THE SECRET DETECTIVES

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nosy crow

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for Leila
&
for Lettie

– E.R.

"[She] made the long voyage to England under the care of an officer's wife, who was taking her children to leave them in a boarding school. She was very much absorbed with her own little boy and girl, and was rather glad to hand the child over to the woman … sent to meet her in London."

– *The Secret Garden*, Frances Hodgson Burnett

Chapter One: A Funny Little Thing

Week 1

Calcutta, the Bay of Bengal; the Laccadive Sea, the Arabian Sea

Isobel disliked Letitia from the very start.

This was not because Letitia disliked *Isobel*, although she probably did.

Everybody disliked Isobel, perhaps because she herself disliked almost everybody.

People seemed to Isobel to be almost another species. They followed rules that Isobel had never been taught; as if they all knew the steps to a dance for which Isobel had never even heard the tune. They looked at each other for too long. They told lies for no reason. They all knew how to *be* with each other in ways Isobel did not, and she disliked them all. All the ones she knew, anyway – although it *was* true that she had never known many people, and very few people of her own age. There had been very few people at Steel's Way.

Steel's Way was the house outside Calcutta where Isobel had lived in the time before.

"You're Isobel Petty," Letitia had said, the first time they met. "And *I* am Miss Letitia Hartington-Davis." She said it as if Isobel ought to recognise her.

Her name sounded a little bit like a sneeze, thought Isobel: *le-TISH-ah, ah-TISH-oo, we all fall down.*

They had been standing on the dock at Calcutta, waiting to go aboard. "I'm ten years old. You're the same age as me." "I'm actually eleven," said Isobel. This should, she felt, have given her superiority – but it was hard to feel superior to Letitia. Letitia had a great deal of self-possession; she was tall for ten, and very capable, and she knew it. She was also – even Isobel could see – a likeable sort of child. Grown-ups liked her, and this was one reason why Isobel did not. Isobel was not the kind of child grown-ups liked. She knew it perfectly well. Isobel was all wrong, in all the ways: she was untidy and sharp-faced and her cheeks were not pink or gold or brown but whitish yellow, like she had been growing under a log instead of in good Indian sunshine.

Her face was wrong, and her manners were wrong, and her clothes were wrong too. Her black dress, which should have been decent, was somehow both too tight and too loose. The fabric had been chosen carelessly

from the end of a roll that had been sitting in the sun, so that in places (where it had been in shade) it was properly black, and in others (where the light had faded it) it was sort of brownish. Combined with her features – eyes a little too big and round for her face; nose and chin a little too sharp – it lent her something of the appearance of a house crow. And Isobel knew it.

It had not been so bad in the lawyer's office, but it had been pretty awful at the clergyman's house where she had been staying, and worse *again* the instant she met the Hartington-Davises. Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis was a smart woman, and she liked her children to be smart, too. The little boy – Horace – was wearing a blue sailor suit for the voyage.

And Letitia, of course, was properly dressed too. She had been wearing a white muslin dress with blue bows on the bodice, and a large, wide-brimmed, white straw hat. The hat had blue bows on it, too, and so did Letitia's shoes and the end of her long, fair plait.

Letitia's hair, Isobel knew, was considered to be very beautiful. Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis brushed it with one hundred strokes every morning with two shining silver hairbrushes. Isobel brushed her own hair, but hers was dark and very thin and tangled easily.

Isobel's mother had had hair like that. Isobel's mother had been exceptionally beautiful: she had worn gowns full of lace, and had enormous blue eyes, and Isobel had barely seen her at all. Isobel had lived in one part of the house at Steel's Way, and her mother and father in the other. The house at Steel's Way had been big and white, all on one level, and all around, the hills had been very green with tea and snakes.

Isobel had lived with her ayah. She had not loved her ayah – she had had six or seven different nannies by the time she was ten – but then again, she didn't really love anybody. Her mother and father had lived quite separately from her, in a world full of candlelight and wine glasses and dancing. Isobel had loved – when she was little – to slip away from her ayah, and hide and watch, and her mother had seemed to her then like a kind of fairy: a fairy princess with diamonds at her wrists and throat.

"Funny that the child should be so dark when you're so fair, Mrs Petty," someone had said to Isobel's mother once, a long time ago, in another life. Isobel had been hiding under the dining-room table. Isobel's mother had said distantly, "Well, she's rather a funny little thing altogether." And the man and Isobel's mother had both laughed, and gone away into the garden to look at the

hibiscus flowers. *I am a funny little thing*, thought Isobel to herself, *I am a funny little thing.* And she could tell that her mother had not meant it in a nice way. But Isobel's mother was dead now. So was her father.

They had died, and Isobel had been left all alone in the bungalow in the hills, and she did not especially like to think about it. There had been a snake – small and brown and curious – and she had liked the snake. She missed the snake.

In any event, someone had come for her eventually, and brought her to Calcutta, and now she was here aboard ship with the Hartington-Davises.

This was because there had simply not been anyone else to see her to England. That was what the lawyer had told her. She had *almost* liked the lawyer. He had seemed to Isobel to be a person who told the truth. Her parents were dead; there was nobody to take care of her in India any more. There was in England a person who could take care of her; therefore she would go to England. There was nobody to take care of her on the boat to England; therefore she would have to go in the charge of some responsible lady with children of her own; therefore, Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis. He had told Isobel all of this in exactly this way: one sentence after the other, very neat and obvious. She

would be sent like a parcel: to the English address on the front, from the Indian address on the back. She would be labelled, equally neatly and obviously, and sent from one place to another. Isobel had approved of this, too.

That is to say, she had approved of the lawyer being straightforward. She had not approved of the plan, particularly. She had certainly not approved of Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis.

Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis would have been pretty, except for the crying. Her clothes were very smart, and she, like Letitia, had fair hair that shone from brushing, but her face was perpetually blotchy, and her hair often a little dishevelled from running her hands through it so often. She ran her hands through it whenever she had a headache. She often had headaches. This was because she missed her husband – *the* Colonel Hartington-Davis himself – who was staying in India without her, and without the children. She was taking the children to boarding school.

"Do you want to go to boarding school?" Isobel asked Letitia. "I wouldn't want to go to *school*." But Letitia just put her nose in the air and said that it was probably actually better to go to boarding school than to go to where Isobel was going.

Isobel was going to live with her uncle, if they ever got to England. Isobel had never been to England, and it was a long way off yet. Three weeks at least, even if they made good time. Part of Isobel hoped they would not make good time. England sounded very cold and unpleasant, and her uncle, worse.

England, the uncle and the rain. A new life. That was what the lawyer said, and Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis too.

The first life – the ayah, the hills – had been one kind of life; and the next life – the uncle, the rain – would be another. And in between there was this: three weeks of the ship *Marianna.* Three weeks of the Hartington-Davises. And three weeks of the ocean: boundless, infinite and touching the sky in all directions.

There was almost nothing to do on board the ship. This was not something Isobel minded: she was used to not having things to do. There had never been very much to do at home in Steel's Way.

Once, long ago, she had had an ayah who told her stories. She had liked that then. But that ayah had gone away when she was quite a little girl of five, and the next ayah didn't tell any stories at all. Isobel liked stories about things that really happened. She liked to know everything that really happened, and that was the

reason for the notebook.

She carried the notebook everywhere, and she wrote everything in it. She wrote down everything that happened, and everything that she saw. Isobel was a very noticing kind of child: she was good at seeing people, and she was even better at taking notes on what she had seen. She liked looking at things and naming them; she liked seeing what people were doing, and putting it into words. She liked matching what people did to the word for it, like playing Snap, between the world and the describing of the world: it made it all easier to understand.

She was keeping the notebook tucked into the top of her knickers for now, underneath her frock. It seemed safer that way, at least until she was sure what kind of people the Hartington-Davises were. In fact, she thought, until she was sure what kind of people were aboard the ship at all. Nobody had cared much at Steel's Way, but they might care on the *Marianna*. What she really wanted was to go off on her own and write everything down about the *Marianna* right away, but it struck her at once that this was going to be rather more difficult on board ship.

"Why don't you girls go off and play?" said Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis, the first morning.

"I don't *play*," said Isobel.

"All children play," said Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis.

"Not me," said Isobel. They were in the cabin: a *stateroom*, Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis called it. There was a porthole, and there were two bunks – one for Letitia and one for Isobel – and a door going off it to Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis's room, which she was sharing with Horace.

Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis had been crying in the night – Isobel had heard her – and this morning she already had a headache, which meant they couldn't go up to the dining room for breakfast.

They had not eaten in the dining room the night before, either. It was very irritating. How was Isobel supposed to find out who was on board if they never went to the dining room? The night before, they had only managed to get on board and eat a little supper in their cabin, and immediately after that Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis had told them to get into nightgowns and into bed.

It had been an awful bother getting all the buttons on the new frock undone by herself, and a worse bother getting them done up again in the morning, but she had managed. She was rather proud of herself.

"Letitia plays, don't you, Lettie?" Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis, who had no intention of dropping the subject, was finishing Letitia's plait.

"Why do you do her hair?" said Isobel.

"I'm sorry, dear?" Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis wasn't really listening to Isobel.

"Why doesn't her ayah do her hair?"

"What's an ayah?" said Horace, from the floor.

"It's the person who does your hair," said Isobel to Horace. "The person who looks after you."

"Mummy looks after me," said Letitia, smugly.

"And me," said Horace.

"Lettie doesn't have an ayah," said Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis.

"Nor do I, now," said Isobel. "She died too."

Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis shot her an alarmed glance. *She thinks I'm a funny little thing*, thought Isobel. *Or something worse.*

"*Passed on*, I think," Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis said to Isobel.

"Passed on?" said Isobel.

"The ayah passed on," said Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis, firmly.

"Passed on where?" said Isobel.

"Isobel," said Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis.

"Please don't be impertinent."

"I'm not," said Isobel. "She didn't pass on anywhere. She just died."

"It's not very polite to say *died*," said Letitia.

"Don't listen to her, Letitia," said Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis. "Don't listen to her, please."

"I can't help listening," said Letitia, reasonably.

"Died like the chicks died when the snake got them?" said Horace, suddenly, from the floor.

"If she died," said Isobel, "why can't I *say* died?"

"Children," said Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis. She finished tying Letitia's bow and put her hands to her forehead. She looked, Isobel thought, as if she might cry again. "Children. I am getting one of my headaches. Will you all please go and play? Girls, take Horace with you."

Almost everything gave Mrs Colonel Hartington-Davis headaches. Reading. Arguing. Perfume. The sun.

"I told you that I don't play," said Isobel. "I simply don't."

"I'm not playing with girls," Horace said.

But Letitia said, "Leave them with *me*, Mummy. I'll take them both out on to the deck."

"I don't need taking anywhere," said Isobel, but Mrs

Colonel Hartington-Davis was already lying back on Letitia's bunk with her hand over her eyes.

Letitia took Horace's hand and led him out of the stateroom. He went with her willingly enough, and Isobel followed, dragging her feet. Her legs were hot, and her stockings had wrinkled around her ankles in a way that was already uncomfortable.

"Mummy gets headaches," said Letitia knowledgeably. "It's because she misses Daddy. I miss Daddy too, but we'll see him again soon." She said it like she was copying something somebody had said to her.

"I won't see mine again," said Isobel. "He's dead too." She wanted Letitia to feel bad about this, but Letitia barely seemed to notice.

"Is everyone you know dead?" asked Horace.

"I don't know many people," said Isobel.

"But are the ones you know all dead?"

"Probably," said Isobel. "Except you."

"Have you ever been on a ship before?" said Letitia. She was changing the subject, Isobel knew, and that was like a grown-up person also.

Isobel said nothing.

"I've been on ships four times," said Letitia. "Including this one. I've been to England twice, counting the time I was born there. You weren't."

"I don't care," said Isobel. She did, a bit, but she didn't really know why.

"You've never even been to England even once, to be born," said Letitia. "How *extraordinary*." She made the last word very long.

"I haven't been to England," said Horace.

"But *you're* English," said Letitia. "Because you're my brother and I was born in England, which makes me English and that makes you English because you can't have a brother and a sister that are different. But *she* isn't."

"I don't want to be English," said Isobel, fiercely.

"What are you then?" said Letitia. "Are you a *native*?" There was suddenly something unpleasant about Letitia's voice: something hard and brittle, like sugar cooked too long. It sounded not like Letitia's ordinary voice at all. It was, Isobel thought again, like she was copying something she'd heard someone else say.

Isobel flushed. The colour looked peculiar in her sallow cheeks and gave her suddenly an appearance of liveliness that she did not otherwise possess. "I'm not a *native*."

"Servants are natives," said Letitia. "Perhaps you're a sort of servant."

"I'm not," said Isobel, hotly.

She could feel herself getting crosser. She had always had a temper, but she was starting to think her temper might not dent Letitia at all. She had never had to argue with a person her own age before. And Letitia might be a special case. Besides, she was not entirely sure about this argument.

She *had* only met natives – Indians – who were servants: that part was true. It was also true, of course, that she had not met many people. The bungalow in the hills where she had grown up was very far from anywhere, and nobody brought their children to play with her.

But her mother and her father had only white friends; the officers and officers' wives who came for the dinner and the candles and the dancing were all white people. Isobel was quite certain that she, herself, was a white person too. And it was true that the native servants had to salaam to her and bow to her and do everything she said. That was simply the way it was. It had never occurred to Isobel to question any of it before, but when Letitia said it, it started to sound rather unpleasant. It started to sound – even to Isobel – rather unfair.

But Isobel did not know anything different: that was the trouble. It had always been this way, and this was the way all the grown-ups had made the world,

and it had never occurred to Isobel to question it for one minute until Letitia had started calling her – Isobel! – a native herself. She did not want to be a native. She did not want to be a servant. But it struck her suddenly that perhaps not even natives *wanted* to be servants, and it gave her a peculiar feeling deep down in her stomach. It made her feel rather sick. She thought it might be the movement of the ship.

Letitia started up the stairs again, Horace trailing behind her like a blanket, and then turned back suddenly. "If you're not a native and you're not English, what *are* you?"

Isobel said nothing.

"You have to be something," said Letitia. "You have to be something. One thing. You have to choose. And you're not English, so what can you be?"

"What can you *be*?" Horace echoed.

"I can be what I want," said Isobel, but she felt it was rather a weak answer.

"Nobody gets to be what they *want*," said Letitia, scornfully, just like a grown-up, and she and Horace went up the stairs through a heavy metal door, out on to the deck, and outside the sun was very bright indeed.

Isobel looked after them, and then looked to the

left and to the right. There was nobody else about, and Letitia and Horace were not looking back. And so Isobel slipped away, down the long forking corridors, into the belly of the ship.