
Opening Extract from...

Havisham

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HAVISHAM

A Novel

RONALD FRAME

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Love is in the one who loves,
not in the one who is loved.

PLATO

Prologue

Four loud blows on the front door.

I stood waiting at the foot of the staircase as the door was opened.

The light from the candles fell upon their faces. Mr Jaggers's, large and London-pale and mapped with a blue afternoon beard. A nursemaid's, pink with excitement after listening on the journey down to Mr Jaggers's discreet account of me – my wealth, my eccentric mode of life, my famous pride and prickliness.

And the third face. The child's. She was standing a few paces behind the nursemaid; she was keeping back, but leaned over sharply to see between the two adults. She looked forward, into the house, across the hall's black and white floor tiles.

When she was brought inside, I studied her, from my vantage-point on the second tread. Her complexion was a little tawny, as I had been led to expect. She had raven hair, which was more of the gypsy in her, but her eyes were blue, from the English father.

Blue, silvery-blue, and wide open, staring up at me. At where I stood, wearing the wedding dress I should have been married in.

I lifted my hand from the banister rail and moved to the step beneath.

Immediately the child turned away. She raised her shoulder as if to protect herself, and hid behind the nursemaid's skirts. The woman smiled a nervous apology.

I retreated, one step up, then another.

'Too much light,' I said. 'That's all.'

The child's eyes rested on my bride's slippers. White satin originally, but soiled after these many months of wear.

‘The light dazzles her,’ I said. ‘She will adjust. She only needs to get her bearings.’

I

YOUNG CATHERINE

Chapter One

I killed my mother.

I had turned round in the womb, and the surgeon needed to cut her open to let me out. He couldn't staunch her, and by the end of that evening she had bled to death.

My father draped the public rooms of Satis House in dust sheets. The chandeliers were left in situ, but wrapped in calico bags. The shutters were closed completely across some windows, and part-drawn at others.

My first days were lived out in a hush of respectfully lowered voices as a procession of folk came to offer their condolences.

My eyes became accustomed to the half-light.

One evening several new candles were set in one of the chandeliers. My mother's clavecin was uncovered, and someone played it again – notwithstanding that it was out of tune – and that was the point at which the house stopped being a sepulchre and was slowly brought back to life.

❧

It was the first word I remember *seeing*.

HAVISHAM.

Painted in green letters on the sooty brick of the brewhouse wall.

Fat letters. Each one had its own character.

Comfortable spreading 'H'. Angular, proud 'A'. Welcoming, open 'V'. The unforthcoming sentinel 'I'. 'S', a show-off, not

altogether to be trusted. The squat and briefly indecisive, then reassuring 'M'.

The name was up there even in the dark. In the morning it was the first thing I would look for from the house windows, to check that the wind hadn't made off with our identity in the night or the slanting estuary rain washed the brickwork clean.

Jehosophat Havisham, otherwise known as Joseph Havisham, son of Matthias.

Havisham's was the largest of several brewers in the town. Over the years we had bought out a number of smaller breweries and their outlets, but my father had preferred to concentrate production in our own (extended) works. He continued *his* father's programme of tying in the vending sites, acquiring ownership outright or making loans to the publicans who stocked our beer.

Everyone in North Kent knew who we were. Approaching the town on the London road, the eye was drawn first to the tower of the cathedral and then, some moments later, to the name HAVISHAM so boldly stated on the old brick.

We were to be found on Crow Lane.

The brewery was on one side of the big cobbled yard, and our home on the other.

Satis House was Elizabethan, and took the shape of an E, with later addings-on. The maids would play a game, counting in their heads the rooms they had to clean, and never agreeing on a total: between twenty-five and thirty.

Once the famous Pepys had strolled by, and ventured into the Cherry Garden. There he came upon a doltish shopkeeper and his pretty daughter, and the great man 'did kiss her'.

My father slept in the King's Room, which was the chamber provided for Charles II following his sojourn in France, in 1660.

The staircase had been made broader to accommodate the Merry Monarch as his manservants manoeuvred him upstairs and down. A second, steeper flight was built behind for the servants.

❧

I grew up with the rich aroma of hops and the potent fumes from the fermenting rooms in my nostrils, filling my head until I failed to notice. I must have been in a state of perpetual mild intoxication.

I heard, but came not to hear, the din of the place. Casks being rolled across the cobbles, chaff-cutting, bottle-washing, racking, wood being tossed into the kiln fires. Carts rumbled in and out all day long.

The labourers had Herculean muscles. Unloading the sacks of malt and raising them on creaky pulleys; mashing the ground malt; slopping out the containers and vats; drawing into butts; pounding the extraneous yeast; always rolling those barrels from the brewhouse to the storehouse, and loading them on to the drays.

Heat, flames, steam, the dust clouds from the hops, the heady atmosphere of fermentation and money being made.

❧

I was told by my father that the brewery was a parlous place for a little girl, and I should keep my distance. The hoists, the traps, those carts passing in and out; the horses were chosen for their strength, not their sensitivity, but every now and then one would be overcome with equine despair and make a bid for freedom, endangering itself and anyone in its path.

The brewhouse was only silent at night, and even then I heard the watchmen whistling to keep up their spirits in that gaunt

and eerily echoing edifice, and the dogs for want of adventure barking at phantom intruders. The first brew-hands were there by five in the morning, sun-up, and the last left seventeen hours later, a couple of hours short of midnight.

I woke, and fell asleep, to the clopping of shod hooves, the whinnying of overworked carthorses.

'It's a dangerous place, miss,' my nursemaids would repeat.

My father insisted. 'Too many hazards for you to go running about.'

But should I ever complain about the noise, or the smell of hops or dropped dung, his response was immediate: this was our livelihood/if it was good enough for my grandfather/you'll simply have to put up with it, won't you, missy. So I learned not to comment, and if I was distracted from my lessons or my handiwork or my day-dreaming, I moved across to the garden side of the house. Out of doors, in the garden, the sounds would follow me, but there were flowers and trees to look at, and the wide Medway sky to traverse with my thoughts.

Sometimes I would see a man or a woman reeling drunk out of a pub, or I'd hear the singing and cursing of regulars deep in their cups.

That, too, was a part of who we Havishams were. But I would be hurried past by whoever was holding my hand, as if they had been issued with orders: the child isn't to linger thereabouts, d'you understand. So we negotiated those obstacles double-quick, taking to side alleys if need be, to remove ourselves to somewhere more salubrious, while the rollicking voices sounded after us – but not their owners, thankfully grounded in a stupor.

Chapter Two

At an upstairs window, in Toad Lane, a bald-headed doll craned forward. One eyelid was closed, so that the doll appeared to be winking. It knew a secret or two.

In Feathers Lane lived a man who pickled and preserved for a trade. In *his* window he displayed some of his wares.

There in one dusty jar a long-dead lizard floated, with its jaws open and the tiny serrations of teeth visible. In another, three frogs had been frozen eternally as they danced, legs trailing elegantly behind them. Next to that was a rolled bluish tongue of something or other.

In the largest jar a two-headed object with one body was suspended, and I somehow realised – before Ruth confirmed it for me – that these were the beginnings of people: two embryos that had grown into one.

The window horrified me, but – just as much – I was fascinated by it. On the occasions when I could persuade Ruth to take me into town or home again that way, I felt a mixture of cold shivers and impatience to reach the grimy bow-fronted window where I had to raise myself on tiptoe to see in.

❧

I thought – was it possible? – that through the slightly bitter citrus fragrance of pomander I could smell further back, I could catch my mother's sweet perfume and powder on the clothes stored flat in the press, years after she had last worn them.

I didn't even know where my mother was buried.

'Far off,' my father said. 'In a village churchyard. Under shade.'

I asked if we might go.

'Your mother doesn't need us now.'

'Don't we need *her*?'

'Some things belong to the past.'

His face carried the pain it always did when I brought up the subject of my mother. His eyes became fixed, pebble-like, as if he were defying tears. I sometimes thought that in the process he was trying to convince himself he didn't like *me* very much.

But those occasions would be followed by shows of kindness, by the purchase of another expensive plaything for me. This, the gift of the toy would be announcing, is how we attempt to put the sad parts of the past out of our minds.

I wondered if he really had recovered from the loss, or wasn't still privately nursing his grief, battening it down inside himself.

I would hear the cathedral bells every morning and evening. On Sundays and High Days the air crumpled with the pealing of so many other bells, from our Saints, Gundulph and Margaret and Zachary and Jude. All that eloquent and silver-toned pressure to be devout, or at least to appear so.

On Sunday mornings we worshipped at ten.

We would walk to the cathedral. Across the brewery yard into Crow Lane. Across the open sward of the Vines, into the Precincts, past the end of Minor Canon Row, with the Old Palace on our left.

I would always keep two or three steps behind my father.

Along the approach of worn flagstones to the Great Porch.

The archdeacon would bend low, his urgent hand pushing into the gloved palm of mine, because a brewer comes next to county stock, his is the aristocrat of trades. Even the lawyers and doctors stood back, and their eyepainted wives and petticoated daughters too, because they knew their place.

Into the gloom, into the reek of leather-bound hymnals and candlewax and withering tomb-flowers, that dry stale odour of old time oozing out of the stone. Heads would turn while I kept my gaze fixed straight ahead.

My sight adjusted to the little light. On the floor, pools of ruby and indigo from the stained window glass. The furious shimmer of candles stuck on spikes.

The pew creaked, it always creaked, as if the planed wood were sounding a complaint, a lament for the forest where it had grown.

In winter Ruth – or Eliza, who replaced her – provided me with a rug, a wrap, a muff, a coal foot-brazier, a water bottle. I imagined I was in a troika, speeding across a snowfield, the drowned Iven Meadow iced over. The ice sparked beneath the metal runners. Rime stiffened the horse's mane, tail, my eyelashes. My breath streaked past me like thin blue smoke.

The noble families were customarily represented at the services, but individual members came and went, and seemed more often away, up in London or at a watering-place or visiting their circle at their grand homes, worshipping – if they did – in private chapels.

By comparison we Havishams were rooted to the spot. People expected to see us there, and I took their expectation as a kind of right, due acknowledgement of our importance in the local order.

I would sit looking at the painted stone effigies on their tombs. I fixed on this or that figure, kneeling or recumbent: on the ruff or

cuffs, on the still folds of a dress or the smooth line of a hosed calf. I stared so hard that I passed into a kind of trance. I forced myself to keep staring, scarcely blinking my eyes, not moving a muscle, as if I was turned to stone myself. After three or four minutes of intense concentration I achieved my purpose, supposing I could catch faint signs of life: the twitch of a slipper, the flutter of an eyelid, the trembling of a finger where the hands were closed in zealous prayer.

The grand figures, dignitaries in their time, might be able to deceive the rest of the congregation, but they couldn't fool *me*.

My father had to cough sometimes, or even reach across and shake my arm, to rouse me. I came back, but not quite willingly. In some ways I preferred my fear, the fright of discovering what I wasn't meant to know, where the truth of a situation was turned inside out.

I breathed in, breathed out. I smelt the melting candlewax, the calf bindings of our hymn books, the stuffy air which was the same uncirculated air as last week's.

When I looked again, the figures on their tombs were utterly still. Petrified. Incontrovertibly dead. Sharp-chinned, razor-nosed, prim-lipped, hands ardently clasped in supplication, that their souls should be received into Heaven.

We returned through the park opposite Satis House, known as The Vines. Originally it was the Monks' Vineyard, when St Andrew's Priory stood close by.

The rooks cawed in their high scrappy nests.

'Come on, Catherine. Keep up.'

My father didn't care for the monkish spirits of the place. We attended the cathedral because he wouldn't have been treated with full seriousness in the town if we hadn't, but his devotion was restricted to eighty minutes once a week. That was quite enough.

I never did get to the bottom of his reluctance, but I sensed that it had something to do with my mother's shockingly sudden end: a death that had made no sense to him, then or now, for which nothing and no one – not even I – could console him.

But he didn't talk about that; and in the house of (opportune, always dependable) silences we shared, neither did I.

Chapter Three

I continued to be taken out for my constitutional every day, a walk lasting an hour or so.

Two hours of lessons in the morning, luncheon, and then some exercise.

Exercise for the body and – once I'd won the confidence of the looser-tongued maids – for my mind also.

I heard about the old man who sold death in bottles.

About Nurse Rooley, who took away the little unwanteds before the mother grew too swollen: a premature borning.

Florry Tonkin, who sold her affections by the hour.

Mr Yarker, who would model your enemies in wax, and puncture the spirit out of them.

Captain Breen – not really a captain at all – importer of oblivion from Shanghai, via Rotherhithe.

The Misses Ginger, who communed with the dead departed, and spoke in voices.

The Siamese twins in Love Lane, genies let out of the pickling jar, walking with three shoes and two hats; one happy and laughing, the other downcast and glowering.

Miss Greville, who fasted keenly, and scourged herself with a twig switch, and who walked to the cathedral at Easter in bare feet and at other times with pebbles in her shoes.

Another spinster, Miss Maxfield in dirty canary yellow, who stood on street corners fretting about crossing the road for half an hour at a stretch, stamping on the spot, pointing at imaginary

obstacles with the Malacca cane of her yellow parasol.

Canon Arbuthnot, who would tell neighbours that a Frenchman or a German friend would shortly be calling; but those callers were never glimpsed, and it was said they too came out of a bottle, a French visitor from Burgundy country and a German from somewhere about the Rhône or Moselle.

The Ali Baba house, whose owner farmed sugar plantations abroad, where four gigantic vases stood in vaulted niches high on the street facade, exposed to everything the elements could throw at them.

Our venerable town.

Children, hand-picked, continued to come to Satis House.

No more than one or two at a time. And my father arranged to have us continuously supervised.

Thinking ourselves too old for playing, we behaved (as we thought) like young adults. I showed them my sewing, my drawings; we attempted a little rudimentary music-making; we walked in the garden. And, in short, we were thoroughly bored. We didn't say anything that couldn't be overheard.

I wondered what on earth was the point of it, unless my father liked to have reported back to him their envy for how I lived, wanting for nothing.

No one pitied me – or dared to mock me – for not having a mother.

The effect was to isolate me further, and to make me feel prouder still of my position.

I used my mother's silver-backed hand mirror, given to her by my father. On the back was engraved a Gothic 'H'.

It was large and heavy to hold. Its weight conferred solemnity.