

THE RIVER, BY MOONLIGHT
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*She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to Camelot.*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

APRIL 1917



HENRIETTA



Nuala awakened her, coming into her room without even knocking, saying, “Sorry, missus, but there’s a telephone call.” For an instant, Henrietta clung to the comfort of sleep, to the pleasure of the dream she would not later remember. But Nuala would not let her be. “Missus,” she repeated, “the fella says it’s urgent.”

The “urgent” did it, the word a brush fire in her mind, clearing it of everything but the fear it left in its wake. Alert now, Henrietta sat up and allowed Nuala to help her out of bed and into her robe and slippers. Ignoring the erratic thud of her heart cautioning her to move slowly, she hurried down the stairs, clutching the wooden banister for support, thinking as she went, It’s Lily, something’s happened to Lily; then, just as quickly, fighting back the rising tide of dread, telling herself, Don’t be

foolish. It won't be anything too awful. A wrong number perhaps. It was just past six o'clock in the morning.

The black candlestick telephone sat on the oak table in the center hall between the Tiffany lamp and silver desk set. The receiver was off the hook. Picking it up, she held it to her ear and said into the round mouth-piece, "Henrietta Canning speaking."

"Mrs. Canning? I'm Detective Malone. New York City Police Department." She could hear the beat of her heart, the rasp of her breath, the detective's voice, halting and apologetic, difficult to understand at times because of the crackling on the wire, telling her that at shortly before midnight a young woman had entered (that was the word he used, absurd as it was) the Hudson River from a slip at the Columbia Yacht Club at Eighty-sixth Street in Manhattan. "A vagrant walking along the New York Central tracks saw her go in," the detective said, though *jump in* was what he meant, Henrietta knew. "The man raised an alarm, and attempted a rescue, but . . . by the time he found her and pulled her back to shore, it was too late."

"What has this to do with me?" Henrietta asked. She was surprised by how calm her own voice sounded, and how faint, as if she were hearing it from a vast distance.

In the woman's purse, the detective explained, among other belongings, was a key to a room in the Pelham Hotel. "We found that the room was registered in the name of your daughter, I believe. Miss Lily Canning?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where she might be?"

Henrietta fought back the tears, the desire to scream. "In her room there, sound asleep, I should imagine," she said, her voice steady, confident. "There must be some mistake. Someone's confused the numbers."

"I'm afraid not, ma'am." When they got no response to their knocking, the police had entered the room, and the night clerk had absolutely identified its contents as belonging to Miss Canning, said the detective. He

sounded as if he would rather be talking to just about anyone but her, thought Henrietta. He sounded like a very nice young man. "Of course, there's always the chance the purse was stolen, and your daughter is . . . elsewhere."

"Yes. I'm certain that's it," Henrietta said, determined to grasp whatever straws blew her way. "No doubt she decided to spend the night with friends." Teddy and Alice, she thought. Lily's stayed over at their studio. Or she's with Edmund. If she were not so frightened, Henrietta would have laughed at the relief she felt at the idea of it when, at any other time, she would have been overcome with anger, and shame. Edmund!

"I'm sorry to have to ask you this, ma'am, and it may well be a waste of your time, but could you come to New York? Today, if possible? We have to try to identify the . . ." He had been about to say body, or worse, corpse; instead, he finished lamely, "the young lady." After again giving her his name, and his number, which Henrietta wrote down carefully with the pen from the desk set, he said, "If you'd let me know when you've made your travel arrangements, I'd appreciate it."

Her hand was barely shaking, Henrietta noticed as she replaced the receiver and put the telephone down; but then, however cynical experience might have made Detective Malone, it was not her custom to believe the worst until she must. The whole matter was undoubtedly a mistake, a ghastly mistake. Lily's purse had been stolen. She was with friends. She was safe. That was the only reasonable thing to think. Turning toward Nuala, who hovered anxiously near the steps leading down to the kitchen, Henrietta said, "They think something might have happened to Lily. Silly girl. Out gallivanting when she ought to be getting a good night's rest." Again her voice sounded very faint, very distant. Go back upstairs, get dressed, go to New York, she urged herself, but she could not seem to move. Please, dear God, she thought. Please. Don't let it be Lily.

"Missus?" said Nuala, her face drawn with concern. "Are you all right?" Usually she was neat as a pin, but not this morning, bundled as she was into her worn, too-big bathrobe, with her mop of red hair, put up

hastily, in danger of tumbling down. Standing there, she looked ridiculously young for the title of housekeeper, bestowed on her after the other servants, in turn, had died or retired or married, leaving her in sole charge of Riverhall, the Canning home.

“Yes. Fine. I have to go to New York,” Henrietta said. Picking up the telephone again (to do what, at least since her husband’s death, she always did at the first hint of trouble), she asked the exchange for Erich Roeder’s number. He answered, thank goodness, not Violet, who would have been very cross indeed to have been awakened by Henrietta at that hour, though one would have thought a doctor’s wife would long since have made her peace with having her sleep disturbed.

Though the local operator would have learned all she needed to know from the detective’s call, had she given in to the temptation to listen, still Henrietta spoke as vaguely as she could manage, giving only as many details as needed for Erich to get the gist of the situation. When she finished, he said, “You’re quite right. No doubt it’s all a load of rubbish. And you, Etta, how are you?”

“Surprisingly all right,” she said, though her voice caught on a sob. “I’m sure all will turn out well, but I do have to go.”

“Not alone,” he insisted, as she had known he would.

Spurred by the thought that he would soon be on his way, refusing Nuala’s offers of help dressing and a hearty breakfast afterward, insisting on coffee only, though she had noticed lately that it made her heart beat even faster, Henrietta returned to her room, washed hurriedly, buttoned herself into her gray wool suit, pulled on her felt hat, and went back downstairs to the library to await Erich’s arrival. She knew that he would come quickly, as quickly as he could make things right with Violet, and with his nurse, who would have to put off the patients scheduled for the day. Still, though she had barely time enough to finish her cup of coffee (freshly brewed and smelling delicious, but like acid in her mouth), it felt like an eternity until he appeared, his daughter in tow. “If I’m not to be

trusted to go off on my own,” he said, his tone as light as he could manage, “I think it’s best if Rosaline were to come with me to New York.”

“But I must go,” Henrietta said, for how was she to keep the awful fear at bay, if she wasn’t busy doing something?

“I understand why you want to, my dear, but as your doctor, as well as your friend, I have to tell you that it would be beyond foolish, Etta. Think of your heart. You’ve had how many episodes in these past few months? All minor, to be sure, but you know exertion sets them off. Why risk another? If this is all rubbish, and I’m sure it is, think how Lily would feel to return home and find you ill again.”

He went on about the strain of the journey and the inevitable unpleasantness of the police business, however happy the outcome. Not one to surrender easily, she stood her ground for a while, but finally, just as she had done when the call had come about her husband, Henrietta conceded. “How I let you bully me!” she said, though relief instantly swamped her irritation, for (if she was to be honest about it) she was only too happy to have Erich, her friend and protector from childhood, interpose his solid, comforting presence between her and heartbreak for as long as he was able, until there was no choice but for her to muster the courage to face it.

With her usual tact, his daughter had stayed out of the discussion, for which Henrietta was thankful, or she might have felt truly under siege. Though a little thing, and kind to a fault, Rosaline was full of spirit and could, as her father always remarked, argue the devil out of his pitchfork if she had a mind to. Now, she looked at Henrietta and said, “Shall we stop at Mrs. Allen’s on the way to the station and ask her to come round?” Except for the solemn expression in her large gray eyes, Rosaline, in her apricot-colored dress with its matching hat and single jaunty feather, looked for all the world as if she were off on an outing to the city with Lily, not in search of her.

“No, I’d rather you didn’t,” said Henrietta. Her sister was the last person she wanted near just then. Edith always had to talk, to air her wor-

ries aloud. She could never resist adding her measure to any bushel of woe. "Nuala's all the company I need."

Without further protest she let Erich and Rosaline go, telephoned to the police detective to let him know they were on their way, and then went back to her room to change into her purple day dress (she refused to put on the black) before returning to the library to wait. For how long? she wondered. They planned to take the eight-thirteen train to New York from Minuit. It was just over a two hour journey into Grand Central, but it would take another half an hour, perhaps longer, to reach the police station. And then? Henrietta had no clear idea of what was to follow, or the amount of time needed to pursue the necessary inquiries, but she supposed she ought not hope to see them again until at least early evening. Meanwhile, it would be best simply not to think about anything, she cautioned herself. She took her sewing basket from its place by the armchair, chose a sheet of Egyptian cotton from among the items to be mended, and settled herself on the leather sofa, her back firmly to the window and its broad view of the Hudson. The day was certain to be endless, no matter how she tried to fill the time.

The sofa was not her usual seat, nor was she often to be found indoors on such a fine April day, with the sun, out at long last, trying to tease the forsythia into bloom and raise the first pink blush of spring on the dogwoods. A spry, athletic girl, she had grown into an energetic woman, an industrious housewife, one who always had to be doing something. At this time of year she should be in the garden, pruning and weeding, or, if not that, then traipsing about the countryside on some errand or other. Only when the weather was bad, or her heart was acting up, and she was forced inside, did she retreat to the library, but then it was in the armchair by the window that she always sat, and no matter the task she set her fingers, her eyes would inevitably find the river, a bolt of shimmering cloth in an ever-changing array of colors, unfurling between the graceful slope of the lawn and the rise of the Highlands across the way. Though not the busy thoroughfare it had been before the railroad had come

through, the river still bustled with the business of life, with barges and steamers, schooners and tugs, with fishermen in rowboats and millionaires on yachts, while motley freight trains, at this distance no bigger than a child's toy, wound around the mountains on the opposite bank.

Today, however, no matter how firmly she held to the conviction that all would turn out well, she could not look at the river, for it was not as if, having lived beside it all her life, she had failed to notice its treachery. And as she picked up a spool of white thread, snipped off a length, slipped it through the eye of the needle (at least she did not need spectacles yet!) and began to sew, taking one stitch and another, soon the sad memories breached the dam in her mind and came flooding in. She recalled the time (she had been how old then? twelve, perhaps?) when a sudden squall capsized a sailboat no more than a few hundred yards from shore. Driven indoors by the storm, she had been reading quietly in a corner of this very room, hoping that — if she kept still enough — her father would not send her away. She remembered the blissful serenity of the moment, the fire in the grate, the distant sounds of a door closing, of footsteps on the stairs, of scales drifting in from the parlor where Rupert, her brother, was practicing the piano. Then, for no particular reason (as he said later), her father had left his desk to amble over to the door that opened out onto the back porch. Lost in her book, his frantic call to “Quick, fetch Jonas” had caught her unawares and brought her back abruptly from France and the Terror, the shadow of the guillotine and Lucie Manette. As he headed off to get his slicker and boots, she had run to the garage to find the handyman while Rupert, hearing the commotion, came racing along the hall to join in the rescue attempt. A raincoat pulled on over her sodden clothes, Henrietta had watched with her mother and Edith from the shelter of the porch to where, at the bottom of the slope, Jonas and Rupert held her father by a rope tied around his waist, as he struggled against the wind and rain into the roiling water.

“Pray, children,” her mother had said. “Pray with all your might.”