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WATCH THE WALL, MY DARLING

JANE AIKEN HODGE

*The Winding
Stair*



*The
Winding
Stair*

by Jane Aiken Hodge



A FAWCETT CREST BOOK

Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn.

**THIS BOOK CONTAINS THE COMPLETE TEXT
OF THE ORIGINAL HARDCOVER EDITION.**

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**With the exception of historical personages, the characters
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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 69-10985

**Selection of the Young World Reader's Club, March 1969
Selection of the Literary Guild, February 1969**

Printed in the United States of America

JUANA took a deep, steadying breath and lit the candle. Its flame flickered for a moment, showing the stair plunging down into blackness. Her breath was coming too fast again. But now there was no excuse for further delay. If she did not start down, quickly, now, this minute, she never would.

She made herself move forward at once into the darkness. She had just reached the door when the gong sounded. Shooting back the bolt, she saw that her hands were shaking. The doors were pulled outwards as soon as the bolt was free. In the light of two torches she could see the hooded members of the Star waiting.

"I am ready." She kept her voice steady with an effort.

"Then let us in."

It seemed an age till the gong sounded for the second time. This was the worst moment of all. For she was not what they thought her, their friend, the Handmaiden of the Star. They did not know that she had secretly become their enemy.

Juana opened the panel, praying they would not see her terror. It was indeed a dangerous game she was playing. How long could she keep it up?

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TO THE READER

Who wants historical footnotes to a romantic novel? You may well ask. But Juana Brett's imagined story is so deeply embedded in the history of her time that I think a few brief notes at the back of the book may amuse some readers, solve problems for others, and be happily ignored by the rest.

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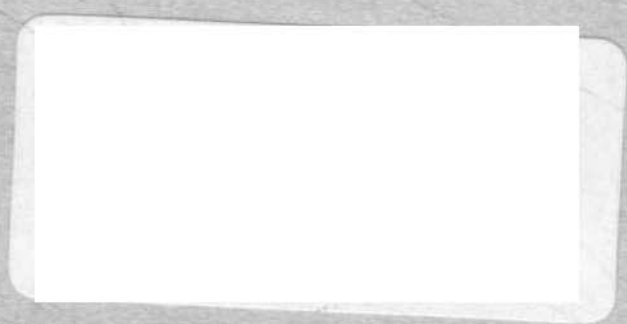
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CHAPTER 1

Moonlight lay like water on smooth grass. Cypresses cast strange shadows across the river that ran fast, deep, and cruel under its ornamental bridge. Pausing there, a moment, before he braced himself to enter Forland House, Gair Varlow lifted his head to listen. Somewhere, a late nightingale sang. Nearer, running feet crunched on gravel. A figure appeared from where Lord Forland's theatre stood at the far side of the house, showed briefly in black silhouette against ranges of lighted windows, then cut across the rose garden towards the river. Watching, Gair instinctively stepped back into the scented shadow of a huge climbing rose, listening now to the sobbing, hard-drawn breath that might mean exhaustion or tears.

The runner emerged from the shadow of the house, and Gair swallowed a gasp of surprise. This was a creature from fairy-tale, a slender boy all silver-white in the moonlight, whose doublet and hose belonged not to 1806, the age of odd old King George and Bonaparte, but to an earlier day when Queen Elizabeth sent out her fleet against the Spaniard.

While Gair watched, stock-still with amazement, the boy reached the middle of the hump-backed bridge. Still sobbing, he stopped for a moment to catch his breath, unaware of the watcher in the shadows, then began to climb on to the low parapet.

"Don't!" In a moment the dream boy was going to plunge into the river, and Gair had stayed, like a fool, amazed, too far away to intervene. He would have to do it with words. The boy was hesitating, surprised at the interruption, poised on the top of the low wall. "Don't," Gair said again, but casually now. "It's quite shallow under the bridge," he lied. "You'll look sufficiently absurd, head down, legs up, in the mud. Besides"—he moved forward into the moonlight—"this is my best suit of clothes. I don't at all want to spoil it hauling you out."

"Are you sure?" The boy's high clear voice suggested that he must still be in his early teens.

"Of course I'm sure." Gair risked another slow step forward. "I ought to know. But let me introduce myself. I'm

Lady Forland's brother, Gair Varlow, and entirely at your service."

"Oh! Mr. Varlow . . . Yes, I suppose you should know." But he stayed perched on the wall and Gair did not dare move nearer. "Is it really so shallow?"

"In winter it might be as much as waist deep, but now—"

"I see." The boy sat down suddenly on the parapet, and Gair breathed a silent sigh of relief. "What a fool I am," the high, clear voice went on. "I might have known it would be no good. Nothing I d—d—d—" He stuck on the letter, and seemed to writhe, for a moment, in ruthlessly revealing moonlight, then began again. "Nothing I do ever is." He finished it in a rush.

While he struggled, Gair had had a moment of delighted illumination. Here, fantastically, was opportunity presenting itself to him unasked. This was the very person he had come to Forland House to see.

"Do you stammer too?" he asked as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "I used to when I was a boy." He had thought a great deal about what his approach was to be, but had never thought of this one.

"You d—d—don't any more?" It came more easily this time.

"Not the least in the world. I grew out of it when I was at the University. I expect you will too."

"The University? Me?" And then, looking down at the extravagant white and silver costume, "Good gracious! You can't think—" An irrepressible, delicious giggle ended the sentence. Then, sliding lightly down from the wall, plumed hat in hand, with a parody of a deep bow: "Your humble servant, Mr. Varlow."

"And yours, Miss Brett." He knew it for the crassest of mistakes the moment it was spoken.

"Miss—" She choked on it. "You knew all the t—t—t— You knew all the while." She was too angry to let even the stammer stop her. "I suppose your sister t—t—told you. My Lady Forland who thinks I'll make such a comic t—t—turn in her opera. Viola with a stutter." She turned away towards the river. "Why did you stop me? If I'd kept still, down there, I might have contrived to d—to d—" She stopped, stutter and words alike lost in a rush of tears.

As for him, he was almost too angry to think. What lunacy was this of Vanessa's? He had asked her to get the girl to her house party so that he could look her over. He had warned

her, too, about the stammer, and yet she had apparently driven the child to the point of suicide. If he had not happened to be here. . . . He shuddered at the threat to his carefully laid plans. And it was not averted yet, though he saw with relief that Juana Brett was making no effort to get back on to the wall, but merely leaned against it, her face in her hands, sobbing and shuddering.

"But what in the world possessed Vanessa to give you the part?"

His tone of simple enquiry was just what she needed. She raised her head to look at him, her thin face ravaged in the moonlight. "I d—d—don't stammer when I sing," she explained. "They said it was just a singing part. My stepmother said I must. It was why we were asked, you see, and she said it was such a chance for the girls—my stepsisters." It was a relief to her to talk about it, here in the cool anonymity of moonlight. "It's a new opera of Mr. Haydn's," she went on. "One they found in the poor D—D—"

He watched her writhe, stuck fast on the letter, his compassion mixed with despair. What use could this poor creature be to him? He had had no idea her stammer was so bad. Had old Mrs. Brett not known, or had she simply not chosen to tell him?

"The D—D—" She threw back her head, her strong features showing shadowed in the moonlight, and amazed him with a fluent stream of Portuguese bad language. Then, on the same high note: "They found it in the Duchess of Devonshire's papers," she said. "It's based on Shakespeare's T—"

It was going to start again. "I admire your command of Portuguese," he said in that language.

"Oh!" It took her aback. "You speak Portuguese?" She, too, spoke it like a native. "I didn't think . . ." Was she blushing? "Nobody else understands it here. It seems to help, somehow. It's only what the servants used to say at my grandmother's."

"I can imagine." Dryly.

"It's not so very bad either," she went on. "They're happy people, the Portuguese; they don't swear much, or drink either. I didn't know what life was really like, till I came here, to England."

"You don't like it here?"

"Who cares whether I like it or not? What's that to the purpose? You don't ask to be born. If you're a girl, you don't