
HELEN HUNT JACKSON
BETWEEN WHILES
Over Again
ERROL THE PERIL
Science Experiments with Everyday Ma
Margaret Hamilton
A Very Special Secret
DIARY

Helen Hunt Jackson

Between Whiles

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The Inn of the Golden Pear.

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Who buys? Who buys?
'Tis like a market-fair;
The hubbub rises
deafening on the air:
The children spend their
honest money there;
The knaves prowl out
like foxes from a lair.

Who buys? Who sells?
Alas, and still alas!
The children sell their
diamond stones for
glass;
The knaves their
worthless stones for
diamonds pass.
He laughs who buys; he
laughs who sells. Alas!

In the days when New England was only a group of thinly settled wildernesses called "provinces," there was something almost like the old feudal tenure of lands there, and a relation between the rich land-owner and his tenants which had many features in common with those of the relation between margraves and vassals in the days of Charlemagne.

Far up in the North, near the Canada line, there lived at that time an eccentric old man, whose name is still to be found

here and there on the tattered parchments, written "WILLAN BLAYCKE, Gentleman."

Tradition occupies itself a good deal with Willan Blaycke, and does not give his misdemeanors the go-by as it might have done if he had been either a poorer or a less clever man. Why he had crossed the seas and cast in his lot with the pious Puritans, nobody knew; it was certainly not because of sympathy with their God-reverencing faith and God-fearing lives, nor from any liking for hardships or simplicity of habits. He had gold enough, the stories say, to have bought all the land from the St. Johns to the Connecticut if he had pleased; and he had servants and horses and attire such as no governor in all the provinces could boast. He built himself a fine house out of stone, and the life he led in it was a scandal and a byword everywhere. For all that, there was not a man to be found who had not a good word to say for Willan Blaycke, and not a woman who did not look pleased and smile if he so much as spoke to her. He was generous, with a generosity so princely that there were many who said that he had no doubt come of some royal house. He gave away a farm to-day, and another to-morrow, and thought nothing of it; and when tenants came to him pleading that they were unable to pay their rent, he was never known to haggle or insist.

Naturally, with such ways as these he made havoc of his estates, vast as they were, and grew less and less rich year by year. However, there was enough of his land to last several generations out; and if he had married a decent woman for his wife, his posterity need never have complained of him. But this was what Willan Blaycke did,--and it is as much a mystery now as it doubtless was then, why he did it,--he married Jeanne Dubois, the daughter of a low-bred and evil-disposed Frenchman who kept a small inn on the Canadian frontier. Jeanne had a handsome but

wicked face. She stood always at the bar, and served every man who came; and a great thing it was for the house, to be sure, that she had such bold black eyes, red cheeks, and a tongue even bolder than her glances. But there was not a farmer in all the north provinces who would have taken her to wife, not one, for she bore none too good a name; and men's speech about her, as soon as they had turned their backs and gone on their journeys, was quite opposite to the gallant and flattering things they said to her face in the bar. Some people said that Willan Blaycke was drunk when he married Jeanne, that she took him unawares by means of a base plot which her father and she had had in mind a long time. Others said that he was sober enough when he did it, only that he was like one out of his mind,--he sorrowed so for the loss of his only son, Willan, whom he had in the beginning of that year sent back to England to be taught in school.

He had brought the child out with him,--a little chap, with marvellously black eyes and yellow curls, who wore always the costliest of embroidered coats, which it was plain some woman's hand had embroidered for him; but whether the child's mother were dead or alive Willan Blaycke never told, and nobody dared ask.

That the boy needed a mother sadly enough was only too plain. Riding from county to county on his little white pony by his father's side, sitting up late at roystering feasts till he nodded in his chair, seeing all that rough men saw, and hearing all that rough men said, the child was in a fair way to be ruined outright; and so Willan Blaycke at last came to see, and one day, in a fit of unwonted conscientiousness and wisdom, he packed the poor sobbing little fellow off to England in charge of a trusty escort, and sternly made up his mind that the lad should not return till he was a man grown. It was only a few months after this that Jeanne

Dubois became Mistress Willan Blaycke; so it seemed not improbable that the bereaved father's loneliness had had much to do with that extraordinary step.

Be that as it may, whether he were drunk or sober when he married her, he treated her as a gentleman should treat his wife, and did his best to make her a lady. She was always clad in a rich fashion; and a fine show she made in her scarlet petticoat and white hat with a streaming scarlet feather in it, riding high on her pillion behind Willan Blaycke on his great black horse, or sitting up straight and stiff in the swinging coach with gold on the panels, which he had bought for her in Boston at a sale of the effects of one of the disgraced and removed governors of the province of Massachusetts. If there had been any roads to speak of in those days, Jeanne Dubois would have driven from one end to the other of the land in her fine coach, so proud was she of its splendor; but even pride could not heal the bruises she got in jolting about in it, nor the terror she felt of being overturned. So she gradually left off using it, and consoled herself by keeping it standing in all good weather in full sight from the highway, that everybody might know she had it.

It was a sore trial to Jeanne that she had no children,--a sore trial also to her wicked old father, who had plotted that the great Blaycke estates should go down in the hands of his descendants. Not so Willan Blaycke. It was undoubtedly a consolation to him in his last days to think that his son Willan would succeed to everything, and the Dubois blood remain still in its own muddy channel. It is evident that before he died he had come to think coldly of his wife; for his mention of her in his will was of the curtest, and his provision for her during her lifetime, though amply sufficient for her real needs, not at all in keeping with the style in which she had dwelt with him.

The exiled Willan had returned to America a year before his father's death. He was a quiet, well-educated, rather scholarly young man. It would be foolish to deny that his filial sentiment had grown cool during the long years of his absence, and that it received some violent shocks on his return to his father's house. But he was full of ambition, and soon saw the opening which lay before him for distinction and wealth as the ultimate owner of the Blaycke estates. To this end he bent all his energies. He had had in England a good legal education; he was a clear thinker and a ready speaker, and speedily made himself so well known and well thought of, that when his father died there were many who said it was well the old man had been taken away in time to leave the young Willan a property worthy of his talents and industry.

Willan had lived in his father's house more as a guest than as a son. To the woman who was his father's wife, and sat at the head of his father's table, he bore himself with a distant courtesy, which was far more irritating to her coarse nature than open antagonism would have been. But Jeanne Dubois was clever woman enough to comprehend her own inferiority to both father and son, and to avoid collisions with either. She had won what she had played for, and on the whole she had not been disappointed. As she had never loved her husband, she cared little that he did not love her; and as for the upstart of a boy with his fine airs, well, she would bide her time for that, Jeanne thought,--for it had never crossed Jeanne's mind that when her husband died she would not be still the mistress of the fine stone house and the gilt panelled coach, and have more money than she knew what to do with. Many malicious reveries she had indulged in as to how, when that time came, she would "send the fellow packing," "he shouldn't stay in her house a day." So, when it came to pass that the cards were turned, and it was Willan who said to her, on the morning after his

father's funeral, "What are your plans, Madame?" Jeanne was for a few seconds literally dumb with anger and astonishment.

Then she poured out all the pent-up hatred of her vulgar soul. It was a horrible scene. Willan conducted himself throughout the interview with perfect calmness; the same impassable distance which had always been so exasperating to Jeanne was doubly so now. He treated her as if she were merely some dependant of the house, for whom he, as the executor of the will, was about to provide according to instructions.

"If I can't live in my own house," cried the angry woman, "I'll go back to my father and tend bar again; and how'll you like that?"

"It is purely immaterial to me, Madame," replied Willan, "where you live. I merely wish to know your address, that I may forward to you the quarterly payments of your annuity. I should think it probable," he added with an irony which was not thrown away on Jeanne, "that you would be happier among your own relations and in the occupations to which you were accustomed in your youth."

Jeanne was not deficient in spirit. As soon as she had ascertained beyond a doubt that all that Willan had told her was true, and that there was no possibility of her ever getting from the estate anything except her annuity, she packed up all her possessions and left the house. No fine instinct had restrained her from laying, hands on everything to which she could be said to have a shadow of claim,--indeed, on many things to which she had not,--and even Willan himself, who had been prepared for her probable greed, was surprised when on returning to the house late one evening he found the piazza piled high from one end to

the other with her boxes. Jeanne stood by with a defiant air, superintending the cording of the last one. She anticipated some remonstrance or inquiry from Willan, and was half disappointed when he passed by, giving no sign of having observed the boxes at all, and simply lifting his hat to her with his usual formality. The next morning, instead of the public vehicle which Jeanne had engaged to call for her, her own coach and the gray horses she had best liked were driven to the door. This unexpected tribute from Willan almost disarmed her for the moment. It was her coach almost more than her house which she had grieved to lose.

"Well, really, Mr. Willan," she exclaimed, "I never once thought of taking that, though there's no doubt about its being my own, and your father'd tell you so if he was here; and the horses too. He always said the grays were mine from the day he bought them. But I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure."

"You have no occasion to thank me, Madame," replied Willan, standing on the threshold of the house, pale with excitement at the prospect of immediate freedom from the presence of the coarse creature. "The coach is your own, and the horses; and if they had not been, I should not have permitted them to remain here."

"Oh ho!" sneered Jeanne, all her antagonism kindled afresh at this last gratuitous fling. "You needn't think you can get rid of everything that'll remind you of me, young man. You'll see me oftener than you like, at the Golden Pear. You'll have to stop there, as your father did before you." And Jeanne's black eyes snapped viciously as she drove off, her piles of boxes following slowly in two wagon-loads behind.

Willan was right in one thing. After the first mortification of returning to her father's house, a widow, disgraced by being

pensioned off from her old home, had worn away, Jeanne was happier than she had ever been in her life. Her annuity, which was small for Mistress Willan Blaycke, was large for Jeanne, daughter of the landlord of the Golden Pear; and into that position she sank back at once,--so contentedly, too, that her father was continually reproaching her with a great lack of spirit. It was a sad come-down from his old air-castles for her and for himself,--he still the landlord of a shabby little inn, and Jeanne, stout and middle-aged, sitting again behind the bar as she had done fifteen years before. It was pretty hard. So long as he knew that Jeanne was living in her fine house as Mistress Blaycke he had been content, in spite of Willan Blaycke's having sternly forbidden him ever to show his face there. But this last downfall was too much. Victor Dubois ground his teeth and swore many oaths over it. But no swearing could alter things; and after a while Victor himself began to take comfort in having Jeanne back again. "And not a bit spoiled," as he would say to his cronies, "by all the fine ways, to which she had never taken; thanks to God, Jeanne was as good a girl yet as ever."--"And as handsome too," the politic cronies would add.

The Golden Pear was a much more attractive place since Jeanne had come back. She was a good housekeeper, and she had learned much in Willan Blaycke's house. Moreover, she was a generous creature, and did not in the least mind spending a few dollars here and there to make things tidier and more comfortable.

A few weeks after Jeanne's return to the inn there appeared in the family a new and by no means insignificant member. This was the young Victorine Dubois, who was a daughter, they said, of Victor Dubois's son Jean, the twin brother of Jeanne. He had gone to Montreal many years ago, and had been moderately prosperous there as a wine-seller in a small way. He had been dead now for two years, and his

widow, being about to marry again, was anxious to get the young Victorine off her hands. So the story ran, and on the surface it looked probable enough. But Montreal was not a great way off from the parish of St. Urbans, in which stood Victor Dubois's inn; there were men coming and going often who knew the city, and who looked puzzled when it was said in their hearing that Victorine was the eldest child of Jean Dubois the wine-seller. She had been kept at a convent all these years, old Victor said, her father being determined that at least one of his children should be well educated.

Nobody could gainsay this, and Mademoiselle Victorine certainly had the air of having been much better trained and taught than most girls in her station. But somehow, nobody quite knew why, the tale of her being Jean Dubois's daughter was not believed. Suspicions and at last rumors were afloat that she was an illegitimate child of Jeanne's, born a few years before her marriage to Willan Blaycke.

Nothing easier, everybody knew, than for Mistress Willan Blaycke to have supported half a dozen illegitimate children, if she had had them, on the money her husband gave her so lavishly; and there was old Victor, as ready and unscrupulous a go-between as ever an unscrupulous woman needed. These rumors gained all the easier credence because Victorine bore so striking a resemblance to her "Aunt Jeanne." On the other hand, this ought not to have been taken as proof any more one way than the other; for there were plenty of people who recollected very well that in the days when little Jean and Jeanne toddled about together as children, nobody but their mother could tell them apart, except by their clothes. So the winds of gossiping breaths blew both ways at once in the matter, and it was much discussed for a time. But like all scandals, as soon as it became an old story nobody cared whether it were false or true; and before Victorine had been a year at the Golden

Pear, the question of her relationship there was rarely raised.

One thing was certain, that no mother could have been fonder or more devoted to a child than Jeanne was to her niece; and everybody said so,--some more civilly, some maliciously. Her pride in the girl's beauty was touching to see. She seemed to have forgotten that she was ever a beauty herself; and she had no need to do this, for Jeanne was not yet forty, and many men found her piquant and pleasing still. But all her vanity seemed now to be transferred to Victorine. It was Victorine who was to have all the fine gowns and ornaments; Victorine who must go to the dances and fêtes in costumes which were the wonder and the envy of all the girls in the region; Victorine who was to have everything made easy and comfortable for her in the house; and above all,--and here the mother betrayed herself, for mother she was; the truth may as well be told early as late in our story,--most of all, it was Victorine who was to be kept away from the bar, and to be spared all contact with the rough roysterers who frequented the Golden Pear.

Very ingenious were Jeanne's excuses for these restrictions on her niece's liberty. Still more ingenious her explanations of the occasional exceptions she made now and then in favor of some well-to-do young farmer of the neighborhood, or some traveller in whom her alert maternal eye detected a possible suitor for Victorine's hand. Victorine herself was not so fastidious. She was young, handsome, overflowing with vitality, and with no more conscience or delicacy than her mother had had before her. If the whole truth had been known concerning the last four years of her life in the convent, it would have considerably astonished those good Catholics, if any such there be, who still believe that convents are sacred retreats filled with the chaste and the

devout. Victorine Dubois at the age of eighteen, when her grandfather took her home to his house, was as well versed a young woman in the ways and the wiles of love-making as if she had been free to come and go all her life. And that this knowledge had been gained surreptitiously, in stolen moments and brief experiences at the expense of the whole of her reverence for religion, the whole of her faith in men's purity, was not poor Victorine's fault, only her misfortune; but the result was no less disastrous to her morals. She went out of the convent as complete a little hypocrite as ever told beads and repeated prayers. Only a certain sort of infantile superstitiousness of nature remained in her, and made her cling to the forms, in which, though she knew they did not mean what they pretended, she suspected there might be some sort of mechanical efficacy at last; like the partly undeceived disciple and assistant of a master juggler, who is not quite sure that there may not be a supernatural power behind some of the tricks. Beyond an overflowing animal vitality, and a passion for having men make love to her, there really was not much of Victorine. But it is wonderful how far these two qualities can pass in a handsome woman for other and nobler ones. The animal life so keen, intense, sensuous, can seem like cleverness, wit, taste; the passion for receiving homage from men can make a woman graceful, amiable, and alluring. Some of the greatest passions the world has ever seen have been inspired in men by just such women as this.

Victorine was not without accomplishments and some smattering of knowledge. She had read a good deal of French, and chattered it like the true granddaughter of a Normandy *propriétaire*. She sang, in a half-rude, half-melodious way, snatches of songs which sounded better than they really were, she sang them with so much heartiness and abandon. She embroidered exquisitely, and had learned the trick of making many of the pretty and

useless things at which nuns work so patiently to fill up their long hours. She had an insatiable love of dress, and attired herself daily in successions of varied colors and shapes merely to look at herself in the glass, and on the chance of showing herself to any stray traveller who might come.

The inn had been built in a piecemeal fashion by Victor Dubois himself, and he had been unconsciously guided all the while by his memories of the old farmhouse in Normandy in which he was born; so that the house really looked more like Normandy than like America. It had on one corner a square tower, which began by being a shed attached to the kitchen, then was promoted to bearing up a chamber for grain, and at last was topped off by a fine airy room, projecting on all sides over the other two, and having great casement windows reaching close up to the broad, hanging eaves. A winding staircase outside led to what had been the grain-chamber: this was now Jeanne's room. The room above was Victorine's, and she reached it only by a narrow, ladder-like stairway from her mother's bedroom; so the young lady's movements were kept well in sight, her mother thought. It was an odd thing that it never occurred to Jeanne how near the sill of Victorine's south window was to the stout railing of the last broad platform of the outside staircase. This railing had been built up high, and was partly roofed over, making a pretty place for pots of flowers in summer; and Victorine never looked so well anywhere as she did leaning out of her window and watering the flowers which stood there. Many a flirtation went on between this casement window and the courtyard below, where all the travellers were in the habit of standing and talking with the ostlers, and with old Victor himself, who was not the landlord to leave his ostlers to do as they liked with horses and grain,--many a flirtation, but none that meant or did any harm; for with all her wildness and love of frolic, Mademoiselle Victorine never lost her head. Deep down in

her heart she had an ambition which she never confessed even to her aunt Jeanne. She had read enough romances to believe that it was by no means an impossible thing that a landlord's daughter should marry a gentleman; and to marry a gentleman, if she married at all, Victorine was fully resolved. She never tired of questioning her aunt about the details of her life in Willan Blaycke's house; and she sometimes gazed for hours at the gilt-panelled coach, which on all fine days stood in the courtyard of the Golden Pear, the wonder of all rustics. On the rare occasions when her aunt went abroad in this fine vehicle, Victorine sat by her side in an ecstasy of pride and delight. It seemed to her that to be the owner of such a coach as that, to live in a fine house, and have a fine gentleman for one's husband must be the very climax of bliss. She wondered much at her aunt's contentment in her present estate.

"How canst thou bear it, Aunt Jeanne?" she said sometimes. "How canst thou bear to live as we live here,--to be in the bar-room with the men, and to sit always in the smoke, after the fine rooms and the company thou hadst for so long?"

"Bah!" Jeanne would reply. "It's little thou knowest of that fine company. I had like to die of weariness more often than I was gay in it; and as for fine rooms, I care nothing for them."

"But thy husband, Aunt Jeanne," Victorine once ventured to say,--"surely thou wert not weary when he was with thee?"

Jeanne's face darkened. "Keep a civiller tongue in thy head," she replied, "than to be talking to widows of the husbands they have buried. He was a good man, Willan Blaycke,--a good man; but I liked him not overmuch, though we lived not in quarrelling. He went his ways, as men go, and I let him be."

Victorine's curiosity was by no means satisfied. She asked endless questions of all whom she met who could tell her anything about her aunt's husband. Very much she regretted that she had not been taken from the convent before this strange, free-hearted, rollicking gentleman had died. She would have managed affairs better, she thought, than Aunt Jeanne had done. Romantic visions of herself as his favorite flitted through her brain.

"Why didst thou not send for me sooner to come to thee, Aunt Jeanne," she said, "that I too might have seen the life in the great stone house?"

A sudden flush covered Jeanne's face. Was she never to hear the end of troublesome questions about the past?

"Wilt thou never have done with it?" she said, half angrily. "Has it never been said in thy hearing how that my husband would not permit even my father to come inside of his house, much less one no nearer than thou?" And Jeanne eyed Victorine sharply, with a suspicion which was wholly uncalled for. Nobody had ever been bold or cruel enough to suggest to Victorine any doubts regarding her birth. The girl was indignant. She had never known before that her grandfather had been thus insulted.

"What had grandfather done?" she cried. "Was he not thy husband's father, too, being thine? How dared thy husband treat him so?"

Jeanne was silent for a few moments. A latent sense of justice to her dead husband restrained her from assenting to Victorine's words.

"Nay," she said; "there are many things thou canst not understand. Thy grandfather never complained. Willan Blaycke treated me most fairly while he lived; and if it had