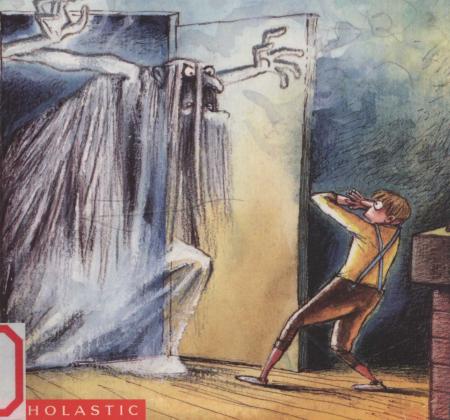


The Spectre of Hairy Hector

Penny Dolan



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The Spectre of Hairy Hector



Penny Dolan illustrated by Philip Hopman

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To Sonia Benster, one of life's great encouragers, with thanks from Penny and Mabel.

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Chapter One



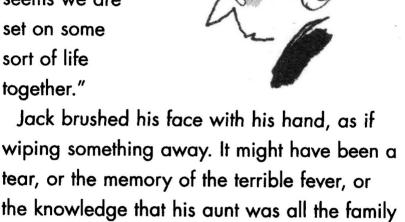
The dawn hung damply in the sky. Two figures, dressed in black, stood on the steps of the city church, staring at each other.

The lad wore an ill-fitting jacket. His chin was set firmly so he didn't show his fear to anyone, let alone this long-lost aunt who had appeared at the funeral, and had been the only one to stand beside him when he needed it.

Aunt Arcady was certainly not young. Her clothes were plain, and her dark bonnet sat unremarkably on her head, but there was an adventurous glint in her eye that gave him hope.

She peered sharply over her glasses.
"So, young Jack," she said, "it seems we are set on some sort of life together."

he had left in the world.



"Are you ready then?" she continued, more gently.

"Yes, Aunt Arcady, I am," Jack replied, snatching up the small bundle that held all he owned. "Then we shall soon find out what there is to find out," she said, checking the time on a small silver watch hanging from her waist.

A covered wagon rounded the corner and jolted noisily towards them. The weary farmer at the reins waved a greeting.



"At last!" said Aunt Arcady, raising a gloved hand in reply.

As the horse slowed to a stop, she hoisted up her own bag of belongings, and gave an encouraging smile. "Here we go, Jack," she said, clambering swiftly up on to the wooden seat. "Climb up!"

Jack nipped up, quick as he could, and the wagon set off towards the rain-clouds gathering in the distance.

By late afternoon, the wagon rumbled over the crest of the moorland, and down the long winding road, full of puddles, towards the coast. Suddenly the grey clouds parted, the pale sun shone on far-off waves, and the travellers tasted salt on the wind.



"The sea, the real sea," breathed Jack, his face full of wonder. He only knew the grimy currents of the city river, and how hard it was to row errands between the crowded banks and quays.

"So it is, Jack," Aunt Arcady said, smiling to herself.



Two hours later, the old horse clip-clopped to a halt close by the Anchor Inn. The pair grabbed their bundles, thanked the farmer and stepped down into Seacombe. Aunt Arcady and Jack did not notice the drizzle. They had arrived at last, and now they could hope that the tale they'd been told was true.

It had started with a few printed words, squashed among numerous notices in a large newspaper.



Final Announcement.

Any person, or persons, with the surname Harrible, to contact Silas Splint of Seacombe.



By luck or chance, Aunt Arcady spotted that announcement, and wrote off immediately. Back came a solicitor's letter, and a large scroll, tied with red wax seals and scarlet ribbons.

The scroll told them that, long ago, a great-great-uncle, Captain Harrible, had built himself a house in Seacombe. One moonlit night, as Harrible's ship lay moored in the bay, waiting for the wooden dinghy to bring him aboard, a storm sprang up. The wild waves drove the vessel against a reef of rugged rocks. The ship, and Captain Harrible, it seemed, had disappeared.



So Harrible's house stood empty. The letter in Arcady's big bag told them the building had passed from one person to another, and another. Nobody stayed for long. Jack and Aunt Arcady, the last of all the Harribles, were too excited to worry about that.

Arcady glanced over at Jack, and smiled.
"Just think! No more cramped attics. No more cold schoolrooms. No more serving and scraping. It's a daydream come true, Jack."

Jack thought about his poor parents, who had grown ill with worry. Then he smiled a little too. "No more one-room-after-another. No more dripping damp. No more rats. Can't hardly believe it, Aunt Arcady," he said. And no more frightened nights, he thought.

Because now they did have a house – Harrible's House – to be their own home, and that was enough. The misting rain of Seacombe didn't bother them at all.

As they waited on the pavement, Jack saw a man huddled in the porch of the Anchor Inn.

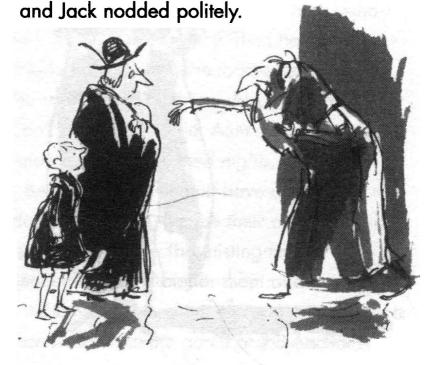
The man's skull was covered in thin, gingery hair, and his pale face blotched with red. A long oilskin coat folded around his gaunt frame, and his bony head stuck out sideways. The man looked rather like an exceptionally ugly umbrella that someone had lost on purpose.



Suddenly the man lurched forward, and gave a small bow.

"Welcome! Silas Splint, of Splint & Sons Solicitors, at your service!" A strange, sneering smile stretched across his yellow teeth. "My family have taken care of everything to do with Harrible's House for years and years and years."

He held a thin hand out towards Aunt Arcady. She merely gave him a crisp smile,



Just then, a small bundle of cheery folk burst out of the Anchor Inn. As soon as they saw Silas – or was it Jack and Aunt Arcady? – the smiles froze on their faces, and they

scuttled off, muttering.
Jack suddenly
felt that Splint
knew something
about Harrible's
House that
they did not.
Something very
important indeed.

As Splint took in Aunt Arcady's patched clothing and Jack's ragged jacket, his eyes narrowed. "If that's all you have, we'll be off then." He sniffed, and turned on his heel. "This way!" he snapped, striding briskly off. Jack and his aunt hurried after him, splashing through the puddles in Seacombe's darkening streets. "Who does he think he is?" remarked Aunt Arcady, angrily.

At last, Splint halted by a door. "Here it is!" he declared, and fished a bundle of keys from his pocket. "Harrible's House!"

It was the narrowest house Jack had ever seen, tucked right up against the cliff.
It was rather ramshackle, but it still had handsome high windows and ornate iron balconies facing outward to the sea.

