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opening extract from

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THE WOLVES OF WILLOUGHBY CHASE

Note

The action of this book takes place in a period of English history that never happened – shortly after the accession to the throne of Good King James III in 1832. At this time, the Channel Tunnel from Dover to Calais having been recently completed, a great many wolves, driven by severe winters, had migrated through the tunnel from Europe and Russia to the British Isles.

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It was dusk – winter dusk. Snow lay white and shining over the pleated hills, and icicles hung from the forest trees. Snow lay piled on the dark road across Willoughby Wold, but from dawn men had been clearing it with brooms and shovels. There were hundreds of them at work, wrapped in sacking because of the bitter cold, and keeping together in groups for fear of the wolves, grown savage and reckless from hunger.

Snow lay thick, too, upon the roof of Willoughby Chase, the great house that stood on an open eminence in the heart of the wold. But for all that, the Chase looked an inviting home – a warm and welcoming stronghold. Its rosy herring-bone brick was bright and well-cared-for, its numerous turrets and battlements stood up sharp against the sky, and the crenellated balconies, corniced with snow, each held a golden square of window. The house was all alight within, and the joyous hubbub of its activity contrasted with the sombre sighing of the wind and the hideous howling of the wolves without.

In the nursery a little girl was impatiently dancing up and down before the great window, fourteen feet

high, which faced out over the park and commanded the long black expanse of road.

'Will she be here soon, Pattern? Will she?' was her continual cry.

'We shall hear soon enough, I dare say, Miss Bonnie,' was the inevitable reply from her maid, who, on hands and knees in front of the fire, was folding and goffering the frills of twenty lace petticoats.

The little girl turned again to her impatient vigil She had climbed up on to the window-seat, the better to survey the snowy park, and was jumping on its well-sprung cushions, covered in crimson satin. Each time she bounced, she nearly hit the ceiling.

'Give over, Miss Bonnie, do,' said Pattern after a while. 'Look at the dust you're raising. I can hardly see my tongs. Come and sit by the fire. We shall hear soon enough when the train's due.'

Bonnie left her perch reluctantly enough and came to sit by the fire. She was a slender creature, small for her age, but rosy-cheeked, with a mass of tumbled black locks falling to her shoulders, and two brilliant blue eyes, equally ready to dance with laughter or flash with indignation. Her square chin also gave promise of a powerful and obstinate temper, not always perfectly controlled. But her mouth was sweet, and she could be very thoughtful on occasion – as now, when she sat gazing into the fire, piled high on its two carved alabaster wolfhounds.

'I hope the train hasn't been delayed by wolves,' she said presently.

'*Nonsense*, Miss Bonnie dear – don't worry your pretty head with thoughts like that,' replied Pattern. 'You know the porters and station-master have been practising with their muskets and fowling-pieces all the week.'

At that moment there was a commotion from downstairs, and Bonnie turned, her face alight with expectancy. As the noise of dogs barking, men shouting, and the doorbell clanging continued, she flew recklessly along the huge expanse of nursery floor, gleaming and polished as glass, and down the main staircase to the entrance hall. Her impetuosity brought her in a heap to the feet of an immensely tall, thin lady, clad from neck to toe in a travelling dress of swathed grey twill, with a stiff collar, dark glasses, and dull green buttoned boots. Bonnie's headlong rush nearly sent this person flying, and she recovered her balance with an exclamation of annoyance.

'Who is guilty of this unmannerly irruption?' she said, settling her glasses once more upon her nose. 'Can this hoydenish creature be my new pupil?'

'I – I beg your pardon!' Bonnie exclaimed, picking herself up.

'So I should hope! Am I right in supposing that you are Miss Green? I am Miss Slighcarp, your new governess. I am also your fourth cousin, once removed,' the lady added haughtily, as if she found the removal hardly sufficient.

'Oh,' Bonnie stammered, 'I didn't know – that is, I thought you were not expected until tomorrow. I was looking for my cousin Sylvia, who is arriving this evening.'

'I am aware of the fact,' Miss Slighcarp replied coldly, 'but that does not excuse bad manners. Where, pray, is your curtsy?'

Rather flustered, Bonie performed this formality with less than her usual grace.

'Lessons in deportment, I see, will need priority on our time-table,' Miss Slighcarp remarked, and she turned to look after the disposition of her luggage. 'You, sir! Do not stand there smirking and dawdling, but see that my valises are carried at once to my apartments, and that my maid is immediately in attendance to help me.'

James, the footman, who had been exchanging grimaces with the butler over the fact that he had received no tip, at once sprang to attention, and said:

'Your maid, miss? Did you bring a maid with you?'

'No, blockhead. The maid whom Lady Green will have appointed to wait on me.'

'Well, I suppose Miss Pattern will be helping you,' said James, scratching his head, and he shouldered one of the nine walrus-hide portmanteaux and staggered off to the service stairs.

'I will show you the way to your room,' said Bonnie eagerly, 'and when you are ready I will take you to see Papa and Mamma. I hope we shall love each other,' she continued, leading the way up the magnificent marble staircase, and along the portrait gallery. 'I shall have so much to show you – my collection of flint arrowheads and my semi-precious stones.'

Miss Slighcarp thinned her lips disapprovingly and

Bonnie, fearing that she had been forward, said no more of her pursuits.

'Here is your apartment,' she explained presently, opening a door and exhibiting a commodious set of rooms, cheerful with fires and furnished with elegant taste in gilt and mahogany. 'And here is my maid Pattern to help you.'

Miss Slighcarp drew down her brows at this, but acknowledged the remark by an inclination of her head. Pattern was already kneeling at the dressing-case and drawing out such articles as the governess might immediately need.

'I shall leave you, then, for the moment,' said Bonnie, preparing to go. She turned to add, 'Shall I come back in half an hour?' but was arrested by the sight of Miss Slighcarp snatching a heavy marble hairbrush from its rest and striking a savage blow at the maid, who had taken out a little case apparently containing letters and papers.

'Prying wretch! Who gave you permission to meddle with my letters?' she cried.

Bonnie sprang back in an instant, all her violent temper roused, and seized the brush from Miss Slighcarp's hand, hurling it recklessly through the plate-glass window. She picked up a jug of warm water which a housemaid had just brought, and dashed it full in the face of her new instructress.

Miss Slighcarp reeled under the impact – her bonnet came off, so did her grey hair, which, apparently, was a wig, leaving her bald, dripping, and livid with rage.

'Oh dear – I am so sorry!' said Bonnie in conster-

nation. 'I did not mean to do that. My temper is a dreadful fault. But you must not strike Pattern. She is one of my best friends. Oh Pattern – help her!'

The maid assisted Miss Slighcarp to replace the damp wig and repair the damage done by the water, but her compressed lips and nostrils showed how little she relished the task. An angry red weal was rising on her cheek where the brush had struck her.

'Go!' said Miss Slighcarp to Bonnie, pointing at the door.

Bonnie was glad to do so. Half an hour later, though, she returned, having done her best in the meantime to wrestle with her rebellious temper.

'Shall I escort you to Mamma and Papa now?' she said, when the governess bade her enter. Miss Slighcarp had changed into another grey twill dress with a high white collar, and had laid aside her merino travelling-cloak.

She permitted Bonnie to lead her towards the apartments of her parents, having first locked up several drawers in which she had deposited papers, and placed the keys in a chatelaine at her belt.

Bonnie, whose indignation never lasted long, danced ahead cheerfully enough, pointing out to her companion the oubliette where Cousin Roger had slipped, the panel which concealed a secret staircase, the haunted portico, the priests' hole, and other features of her beloved home. Miss Slighcarp, however, as she followed, wore on her face an expression that boded little good towards her charge.

At length they paused before a pair of doors

grander than any they had yet passed, and Bonnie inquired of the attendant who stood before them if her parents were within. Receiving an affirmative answer, she joyfully entered and, running towards an elegant-looking lady and gentleman who were seated on an ottoman near the fireplace, exclaimed:

'Papa! Mamma! Such a surprise! Here is Miss Slighcarp, come a day earlier than expected!'

Miss Slighcarp advanced and made her salutations to her employers.

'I regret not having come up to London to make arrangements with you myself,' said Sir Willoughby, bowing easily to her, 'but my good friend and man of business Mr Gripe will have told you how we are situated – on the eve of a departure, with so much to attend to. I had been aware that we had a distant cousin – yourself, ma'am – living in London, and I entrusted Mr Gripe with the task of seeking you out and asking whether you would be willing to undertake the care of my estates and my child while we are abroad. My only other relative, my sister Jane, is, as perhaps you know, too frail and elderly for such a responsibility. I hope you and Bonnie will get on together famously.'

Here Miss Slighcarp, in a low and grating tone, told him the story of the hairbrush and the jug of water, omitting, however, her unprovoked assault in the first place upon poor Pattern. Sir Willoughby burst into laughter.

'Did she do that, the minx? Eh, you hussy!' and he lovingly pinched his daughter's cheek. 'Girls will be girls, Miss Slighcarp, and you must allow something

for the natural high spirits and excitement attendant on your own arrival and the expected one of her cousin. I shall look to you to instil, in time, a more ladylike deportment into our wild sprite.'

Lady Green, who was dark-haired and sad-eyed, and who looked very ill, here raised her voice wearily and asked her husband if that were not a knock on the door. He called a summons impatiently, and the station-master entered – a black, dingy figure, twisting his cap in his hands.

'The down train is signalled, Squire,' he said, after bobbing his head in reverence to each of the persons present in the room. 'Is it your pleasure to let it proceed?'

'Surely, surely,' said Sir Willoughby. 'My little niece is aboard it — let it approach with all speed. How did you come from the station, my man? Walked? Let orders be given for Solly to drive you back in the chaise – with a suitable escort, of course – then he can wait there and bring back Miss Sylvia at the same time.'

'Oh, thank you indeed, sir,' said the man with heartfelt gratitude. 'Bless your noble heart! It would have taken me a weary while to walk those ten miles back, and it is freezing fast.'

'That's all right,' said Sir Willoughby heartily. 'Mustn't let Miss Sylvia die of cold on the train. Besides, the wolves might get you, and then the poor child would be held up on the train all night for want of the signal. Never do, eh? Well, Bonnie, what is it, miss?'

'Oh, Papa,' said Bonnie, who had been plucking at

his sleeve, 'may I go with Solly in the chaise to meet Sylvia? May I?'

'No indulgence should be permitted a child who has behaved as she has done,' remarked Miss Slighcarp.

'Oh, come, come, Miss Slighcarp, come, come, ma'am,' said Sir Willoughby good-naturedly. 'Young blood, you know. Besides, my Bonnie's as good a shot at a wolf as any of them. Run along, then, miss, but wrap up snug – remember you'll be several hours on the road.'

'Oh, thank you, Papa! Goodbye! Goodbye, Mamma dear, goodbye, Miss Slighcarp!' and she fondly kissed her parents and ran from the room to find her warmest bonnet and pelisse.

'Reckless, foolish indulgence,' muttered the governess, directing after Bonnie a look of the purest spite.

'But hey!' exclaimed Sir Willoughby, recalled to memory of Miss Slighcarp's presence by the sound though he missed the sense, of her words. 'If the train's only just signalled, how did you come, then, ma'am? You can't have flown here, hey?'

For the first time the governess showed signs of confusion.

'I – er – that is to say, a friend who was driving over from Blastburn kindly offered to bring me here with my baggage,' she at length replied.

A bell clanged through the apartment at that moment.

'The dressing-bell,' said Sir Willoughby, looking at a handsome gold watch, slung on a chain across his

ample waist-coat. 'I apprehend, Miss Slighcarp, that you are fatigued from your journey and will not wish to dine with us. A meal will be served in your own apartments.'

He inclined his head in a dignified gesture of dismissal, which the governess had no option but to obey.