

JOAN HASTE

by H. Rider Haggard

**‘Il y a une page effrayante dans le livre des destinées humaines;
on y lit en tête ces mots “les désirs accomplis.”’—GEORGES
SAND**

**To
I. H.**



‘Indeed, in that moment she was lovely.’

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CHAPTER I.

JOAN HASTE.

Alone and desolate, within hearing of the thunder of the waters of the North Sea, but not upon them, stand the ruins of Ramborough Abbey. Once there was a city at their feet, now the city has gone; nothing is left of its greatness save the stone skeleton of the fabric of the Abbey above and the skeletons of the men who built it mouldering in the earth below. To the east, across a waste of uncultivated heath, lies the wide ocean; and, following the trend of the coast northward, the eye falls upon the red roofs of the fishing village of Bradmouth. When Ramborough was a town, this village was a great port; but the sea, advancing remorselessly, has choked its harbour and swallowed up the ancient borough which to-day lies beneath the waters.

With that of Ramborough the glory of Bradmouth is departed, and of its priory and churches there remains but one lovely and dilapidated fane, the largest perhaps in the east of England—that of Yarmouth alone excepted—and, as many think, the most beautiful. At the back of Bradmouth church, which, standing upon a knoll at some distance from the cliff, has escaped the fate of the city that once nestled beneath it, stretch rich marsh meadows, ribbed with raised lines of roadway. But these do not make up all the landscape, for between Bradmouth and the ruins of Ramborough, following the indentations of the sea coast and set back in a fold or depression of the ground, lie a chain of small and melancholy meres, whose brackish waters, devoid of sparkle even on the brightest day, are surrounded by coarse and worthless grass land,

the haunt of the shore-shooter, and a favourite feeding-place of curlews, gulls, coots and other wild-fowl. Beyond these meres the ground rises rapidly, and is clothed in gorse and bracken, interspersed with patches of heather, till it culminates in the crest of a bank that marks doubtless the boundary of some primeval fiord or lake, where, standing in a ragged line, are groups of wind-torn Scotch fir trees, surrounding a grey and solitary house known as Moor Farm.

The dwellers in these parts—that is, those of them who are alive to such matters,—think that there are few more beautiful spots than this slope of barren land pitted with sullen meres and bordered by the sea. Indeed, it has attractions in every season: even in winter, when the snow lies in drifts upon the dead fern, and the frost-browned gorse shivers in the east wind leaping on it from the ocean. It is always beautiful, and yet there is truth in the old doggerel verse that is written in a quaint Elizabethan hand upon the fly-leaf of one of the Bradmouth parish registers,—

‘Of Rambro’, north and west and south,
Man’s eyes can never see enough;
Yet winter’s gloom or summer’s light,
Wide England hath no sadder sight.’

And so it is; even in the glory of June, when lizards run across the grey stonework and the gorse shows its blaze of gold, there is a stamp of native sadness on the landscape which lies between Bradmouth and Ramborough, that neither the hanging woodlands to the north, nor the distant glitter of the sea, on which boats move to and fro, can altogether conquer. Nature set that seal upon the district in the beginning, and the lost labours of the generations now sleeping round its rotting churches have but accentuated the primal impress of her hand.

Though on the day in that June when this story opens, the sea shone like a mirror beneath her, and the bees hummed in the flowers growing on the ancient graves, and the larks sang sweetly above her head, Joan felt this sadness strike her heart like the chill of an autumn night. Even in the midst of life everything about her seemed to speak of death and oblivion: the ruined church, the long neglected graves, the barren landscape, all cried to her with one voice, seeming to say, "Our troubles are done with, yours lie before you. Be like us, be like us."

It was no high-born lady to whom these voices spoke in that appropriate spot, nor were the sorrows which opened her ears to them either deep or poetical. To tell the truth, Joan Haste was but a village girl, or, to be more accurate, a girl who had spent most of her life in a village. She was lovely in her own fashion, it is true,—but of this presently; and, through circumstances that shall be explained, she chanced to have enjoyed a certain measure of education, enough to awaken longings and to call forth visions that perhaps she would have been happier without. Moreover, although Fate had placed her humbly, Nature gave to her, together with the beauty of her face and form, a mind which, if a little narrow, certainly did not lack for depth, a considerable power of will, and more than her share of that noble dissatisfaction without which no human creature can rise in things spiritual or temporal, and having which, no human creature can be happy.

Her troubles were vulgar enough, poor girl: a scolding and coarse-minded aunt, a suitor toward whom she had no longings, the constant jar of the talk and jest of the ale-house where she lived, and the irk of some vague and half-understood shame that clung to her closely as the ivy clung to the ruined tower above her. Common though such woes be, they were yet sufficiently real to

Joan—in truth, their somewhat sordid atmosphere pressed with added weight upon a mind which was not sordid. Those misfortunes that are proper to our station and inherent to our fate we can bear, if not readily, at least with some show of resignation: those that fall upon us from a sphere of which we lack experience, or arise out of a temperament unsuited to its surroundings, are harder to endure. To be different from our fellows, to look upwards where they look down, to live inwardly at a mental level higher than our circumstances warrant, to desire that which is too far from us, are miseries petty in themselves, but gifted with Protean reproductiveness.

Put briefly, this was Joan's position. Her parentage was a mystery, at least so far as her father was concerned. Her mother was her aunt's younger sister; but she had never known this mother, whose short life closed within two years of Joan's birth. Indeed, the only tokens left to link their existences together were a lock of soft brown hair and a faded photograph of a girl not unlike herself, who seemed to have been beautiful. Her aunt, Mrs. Gillingwater, gave her these mementos of the dead some years ago, saying, with the brutal frankness of her class, that they were almost the only property that her mother had left behind her, so she, the daughter, might as well take possession of them.

Of this mother, however, there remained one other memento—a mound in the churchyard of the Abbey, where until quite recently the inhabitants of Ramborough had been wont to be laid to sleep beside their ancestors. This mound Joan knew, for, upon her earnest entreaty, Mr. Gillingwater, her uncle by marriage, pointed it out to her: indeed, she was sitting by it now. It had no headstone, and when Joan asked him why, he replied that those who were

neither wife nor maid had best take their names with them six feet underground.

The poor girl shrank back abashed at this rough answer, nor did she ever return to the subject. But from this moment she knew that she had been unlucky in her birth, and though such an accident is by no means unusual in country villages, the sense of it galled her, lowering her in her own esteem. Still she bore no resentment against this dead and erring mother, but rather loved her with a strange and wondering love than which there could be nothing more pathetic. The woman who bore her, but whom she had never seen with remembering eyes, was often in her thoughts; and once, when some slight illness had affected the balance of her mind, Joan believed that she came and kissed her on the brow—a vision whereof the memory was sweet to her, though she knew it to be but a dream. Perhaps it was because she had nothing else to love that she clung thus to the impalpable, making a companion of the outcast dead whose blood ran in her veins. At the least this is sure, that when her worries overcame her, or the sense of incongruity in her life grew too strong, she was accustomed to seek this lowly mound, and, seated by it, heedless of the weather, she would fix her eyes upon the sea and soothe herself with a sadness that seemed deeper than her own.

Her aunt, indeed, was left to her, but from this relation she won no comfort. From many incidents trifling in themselves, but in the mass irresistible, Joan gathered that there had been little sympathy between her mother and Mrs. Gillingwater—if, in truth, their attitude was not one of mutual dislike. It would appear also that in her own case this want of affection was an hereditary quality, seeing that she found it difficult to regard her aunt with any feeling warmer than tolerance, and was in turn held in an open aversion,

which to Joan's mind, was scarcely mitigated by the very obvious pride Mrs. Gillingwater took in her beauty. In these circumstances Joan had often wondered why she was not dismissed to seek her fortune. More than once, when after some quarrel she sought leave to go, she found that there was no surer path to reconciliation than to proffer this request; and speeches of apology, which, as she knew well, were not due to any softening of Mrs. Gillingwater's temper, or regret for hasty misbehaviour, were at once showered upon her.

To what, then, were they due? The question was one that Joan took some years to answer satisfactorily. Clearly not to love, and almost as clearly to no desire to retain her services, since, beyond attending to her own room, she did but little work in the way of ministering to the wants and comforts of the few customers of the Crown and Mitre, nor was she ever asked to interest herself in such duties.

Gradually a solution to the riddle forced itself into Joan's intelligence—namely, that in some mysterious way her aunt and uncle lived on her, not she on them. If this were not so, it certainly became difficult to understand how they did live, in view of the fact that Mr. Gillingwater steadily consumed the profits of the tap-room, if any, and that they had no other visible means of subsistence. Yet money never seemed to be wanting; and did Joan need a new dress, or any other luxury, it was given to her without demur. More, when some years since she had expressed a sudden and spontaneous desire for education; after a few days' interval, which, it seemed to her, might well have been employed in reference to superior powers in the background, she was informed that arrangements had been made for her to be sent to a boarding school in the capital of the county. She went, to find that her

fellow-pupils were for the most part the daughters of shop-keepers and large farmers, and that in consequence the establishment was looked down upon by the students of similar, but higher-class institutions in the same town, and by all who belonged to them. Joan being sensitive and ambitious, resented this state of affairs, though she had small enough right to do so, and on her return home informed her aunt that she wished to be taken away from that school and sent to another of a better sort. The request was received without surprise, and again there was a pause as though to allow of reference to others. Then she was told that if she did not like her school she could leave it, but that she was not to be educated above her station in life.

So Joan returned to the middle-class establishment, where she remained till she was over nineteen years of age. On the whole she was very happy there, for she felt that she was acquiring useful knowledge which she could not have obtained at home. Moreover, among her schoolfellows were certain girls, the daughters of poor clergymen and widows, ladies by birth, with whom she consorted instinctively, and who did not repel her advances.

At the age of nineteen she was informed suddenly that she must leave her school, though no hint of this determination had been previously conveyed to her. Indeed, but a day or two before her aunt had spoken of her return thither as if it were a settled thing. Pondering over this decision in much grief, Joan wondered why it had been arrived at, and more especially whether the visit that morning of her uncle's landlord, Mr. Levinger, who came, she understood, to see about some repairs to the house, had anything to do with it. To Mr. Levinger himself she had scarcely spoken half a dozen times in her life, and yet it seemed to her that whenever they met he regarded her with the keenest interest. Also on this

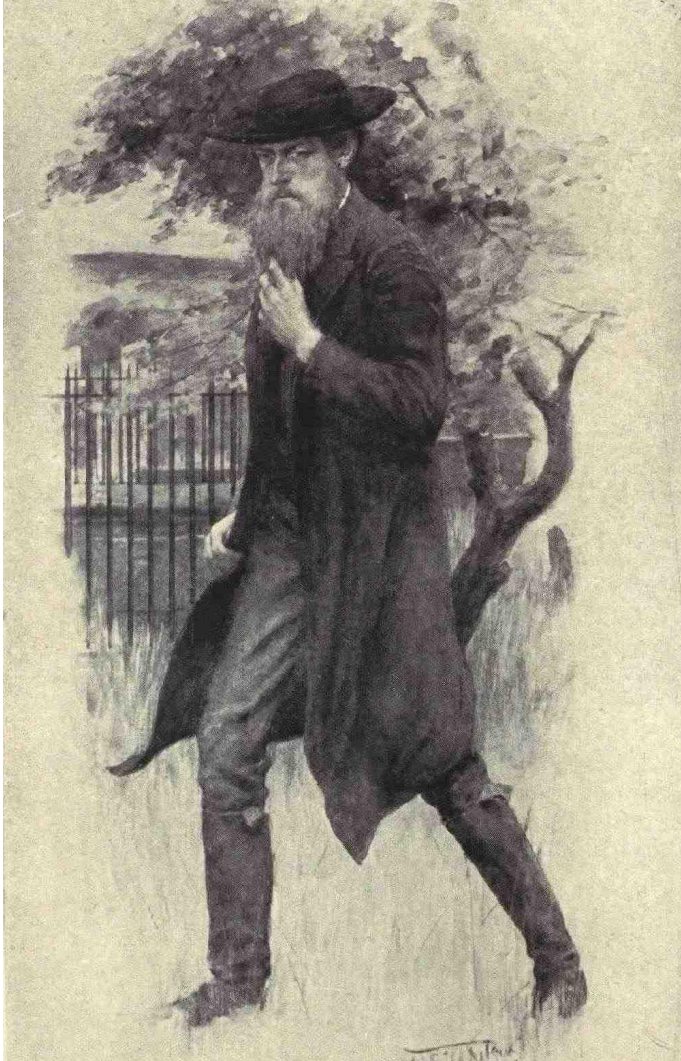
particular occasion Joan chanced to pass the bar-parlour where Mr. Levinger was closeted with her aunt, and to overhear his parting words, or rather the tag of them which was “too much of a lady,” a remark that she could not help thinking had to do with herself. Seeing her go by, he stopped her, keeping her in conversation for some minutes, then abruptly turned upon his heel and left the house with the air of a man who is determined not to say too much.

Then it was that Joan’s life became insupportable to her. Accustomed as she had become to more refined associations, from which henceforth she was cut off, the Crown and Mitre, and most of those connected with it, grew hateful in her sight. In her disgust she racked her brain to find some means of escape, and could think of none other than the time-honoured expedient of “going as a governess.” This she asked leave to do, and the permission was accorded after the usual pause; but here again she was destined to meet with disappointment. Her surroundings and her attainments were too humble to admit of her finding a footing in that overcrowded profession. Moreover, as one lady whom she saw told her frankly, she was far too pretty for this walk of life. At length she did obtain a situation, however, a modest one enough, that of nursery governess to the children of the rector of Bradmouth, Mr. Biggen. This post she held for nine months, till Mr. Biggen, a kind-hearted and scholarly man, noting her beauty and intelligence, began to take more interest in her than pleased his wife—a state of affairs that resulted in Joan’s abrupt dismissal on the day previous to the beginning of this history.

To come to the last and greatest of her troubles: it will be obvious that such a woman would not lack for admirers. Joan had several, all of whom she disliked; but chiefly did she detest the most ardent and persistent of them, the favoured of her aunt, Mr. Samuel Rock.

Samuel Rock was a Dissenter, and the best-to-do agriculturist in the neighbourhood, farming some five hundred acres, most of them rich marsh-lands, of which three hundred or more were his own property inherited and acquired. Clearly, therefore, he was an excellent match for a girl in the position of Joan Haste, and when it is added that he had conceived a sincere admiration for her, and that to make her his wife was the principal desire of his life, it becomes evident that in the nature of things the sole object of hers ought to have been to meet his advances half-way. Unfortunately this was not the case. For reasons which to herself were good and valid, however insufficient they may have appeared to others, Joan would have nothing to do with Samuel Rock. It was to escape from him that she had fled this day to Ramborough Abbey, whither she fondly hoped he would not follow her. It was the thought of him that made life seem so hateful to her even in the golden afternoon; it was terror of him that caused her to search out every possible avenue of retreat from the neighbourhood of Bradmouth.

She might have spared herself the trouble, for even as she sighed and sought, a shadow fell upon her, and looking up she saw Samuel Rock standing before her, hat in hand and smiling his most obsequious smile.



Samuel Rock.

CHAPTER II.

SAMUEL ROCK DECLARES HIMSELF.

Mr. Samuel Rock was young-looking rather than young in years, of which he might have seen some thirty-five, and, on the whole, not uncomely in appearance. His build was slender for his height, his eyes were blue and somewhat shifty, his features sharp and regular except the chin, which was prominent, massive, and developed almost to deformity. Perhaps it was to hide this blemish that he wore a brown beard, very long, but thin and straggling. His greatest peculiarity, however, was his hands, which were shaped like those of a woman, were long, white notwithstanding their exposure to the weather, and adorned with almond-shaped nails that any lady might have envied. These hands were never still; moreover, there was something furtive and unpleasant about them, capable as they were of the strangest contortions. Mr. Rock's garments suggested a compromise between the dress affected by Dissenters who are pillars of their local chapel and anxious to proclaim the fact, and those worn by the ordinary farmer, consisting as they did of a long-tailed black coat rather the worse for wear, a black felt wide-awake, and a pair of cord breeches and stout riding boots.

“How do you do, Miss Haste?” said Samuel Rock, in his soft, melodious voice, but not offering to shake hands, perhaps because his fingers were engaged in nervously crushing the crown of his hat.

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