

THE SECRETS OF GREYSTONE HOUSE

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THE HOUSE

I walk through the gates of 22 Andover Lane, and for a moment I wonder if I have come to the right place. In my memory Greystone House is more imposing, more extravagant in its collection of gables and chimneys and outbuildings. But I know this must be it, and as I continue down the drive an earlier perspective reasserts itself. It is a large house, a house which announces itself to the world, and if it spoke louder to me as a boy than it does to me now, it is still the same Greystone: sitting foursquare in the garden, with its smooth lawns and yew hedges and yes, even with the big urns filled with geraniums either side of the front door steps. The garden is looking a bit rough around the edges now. The sycamore has outgrown the lawn and towers threateningly over the house, the ivy covers more of the grey stone.

The house is late Victorian, built for the founder of Hambleton's, the toffee manufacturers, in 1890. It is not an especially graceful or well-proportioned building, just a bit too tall for its width and giving the impression that it has been haphazardly assembled of all the pieces the owner thought should go into a rich man's house: a porticoed front door, bay windows, terraces, a conservatory. Inside, the main staircase is impressive, but the backstairs have an inconvenient twist in them; the first floor passage goes around more corners than seems necessary, as if the architect wasn't quite sure how to dispose of the bedrooms; and reaching the guest rooms on the attic floor involves travelling through the servants' part of the house. I saw none of this when I stayed here that summer. It was a house of a kind I had never known before, admitting of endless exploration, and its inhabitants provided a continuous pageant of a life I was unfamiliar with. What I didn't know then - what I have, in fact, only recently learned as I walk through those gates - is that the

Hambletons of Greystone House have their own reasons to remember that particular summer, reasons more sad and troubling than my own.

The first time I came through these gates I was eleven, a shopkeeper's son from East Finchley. I spent eight weeks here, eight weeks so far removed from my normal London life that they have always remained a separate episode in my memory, a clutch of vivid impressions that stand out in bold colour among the fuzzier recollections of the time before and the brown and grey of the years which came after. It was one glorious holiday to me, and it is only with hindsight that I recognise that those were not halcyon days, that I spent my time among individuals with their own passions and preoccupations, their own sorrows – and secrets.

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THE KITCHEN

Green fields roll by on either side of the train, dotted with sheep in the foreground and steeples in the distance, interrupted regularly by level crossings and tiny stations. I can't understand the old lady across from me sleeping through it all, there is so much to see, and I almost wish I were continuing to Sutton Scotney or Worthy Down just for their names. What couldn't happen in a place called Worthy Down?

I am travelling alone for the first time in my life, carrying a small suitcase and eight weeks' pocket money, plus 10/ for emergencies. My clothes have been sent ahead by post, and the suitcase only contains my night things and a change of underclothes, a parcel from my mum for my aunt, and the shoebox with my personal treasures. Dad has written down where to change trains (Newbury) and where to get off. *You'll be met at Kingfield Halt at 2:40.* There is a telephone number for if the train is early, or more likely, late. Now I am watching anxiously to see if we are running on time, dreading having to enter a call box and ring up my aunt's employers, a rich family I have not met before. It almost obscures the pleasure of being thought old enough to travel on my own.

Dad explained it all carefully, in the last week of school: 'Your mother is feeling a bit poorly, and she is going to stay with her sister in Surrey until she is better. But with her twins there is no room for you as well, and I can't look after you and the shop both, with your mum not here, so I've arranged for you to stay with Helen during the holidays.'

Aunt Helen is dad's older sister. She is a widow with a son called Dick, who is in the navy, and she is cook to a family in Hampshire.

'I've written, and Mrs Hambleton has given permission for you to come. It's a big house, Helen says, so you won't be in the way, and it will be nice for you to spend some time in the country.'

All this didn't make much impression on me at the time, worried as I was. 'But will mum be all right? Is she ill?'

'She'll be fine,' dad said, 'She just needs a good long rest. I'll write down the address for you, so you can send her a postcard.'

At long last the train arrives at Kingfield Halt. The old lady continues to sleep, and I am the only passenger to alight. I look around the unfamiliar platform and am seized by panic. There is nobody here, no one who looks remotely like Aunt Helen or her fellow servants.

'Can I help you, son?' the porter asks.

'There should be someone here to meet me,' I stammer.

'You'll be Mrs Wilmot's nephew, I'm thinking. Miss Abbot is here for you. Come along.'

How does he know who I am? And who is Miss Abbot? As we come out of the station I see why she (whoever she is) wasn't on the platform to meet me. She is waiting by a small pony carriage with a girl of about five or six sitting in it.

'Ah, you've found him, Bates. Are you Jack? I'm Nanny Abbot, and this is Felicity.'

'And this is Biscuit,' the little girl says, indicating the pony.

The porter puts my suitcase in the carriage. 'Hop in.' Nanny Abbot gives him some money. I suppose the little girl must be the Hambletons' daughter.

'We thought it would be more fun to come for you with the pony and trap than to send the car didn't we, Felicity?' Miss Abbot says, as she drives off along a lane through what she calls 'the bit of wood'. It never occurred to me that they would send a motor car to collect me, much less a carriage. There is no other traffic, but there are magpies chattering in the trees, and a farm horse whinnies at Biscuit as we pass.

'Is it very far?'

'Not really, but just too far for Felicity to walk. This is Abbey Hill, the village, and the house is on the other side of it.'

Biscuit cheerfully trots along the road and left into another lane, through wrought iron gates and down a gravel drive, past the front door

of a tall, gabled building. 'Welcome to Greystone,' Nanny says, 'We'll go in through the back door. Mr Matthews will see to the pony.'

Through the back door and into the kitchen there is at last something familiar. 'There you are! Let me look at you.'

Aunt Helen says that I've grown - she always says that - but she herself hasn't changed a bit. She is ten years older than my dad and getting rather stout. She is one of the most comfortable people I know. You are never afraid to get things wrong, with Aunt Helen.

'Now I can't be climbing stairs all day with my legs, so Nanny'll show you your room and the facilities.'

Felicity comes too, chatting happily as we climb the stairs. On the first floor landing we run into a young man carrying a book. 'Hullo, who's this?'

Like a proper little lady, Felicity introduces us, with Nanny beaming approval.

'Jack, this is my brother Arthur. Arthur, this is Jack, he's Cook's nephew.' She turns to me, 'Are you called Wilmot like Cook?'

'No, my name is Riley.'

Arthur shakes my hand as if I am a grown-up. 'Welcome to Greystone House, Jack.'

My room is at the very top of the house, at the end of a long passage. From the dormer window I can see a large part of the garden, and farmland beyond the garden wall.

'Only the maids sleep on this floor,' Nanny says, 'At the other end. And when the tutor comes for the children he'll have the room across from you.'

They must have a lot of servants here. Someone has already unpacked my clothes and put them neatly in the chest of drawers.

'You can come down to the kitchen again when you've put your things away. I'm sure you must be hungry.'

I open my suitcase and take out my box of treasures. When I've put them on the nightstand this is really *my* room: the cigarette card album

of the kings and queens of England, the fossil ammonite Dick gave me when he was on leave, *Tales from King Arthur*, which is my favourite book, and the letter confirming that I have a place at Woodhill Grammar School starting in September.

II

On the first floor, on the same side of the house as my attic room, is the schoolroom. As I go downstairs with mum's parcel under my arm, Nanny calls me inside to introduce me to Felicity's other siblings.

'Jack is Cook's guest, and we must all make him welcome. After luncheon you can take him over the house, Felicity. And then when Felicity is having her nap perhaps you and Ian would like to show him the village, Gwendolyn?'

'O, but Nanny!'

'Did you have other plans?'

'No, but you said he was Cook's guest, not ours.'

'So he is. But he is a guest staying in your house, and you can hardly expect Mrs Wilmot to take time off to show him around, not if you want your tea tonight.'

'Of course not.'

And so it is arranged. While I eat bread and jam in the kitchen, Aunt Helen explains about the household. In addition to herself and Nanny there is Dolly the parlourmaid, Gladys the housemaid, Mr Matthews the chauffeur, and Thompson, who is the gardener. There is no manservant, my aunt says, as if I am likely to find fault with the fact, but sometimes Mr Matthews lends a hand indoors.

The family consists of Mr Hambleton (who is driven to his office in London every Monday by Mr Matthews, and comes home again on Friday afternoons), his wife, their four children, two dogs, and Bluebell the cat. Aunt Helen explains that the grown-ups don't eat at the same time as the children, and the servants have their own mealtimes as well.

'I'll give you your dinner in the servants' pantry and you'd best have your tea at the same time as the other children. But I can't have you in the kitchen all the time, Jack. You'll have to amuse yourself.'

I assure her that I'm good at finding things to do. 'Can I read the books from the schoolroom?'

'I'm sure you can, if you ask Gwendolyn or Ian. And of course you can play outside. If you want to be off all day I'll make you a picnic, just don't go farther than the river or the town. There are bicycles in the stables – you can ask the children if you can borrow one if you like. And I expect there are boys in the village you can play with.'

When I've finished my bread I get a tour of the house as promised, and there is a lot to see. On the ground floor are the drawing room, the dining room, the morning room, the study ('we're not allowed in here') and a spare bedroom and dressing room; on the first floor the family's bedrooms, the nursery and night nursery, and the schoolroom; and on the attic floor the long passage of bedrooms and box rooms with which I'm already familiar. Through a door in the hall one goes into 'the back of the house', to the kitchen and scullery, the servants' pantry, the larder, and the backstairs, with on the first floor above the kitchen my aunt's bedroom and sitting room, and the linen closets. I'm sure I shall never learn to find my way through all this, but then I think I will most likely stay out of the front rooms in any case.

In the drawing room we encounter a lady sitting very upright on a sofa, working on a piece of embroidery.

'What are you doing downstairs, Felicity? And who is this?'

'This is Jack, mother, he's Cook's nephew. Nanny said I should show him the house.'

'Ah, yes, your father wrote to me. Welcome, Jack. Now run along children, there is no need for you to be in here.'

I think Mrs Hambleton doesn't look like a mother at all, not like the mums on our street. She is more like a lady from a story in an illustrated paper, thin and smart and not quite real.

Felicity goes back to the nursery to take her nap, and her brother and

sister take me into Abbey Hill. They bring along the dogs, Rex and Boy, and I think they are pretending that they would have gone for a walk anyway. But they show me around kindly enough, pointing out St Oda's church (which is much too large for the little village), and the school they went to when they were small, and the High Street where the shops are. I buy a postcard with a painting of the Old Hall on it.

'There isn't a post office in the village, but we can get you a stamp at home,' Gwendolyn says.

Dear mum,

I hope you are feeling better. I am staying at Greystone House, which is very big, but not as big as the house in the picture. That is on the other side of the village. The Hambletons have 4 children: a little girl, a boy who is my age (his name is Ian) another girl and Arthur who is grown-up. I expect I shall have fun here.

Love from

Jack

Ian is not really my age, he is twelve, and has been going to boarding school for a year. He is thin, and almost a head taller than me, and at first I think he'd rather be left alone. But he condescends to play with me until his cousins get here on Friday.

'They're called Rory and Jamie and they always come in the summer hols. Only this year Rory and I have to have some beastly tutor.' He kicks a stone across the lane, which is enthusiastically chased by one of the dogs. 'It said on my report that if I didn't have coaching in the hols I would be held back a year. They mind awfully if one isn't good at Latin and History and all that rot.'

This makes no sense to me. It's a school, isn't it?

'And then Rory is coming to my school next term, and Uncle Gerald said he'd better be prepared and have lessons, too. Tutor's coming next week. Anyway, I'm free now. What shall we do?'

I don't know yet that Ian is always asking that, I think he's just being polite. But I've seen some children down the road kicking a ball around, so I'm ready with my answer.

'Why don't we join the football?'

He looks at me as if I have said a bad word. 'We play rugby at school.'

I shrug. 'It's just a game in the street. You'll soon get the hang of it.'

'Gentlemen don't play soccer,' Ian says stiffly. He turns back towards the lane, and the dogs follow. 'You go and play with those common kids if you want.'

I'm not particularly offended. I understand the Hambletons belong to another class, and so they do things differently. They speak with what Lizzy back home calls 'pound note voices', they call their tea dinner and their dinner luncheon. They go to expensive schools. I just don't understand why Ian would let that stop him from enjoying a game of football. Now I hesitate – should I go off on my own and join the game, or follow Ian back to the house? I suppose if I have to stay here for another two months, I'd better try and stay friends with Ian. I go back.

III

On my second day at Greystone House I decide to explore the garden. The weather is mild and summery, and Aunt Helen says I may go anywhere as long as I do not disturb the family.

Straight out of the back door is the kitchen yard, with the apricot and plum trees against the south-facing wall, the greenhouse, and the potting shed. The kitchen door is just around the corner, and the walled herb garden directly across from it, with its regimented beds of greens. With all these places I am already familiar, but I haven't been in the garden proper yet. Through the gate in the kitchen yard wall you arrive at the back of the house, between a border of colourful flowers and the tennis lawn. Here the path splits: you can go left, and follow its curve to a little door in the garden wall, or go right past the conservatory terrace and

towards the big lawn. I choose to go left, but the little door is bolted. Growing at the foot of the wall to the right of it are some straggly strawberry plants, and I spot a few ripe ones on them still. They look different somehow from the ones you can buy in a punnet in London, but they taste just as good.

The lawn is dominated by a big tree growing in the middle of it – a sycamore? It looks attractively climbable, but I’m not sure that would be allowed. Even the lawn itself is so perfectly smooth that I dare not set foot on it. Instead I stay on the path that brings me through an opening in a dark hedge, which I think is yew, and into the rose garden. My mum would love this, she likes the scent of roses, but it is a bit too smelly for me. Beyond the rose garden there is a rocky slope, with a different kind of pale green, white-flowered plants – there are so many things here I don’t know the names of! At the bottom is a still pond, with benches set to either side. From here I can only just see the gables of Greystone House above the hedges. I think the distance from the very end of the garden to the front door of the house must be about the same as that from the shop to the post office on our street. I walk back along the drive, past the front door and the big urns with the geraniums (I recognise those, at least). If I take a right hand path again that should bring me back into the kitchen yard and on home ground. But when I turn right at the corner of the house, I find myself instead in another yew-enclosed garden, with more coloured borders, and a terrace with open french windows leading onto it – I can hear the gramophone playing in the drawing room. On the terrace sits Arthur, reading a book.

‘Hullo, you’re Cook’s nephew aren’t you? Having a look around?’

‘Is that all right? I thought I could get back to the kitchen this way.’

‘You just need to follow the drive a bit farther, you’ll see the kitchen from the corner.’ He smiles at me over his book. ‘I imagine it’s a bit different from what you’re used to.’

‘It’s so big! I think our flat above the shop would fit into the drawing room, almost. Of course, we don’t have so many people living there. Is the house very old?’

‘No, not at all. It was built for my grandfather in 1890. I bet your house in London is older.’

I have never thought about that. It is just home, and the shop. Only grand houses have a history. But my *great*-grandfather opened the shop, so it must have been there already when this house was built.

‘There have been people living here for a long time, though,’ Arthur continues, ‘When they were digging the foundations for the house they found a dagger from the Iron Age. Do you know when that was?’

I nod. ‘Before the Romans.’

‘Exactly. Now that is *really* old. It’s in the museum in town, if you want to see it.’

Arthur is nineteen, and an undergraduate at Birmingham University, home now for the long vacation. His sister is fourteen, nearly the same age as Lizzy who works for my father in the shop. Gwendolyn is tall, and her dark hair is short and shingled, which makes her look almost like a grown woman. But she is still a schoolgirl, you can’t imagine her working behind a counter five days a week, and sew her own clothes, like Lizzy does. Or making up her face and going to the pictures with boys on her day off.

Whenever I don’t know how things are done here I ask Gwendolyn. She shows me where to leave dirty clothes for the laundry, and where to put my letters for the post to collect. When I ask Ian something like that he is scornful, and acts like there is something wrong with taking your letters to the pillar-box yourself, or having a mother who does her own washing. He isn’t exactly secretive, but he likes knowing things other people don’t, and sometimes it is just easier to ask his sister. But since he is closest to me in age, it is in Ian’s company that I mostly find myself in my first week.

A boy at his school has told Ian about Sherlock Holmes, and he has found a copy of Arthur Conan Doyle’s work in the drawing room bookcase. Now he insists on playing detectives. I have read the books too, and am willing to fall in with this suggestion, even though it means

I have to be Watson and am not allowed to be brilliant. After a failed experiment with casting Rex the Labrador as a ghostly hound, we settle down to making inferences about the people who come to Greystone House, trying to identify them from their appearance. Some are easy. The stooping, grey-haired man with the back-to-front collar must be the rector (although the fact that he is called Johns is supplied by Ian from prior knowledge), and the young man carrying a black leather case is clearly a doctor.

Ian isn't at all worried by the latter's appearance. 'Mother is always asking Dr Underwood to come, there's never anything the matter.'

I think it must cost a lot of money to have the doctor come when there is nothing the matter. You never see the doctor on our street unless someone is seriously ill.

The people at the back door are more difficult than those who call at the front. The butcher's boy and the man from the laundry are easily identified, but who is the sunburnt young man smoking a cigarette and talking to Thompson? Ian has no idea, but I do, from something I heard Aunt Helen say in the kitchen.

'He's Dolly's young man, Bobby Erskine,' I say, proud to show there is something I know that Ian doesn't, 'He comes here for a cup of tea most mornings.'

'Well, I suppose if you spend time with the *servants*...' Ian says.

'I bet Sherlock Holmes did.'

THE SCHOOLROOM

From their names I had assumed Ian's cousins Rory and Jamie to be boys, but Jamie is a girl – it is short for Jemima. They are twins, though, and the same age as me. Rory is short and stocky, with untidy brown hair, Jamie is slighter and darker, and a bit of a tomboy. They come to Greystone House so often that they have bedrooms on the first floor which they regard as their own. Ian introduces us, careful of his manners, and then forgets all about me in his hurry to discuss with Rory everything that has happened to them since they last saw each other.

Mrs Knight, the twins' mother, is Mr Hambleton's sister. They live in Lincoln, and they are brought to Greystone House in a motor car by their father. He stays for tea before driving all the way back. 'See you in ten days,' he says to Rory and Jamie.

'I thought you were to be here all summer?'

'Yes, but father and mother will also come to stay here for a week, when it is his holiday,' Jamie explains, 'Shall we go outside? I've missed being here so, I want to say hullo to Biscuit and see the fish in the pond and there may be ripe plums and...'

I think Ian may forget about me now he has Rory to play with, but no one objects when I trail into the garden after them. With the twins' arrival our games suddenly become more interesting and less predictable. At a moment's notice the house turns into a palace or a stockade, the garden becomes a vast sea or a rolling prairie. Or, as today, Sherwood Forest.

Rory is Robin Hood, Ian is the Sheriff of Nottingham. Gwendolyn is King John and has consented to be robbed of the royal treasure chest (her workbasket), and I'm to be the merry men.

I don't mind being given the less glamorous roles, knowing I'm not

one of the family, and I like being on Rory's side, he's more fun to play with than his cousin. Rory-as-Robin mimics taking aim at the Sheriff, and complains that it's no use being a crack archer without a bow and arrows. 'We should make ourselves some.'

Jamie, fed up with being Maid Marian (none of us is entirely sure what she does in the story), points out that there are plenty of branches lying beside the potting shed from when Thompson pruned the fruit trees. We troop past the conservatory terrace, where Gwendolyn is sitting with the royal treasure chest at her feet, sorting her embroidery silks. She looks more like the Lady of Shalott than the King of England. 'Am I going to be robbed or not?'

'We're going to make bows and arrows,' Rory calls back.

'Then I suppose it is not. Don't be late for tea.'

When teatime arrives, I go to the kitchen while the others run upstairs. Aunt Helen and Gladys are preparing the trays, and as Nanny takes the one for the nursery she looks at my own tea, set on the kitchen table. 'It's ridiculous, really, him having the same tea down here as the other children have upstairs. Why don't we let Jack eat with the others? It will be more fun for him and less work for you.'

Aunt Helen looks doubtful. 'If you think madam won't mind.'

'Madam won't even notice. And the children get along fine.'

There is something here which I do not understand. I would like to have my tea with the others, but Aunt Helen seems to think that wouldn't quite do. And I recall Gwendolyn's displeasure the other day, when Nanny suggested I accompany her and Ian. However, another tray is fetched, and I follow Nanny and Gladys upstairs.

'Oh good, you're eating with us,' Rory says, 'What do you think we'd better use for bowstrings?'

A day or two later Rory and I are ready to take our bows and arrows out to the bit of wood. The others come along to see the fun.

'You're not really going to shoot any rabbits, are you?' Jamie asks,