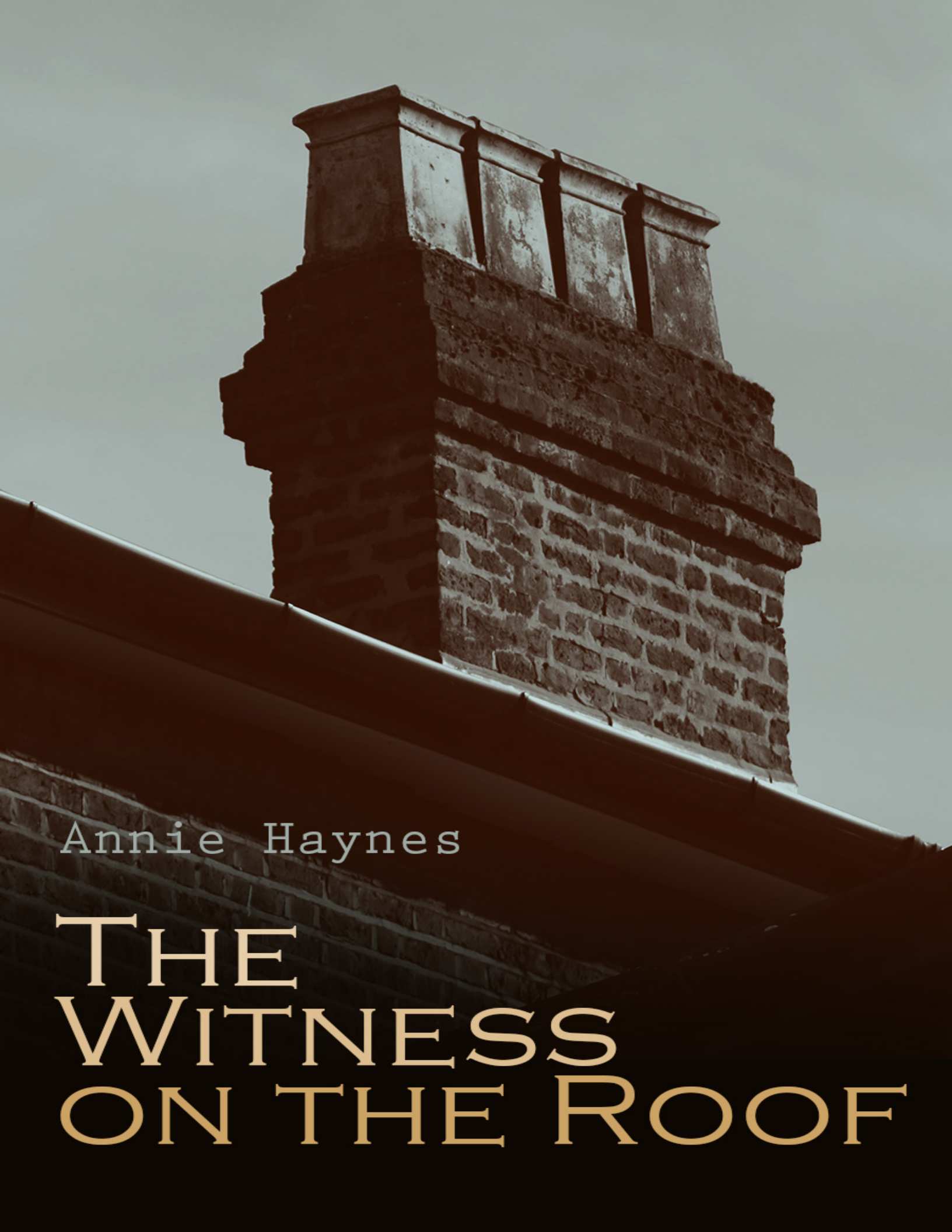

Annie Haynes

The Witness on the Roof

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The Witness on the Roof

British Murder Mystery

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Chapter I

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“Now, polly, there you go again! Didn’t I promise you the worst thrashing you ever had in your life if you let little Tim out of your arms again? And there he is, crawling in the gutter, and his clean pinny all dirty, and you with one of them nasty, trashy fairy-tale books! I declare you forget everything. I’ll give you something to remember!”

The speaker seized the frightened-looking child, who was cowering away from her against the wall and administered a series of shakes, punctuating them with rough blows aimed haphazard on the thin shoulders. Tim, the cause of the commotion, paused in the midst of his happy investigation of the contents of the gutter and set up a loud howl.

A man’s shadow darkened the threshold.

“Let be, missis, let be!” a gruff voice said. “What has the child been doing now? Haven’t I told you I won’t have her thrashed?”

“Doing? Little need to ask that question, John Spencer—look at Tim out there! You are fair silly over the girl—”

But the hand had relaxed its grip; little Polly waited for no more. Experience had taught her that, though her father might take her part at the time, her stepmother was sure to have her own way in the end. She ran out at the back of the house, past the stables, in which she could hear her father’s charges, the great Sir Robert Brunton’s carriage horses, stirring impatiently. With a passing feeling of wonder that Jim Gregory, her father’s underling, should be away from his post, she climbed up a ladder into the loft where the provender for the horses was kept.

High above, almost hidden by the rough straw, there was a small round window. To get to it, holding by the bundles of straw, was an easy matter to Polly. She caught an echo of her stepmother's voice in the yard as she popped through and, clambering by a water-pipe, made a perilous ascent to the roof of the nearest house. There, concealed by a high stack of chimneys, she presently sat down to review the situation.

Mrs. Spencer was the only mother the child had ever known. John Spencer's first wife had died in 1887, leaving him with two daughters—Evie, then just fifteen, and the week-old baby.

It had been a sorry time for the man. Evie adored the baby, but her ideas of managing it, and the house, had been vague, and there had been no one to blame John Spencer when, a couple of years after his wife's death, he had married the buxom cook in the establishment in which he was coachman—no one, that is to say, but Evie, who had resented her father's second marriage passionately. There had been constant skirmishes between her and her stepmother until, when Polly was five years old, Evie had found the situation intolerable and had suddenly disappeared from home.

Polly—whose memory of her sister was now merely a vague recollection of being cradled in tender arms, of loving kisses being pressed upon her cheeks—sometimes had letters and beautiful presents from Evie. The rest of the family had nothing. Her stepmother, loudly opining that the girl had gone to the bad, confiscated the presents; the letters, written very plainly so that the child might read them, Polly kept and conned over and over again until she knew them by heart. It was nice to feel that some one cared for her, even this dimly-remembered elder sister.

She was thinking of that now as she sat hunched up behind the chimneys. She had had a letter from her sister the day before; perhaps that had helped to make her stepmother so cross, she reflected. Young as she was, she realized perfectly that the fact that Evie had so completely emancipated herself from her thraldom was exceedingly galling to Mrs. Spencer—almost as galling perhaps as that other fact which she had heard her father state in one of his rare fits of anger.

“Leave the child alone!” he had growled. “You don’t understand her—how should you? Her mother was a lady born.”

Polly thought of that now as she looked round with the air of a conqueror exploring some unknown world.

Grove Street Mews ran at the back of Hinton Square, where the town house of her father’s employer was situated. At the opposite side, nearer where Polly had emerged, was Grove Street, a precinct which had undoubtedly known better days; fallen as it was, it still retained some remnants of past greatness in the shape of lofty rooms and large windows. It had, however, become the prey of the tenement owner, and each house harbored six or eight different tenants.

It was on the roof of one of these Grove Street houses that Polly now found herself. Above her there arose another story and yet another. Polly ran great danger of being seen as she picked her way carefully along. It was very dirty; soot and grime seemed to have found a final resting-place on the ledges. Looking down at her begrimed frock and pinafore, Polly shrugged her thin shoulders with unchild-like resignation. What did it matter? Her stepmother was sure to be angry anyhow.

At first there was fascination enough in the roof itself—in climbing over the various little projections, skirting the chimneys, or watching the sparrows that sat looking at her with their unwinking black eyes, as if marvelling at this sudden invasion of their territory.

But presently Polly grew more enterprising; she looked up at the long rows of windows. What were the people doing behind the blinds and curtains?

Some of the sills were on a level with her head; raising herself on tiptoe she could just manage to see in. The first was a sitting-room; so much she had contrived to make out when there was a sound of an opening door, and with a little gasp of alarm she drew back.

No sound came from the room, however; evidently she had passed unnoticed; and presently, regaining confidence, she crept along.

At length she was stopped by the wall of the next story. Polly looked up at the overhanging eaves wistfully; it was impossible to think of getting up there, and she was about to turn back hopelessly when a window close at hand caught her attention—it was sufficiently low to be easy of access. Polly found herself unable to resist the temptation. Tiptoeing, she gazed through the lower pane. At first, by contrast with the sunshine outside, everything looked dark, but, becoming used to the dimness, the child saw that the room was a great bare-looking apartment. She was too ignorant to know that the big easel in the middle of the room, the stacks of unfinished canvases against the walls, the untidy litter of paints and tubes and rags on the centre table proclaimed it to be a studio, but something in its aspect attracted her.

A tall man was standing with his back to the window; farther on, nearer the fireplace across the black rug, there

lay what Polly thought was a heap of white drapery. But Polly scarcely noticed that; she was altogether absorbed in watching the man's movements. There was something odd about the way he was seizing papers, photographs, books, tearing them, through and casting them hurriedly into the bright, open fire that burned on the hearth.

In the recess, nearest the window by which Polly was standing, was a door; as the child, her big brown eyes wide open, marveled why the man in the room was recklessly destroying all the pretty pictures she thought so fascinating, a slight movement in the recess caught her eye. She glanced round quickly—the door was being opened. Slowly, very cautiously, it was pushed forward an inch or two; then it remained stationary.

The man went on with his work of destruction; there, was something oddly stealthy about his movements, in spite of his evident haste; scarcely a sound reached Polly's ears, though the window above her was open. Yet there was a certain system about the way he went to work; he would open a book, tear out a few leaves and throw them into the fire, then lay the book down on the table, still in the same furtive, noiseless fashion, and dart to the other end of the table.

As he turned, Polly saw his face plainly.

It was dark, with strongly-marked, rugged features, a mass of rather long, curly hair, a short, neat beard. He was strongly built on massive lines, with big, loose limbs and broad shoulders. Long afterward other details came back to Polly. She remembered that he was wearing a grey suit, that his linen was clean and white; she recalled the bunch of violets in his buttonhole, the flash of the big. red stone on the little finger of his left hand.

Presently he stood for a moment near the easel. Polly could see that he was putting things in his pockets. Was he a thief, she asked herself breathlessly. She had heard her father and stepmother talking of some daring burglaries that had been perpetrated in the neighborhood. Was it possible that this man, whose whole mode of procedure seemed to her so extraordinary, was a burglar? Would she have to tell the police? Her round eyes grew rounder. But the man by the table had evidently got all he wanted. With a little gesture of repudiation, he pushed from him all the rest of the litter upon the table, then he went farther away from the window, picked up some small object from the floor, and came over to the white heap upon the rug.

The door in the corner moved, opened rather wider. Little Polly's breathing quickened; she stared before her with wide open, dilated eyes, as if fascinated. It was her imagination of course—it was like the ghastly fancies that sometimes, came when she was in bed and the candle was dying down, turning the homely shadows on the walls into things of dread—but it seemed to her, now that she saw things more clearly, there was something terrifying about the aspect of that tangled mass of drapery heaped upon the rug. It was curiously hunched up; at one end a small black object protruded, a stray beam of sunlight caught it, sparkled on something bright.

Polly's little face turned white; she felt frightened! It could not be a buckle on a woman's shoe—it could not be a woman's foot and ankle that were stretched out there, rigid, motionless?

The man was bending down; he was moving the white mass.

Polly, watching, dominated by terror, saw that it was unmistakably a human form that lay there. With the pathetic

early experience of the children of the poor, she had looked on the face of death more than once; she needed no words to tell her the reason of that rigid immobility.

With all her heart the child longed to get away; but sheer horror rendered her motionless.

The figure on the floor lay very still, just as the man placed it. Now that he had moved it, Polly could see that there were ugly dark stains on the white, flimsy gown near the shoulder. She could not see the whole face, only the outline of a rounded cheek and a knot of golden hair.

The man lifted one arm, looked at it scrutinizingly, bent it to one particular angle, then put it down carefully and studied the aspect with his head on one side. Polly saw the crimson gleam of his ring against the white of the dead woman's gown. There was something remarkable about the setting: three heavy golden claws seemed to hold the stone.

The man's face was turned to the window now as he stooped over the dead woman, but he did not look up. He was pallid, with an unnatural greenish pallor; even from that distance it was possible to see great beads of perspiration standing on his brow. He paused a moment as if listening for some sound behind. Then he laid the shining object which he had picked up from the polished boards at the other side of the table on the rug close by the girl's hand. Polly knew what that was; she had seen something like it at the shooting booths.

The door near the window moved again; Polly felt a sudden accession of terror. Who was on the other side? Did the man in the room know that some one was there watching him? What would happen when the door, now only slightly ajar, was fully open? She turned away with a frightened sob; in that silent room it had the force of a louder sound. With a quick gesture the man raised his head,

his hand sought his pocket; his eyes, wild and haggard, glanced rapidly behind, then met those of the child peering in at the window.

He sprang to his feet; the door at the side moved again; with a cry of terror, Polly fell back on the sooty roof. She heard a sound behind her, and, fearing that the man was coming after her, she ran over the roof back to the hayloft, little sobs escaping from her. She fell rather than dropped into the loft, too terrified to look behind her, and, tumbling into the straw, she crouched down with her head covered, long quivering sobs shaking her body. How long she had lain there she never knew—to her it seemed hours—when there was a noise in the stable below; some one was coming up the ladder to the loft.

Polly sat up and listened, her heart beating fast with terror. She recognized the step in a minute—it was that of Jim Gregory, the groom—and cried out with a deep sigh of relief:

‘‘Oh, Jim, Jim!”

He gazed at her in amazement, his usually florid face paler than its wont.

“Why, what in the world—” he began.

Polly clutched him in an agony; even at that moment a passing wonder as to why he was wearing his best clothes in the daytime struck her.

“I’m frightened, Jim,” she moaned, “so frightened.”

“Frightened!” The man stooped down and gathered her up in his arms. “Who’s frightened you, Polly? Them that tries to hurt you will have to reckon with Jim Gregory!”

“She was lying on the floor all white, and he was there, and the door opened—”

The sentence ended in a little gasp, and the child hid her face on Gregory’s shoulder.

Chapter II

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“I won’t have the child frightened,” said John Spencer obstinately, as he finished lacing his boots. His wife’s face was rather redder than usual as she stood opposite, her sleeves rolled up in readiness to begin the week’s washing, Tim clinging to her skirts.

“But don’t I tell you, John, it’s all the talk this morning, and here I’ve been listening to the child for the past hour, and this is what she’s seen—”

Mr. Spencer’s face became apoplectic.

“Don’t want to know what she’s seen! I tell you I won’t have the child bothered!”

Mrs. Spencer shrugged her shoulders scornfully.

“If you don’t know what she’s seen, John Spencer, it strikes me other folk will. Why, the police will be round asking questions! No good you thinking—” She broke off with a little cry.

Her husband had advanced a step or two towards her; his face was very close to hers.

“Let them ask!” he roared. “You will tell them nothing; do you hear that, woman? I’m not going to have the child brought into court and questioned and cross-questioned until the senses are frightened out of her. What is that you say—you don’t see why she should be frightened? No, it would be different with you, no doubt, but her mother was a lady born.” His voice dropped a little. “It was not fit for the likes of me to touch her gown; and I haven’t took the care of her children I ought. You drove Eve from home with your nasty, nagging tongue, and now it is Polly. But I won’t have

it, missis—I won’t have it, so remember!” He banged his great fist on the table as he spoke and glared into the woman’s eyes.

Mrs. Spencer shrank back, for once in her life thoroughly cowed.

Her husband was generally of an easy, phlegmatic temperament, but she had always known that he was a man it would be dangerous to rouse—that beneath his apparent placid exterior there slumbered hidden fires. Her common sense came to her aid now. She picked up her basket of dirty clothes and retired to the kitchen.

John Spencer reached down his jar of tobacco from a shelf and sat down in his easy chair, preparatory to enjoying a well-earned rest before he went back to his horses.

He frowned as he filled his pipe. Faulty as he might have been in his dealings with his first wife’s children, he was fully conscious that they occupied a place in his heart that the present Mrs Spencer’s numerous progeny was never likely to fill. Polly had been talking a lot of nonsense during the night, he said to himself; the child was feverish and overwrought, but he was not going to have mountains made out of molehills. He had been a little touched as well as surprised at the length of the visits his wife had paid to her bedside during the night, but the matter was explained now —women did not mind a bit of trouble if they wanted to satisfy their curiosity.

Just as he reached this point in his reflections there was a knock at the open door.

“Well, what is it?” Spencer called out. Then turning his head and catching sight of the man who stood outside, he got up awkwardly and touched his forehead. “Beg pardon, sir! You were wanting to see me?”

His unexpected visitor glanced at him a moment before he answered. He was a short, dapper man, attired in an immaculate suit; his face, long and rather thin, bore a striking resemblance to a hawk, added to, perhaps, by the gold rimmed pince-nez that was perched high upon the Roman nose; he was clean-shaven save for stubby side-whiskers.

“If you are John Spencer, head coachman to Sir Robert Brunton, I should be glad of a few words with you,” he said.

Spencer touched his forehead again.

“That is me, right enough, sir.”

The stranger walked inside and deposited his hat on the deal table.

“I must introduce myself, though you and I have met before, Mr. Spencer. But there—time has altered us both. You have not forgotten an interview we had in the offices of Hurst and Pounceby, of Obeston?”

Spencer’s face distinctly deepened in hue; he shuffled his feet together awkwardly.

“No, I haven’t forgotten sir. But you can’t be Mr. Hurst.”

The other readjusted his glasses.

“Ah, yes! The progress of years! But I am sure that you will remember that my firm had the honor of representing Mr. Davenant?”

Spencer moved his great foot backwards and forwards along the floor.

“I remember, sir. And he stuck to what you said, then, did Mr. Davenant. Even when my poor wife died he—”

“Ah, well, you must let bygones be bygones!” the lawyer interrupted. “I have brought better news to-day, Mr. Spencer! You heard of the old Squire’s death of course?”

“Ay, and Mr. Guy’s!”

“And Mr. Guy’s son’s?” Mr. Hurst added gravely, “You can understand what that means?”

“I don’t know as I do,” Spencer said slowly. “I don’t see as it will make any difference to me or mine, Mr. Hurst, sir. You told me yourself as he vowed—the old Squire did—as never a penny of his should come to anyone as bore my name.”

Mr. Hurst coughed.

“Many a man says more than he means when he is angry, Mr. Spencer; the approach of death softens most of us. Mr. Davenant left Davenant Hall to his wife for her life; on her, death it was to descend to his son Guy and his heirs; failing them, he desires her to select one of the children of his late daughter, Mary Evelyn, who shall take the name of Davenant and become the heiress of Davenant Hall. Now, as you know, Guy was killed in the hunting field five years after his father’s death; two months ago his son George died of typhoid at his school. Thus you see—” pausing suggestively.

Spencer stood still, his big, red face turned expectantly on the lawyer, only his quickened breathing betraying that his silence betokened no lack of interest.

“So that at Mrs. Davenant’s death, under the old Squire’s will, the Hall will pass, with all the rest of his possessions, to one of your children, whichever Mrs. Davenant selects,” Mr. Hurst went on. “I am here as her representative today. She is naturally anxious—” with a dry cough—“to make the acquaintance of the grandchildren to whom she has been hitherto a stranger.”

“I see what you mean, Mr. Hurst, sir,” John Spencer’ said slowly. “Squire has left it so as she can’t help herself, else my children might have died same as their poor mother, without a word from her.”

Mr. Hurst took off his glasses and polished them carefully.

“Well, well, Mr. Spencer, as I said before, it seems to me that the time has come to let bygones be bygones. You must remember that there is much to be said on both sides. We have heard that you have formed other ties”—his keen eyes watching the half-open door, behind which Mrs. Spencer was listening eagerly to his words—“you have another family to provide for, for I am instructed by Mrs. Davenant to inform you that she is willing to undertake the maintenance of the children of your first marriage, and to allow you, on condition of their being given up entirely to her, one hundred pounds a year to be paid quarterly.”

“Stop!” Mr. Spencer’s face became suddenly redder. “I don’t sell my own flesh and blood!” he said roughly. “Never a penny of the Davenants’ money have I had, and never a penny of it will I take!”

“But my dear sir—” the lawyer was beginning, when there was a sudden interruption.

Mrs. Spencer threw open the door and came forward.

“You would never be such a fool, John Spencer!” she cried energetically. “Begging your pardon, sir”—with a slight curtsey to Mr. Hurst—“but I could not help hearing what you were saying, and to think of Spencer refusing!”

“I said I should not sell my own flesh and blood!” her husband affirmed stolidly. “No more I shan’t!” he went on with dogged determination in his tone, “But it isn’t for me to stand in the children’s light. Their mother”—with an odd choking sound in his throat—“would have wished it. Mrs. Davenant shall have them, sir—leastways Polly. I don’t rightly know where Evie is—she has been away from home for some time, in a place I reckon —but the little one had a letter from her yesterday morning, and she will be coming home fast enough when she hears of this.”

“Ay, I dare say she will! But I think I shall have a word to say to this,” Mrs. Spencer broke in truculently. “It is one thing to let the child go if it is made worth our while, but if Spencer is going to make a fool of himself it is a different matter. I am not going to put myself out to do without Polly.” She looked defiantly at her husband.

Spencer scowled at her and then deliberately turned his back.

“You shall have Polly, sir. It will be for the child’s good and it may be as they will let us hear how she goes on sometimes.”

“Certainly, certainly!” the lawyer acquiesced blandly. “This decision does you credit, Mr. Spencer. Probably the child herself will be able to thank you in later years. And now—how soon can she be ready? I have business which will keep me in town to-day, but to-morrow I hope to start for Warchester.”

John Spencer drew a deep breath.

“Polly shall be ready for you to-morrow, sir.”

“Thank you, Mr. Spencer! Thank you!” The lawyer turned to the door. He had seen war in Mrs Spencer’s eyes, and he was anxious to avoid a scene. “To-morrow,” he repeated, and made his escape.

Mrs. Spencer turned on her husband in a fury.

“Well, of all the fools, John Spencer! But I shall have something to say to this. I’ll see if the police can’t stop the child from being took away from me as have always been a mother to her. It is my belief if they hear what’s she’s seen —ah!”

Spencer had gripped her arm.

“Polly is going, and she’s seen nothing! You remember that, woman! How should she, a child like her? Don’t you be making a fool of yourself! Polly will go back to her mother’s

folk and be made a lady of, same as her mother before her, and you will look after the young ones yourself, like other people. I ought to ha' seen as you did before; but it's never too late to mend, and you'll bear in mind what I have said. If I hear as you have spoke I'll—" He did not finish the threat, he kept his face near hers for a moment before he released her arm and pushed her from him.

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Spencer was too thoroughly cowed to say more.

She leaned back against the doorpost in silence, while her husband knocked the ash from his pipe, and then, pulling his cap low over his brow, turned to the stables.

It was raining hard the next day when Polly, crying miserably, bade good-bye to her father and stepmother, and set out with Mr. Hurst for her unknown grandmother's house.

It was a long journey to Warchester, and dusk was gathering when the cab Mr. Hurst had hired at the station turned in at the Hall gates.

"We are nearly there now," Mr. Hurst remarked cheerfully to his little companion.

The child made no reply; she shrank a little further from him into her corner. So far, even direct questioning had produced nothing from her but monosyllables, and she had refused to eat a morsel of the refreshment Mr, Hurst had ordered for her.

As the cab stopped a footman came down the steps and opened the door. Mr. Hurst lifted his little charge out.

In the hall the butler, an elderly man whose hair had grown white in the service of the Davenants, was waiting to receive them.

"The mistress is in the morning-room, sir. I am to take you to her at once, and the young lady. So this is Miss

Mary’s child, sir?”

“Yes, Sturgess, this is Miss Mary’s child,” Mr. Hurst assented.

He took Polly’s cold, thin little hand in his and led her across the hall. Old Sturgess cleared his throat gruffly as he preceded them.

“It seems to bring the old time back, sir,” he observed apologetically.

Mr. Hurst made no reply; he was wondering how the coming interview would end. He, knew that the child who was now clinging nervously to him symbolized the bitterest trouble and humiliation of her life to the lonely old woman who was now awaiting them.

Mrs. Davenant had not been a young woman twenty-one years before when that terrible grief had overtaken her, but assuredly from that time she had become old—all her comely middle-age had fled, her hair had grown white, her face lined and marked, her slight frame bowed, Yet there had been many who had blamed her and said that, in her intense love for her son, she had in a measure neglected her daughter —that she had been harsh and imperious with the girl who, as a child, had always been at her father’s heels in the garden and round the stables and as a young woman had been in the habit of taking long, lonely rides. The end had come suddenly; a suitor, favored by Mrs. Davenant, had been refused by her daughter, there had been a period of bickering, and recrimination, useless insistence on the mother’s side, obstinate refusal on the daughter’s, and then one morning the neighborhood had been electrified to hear that Miss Mary Davenant had eloped with her groom.

It had been a terrible scandal of course; thenceforward Mary Davenant’s name was never uttered in her old home.

It was rumored in the neighborhood that more than once she had written to her parents, but that her letters had been returned unopened. It was said that the father was harder than the mother. Be that as it might, it was certain that when Squire Davenant was making his will some tender recollection of the pretty, dark-eyed daughter who had been the joy of his life must have obtruded itself, and for once he had dared to disregard his wife's wishes and to add a clause which stated that, failing his son, Guy, and his heirs, the children of his daughter Mary should succeed to the property. That his independent action had been a bitter pill to his widow, none could doubt, but she had given no sign of her mortification.

The door was thrown open. A little old lady occupied the chair in the centre of the room just under the electric light—a pretty, dainty old lady, whose pink-and-white complexion and elaborately-waved white hair gave her the appearance of a Dresden china shepherdess.

Mr. Hurst led Polly to her at once.

"You see I have fulfilled my commission, Mrs. Davenant."

"I see."

The old lady smiled as she looked at the child, who quailed before her gaze. Polly's small, icy fingers instinctively clung to Mr. Hurst's warm hand. Here at least was something tangible, human; anything, she thought vaguely, was better than meeting the gaze of those blue eyes, than being expected to respond to that cold smile.

"So this is my new granddaughter, is it?" Mrs. Davenant said in clear, silvery tones that seemed to hold a ring of her lost youth. "Be good enough to stand aside, Mr. Hurst, and let me look at her!"

Thus adjured, Mr. Hurst had no choice but to obey. He was compelled to disregard the child's mute appeal and

release the unwilling fingers.

Polly never forgot her feeling of misery as she stood by herself in the blaze of light, the one incongruous element in the luxuriously furnished room.

So they waited for a moment; the drooping brown eyes raised themselves reluctantly and met the mocking gaze of the blue ones.

The merciless scrutiny included all the child's defects of costume—the shabby, ill-fitting blue cashmere that had been her Sunday best, the big white pinafore peeping out in front from beneath the cloak that had been Mrs. Spencer's and had been cut down for Polly, the child's thin face, the big, frightened eyes, the untidy wisps of hair beneath the sailor-hat, the long thin arms and legs.

Then at last Mrs. Davenant laid her lorgnette down and smiled again.

"So this is the heiress of Davenant Hall! You are a brave man, Mr. Hurst."

Mr. Hurst moved uncomfortably. Long as he had known Mrs. Davenant, he had never learnt to feel at home with her.

"Not of necessity the heiress," he ventured to remind her. "There is another daughter, Evelyn."

"Who has followed her mother's example, and run away from home, I think you told me." Mrs. Davenant shut up her lorgnette with a snap. "I don't think we will trouble about Evelyn, thank you, Mr. Hurst!"

But at the mention of that familiar name some of little Polly's hardly-won composure deserted her.

"Oh, I want Evie!" she cried, with a miserable sob; then, falling on her knees at her grandmother's feet, "Oh, please, please, send for Evie!"

Mrs. Davenant looked at her with cold distaste as she drew her velvet gown out of the child's reach.

“Really, I am afraid that this child is going to be troublesome! May I trouble you to ring the bell, Mr. Hurst? Ah, Mason,” as an elderly woman appeared. “Will you take Miss—Miss—Really I have not thought what we are to call the child, Mr. Hurst; Polly is impossible of course, and Mary”—a momentary contraction passing over her delicate features—“I do not care for Mary. Her name is Mary Ursula Joan, I think. Well, Joan was my mother’s name, but it will have to serve. Take Miss Joan to her nursery, Mason, and see that she has some bread and milk. Don’t let me see her again until she had learnt to control herself.”

Mason took the child’s hand in hers.

“Come, Miss Joan,” she said kindly.

The forlorn child found herself guided across the dreadful space that lay between her and the door; then, when it, had closed behind them she was caught up in the woman’s strong arms. “Ay, my child, don’t let the mistress frighten you! I’ll look after you, my Miss Mary’s own child!”

Chapter III

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“The Marristors and the Stourminsters have accepted, Joan, and this new man, Lord Warchester—you saw him with Reggie the other day. Aunt Ursula will simply have to let you come.”

“If you can get Granny to realize the strength of your argument—” Joan Davenant shrugged her shapely shoulders, a slight enigmatical smile curving the corners of her mouth.

The years had changed the neglected child of Grove Street Mews into a remarkably good-looking young woman. Tall and straight, with a certain resemblance to the Davenants in the modelling of her features and the set of her firm chin, she had inherited from a plebeian ancestry on her father’s side a strength of constitution, a soundness of mind and limb that made her vigorous youth a joy to look upon. Her eyes were brown, flecked with gold; her hair and the long upcurled lashes were black in the shadow, amber in the sunlight.

Her companion, Cynthia Trewhistle, the wife of Reginald Trewhistle, Mrs. Davenant’s nephew, was considerably Joan’s senior, a little, delicate-looking woman with fluffy golden hair and big, appealing grey eyes. Her dainty white cloth costume and big black picture hat were curiously in contrast with Joan’s shabby blue serge gown and plain straw hat.

The two were walking up the park towards the Hall. The March sunshine which streamed down upon them and made Mrs. Trewhistle loosen her sables, despite the touch of frost

in the air, showed up with cruel distinctness the frayed seams of Joan's frock, but found no flaw in the firm whiteness of her skin or the brilliant color mantling in her cheeks.

Mrs. Trewhistle slipped her arm within the girl's.

"It's a shame the way Aunt Ursula treats you! I was saying so to Reggie before I started. Here are you wasting your youth and beauty cooped up in this dull old place—for you are beautiful you know, Joan," giving her arm an affectionate squeeze. "You have never been to Court, you have never been to a dance, or a picnic even, or any of the delightful things that every girl expects."

"On the other hand I have had a good many things that my father's daughter could not have expected," said Joan quietly.

Mrs. Trewhistle's face clouded.

"Bother your father!" she exclaimed impetuously. "I beg your pardon, Joan—I suppose I ought not to have said that, but you and Aunt Ursula are really too old-fashioned. The idea of worrying about your father nowadays! You are unusually good-looking, you are the greatest heiress in the county, and that is all that matters."

"Is it?" Joan said absently. She stooped and picking three early daffodils tucked them in her belt.

"Yes, of course it is!" Mrs. Trewhistle assured her with decision. "Now, Joan, I am going to see Aunt Ursula. I am frightened to death of her, as you know, but I mean you to come to my dance."

"It will not be any use, Cynthia, but if you like—"

Mrs Trewhistle quickened her steps.

"We will go at once while my courage is screwed up to the sticking-point. Come, Joan!"

The girl looked down affectionately at her companion more than once; her friendship for her cousin's wife was the one bright spot in a life which but for Cynthia would have been dull indeed. Sometimes Joan was tempted to wonder why her grandmother had sent for her to Warchester, why she had troubled herself about her upbringing at all; it was so very evident that old Mrs. Davenant had no love—scarcely even any toleration—for her dead daughter's child.

Joan could look back to her coming to Warchester with a kind of detached pity for the lonely child who had found the new life so difficult and so alarming. She could not recall one sign of sympathy, one word of affection from her grandmother, and but for Mason, her mother's old nurse, her lot would have been lonely indeed. To the best of her powers Mason had mothered her, had rejoiced in her health and strength. It had been through Mason that her few pleasures had been obtained.

For as time went on Mrs. Davenant had developed habits of parsimony. Her own gowns came from Paris; though she never went out she was as elegantly dressed as in her youth; but for Joan it was a different matter. The very plainest of stuff was good enough for her—made up by the village dress-maker. The girl's governesses had found themselves restricted in every way with regard to her education.

Joan had done with governesses now, for the last two years she had been her own mistress, but beyond the actual ceasing of lessons the fact of being grown up scarcely affected her life at all. Her grandmother made her no dress allowance. The only visitors who were ever received at the Hall were the old vicar of the parish and his wife and Reggie and Cynthia Trewhistle. Even with them Joan's intercourse was very much restricted. Cynthia Trewhistle had grumbled

to her husband ever since her marriage at the state of seclusion in which Joan was kept; to-day she had come with the express determination of “having it out” with Mrs. Davenant.

Nevertheless, the awe in which she stood of her aunt by marriage was considerable; her knees were quaking as she mounted the steps to the front door.

Joan led the way across the hall to the room to which Mr. Hurst had brought her, a shivering, frightened child, ten years before.

“Here is Cynthia, granny,” she said, as she opened the door.

Mrs. Davenant looked up. She was sitting at her writing table, apparently immersed in correspondence. Joan often wondered to whom these lengthy epistles were sent, since comparatively few letters came to the Hall. Time had dealt lightly with Mrs. Davenant; she was scarcely altered since that memorable evening when Joan arrived at the Hall; the lines round her mouth were a little deeper, the tiny network of wrinkles round her eyes had spread a little, but that was all. There was still that resemblance to a Dresden china shepherdess.

“How do you do, Cynthia? You are here betimes,” she said slowly.

“I came early because I wanted to ask you something, Aunt Ursula,” Mrs. Trewhistle began boldly, taking the bull by the horns, as she afterward phrased it to her husband.

Mrs. Davenant raised her pencilled eyebrows.

“Indeed! Well, you, know that anything I can do, dear Cynthia—”

“Well, you really can do this quite easily.” Mrs. Trewhistle’s color came and went quickly despite her courage. There was something most disconcerting in the

gaze of those blue eyes. “You know next week I am having a dance—”

“Ah, yes!” Mrs. Davenant nodded. “I remember you were good enough to send me an invitation. Well, go on, my dear.”

“I want you to let Joan come,’’ Cynthia went on desperately. “Oh, I know you never go out, Aunt Ursula, but it is quite a small dance really. We would take every care of Joan, and really she ought to go out sometimes. It is not fair to keep a young girl shut up altogether.”

There was a pause; Cynthia did not dare to raise her eyes. Chatter away though she might at other times, she always felt it an effort to speak to her husband’s aunt; she was well aware that even this very mild remonstrance would border upon audacity in the old lady’s eyes.

“You are really very kind,” said Mrs. Davenant at last. “But I thought you understood—I imagined I had fully explained it to Reginald, at any rate—that I think it better that Joan should not go out. Therefore, my dear Cynthia—”

“Oh, yes, I know, and I think, as Reggie thinks, that it is an awful shame!” Mrs. Trewhistle retorted hotly, her sense of Mrs. Davenant’s injustice to the girl whom she had learnt to love as a sister overcoming her fear of the old lady. “It is cruel to make her waste her life like this! What good is it to her to be the heiress to Davenant Hall if she never goes anywhere, never sees anybody?”

“‘The heiress of Davenant Hall—ah!” said Mrs. Davenant. “And so Joan has been getting you to speak for her; my dear?”

Joan was leaning with one arm against the high oak mantel piece, her fingers gently touching the daffodils in her belt, her head bent; apparently she had been taking no

interest in the conversation. She glanced at her grandmother now.

“I did not get Cynthia to speak,” she said quietly. “I told her that it would be no use.”

“Yes, indeed, she tried to stop me,” Cynthia went on impetuously. “It was I who had quite determined to ask you. You will let Joan come, will you not, Aunt Ursula? It is going to be a great success. The new Lord Warchester has accepted—you remember how fond poor Guy was of him when he was Paul Wilton—and—oh, lots of people! It will simply break my heart if Joan is not allowed to come!”

“Oh, really, my dear Cynthia, I do not think hearts are broken quite so easily!” and the old lady laughed amusedly.

Joan looked at her quickly as she heard the sound.

“What does the heiress of Davenant Hall say in the matter?” Mrs. Davenant went on, a little sarcastic inflection in her voice.

“I should like to go, naturally,” Joan said composedly. “But you know I never ask favors from you, granny.”

“No, no—it is I. Aunt Ursula, do for once!” Cynthia pleaded.

Mrs. Davenant glanced at her anxious face coldly.

“I do not see why it should be any satisfaction to you, but —”

“You will!” Cynthia cried, clasping her hands. “Aunt Ursula, it is perfectly sweet of you!”

“That is settled then!” Mrs. Davenant took up a paper as though to intimate that the interview was ended.

Cynthia turned to Joan.

“Is it not perfectly delightful? About your dress? Of course you have nothing”—with a disparaging glance at the blue serge—“but I dare say, for me, Madame Benoit would get one done in time.”