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Bogwoppit

Written by

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1. Samantha Finds a New Home

THREE things were happening inside the Park on that Saturday evening in May.

The Price children were running for their lives away from the marsh pools, slopping tadpole spawn out of jam jars, pursued by the angry shouts of the gamekeeper calling up his dogs.

Samantha Millett was dragging a suitcase up the Park drive to the house, resentful because the lodge gates were shut against her,

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which prevented her from making a triumphal entry to her ancestral home . . . and inside the house itself Lady Clandorris was writing a letter, long overdue, to her sister Lily, who was Samantha's aunt.

'Dear Lil,' wrote Lady Clandorris.

> We won't go into old arguments or rake up old quarrels or remind you what you called me when our sister Gertie died or how you tricked me out of her jewellery that Mother meant me to have being the eldest, and I won't remind you that Gertie never did a thing for me all her life while she was always hand in glove with yourself and left you all, not only what was due to you but what wasn't. But as you keep pestering me I must ask you here and now to stop writing to me and it is nothing to me if you want to go off to America with your boyfriend and leave sister Gertie's child behind you on the

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doorstep. You must make your own arrangements for her since I have not the slightest intention of having her to live with me at the Park.

Wishing you all the best in your life at home or abroad,

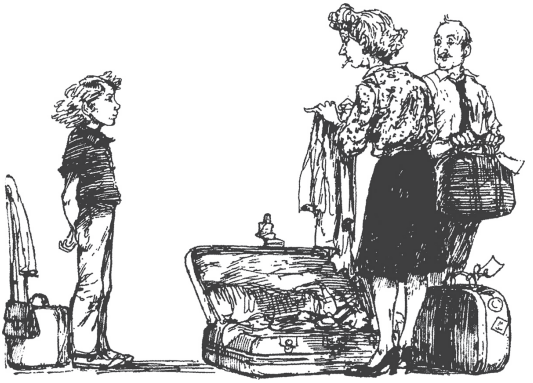
I am, your affectionate sister,
Daisy Clandorris

By the time this letter was tucked into an envelope and stamped the Price children had reached the boundary of the Park, and were scrambling over the fence, sobbing with relief and exhaustion. The keeper's dogs had been rabbiting inside the wood, or Deborah, Jeff and Timothy would probably have had their heels bitten. They had lost nearly all their frogspawn, and walked home feeling deflated, as one does after great fear. They put the remaining frog jelly into the goldfish pond and threw away the jam jar.

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Then they went in to tea as if nothing had happened. The Prices, like all the other children in the village, were expressly forbidden to go tadpoling in the Park.

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2. Aunt Daisy Clandorris

SAMANTHA'S Aunt Lily, having raised her sister Gertie's Samantha as a baby, had grown tired of the job. They had never got on well together. Since Samantha first learned to speak they had wrangled and argued, and when Aunt Lily wanted to marry her lodger, the lodger took her part and argued with Samantha too.

Aunt Lily thought it most unfair that her elder sister, Daisy, who lived in an enormous house in the middle of a Park, and had married a knight, should refuse to adopt Samantha

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when she married the lodger and wanted to emigrate to America with her new husband.

Not exactly refused, it would be correct to say, since Lady Clandorris's letter had not yet been written, but that she should not even answer her request brought lumps of rage into her sister Lily's throat at most inconvenient moments of the day. One might have thought it would have been more sensible of Lily to pay a call on her sister and state her case, but when the lodger suggested this, Lily returned that she had never been invited to her sister's house in the whole of eleven years, and she wasn't going up there at this stage of her life to beg for favours at the door.

Finally, she packed her bag. The one-time lodger, now her husband, packed his, and offered Samantha his old suitcase, which Aunt Lily packed for her with all the clothes she had.

'You go up and bang on that door and say you've come!' said Aunt Lily, having looked

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up trains and bought tickets to the airport, and more tickets to America. 'You can be Anne of Green Gables and Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm and Little Lord Fauntleroy all rolled into one. Seeing you have what one might call a right to live at the Park, I don't see how she can send you away. Mind you, if she does, I suppose we shall have to take you with us. But if you aren't here by breakfast time tomorrow morning, that's all as far as Duggie and me are concerned. We're catching the nine thirty to Reading and Heathrow.'

'I don't want to go to America with you and Uncle Duggie!' retorted Samantha crossly, juggling with the zip fastener of her case, which was hanging outside like the discarded backbone of a kipper. 'Of course I shall go to live with my aunt, Lady Clandorris.' And about time too, thought Samantha to herself.

Aunt Lily sniffed. She did not feel nearly so convinced as Samantha was that Lady Clandorris would see where her duty lay. But

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Samantha *had* to feel convinced. For years she had been telling the children at school that her aunt was Lady Clandorris who lived at the Park. After the first few times it made very little impression on them, since she could not even describe the house, and had quite clearly never been inside it.

But now at last she was going to live there. She would have to, since she had never heard of children being turned out to live just nowhere, and there wasn't anywhere else for her to live. She was so rash as to write: 'Samantha Millett, Park House, Filley Green,' on the covers of her exercise books, and her neighbours in the classroom were suitably surprised.

For years she had dreamed of this moment, and now it was all coming true. The Park, forbidden ground to all the children of Filley Green, was to become her home. She would belong to it. The gamekeeper would not be allowed to shout at her. The dogs would be

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forbidden to nip her ankles. She might even invite her friends to come to tea . . .

Samantha did not expect to like her aunt, Lady Clandorris. She had not liked her Aunt Lily. She did not like her teachers very much, and very few grown-up people that she could think of. She much preferred people of her own age. Also pets like puppies, kittens, guinea pigs and hamsters, and pretty little birds in cages. Aunt Lily would never let her keep any of these. She did not expect her aunt to like her at first. But in all the stories she had read, fierce, unwilling relations were won over in the end by the courage, cleverness and charm of the children fate had thrust upon them. Samantha liked to pretend she was much braver, more charming and cleverer than any storybook heroine she had read about.

As she trudged up the drive she heard the gamekeeper yelling in the distance and wondered what she would do if his dogs burst

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out of the wood to attack her. The trees hid from her the sight of the escaping Prices, who were her friends, living in the next street to her Aunt Lily, and showing quite a respectable interest in Samantha's claims on the Park. On the other hand, had she seen them she might have felt obliged to admonish them for trespassing, since from today the Park was to become almost her own property. But that put her on the same side as the keeper and his dogs, loathed by every child in Filley Green, especially on the new estate that crowded on the Park boundaries, spreading little pink brick fingers into long avenues that could be glimpsed along the Park's edge, between the oaks.

Preparing a scorching speech, in case she met the keeper, Samantha trudged along the rutted, grass-grown drive, stumbling into puddles as she pushed back the trailing legs of her pyjamas, that were escaping under the broken lid of the suitcase, and stuffed the broken zip fastener in after them.

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The keeper's shouts grew fainter. Much closer to her, but also receding, came yelps from the bracken-breasting dogs, happily chasing rabbits through the undergrowth.

Samantha turned the last muddy bend of the drive, and saw the house.

It was much as she had expected to find it. Gaunt, she might have called it had she known such a word, and gloomy, and very grey. Four tall grey pillars upheld a grey stone portico, while on either side of the pillars flat windows stared down at her like the indifferent eyes of total strangers. The flat walls, tall and box-like, stretched three storeys high to a narrow parapet, behind which the roof seemed somehow to have disappeared. The faded linings of still more faded curtains lurked behind the casements as if ashamed of their shabby appearance. Lichen rambled over the tops of the pillars and clung to the parapet.

But it still looked grand.

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Samantha took a new grip on her suitcase, walked up the damp, grey steps, and knocked on the front door.

Nobody came, because Lady Clandorris had just left the house by the back door to post her letter in the pillar box at the end of the back drive.

That she was living in the house Samantha was assured, because the front door was slightly open, and inside, in the entrance hall, spread out across a chair, was a tweed coat, a feathered hat, partly covered with pheasants' feathers and with much of the foundation netting exposed; also a pair of outdated ankle boots.

The hat, Samantha decided, was like the house, old, but still grand.

She knocked again, very loudly, but solemnly and severely. The angry silence of the house warned her to stop knocking and go away. Absence filled the hall, like the echo of a bell. You can knock till the cows come

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home, the house seemed to warn her, but no one will invite you to come in.

Samantha knew just what her Aunt Lily would say if she went home and announced that her Aunt Daisy Clandorris was not at home.

'Well you can just go back and wait until she is!' her Aunt Lily would snap at her. So to save herself a walk Samantha pushed open the door and went into the house.

The hall was really more like a lounge than an entrance lobby. There was a sulky fire in a grate which was sunk deep in a chimney piece, flanked on either side by two flights of stairs, that curved upwards very gracefully, presumably meeting each other once again on the landing above. Daft, thought Samantha, you can't use two staircases at once. You would have to use them alternately to save one of the stair carpets going into holes before the other.

There were armchairs in front of the fire, covered in worn tapestries, and permanently

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hollowed, as if nobody ever plumped up the cushions or sat in any other position than halfway across the middle, and sideways at that. A heavy wrought-iron fireguard protected the hearth rug from sparks, and on the floor inside the grate a plate of hot buttered toast was standing, looking so unwanted that within a few minutes Samantha was helping herself, rather in the fashion of Goldilocks visiting the three bears. She put her suitcase down on one of the chairs and munched the toast standing up.

She had never thought twice about helping herself to anything Aunt Lily or the lodger left within her reach. That was what many of their arguments had been about.

Once the toast was finished Samantha began to imagine the consequences, and the thought of arguing with a total stranger who was about to adopt her, coupled with the silence and emptiness of the house, caused a slight shiver to run down her spine.

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The dead-looking portraits on the walls, to which she had paid very little attention, suddenly began to appear hostile, as if every one of them was looking at her, and disliking what they saw. Even those whose faded profiles were facing in quite a different direction seemed to know all about her, and to disapprove.

She wished she had not eaten the toast, because, in spite of the hostility and the total lack of any welcome in the cold grey empty house, Samantha knew that she wanted to stay here, and never never go back to number four Greenfield Road, nor to America with Aunt Lily and the lodger, nor, in fact, to live anywhere but at the Park for the rest of her life.

She sat licking her buttery fingers, listening rather anxiously for footsteps, but hearing nothing but the footfalls of a cat coming up the passage, beyond one of the flights of stairs.

Or was it a dog? The footfalls were just that degree noisier than a cat makes with

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its paws . . . But dogs walked, or trotted deliberately . . . not tap-tap-tap-shuffle. It was more like . . . Samantha listened . . . no, it couldn't be . . . a bird! . . . or – or . . . *a frog*? Oh no! Not a frog, anything but that! Not a frog in a house, in an empty house, a huge old grey empty house where she had hardly any business to be, whatever Aunt Lily had to say about it.

Perfectly petrified with fright, because the unknown always is more frightening than anything one is prepared for, Samantha squeezed herself into the chair beside her suitcase, shielding herself with the broken lid, watching for the moment when the animal – she was convinced it was an animal – would turn the corner of the fireplace and appear.

The strange sounds came nearer and nearer, and suddenly the awful realization of what it must be struck Samantha with such icy terror that she stuffed the corner of the suitcase

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against her mouth to prevent herself from screaming aloud.

A rat! It must be a rat! It could be nothing else in such an old, neglected skeleton of a mansion. Of course it was a rat, exploring the comfort of the hall in the absence of Lady Clandorris! It knew there might be toast in the grate! And if the toast had been there it was most likely that the rat would have eaten it and gone quietly away. Without toast there was no manner of knowing what it might do or whom it might attack! At the thought of it running up her legs or angrily exploring inside her suitcase Samantha gathered all her goods about her and looked frantically towards the door.

But a flash of indignation at being scared away from her heritage by a mere animal, however loathsome, stopped her from bolting out of the house. Instead, she ran to the staircase on the far side of the fireplace, hugging her case in both arms.

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She allowed herself one single glance behind her before she fled up the stairs. And it was exactly as she had feared. A round, dark body had come into the hall and was snuffling up and down between the chairs. She had only a brief glimpse of it before it disappeared inside the grate, and she heard the fire irons rattle. But the long furry tail that whisked around the chair leg could only belong to a rat, a big rat, a very big, furry, rather damp rat from the cellars below . . .

Samantha retreated up the stairs step by step to the upper landing, and then, by instinct, rather than by reason, up still another flight of stairs to the corridor above, which was flanked by a whole series of bedrooms, some furnished, some not, but all lined with peeling wallpaper, much of it hanging in loops from the walls.

In one of the bedrooms she found a fairly comfortable-looking bed. Samantha went inside and sat upon it, suitcase and all, her

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legs well drawn up, in case the toast-seeking rat might follow her, even so far away upstairs as this.

She waited and waited, but no sound came up from below. In fact the hall was too far away to carry any sounds at all. Presently she grew tired of waiting and made herself more comfortable upon the bed, where finally she curled up on top of the counterpane and went to sleep.

When she awoke it was dark, and although she could see the night sky through the window, there was no moon and very few stars.

Samantha sat up suddenly, her heart beating.

The house was still very quiet, but an undefinable instinct told her that it was no longer deserted. Yet it was hardly the moment to go downstairs and find out. She did not know her way downstairs, nor whether there

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was electricity in the house or merely oil lamps or candles. It seemed more like that kind of a house. And she dreaded putting her feet to the floor with the blackness all around her.

How could she go and introduce herself to a complete stranger in complete darkness?

Samantha did the most sensible thing she could think of. She fumbled in her suitcase for her pyjamas, sat on the bed to change out of her day clothes, and scrambled under a soft, old-fashioned kind of eiderdown into the musty comfort of woollen blankets, where almost immediately she went back to sleep.

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