

Chapter 1

It wasn't possible to take a walk that day. We had been outside for an hour in the morning, but now the cold winter wind was blowing and a hard rain was falling. Going outdoors again was out of the question.

I was glad that it was raining. I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons. I hated coming home with cold hands and feet. I hated being scolded by Bessie, the nanny. And I hated feeling worthless compared to the other children: Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed.

Eliza, John, and Georgiana now were gathered around their mother in the living room. Mrs. Reed lay on a sofa by the fireplace. For once, her darlings were not arguing or crying, and she looked perfectly happy.

Mrs. Reed had sent me away from the group. "I'm sorry to have to send you away," she had said, "but until Bessie tells me that you are trying to become a more pleasant child, you don't deserve to join us."

"What does Bessie say I have done?" I had asked.

"Jane, I don't like complainers or questioners. Besides, a child should not talk back to an adult like



that. Go sit somewhere, and until you can speak pleasantly, be quiet.”

I slipped into the dining room, which was next to the living room. It contained a bookcase, so I helped myself to a book, being careful to choose one with pictures. I climbed onto the window seat and sat there cross-legged. Once I closed the curtain that hid the window seat, I was nearly invisible.

I couldn't see anything on my right except the red curtain. But to my left were clear panes of glass, protecting me from the dreary November day. Sometimes, instead of looking at my book, I stared out into the wintry afternoon. In the distance I could see nothing but mist and cloud. Nearby, heavy rain swept over the lawn and bushes.

I returned to my book, a history of British birds. I was not interested in the subject. But there were some illustrations that fascinated me. They showed far-off places that stirred my imagination:

Norway's coast, Lapland's cold shores, Siberia, the Arctic. The illustrations mixed with strange, shadowy pictures that formed in my childish mind. I saw a haunted churchyard; ships attacked by sea monsters; a terrible, black-horned thing that was too scary to think about. These thoughts were as interesting as the stories that Bessie sometimes told us on winter evenings. When she was in a good mood, she would let us sit around her as she did her ironing, and she would tell us tales of love and adventure.

With the book on my knee, I was happy—as happy, at least, as I ever was. I hoped that I would not be interrupted. But then the dining-room door opened.

“Boo! Madam Mope!” John Reed cried. Then he paused. He thought that the room was empty. “Where the dickens is she?” he continued. “Lizzy! Georgy!” he called to his sisters. “Jane is not here. Tell Mother that she has run out into the rain, the bad animal!”

“It is good that I closed the curtain,” I thought. I hoped very much that he wouldn't find me. And he wouldn't have found me (because he was not very bright) if Eliza hadn't poked her head into the doorway and said, “She is in the window seat, John.”

I came out immediately because I did not like the idea of being dragged out by John. “What do you want?” I asked.

“Say, ‘What do you want, Master Reed?’” John

answered. "I want you to come here." Seating himself in an armchair, he waited for me to come stand before him.

John Reed was fourteen years old, and I was only ten. He was tall and heavy for his age, with a nasty, pasty complexion. He stuffed himself at every meal, which made him feel sick and gave him dull eyes and flabby cheeks. He should have been away at boarding school, but his mother had taken him out. She had said that he needed to rest for a month or two "on account of his delicate health." The school principal had told her that what John needed was less cake and candy. But Mrs. Reed didn't believe it. According to her, John looked unhealthy because he had studied too much and had been homesick.

John did not like his mother or sisters much, and he absolutely hated me. He bullied and punished me, not just two or three times a week but constantly. I was terrified of him, and there was no one I could turn to for help. The servants did not like to offend their young master by speaking up for me. Mrs. Reed was blind and deaf on the subject. She seemed to never see him hit me or hear him abuse me, even though he did it right in front of her. He did it even more often behind her back.

I always obeyed John. I came up to his chair, and he stuck out his tongue at me so far that I thought it might fall out. I knew he soon would hit me. While waiting for the blow, I thought about how disgusting and ugly he looked. Maybe he

could tell what I was thinking because all at once, without speaking, he struck me hard. I nearly fell. Once I regained my balance, I stepped away from his chair. "That is for speaking so rudely to Mother," he said, "and for sneaking behind curtains, and for the look in your eyes just now, you rat!" I was so used to John's abuse that I never thought of saying anything back to him. I only worried about when he would hit me again. "What were you doing behind the curtain?" he asked.

"I was reading."

"Show me the book." I returned to the window seat and got it. "You have no business taking our books," he said. "You are a charity case, Mother says. You have no money; your father didn't leave you any. You shouldn't be allowed to live here with a gentleman's children and eat the same meals that we do, and wear clothes our mother has to pay for. I'll teach you to take my books. They are mine. The whole house belongs to me, or it will in a few years. Go and stand by the door, away from the mirror and windows."

I did what he told me, not understanding what he was going to do. But when I saw him lift the book to throw it at me, I tried to jump out of the way. I was not quick enough. The book hit me and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled; the pain was sharp. Suddenly I was not afraid anymore. My anger was too strong. "You wicked, cruel boy!" I cried. "You are like a murderer! You are like a slave driver! You are like the

Roman emperors!" I had read a book about Rome and its cruel, evil emperors. I had thought then that they sounded like John, but I never had expected to say such a thing out loud.

"What? What?" he cried. "Did she say that to me? Did you hear her, Eliza and Georgiana? I'll tell Mother! But first . . ." He ran straight at me. I felt him grab my hair and my shoulder. In that moment I really saw him as a tyrant, a murderer. I felt a drop or two of blood from my head trickle down my neck, and my pain overcame my fear of him. I fought back as never before. I don't remember exactly what I did with my hands, but he called me "Rat! Rat!" and bellowed.

Help arrived quickly. Eliza and Georgiana had run for Mrs. Reed, who now came upon the scene, followed by Bessie and Mrs. Reed's maid, Miss Abbot. We were pulled apart. I heard the words "Dear, dear! What an awful girl to fly at Master John! Did anybody ever see such a temper!" Then Mrs. Reed ordered, "Take her away to the red room, and lock her in there." Four hands immediately seized me, and I was forced upstairs.