

## Grey

For nine years, Sarah Jane Lyon-White lived happily with her parents in the heart of Africa. Her father was a physician, her mother, a nurse, and they worked at a Protestant mission in the Congo. She was happy there, not the least because her mother and father were far more enlightened than many another mission worker in the days when Victoria was Queen; taking the cause of healing as more sacred than that of conversion, they undertook to work with the natives, and made friends instead of enemies among the shamans and medicine-people. Because of this, Sarah was a cherished and protected child, although she was no stranger to the many dangers of life in the Congo.

When she was six, and far older in responsibility than most of her peers, one of the shaman brought her a parrot-chick still in quills; he taught her how to feed and care for it, and told her that while it was a child, she was to protect it, but when it was grown, it would protect and guide her. She called the parrot "Grey," and it became her best friend—and indeed, although she never told her parents, it became her protector as well.

But when she was nine, her parents sent her to live in England for the sake of her health. And because her mother feared that the climate of England would not be good for Grey's health, she had to leave her beloved friend behind.

Now, this was quite the usual thing in the days when Victoria was Queen and the great British Empire was so vast that there was never an hour when some part of it was not in sunlight. It was thought that English children were more delicate than their parents, and that the inhospitable humors of hot climes would make them sicken and die. Not that their parents didn't sicken and die quite as readily as the children, who were, in fact, far sturdier than they were given credit for—but it was thought, by anxious mothers, that the climate of England would be far kinder to them. So off they were shipped, some as young as two and three, torn away from their anxious mamas and native nurses and sent to live with relatives or even total strangers.

Now, as Mr. Kipling and Mrs. Hope-Hodgson have shown us, many of these total strangers—and no few of the relatives—were bad, wicked people, interested only in the round gold sovereigns that the childrens' parents sent to them for their care. There were many schools where the poor lonely things were neglected or even abused; where their health suffered far more than if they had stayed safely at the sides of their mamas.

But there were good schools too, and kindly people, and Sarah Jane's mama had been both wise and careful in her selection. In fact, Sarah Jane's mama had made a choice that was far wiser than even she had guessed. . . .

Nan—that was her only name, for no one had told her of any other—lurked anxiously about the back gate of the Big House. She was new to this neighborhood, for her slatternly mother had lost yet another job in a gin-mill and they had been forced to move all the way across Whitechapel, and this part of London was as foreign to Nan as the wilds of Australia. She had been told by more than one of the children hereabouts that if she hung about the back gate after tea, a strange man with a towel wrapped about his head would come out with a basket of food and give it out to any child who happened to be there. Now, there were not as many children willing to accept this offering as might have been expected, even in this poor neighborhood. They were afraid of the man, afraid of his piercing, black eyes, his swarthy

skin, and his way of walking like a great hunting-cat. Some suspected poison in the food, others murmured that he and the woman of the house were foreigners, and intended to kill English children with terrible curses on the food they offered. But Nan was faint with hunger; she hadn't eaten in two days, and was willing to dare poison, curses, and anything else for a bit of bread.

Furthermore, Nan had a secret defense; under duress, she could often sense the intent and even dimly hear the thoughts of others. That was how she avoided her mother when it was most dangerous to approach her, as well as avoiding other dangers in the streets themselves. Nan was certain that if this man had any ill intentions, she would know it.

Still, as tea-time and twilight both approached, she hung back a little from the wrought-iron gate, beginning to wonder if it wouldn't be better to see what, if anything, her mother brought home. If she'd found a job—or a "gen'lmun"—there might be a farthing or two to spare for food before Aggie spent the rest on gin. Behind the high, grimy wall, the Big House loomed dark and ominous against the smoky, lowering sky, and the strange, carved creatures sitting atop every pillar in the wall and every corner of the House fair gave Nan the shivers whenever she looked at them. There were no two alike, and most of them were beasts out of a rummy's worst deliriums. The only one that Nan could see that looked at all normal was a big, grey bird with a fat body and a hooked beak that sat on top of the right-hand gatepost of the back gate.

Nan had no way to tell time, but as she waited, growing colder and hungrier—and more nervous—with each passing moment, she began to think for certain that the other children had been having her on. Tea-time was surely long over; the tale they'd told her was nothing more than that, something to gull the newcomer with. It was getting dark, there were no other children waiting, and after dark it was dangerous even for a child like Nan, wise in the ways of the evil streets, to be abroad. Disappointed, and with her stomach a knot of pain, Nan began to turn away from the gate.

"I think that there is no one here, Missy S'ab," said a low, deep voice, heavily accented, sounding disappointed. Nan hastily turned back, and peering through the gloom, she barely made out a tall, dark form with a smaller one beside it.

"No, Karamjit—look there!" replied the voice of a young girl, and the smaller form pointed at Nan. A little girl ran up to the gate, and waved through the bars. "Hello! I'm Sarah—what's your name? Would you like some tea-bread? We've plenty!"

The girl's voice, also strangely accented, had none of the imperiousness that Nan would have expected coming from the child of a "toff." She sounded only friendly and helpful, and that, more than anything, was what drew Nan back to the wrought-iron gate.

"Indeed, Missy Sarah speaks the truth," the man said; and as Nan drew nearer, she saw that the other children had not exaggerated when they described him. His head was wrapped around in a cloth; he wore a long, high-collared coat of some bright stuff, and white trousers that were tucked into glossy boots. He was as fiercely erect as the iron gate itself; lean and angular as a hunting tiger, with skin so dark she could scarcely make out his features, and eyes that glittered at her like beads of black glass.

But strangest, and perhaps most ominous of all, Nan could sense nothing from the dark man. He might not even have been there; there was a blank wall where his thoughts should have been.

The little girl beside him was perfectly ordinary by comparison; a bright little wren of a thing, not pretty, but sweet, with a trusting smile that went straight to Nan's heart. Nan had a motherly side to her; the younger children of whatever neighborhood she lived in tended to flock to her, look up to her, and follow her lead. She in her turn tried to keep them out of trouble, and whenever there was extra to go around, she fed them out of her own scant stocks.

But the tall fellow frightened her, and made her nervous, especially when further moments revealed no more of his intentions than Nan had sensed before; the girl's bright eyes noted that, and she whispered something to the dark man as Nan withdrew a little. He nodded, and handed her a basket that looked promisingly heavy.

Then he withdrew out of sight, leaving the little girl alone at the gate. The child pushed the gate open enough to hand the basket through. "Please, won't you come and take this? It's awfully heavy."

In spite of the clear and open brightness of the little girl's thoughts, ten years of hard living had made Nan suspicious. The child might know nothing of what the dark man wanted. "Woi're yer givin' food away?" she asked, edging forward a little, but not yet quite willing to take the basket.

The little girl put the basket down on the ground and clasped her hands behind her back. "Well, Mem'sab says that she won't tell Maya and Selim to make less food for tea, because she won't have us going hungry while we're growing. And she says that old, stale toast is fit only for starlings, so people ought to have the good of it before it goes stale. And she says that there's no reason why children outside our gate have to go to bed hungry when we have enough to share, and my Mum and Da say that sharing is charity and Charity is one of the cardinal virtues, so Mem'sab is being virtuous, which is a good thing, because she'll go to heaven and she would make a good angel."

Most of that came out in a rush that quite bewildered Nan, especially the last, about cardinal virtues and heaven and angels. But she did understand that "Mem'sab," whoever that was, must be one of those daft religious creatures that gave away food free for the taking, and Nan's own Mum had told her that there was no point in letting other people take what you could get from people like that. So Nan edged forward and made a snatch at the basket-handle.

She tried, that is; it proved a great deal heavier than she'd thought, and she gave an involuntary grunt at the weight of it.

"Be careful," the little girl admonished mischievously. "It's heavy."

"Yer moight'o warned me!" Nan said, a bit indignant, and more than a bit excited. If this wasn't a trick—if there wasn't a brick in the basket—oh, she'd eat well tonight, and tomorrow, too!

"Come back tomorrow!" the little thing called, as she shut the gate and turned and skipped towards the house. "Remember me! I'm Sarah Jane, and I'll bring the basket tomorrow!"

"Thenkee, Sarah Jane," Nan called back, belatedly; then, just in case these strange creatures would think better of their generosity, she made the basket and herself vanish into the night.

She came earlier the next day, bringing back the now-empty basket, and found Sarah Jane waiting at the gate. To her disappointment, there was no basket waiting beside the child, and Nan almost turned back, but Sarah saw her and called to her before she could fade back into the shadows of the streets.

"Karamjit is bringing the basket in a bit," the child said, "There's things Mem'sab wants you to have. And—what am I to call you? It's rude to call you 'girl,' but I don't know your name."

"Nan," Nan replied, feeling as if a cart had run over her. This child, though younger than Nan herself, had a way of taking over a situation that was all out of keeping with Nan's notion of how things were. "Wot kind'o place is this, anyway?"

"It's a school, a boarding-school," Sarah said promptly. "Mem'sab and her husband have it for the children of people who live in India, mostly. Mem'sab can't have children herself, which is very sad, but she says that means she can be a mother to us. Mem'sab came from India, and that's where Karamjit and Selim and Maya and the others are from, too; they came with her."

"Yer mean the black feller?" Nan asked, bewildered. "Yer from In'ju too?"

"No," Sarah said, shaking her head. "Africa. I wish I was back there." Her face paled and her eyes misted, and Nan, moved by an impulse she did not understand, tried to distract her with questions.

"Wot's it loik, then? Izit loik Lunnun?"

"Like London! Oh, no, it couldn't be less like London!" Nan's ploy worked; the child giggled at the idea of comparing the Congo with a metropolis, and she painted a vivid word-picture of the green jungles, teeming with birds and animals of all sorts; of the natives who came to her father and mother for medicines. "Mum and Da don't do what some of the others do—they went and talked to the magic men and showed them they weren't going to interfere in the magic work, and now whenever Mum and Da have a patient who thinks he's cursed, they call the magic man in to help, and when a magic man has someone that his magic can't help right away, he takes the patient to Mum and Da and they all put on feathers and Mum and Da give him White Medicine while the magic man burns his herbs and feathers and makes his chants, and everyone is happy. There haven't been any uprisings at our station for ever so long, and our magic men won't let anyone put black chickens at our door. One of them gave me Grey, and I wanted to bring her with me, but Mum said I shouldn't." Now the child sighed, and looked woeful again.

"Wot's a Grey?" Nan asked.

"She's a Polly, a grey parrot with the beautifulest red tail; the medicine man gave her to me when she was all prickles, he showed me how to feed her with mashed-up yams and things. She's so smart, she follows me about, and she can say, oh, hundreds of things. The medicine man said that she was to be my guardian and keep me from harm. But Mum was afraid the smoke in London would hurt her, and I couldn't bring her with me." Sarah looked up at the fat, stone bird on the gatepost above her. "That's why Mem'sab gave me that gargoyle, to be my guardian instead. We all have them, each child has her own, and that one's mine." She looked down again at Nan, and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Sometimes when I get lonesome, I come here and talk to her, and it's like talking to Grey."

Nan nodded her head, understanding. "Oi useta go an' talk t' a stachew in one'a the yards, 'til we 'adta move. It looked loik me grammum. Felt loik I was talkin' to 'er, I fair did."

A footstep on the gravel path made Nan look up, and she jumped to see the tall man with the head-wrap standing there, as if he had come out of the thin air. She had not sensed his presence, and once again, even though he stood materially before her she could not. He took no notice of Nan, which she was grateful for; instead, he handed the basket he was carrying to Sarah Jane, and walked off without a word.

Sarah passed the basket to Nan; it was heavier this time, and Nan thought she smelled something like roasted meat. Oh, if only they'd given her the drippings from their beef! Her mouth watered at the thought.

"I hope you like these," Sarah said shyly, as Nan passed her the much-lighter empty. "Mem'sab says that if you'll keep coming back, I'm to talk to you and ask you about London; she says that's the best way to learn about things. She says otherwise, when I go out, I might get into trouble I don't understand."

Nan's eyes widened at the thought that the head of a school had said anything of the sort—but Sarah Jane hardly seemed like the type of child to lie. "All roit, I s'pose," she said dubiously. "If you'll be 'ere, so'll Oi."

The next day, faithful as the rising sun, Sarah was waiting with her basket, and Nan was invited to come inside the gate. She wouldn't venture any farther in than a bench in the garden, but as Sarah asked questions, she answered them as bluntly and plainly as she would any similar question asked by a child in her own neighborhood. Sarah learned about the dangers of the dark side of London first-hand—and oddly, although she nodded wisely and with clear understanding, they didn't seem to frighten her.

"Garn!" Nan said once, when Sarah absorbed the interesting fact that the opium den a few doors from where Nan and her mother had a room had pitched three dead men out into the street the night before. "Yer ain't never seen nothin' loik that!"

"You forget, Mum and Da have a hospital, and it's very dangerous where they are," Sarah replied matter-of-factly. "I've seen dead men, and dead women and even babies. When Nkumba came in clawed up by a lion, I helped bring water and bandages, while Mum and Da sewed him up. When there was a black-water fever, I saw lots of people die. It was horrid and sad, but I didn't fuss, because Nkumba and Da and Mum were worked nearly to bones and needed me to be good."

Nan's eyes widened again. "Wot else y'see?" she whispered, impressed in spite of herself.

After that, the two children traded stories of two very different sorts of jungles. Despite its dangers, Nan thought that Sarah's was the better of the two.

She learned other things as well; that "Mem'sab" was a completely remarkable woman, for she had a Sikh, a Gurkha, two Moslems, two Buddhists, and assorted Hindus working in peace and harmony together—"and Mum said in her letter that it's easier to get leopards to herd sheep than that!" Mem'sab was by no means a fool; the Sikh and the Gurkha shared guard duty, patrolling the walls by day and night. One of the Hindu women was the "ayah," who took care of the smallest children; the rest of the motley assortment were servants and even teachers.

She heard many stories about the remarkable Grey, who really did act as Sarah's guardian, if Sarah was to be believed. Sarah described times when she had inadvertently gotten lost; she had called frantically for Grey, who was allowed to fly free, and the bird had come to her, leading her back to familiar paths. Grey had kept her from eating some pretty but poisonous berries by flying at her and nipping her fingers until she dropped them. Grey alerted the servants to the presence of snakes in the nursery, always making a patrol before she allowed Sarah to enter. And once, according to Sarah, when she had encountered a lion on the path, Grey had flown off and made sounds like a young gazelle in distress, attracting the lion's attention before it could scent Sarah. "She led it away, and didn't come back to me until it was too far away to bother coming back," the little girl claimed solemnly, "Grey is very clever." Nan didn't know whether to gape at her or laugh; she couldn't imagine how a mere bird could be intelligent enough to talk, much less act with purpose.

Nan had breath to laugh with, nowadays, thanks to baskets that held more than bread. The food she found in there, though distinctly odd, was always good, and she no longer felt out of breath and tired all the time. She had stopped wondering and worrying about why "Mem'sab" took such an interest in her, and simply accepted the gifts without question. They might stop at any moment; she accepted that without question, too.

The only thing she couldn't accept so easily was the manservant's eerie mental silence.

"How is your mother?" Sarah asked, since yesterday Nan had confessed that Aggie been "on a tear" and had consumed, or so Nan feared, something stronger and more dangerous than gin.

Nan shook her head. "I dunno," she replied reluctantly. "Aggie didn' wake up when I went out. Tha's not roight, she us'lly at least waked up t'foind out wha' I got. She don' half loik them baskets, 'cause it means I don' go beggin' as much."

"And if you don't beg money, she can't drink," Sarah observed shrewdly. "You hate begging, don't you?"

"Mostly I don' like gettin' kicked an' cursed at," Nan temporized. "It ain't loik I'm gettin' underfoot . . ."

But Sarah's questions were coming too near the bone, tonight, and Nan didn't want to have to deal with them. She got to her feet and picked up her basket. "I gotter go," she said abruptly.

Sarah rose from her seat on the bench and gave Nan a penetrating look. Nan had the peculiar feeling that the child was looking at her thoughts, and deciding whether or not to press her further. "All right," Sarah said. "It is getting dark."

It wasn't, but Nan wasn't about to pass up the offer of a graceful exit. "'Tis, that," she said promptly, and squeezed through the narrow opening Karamjit had left in the gate.

But she had not gone four paces when two rough-looking men in shabby tweed jackets blocked her path. "You Nan Killian?" said one hoarsely. Then when Nan stared at him blankly, added, "Aggie Killian's girl?"

The answer was surprised out of her; she hadn't been expecting such a confrontation, and she hadn't yet managed to sort herself out. "Ye—es," she said slowly.

"Good," the first man grunted. "Yer Ma sent us; she's gone t' a new place, an' she wants us t'show y' the way."

Now, several thoughts flew through Nan's mind at that moment. The first was, that as they were paid up on the rent through the end of the week, she could not imagine Aggie ever vacating before the time was up. The second was, that even if Aggie had set up somewhere else, she would never have sent a pair of strangers to find Nan.

And third was that Aggie had turned to a more potent intoxicant than gin—which meant she would need a deal more money. And Aggie had only one thing left to sell.

Nan.

Their minds were such a roil that she couldn't "hear" any distinct thoughts, but it was obvious that they meant her no good.

"Wait a minnit—" Nan said, her voice trembling a little as she backed away from the two men, edging around them to get to the street. "Did'jer say Aggie Killian's gel? Me Ma ain't called Killian, yer got th' wrong gel—"

It was at that moment that one of the men lunged for her with a curse. He had his hands nearly on her, and would have gotten her, too, except for one bit of interference.

Sarah came shooting out of the gate like a little bullet. She body-slammed the fellow, going into the back of his knees and knocking him right off his feet. She danced out of the way as he fell in the nick of time, ran to Nan, and caught her hand, tugging her towards the street. "Run!" she commanded imperiously, and Nan ran.

The two of them scrabbled through the dark alleys and twisted streets without any idea where they were, only that they had to shake off their pursuers. Unfortunately, the time that Nan would have put into learning her new neighborhood like the back of her grimy little hand had been put into talking with Sarah, and before too long, even Nan was lost in the maze of dark, fetid streets. Then their luck ran out altogether, and they found themselves staring at the blank wall of a building, in a dead-end cul-de-sac.

They whirled around, hoping to escape before they were trapped, but it was already too late. The bulky silhouettes of the two men loomed against the fading light at the end of the street.

"Oo's yer friend, ducky?" the first man purred. "Think she'd loik t'come with?"

To Nan's astonishment, Sarah stood straight and tall, and even stepped forward a pace. "I think you ought to go away and leave us alone," she said clearly. "You're going to find yourselves in a lot of trouble."

The talkative man laughed. "Them's big words from such a little gel," he mocked. "We ain't leavin' wi'out we collect what's ours, an' a bit more fer th' trouble yer caused."

Nan was petrified with fear, shaking in every limb, as Sarah stepped back, putting her back to the damp wall. As the first man touched Sarah's arm, she shrieked out a single word.

"Grey!"

As Sarah cried out the name of her pet, Nan let loose a wordless prayer for something, anything, to come to their rescue.

Something screamed behind the man; startled and distracted for a moment, he turned. For a moment, a fluttering shape obscured his face, and he screamed in pain. He shook his head, violently.

"Get it off!" he screamed at his partner. "Get it off!"

"Get what off?" the man said, bewildered. "There ain't nothin' there!"

The man clawed frantically at the front of his face, but whatever had attacked him had vanished without a trace. But not before leading more substantial help to the rescue.

Out of the dusk and the first wisps of fog, Karamjit and another swarthy man ran on noiseless feet. In their hands were cudgels which they used to good purpose on the two who opposed them. Nor did they waste any effort, clubbing the two senseless with a remarkable economy of motion.

Then, without a single word, each of the men scooped up a girl in his arms, and bore them back to the school. At that point, finding herself safe in the arms of an unlooked-for rescuer, Nan felt secure enough to break down into hysterical tears.

Nor was that the end of it; she found herself bundled up into the sacred precincts of the school itself, plunged into the first hot bath of her life, wrapped in a clean flannel gown, and put into a real bed. Sarah was in a similar bed beside her. As she sat there, numb, a plain-looking woman with beautiful eyes came and sat down on the foot of Sarah's bed, and looked from one to the other of them.

"Well," the lady said at last, "what have you two to say for yourselves?"

Nan couldn't manage anything, but that was all right, since Sarah wasn't about to let her get in a word anyway. The child jabbered like a monkey, a confused speech about Nan's mother, the men she'd sold Nan to, the virtue of Charity, the timely appearance of Grey, and a great deal more besides. The lady listened and nodded, and when Sarah ran down at last, she turned to Nan.

"I believe Sarah is right in one thing," she said gravely. "I believe we will have to keep you. Now, both of you—sleep."

And to Nan's surprise, she fell asleep immediately.

But that was not the end to the story. A month later, Sarah's mother arrived, with Grey in a cage. Nan had, by then, found a place where she could listen to what went on in the best parlor without being found, and she glued her ear to the crack in the pantry to listen when Sarah was taken into that hallowed room.

"—found Grey senseless beside her perch," Sarah's mother was saying. "I thought it was a fit, but the Shaman swore that Sarah was in trouble and the bird had gone to help. Grey awoke none the worse, and I would have thought nothing more of the incident, until your message arrived."



"And so you came, very wisely, bringing this remarkable bird." Mem'sab made chirping noises at the bird, and an odd little voice said, "Hello, bright eyes!"

Mem'sab chuckled. "How much of strangeness are you prepared to believe in, my dear?" she asked gently. "Would you believe me if I told you that I have seen this bird once before——fluttering and pecking at my window, then leading my men to rescue your child?"

"I can only answer with Hamlet," Sarah's mother said after a pause. "That there are more things in heaven and earth than I suspected."

"Good," Mem'sab replied decidedly. "Then I take it you are not here to remove Sarah from our midst."

"No," came the soft reply. "I came only to see that Sarah was well, and to ask if you would permit her pet to be with her."

"Gladly," Mem'sab said. "Though I might question which of the two was the pet!"

"Clever bird!" said Grey.