption. To-night the moon shone brightly in through a narrow window in the gable, and all the way upstairs there was a track of white light as though a company of ghosts had lately passed that way. As I went upstairs I counted them up to the tenth, and then I stood still. Yes, the thread of light was there as it always was, only—only somehow it seemed broader to-night than I had ever noticed it as being before. It *was* broader. I could not be mistaken. While I was still pondering over this problem, and wondering what it might mean, my eye was taken by the dull gleam of some small white object about half way up the door. My eyes were taken by it, and would not leave it till I had ascertained what it really was. I approached it step by step, slowly, and then I saw that it was in reality that which I had imagined it to be. It was a small silver key—Sister Agnes's key—which she had forgotten to take away with her on leaving the room. Moreover the door was unlocked, having been simply pulled to by Sister Agnes on leaving, which explained why the streak of light showed larger than common.

I felt as though I were walking in a dream, so unreal did the whole business seem to me by this time. I was in a moonlight glamour; the influence of the silver orb was upon me. Of self-volition I seemed to have little or none left. I was given over to unseen powers, viewless, that dwell in space, of which we have ordinarily no human cognition. At such moments as these, and I have gone through many of them, I am no longer the Janet Hope of everyday life. I am lifted up and beyond my ordinary self. I obey a law whose beginning and whose ending I am alike ignorant of: but I feel that it is a law and not an impulse. I am led blindly forward, but I go unresistingly, feeling that there is no power left in me save that of obeying.

Did I push open the door of the secret room, or was it opened for me by unseen hands? I know not. I only know that it closed noiselessly behind me of its own accord and left me standing there wondering, alone, with white face and staring eyes.

The chamber was a large one, or seemed so to me. It was draped entirely in black, hiding whatever windows there might be. The polished wood floor was bare. The ceiling was painted with a number of sprawling Cupids, some of them scattering flowers, others weaving leafy chaplets, presumably to crown the inane-looking goddess reclining in their midst on a bank of impossible cloud. But both Cupids and goddess were dingy with age, and seemed to have grown too old for such Arcadian revels.

The room was lighted with a dozen large wax candles placed in four silver tripods, each of them about six feet in height, and screwed to the floor to prevent their being overturned. All these preparations were not without an object. That object was visible in the middle of the room. It was a large black coffin studded with silver nails, placed on a black slab about four feet in height, and more than half covered with a large pall.

I felt no fear at sight of this grim object. I was lifted too far above my ordinary self to be afraid. I simply wondered—wondered who lay asleep inside the coffin, and how long he or she had been there.

The only article of furniture in the room was a *prie-dieu* of black oak. I knelt on this, and gazed on the coffin, and wondered. My curiosity urged me to go up to it, and turn down the pall, and ascertain whether the name of the occupant was engraved on the lid. But stronger than my curiosity was a certain repugnance to go near it which I could not overcome. That some person was shut up there who during life had been of importance in the world, I could not doubt. This, too, was the room in which Lady Chillington took her midnight perambulations, and that coffin was the object she came to contemplate. Perhaps the occupant of the coffin came out, and walked with my lady, and held ghostly converse with her on such occasions. I fancied that even now I could hear him breathing heavily, and turning over uneasily in his narrow bed. There seemed a rustling, too, among the folds of the sombre curtains as though someone were in hiding there; and that low faint sobbing sigh which

quivered through the room, like an accent of unutterable sorrow, whence did it come? Others than myself were surely there, though I might not be able to see them.

I knelt on the *prie-dieu*, stirring neither hand nor foot; as immovable, in fact, except for my breathing, as a figure cut out of stone. Looking and wondering still, after a time it seemed to me that the lights were growing dimmer, that the room was growing colder; that some baleful presence was beside me with malicious intent to gradually numb and chill the life out of me, to freeze me, body and soul, till the two could no longer hold together; and that when morning came, if ever it did come to that accursed room, my husk would be there indeed, but Janet Hope herself would be gone for ever. A viewless horror stirred my hair, and caused my flesh to creep. The baneful influence that was upon me was deepening in intensity; every minute that passed seemed to render me more powerless to break the spell. Suddenly the clock struck two. At the same moment a light footfall sounded on the stairs outside. It was Sister Agnes coming back to lock the door, and to fetch the key which she had left behind two hours before. I heard her approach the door, and I saw the door itself pulled close to; then the key was turned, the bolt shot into its place, the key was withdrawn, and I was left locked up alone in that terrible room.

But the proximity of another human being sufficed to break the spell under which I had been powerless only a minute before. Better risk discovery, better risk everything, than be left to pass the night where I was. Should that horror settle down upon me again, I felt that I must succumb to it. It would crush the life out of me as infallibly as though I were in the folds of some huge python. Long before morning I should be dead.

I slid from off the *prie-dieu*, and walking backward, with my eyes glancing warily to right and left, I reached the door and struck it with my fists. "Sister Agnes!" I cried, "Sister Agnes! do not leave me. I am here alone."

Again the curtains rustled, stirred by invisible fingers; again that faint long-drawn sigh ran like an audible shiver through the room. I heard eager fingers busy outside the door; a mist swam up before my eyes, and next moment I fainted dead away in the arms of Sister Agnes.

For three weeks after that time I lay very ill—lay very close to the edge of the grave. But for the ceaseless attentions and tender assiduities of Sister Agnes and Dance I should have slipped out of life and all my troubles. To them I owe it that I am now alive to write these lines. One bright afternoon, as I was approaching convalescence, Sister Agnes and I, sitting alone, got into conversation respecting the room upstairs, and my visit to it.

"But whose coffin is that, Sister Agnes?" I asked. "And why is it left there unburied?"

"It is the coffin of Sir John Chillington, her ladyship's late husband," answered Sister Agnes, very gravely. "He died thirteen years ago. By his will a large portion of the property left to his widow was contingent on his body being kept unburied and above ground for twenty years. Lady Chillington elected to have the body kept in that room which you were so foolish as to visit without permission; and there it will probably remain till the twenty years shall have expired. All these facts are well known to the household; indeed, to the country for miles around; but it was not thought necessary to mention them to a child like you, whose stay in the house would be of limited duration, and to whom such knowledge could be of no possible benefit."

"But why do you visit the room every midnight, Sister Agnes?"

"It is the wish of Lady Chillington that, day and night, twelve candles shall be kept burning round the coffin, and ever since I came to reside at Deepley Walls it has been part of my duty to renew the candles once every twenty-four hours. Midnight is the hour appointed for the performance of that duty."

"Do you not feel afraid to go there alone at such a time?"

"Dear Janet, what is there to be afraid of? The dead have no power to harm us. We shall be as they are in a very little while. They are but travellers who have gone before us into a far country,

leaving behind them a few poor relics, and a memory that, if we have loved them, ought to make us look forward with desire to the time when we shall see them again."

Three weeks later I left Deepley Walls. Madame Delclos was in London for a week, and it was arranged that I should return to France with her. Major Strickland took me up to town and saw me safely into her hands. My heart was very sad at leaving all my dear new-found friends, but Sister Agnes had exhorted me to fortitude before I parted from her, and I knew that neither by her, nor the Major, nor George, nor Dance, should I be forgotten. I saw Lady Chillington for a moment before leaving. She gave me two frigid fingers, and said that she hoped I should be a good girl, and attend assiduously to my lessons, for that in after life I should have to depend upon my own industry for a living. I felt at the moment that I would much rather do that than have to depend through life on her ladyship's bounty.

A few tears would come when the moment arrived for me to say farewell to the Major. He tried his best, in his hearty, affectionate way, to cheer me up. I flung my arms round his neck and kissed him tenderly. He turned abruptly, seized his hat, and rushed from the room. Whereupon Madame Delclos, who had been trying to look *sympathique*, drew herself up, frowned, and pinched one of my ears viciously. Forty-eight hours later I was safely shut up in the Pension Clissot.

Here my personal narrative ends. From this point the story of which the preceding pages form a part will be recorded by another pen. It was deemed advisable by those to whose opinion in such matters I bow without hesitation, that this narrative of certain events in the life of a child—a necessary introduction to the narrative yet to come—should be written by the person whom it most concerned. Now that her task is done, she abnegates at once (and thankfully) the first person singular in favour of the third, and whatever is told of her in the following pages, is told, not by herself, but by that other pen, of which mention is made above.

Between the time when this curtain falls and the next one draws up, there is a lapse of seven years.

CHAPTER VIII

BY THE SCOTCH EXPRESS

Among other passengers, on a certain fine spring morning, by the 10 a.m. Scotch express, was one who had been so far able to propitiate the guard as to secure a whole compartment to himself. He was enjoying himself in a quiet way—smoking, and skimming his papers, and taking a bird's-eye view now and again at the landscape that was flying past him at the rate of forty miles an hour. Few people who cared to speculate as to his profession would have hesitated to set him down as a military man, even had not the words, "Captain Ducie," painted in white letters on a black portmanteau which protruded half-way from under his seat, rendered any such speculation needless. He must have been three or four-and-forty years old, judging from the lines about his mouth and eyes, but in some other respects he looked considerably younger. He wore neither beard nor whiskers, but his short hair, and his thick, drooping moustache were both jet black, and betrayed as yet, thanks either to Nature or Art, none of those straggling streaks of silver which tell so plainly of the advance of years. He had a clear olive complexion, a large aquiline nose and deep-set eyes, piercing and full of fire, under a grand sweep of eyebrow. In person he was tall and thin; broad-chested, but lean in the flank, with hands and feet that looked almost effeminate, so small were they in comparison with his size. A black frock-coat, tightly buttoned, set off to advantage a figure of which he might still be reasonably proud. The remainder of his costume was in quiet keeping with the first fashion of the period.

Captain Ducie smoked and read and stared out of the window much as eleven out of twelve of us would do under similar circumstances, while milepost after milepost flashed out for an instant and was gone. After a time he took a letter out of his breast-pocket, opened it, and read it. It was brief, and ran as under:—

"Stapleton, Scotland, March 31st.

"My Dear Ned,—Since you wish it, come down here for a few weeks; whether to recruit your health or your finances matters not. Mountain air and plain living are good for both. However, I warn you beforehand that you will find us very dull. Lady B.'s health is hardly what it ought to be, and we are seeing no company just now. If you like to take us as we are, I say again—come.

"As for the last paragraph of your letter, I scarcely know in what terms to answer it. You have already bled me so often the same way, that I have grown heartily sick of the process. This must be the last time of asking, my boy; I wish you clearly to understand that. This place has cost me a great deal of money of late, and I cannot spring you more than a hundred. For that amount I enclose you a cheque. *Finis coronat opus.* Bear those words in mind, and believe me when I say that you have had your last cheque

"From your affectionate cousin,

"Barnstake."

"Consummate little prig!" murmured Captain Ducie to himself as he refolded the letter and put it away. "I can fancy the smirk on his face as he penned that precious effusion, and how, when he had finished it, he would trot off to his clothes-prop of a wife and ask her whether she did not think it at once amusing and severe. That letter shall cost your lordship fifty guineas, I don't allow people to write to me in that style with impunity."

He lighted another cigar frowningly. "I wonder if I was ever so really hard up as I am now?" he continued to himself. "I don't think I ever was quite. I have been in Queer Street many a time, but I've always found a friend round the corner, or have pulled myself through by the skin of the teeth somehow. But this time I see no lift in the cloud. My insolvency has become chronic; it is attacking the very citadel of life. I have not a single uncle or aunt to fall back upon. The poor creatures are all dead and buried, and their money all spent. Well!—Outlaw is an ugly word, but it is one that I shall have to learn how to spell before long. I shall have to leave my country for my country's good."

He puffed away fiercely for a little while, and then he resumed.

"It would not be a bad thing for a fellow like me to become a chief among the Red Skins—if they would have me. With them my lack of pence would be no bar to success. I can swim and shoot and ride: although I cannot paint a picture, I daresay that I could paint myself; and I know several fellows whose scalps I should have much pleasure in taking. As for the so-called amenities of civilized life, what are they worth to one who, like me, has no longer the means of enjoying them? After all, it is a question whether freedom and the prairie would not be preferable to Pall-Mall and a limited income of, say—twelve hundred a year—the sort of income that is just enough to make one the slave of society, but is not sufficient to pay for gilding its fetters. A station, by Jove! and with it the possibility of getting a drop of cognac."

As soon as the train came to a stand, Captain Ducie vacated his seat and went in search of the refreshment-room. On coming back five minutes later, he was considerably disgusted to find that he was no longer to have his compartment to himself. The seat opposite to that on which he had been sitting was already occupied by a gentleman who was wrapped up to the nose in rugs and furs.

"Any objection to smoking?" asked the Captain presently as the train began to move. He was pricking the end of a fresh cigar as he asked the question. The words might be civil, but the tone was offensive; it seemed to convey—"I don't care whether you object or not: I intend to enjoy my weed all the same."

The stranger, however, seemed in nowise offended. He smirked and quavered two yellow-gloved fingers out of his furs. "Oh, no, certainly not," he said. "I, too, am a smoker and shall join you presently."

He spoke with the slightest possible foreign accent, just sufficient to tell an educated ear that he was not an Englishman. If Captain Ducie's features were aquiline, those of the stranger might be termed vulturine—long, lean, narrow, with a thin, high-ridged nose, and a chin that was pointed with a tuft of thick, black hair. Except for this tuft he was clean shaven. His black hair, cropped close at back and sides, was trained into an elaborate curl on the top of the forehead and there fixed with *cosmétique*. Both hair and chin-tuft were of that uncompromising blue-black which tells unmistakably of the dye-pot. His skin was yellow and parchment-like, and stretched tightly over his forehead and high cheek-bones, but puckering into a perfect net-work of lines about a mouth whose predominant expression was one of mingled cynicism and suspicion. There was suspicion, too, in his small black eyes, as well as a sort of lurking fierceness which not even his most urbane and elaborate smile could altogether eliminate. In person he was very thin and somewhat under the middle height, and had all the air of a confirmed valetudinarian. He was dressed as no English gentleman would care to be seen dressed in public. A long brown velvet coat trimmed with fur; lavender-coloured trousers tightly strapped over patent leather boots; two or three vests of different colours under one made of the skin of some animal and fastened with gold buttons; a profusion of jewellery; an embroidered shirt-front and deep turn-down collar: such were the chief items of his attire. A hat with a very curly brim hung from the carriage roof, while for present head-gear he wore a sealskin travelling cap with huge lappets that came below his ears. In this cap, and wrapped to the chin in his bear-skin rug, he looked like some newly-discovered species of animal—a sort of cross between a vulture and a monkey, were such a thing possible, combining the deep-seated fierceness of the one with the fantastic cunning, and the impossibility of doing the most serious things without a grimace, of the other.

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