

**THE  
HOUSE OF SPIES**

**BY  
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# The House of Spies

## I

Jasper Benham tumbled out of bed, with the crack of a pistol-shot splitting the silence of the night. Before him ran the long casement window, each diamond pane a silver lozenge set in a frame of jet. Moonlight came through and lay patterned upon the floor.

"Master Jasper—Master Jasper——!"

It was a plaintive howl from under the window, the voice of a man who was afraid.

"Master Jasper—horse-thieves in t' yard!"

The lattice opened, and a pair of broad shoulders caught the moonlight.

"What's this—Jack——?"

John Bumpstead, the groom, was squeezing himself against the wall.

"Dear Lord—sir—they've bruk into t' stable. Me and Jim Burgess tumbled up to see what was wrong. We couldn't face pistols, sir. They be there still, sir——"

"What! The infernal rogues! Here, take the blunderbuss, Jack, and have a blaze——"

"Master Jasper—I dursn't——"

"You're not man enough to scare rooks!"

The figure disappeared from the window, and from the moonlit room came the sounds of an active young man plunging furiously for his clothes. Anything served; a frilled shirt, the red coat of a lieutenant of volunteers thrown over a chair, a pair of riding-breeches and rough boots. A hanger hung from the bed-post, and there was the blunderbuss in the corner. Jasper Benham went down the oak stairs with the clattering impetuosity of a boy playing hide-and-seek. He drew back the bolts of the heavy porch door, and ran the oak bar out of its socket.

Jack Bumpstead waited in the porch, with little coquettish flirts of something white swaying in the draught. He had been valorously quick in dressing, but his teeth chattered behind his thin beard.

"Take the oak bar, Jack; it's a good cudgel. How many of them?"

"May be a dozen."

"Fudge! Where's Jim Jenner?"

"I shouldn't like t' say, sir."

"No doubt back in bed and under the sheets by this time! Shout—if you can't fight, Jack; make a noise—anything. Come along."

They skirted along the terrace, turned down by the yew hedge, and so by the stone-paved passage between the bake-house and the great brick barn. The passage was in deep shadow, and Jasper had

no notion that a man was lurking there till the yellow spurt of the powder in the priming-pan of a pistol made him throw himself against the wall. The piece missed fire, and the clatter of heavy boots over the stones betrayed what had become of the man who had pulled the trigger. There was some shouting in the stable yard, and the stamping of horses. One deep voice sent oaths flying, the savage and impatient oaths of a man in a fluster.

Jack Bumpstead had thrown himself flat on his face. He caught young Benham by the ankle.

"You shan't go for to be shot, master; they be some of Dan Stunt's gang."

"Let go—you fool!"

"They don't mind God or devil, sir. Better for 'em to have the nags——"

"Let go, Jack, or by Jove——"

He twisted free and ran on into the yard in time to see a hustle of horses crowding through the gateway into the moonlight. One fellow was still lying across his horse's back with his legs dangling. Another sat gaunt and erect, pistol raised, ready, like a big forefinger.

Jasper's blunderbuss came up. He fired high, because of the horses, and the belching mouth of the blunderbuss stabbed the night with flame. Smoke hung for a moment, drifting away in wisps. The gateway had emptied as though by magic, and in the place of the black knot of men and horses, a strip of moonlit road was guarded by the two black, brick pillars with their two stone balls.

Jasper ran for the gate, shouting to Jack Bumpstead as he ran.

"Get a lantern—get a lantern."

Nothing lay in the roadway beyond the gate, no dark thing that squirmed with leaden slugs burning in its body. A dark blur that moved broke the white road across the paddock. Jasper watched it a moment with jaws set, and then turned back into the yard. He was in an ugly temper, and even the tail of Jack Bumpstead's shirt, flickering in doleful whiteness by the stable door, flapped no laughter from him. A tinder-box was kept on a window-ledge close to where the cord that held the great stable lantern sloped down to a hook in the wall. The groom had groped for the tinder-box and was trying to get a light, though his hands were shaking so that he struck the flint with his knuckles more often than he struck it with the steel.

"The deuce, Jack! Here, give me the things!"

From the loose-box at the far end of the stable came the whimpering of a horse and the clatter of hoofs on the brick floor.

"Why, they've left Devil Dick!"

"Sure, Master Jasper, sure!"

"That's luck, indeed!"

John Bumpstead managed to get one of the sulphur-tipped matches alight. Benham had lowered the great lantern and it dangled close by. The groom put the match to the candle, and the yellow rays shooting between the black bars showed four empty stalls littered with trampled straw.

Benham pulled a wry face.

"Confound the blackguards! Two cart-horses, and Peggy, and Brown Bob gone. And they have left Devil Dick, the best of the whole bunch!"

He went to the loose-box, and a warm nose was thrust over the door. The horse's lips nibbled affectionately at his hand.

"Jack, light that other lantern there. Run into the house and get me a brace of pistols. You'll find them in the case on the oak chest in my room. Run, man, run. I'll saddle Dick."

"Sir——?"

"Don't stand and stare, you fool! Do you think I'm going to let these gentry go without a gallop! I may follow them up if I can't bring them to action."

In ten minutes Devil Dick was prancing sideways through the gateway, carrying a bare-headed, bare-legged man with a pistol in each pocket. A good square jaw, blue eyes, and a firm mouth are the points of a youngster who does not fawn upon fate. Jasper Benham had been an impudent young cub, a little laughing, keen-eyed imp who had been whacked and cuffed into a sturdy, determined, brown-faced man.

Jasper drew Devil Dick on to the grass and listened. The night was still, with a gibbous moon sailing away up yonder, and a vague, inconstant breeze murmuring occasionally in the trees and hedgerows. Rush Heath House stood black and huge at Jasper's back. He listened to a faint galloping rhythm coming like the noise of a stream running in the distance. The moonlight shone on the deep-set eyes under the square brows.

"Tsst—Dick—on—lad."



They started away through the paddock, and over the furze-covered slopes of Rush Heath, the big black horse swinging smoothly between Jasper's knees. Stones clinked in the road. The stunted thorns rushed by, stretching out warning hands. In the damp places the rush tufts splintered the moonlight like silver wires. The further woods were very black upon the hillsides, and the fresh smell of the spring night was tinged with the scent of the sea.

Jasper galloped through Polecat Wood, on over Stubb's Common, and past Flanders Farm into Lavender's Hole. At the top of the further hill he drew in to listen, and heard something that heartened him and set his blood a-spinning. There was good turf along the track over Stonehanger Heath, and by the light of the moon he could see the fresh marks left by the horses ahead. A lively imagination is needed for the making of a coward, and Jasper Benham's shoulders were too sturdy to form a squatting-place for fear. Devil Dick at a gallop was made for audacity, pistol-shots, and the clashing of swords.

"Scurvy thieves——!"

The land was very wild here, rough wood and heathland rising toward uplands that overlooked the sea. Stunted oaks and firs hung in black tangles against the moon. Desolate furze-covered knolls heaved this way and that, and the track plunged, twisted, and burrowed through thickets. Even higher ground lay up yonder under the moon, a bluff ridge where the trees had been blown all one way by the wind, and the furze rolled like green breakers.

Jasper saw the roof and chimneys of a house rising black against the sky. He lost sight of it for a moment as the track curved

under a rocky bank where dwarf trees and brushwood broke the moonlight. Then the house reappeared again upon the hilltop, a bleak house, parapeted, square-windowed, with massive chimneys built for the roar of the wind. Tattered thorns, oaks, and firs sheltered it on the north and the south-west, and held out their arms to it as though it had tormented them for years with some strange secret. The furze broke upon the very walls of its terrace and garden.

Jasper drew in, like a man challenged in the darkness.

"Stonehanger! I had forgotten the old place!"

He looked up at it, frowningly, as though it roused grim thoughts, ghostly drifts of gossip that made folk draw nearer to the fire.

"Who's there now? Bless me if I know! These horse-thieves—!"

He took a pistol from his pocket and let Devil Dick advance at a walk. The black house up yonder oppressed him. Such things had happened there. It was as though it threw a shadow across his heart.

What was that? Horses galloping! By George—what a fool he was to be shying at a dark house like a nervous horse, while the gentry yonder were going over the hill. Jasper urged Devil Dick to a trot. The track was steep here, and Uttered with loose stones.

But in chasing blackguards a man may forget to be on his guard against the blackguards' tricks. At the spot where the grey stone wall of the Stonehanger garden began a great yew threw its shadow across the road. And a man leaning round the trunk of the tree, flashed a pistol at Jasper, and then jumped into the road.

"Take that—for being obstinate, and be darned to you!"

Jasper was down in the road as quickly as the man, simply because Devil Dick had swerved and thrown him, and left him lying on his back. The horse-thief bent over Jasper with the butt-end of his pistol ready. A superfluous precaution. Benham of Rush Heath lay as still as a stone, and his horse had bolted down the road.

The man spat, and nodded.

"You lie nice and quiet there, lad. I should have liked your nag, but the beast's bolted. Good-night to ye——"

And he went off with a wave of the hat.

## II

There was a light in Stonehanger House. It had flashed out suddenly in one of the side windows, as though the black house had raised an eyelid and looked out on the world with a sinister, yellow eye.

The light disappeared from the window, and left the eastern side of the house a mere dark surface. At the same moment a gust of wind came over the hill from the sea. The stunted trees shook their fists at the house, cursing it and bidding it beware.

Then a door opened, and the light came out into the paved yard at the back of Stonehanger. It flickered across toward the stable whose stone roof was brushed by the boughs of a clump of firs. There was the sound of some one hammering at a door, a hollow sound like blows struck with the hilt of a sword upon the panelling covering some secret hiding-place.

The light approached the road, shooting yellow rays among the overgrown laurels and hollies of the shrubbery inside the stone wall. There was a gate here, with an arched stone bridge leading over the ditch to the road. The gate was thrust open and the lantern held out at the end of a white forearm. Ten yards away Jasper Benham lay flat on his back, one arm flung out, the other twisted as though it were broken. The lantern swayed uncertainly at the gate and then came down into the road. It showed the white face and the slight figure of a girl, a red cloak flung over her shoulders, her dress open at the throat.

She stood and looked at the figure in the road as though she were shrewdly afraid, and ready to reason with herself for being so.

"Don't be a coward, Nance. You won't help any one by being afraid."

She spoke the words aloud, in a mood to be reassured by the sound of her own voice.

"Can't you see that the man has a soldier's coat? The French may have landed at last. You heard horses go by, and the sound of a pistol-shot."

She moved forward and, holding the lantern shoulder-high, bent over the man in the road. It was a pure coincidence that Benham opened his eyes at the same moment, and blinked at the light that was within two feet of his face.

"Hallo!—O—my head!"

He stirred, turned on one elbow, and fell back with a savage start of pain.

"Damnation, what's this? What have they done to my arm? Who—? I say—I beg your pardon——!"

Sudden sanity came into his eyes, and he lay and stared at the girl's face. It seemed that these two were fascinated momentarily by each other's eyes. Benham moistened his lips, and made an effort to explain himself.

"I must have had a crack on the head. Of course, what am I thinking of! The scoundrel shot at me from behind a tree. Where's Dick? Can you see anything of a horse?"

She looked up and down the lane, and her eyes returned slowly to his face. They were very solemn eyes, big and dark, like the eyes of a southern woman.

"I can't see any horse. Have the French landed——?"

"The French?"

"Yes."

"Nothing so respectable. I was chasing horse-thieves, and one of them shot me from behind that yew-tree. I'm Benham of Rush Heath."

Her solemnity took the colour of compassion.

"I'm sorry. And your poor arm there! No, don't move. I'm Nance Durrell, and this is Stonehanger Lane."

"Durrell! H'm. That fellow's bullet must have broken my right arm."

"I heard horses galloping, and the sound of a pistol-shot. You see, I was watching for father. And I couldn't wake David; he's stone deaf."

"You live here then?"

"Yes, at Stonehanger. Don't you know?"

Jasper looked discomfited by his ignorance.

"It's my head; this tumble has knocked my wits to pieces. I wonder if I can get up."

She put the lantern down, and they regarded each other with great seriousness.

"I don't know. There's your arm! And it has been bleeding."

"Has it?"

"Sssh—it must hurt!"

"Well, I can't lie here in the road, can I?"

"No."

"I must get up—and home—somehow."

She looked at him as though considering what was best to do.

"I know. You ought to have your arm fastened to your side. I had my arm broken once. I'll go in and get a scarf."

She picked up the lantern and disappeared through the gate with beams of light swinging about her in the darkness. As for Jasper Benham, his head had cleared sufficiently to admit some measure of astonished curiosity. Who were the Durrells, and how had they come to Stonehanger House, and how was it he could not remember ever having heard the name?

"Nance Durrell—Nance Durrell."

He repeated it to himself as he lay under the shadow of the yew-tree, as though the uttering of the name might help him to realise that he was not dreaming in his bed at Rush Heath. No; the ground was solid, the yew bough above him was solid, the pain in his arm was very real. And the girl who called herself Nance

Durrell? He found himself waiting impatiently for her return, and watching the foliage of the shrubs for the shine of her lantern.

She was back again in the road, carrying a red scarf in one hand.

"I had to hunt for it, or I should not have been so long."

She put the lantern down, and knelt beside him, her lips parted, her eyes full of her purpose. It struck Benham of a sudden that she must have led a free and rather lonely life. She seemed ready to rely upon herself, to meet responsibilities with the frank self-reliance of a girl who has had to trust to her own hands.

"Do you think you can sit up?"

"Of course I can."

"Wait; I'll help you. Hold your arm with your other hand."

She drew herself behind him, and put her hands under his shoulders.

"Now."

He was up, with her hands still holding him, and her breath touching his cheek.

"Can you bear it?"

"Yes."

"Draw the arm across—so."

"Phew—confound it! I'm sorry; it's nothing."

"I know how it must hurt."



The frank impulse toward sympathy in her voice sent a start of emotion through him. He set his teeth as she bound the broken arm to his side with the red scarf. There was a kind of pleasure in the pain.

"What gentle hands you have."

"Have I? There! How does that feel?"

"Splendid."

"Now I'll help you up."

Whatever a man's pluck may be it cannot raise him above nature, or make him independent of the ills of the flesh. Jasper Benham scrambled to his feet to be smothered by a sudden fog of faintness that blotted out the moonlight and set him groping with his hands.

"I can't help it—but——"

She understood what ailed him, and was practical in her compassion.

"You're faint."

Her hands steadied him.

"Put your head down—just for a moment."

He felt the grip of her strong young hands, and the thrill of it may have helped his heart.

"That's better."

"Are you sure?"

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