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Opening Extract from...

The Summer Before the War

Written by Helen Simonson

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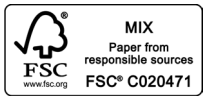
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CHAPTER ONE



The town of Rye rose from the flat marshes like an island, its tumbled pyramid of red-tiled roofs glowing in the slanting evening light. The high Sussex bluffs were a massive, unbroken line of shadow from east to west, the fields breathed out the heat of the day, and the sea was a slate silk dress. Standing at the tall French windows, Hugh Grange held his breath in a vain attempt to suspend the moment in time as he used to do when he was a little boy, in this same, slightly shabby drawing room, and the lighting of the lamps had been the signal for his aunt to send him to bed. He smiled now to think of how long and late those summer evenings had run and how he had always complained bitterly until he was allowed to stay up well beyond bedtime. Small boys, he now knew, were inveterate fraudsters and begged, pleaded and cajoled for added rights and treats with innocent eyes and black hearts.

The three boys his aunt had asked him to tutor this summer had relieved him of half a sovereign and most of his books before he realised that they neither were as hungry as their sighs proposed nor had any interest in *Ivanhoe* except for what it might bring when flogged to the man with the secondhand bookstall in the town market. He held no grudge. Instead he admired their ferret wits and held some small dream that his brief teaching and example might turn sharpness into some intellectual curiosity by the time the grammar school began again.

The door to the drawing room was opened with a robust hand, and Hugh's cousin, Daniel, stood back with a mock bow to allow their aunt Agatha to pass into the room. 'Aunt Agatha says there isn't going to be a war,' said Daniel, coming in behind her, laughing. 'And so of course there won't be. They would never dream of defying her.' Aunt Agatha tried to look severe but only managed to cross her eyes and almost stumbled into a side table due to the sudden blurring of her vision.

'That isn't what I said at all,' she said, trying to secure her long embroidered scarf, an effort as futile as resting a flat kite on a round boulder, thought Hugh, as the scarf immediately began to slide sideways again. Aunt Agatha was still a handsome woman at forty-five, but she was inclined to stoutness and had very few sharp planes on which to drape her clothing. Tonight's dinner dress, in slippery chiffon, possessed a deep, sloppy neckline and long Oriental sleeves. Hugh hoped it would maintain its dignity through dinner, for his aunt liked to embellish her vigorous discussions with expansive gestures.

'What does Uncle John say?' asked Hugh, stepping to a tray of decanters to pour his aunt her usual glass of Madeira. 'No chance he's coming down for the weekend?' He had hoped to ask his uncle's opinion on a smaller but no less delicate subject. After years devoted to his medical studies, Hugh found himself not only on the point of becoming primary assistant surgeon to Sir Alex Ramsey, one of England's leading general surgeons, but also quite possibly in love with his surgeon's very pretty daughter, Lucy Ramsey. He had held rather aloof from Lucy the past year, perhaps to prove to himself, and others, that his affection for her was not connected to any hopes of advancement. This had only made him a favourite of hers among the various students and younger doctors who flocked around her father, but it was not until this summer, when she and her father left for an extended lecture tour in the Italian Lakes, that he had felt a pleasurable misery in her absence. He found he missed her dancing eyes, the toss of her pale hair as she laughed at some dry comment he made; he even missed the little spectacles she wore to copy her father's case files or reply to his voluminous correspondence. She was fresh from the schoolroom and sometimes distracted by all the pleasures London offered bright young people, but she was devoted to her father and would make, thought Hugh, an exceptional wife for a rising young surgeon. He wished to discuss, with some urgency, whether he might be in a position to contemplate matrimony.

Uncle John was a sensible man and through the years had always seemed swiftly to understand whatever difficulty Hugh stammered out and would help talk the matter over until Hugh was convinced he had resolved some

intractable problem all on his own. Hugh was no longer a small boy and now understood some of his uncle's wisdom to be the result of diplomatic training, but he knew his uncle's affection to be genuine. His own parents' parting words, as they left for a long-awaited year of travel, had been to apply to Uncle John in any case of need.

'Your uncle says they are all working feverishly to smooth things over, before everyone's summer holiday,' said his aunt. 'He tells me nothing, of course, but the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary spent much of the day closeted with the King.' Uncle John was a senior official in the Foreign Office, and the usually sleepy summer precincts of Whitehall had been crammed with busy civil servants, politicians and generals since the Archduke's assassination in Sarajevo. 'Anyway, he telephoned to say he met the schoolteacher and transferred her to Charing Cross to catch the last train, so she'll be getting in after dinner. We'll give her a late supper.'

'At such a late hour, wouldn't it be kinder to deliver her to her rooms in town and maybe have Cook send down something cold?' said Daniel, ignoring Hugh's proffered dry sherry and pouring a glass of Uncle John's best whisky. 'I'm sure she'll be horribly fagged and not up to a room full of people in evening dress.' He tried to keep a neutral face, but Hugh detected a slight moue of distaste at the thought of entertaining the new schoolteacher his aunt had found. Since graduating from Balliol in June, Daniel had spent the first few weeks of the summer in Italy as the guest of an aristocratic college chum, and had developed a sense of social superiority that Hugh was dying to see Aunt Agatha knock out of his silly head. Instead Agatha had

been patient, saying, 'Oh, let him have his taste of the high life. Don't you think his heart will be broken soon enough? When Daniel goes into the Foreign Office this autumn, as your uncle John has taken such pains to arrange, I'm sure his friend will drop him in an instant. Let him have his hour of glamour.'

Hugh was of the opinion that Daniel should be made to understand his place, but he loved his aunt Agatha and he thought any continued argument might lead her to think he resented Daniel being her favourite. Daniel's mother, Agatha's sister, had died when Daniel was only five, and his father was a strange, distant sort of man. Daniel had been sent to boarding school a month after his mother's death, and Agatha had been his refuge in the Christmas and summer holidays. Hugh had always been torn about Christmas. He spent it at home in London with his parents, who loved him and made a great fuss of him. He would have preferred if they could have all gone down to Sussex to Agatha's house together, but his mother, who was Uncle John's sister, liked to be among her friends in town and his father did not like to be away from the bank too long at Christmas. Hugh had been happy in the midst of piles of striped wrapping paper, huge mysterious boxes and the dishes of sweets and fruits set all around their Kensington villa. But sometimes, when he'd been sent to bed and the music from his parents' guests drifted up to his room, he would lie in bed and peer out of the window over the dark rooftops and try to see all the way to Sussex, where no doubt Aunt Agatha was tucking Daniel in with one of her wild stories of giants and elves who lived in caves under the Sussex Downs and whose parties could be mistaken sometimes as thunder.

'Don't be silly, Daniel. Miss Nash will stay here this evening,' said Aunt Agatha, bending to switch on the electric lamp by the flowered couch. She sat down and stretched out her feet, which were encased in Oriental slippers embroidered, rather strangely, with lobsters. 'I had to fight to bring the full weight of the School Board to bear on the governors to hire a woman. I mean to get a good look at her and make sure she understands what's to be done.'

The local grammar school was one of his aunt's many social causes. She believed in education for all and seemed to expect great leaders of men to emerge from the grubby-kneed group of farmers' and merchants' boys who crowded the new red-brick school building out beyond the railway tracks.

'You mean you want her to get a good look at you,' said Hugh. 'I'm sure she'll be suitably cowed.'

'I'm with the governors,' said Daniel. 'It takes a man to keep a mob of schoolboys in line.'

'Nonsense,' said Agatha. 'Besides, you can't just drum up teachers these days. Our last Latin master, Mr Puddlecombe, was only here a year and then he had the nerve to tell us he was off to try his luck with a cousin in Canada.'

'Well, school had broken up for the summer, Auntie,' said Hugh.

'Which made it all the more impossible,' said Agatha. 'We were fortunate that your uncle John spoke to Lord Marbely and that Lady Marbely had been looking for a position for this young woman. She is a niece apparently, and the Marbelys highly recommended her; though I did get a hint that maybe they had an ulterior motive for getting her out of Gloucestershire.'

'Do they have a son?' asked Daniel. 'That's usually the story.'

'Oh no, Lady Marbely took pains to assure me she's quite plain,' said Aunt Agatha. 'I may be progressive, but I would never hire a pretty teacher.'

'We'd better eat dinner soon,' said Hugh, consulting the battered pocket watch that had been his grandfather's and that his parents were always begging to replace with something more modern. The dinner gong rang just as he spoke.

'Yes, I'd like to digest properly before this paragon descends upon us,' said Daniel, downing the rest of his glass in a swallow. 'I assume I have to be introduced and can't just hide in my room?'

'Would you go with Smith to pick her up, Hugh?' said Agatha. 'Two of you would probably overwhelm the poor girl, and obviously I can't trust Daniel not to sneer at her.'

'What if Hugh falls in love with her?' asked Daniel. Hugh was tempted to retort that his affections were already engaged, but his matrimonial intentions were too important to be subjected to Daniel's disrespectful teasing, and so he merely gave his cousin a look of scorn. 'After all,' added Daniel, 'Hugh is so terribly plain himself.'

Beatrice Nash was quite sure she had a large smut of soot on her nose, but she did not want to take out her pocket mirror again in case doing so roused the inebriated young man opposite her to further flights of compliment. She had checked her face soon after leaving Charing Cross, and he had taken the tiny gold mirror as some recognised signal of coy flirtation. Her book had been further cause for

conversation, though he did not seem to recognise the Trollope name and then confessed he had no use for reading. He had even proffered the use of his small bag for her feet, and she had tucked her ankles hard back under the seat, fearing that he might whip off her shoes.

She had scolded him severely when they changed trains in Kent and he followed her into her chosen compartment. He had backed away, laughing, but the train had already started. Now they were stuck together in a compartment without access to a corridor. He was sunk into the appearance of a petulant doze, and she sat rigid, her back straight against the prickly fabric of the bench, trying not to breathe in the stench of stale liquor or feel the insolent proximity of his outstretched legs in pressed white flannels and shiny, buckled brown shoes.

She kept her face turned to the window and let the image of wet green fields run freely across her eyes until the sheep, grass and sky blurred into painted streaks. She wished now she had not refused the Marbelys' offer to send a servant to accompany her. She had been tormented by Ada Marbely's long discussion of what conveyance might be available to reach the station and who might be spared. She had been made to understand that her transfer was a very, very large inconvenience and that of course they could not offer to send her in the car, or send anyone from the permanent household staff. She had hidden her humiliation behind a firm claim of independence. She reminded them that she had travelled widely with her father, from the American West to the kasbahs of Morocco and the lesser-known classical sites of southern Italy, and was perfectly capable of seeing herself and one trunk to Sussex,

by farm cart if needed. She had been adamant and now understood that she had only herself to blame for being exposed to the indignities of travelling alone. She managed a small smile at her own stubbornness.

'All women can be pretty when they smile,' said the man. She whipped her face around to glare at him, but his eyes appeared to be still closed, and his face, round and sweating, remained sunk on its thick neck, wrapped in a greasy yellow cravat. He scratched at his shirtfront and yawned without covering his mouth, as if she didn't exist.

It was the cheapest kind of rebuke, to call a woman ugly, but one to which small boys and grown men seemed equally quick to stoop when feeling challenged. While she had always playfully dismissed her father's insistence on calling her his beauty, she believed she had a pleasant, regular face and took pride in a certain strength about the chin and a straight posture. That such an insult was a lie never seemed to reduce its effectiveness, and she could only bite her lip not to give him the satisfaction of a response.

The train slowed in a great hissing fog of steam and she felt a flood of relief to hear the stationmaster calling, 'Rye. Rye station.' She jumped up to take down her bag, lowered the window, heedless of the threat of flying cinders, and had her hand on the outside doorknob ready to open it at the earliest moment.

'Now the stars align,' said the young man, coming to press her towards the door, his bag against her leg. She almost wept to feel him breathing on her neck. 'If you're staying in the area you must allow me to call on you.'

She opened the door and stepped from the carriage, nearly falling to the platform as the train gave a last lurch.

She hit her left ankle with her bag and felt at least one hairpin come away from the side of her head. Not caring for her appearance or the pain, she fled towards the baggage car to retrieve her trunk and ran right into a man standing enveloped in the steam. She could not prevent a cry of fear as he grasped her elbow to stop them both from falling.

'Are you all right?' asked the man. 'I'm terribly sorry.'

'Let go of me,' she said, and she could hear her voice fierce with suppressed rage.

The man, a young man, stepped back, raising his hands in submission. 'I meant no offence, miss,' he said. 'I'm terribly sorry.'

'I saw her first, Grange,' said the man from the train.

'Please leave me alone,' said Beatrice, holding her hand to her face. She was suddenly too exhausted to fight any more. Her rage drained away, and she could feel her limbs tremble as if the light breeze were a winter squall.

'Wheaton, you're an ugly drunk,' said the young man in a voice so calm he might have been talking about the weather. 'Can't you tell a respectable young woman from one of your floozies? Behave yourself.'

'Didn't think you were much for the ladies, Grange,' said Wheaton with a sly chuckle. 'Or is that just your pretty cousin, Daniel?'

'Don't be a bully, Wheaton,' the young man replied. 'Go home before I'm obliged to make you go. No doubt you'll pound me into the ground, but you'll ruin those perfectly good clothes doing it.'

'I'm going; expected home for the fatted calf by my sobbing mother,' said Wheaton, unruffled by the veiled

threat of physical harm. 'You can have the schoolteacher.' He staggered away, and Beatrice felt her face flush.

'Are you Miss Nash?' asked the young man. She looked at him but could not trust herself to speak. 'I'm Hugh Grange. My aunt, Agatha Kent, sent me to meet you.'

'I think I need to sit down,' she said. She could tell the young man had kind grey eyes, but she saw nothing else as the whole station began to slowly spin. 'Please don't allow me to faint.'

'Here's a bench,' he said, and she felt his hand tugging urgently at her elbow. She sank down. 'Good. Hang your head below your knees and breathe,' he added, and she felt her head pushed down towards the dusty bricks of the platform. She breathed deep, slow breaths and relief came as a light sweat on her forehead.

'Sorry. Ridiculous of me.'

'Not at all.' She could see only a pair of country boots, well oiled but creased and scuffed with age. 'I'm sorry Wheaton upset you.'

'He did no such thing. I just – I should have eaten more lunch, that's all. I usually eat very well when I travel.'

'It's important to keep up one's strength,' he said, and though she could not detect any note of sarcasm, she felt the anger she had held in all day return. She shivered again, and the young man, his fingers on the pulse in her left wrist, added, 'Shall I go ask the stationmaster for some water, or do you think you can make it out to the car? We really should get you to my aunt Agatha's right away.'

'I'm perfectly all right,' she said, standing up slowly. 'I must see to my trunk and bicycle.'

'Smith will arrange to fetch them later from the station-master,' he said. 'Let me carry your bag.'

Beatrice hesitated, but there was no hint of condescension in the young man's tone, and his blunt face showed worry in a single vertical crease between the eyes. He was trying to treat her well. She understood that not just in the past couple of hours, but in the past few months, she had lost some trust in how people would treat her. She blinked her eyes and handed him her bag without a word. He took it and hefted its unexpected weight.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I packed too many books as always.'

'That's quite all right,' he said as he took her arm and steered her out through a side gate. 'Though I hate to think how heavy the trunk must be. Maybe I'll ask the station-master to telephone for a farm cart and save the car from breaking an axle.'

On the ride up the hill away from town, the young woman kept her face averted and her gaze fixed on the passing hedges and cottages. Hugh contemplated the curve of her long neck with the thick brown hair loosely bunched at the nape. She must have been tired, and yet she did not have the rounded slump of permanent defeat that seemed to Hugh to be the hallmark of the schoolteachers he had known. Even his professors at Oxford, many of them secure in family and finances, had seemed to bow over time as if under the perpetual onslaught of student ignorance. The woman's summer travelling coat was made of thick, supple linen that seemed of some quality, and her trim jacket and skirt were fashionably narrow, though unadorned. He judged her to be almost his own age; perhaps twenty-two or -three to his august twenty-four.

While she was not a tremulous girl fresh from the schoolroom, she was far from the dull spinster he had been expecting. He acknowledged a flicker of interest best investigated and fanned by conversation.

'I apologise again for poor Wheaton,' he said. 'He's perfectly gentlemanly around women when he's sober, but when he drinks he sort of launches himself at any female in the vicinity.'

'Don't apologise,' she said. 'Obviously it was my fault, then, for occupying a railway carriage in which he wished to ride?'

Hugh found himself flushing under her stare. 'Not what I meant at all,' he said. 'But men like Wheaton . . .'

'Are there different kinds, then?' she asked.

'Different kinds?'

'Of men? Only, the majority seem prone to some similar lapse of manners under the influence of alcohol.' She pressed her lips together, and Hugh began to wonder how to get himself out of the conversation.

'Do you wish me to apologise on behalf of us all?' he asked, quietly.

'I would prefer you did not apologise for anyone else,' she said. 'My father always says that if we were as quick to own our own faults as we are to apologise for those of others, society might truly advance.'

'I'd say he's right, but woefully optimistic,' said Hugh. 'Very religious man, is he?' He had a vision of a purse-lipped temperance type with thin fingers tapping the cover of a Bible.

The girl gave what could only be described as a snort of laughter and then covered her mouth with her gloved hand and seemed to struggle with her emotions.

'Sorry,' said Hugh, unable to bite back the word.

'Thank you,' she said at last. A smile transformed her face and set her brown eyes alight. 'He died a year ago, and I didn't think it would be possible to laugh about him again.'

'Not religious then,' said Hugh,

'No,' she said. 'Not exactly. But I do hope you won't repeat it to your aunt. I'm sure schoolteachers are expected to have irreproachable parents.'

'I'm sure they are,' he said. 'Have you studied their other attributes?'

She gave him a doubtful look.

'I assure you I'm completely qualified,' she said. 'But I've been told I have to work harder to cultivate an appropriate attitude of grateful subordination.'

'Lucky for you, my aunt has taken such a stand with the school governors that she would be loath to tell them her candidate was unsuitable,' he said as they drew up on the broad gravel forecourt of his aunt's comfortable villa. He meant it in fun, but he noticed the young woman looked worried as Smith opened her door. As she preceded him in to meet Aunt Agatha, he wondered if he should also have mentioned to her that she was in no way as plain as his aunt would have preferred.