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UNCLE SILAS

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EAN 8596547385950

DigiCat, 2022

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Chapter 1.

Austin Ruthyn, of Knowl, and His Daughter

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IT WAS WINTER— that is, about the second week in November — and great gusts were rattling at the windows, and wailing and thundering among our tall trees and ivied chimneys — a very dark night, and a very cheerful fire blazing, a pleasant mixture of good round coal and spluttering dry wood, in a genuine old fireplace, in a sombre old room. Black wainscoting glimmered up to the ceiling, in small ebony panels; a cheerful chump of wax candles on the tea-table; many old portraits, some grim and pale, others pretty, and some very graceful and charming, hanging from the walls. Few pictures, except portraits long and short, were there. On the whole, I think you would have taken the room for our parlour. It was not like our modern notion of a drawing-room. It was a long room, too, and every way capacious, but irregularly shaped.

A girl of a little more than seventeen, looking, I believe, younger still; slight and rather tall, with a great deal of golden hair, dark grey-eyed, and with a countenance rather sensitive and melancholy, was sitting at the tea-table, in a reverie. I was that girl.

The only other person in the room — the only person in the house related to me — was my father. He was Mr. Ruthyn, of Knowl, so called in this county, but he had many other places, was of a very ancient lineage, who had refused a baronetage often, and it was said even a viscounty, being of a proud and defiant spirit, and thinking themselves higher in station and purer of blood than two-thirds of the nobility into whose ranks it was said, they had been invited to enter.

Of all this family lore I knew but little and vaguely; only what is to be gathered from the fireside talk of old retainers in the nursery.

I am sure my father loved me, and I know I loved him. With the sure instinct of childhood I apprehended his tenderness, although it was never expressed in common ways. But my father was an oddity. He had been early disappointed in Parliament, where it was his ambition to succeed. Though a clever man, he failed there, where very inferior men did extremely well. Then he went abroad, and became a connoisseur and a collector; took a part, on his return, in literary and scientific institutions, and also in the foundation and direction of some charities. But he tired of this mimic government, and gave himself up to a country life, not that of a sportsman, but rather of a student, staying sometimes at one of his places and sometimes at another, and living a secluded life.

Rather late in his life he married, and his beautiful young wife died, leaving me, their only child, to his care. This bereavement, I have been told, changed him — made him more odd and taciturn than ever, and his temper also, except to me, more severe. There was also some disgrace about his younger brother — my uncle Silas — which he felt bitterly.

He was now walking up and down this spacious old room, which, extending round an angle at the far end, was very dark in that quarter. It was his wont to walk up and down thus, without speaking — an exercise which used to remind me of Chateaubriand's father in the great chamber of the Château de Combourg. At the far end he nearly disappeared in the gloom, and then returning emerged for a few minutes, like a portrait with a background of shadow, and then again in silence faded nearly out of view.

This monotony and silence would have been terrifying to a person less accustomed to it than I. As it was, it had its effect. I have known my father a whole day without ounce

speaking to me. Though I loved him very much, I was also much in awe of him.

While my father paced the floor, my thoughts were employed about the events of a month before. So few things happened at Knowl out of the accustomed routine, that a very trifling occurrence was enough to set people wondering and conjecturing in that serene household. My father lived in remarkable seclusion; except for a ride, he hardly ever left the grounds of Knowl; and I don't think it happened twice in the year that a visitor sojourned among us.

There was not even that mild religious bustle which sometimes besets the wealthy and moral recluse. My father had left the Church of England for some odd sect, I forget its name, and ultimately became, I was told, a Swedenborgian. But he did not care to trouble me upon the subject. So the old carriage brought my governess, when I had one, the old housekeeper, Mrs. Rusk, and myself to the parish church every Sunday. And my father, in the view of the honest rector who shook his head over him —“a cloud without water, carried about of winds, and a wandering star to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness”— corresponded with the “minister” of his church, and was provokingly contented with his own fertility and illumination; and Mrs. Rusk, who was a sound and bitter churchwoman, said he fancied he saw visions and talked with angels like the rest of that “rubbitch.”

I don't know that she had any better foundation than analogy and conjecture for charging my father with supernatural pretensions; and in all points when her orthodoxy was not concerned, she loved her master and was a loyal housekeeper.

I found her one morning superintending preparations for the reception of a visitor, in the hunting-room it was called, from the pieces of tapestry that covered its walls, representing scenes à la Wouvermans, of falconry, and the chase, dogs, hawks, ladies, gallants, and pages. In the midst

of whom Mrs. Rusk, in black silk, was rummaging drawers, counting linen, and issuing orders.

“Who is coming, Mrs. Rusk?”

Well, she only knew his name. It was a Mr. Bryerly. My papa expected him to dinner, and to stay for some days.

“I guess he’s one of those creatures, dear, for I mentioned his name just to Dr. Clay (the rector), and he says there is a Doctor Bryerly, a great conjurer among the sss sect — and that’s him, I do suppose.”

In my hazy notions of these sectaries there was mingled a suspicion of necromancy, and a weird freemasonry, that inspired something of awe and antipathy.

Mr. Bryerly arrived time enough to dress at his leisure, before dinner. He entered the drawing-room — a tall, lean man, all in ungainly black, with a white choker, with either a black wig, or black hair dressed in imitation of one, a pair of spectacles, and a dark, sharp, short visage, rubbing his large hands together, and with a short brisk nod to me, whom he plainly regarded merely as a child, he sat down before the fire, crossed his legs, and took up a magazine.

This treatment was mortifying, and I remember very well the resentment of which he was quite unconscious.

His stay was not very long; not one of us divined the object of his visit, and he did not prepossess us favourably. He seemed restless, as men of busy habits do in country houses, and took walks, and a drive, and read in the library, and wrote half a dozen letters.

His bed-room and dressing-room were at the side of the gallery, directly opposite to my father’s, which had a sort of ante-room en suite, in which were some of his theological books.

The day after Mr. Bryerly’s arrival, I was about to see whether my father’s water caraffe and glass had been duly laid on the table in this ante-room, and in doubt whether he was there, I knocked at the door.

I suppose they were too intent on other matters to hear, but receiving no answer, I entered the room. My father was sitting in his chair, with his coat and waistcoat off, Mr. Bryerly kneeling on a stool beside him, rather facing him, his black scratch wig leaning close to my father's grizzled hair. There was a large tome of their divinity lore, I suppose, open on the table close by. The lank black figure of Mr. Bryerly stood up, and he concealed something quickly in the breast of his coat.

My father stood up also, looking paler, I think, than I ever saw him till then, and he pointed grimly to the door, and said, "Go."

Mr. Bryerly pushed me gently back with his hands to my shoulders, and smiled down from his dark features with an expression quite unintelligible to me.

I had recovered myself in a second, and withdrew without a word. The last thing I saw at the door was the tall, slim figure in black, and the dark, significant smile following me: and then the door was shut and locked, and the two sssians were left to their mysteries.

I remember so well the kind of shock and disgust I felt in the certainty that I had surprised them at some, perhaps, debasing incantation — a suspicion of this Mr. Bryerly, of the ill-fitting black coat, and white choker — and a sort of fear came upon me, and I fancied he was asserting some kind of mastery over my father, which very much alarmed me.

I fancied all sorts of dangers in the enigmatical smile of the lank high-priest. The image of my father, as I had seen him, it might be, confessing to this man in black, who was I knew not what, haunted me with the disagreeable uncertainties of a mind very uninstructed as to the limits of the marvellous.

I mentioned it to no one. But I was immensely relieved when the sinister visitor took his departure the morning after, and it was upon this occurrence that my mind was now employed.

Some one said that Dr. Johnson resembled a ghost, who must be spoken to before it will speak. But my father, in whatever else he may have resembled a ghost, did not in that particular; for no one but I in his household — and I very seldom — dared to address him until first addressed by him. I had no notion how singular this was until I began to go out a little among friends and relations, and found no such rule in force anywhere else.

As I leaned back in my chair thinking, this phantasm of my father came, and turned, and vanished with a solemn regularity. It was a peculiar figure, strongly made, thick-set, with a face large, and very stern; he wore a loose, black velvet coat and waistcoat. It was, however, the figure of an elderly rather than an old man — though he was then past seventy — but firm, and with no sign of feebleness.

I remember the start with which, not suspecting that he was close by me, I lifted my eyes, and saw that large, rugged countenance looking fixedly on me, from less than a yard away.

After I saw him, he continued to regard me for a second or two; and then, taking one of the heavy candlesticks in his gnarled hand, he beckoned me to follow him; which, in silence and wondering, I accordingly did.

He led me across the hall, where there were lights burning, and into a lobby by the foot of the back stairs, and so into his library.

It is a long, narrow room, with two tall, slim windows at the far end, now draped in dark curtains. Dusky it was with but one candle; and he paused near the door, at the left-hand side of which stood, in those days, an old-fashioned press or cabinet of carved oak. In front of this he stopped.

He had odd, absent ways, and talked more to himself, I believe, than to all the rest of the world put together.

“She won’t understand,” he whispered, looking at me enquiringly. “No, she won’t. Will she?”

Then there was a pause, during which he brought forth from his breast pocket a small bunch of some half-dozen keys, on one of which he looked frowningly, every now and then balancing it a little before his eyes, between his finger and thumb, as he deliberated.

I knew him too well, of course, to interpose a word.

“They are easily frightened — ay, they are. I’d better do it another way.”

And pausing, he looked in my face as he might upon a picture.

“They are — yes — I had better do it another way — another way; yes — and she’ll not suspect — she’ll not suppose.”

Then he looked steadfastly upon the key, and from it to me, suddenly lifting it up, and said abruptly, “See, child,” and, after a second or two, “Remember this key.”

It was oddly shaped, and unlike others.

“Yes, sir.” I always called him “sir.”

“It opens that,” and he tapped it sharply on the door of the cabinet. “In the daytime it is always here,” at which word he dropped it into his pocket again. “You see? — and at night under my pillow — you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You won’t forget this cabinet — oak — next the door — on your left — you won’t forget?”

“No, sir.”

“Pity she’s a girl, and so young — ay, a girl, and so young — no sense — giddy. You say, you’ll remember?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It behoves you.”

He turned round and looked full upon me, like a man who has taken a sudden resolution; and I think for a moment he had made up his mind to tell me a great deal more. But if so, he changed it again; and after another pause, he said slowly and sternly —

“You will tell nobody what I have said, under pain of my displeasure.”

“Oh! no, sir!”

“Good child!”

“Except,” he resumed, “under one contingency; that is, in case I should be absent, and Dr. Bryerly — you recollect the tin gentleman, in spectacles and a black wig, who spent three days here last month — should come and enquire for the key, you understand, in my absence.”

“Yes, sir.”

So he kissed me on the forehead, and said —

“Let us return.”

Which, accordingly, we did, in silence; the storm outside, like a dirge on a great organ, accompanying our flitting.

Chapter 2.

Uncle Silas

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WHEN WE REACHED the drawing-room, I resumed my chair, and my father his slow and regular walk to and fro, in the great room. Perhaps it was the uproar of the mind that disturbed the ordinary tenor of his thoughts; but, whatever was the cause, certainly he was unusually talkative that night.

After an interval of nearly half an hour, he drew near again, and sat down in a high-backed arm-chair, beside the fire, and nearly opposite to me, and looked at me steadfastly for some time, as was his wont, before speaking; and said he —

“This won’t do — you must have a governess.”

In cases of this kind I merely set down my book or work, as it might be, and adjusted myself to listen without speaking.

“Your French is pretty well, and you Italian; but you have no German. Your music may be pretty good — I’m no judge — but your drawing might be better — yes — yes. I believe there are accomplished ladies — finishing governesses, they call them — who undertake more than any one teacher would have professed in my time, and do very well. She can prepare you, and next winter, then, you shall visit France and Italy, where you may be accomplished as highly as you please.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You shall. It is nearly six months since Miss Ellerton left you — too long without a teacher.”

Then followed an interval.

“Dr. Bryerly will ask you about that key, and what it opens; you show all that to him, and no one else.”

“But,” I said, for I had a great terror of disobeying him in even so minute a matter, “you will then be absent, sir — how am I to find the key?”

He smiled on me suddenly — a bright but wintry smile — it seldom came, and was very transitory, and kindly though mysterious.

“True, child; I’m glad you are so wise; that, you will find, I have provided for, and you shall know exactly where to look. You have remarked how solitary I live. You fancy, perhaps, I have not got a friend, and you are nearly right — nearly, but not altogether. I have a very sure friend — one — a friend whom I once misunderstood, but now appreciate.”

I wondered silently whether it could be Uncle Silas.

“He’ll make a call, some day soon; I’m not quite sure when. I won’t tell you his name — you’ll hear that soon enough, and I don’t want it talked of; and I must make a little journey with him. You’ll not be afraid of being left alone for a time?”

“And have you promised, sir?” I answered, with another question, my curiosity and anxiety overcoming my awe. He took my questioning very good-humouredly.

“Well — promise? — no, child; but I’m under condition; he’s not to be denied. I must make the excursion with him the moment he calls. I have no choice; but, on the whole, I rather like it — remember, I say, I rather like it.”

And he smiled again, with the same meaning, that was at once stern and sad. The exact purport of these sentences remained fixed in my mind, so that even at this distance of time I am quite sure of them.

A person quite unacquainted with my father’s habitually abrupt and odd way of talking, would have fancied that he was possibly a little disordered in his mind. But no such suspicion for a moment troubled me. I was quite sure that he spoke of a real person who was coming, and that his

journey was something momentous; and when the visitor of whom he spoke did come, and he departed with him upon that mysterious excursion, I perfectly understood his language and his reasons for saying so much and yet so little.

You are not to suppose that all my hours were passed in the sort of conference and isolation of which I have just given you a specimen; and singular and even awful as were sometimes my tête-à-têtes with my father, I had grown so accustomed to his strange ways, and had so unbounded a confidence in his affection, that they never depressed or agitated me in the matter you might have supposed. I had a great deal of quite a different sort of chat with good old Mrs. Rusk, and very pleasant talks with Mary Quince, my somewhat ancient maid; and besides all this, I had now and then a visit of a week or so at the house of some one of our country neighbours, and occasionally a visitor — but this, I must own, very rarely — at Knowl.

There had come now a little pause in my father's revelations, and my fancy wandered away upon a flight of discovery. Who, I again thought, could this intending visitor be, who was to come, armed with the prerogative to make my stay-at-home father forthwith leave his household goods — his books and his child — to whom he clung, and set forth on an unknown knight-errantry? Who but Uncle Silas, I thought — that mysterious relative whom I had never seen — who was, it had in old times been very darkly hinted to me, unspeakable unfortunate or unspeakably vicious — whom I had seldom heard my father mention, and then in a hurried way, and with a pained, thoughtful look. Only once he had said anything from which I could gather my father's opinion of him, and then it was so slight and enigmatical that I might have filled in the character very nearly as I pleased.

It happened thus. One day Mrs. Rusk was in the oak-room, I being then about fourteen. She was removing a stain

from a tapestry chair, and I watched the process with a childish interest. She sat down to rest herself — she had been stooping over her work — and threw her head back, for her neck was weary, and in this position she fixed her eyes on a portrait that hung before her.

It was a full-length, and represented a singularly handsome young man, dark, slender, elegant, in a costume then quite obsolete, though I believe it was seen at the beginning of this century — white leather pantaloons and top-boots, a buff waist-coat, and a chocolate-coloured coat, and the hair long and brushed back.

There was a remarkable elegance and a delicacy in the features, but also a character of resolution and ability that quite took the portrait out of the category of mere fops or fine men. When people looked at it for the first time, I have so often heard the exclamation —“What a wonderfully handsome man!” and then, “What a clever face!” An Italian greyhound stood by him, and some slender columns and a rich drapery in the background. But though the accessories were of the luxurious sort, and the beauty, as I have said, refined, there was a masculine force in that slender oval face, and a fire in the large, shadowy eyes, which were very peculiar, and quite redeemed it from the suspicion of effeminacy.

“Is not that Uncle Silas?” said I.

“Yes, dear,” answered Mrs. Rusk, looking, with her resolute little face, quietly on the portrait.

“He must be a very handsome man, Mrs. Rusk. Don’t you think so?” I continued.

“He was, my dear — yes; but it is forty years since that was painted — the date is there in the corner, in the shadow that comes from his foot, and forty years, I can tell you, makes a change in most of us;” and Mrs. Rusk laughed, in cynical good-humour.

There was a little pause, both still looking on the handsome man in top-boots, and I said —

“And why, Mrs. Rusk, is papa always so sad about Uncle Silas?”

“What’s that, child?” said my father’s voice, very near. I looked round, with a start, and flushed and faltered, receding a step from him.

“No harm, dear. You have said nothing wrong,” he said gently, observing my alarm. “You said I was always sad, I think, about Uncle Silas. Well, I don’t know how you gather that; but if I were, I will now tell you, it would not be unnatural. Your uncle is a man of great talents, great faults, and great wrongs. His talents have not availed him; his faults are long ago repented of; and his wrongs I believe he feels less than I do, but they are deep. Did she say any more, madam?” he demanded abruptly of Mrs. Rusk.

“Nothing, sir,” with a stiff little courtesy, answered Mrs. Rusk, who stood in awe of him.

“And there is no need, child,” he continued, addressing himself to me, “that you should think more of him at present. Clear your head of Uncle Silas. One day, perhaps, you will know him — yes, very well — and understand how villains have injured him.”

Then my father retired, and at the door he said —

“Mrs. Rusk, a word, if you please,” beckoning to that lady, who trotted after him to the library.

I think he then laid some injunction upon the housekeeper, which was transmitted by her to Mary Quince, for from that time forth I could never lead either to talk with me about Uncle Silas. They let me talk on, but were reserved and silent themselves, and seemed embarrassed, and Mrs. Rusk sometimes pettish and angry, when I pressed for information.

Thus curiosity was piqued; and round the slender portrait in the leather pantaloons and top-boots gathered many-coloured circles of mystery, and the handsome features seemed to smile down upon my baffled curiosity with a provoking significance.

Why is it that this form of ambition — curiosity — which entered into the temptation of our first parent, is so specially hard to resist? Knowledge is power — and power of one sort or another is the secret lust of human souls; and here is, beside the sense of exploration, the undefinable interest of a story, and above all, something forbidden, to stimulate the contumacious appetite.

Chapter 3.

A New Face

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I THINK IT was about a fortnight after that conversation in which my father had expressed his opinion, and given me the mysterious charge about the old oak cabinet in his library, as already detailed, that I was one night sitting at the great drawing-room window, lost in the melancholy reveries of night, and in admiration of the moonlighted scene. I was the only occupant of the room; and the lights near the fire, at its farther end, hardly reached to the window at which I sat.

The shorn grass sloped gently downward from the windows till it met the broad level on which stood, in clumps, or solitarily scattered, some of the noblest timber in England. Hoar in the moonbeams stood those graceful trees casting their moveless shadows upon the grass, and in the background crowning the undulations of the distance, in masses, were piled those woods among which lay the solitary tomb where the remains of my beloved mother rested.

The air was still. The silvery vapour hung serenely on the far horizon, and the frosty stars blinked brightly. Everyone knows the effect of such a scene on a mind already saddened. Fancies and regrets float mistily in the dream, and the scene affects us with a strange mixture of memory and anticipation, like some sweet old air heard in the distance. As my eyes rested on those, to me, funereal but glorious woods, which formed the background of the picture, my thoughts recurred to my father's mysterious intimations and the image of the approaching visitor; and the thought of the unknown journey saddened me.

In all that concerned his religion, from very early association, there was to me something of the unearthly and spectral.

When my dear mamma died I was not nine years old; and I remember, two days before the funeral, there came to Knowl, where she died, a thin little man, with large black eyes, and a very grave, dark face.

He was shut up a good deal with my dear father, who was in deep affliction; and Mrs. Rusk used to say, "It is rather odd to see him praying with that little scarecrow from London, and good Mr. Clay ready at call, in the village; much good that little black whipper-snapper will do him!"

With that little black man, on the day after the funeral, I was sent out, for some reason, for a walk; my governess was ill, I know, and there was confusion in the house, and I dare say the maids made as much of a holiday as they could.

I remember feeling a sort of awe of this little dark man; but I was not afraid of him, for he was gentle, though sad — and seemed kind. He led me into the garden — the Dutch garden, we used to call it — with a balustrade, and statues at the farther front, laid out in a carpet-pattern of brilliantly-coloured flowers. We came down the broad flight of Caen stone steps into this, and we walked in silence to the balustrade. The base was too high at the spot where we reached it for me to see over; but holding my hand, he said, "Look through that, my child. Well, you can't; but I can see beyond it — shall I tell you what? I see ever so much. I see a cottage with a steep roof, that looks like gold in the sunlight; there are tall trees throwing soft shadows round it, and flowering shrubs, I can't say what, only the colours are beautiful, growing by the walls and windows, and two little children are playing among the stems of the trees, and we are on our way there, and in a few minutes shall be under those trees ourselves, and talking to those little children. Yet now to me it is but a picture in my brain, and to you but a

story told by me, which you believe. Come dear; let us be going."

So we descended the steps at the right, and side by side walked along the grass lane between tall trim walls of evergreens. The way was in deep shadow, for the sun was near the horizon; but suddenly we turned to the left, and there we stood in rich sunlight, among the many objects he had described.

"Is this your house, my little men?" he asked of the children — pretty little rosy boys — who assented; and he leaned with his open hand against the stem of one of the trees, and with a grave smile he nodded down to me, saying —

"You see now, and hear, and feel for yourself that both the vision and the story were quite true; but come on, my dear, we have further to go."

And relapsing into silence we had a long ramble through the wood, the same on which I was now looking in the distance. Every now and then he made me sit down to rest, and he in a musing solemn sort of way would relate some little story, reflecting, even to my childish mind, a strange suspicion of a spiritual meaning, but different from what honest Mrs. Rusk used to expound to me from the Parables, and, somehow, startling in its very vagueness.

Thus entertained, though a little awfully, I accompanied the dark mysterious little "whipper-snapper" through the woodland glades. We came, to me quite unexpectedly, in the deep sylvan shadows, upon the grey, pillared temple, four-fronted, with a slanting pedestal of lichen-stained steps, the lonely sepulchre in which I had the morning before seen poor mamma laid. At the sight the fountains of my grief reopened, and I cried bitterly, repeating, "Oh! mamma, mamma, little mamma!" and so went on weeping and calling wildly on the deaf and the silent. There was a stone bench some ten steps away from the tomb.

“Sit down beside me, child!” said the grave man with the black eyes, very kindly and gently. “Now, what do you see there?” he asked, pointing horizontally with his stick towards the centre of the opposite structure.

“Oh, that — that place where poor mamma is?”

“Yes, a stone wall with pillars, too high for either you or me to see over. But ——”

Here he mentioned a name which I think must have been Swedenborg, from what I afterwards learnt of his tenets and revelations; I only know that it sounded to me like the name of a magician in a fairy tale; I fancied he lived in the wood which surrounded us, and I began to grow frightened as he proceeded.

“But Swedenborg sees beyond it, over, and through it, and has told me all that concerns us to know. He says your mamma is not there.”

“She is taken away!” I cried, starting up, and with streaming eyes, gazing on the building which, though I stamped my feet in my distraction, I was afraid to approach. “Oh, is mamma taken away? Where is she? Where have they brought her to?”

I was uttering unconsciously very nearly the question with which Mary, in the grey of that wondrous morning on which she stood by the empty sepulchre, accosted the figure standing near.

“Your mamma is alive, but too far away to see or hear us; but Swedenborg, standing here, can see and hear her, and tells me all he sees, just as I told you in the garden about the little boys and the cottage, and the trees and flowers which you could not see, but believed in when I told you. So I can tell you now as I did then; and as we are both, I hope, walking on to the same place, just as we did to the trees and cottage, you will surely see with your own eyes how true is the description which I give you.”

I was very frightened, for I feared that when he had done his narrative we were to walk on through the wood into that

place of wonders and of shadows where the dead are visible.

He leaned his elbow on his knee, and his forehead on his hand, which shaded his downcast eyes, and in that attitude described to me a beautiful landscape, radiant with a wondrous light, in which, rejoicing, my mother moved along an airy path, ascending among mountains of fantastic height, and peaks, melting in celestial colouring into the air, and peopled with human beings translated into the same image, beauty, and splendour. And when he had ended his relation, he rose, took my hand, and smiling gently down on my pale, wondering face, he said in the same words he had spoken before —

“Come, dear, let us be going.”

“Oh! no, no, no — not now,” I said, resisting, and very much frightened.

“Home, I mean, dear. We cannot walk to the place I have described. We can only reach it through the gate of death, to which we are all tending, young and old, with sure steps.”

“And where is the gate of death?” I asked in a sort of whisper, as we walked together, holding his hand very fast, and looking stealthily. He smiled sadly and said —

“When, sooner or later, the time comes, as Hagar’s eyes were opened in the wilderness, and she beheld a fountain of water, so shall each of us see the door open before us, and enter in and be refreshed.”

For a long time after this walk I was very nervous; the more so for the awful manner in which Mrs. Rusk received my statement — with stern lips and upturned hands and eyes, and an angry expostulation: “I do wonder at you, Mary Quince, letting the child walk into the wood with that limb of darkness. It is a mercy he did not show her the devil, or frighten her out of her senses, in that lonely place!”

Of these Swedenborgians, indeed, I know no more than I might learn from good Mrs. Rusk’s very inaccurate talk. Two or three of them crossed in the course of my early life, like

magic-lantern figures, the disk of my very circumscribed observation. All outside was and is darkness. I once tried to read one of their books upon the future state — heaven and hell; but I grew after a day or two so nervous that I laid it aside. It is enough for me to know that their founder either saw or fancied he saw amazing visions, which, so far from superseding, confirmed and interpreted the language of the Bible; and as dear papa accepted their ideas, I am happy in thinking that they did not conflict with the supreme authority of holy writ.

Leaning on my hand, I was now looking upon that solemn wood, white and shadowy in the moonlight, where, for a long time after that ramble with the visionary, I fancied the gate of death, hidden only by a strange glamour, and the dazzling land of ghosts, were situate; and I suppose these earlier associations gave to my reverie about my father's coming visitor a wilder and a sadder tinge.

Chapter 4.

Madame De La Rougierre

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ON A SUDDEN, on the grass before me, stood an odd figure — a very tall woman in grey draperies, nearly white under the moon, courtesying extraordinarily low, and rather fantastically.

I stared in something like a horror upon the large and rather hollow features which I did not know, smiling very unpleasantly on me; and the moment it was plain that I saw her, the grey woman began gobbling and cackling shrilly — I could not distinctly hear what through the window — and gesticulating oddly with her long hands and arms.

“There’s a woman at the window!” I gasped; “turn her away, please.”

If I had said a man, I suppose fat Branston would have summoned and sent forward a detachment of footmen. As it was, he bowed gravely, with a —

“Yes, ‘m — shall ‘m.”

And with an air of authority approached the window.

I don’t think that he was pleasantly impressed himself by the first sight of our visitor, for he stopped short some steps of the window, and demanded rather sternly —

“What ye doin’ there, woman?”

To this summons, her answer, which occupied a little time, was inaudible to me. But Branston replied —

“I wasn’t aware, ma’am; I heerd nothin’; if you’ll go round that way, you’ll see the hall-door steps, and I’ll speak to the master, and do as he shall order.”

The figure said something and pointed.

“Yes, that’s it, and ye can’t miss of the door.”

And Mr. Branston returned slowly down the long room, and halted with out-turned pumps and a grave inclination before me, and the faintest amount of interrogation in the announcement —

“Please, ‘m, she says she’s the governess.”

“The governess! What governess?”

Branston was too well-bred to smile, and he said thoughtfully —

“P’raps, ‘m, I’d best ask the master.”

To which I assented, and away strode the flat pumps of the butler to the library.

I stood breathless in the hall. Every girl at my age knows how much is involved in such an advent. I also heard Mrs. Rusk, in a minute or two more, emerge I suppose from the study. She walked quickly, and muttered sharply to herself — an evil trick, in which she indulged when much “put about.” I should have been glad of a word with her; but I fancied she was vexed, and would not have talked satisfactorily. She did not, however, come my way; merely crossing the hall with her quick, energetic step.

Was it really the arrival of a governess? Was that apparition which had impressed me so unpleasantly to take the command of me — to sit alone with me, and haunt me perpetually with her sinister looks and shrilly gabble?

I was just making up my mind to go to Mary Quince, and learn something definite, when I heard my father’s step approaching from the library: so I quietly re-entered the drawing-room, but with an anxious and throbbing heart.

When he came in, as usual, he patted me on the head gently, with a kind of smile, and then began his silent walk up and down the room. I was yearning to question him on the point that just then engrossed me so disagreeably; but the awe in which I stood of him forbade.

After a time he stopped at the window, the curtain of which I had drawn, and the shutter partly opened, and he

looked out perhaps with associations of his own, on the scene I had been contemplating.

It was not for nearly an hour after, that my father suddenly, after his wont, in a few words, apprised me of the arrival of Madame de la Rougierre to be my governess, highly recommended and perfectly qualified. My heart sank with a sure presage of ill. I already disliked, distrusted, and feared her.

I had more than an apprehension of her temper and fear of possibly abused authority. The large-featured, smirking phantom, saluting me so oddly in the moonlight, retained ever after its peculiar and unpleasant hold upon my nerves.

“Well, Miss Maud, dear, I hope you’ll like your new governess — for it’s more than I do, just at present at least,” said Mrs. Rusk, sharply — she was awaiting me in my room. “I hate them Frenchwomen; they’re not natural, I think. I gave her her supper in my room. She eats like a wolf, she does, the great raw-boned hannimal. I wish you saw her in bed as I did. I put her next the clockroom — she’ll hear the hours betimes, I’m thinking. You never saw such a sight. The great long nose and hollow cheeks of her, and oogh! such a mouth! I felt a’most like little Red Riding-Hood — I did, Miss.”

Here honest Mary Quince, who enjoyed Mrs. Rusk’s satire, a weapon in which she was not herself strong, laughed outright.

“Turn down the bed, Mary. She’s very agreeable — she is, just now — all new-comers is; but she did not get many compliments from me, Miss — no, I rayther think not. I wonder why honest English girls won’t answer the gentry for governesses, instead of them gaping, scheming, wicked furriners? Lord forgi’ me, I think they’re all alike.”

Next morning I made acquaintance with Madame de la Rougierre. She was tall, masculine, a little ghastly perhaps, and draped in purple silk, with a lace cap, and great bands of black hair, too thick and black, perhaps, to correspond

quite naturally with her bleached and sallow skin, her hollow haws, and the fine but grim wrinkles traced about her brows and eyelids. She smiled, she nodded, and then for a good while she scanned me in silence with a steady cunning eye, and a stern smile.

“And how is she named — what is Mademoiselle’s name?” said the tall stranger.

“Maud, Madame.”

“Maud! — what a pretty name! Eh bien! I am very sure my dear Maud she will be very good little girl — is not so? — and I am sure I shall love you vary moche. And what ‘av you been learning, Maud, my dear cheaile — music, French, German, eh?”

“Yes, a little; and I had just begun the use of the globes when my governess went away.”

I nodded towards the globes, which stood near her, as I said this.

“Oh! yes — the globes;” and she spun one of them with her great hand. “Je vous expliquerai tout cela à fond.”

Madame de la Rougierre, I found, was always quite ready to explain everything “à fond;” but somehow her “explications,” as she termed them, were not very intelligible, and when pressed her temper woke up; so that I preferred, after a while, accepting the expositions just as they came.

Madame was on an unusually large scale, a circumstance which made some of her traits startling, and altogether rendered her, in her strange way, more awful in the eyes of a nervous child, I may say, such as I was. She used to look at me for a long time sometimes, with the peculiar smile I have mentioned, and a great finger upon her lip, like the Eleusinian priestess on the vase.

She would sit, too, sometimes for an hour together, looking into the fire or out of the window, plainly seeing nothing, and with an odd, fixed look of something like triumph — very nearly a smile — on her cunning face.

She was by no means a pleasant gouvernante for a nervous girl of my years. Sometimes she had accesses of a sort of hilarity which frightened me still more than her graver moods, and I will describe these by-and-by.

Chapter 5.

Sights and Noises

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THERE IS NOT an old house in England of which the servants and young people who live in it do not cherish some traditions of the ghostly. Knowl has its shadows, noises, and marvellous records. Rachel Ruthyn, the beauty of Queen Anne's time, who died of grief for the handsome Colonel Norbrooke, who was killed in the Low Countries, walks the house by night, in crisp and sounding silks. She is not seen, only heard. The tapping of her high-heeled shoes, the sweep and rustle of her brocades, her sighs as she pauses in the galleries, near the bed-room doors; and sometimes, on stormy nights, her sobs.

There is, beside, the "link-man," a lank, dark-faced, black-haired man, in a sable suit, with a link or torch in his hand. It usually only smoulders, with a deep red glow, as he visits his beat. The library is one of the rooms he sees to. Unlike "Lady Rachel," as the maids called her, he is seen only, never heard. His steps fall noiseless as shadows on floor and carpet. The lurid glow of his smouldering torch imperfectly lights his figure and face, and, except when much perturbed, his link never blazes. On those occasions, however, as he goes his rounds, he ever and anon whirls it round his head, and it bursts into a dismal flame. This is a fearful omen, and always portends some direful crisis or calamity. It occurs, however, only once or twice in a century.

I don't know whether Madame had heard anything of these phenomena; but she did report what very much frightened me and Mary Quince. She asked us who walked in the gallery on which her bed-room opened, making a rustling with her dress, and going down the stairs, and