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PART ONE



GONE!

The fourth-floor window was wide open, and there, on the sill, stood a very young boy. Little Mouse laughed and reached his arms out towards the birds in the tree-tops and the clouds blowing across the sky, as if he longed to be flying with them.

Hanny, the nursery maid, saw all this. She also saw Uncle Scrope with one hand raised behind the small boy's back, waiting. One strong hand, one quick push, and what then?

Hanny rushed forward. With a quick sweep of her arm, she gathered the child back into her apron and lifted him down to the floor.

Scrope blinked. The strange light in his pale eyes died away, as if some wild urge had been halted. He slipped his hand – the one that had been poised behind Mouse's back – casually back into his own pocket.

'Oh,' Scrope drawled, 'it's you. The nursery maid.' He stared at the gravel path far below. 'Long way down, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir. It is,' Hanny replied, trying to calm the fear in her heart. 'I'll take Mouse safely back to the nursery now, sir. I was surprised to find him gone.'

'Good girl. Children do wander so, I hear.' Scrope did not even look at Hanny. 'And get someone to close this window properly. It seems to have become unlatched.'

By the time Hanny reached the nursery, she was shaking all over. She pointed towards the supper tray.

'Eat, please, Mouse.'

The boy peeped up at Hanny out of the corner of his eye. He studied her round, pleasant face and her rosy cheeks. Then, smiling mischievously, he carefully picked up a triangle of buttered bread in his fingers and popped it in his mouth. Then he opened wide to show he was doing what she had asked.

'Oh, Mouse!' Hanny said sadly, while she smiled at the boy, at his soft tufty hair, his bright brown eyes and his slightly sticking-out ears. 'Mouse, what am I going to do about you?'

Only when Mouse was safely in his cot did Hanny dare to think about what she had witnessed. A child like Mouse could fall down a flight of steep marble stairs, or topple from a balcony, or drop from a window so, so quickly. A child like Mouse could slip and trip and crash to his doom so, so easily. A man like Scrope would find

it very, very useful if such an accident happened to happen.

Nurse Hanny had seen the secret self hidden within the unremarkable Uncle Scrope. She knew he was someone who lived two lives.

Here, in the grand mansion that was Epton Towers, Scrope lived quietly. He seemed content. Obedient to his elderly father's commands, Scrope acted the perfect aide, attending to the family papers and letters and ever at his side. Scrope's voice, when he spoke, was as soft as feathers.

Yet Hanny had caught sight of Scrope returning from trips to the city, with his pocketbook full of winnings and his eyes as bright as those of a hawk seizing its prey. She had seen Scrope come skulking home when the cards had turned and brought him bad chance. At such times, his eyes brooded malevolently on young Mouse.

Why? Simple. Scrope was the second son of old Epsilon. Mouse, too young to know about such differences, was the first son of the first son – and the one who stood between Scrope and his family's fortune.

Hanny shivered again, remembering that wide-open window. One push, one shove, and Mouse would be no more. Other dangers were waiting too. Hadn't Scrope enquired very, very eagerly about when Mouse could be set on a saddle and taught to ride?

Hanny fretted. The worry would not go away. If Mouse, her young charge, was to grow from baby to boy, she had to do something, say something, and soon.

*

Hanny tried to do the right thing. On Sunday, when the bell rang for Mouse to make his weekly visit to Grandfather Epsilon, Hanny tucked her yellow curls into her nursemaid's cap, put on a fresh starched apron and dressed Mouse in his best clothes.

Then, as the clock struck four – no earlier, no later – they went downstairs, entered the vast drawing room and waited silently, as instructed, near the terrible tiger-skin rug.

Mouse stared back into the glass tiger-eyes, and snarled silently back at the sharp tiger-teeth. He did not like seeing the tiger. He did not like seeing the old man either. Grandfather Epsilon, nodding within his huge claw-footed armchair, reminded Mouse of the ancient tortoise in his alphabet book. Mouse was glad Hanny did not bring him to this room very often.

Many years before, Epsilon had energy. He had built and bought and schemed and toiled until he possessed – at last – the grandeur of Epton Towers, whereupon he had stuffed it with riches. He had all he wanted, despite the early death of his unfortunate wife, until the day that Albert, his eldest son, his beloved heir, disobeyed him. From that moment, Epsilon's heart had turned cold as iron and his head had become a hive of bitter thoughts.

Though the nursery nurse and the boy waited on the rug, Epsilon barely saw them. He sat, letting his mind churn continually on Albert's folly. A useless expedition!

How could Adeline, Albert's young wife, have urged his son to go adventuring, to disobey Epsilon's orders? How could they have sailed away, leaving him, the father, all alone in Epton Towers? After all he had done for them. Why had they not stayed to do their duty? Ungrateful heir! Ungrateful pair!

Epsilon's eyes narrowed. How he would punish them! How he would punish the one they had to leave behind! If Albert was not here to speak to his own child, why should he, Epsilon, do so? Not one word, not one breath, would he bestow . . .

What, what? A voice had interrupted his tangle of complaints. Someone was talking to him. That young nurse in her drab grey dress was pleading with him, begging him to pay some kind of attention to Albert's toddling infant. Silly woman! It could not be done.

Epsilon rapped his ivory-headed cane on the floor. No, no, no! No requests. Go away! Go away! Go away to the nursery, and bother me no more! The cane spoke clearly of Epsilon's displeasure.

Mouse's lip quivered in alarm, but then the boy turned and ran out quite happily, with Hanny following. There, at the end of the corridor, was the grand marble staircase, ready for his infant ascent. Up those chilly heights crawled Mouse, climbing higher and higher, eager to touch the topmost step of all.

Alone once more, Grandfather Epsilon sniffed with bleak satisfaction. 'When Albert returns, he will be sorry for what he has done,' he muttered, aching for his moment of cold triumph.

*

Rarely did Epsilon look beyond his nose. Rarely did he ponder on his second son, Scrope, sitting at a desk scribbling away. That feeble creature would always do what he was told.

No wonder Scrope's long face was pale as the parchment on which he copied his father's papers. *Scritch-scratch* went Scrope's dutiful quill, so humbly, so bitterly. Scrope knew he would never be his father's favourite, never compare well against the absent Albert. Epsilon had made this clear to Scrope almost every day of his life.

Quietly, Scrope brooded on this and on other hurts. He brooded on Albert's only son too, the one who was Adeline's child and would one day be heir to Epton Towers. He brooded, and he dreamed.

Back in the nursery, while Mouse picked the currants out of his cake, eating them one at a time and counting each bite, Hanny was in despair. How could old Epsilon be so deaf to her warnings?

Around midnight, as Hanny stitched at another small nightshirt, thoughts started stitching themselves together in her mind.

Mouse's grandfather didn't want him. Mouse's uncle wanted him even less. Mouse's grandfather didn't want him . . . Mouse's uncle . . .

An idea popped into her head. At once Hanny knew the idea might be wrong. How could she even have thought of such a thing? But she had, and now she could not unthink it. Slowly, as the dark hours of the night passed, Hanny stitched the pieces of her plan together.

*

There had been, Hanny remembered, a much earlier plan, a departure day when all was ready for the expedition. It was the same morning that Hanny discovered the baby burning with fever in his crib, too ill to be moved. Hanny's mistress, Adeline, was torn apart with anguish. How could her baby face the dangers of such a long voyage?

What had Adeline said at that moment? What had she decided? Hanny almost spoke the words aloud.

'I have to go with Albert, Hanny. I promise to send word as soon as I can, but, until then, take good care of my child for me. Keep Mouse safe, please, Hanny. Keep him safe and well!'

Safe and well. Safe and well! Those had been Adeline's exact words. Now Hanny had to make her choice too, and she would do what she must do. Hanny would keep Mouse safe, no matter the cost.

So, when first light came, Hanny lifted Mouse from his nursery bed. She wrapped him warmly and tied him tightly to her back with a shawl, like a country child. His little legs dangled in their button boots.

'Shh, Mousekin!' said Hanny. 'I'm taking you where we will be wanted and where you will be safe.' Even, she thought, if this might not be exactly the end of the problem. 'Go back to sleep, child.'

The small boy tucked his thumb back in his mouth and closed his eyes.

Hanny slipped out of the nursery, stepped down the long back stairs and, as dawn warmed the sky, was off and away with her burden.

Hanny knew nobody would notice that she and Mouse had gone, not for a while, because she attended to all the child's cooking and laundry. For a time, life at Epton Towers would carry on as normal.

Nevertheless, she left things in some kind of order, ready for when people came looking.

'*Dear Sirs*,' she had written, on the notepaper that lay on the side cupboard, '*Please excuse this hurried departure. The cough Mouse suffered from last month may be returning. He needs some country air most urgently. So I am taking him somewhere where he will grow strong and happy and healthy, and all will be well.*

Yours sincerely,

Nurse Hanny.'

She left no forwarding address.

In fact, as Hanny hurried along, she felt sure she was making life easier for everyone. Who but she cared about the boy anyway? Certainly, by the time a cart, trundling early along the high road, stopped to offer her and the child a lift, Hanny's heart was much lighter. All would be well!

Oh dear, oh dear! The young Nurse Hanny did not know quite enough about Uncle Scrope; nor did she know who else would act in the life of a boy called Mouse.