

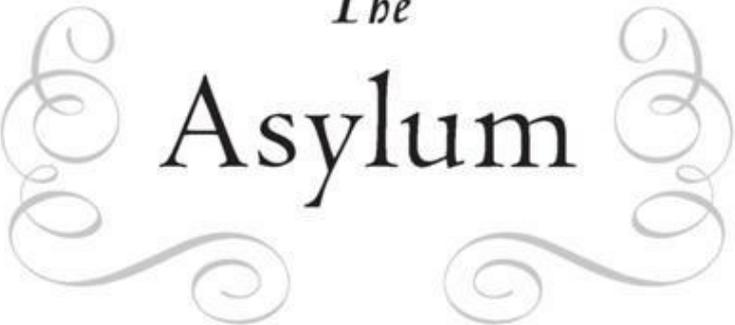
THE

*Asylum*

A NOVEL

JOHN HARWOOD

*The*  
**Asylum**

The title 'The Asylum' is centered. 'The' is in a smaller, italicized serif font above 'Asylum', which is in a larger, bold serif font. The text is flanked by symmetrical, light gray decorative flourishes consisting of multiple loops and swirls.

John Harwood

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FOR ROBIN

## Part One

## Georgina Ferrars' Narrative

I WOKE, AS IT SEEMED, from a nightmare of being stretched on the rack, only to sink into another dream in which I was lying in a strange bed, afraid to open my eyes for fear of what I might see. The smell and the texture of the blanket against my cheek felt wrong, and I was clad, I became aware, in a coarse flannel nightgown that was certainly not my own. I knew that I must still be dreaming, for I had gone to sleep as usual in my bedroom at home. Every joint in my body ached as if I had been stricken with fever; yet I had felt perfectly well the night before.

I lay still for a little, waiting for the dream to dissolve, until my eyes opened of their own accord. The ceiling above me was a dull white; the bare walls, a dismal shade of green. Grey light filtered through a metal grille; the glass behind it was clouded and streaked with moisture.

I sat up, wincing at the pain, to find myself in what appeared to be a prison cell. The door to my left was solid oak, with a narrow aperture at eye level, closed by a wooden shutter. The air was damp and chill, and smelt of cold ashes and chloride of lime. A small fireplace was, like the window, entirely covered by a stout metal grille. There was no furniture beyond a bedside table, a single upright chair, a washstand, and a small closet; there were no ornaments, no looking glass; not so much as a candlestick.

It was impossible; I could not be here. But neither could I deny that I was wide awake. And I was not, I realised, at all feverish; my forehead was cool, my skin was dry, and my breath came freely. So why did my body protest at the slightest movement? Had I fallen somehow? or been attacked?—or worse? Trembling, I threw off the bedclothes and examined myself, but I could find no trace of injury, except for some bruises on my upper arms, as if someone had gripped them tightly.

Was it some sort of hallucination? If I lie down, I thought, and pull the covers over my head and try to go to sleep again, perhaps I will find myself back in my own bed. But my feet, seemingly of their own volition, were already on the floor. I moved unsteadily to the door and tried the handle, but it would not budge.

Should I call out? And who would come if I did? I turned toward the window, wondering if this was what sleepwalkers experienced. Half a dozen paces brought me to the grille. The world beyond was obscured by grey, swirling mist, with faint, unidentifiable forms—walls? houses? trees?—hovering at the edge of visibility.

I returned to the door and tried the handle again. This time the panel shot open, and two eyes appeared in the slot.

“Where am I?” I cried.

“The infirmary, miss,” replied a young woman’s voice. “Please, miss, I’m to say you’re to get back into bed, and the doctor will be here directly.”

The panel slid shut, and I heard the muffled sound of footsteps receding. Shivering, I did as she had asked, relieved at least to discover that I was in a hospital. But what had happened to me, and why had they locked me in? I waited apprehensively until another, heavier tread approached. A lock rasped, the door swung inward, and a man stepped into the room. From his dress—a tweed suit and waistcoat, somewhat rumpled, a white collar which had sprung loose at one side, a tie of dark blue silk,

carelessly knotted—and a certain humorous glint in his eye, you might have taken him for an artist, but there was an air of authority about him, of a man accustomed to being obeyed. He looked somewhere between forty and fifty, not especially tall, but broad-shouldered and trim. His eyes were pale blue, accentuating the blackness of the pupils, deep-set and piercing beneath heavy brows, with dark pouches beneath; his nose strong and aquiline and straight as a blade, the nostrils flared above chiselled lips. A long, lean face, clean-shaven except for a fringe of side-whiskers, tapering down to a creased, prominent chin. He stood silent, surveying me appraisingly.

“Where am I?” I said again. “Who are you? Why am I here?”

A gleam of satisfaction showed in his eyes.

“Do you mean you don’t know?—I see you do not. This is most inter—that is to say, most distressing for you. Forgive me: my name is Maynard Straker, and I am the superintendent and chief medical officer here at Tregannon House—on Bodmin Moor, in Cornwall,” he added, seeing that my bewilderment had not lessened. “Have no fear, Miss Ashton, I am entirely at your ser—”

He stopped short at the expression on my face.

“Sir, my name is not Ashton! I am Miss Ferrars, Georgina Ferrars; I live in London, with my uncle; there has been a terrible mistake.”

“I see,” he said calmly. “Well, never fear. Let me order you some toast and tea, and we shall talk it all through in comfort.”

“But sir, I should not be here! Please, I wish to go home at once!”

“All in good time, Miss—Ferrars, if you prefer. The first thing you must understand is that you have been very ill. I know”—he held up his hand to silence me—“I know you do not remember: that is a consequence of your illness. Now please; first you must allow me to examine you, and then I shall explain what has happened to you.”

Such was the force of his personality that I waited in silence whilst he murmured instructions to someone outside the door. He took my pulse, listened to my heartbeat, tested my reflexes, and seemed quite satisfied with the result. Then he settled himself on the wooden chair so that he was facing me directly.

“You arrived here yesterday morning; without notice, which is most unusual. You gave your name as Lucy Ashton and said that you wished to consult me on an urgent and confidential matter. As I was away on business, the maid referred you to my assistant, Mr. Mordaunt. You were, he says, in an agitated state, though striving to conceal your distress. He explained that I would not be back until the evening, and that you would therefore have to stay here overnight, and register as a voluntary patient in order to see me, and to this you very reluctantly agreed. You would not admit to any disturbance of mind; only to extreme fatigue, and, after giving him a few cursory details, asked if you might complete the admission forms later.

“Mr. Mordaunt found you a room in the voluntary wing and left you there, assuming you would rest. But several times that afternoon he saw you walking about the grounds in what he described—my assistant is something of a poet—as a trance of desolation.

“I returned at about nine o’clock, and, upon hearing Mr. Mordaunt’s account of you, called briefly at your room to arrange an appointment for this morning; I had too many calls upon my time to speak to you last night. You were plainly in a state of extreme nervous exhaustion, but again you refused to concede anything beyond fatigue. I

naturally ordered you a sedative, which you promised to take, though I fear you did not. Voluntary patients are, I should say, under no compulsion to accept any particular treatment here. So long as they pose no danger to themselves or others, they are free to do as they wish: it is part of our philosophy.

“Early this morning you were found unconscious on the path behind this building; you must have slipped out without anyone noticing. It was evident to me that you had suffered a seizure, which, though rare, is not unheard of in cases such as yours, where extreme mental agitation induces something like an epileptic fit, or, in those actually prone to epilepsy, a grand mal episode. It is nature’s way of discharging excessive mental energy. Upon waking, the patient commonly remembers nothing of the preceding days, or even weeks, and is at a loss to account for the extreme soreness of joints and muscles, which is due to the violence of the spasms. Such episodes are, of course, more common in women, whose faculties are more delicate, and more readily overstrained, than those of men—”

“Sir,” I broke in, as the full horror of realisation dawned, “am I in a madhouse?”

“It is not a term I favour; say rather you are in the care of a private establishment for the cure of diseases of the mind. An enlightened institution, Miss—Ferrars, run on the most humane principles, dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the comfort of our patients.

“Now, you assured me at our first interview that you had never suffered from epilepsy, or any form of mental disturbance—but I take it you cannot recall that interview?”

“No, sir.”

“And you have no idea of how, or why, you presented yourself to us as Lucy Ashton?”

“None whatever, sir.”

“What is the last thing—the very last thing—you can recall?”

I had clung, throughout his recital, to the belief that this was all a ghastly mistake, and that I should be escorted home to London as soon as I could persuade him that I was Georgina Ferrars and not Lucy Ashton. But his question provoked a sort of landslip in my mind. My memory, as it had seemed, of going to bed at home the night before, wavered and collapsed, leaving only a dreadful, buzzing confusion. I must, I thought desperately, *must* be able to remember. If not last night, then the day before? Memories—if they *were* memories—spilled from my grasp like playing cards, even as I tried to order them. I saw my life dissolving before my eyes. The room swayed like the deck of a ship; for a moment I felt sure I should faint.

Dr. Straker regarded me calmly.

“Do not be alarmed; the confusion will pass. But you see now why I hesitate to address you as Miss Ferrars. It is possible—I have seen such cases—that you are in fact Lucy Ashton; that Miss Ferrars—Georgina, did you say?—that Georgina Ferrars is your friend or relation, or even just a figment of your disordered imagination. The mind, after an insult such as this, can play the most extraordinary tricks upon us.”

“But sir, I *am* Georgina Ferrars! You must believe me! I live in Gresham’s Yard, in Bloomsbury, with my uncle, Josiah Radford, the bookseller. You must wire to tell him I am here—”

Dr. Straker held up his hand to stop the rush of words.

“Steady, steady, Miss . . . Ferrars, let us say. Of course we shall wire. But before we do so, you should at least consider the evidence of your own possessions . . . Ah, here is tea.”

A young maidservant in a neat grey uniform entered with a tray.

“You will be pleased to see, Bella, that our patient is recovering,” said Dr. Straker.

“Yes indeed, sir,” she said. “Very glad to see you looking better, Miss Ashton. Will there be anything else, sir?”

“Yes; run down to Miss Ashton’s room, and bring all of her things up here. Ask one of the porters if you need assistance. We can manage the tea.”

“Yes sir; right away, sir.”

“You see?” said Dr. Straker wryly as she hurried out. “Miss Ashton is, at least, not just a figment of *my* imagination. Milk? Sugar?”

If Dr. Straker had betrayed the slightest anxiety on my behalf, I think I should have given way to hysteria. But his nonchalance had a strangely calming, or rather numbing, effect upon me. I had come here calling myself Lucy Ashton: so much seemed undeniable, though utterly incomprehensible. I felt certain I knew no one of that name, and yet it seemed vaguely familiar. He has promised to wire, I told myself. I shall be going home soon, and must cling to that thought. I sipped my tea mechanically, grateful for the warmth of the cup in my cold hands.

My mother’s birthday! It had been a warm autumn day.

“Sir, I have remembered something,” I said. “The twenty-third of September, my mother’s birthday—she died ten years ago, but I vowed I would always do something that we should have enjoyed together. It was a Saturday, and I walked up to Regent’s Park, and ate an ice, and felt very ill afterward.”

“I see . . . and after that?”

I strove to pick up the thread, but beyond that one glimpse, I could not be sure. I could go backward with some confidence, over the events of the summer, and the spring, and indeed all the way back to my childhood—or so it seemed—but when I tried to advance, I could summon only blurred images of myself in my uncle’s house; the power of ordering them seemed to have deserted me.

“I—I cannot be sure,” I said at last.

“Most interesting. Let us say, then, that your last clear recollection is—or appears to be—of the twenty-third of September. Would you care to hazard a guess at today’s date?”

I knew then what had been troubling me about the chill, the damp, even the quality of the light.

“I cannot guess the time, sir, let alone the date.”

“It is two o’clock in the afternoon of Thursday, the second of November. In the year of our Lord 1882,” he added, raising one eyebrow.

“November!” I exclaimed. “Where have I . . . How could I have . . . Sir, you must wire my uncle at once; he will be desperately worried.”

“Not necessarily. If a Georgina Ferrars had been missing for the past week, let alone the past month, we should have been informed. Asylums, like the hospitals and the police, are kept up to date with news of missing persons; and there is no one of that name—indeed, no one resembling you—on any of our lists. You may have told your uncle that you were going away; though not, presumably, to a lunatic asylum under a

false name. So before we trouble him, let us try to set the record straight.”

He drew a piece of paper from his coat pocket.

“This is all the information you gave my assistant when he admitted you yesterday morning. ‘Name: Lucy Ashton. Address: Royal Hotel, Plymouth. Date of birth: the fourteenth of February 1861. Place of birth: London. Parents: deceased. Next of kin: none living. No history of serious physical or mental illness. No person to be advised in case of illness or decease. “Patient says she is quite alone in the world,” Mr. Mordaunt has noted. Interesting, is it not?”

“Sir, I have never even *been* to Plymouth!”

“I think we can safely say that you have. Amnesia is the most difficult of all conditions for a patient to grasp, Miss Ashton, because there is literally nothing to hold on to. You do not recognise any of those details, then?”

“None, sir. I cannot imagine why—”

“I can think of at least two explanations,” he said, producing a notebook and pencil. “But before we come to that . . . Your full name?”

“Georgina May Ferrars, sir.”

“And your date and place of birth?”

“March third, 1861, at Nettleford, in Devon.”

“That is *near* Plymouth, is it not?”

“I believe so, sir; I have no memory of it. We—my mother and I—moved to a cottage on the cliffs near Niton, on the Isle of Wight, to live with my aunt Vida—my great-aunt, I mean—when I was only an infant.”

He listened to this halting explanation with an air of polite amusement, as if to say, And why should we believe you this time?

“I see . . . And your father?”

“His name was Godfrey Ferrars, sir; I never knew him. He died before I was two years old.”

“I am sorry to hear it. What was his profession, do you know?”

“He was a doctor, sir—” I almost said, “like yourself,” but checked myself. “A medical officer, in London.”

“What part of London?”

“Clerkenwell, sir. But he became very ill and had to move to the country; he was convalescing in Nettleford when I was born.”

“And did not recover, I take it?”

“He did recover, sir, but then he insisted on taking another situation, in Southwark —”

“Again as a medical officer?”

“Yes, sir. My mother took me to Niton—we were to follow as soon as he had settled in—but he came down with typhoid fever and was dead before news of his illness reached us.”

“Do you know the date?”

“No, sir; only that it was summer.”

“Well, let us say the summer of 1862.” He scribbled in his notebook. “And your mother’s maiden name?”

“Emily Radford.”

“She died, I think you said, ten years ago?”

“Yes, sir. She had some weakness of the heart—an aneurism, we were told. It was not discovered until after her death.”

“A melancholy history. Are you her only child?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dr. Straker regarded me curiously.

“Do you know, I wonder, whether the weakness was hereditary? Your own heart seems sound enough, on a brief examination, but have you ever suffered from palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, fainting fits . . . ?”

“No, sir, I was a very healthy child. She and my aunt were always anxious that I should take plenty of rest and exercise, and not become over-excited, but they never mentioned my heart.”

“That, at least, is reassuring,” he said, making another note. “And after that?”

“I remained with my great-aunt, Vida Radford, on my mother’s side, until we lost—until she died last year. After that I went to London to live with Uncle Josiah—Aunt Vida’s brother, so he is my great-uncle, too—”

Again I heard myself faltering.

“And has your uncle any children of his own?”

“No, sir. Like my aunt, he never married.”

“I see. And—if you will forgive me—what are your financial circumstances? Have you money of your own, or expectations of your uncle?”

Something in his tone made me even more fearful.

“I have a small income, sir, about a hundred pounds a year, from my aunt. And my uncle is certainly not rich; he says his estate is worth only a few hundred pounds.”

“I see. And now we come to your mental health. As Miss Ashton”—he glanced again at the paper on his knee—“you told my assistant that you had no history of mental disturbance. But given that you came here under an *alias*, and have since suffered a seizure, almost certainly brought on by prolonged and violent mental agitation, perhaps there is something you would like to add to Miss Ashton’s account?”

Again the room seemed to revolve around me. There were, I thought, with my heart beginning to pound, several things I ought to add; but if I confessed to them, I might never be allowed to leave. The seconds ticked by under his ironic gaze.

“I—I do not think there is anything out of the ordinary.”

“Very well,” he said, after an uncomfortable pause. “And now I must look in on some of my other patients. In the meantime, you must stay in bed and keep warm; Bella will see to the fire when she returns with your luggage.”

“But sir, you will send that wire to my uncle?”

“By all means. The nearest telegraph office is at Liskeard, a good forty minutes’ ride from here, so we cannot expect a reply until this evening at the earliest. Mr. Josiah Radford, of Gresham’s Yard, Bloomsbury, is it not?” he added, glancing at his notebook.

You *must* be able to remember, I told myself as the echo of his footsteps died away. It is like a door that sticks; you have forgotten the trick of it; that is all. Or a name that will not come to you, and then you find it upon your lips a few minutes later. But no matter how hard I strained, I could not even discern a gap where memory should have been. Was it possible that the real Lucy Ashton—where *had* I heard that name before?

—looked just like me? Could we have been confused with each other? But that did nothing to explain what *I* was doing in a private asylum in Cornwall, a part of the world I had never visited . . . and so my thoughts went spiralling on, until Bella reappeared, struggling under the weight of a stout leather valise, a hatbox, and a dark blue travelling-cloak, none of which I recognised.

“I am afraid those are not my things.”

The girl regarded me with, I thought, a certain compassion.

“Beg pardon, miss, but you was wearing that cloak when you come here yesterday. And look,” she added, setting down the case and opening it. “Here’s your wrap, miss, the one you asked me to look out when you was cold later on.”

She held up a blue woollen shawl—the pattern was certainly one I might have chosen myself—and draped it around my shoulders. I watched numbly as she opened the closet and began to unpack the case—which had “L.A.” stamped in faded gold lettering below the handle. Everything she took out of it looked like clothes I might have chosen myself, but none of them were mine. It struck me that my own wardrobe, in its entirety, would fit into a case not much larger than this.

“Wait!” I cried. “I am not staying here; I must return to London as soon as—” My voice trailed away; the fog of confusion seemed suddenly to lift. Why on earth was I waiting for the answer to Dr. Straker’s wire? He had said I was a voluntary patient, and regardless of how and why they had mistaken me for Lucy Ashton—regardless, indeed, of what had happened to my memory—the sooner I was back in London, the better.

“In fact,” I said firmly, “I wish to leave immediately. Would you please help me to dress, and—”

“I’m sorry, miss, but I can’t, not without the doctor’s say-so.” She had a soft country accent which would, in other circumstances, have been pleasing to my ear.

“Then I shall dress myself. Please go at once and find Dr. Straker, and ask him to order me”—I was about to say, “a cab”—“a conveyance, to take me to the nearest railway station. You do understand,” I added, hearing my voice beginning to tremble, “that I am a voluntary patient here.”

“I’ll go and see, miss. But please, miss, doctor’s orders was for you to stay in bed.”

She hurried out, closing the door behind her. I slipped out of bed, suddenly afraid that she might have locked me in. But the door opened readily, onto a dark-panelled corridor, in which Bella’s receding figure was the only sign of life.

I closed the door again and turned to the closet. Lucy Ashton’s taste in clothing was almost identical to my own; like me, she favoured the aesthetic style; her blue woollen travelling-dress was the twin of one that I possessed in grey, and when I held it up against myself, it was plain, even without a mirror, that it would fit me perfectly. Even the laundry marks were exactly the same as mine: small cotton tags stitched into the lining, with “L.A.” sewn into them in neat blue lettering. If I had been asked to outfit myself for a journey, I could not have chosen better.

Again I found myself clutching at the idea that Lucy Ashton must be my double, only to remember that this did nothing to explain why *I* was here. Once more I strove to penetrate the void shrouding my mind, until something brought me back to the immediate present, and the awareness that Lucy Ashton’s case contained no purse or pocketbook; no jewellery, no rings, and no money.

And two other things were missing—though of course they were missing, since these were not my things: the dragonfly brooch my mother had bequeathed to me, which I would never have left behind; and my writing case, a present from Aunt Vida, containing the journal I had kept since my sixteenth birthday. It was a quarto-sized case made of soft blue leather, with two gold clasps, and a key, which I always kept on a fine silver chain around my neck, but which was certainly not there now.

The loss of that key somehow brought home the extremity of my plight. My strength deserted me, and I sank down upon the edge of the bed, just as Dr. Straker reappeared in the doorway, followed by Bella with a pail of coals.

“Miss—Ferrars,” he said sternly, “you must get back into bed and stay there. As your physician, I command it. There can be no question of your leaving; you are far too ill.”

“But sir—”

“No more, I pray you. The wire has been dispatched as you requested; as soon as we have an answer, I shall let you know,” he said, and strode from the room.

“Bella,” I said as she arranged the blankets over me, “I can’t find my purse, or my brooch—in a small red plush box; it is quite valuable; or my writing case—a blue leather one. Have you see them anywhere?”

“No, miss, I ’aven’t. This is all there was, miss, when I packed up your room just now.”

“But I *must* have had money,” I said desperately. “How else could I have got here?”

“You gave me a sixpence, miss, when you was still wearing your cloak. P’raps it’s there.”

She tried the pockets but found only a pair of gloves.

“You don’t think *I* took it, miss?” she said, with a look of alarm.

“No, Bella. But *someone* must have, and my brooch and writing case; I would never travel without them.”

“I don’t know, miss, I’m sure. We’re all honest girls here. Might you have put them away somewhere yourself, miss, and—and forgotten? Now please, miss, I must get on.”

To this there was plainly no answer. I gave up all hope of escaping that day, and lay with my mind spinning, and a sick feeling of dread gnawing at the pit of my stomach, while daylight slowly faded from the room, until I woke with the glare of a lantern in my eyes, to find Dr. Straker standing beside my bed.

“I am afraid, Miss Ashton, that you must prepare yourself for a shock. As well as conveying your message to Josiah Radford, I took the liberty of asking him whether he had ever heard of a Lucy Ashton. This is his reply.”

NO KNOWLEDGE LUCY ASHTON STOP GEORGINA FERRARS HERE STOP YOUR PATIENT MUST BE IMPOSTER STOP JOSIAH RADFORD.

I was sedated, that night, with chloral, and emerged from a pit of oblivion with my body still aching and a foul taste in my mouth. Whether it was the after-effect of the drug, or the accumulated shocks of the previous day, all I could think was that Dr. Straker must have wired the wrong Josiah Radford; further than that, my mind refused to go. Bella brought me breakfast, which I was unable to eat, along with a mirror in which I saw a drawn, sunken face, white as a ghost’s except for dark pouches like

bruises beneath eyes that were scarcely recognisable as my own. Dr. Straker, she told me, as she brushed the worst of the knots out of my hair, would be here directly; his orders were for me to stay in bed; and no, I was not to dress on any account. And so I was condemned to wait in my nightgown and wrap until he appeared at my bedside, looking, if anything, even more cheerful than he had the day before.

“Well, Miss Ashton, as I think we must call you until we discover who you really are, I must say that your case is unique in my experience.”

“Sir, I beg of you . . . I cannot explain what has happened, but I swear to you, on my dear mother’s grave, I *am* Georgina Ferrars!”

“I know. I know that is what you believe, with every fibre of your being. But consider the facts. There is a Georgina Ferrars presently at the address you gave me—no, hear me out. You came here under the name Lucy Ashton, and I think we may say with certainty that Lucy Ashton is not your real name, either. You are, I take it, familiar with Scott’s *Waverley* novels?”

I knew, suddenly, where I had heard the name before.

“Lucy Ashton is the heroine of *The Bride of Lammermoor*. She is forced by her mother to break her engagement to the man she loves, Edgar Ravenswood, and marry another whom she loathes. She stabs her husband on their wedding night, and dies, insane, of a seizure. So it occurs to me to ask whether this has any personal significance for you.”

I stared at him, appalled.

“I have never been engaged, sir, let alone . . . !”

“Nevertheless, you will agree that it is a disturbing choice of alias for a troubled young woman presenting herself for treatment at a private asylum. It suggests that there is something in her past—perhaps her immediate past—from which she is fleeing.”

“There is nothing, sir, nothing!”

“Nothing that you can remember, I agree.”

“But sir, I have told you my history; you wrote it down yesterday. The person who sent that telegram is lying; I do not know why. If you do not believe me—”

“I have already been in touch with the medical boards of Clerkenwell and Southwark: a Dr. Godfrey Ferrars held positions there in 1859 and 1862 respectively. He died at Southwark of typhoid fever on the thirtieth of August 1862, survived by his wife, Emily, and their infant daughter, Georgina.”

“Then how can you not believe me?” I cried.

“Because—though I am sure you could give me the most fluent recital of the facts of Georgina Ferrars’ life—it does not follow that you *are* Georgina Ferrars. You may, for example, have met the real Georgina Ferrars, or someone who knows her very well, and—for reasons we cannot yet fathom—become obsessed with her. I have seen such cases before; it is called hysterical possession, where the patient assumes the identity of another and comes to believe in all sincerity that she *is* that person. As well as the evidence of the telegram, we have the fact that you presented yourself here as Miss Ashton, suffered a seizure, lost all memory of the past six weeks, and only then declared yourself to be Georgina Ferrars—”

“Sir,” I broke in, gathering my courage, “you *must* hear me! That cable is a fraud. I do not know who sent it, or why, but if you send someone to Gresham’s Yard, you will

find only my uncle; he will come straight away and fetch me. I have a little money saved," I added, praying that it was still true, "and I will pay any expenses—"

"That will not be necessary. As it happens, I have to go up to London by this afternoon's train. I shall call at Gresham's Yard tomorrow, and speak to Josiah Radford—and, I fear, to Georgina Ferrars, and try to persuade her to come down and identify you—since you clearly know a good deal about her.

"And if," he added, before I could speak, "if it *should* turn out that you have a mortal enemy, who has been lurking around Gresham's Yard, waiting to intercept a telegram he could not possibly have known would come, I promise to bring Mr. Josiah Radford back with me on the very next train, and eat my hat—a thing I have never promised to do before—as penance. In the meantime, we shall keep you comfortable, at our expense, of course."

"But sir, I wish to leave at once!"

"I am afraid I cannot allow it. You are not well enough to travel, and, if my instinct is right, and you were to appear at Gresham's Yard in your present frame of mind, you would probably be arrested and confined at Bethlem Hospital, which, though much improved, is not a place I should recommend to anyone in my care. And now I must see to my other patients; I shall leave you in the care of my colleague Dr. Mayhew until I return—which may not be until Monday."

"Monday! But sir . . ."

He rose, silencing me with a gesture, and strode to the door, where he paused.

"Oh, and I shall ask my assistant, Mr. Mordaunt, to look in on you. I think you will find him—sympathetic."

For the rest of that day I saw no one but Bella and Dr. Mayhew, a stout, grey-bearded physician who took my pulse, peered at my tongue, felt my forehead, grunted a few times and went away without speaking. Bella helped me to bathe, and brought me meals, most of which I was unable to eat. *You must keep up your strength for the journey home*, I kept telling myself, but the clenched knot in the pit of my stomach left little room for food. Once, after she had taken away my tray, I slipped out of bed and made my way unsteadily to the window. The mist had cleared, and through the grille I looked down upon an enclosed garden, perhaps thirty yards across, surrounded by high brick walls. Gravel paths ran between beds of dark green foliage; there was no one in sight, and no sign of any way in or out. Above the walls I could see only the tops of trees, silhouetted against a leaden sky.

There was no clock within my hearing; nothing to mark the passing of the hours except the slow fading of the light and the occasional spatter of rain against the glass; nothing to do but struggle in vain to comprehend what had befallen me, until I fell at last into a doze and woke in lamplight to find Bella arranging my supper tray. She had brought me another draught of chloral, which I swallowed reluctantly for the oblivion it promised. But instead of sleeping through the night, I woke in a kind of delirium in which I was aware of myself lying in bed, unable to move, spinning through fearful dreams until daylight and the horror of coming fully awake and finding myself still at Tregannon Asylum.

Before this, the idea that I might not even be—myself, was the only way I could conceive of it—would have seemed merely absurd. But here, anything seemed

possible; not only possible, but nightmarishly plausible. How could I be sure that I was not insane? I did not *feel* mad, but how was I to know what madness felt like? Dr. Straker evidently believed it; and I had only to think of that telegram to feel terror rising to engulf me. Why had I called myself Lucy Ashton—as I must have done, unless everyone here was lying to me? Was there a strain of madness in our family, which had come out in me?

*You must not think of it*, I told myself, and a great sob burst from my throat. When the fit of weeping had passed, I lay down and closed my eyes and strove to imagine myself back in my own small bed in our house on the cliffs at Niton, with Mama and Aunt Vida murmuring nearby, their voices blending with the ebb and wash of the sea far below.

My great-aunt Vida had found the cottage many years before I was born, and had fallen in love with it at first sight. It stood about fifty yards up from the cliff, with the ground rising steeply behind. Away to the east ran the great sweep of the cliffs, the edge so sharp in places that it might have been cut with a knife, plunging down to two horizontal lines of fluted rock like great jagged teeth, the lower jaw projecting beyond the upper, and then down again to the falls of rock heaped along the shore far below. Whole farms lay buried in some of these mounds, but my aunt insisted that we were too far from the edge to be in any danger.

Our sitting room was upstairs at the front, with windows on two sides looking to the east and south, over the vast expanse of the sea. My mother had a chaise longue by the side windows, and here she would spend hours each day reading, knitting or embroidering, or simply gazing out to sea. Every morning after breakfast, the sitting room would become my schoolroom, and much of my education came from reading aloud—I could not remember a time when I could not read—or being read to, and asking questions whenever I did not understand. We read a great deal of poetry, and Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, and Macaulay's *History*; anything from our small library that my mother considered suitable, and I do not remember her ever condescending to me, or saying that anything was too hard for a child to understand.

My aunt slept in the other front room; my bedroom was across the passage from hers, and my mother had the room next to mine. From my window I could see the long westward sweep of the coast. The dining room, which we seldom used, was downstairs, along with a breakfast room where we took most of our meals, and the kitchen and servants' quarters where Mrs. Briggs, the housekeeper, and Amy, the maid, lived.

Aunt Vida seemed, when I was small, to tower above my mother, though I came to realise that there was only an inch or two between them. But my mother was pale and slender, whereas Aunt Vida was as stout and solid as a tree-trunk, her face weathered by long exposure to wind and sun. She was a great walker, and I would often see her striding out in the morning, swinging her blackthorn stick. In summer, especially, she might not return until after my bedtime; I would hear her voice raised in greeting as I was drifting on the edge of sleep, or wake to the murmur of conversation from the sitting room. She spoke, as a rule, in a gruff, staccato fashion, as though dictating her thoughts at the telegraph office. "I should have been born a man," she once said to me, years after my mother had died, and indeed she behaved, for the most part, as if she

had been. Once, having seen her snipping at her hair—a thick, white, wiry mane, very like that of Mr. Allardyce the vicar—with the kitchen scissors, I decided to try it myself, with predictable consequences. “I am old enough, and ugly enough, to do as I please,” she had said sternly, “but you, child, are not.” She despised bustles and crinolines; her wardrobe consisted of two summer and two winter walking-dresses, all in the same shade of brown (“doesn’t show the mud”), and two pairs of stout boots; in wet weather she would array herself in oilskins and a sou’wester. Years later, when I was fully grown, she insisted upon giving me a set of my own, which I thought deeply unbecoming and would wear only as a last resort. They smelt faintly but persistently of tobacco, and I suspected her of buying them from a sailor.

My own taste in dress was formed by my mother, who, like my aunt, refused to wear a bustle, or endure any form of tight lacing. She, however, had embraced the artistic fashion when I was still very small: plain, loose-fitting gowns in muted shades and soft fabrics, which she cut out and sewed herself. With me, she was abundantly affectionate; even during my lessons, we would nestle together on the sofa, whereas Aunt Vida, though I never doubted her love for me, could manage no more than a clumsy pat on my shoulder, as you might pat a horse you were not entirely sure of. But sometimes, if I caught my mother unawares, I would find her staring absently into space with a haunted, fearful expression—was it dread, or physical pain? I could not tell, because the instant she caught sight of me, she would shake herself, beckon me into her arms, and assure me that it was nothing, nothing at all. If she was in pain, or visited by some premonition of approaching death, she concealed it resolutely; if I suggested a walk, and she did not feel up to it, she would simply smile and say that she thought she had better rest. And so, with my aunt out roaming the countryside, I was left a good deal to myself in the afternoons.

The only remarkable thing about my bedroom, from a child’s point of view, was a full-length mirror in a tarnished gilt frame, fixed to the wall beside my bed. When I was about six years old, I invented a game—at least it began as a game—in which my reflection was my sister, Rosina. The name simply floated into my head one day, and I liked the music of it. I would stare at my reflection in the glass until I drifted into a strange, half-mesmerised state in which Rosina’s gestures and expressions seemed independent of my own. Rosina, of course, looked exactly like me, except that she was left-handed. But in personality she was quite different: bold, headstrong, defiant of authority, and entirely fearless. And oddly, though it did not seem so at the time, she was not my mother’s daughter, despite being my sister; she had sprung fully formed from the mirror, a law unto herself.

I had a separate voice for Rosina, higher and fiercer than mine, and sometimes our exchanges would become quite heated, if she was taunting me for refusing to do something forbidden, such as creeping downstairs before dawn to play in the moonlight. As I grew more adventurous, it was always fear of Rosina’s scorn, which I could summon as vividly as any feeling of my own, that kept me from turning back. When my mother was resting, I liked to play by myself in the garden, which was enclosed by a rough stone wall—I suppose it was no more than six feet high, but to me it seemed immense—partly hidden from the house by a coppice of ancient fruit trees. I was forbidden to climb it, but at Rosina’s urging I went a little higher each time, until I was perched on the very top. Looking along the coast, I could see the edge of the cliff,

cut as cleanly as a pat of butter, and hear the wash of the sea far below.

That was as far as I dared go for a week or more, and it was even longer before I made my first tentative descent to the rough, tussocky grass outside. The hillside around was overgrown with gorse, which made it easy to keep out of sight of the house, though I learnt to be very careful of the thorns. Despite my apprehension, I knew at once what the next dare would be: to go right down to the edge of the cliff and look over.

I do not know how far I believed in Rosina as a separate being. Part of me, at least, was aware that I was playing a game with myself; yet the Rosina-voice also seemed to come from outside. *I* did not want to be bad, or cause my mother distress, but Rosina simply did not care; *I* was afraid of the cliff and had promised never to go near it; but Rosina was not afraid of anything. And so, day by day, I ventured closer to the edge.

Though the slope down to the cliff was quite steep, there was a place where the ground curled up like a lip: a small patch of grass, growing right to the edge, flanked by two gorse bushes. The afternoon I chose for my attempt was mild and still, but I was scarcely conscious of the sun's warmth on my back, or the droning of the bees amongst the gorse, as I crawled up the lip on my hands and knees, too intent even to notice the stains accumulating on my pinafore. But the grass was higher than it had seemed from above, and I could no longer tell where the edge was; the gorse bushes on either side obscured everything beyond the small circle of crushed grass. All I could see before me was a tangle of green and brown stalks against the shimmering blue of the sky.

It did not occur to me that I could turn back. With my heart thudding violently, I lay flat on my stomach, stretched my hands as far ahead of me as I could reach, and inched forward, expecting every moment to feel empty space beneath my fingers. The coarse, springy grass confused me. Was the ground sloping up, or down? Was I pushing myself along, or beginning to slide toward the brink? Panic seized me. I dug in my toes into the earth, and pressed myself even flatter. I felt my fingers slipping through the grass, until they encountered a large stone, at which I clutched frantically, pushing myself back with all my strength.

The stone stirred like a live thing. It seemed to lift itself slightly, and shiver, before the grass beneath me vanished in a great slithering rush. Something caught me across the chest, and I was left suspended in midair while a mass of earth and rock hurtled down the cliff-face. It struck the undercliff in a silent explosion of debris, followed by a sound like a muffled peal of thunder. A plume of reddish-brown dust hung in its wake.

I found that my hands were gripping a gnarled tangle of roots, projecting from what was now the cliff-face. Small rivulets of dirt were spilling around me. I was lying side-on to the precipice, too terrified to move or breathe. Far below, jagged spurs of rock protruded from a mound of rubble, like teeth waiting to devour me. My perch was trembling in my grasp.

Whimpering with fear, I turned my head very slowly away from the abyss. The gorse bush whose roots had saved me, was now poised on the very edge of the cliff, the base of its trunk half-exposed. With every slight movement I made, more dirt trickled from around the roots.

I was perhaps two feet below the brink. To survive, I would have to pull myself

closer to the trunk, wedge my feet amongst the roots, and actually stand up, balanced against the crumbling bank, before I could scabble over. It was impossible: my feet and hands would not move. I tried to scream for help, but no sound came out.

*Climb, you fool!* Rosina's voice seemed to explode inside my head, scornful, imperious. The roots shook; a rush of earth and pebbles spurted from the bank. I remember one glimpse, as if looking down from above, of myself pressed against the cliff with my fingers clawed over the brink. The next instant, as it seemed, I was sprawled on the ground, scraped and bloodied and weeping with shock and relief.

I do not know how long I lay there before realisation struck me. I had broken my solemn promise never, ever, to go anywhere near the edge; I had set off a landslip; and what if more of the cliff should fall? I was covered in dirt from head to foot, and my pinafore was torn and filthy. I sprang to my feet, raced up the hillside, heedless of the need to keep out of sight of the house, and scrambled back over the wall with a horrid rending of cloth. I dared not tell the truth; I would have to say that I had fallen in the garden; or perhaps I should say that I had tried to climb the wall to look over and had fallen off. Then at least I should be confessing to a small part of my sin. Yes; I could say that I had heard a strange noise from the cliff, climbed up to see what it was, and slipped. And I knew that I must go indoors straightaway, and not wait to be called and have to explain why I had stayed in the garden in such a dreadful state.

As it happened, my mother was still asleep, and the first person I met was Amy, who scolded me roundly, scrubbed me down, and gave me a clean pinafore. Mama was alarmed rather than angry when she saw my scrapes and bruises, said she hoped I had learnt my lesson, and made me promise, which I did with heartfelt sincerity, never to climb the wall again. I was still afraid that more of the cliff might collapse—what if our house was swallowed up in the night?—but as no one had heard the noise, they assumed I had imagined it.

I tried not to show how shaken I was, but every time I closed my eyes I would find myself back on the cliff-face, and I was so pale the next morning that Mama thought I might be sickening for something. Though I would much have preferred to do my lessons with her, I was made to rest in bed, with nothing to do but brood upon what I had done. If Rosina had not shouted at me—as it had truly seemed—I should certainly have died; but then if she had not taunted me with my fear of the cliff, I should never have gone near it. After a while I slipped out of bed, confronted my reflection in the mirror, and berated her for putting me in such danger. “I might have died!” I was shouting, when my mother appeared behind Rosina—as it momentarily seemed—in the glass, staring down at me with a look of consternation.

“Georgina! What are you doing?”

“I was only playing at charades, Mama,” I said lamely. I was not sure what charades were, but I knew that they involved pretending to be other people.

“But you were shouting at your own reflection, and calling it Rosina; you said you might have died.”

“She is only someone I made up, Mama; it was just a story I was telling myself.”

“Georgina,” she said, kneeling down, taking me gently but firmly by the shoulders, and turning me to face her, “I am not angry, but you must tell me the truth. This—what you were doing with the mirror—is not good for you. And what is this about dying? Is it to do with your falling off the wall yesterday?”