

Frances Hodgson Burnett

In the Closed Room

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, vigorous 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.