

A Search For A Secret

G. A. Henty



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CHAPTER I.

EARLY DAYS.

There are towns over which time seems to exercise but little power, but to have passed them by forgotten, in his swift course. Everywhere else, at his touch, all is changed. Great cities rise upon the site of fishing villages; huge factories, with their smoky chimneys grow up and metamorphose quiet towns into busy hives of industry; while other cities, once prosperous and flourishing, sink into insignificance; and the passer by, as he wanders through their deserted streets, wonders and laments over the ruin which has fallen upon them.

But the towns of which I am speaking—and of which there are but few now left in England, and these, with hardly an exception, cathedral towns—seem to suffer no such change. They neither progress nor fall back. If left behind, they are not beaten in the race, for they have never entered upon it; but are content to rest under the shelter of their tall spires and towers; to seek for no change and to meet with none; but to remain beloved, as no other towns are loved, by those who have long known them—assimilating, as it were, the very natures of those who dwell in them, to their own sober, neutral tints.

In these towns, a wanderer who has left them as a boy, returning as an old, old man, will see but little change—a house gone here, another nearly similar built in its place; a greyer tint upon the stone; a tree fallen in the old close; the ivy climbing a little higher upon the crumbling wall;—these are all, or nearly all, the changes which he will see. The trains rush past, bearing their countless passengers, who so rarely think of stopping there, that the rooks, as they hold their grave conversations in their nests in the old elm-trees, cease to break off, even for a moment, at the sound

of the distant whistle. The very people seem, although this is but seeming, to have changed as little as the place: the same names are over the shop doors—the boy who was at school has taken his grand-sire's place, and stands at his door, looking down the quiet street as the old man used to do before him; the dogs are asleep in the sunny corners they formerly loved; and the same horses seem to be lazily drawing the carts, with familiar names upon them, into the old market-place. The wanderer may almost fancy that he has awoke from a long, troubled dream. It is true that if he enters the little churchyard, he will see, beneath the dark shadows of the yew-trees, more gravestones than there were of old; but the names are so similar, that it is only upon reading them over, that he will find that it is true after all, and that the friends and playfellows of his childhood, the strong, merry boys, and the fair girls with sunny ringlets, sleep peacefully there. But it is not full yet; and he may hope that, when his time shall come, there may be some quiet nook found, where, even as a child, he may have fancied that he would like some day to rest.

Among these cities pre-eminent, as a type of its class, is the town in which I now sit down to recount the past events of my life, and of the lives of those most dear to me—not egotistically, I hope, nor thrusting my own story, in which, indeed, there is little enough, into view; but telling of those I have known and lived with, as I have noted the events down in my journal, and at times, when the things I speak of are related merely on hearsay, dropping that dreadful personal pronoun which will get so prominent, and telling the story as it was told to me.

Although not born at Canterbury, I look upon it as my native town, my city of adoption. My earliest remembrances are of the place; my childhood and youth were spent there; and, although I was then for a few years absent, it was for that stormy, stirring time, when life is wrapped up in persons and not in places, when the mere

scene in which the drama is played out leaves barely an impression upon the mind, so all-absorbing is the interest in the performers. That time over, I returned to Canterbury as to my home, and hope, beneath the shadow of its stately towers, to pass tranquilly down the hill of life, whose ascent I there made with such eager, strong young steps.

Dear old Canterbury! It is indeed a town to love with all one's heart, as it lies, sleeping, as it were, amidst its circle of smiling hop-covered hills, with its glorious cathedral looking so solemnly down upon it, with its quiet courts, its shady, secluded nooks and corners, its quaint, old-fashioned houses, with their many gables and projecting eaves, and its crumbling but still lofty walls, it gives me somehow the idea of a perfect haven of rest and peace. It, like me, has seen its stormy times: Briton, Dane, and Saxon have struggled fiercely before its walls. It, too, has had its proud dreams, its lofty aspirations; but they are all over now, and it is, like myself, contented to pass its days in quiet, resting upon its old associations, and with neither wish nor anticipation of change in the tranquil tenour of its way.

I was not, as I have said, born in the town, but went there very young—so young that I have no remembrance of any earlier time.

We lived in a large, rambling, old-fashioned house in a back lane. In a little court before it stood some lime-trees, which, if they helped to make the front darker and more dismal than it would otherwise have been, had the good effect of shutting it out from the bad company into which it had fallen.

It had at one time been a place of great pretension, and belonged, doubtless, to some country magnate, and before the little houses in the narrow lane had sprung up and hemmed it in, it may have had a cheerful appearance; but, at the time I speak of, the external aspect was undeniably gloomy. But behind it was very different. There was a lawn and large garden, at the end of which the Stour flowed

quietly along, and we children were never tired of watching the long streamer-like green weeds at the bottom waving gently in the current, and the trout darting here and there among them, or lying immovable, apparently watching us, until at the slightest noise or motion they would dart away too quickly for the eye to follow them.

Inside, it was a glorious home for us, with its great old-fashioned hall with dark wainscoting and large stags' heads all round it, which seemed to be watching us children from their eyeless sockets; and its vast fireplace, with iron dogs, where, in the old days, a fire sufficient for the roasting of a whole bullock, might have been piled up; with its grand staircase, with heavy oak balustrades, lit by a great window large enough for an ordinary church; with its long passages and endless turnings and backstairs in unexpected places; with all its low, quaint rooms of every shape except square, and its closets nearly as large as rooms.

Oh, it was a delightful house! But very terrible at dusk. Then we would not have gone along alone those long, dark passages for worlds; for we knew that the bogies, and other strange things of which our old nurse told us, would be sure to be lurking and upon the watch.

It was a wonderful house for echoes, and at night we would steal from our beds and creep to the top of the grand staircase, and listen, with hushed breath, to the almost preternaturally loud tick of the old clock in the hall, which seemed to us to get louder and louder, till at last the terrors of the place would be almost too much for us, and, at the sound of some mouse running behind the wainscoting, we would scamper off to our beds, and bury our heads beneath the clothes, falling into a troubled sleep, from which we woke, with terrified starts, until the welcome approach of day, when, as the sun shone brightly in, we would pluck up courage and laugh at our night's fright.

Of my quite young days I have not much to say. My brother Harry, who was two years older than I, went to the King's

School; and Polly—who was as much my junior—and I were supposed to learn lessons from our mother. Poor mamma! not much learning, I think, did we get from her. She was always weak and ailing, and had but little strength or spirits to give to teaching us. When I was twelve, and Polly consequently ten, we had a governess in of a day, to teach us and keep us in order; but I am afraid that she found it hard work, for we were sadly wild, noisy girls—at least, this was the opinion of our unmarried aunts, who came to stay periodically with us.

I have not yet spoken of my father, my dear, dear father. How we loved him, and how he loved us, I cannot even now trust myself to write. As I sit at my desk his portrait hangs on the wall before me, and he seems to be looking down with that bright genial eye, that winning smile which he wore in life. Not only by us was he loved, almost adored, but all who came in contact with him were attracted in a similar way. To rich or poor, ill or in health, to all with whom he was in any way associated, he was friend and adviser. A large man and somewhat portly, with iron-grey hair, cut short, and brushed upright off his forehead, a rather dark complexion, a heavy eyebrow, a light-blue eye, very clear and penetrating, and the whole face softened and brightened by his genial smile. Very kind and sympathetic to the poor, the sick, and the erring; pitilessly severe upon meanness, hypocrisy, and vice. He was a man of great scientific attainments, and his study was crowded with books and instruments which related to his favourite pursuits. Upon the shelves were placed models of steam-engines, electrical machines, galvanic batteries, air-pumps, microscopes, chemical apparatus, and numberless other models and machinery of which we could not even guess the uses. Thick volumes of botanical specimens jostled entomological boxes and cases, butterfly-nets leant in the corner with telescopes, retorts stood beneath the table, the

drawers of which were filled with a miscellaneous collection indescribable.

With us children he was firm, yet very kind, ever ready to put aside his work to amuse us, especially of a winter's evening, when, dinner over, he always went into his study, to which we would creep, knock gently at the door, and when allowed to enter, would sit on stools by his side, looking into the fire, while he told us marvellous tales of enchanters and fairies. It was at these times, when we had been particularly good—or at least when he, who was as glad of an excuse to amuse us as we were to be amused, pretended that we had been so—that he would take down his chemicals, or electrical apparatus, and show us startling or pretty experiments, ending perhaps by entrapping one of us into getting an unexpected electric shock, and then sending us all laughing up to bed.

We always called papa Dr. Ashleigh in company. It was one of mamma's fancies: she called him so herself, and was very strict about our doing the same upon grand occasions. We did not like it, and I don't think papa did either, for he would often make a little funny grimace, as he generally did when anything rather put him out; but as mamma set her mind upon it so much, he never made any remark or objection. He was very, very kind to her, and attentive to her wishes, and likes and dislikes; but their tastes and characters were as dissimilar as it was possible for those of any two persons to be.

She was very fond of papa, and was in her way proud to see him so much looked up to and admired by other people; but I do not think that she appreciated him for himself as it were, and would have been far happier had he been a common humdrum country doctor. She could not understand his devotion to science, his eager inquiry into every novelty of the day, and his disregard for society in the ordinary sense of the word; still less could she understand his untiring zeal in his profession. Why he should be willing

to be called up in the middle of a winter's night, get upon his horse, and ride ten miles into the country on a sudden summons to some patient, perhaps so poor that to ask payment for his visit never even entered into the Doctor's mind, was a thing she could not understand. Home, and home cares occupied all her thoughts, and it was to her inexpressibly annoying, when, after taking extreme care to have the nicest little dinner in readiness for his return from work, he would come in an hour late, be perfectly unconcerned at his favourite dish being spoilt, and, indeed, be so completely absorbed in the contemplation of some critical case in his day's practice, as not even to notice what there was for dinner, but to eat mechanically whatsoever was put before him.

Mamma must have been a very pretty woman when she married Dr. Ashleigh. Pretty is exactly the word which suits her style of face. A very fair complexion, a delicate colour, a slight figure, light hair, which then fell in curls, but which she now wore in bands, with a pretty apology for a cap on the back of her head. She had not much colour left when I first remember her, unless it came in a sudden flush; but she was still, we thought, very pretty, although so delicate-looking. She lay upon the sofa most of the day, and would seldom have quitted it, had she not been so restlessly anxious about the various household and nursery details, that every quarter of an hour she would be off upon a tour of inspection and supervision through the house. She was very particular about our dress and manners, and I am sure loved us very much; but from her weak state of health she could not have us long with her at a time.

It was one bright summer afternoon, I remember well, when I was rather more than fourteen years old, we had finished our early dinner, Harry had started for school, and we had taken our books and gone out to establish ourselves in our favourite haunt, the summer-house at the end of the garden. This summer-house was completely covered with

creepers, which climbed all over the roof, and hung in thick festoons and clusters, almost hiding the woodwork, and making it a perfect leafy bower; only towards the river we kept it clear. It was so charming to sit there with our toys or our work and watch the fish, the drifting weeds and fallen leaves, to wonder which would get out of sight first, and whether they would catch in the wooden piles of the bridge,—for there was a bridge over from our garden into the fields beyond, where our cow Brindle was kept, and where our horses were sometimes turned out to graze, and make holiday. It was a very happy and peaceful spot. When we were little, the summer-house was our fairy bower; here we could play with our dolls, and be queens and princesses without fear of interruption, and sometimes when Harry was with us, we would be Robinson Crusoes wrecked on a desert island; here we would store up provisions, and make feasts, here we would find footprints in the sand, and here above all we would wage desperate battles with imaginary fleets of canoes full of savages endeavouring to cross the stream. Harry would stand courageously in front, and we girls carefully concealing ourselves from the enemy, would keep him supplied with stones from the magazine, with which he would pour volleys into the water, to the imaginary terror of the savages, and the real alarm of our friends the fish. With what zeal did we throw ourselves into these fights, with what excited shouts and cries, and what delight we felt when Harry proclaimed the victory complete and the enemy in full flight!

As time went on, and the dolls were given up, and we could no longer believe in savages, and began to think romping and throwing stones unladylike, although at times very pleasant, the summer-house became our reading-room, and at last, after we had a governess, our schoolroom in fine weather. This was not obtained without some opposition upon the part of mamma, who considered it as an irregular sort of proceeding; but we coaxed papa into putting in a

good word for us, and then mamma, who was only too glad to see us happy, gave in at once. We had but just gone out, and after a look down at the river and the fish, and across at the pretty country beyond, had opened our books with a little sigh of regret, when we heard a footstep coming down the garden and to our surprise found it was papa.

"Now girls," he said, "put on your things as quickly as you can. I am going over to Mr. Harmer at Sturry, and will take you with me. First though, we must ask mamma's leave. I have no doubt Miss Harrison here, will be as glad of a holiday as you are."

Mamma, however, although she seldom opposed any of papa's plans for our amusement, raised many objections. Indeed, I had for some time past noticed that she did not like our visiting at Harmer Place. Upon this occasion she was particularly averse to our going, and said that I "was getting too old to associate with a person of such extraordinary antecedents as——."

We did not hear who the person was, for papa broke in more sternly than I had ever before heard him speak to mamma, and said that "he differed from her entirely: for his part he could see no harm whatever in our going, and that, at any rate until we were of an age to judge for ourselves, no question of the sort could arise."

Mamma, directly she saw he was in earnest, said no more, and we set out soon afterwards, with the understanding that we should most probably not be back until evening.

Although neither Polly nor I ever made any remark to each other about that conversation, we—or at least I can answer for myself—were not the less astonished at it. It seemed perfectly inexplicable to me. What objection could there be to our going to the Harmers? I was, as I have said, past fourteen, and was beginning to think and reason about all sorts of things, and this was a problem which I tried in vain for a long time to solve to my satisfaction. How I pondered the matter over in every light, but ever without success.

Mamma had said it was a person. Now, person generally means a woman, and the only women at Harmer Place were the two Miss Harmers. Had it been a principle mamma objected to, I could have understood it, for the Miss Harmers were bigoted Catholics. Not that that would have made any difference with papa, who looked at these matters with a very latitudinarian eye. "In my opinion," I have heard him say, "the sect to which a man belongs makes but little difference, if he does but do his best according to his belief."

And I remember that in after years, when we had suffered much, he warned us not to blame a creed for the acts of its professors. "History has shown," he would say, "that a bigot, whether he be Catholic, Protestant, or Mussulman, will be equally a cruel persecutor of others, equally ready to sacrifice everything which he believes to stand in the way of his Church."

I mention this here because I should be very sorry that the feelings of any one who may ever come to read this story of mine should be hurt, or that it should be taken to be an attack or even an implication against a particular form of worship.

I knew then that although papa objected to the extreme opinions which the Miss Harmers held, and which had been caused by the exceptional life which they had led, still the antecedents, to which mamma alluded, could be no question of religion. And yet the only other female at Harmer Place was Sophy Needham, the pretty girl we so often met there. She was an orphan village child, to whom Mr. Harmer had taken such a fancy that he had sent her, at his own expense, to a London school, and had her constantly staying at the house with him. But, of course, it could not be Sophy; for I was quite sure that the fact of her having been a village girl would not make the slightest difference in either papa's or mamma's eyes, so far as our associating with her went; and in other respects there

could be no objection, for she was a particularly quiet, retiring girl, and was two years older than myself.

The objection, then, did not appear to apply to any one at Harmer Place, and I puzzled myself in vain upon the subject; and indeed it was not for some years afterwards that the mystery was solved, or that I found out that it was indeed Sophy Needham to whom mamma had alluded. There is no reason why I should make a mystery of it in this journal of mine, which will be more easily understood by making the matter clear at once, and I will therefore, before I go on with my own story, relate the history of the Harmers as nearly as I can as it was told to me.

CHAPTER II.

THE HARMERS OF HARMER PLACE.

The Harmers of Harmer Place, although of ancient descent, could yet hardly be ranked among the very old Kentish families, for they could trace back their history very little beyond the commencement of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, of pious and Protestant memory. About that period it is ascertained that they were small landed proprietors, probably half gentry, half farmers. All documentary and traditional history goes to prove that the Harmers of those days were a stiff-necked race, and that their consciences were by no means of the same plastic nature as those of the great majority of their neighbours. They could not, for the life of them, see why—because the Royal family had all of a sudden come to the conclusion that the old Roman religion, in which their fore-fathers had for so many centuries worshipped, was after all wrong, that therefore the whole nation was bound to make the same discovery at the same moment.

So the Harmers clung to the old faith, and were looked upon with grievous disfavour in consequence by the authorities for the time being. Many were the domiciliary visits paid them, and grievous were the fines inflicted upon them for nonconformity. Still, whether from information privately sent to them previous to these researches, or whether from the superior secrecy and snugness of their "Priest's chamber," certain it is, that although frequently denounced and searched, no priest or emissary of papacy was ever found concealed there; and so, although constantly harassed and vexed, they were suffered to remain in possession of their estate.

As generation of Harmers succeeded generation, they continued the same stiff-necked race, clinging to their old

tenets, and hardening their hearts to all inducements to desert them. Over and over again they went through "troublous times," especially when those God-fearing and enlightened Puritans domineered it over England. In after reigns difficulties arose, but the days of persecution were over then, and they had nothing to undergo comparable to their former trials.

It would have been naturally supposed that as at the commencement of the reign of Elizabeth the Harmers were by no means a wealthy race, they would speedily have been shorn of all the little property they then possessed. But it was not so. The more they were persecuted so much the more they flourished, and from mere farmers they speedily rose to the rank of county families.

One reason, doubtless, for their immunity from more than comparatively petty persecutions, such as fines and imprisonments, was, that the Harmers never took any part in political affairs; neither in plots, nor risings, nor civil wars, were they ever known actively to interfere.

As the Harmers were in other respects an obstinate, quarrelsome race, stubborn in will, strong in their likes and dislikes, it was singular that they should never have actively bestirred themselves in favour of the cause which they all had so strongly at heart. The popular belief on the matter was, that a settled and traditional line of policy had been recommended, and enforced upon the family, by their priests; namely, to keep quite neutral in politics, in order that there might be at least one house in the country—and that, from its proximity to the sea-coast, peculiarly suitable to the purpose,—where, in cases of necessity, a secure hiding-place could be relied on. Mother Church is very good to her obedient children; and if the Harmers gave up their personal feelings for her benefit, and sheltered her ministers in time of peril, she no doubt took care that in the long run they should not be losers. And so, while their Roman Catholic neighbours threw themselves into plots

and parties, and lost house and land, and not uncommonly life, the Harmers rode quietly through the gale, thriving more and more under the small persecutions they suffered for the faith's sake. And thus it happened that going into troubles as small proprietors in the reign of Elizabeth, they came out of them in that of George, owners of a large estate and a rambling old mansion in every style of architecture.

After that date, persecution having ceased, and "Priests' chambers" being no longer useful, the Harmers ceased to enlarge their boundaries, and lived retired lives on their property, passing a considerable portion of their time on the Continent.

Robert Harmer had, contrary to the usual custom of his ancestors, six children—four sons and two daughters. Edward was, of course, intended to inherit the family property, and was brought up in accordance with the strictest traditions of his race; Robert was also similarly educated, in order to be fitted to take his brother's place should Edward not survive his father, or die leaving no heirs; Gregory was intended for the priesthood; and Herbert, the youngest of all, was left to take his chance in any position which the influence of his family or Church might obtain for him.

Herbert Harmer, however, was not so ready as the rest of his family to submit his judgment without question to that of others; and having, when about sixteen, had what he conceived an extremely heavy and unfair penance imposed upon him for some trifling offence, he quitted his home, leaving a letter behind him stating his intention of never returning to it. Herbert Harmer was not of the stuff of which a docile son of Holy Church is made; of a warm and affectionate disposition, and a naturally buoyant, joyous frame of mind, the stern and repressive discipline to which he was subjected, and the monotonous existence he led in his father's house, seemed to him the height of misery.

The lad, when he turned his back on home, knew little of the world. He had lived the life almost of a recluse, never stirring beyond the grounds of the mansion except to attend mass at the Roman Catholic chapel at Canterbury, and this only upon grand occasions, as the family confessor, who acted also as his tutor, resided in the village, and ordinarily performed the service at the chapel attached to the place.

Companions he had none. Gregory, the brother next to him in age, was away in Italy studying for the priesthood; Cecilia and Angela he had seen but seldom, as they also were abroad, being educated in a convent; Edward and Robert were young men nearly ten years older than himself, and were when at home his father's companions rather than his, and both were of grave taciturn disposition, ascetic and bigoted even beyond the usual Harmer type.

Thrown therefore almost entirely upon his own resources, Herbert had sought what companionship he best could. Books, first and best; but of these his stock was limited. Religious and controversial treatises, church histories, and polemical writings formed the principal part of the library, together with a few volumes of travel and biography which had somehow found their way there. On a library so limited as this the boy could not employ his whole time, but had to seek amusement and exercise out of doors, and the only companion he had there, was perhaps of all others the very one with whom he would have been most strictly forbidden to associate, had their intimacy been guessed at.

Robert Althorpe was the son of a tenant on the estate, and was a man of thirty or thereabouts. Originally a wild, reckless lad, he had, as many an English boy has done before and since, ran away to sea, and, after nearly fifteen years absence, had lately returned with only one arm, having lost the other in a naval engagement. On his return he had been received with open arms by his father, as at