In the Closed Room

By

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PART ONE

In the fierce airless heat of the small square room the child Judith panted as she lay on her bed. Her father and mother slept near her, drowned in the heavy slumber of workers after their day's labour. Some people in the next flat were quarrelling, irritated probably by the appalling heat and their miserable helplessness against it. All the hot emanations of the sun-baked city streets seemed to combine with their clamour and unrest, and rise to the flat in which the child lay gazing at the darkness. It was situated but a few feet from the track of the Elevated Railroad and existence seemed to pulsate to the rush and roar of the demon which swept past the windows every few minutes. No one knew that Judith held the thing in horror, but it was a truth that she did. She was only seven years old, and at that age it is not easy to explain one's self so that older people can understand.

She could only have said, "I hate it. It comes so fast. It is always coming. It makes a sound as if thunder was quite close. I can never get away from it." The children in the other flats rather liked it. They hung out of the window perilously to watch it thunder past and to see the people who crowded it pressed close together in the seats, standing in the aisles, hanging on to the straps. Sometimes in the evening there were people in it

who were going to the theatre, and the women and girls were dressed in light colours and wore hats covered with white feathers and flowers. At such times the children were delighted, and Judith used to hear the three in the next flat calling out to each other, "That's MY lady! That's MY lady! That one's mine!"

Judith was not like the children in the other flats. She was a frail, curious creature, with silent ways and a soft voice and eyes. She liked to play by herself in a corner of the room and to talk to herself as she played. No one knew what she talked about, and in fact no one inquired. Her mother was always too busy. When she was not making men's coats by the score at the whizzing sewing machine, she was hurriedly preparing a meal which was always in danger of being late. There was the breakfast, which might not be ready in time for her husband to reach his "shop" when the whistle blew; there was the supper, which might not be in time to be in waiting for him when he returned in the evening. The midday meal was a trifling matter, needing no special preparation. One ate anything one could find left from supper or breakfast.

Judith's relation to her father and mother was not a very intimate one. They were too hard worked to have time for domestic intimacies, and a feature of their acquaintance was that though neither of them was sufficiently articulate to have found expression for the fact--the young man and woman felt the child

vaguely remote. Their affection for her was tinged with something indefinitely like reverence. She had been a lovely baby with a peculiar magnolia whiteness of skin and very large, sweetly smiling eyes of dark blue, fringed with quite black lashes. She had exquisite pointed fingers and slender feet, and though Mr. and Mrs. Foster were--perhaps fortunately--unaware of it, she had been not at all the baby one would have expected to come to life in a corner of the hive of a workman's flat a few feet from the Elevated Railroad.

"Seems sometimes as if somehow she couldn't be mine," Mrs. Foster said at times. "She ain't like me, an' she ain't like Jem Foster, Lord knows. She ain't like none of either of our families I've ever heard of--'ceptin' it might be her Aunt Hester--but SHE died long before I was born. I've only heard mother tell about her. She was a awful pretty girl. Mother said she had that kind of lily-white complexion and long slender fingers that was so supple she could curl 'em back like they was double-jointed. Her eyes was big and had eyelashes that stood out round 'em, but they was brown. Mother said she wasn't like any other kind of girl, and she thinks Judith may turn out like her. She wasn't but fifteen when she died. She never was ill in her life--but one morning she didn't come down to breakfast, and when they went up to call her, there she was sittin' at her window restin' her chin on her hand, with her face turned up smilin' as if she was talkin' to some one. The doctor said it had happened hours before, when she had

come to the window to look at the stars. Easy way to go, wasn't it?"

Judith had heard of her Aunt Hester, but she only knew that she herself had hands like her and that her life had ended when she was quite young. Mrs. Foster was too much occupied by the strenuousness of life to dwell upon the passing of souls. To her the girl Hester seemed too remote to appear quite real. The legends of her beauty and unlikeness to other girls seemed rather like a sort of romance.

As she was not aware that Judith hated the Elevated Railroad, so she was not aware that she was fond of the far away Aunt Hester with the long-pointed fingers which could curl backwards. She did not know that when she was playing in her corner of the room, where it was her way to sit on her little chair with her face turned towards the wall, she often sat curving her small long fingers backward and talking to herself about Aunt Hester. But this--as well as many other things--was true. It was not secretiveness which caused the child to refrain from speaking of certain things. She herself could not have explained the reasons for her silence; also it had never occurred to her that explanation and reasons were necessary. Her mental attitude was that of a child who, knowing a certain language, does not speak it to those who have never heard and are wholly ignorant of it. She knew her Aunt Hester as her mother did not. She had seen her

often in her dreams and had a secret fancy that she could dream of her when she wished to do so. She was very fond of dreaming of her. The places where she came upon Aunt Hester were strange and lovely places where the air one breathed smelled like flowers and everything was lovely in a new way, and when one moved one felt so light that movement was delightful, and when one wakened one had not quite got over the lightness and for a few moments felt as if one would float out of bed.

The healthy, vigourous young couple who were the child's parents were in a healthy, earthly way very fond of each other. They had made a genuine love match and had found it satisfactory. The young mechanic Jem Foster had met the young shop-girl Jane Hardy, at Coney Island one summer night and had become at once enamoured of her shop-girl good looks and high spirits. They had married as soon as Jem had had the "raise" he was anticipating and had from that time lived with much harmony in the flat building by which the Elevated train rushed and roared every few minutes through the day and a greater part of the night. They themselves did not object to the "Elevated"; Jem was habituated to uproar in the machine shop, in which he spent his days, and Jane was too much absorbed in the making of men's coats by the dozens to observe anything else. The pair had healthy appetites and slept well after their day's work, hearty supper, long cheerful talk, and loud laughter over simple common joking.

"She's a queer little fish, Judy," Jane said to her husband as they sat by the open window one night, Jem's arm curved comfortably around the young woman's waist as he smoked his pipe. "What do you think she says to me to-night after I put her to bed?"

"Search ME!" said Jem oracularly.

Jane laughed.

"'Why,' she says, 'I wish the Elevated train would stop.'

"'Why?' says I.

"'I want to go to sleep,' says she. 'I'm going to dream of Aunt Hester.'"

"What does she know about her Aunt Hester," said Jem. "Who's been talkin' to her?"

"Not me," Jane said. "She don't know nothing but what she's picked up by chance. I don't believe in talkin' to young ones about dead folks. 'Tain't healthy."

"That's right," said Jem. "Children that's got to hustle about among live folks for a livin' best keep their minds out of

cemeteries. But, Hully Gee, what a queer thing for a young one to say."

"And that ain't all," Jane went on, her giggle half amused, half nervous. "'But I don't fall asleep when I see Aunt Hester,' says she. 'I fall awake. It's more awake there than here.'

"'Where?' says I, laughing a bit, though it did make me feel queer.

"'I don't know' she says in that soft little quiet way of hers. 'There.' And not another thing could I get out of her."

On the hot night through whose first hours Judith lay panting in her corner of the room, tormented and kept awake by the constant roar and rush and flash of lights, she was trying to go to sleep in the hope of leaving all the heat and noise and discomfort behind, and reaching Aunt Hester. If she could fall awake she would feel and hear none of it. It would all be unreal and she would know that only the lightness and the air like flowers and the lovely brightness were true. Once, as she tossed on her cot-bed, she broke into a low little laugh to think how untrue things really were and how strange it was that people did not understand--that even she felt as she lay in the darkness that she could not get away. And she could not get away unless the train would stop just long enough to let her fall asleep. If she

could fall asleep between the trains, she would not awaken. But they came so quickly one after the other. Her hair was damp as she pushed it from her forehead, the bed felt hot against her skin, the people in the next flat quarreled more angrily, Judith heard a loud slap, and then the woman began to cry. She was a young married woman, scarcely more than a girl. Her marriage had not been as successful as that of Judith's parents. Both husband and wife had irritable tempers. Through the thin wall Judith could hear the girl sobbing angrily as the man flung himself out of bed, put on his clothes and went out, banging the door after him.

"She doesn't know," the child whispered eerily, "that it isn't real at all."

There was in her strange little soul a secret no one knew the existence of. It was a vague belief that she herself was not quite real--or that she did not belong to the life she had been born into. Her mother and father loved her and she loved them, but sometimes she was on the brink of telling them that she could not stay long--that some mistake had been made. What mistake--or where was she to go to if she went, she did not know. She used to catch her breath and stop herself and feel frightened when she had been near speaking of this fantastic thing. But the building full of workmen's flats, the hot room, the Elevated Railroad, the quarrelling people, were all a mistake. Just once or twice in her

life she had seen places and things which did not seem so foreign. Once, when she had been taken to the Park in the Spring, she had wandered away from her mother to a sequestered place among shrubs and trees, all waving tender, new pale green, with the leaves a few early hot days had caused to rush out and tremble unfurled. There had been a stillness there and scents and colours she knew. A bird had come and swung upon a twig quite near her and, looking at her with bright soft full eyes, had sung gently to her, as if he were speaking. A squirrel had crept up onto her lap and had not moved when she stroked it. Its eyes had been full and soft also, and she knew it understood that she could not hurt it. There was no mistake in her being among the new fair greenness, and the woodland things who spoke to her. They did not use words, but no words were needed. She knew what they were saying. When she had pushed her way through the greenness of the shrubbery to the driveway she had found herself quite near to an open carriage, which had stopped because the lady who sat in it was speaking to a friend on the path. She was a young woman, dressed in delicate spring colours, and the little girl at her side was dressed in white cloth, and it was at the little girl Judith found herself gazing. Under her large white hat and feathers her little face seemed like a white flower. She had a deep dimple near her mouth. Her hair was a rich coppery red and hung heavy and long about her cheeks and shoulders. She lifted her head a little when the child in the common hat and frock pressed through the greenness of the bushes and she looked

at Judith just as the bird and the squirrel had looked at her. They gazed as if they had known each other for ages of years and were separated by nothing. Each of them was quite happy at being near the other, and there was not in the mind of either any question of their not being near each other again. The question did not rise in Judith's mind even when in a very few minutes the carriage moved away and was lost in the crowd of equipages rolling by.

At the hottest hours of the hot night Judith recalled to herself the cool of that day. She brought back the fresh pale greenness of the nook among the bushes into which she had forced her way, the scent of the leaves and grass which she had drawn in as she breathed, the nearness in the eyes of the bird, the squirrel, and the child. She smiled as she thought of these things, and as she continued to remember yet other things, bit by bit, she felt less hot--she gradually forgot to listen for the roar of the train--she smiled still more--she lay quite still--she was cool--a tiny fresh breeze fluttered through the window and played about her forehead. She was smiling in soft delight as her eyelids drooped and closed.

"I am falling awake," she was murmuring as her lashes touched her cheek.

Perhaps when her eyes closed the sultriness of the night had

changed to the momentary freshness of the turning dawn, and the next hour or so was really cooler. She knew no more heat but slept softly, deeply, long--or it seemed to her afterwards that she had slept long--as if she had drifted far away in dreamless peace.

She remembered no dream, saw nothing, felt nothing until, as it seemed to her, in the early morning, she opened her eyes. All was quite still and clear--the air of the room was pure and sweet. There was no sound anywhere and, curiously enough, she was not surprised by this, nor did she expect to hear anything disturbing.

She did not look round the room. Her eyes remained resting upon what she first saw--and she was not surprised by this either. A little girl about her own age was standing smiling at her. She had large eyes, a deep dimple near her mouth, and coppery red hair which fell about her cheeks and shoulders. Judith knew her and smiled back at her.

She lifted her hand--and it was a pure white little hand with long tapering fingers.

"Come and play with me," she said--though Judith heard no voice while she knew what she was saying. "Come and play with me."

Then she was gone, and in a few seconds Judith was awake, the air

of the room had changed, the noise and clatter of the streets came in at the window, and the Elevated train went thundering by. Judith did not ask herself how the child had gone or how she had come. She lay still, feeling undisturbed by everything and smiling as she had smiled in her sleep.

While she sat at the breakfast table she saw her mother looking at her curiously.

"You look as if you'd slept cool instead of hot last night," she said. "You look better than you did yesterday. You're pretty well, ain't you, Judy?"

Judith's smile meant that she was quite well, but she said nothing about her sleeping.

The heat did not disturb her through the day, though the hours grew hotter and hotter as they passed. Jane Foster, sweltering at her machine, was obliged to stop every few minutes to wipe the beads from her face and neck. Sometimes she could not remain seated, but got up panting to drink water and fan herself with a newspaper.

"I can't stand much more of this," she kept saying. "If there don't come a thunderstorm to cool things off I don't know what I'll do. This room's about five hundred."

But the heat grew greater and the Elevated trains went thundering by.

When Jem came home from his work his supper was not ready. Jane was sitting helplessly by the window, almost livid in her pallor. The table was but half spread.

"Hullo," said Jem; "it's done you up, ain't it?"

"Well, I guess it has," good-naturedly, certain of his sympathy. "But I'll get over it presently, and then I can get you a cold bite. I can't stand over the stove and cook."

"Hully Gee, a cold bite's all a man wants on a night like this. Hot chops'd give him the jim-jams. But I've got good news for you--it's cheered me up myself."

Jane lifted her head from the chair back.

"What is it?"

"Well, it came through my boss. He's always been friendly to me. He asks a question or so every now and then and seems to take an interest. To-day he was asking me if it wasn't pretty hot and noisy down here, and after I told him how we stood it, he said he

believed he could get us a better place to stay in through the summer. Some one he knows has had illness and trouble in his family and he's obliged to close his house and take his wife away into the mountains. They've got a beautiful big house in one of them far up streets by the Park and he wants to get caretakers in that can come well recommended. The boss said he could recommend us fast enough. And there's a big light basement that'll be as cool as the woods. And we can move in to-morrow. And all we've got to do is to see that things are safe and live happy."

"Oh, Jem!" Jane ejaculated. "It sounds too good to be true! Up by the Park! A big cool place to live!"

"We've none of us ever been in a house the size of it. You know what they look like outside, and they say they're bigger than they look. It's your business to go over the rooms every day or so to see nothing's going wrong in them--moths or dirt, I suppose. It's all left open but just one room they've left locked and don't want interfered with. I told the boss I thought the basement would seem like the Waldorf-Astoria to us. I tell you I was so glad I scarcely knew what to say."

Jane drew a long breath.

"A big house up there," she said. "And only one closed room in it. It's too good to be true!"

"Well, whether it's true or not we'll move out there to-morrow," Jem answered cheerfully. "To-morrow morning bright and early. The boss said the sooner the better."

A large house left deserted by those who have filled its rooms with emotions and life, expresses a silence, a quality all its own. A house unfurnished and empty seems less impressively silent. The fact of its devoidness of sound is upon the whole more natural. But carpets accustomed to the pressure of constantly passing feet, chairs and sofas which have held human warmth, draperies used to the touch of hands drawing them aside to let in daylight, pictures which have smiled back at thinking eyes, mirrors which have reflected faces passing hourly in changing moods, elate or dark or longing, walls which have echoed back voices--all these things when left alone seem to be held in strange arrest, as if by some spell intensifying the effect of the pause in their existence.

The child Judith felt this deeply throughout the entirety of her young being.

"How STILL it is," she said to her mother the first time they went over the place together.

"Well, it seems still up here--and kind of dead," Jane Foster replied with her habitual sociable half-laugh. "But seems to me it always feels that way in a house people's left. It's cheerful enough down in that big basement with all the windows open. We can sit in that room they've had fixed to play billiards in. We shan't hurt nothing. We can keep the table and things covered up. Tell you, Judy, this'll be different from last summer. The Park ain't but a few steps away an' we can go and sit there too when we feel like it. Talk about the country--I don't want no more country than this is. You'll be made over the months we stay here."

Judith felt as if this must veritably be a truth. The houses on either side of the street were closed for the summer. Their occupants had gone to the seaside or the mountains and the windows and doors were boarded up. The street was a quiet one at any time, and wore now the aspect of a street in a city of the dead. The green trees of the Park were to be seen either gently stirring or motionless in the sun at the side of the avenue crossing the end of it. The only token of the existence of the Elevated Railroad was a remote occasional hum suggestive of the flying past of a giant bee. The thing seemed no longer a roaring demon, and Judith scarcely recognized that it was still the centre of the city's rushing, heated life.

The owners of the house had evidently deserted it suddenly. The

windows had not been boarded up and the rooms had been left in their ordinary condition. The furniture was not covered or the hangings swathed. Jem Foster had been told that his wife must put things in order.

The house was beautiful and spacious, its decorations and appointments were not mere testimonies to freedom of expenditure, but expressions of a dignified and cultivated thought. Judith followed her mother from room to room in one of her singular moods. The loftiness of the walls, the breadth and space about her made her, at intervals, draw in her breath with pleasure. The pictures, the colours, the rich and beautiful textures she saw brought to her the free--and at the same time soothed--feeling she remembered as the chief feature of the dreams in which she "fell awake." But beyond all other things she rejoiced in the height and space, the sweep of view through one large room into another. She continually paused and stood with her face lifted looking up at the pictured things floating on a ceiling above her. Once, when she had stood doing this long enough to forget herself, she was startled by her mother's laugh, which broke in upon the silence about them with a curiously earthly sound which was almost a shock.

"Wake up, Judy; have you gone off in a dream? You look all the time as if you was walking in your sleep."

"It's so high," said Judy. "Those clouds make it look like the sky."

"I've got to set these chairs straight," said Jane. "Looks like they'd been havin' a concert here. All these chairs together an' that part of the room clear."

She began to move the chairs and rearrange them, bustling about cheerfully and talking the while. Presently she stooped to pick something up.

"What's this," she said, and then uttered a startled exclamation. "Mercy! they felt so kind of clammy they made me jump. They HAVE had a party. Here's some of the flowers left fallen on the carpet."

She held up a cluster of wax-white hyacinths and large heavy rosebuds, faded to discoloration.

"This has dropped out of some set piece. It felt like cold flesh when I first touched it. I don't like a lot of white things together. They look too kind of mournful. Just go and get the wastepaper basket in the library, Judy. We'll carry it around to drop things into. Take that with you."

Judith carried the flowers into the library and bent to pick up the basket as she dropped them into it.

As she raised her head she found her eyes looking directly into other eyes which gazed at her from the wall. They were smiling from the face of a child in a picture. As soon as she saw them Judith drew in her breath and stood still, smiling, too, in response. The picture was that of a little girl in a floating white frock. She had a deep dimple at one corner of her mouth, her hanging hair was like burnished copper, she held up a slender hand with pointed fingers and Judith knew her. Oh! she knew her quite well. She had never felt so near any one else throughout her life.

"Judy, Judy!" Jane Foster called out. "Come here with your basket; what you staying for?"

Judith returned to her.

"We've got to get a move on," said Jane, "or we shan't get nothin' done before supper time. What was you lookin' at?"

"There's a picture in there of a little girl I know," Judith said. "I don't know her name, but I saw her in the Park once and--and I dreamed about her."

"Dreamed about her? If that ain't queer. Well, we've got to hurry up. Here's some more of them dropped flowers. Give me the

basket."

They went through the whole house together, from room to room, up the many stairs, from floor to floor, and everywhere Judith felt the curious stillness and silence. It can not be doubted that Jane Foster felt it also.

"It is the stillest house I was ever in," she said. "I'm glad I've got you with me, Judy. If I was sole alone I believe it 'ud give me the creeps. These big places ought to have big families in them."

It was on the fourth floor that they came upon the Closed Room. Jane had found some of the doors shut and some open, but a turn of the handle gave entrance through all the unopened ones until they reached this one at the back on the fourth floor.

"This one won't open," Jane said, when she tried the handle. Then she shook it once or twice. "No, it's locked," she decided after an effort or two. "There, I've just remembered. There's one kept locked. Folks always has things they want locked up. I'll make sure, though."

She shook it, turned the handle, shook again, pressed her knee against the panel. The lock resisted all effort.

"Yes, this is the closed one," she made up her mind. "It's locked hard and fast. It's the closed one."

It was logically proved to be the closed one by the fact that she found no other one locked as she finished her round of the chambers.

Judith was a little tired before they had done their work. But her wandering pilgrimage through the large, silent, deserted house had been a revelation of new emotions to her. She was always a silent child. Her mind was so full of strange thoughts that it seemed unnecessary to say many words. The things she thought as she followed her from room to room, from floor to floor, until they reached the locked door, would have amazed and puzzled Jane Foster if she had known of their existence. Most of all, perhaps, she would have been puzzled by the effect the closed door had upon the child. It puzzled and bewildered Judith herself and made her feel a little weary.

She wanted so much to go into the room. Without in the least understanding the feeling, she was quite shaken by it. It seemed as if the closing of all the other rooms would have been a small matter in comparison with the closing of this one. There was something inside which she wanted to see--there was something--somehow there was something which wanted to see her. What a pity that the door was locked! Why had it been done? She sighed unconsciously several

times during the evening, and Jane Foster thought she was tired.

"But you'll sleep cool enough to-night, Judy," she said. "And get a good rest. Them little breezes that comes rustling through the trees in the Park comes right along the street to us."

She and Jem Foster slept well. They spent the evening in the highest spirits and--as it seemed to them--the most luxurious comfort. The space afforded them by the big basement, with its kitchen and laundry and pantry, and, above all, the specially large room which had been used for billiard playing, supplied actual vistas. For the sake of convenience and coolness they used the billiard room as a dormitory, sleeping on light cots, and they slept with all their windows open, the little breezes wandering from among the trees of the Park to fan them. How they laughed and enjoyed themselves over their supper, and how they stretched themselves out with sighs of joy in the darkness as they sank into the cool, untroubled waters of deep sleep.

"This is about the top notch," Jem murmured as he lost his hold on the world of waking life and work.

But though she was cool, though she was undisturbed, though her body rested in absolute repose, Judith did not sleep for a long time. She lay and listened to the quietness. There was mystery in it. The footstep of a belated passer-by in the street woke

strange echoes; a voice heard in the distance in a riotous shout suggested weird things. And as she lay and listened, it was as if she were not only listening but waiting for something. She did not know at all what she was waiting for, but waiting she was.

She lay upon her cot with her arms flung out and her eyes wide open. What was it that she wanted--that which was in the closed room? Why had they locked the door? If they had locked the doors of the big parlours it would not have mattered. If they had locked the door of the library--Her mind paused--as if for a moment, something held it still. Then she remembered that to have locked the doors of the library would have been to lock in the picture of the child with the greeting look in her eyes and the fine little uplifted hand. She was glad the room had been left open. But the room up-stairs--the one on the fourth floor--that was the one that mattered most of all. She knew that to-morrow she must go and stand at the door and press her cheek against the wood and wait--and listen. Thinking this and knowing that it must be so, she fell--at last--asleep.