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Opening extract from

Heap House
The Iremonger Trilogy

Written by

Edward Carey

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I

A UNIVERSAL BATH PLUG

Beginning the narrative of Clod Iremonger,
Forlichingham Park, London

How It Started

It all really began, all the terrible business that followed, on the day my Aunt Rosamud's door handle went missing. It was my aunt's particular door handle, a brass one. It did not help that she had been all over the mansion the day before with it, looking for things to complain about as was her habit. She had stalked through every floor, she had been up and down staircases, opening doors at every opportunity, finding fault. And during all her thorough investigations she insisted that her door handle was about her, only now it was not. Someone, she screamed, had taken it.

There hadn't been such a fuss since my Great Uncle Pitter lost his safety pin. On that occasion there was

searching all the way up and down the building only for it to be discovered that poor old Uncle had had it all along, it had fallen through the ripped lining of his jacket pocket.

I was the one that found it.

They looked at me very queerly afterwards, my family did, or I should say more queerly, because I was never absolutely trusted and was often shooed from place to place. After the safety pin was found it seemed to confirm something more in my family, and some of my aunts and cousins would steer clear of me, not even speaking to me, whilst others, my cousin Moorcus for example, would seek me out. Cousin Moorcus was certain that I had hidden the pin in the jacket myself and down a dim passageway he caught up with me and smacked my head against the wall, counting to twelve as he did it (my age at the time), and lifted me high up onto a coat hook, leaving me suspended there until I was found two hours later by one of the servants.

Great Uncle Pitter was most apologetic after his pin was found and never, I think, properly recovered from the drama. All that fuss, accusing so many people. He died the next spring, in his sleep, his safety pin pinned to his pyjamas.

'But how could you tell, Clod?' my relations wondered. 'How could you know the safety pin was there?'

'I heard it,' I said, 'calling out.'

I Heard Things

Those flesh flaps on the sides of my head did too much, those two holes where the sounds went in were over-busy. I heard things when I shouldn't.

It took me a time to understand my hearing.

I was told that as a baby I started to cry for no reason. I'd be lying there in my crib and nothing would have happened at all but suddenly I would be screaming as if someone had pulled my scant hair or as if I had been scalded with boiling water or as if someone had sliced into me with a knife. It was always like that. I was an odd child, they said, unhappy and difficult, hard to calm. Colic. Chronic colic. The nursery maids never stayed long. 'Why are you so bad?' they asked. 'Why will you not settle?'

The noises upset me; I was always jumpy and scared and angry. I could not understand the words of the noises at first. At first it was just sounds and rustles, clinks, clicks, smacks, taps, claps, bangs, rumbles, crumblings, yelps, moans, groans, that sort of thing. Not very loud mostly. Sometimes unbearably so. When I could speak I should keep saying, 'Who said that? Who said that?' or 'Be quiet. Shut up you, you're nothing but a washcloth!' or 'Will you be silent, you chamber pot!' because it seemed to me that objects, ordinary everyday objects, were speaking to me in human voices.

The maids would be so cross when I slapped about

some chair or bowl, some handbell or side table. 'Calm down,' they kept telling me.

It was only when my Uncle Aliver, recently made a doctor then, took notice of my upset that things began to improve for me. 'Why are you crying?' he asked me.

'The forceps,' I said.

'My forceps?' he asked. 'What about them?'

I told him that his forceps, which were something that Aliver always carried about him, were talking. Usually I was ignored when I spoke of the talking things, sighed over, or I was given a beating for telling lies, but Uncle Aliver asked me that day, 'And what do my forceps say?'

'They say,' I said, so pleased to be asked, 'Percy Hotchkiss.'

'Percy Hotchkiss?' repeated Uncle Aliver, all interest. 'Anything else?'

'No,' I said, 'that's all I hear. "Percy Hotchkiss."'

'But how can an object speak, Clod?'

'I do not know, and I wish it wouldn't.'

'An object has no life, it has no mouth.'

'I know,' I said, 'and yet it persists.'

'*I* do not hear the forceps speaking.'

'No, but I do, I promise you, Uncle, a muffled, trapped voice, something locked away, saying, "Percy Hotchkiss."'

Afterwards Aliver would often come to me and listen for a long time about all the different voices I heard, about all the different names, and he would make notes. It was just names that I heard, only ever names, some spoken in

whispers, some in great shouts, some singing, some screaming, some sounded with modesty, some with great pride, some with miserable timidity. And always, to me, the names seemed to be coming from different objects all about the great house. I could not concentrate in the school room because the cane kept calling out, 'William Stratton', and there was an inkwell that said, 'Hayley Burgess', and the globe was rumbling, 'Arnold Percival Lister.'

'Why are the names of the objects,' I asked Uncle Aliver one day, I was but seven or so at the time, 'these Johns and Jacks and Marys, these Smiths and Murphys and Joneses, why are they such odd names? So different from ours.'

'Well, Clod,' said Aliver, 'it is certain that we are the ones with the less usual names. And that it is a tradition of our family. We Iremongers have different monikers, because we are different from the rest of them. So that we may be told apart from them. It is an old family custom, our names are like theirs that live away from here, beyond the heaplands, only slanted.'

'The people in London do you mean, Uncle?' I asked.

'In London and far away in all directions, Clod.'

'They have names like the ones I hear?'

'Yes, Clod.'

'Why do I hear the names, Uncle?'

'I do not know, Clod, it is something peculiar to you.'

'Shall it stop ever?'

'I cannot tell. It might go away, it might lessen, it may get worse. I do not know.'

Of all the names I heard, the one I heard most of all was James Henry Hayward. That was because I always kept the object that said 'James Henry Hayward' with me wherever I went. It was a pleasant, young voice.

James Henry was a plug, a universal plug, it could fit most sink holes. I kept it in my pocket. James Henry was my birth object.

When each new Iremonger was born it was a family custom for them to be given something, a special object picked out by Grandmother. The Iremongers always judged an Iremonger by how he looked after his certain object, his birth object as they were called. We were to keep them with us at all times. Each was different. When I was born I was given James Henry Hayward. It was the first thing that ever I knew, my first toy and companion. It had a chain with it, two feet long, at the end of the chain there was a small hook. When I could walk and dress myself, I wore my bath plug and chain as many another person might wear his fob watch. I kept my bath plug, my James Henry Hayward, out of sight so that it was safe, in my waistcoat pocket while the chain looped out U-shaped from the pocket and the hook was attached to my middle waistcoat button. I was very fortunate in the object I had, not all birth objects were so easy as mine.

While it was true my bath plug was a thing of no monetary value, such as Aunt Onjla's diamond tiepin (that said Henrietta Nysmith), it was in no way as cumbersome as Cousin Gustrid's skillet (Mr Gurney), or even my

grandmother's own marble mantelpiece (Augusta Ingrid Ernesta Hoffmann) that had kept her on the second floor all her long life. I did wonder over our birth objects. Should Aunt Loussa ever have taken up smoking had she not been given an ashtray (Little Lil) at birth? She began her habit at seven years of age. Should Uncle Aliver ever have been a doctor if he was not presented with that pair of curved forceps designed for child delivery (Percy Hotchkiss)? And then of course there was my poor melancholy Uncle Pottrick who was given a rope (Lieutenant Simpson) tied into a noose at birth; how miserable it was to see him mournfully limp through the unsteady corridors of his days. But it was deeper than even that, I think: should Aunt Urgula have been taller if she had not been given a footstool (Polly)? It was very complicated, people's relationships with their birth objects. I used to look at my own and know it fitted me perfectly, my bath plug. I couldn't say exactly why but I knew it was true. I could never have been given anything else other than my James Henry. There was only one Iremonger's birth object in the whole family that did not speak a name when I listened to it.

Poor Aunt Rosamud

And so, despite their distrust and mutterings, despite the fact that I was generally left alone, I was called for when Aunt Rosamud lost her door handle. I never liked entering

the domain of Aunt Rosamud, and as a rule I should not be permitted in such an uncomfortable pasture, but it suited them that day to have me there.

Aunt Rosamud, truth be told, was old and grumpy, a bit lumpy, and quick to shout and point and pinch. She distributed charcoal biscuits to all us boys willy-nilly. She was apt to trap us upon the stairs and ask us questions about family history and if we got the answer wrong, confusing a second cousin with a third for example, then she should grow itchy and unpleasant and take out her particular door handle (Alice Higgs) and knock us upon the head with it. You. Stupid. Boy. And it would hurt. Exceedingly so. She had bruised, bumped and banged so many young heads with her particular door handle that she had given door handles a bad name and several of us might be cautious when turning such objects, bringing back such memories as they did. It was not a huge wonder then that we school fellows were held especially suspicious that day. There were many among us that should not mourn for the door handle should it never be recovered, and many of us were terrified at how active it should be if it was. But surely all of us felt some sympathy for Rosamud in her loss, never forgetting that Aunt Rosamud had lost something before.

Aunt Rosamud was supposed to marry a man I never met, some sort of a cousin called Milcrumb, but he got caught beyond the wall of the mansion in a great storm and was drowned in the heaps that surround our home.

His body was never recovered, not even his particular plant pot. And so Milcrumbless Aunt Rosamud shifted about in her unmarried rooms and hit at the world with her door handle. Until one morning the door handle was, like Milcrumb before it, not about.

Rosamud sat on a high-backed chair that morning, full of misery, and with nothing about her saying Alice Higgs at all, as if she'd been suddenly silenced. She seemed a half thing to me then. There were many cushions stuffed around her and some uncles and aunts hovering beyond the cushions. She didn't talk, which was unlike her, she only looked ahead, dolefully. The others, though, made much fuss.

'Come, Muddy, dear, we're certain to find it.'

'Take heart, Rosamud, it is not such a small thing, it shall surface soon enough.'

'Bound to, bound to.'

'Before the hour is out, I'm sure of it.'

'Look now, here is Clod, come to listen out for us.'

This latest information did not seem to cheer her especially. She looked up a little and for a small moment regarded me, with anxiety and perhaps a very little hope.

'Now, Clod,' said my Uncle Aliver, 'shall the rest of us step outside while you listen?'

'That's all right, Uncle,' I said, 'no need at all. Please don't put yourselves out.'

'I don't have a care for this,' said Uncle Timfy, the senior House Uncle, my uncle whose birth object was a whistle that said Albert Powling. Uncle Timfy blew his Albert

Powling so very often when he found something not right. Uncle Timfy the sneak, Uncle Timfy of the plump lips, who never grew above child size, Uncle Timfy the house spy, whose business it was to creep and creep and find disorder. 'This is wasting time,' he protested. 'The whole house must be searched and searched at once.'

'Please, Timfy,' said Aliver, 'it can do no harm. Recall how Pitter's pin was discovered.'

'A fluke, I call it, I've no time for fancies and lies.'

'Now, Clod, please, can you hear your aunt's door handle?'

I listened hard, I walked about her rooms.

'James Henry Hayward.'

'Percy Hotchkiss.'

'Albert Powling.'

'Annabel Carrew.'

'Is it here, Clod?' asked Aliver.

'I hear your forceps very clearly, Uncle, and Uncle Timfy's whistle, most particularly. I hear Aunt Pomular's tea tray right enough. But I cannot hear Aunt Rosamud's door handle.'

'You are quite sure, Clod?'

'Yes, Uncle, there is nothing here by the name Alice Higgs.'

'You are certain of it?'

'Yes, Uncle, most certain.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' snapped Uncle Timfy. 'Get the unwholesome brat out of here; you're not welcome, child, go to the schoolroom at once!'

'Uncle?' I asked.

'Yes, Clod,' said Aliver, 'run along then, thank you for trying. Don't tire yourself, tread carefully. We must mark this officially: date and time of loss, 9th November 1875, 09:50 hours.'

'Would you care for me to listen out about the house?' I asked.

'I won't have him snooping!' cried Timfy.

'No, thank you, Clod,' said Aliver, 'we shall take it from here.'

'The servants shall be stripped,' I heard Timfy saying as I left, 'every cupboard tipped out, everything emptied, every corner disturbed, every little thing!'