

**Synopsis of Jeanie - An Army of One:  
The life and work of Mrs. Nassau Senior 1828-1877**

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Not for quotation

**Chapter One: The childhood of Tom Brown's Sister, Jeanie Hughes.**

`God is a wicked devil` (Jeanie aged about ten).

Jeanie Hughes' birth at the cherished heart of the Hughes family as the only girl in the middle of seven boys. Her unusual parents and grand-parents, including the formidable Mrs. Mary Ann Hughes, friend of Sir Walter Scott and her father, the `Squire Brown` of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Her secret, defiant rejection of orthodox Christianity and the doctrine of Hell, caused by her troubled recognition of the terrible, unjust suffering of the poor. Her schooldays and Tour of France and Italy in 1844-45 where she receives advanced singing tuition and also grows in social tolerance and political awareness. Her special closeness to her gallant, many-gifted, brother Walter who was her `twin` within the family. The traumatic news of his sudden death in British Guiana when he is twenty and she just eighteen, marks the end of her childhood and youth and leads to a physical and mental collapse, followed by her engagement `on the rebound` at eighteen and a half, to marry Nassau John Senior, the son of her father's oldest friend.

**Chapter Two: Being Mrs Nassau Senior, 1848-1855.**

`I have had one great disappointment in my life`

Jeanie's idealistic hopes at the outset of her marriage in 1848, set in the contemporary context of lofty theories concerning `Woman's Mission` as morally influential wife and mother, in the writings of Sarah Lewis, Sarah Ellis, Clara Balfour and Sara Josepha Hale. On her marriage, Jeanie's musical training as a serious singer makes her a great social attraction at the dinner parties of her eminent father-in-law, the political economist Nassau William Senior. But she soon discovers the opposition between the latter's `iron law` rejection of distributionism and the new `Christian Socialism`, promoted by her barrister brother, young Thomas Hughes, and his mentor Frederick Maurice. Jeanie secretly sympathetic to the young radicals but too afraid to speak up in front of her domineering father-in-law.

Her only child, Walter, is born in March 1850. Jeanie's growing disillusionment with her *fainéant*, irritable husband becomes impossible to hide from herself, as the fat, work-shy, *gourmand* Nassau John becomes increasingly isolated among his Victorian contemporaries dedicated to the betterment of their fellows. The chapter ends with a comparison between frustrated, idealistic Jeanie and her friend George Eliot's frustrated, idealistic future heroine, Dorothea, both trapped in hopeless mis-marriage.

### Chapter Three: Enter the painter George Frederick Watts, 1853-1856

'I see you standing on a precipice' (Watts to Jeanie, 1856)

Jeanie Senior's three ways of surviving her disillusionment in marriage – occupation outside the home, devotion to her child and new friendships, including the possibility of love. Her work for Miss Stanley, Florence Nightingale's ally, in sending out medical and other relief supplies to the wounded at the time of the Crimean War. Her introduction to a new world of artists and musicians, many of whom became friends for life – Jenny Lind, Adelaide Kemble Sartoris, Tom Taylor, Thackeray and his daughters, Millais – and G.F. Watts. She models for Millais in 'The Rescue' in 1855, which is exhibited at the Royal Academy. The enigma of Watts, her most 'significant other' at this time. Sensitive and sympathetic, he responds to her confession of deep unhappiness by writing intense, devoted letters to her, many of which have never before been made public. (His most recent biographer calls her 'the love of his life') His over-riding anxiety lest she be 'reckless' in her desperation and wreck her life (and all the Hughes' family's happiness) by running away from her marriage. He implores her to be prudent, but does not offer her a solution or a way out. Finally he becomes deeply upset when he learns from her that there is another, greater influence on her than his own.

### Chapter Four: The 'Foreign Influence' 1854 –1856

'You call me satanic' (Merimee to Jeanie)

Jeanie Senior's extraordinary correspondence with the French writer, cynic, atheist and roué, Prosper Merimee, 25 years older than herself lasted for two years. Merimee's immense achievements in literature (he invented the literary short story and wrote *Carmen*), in history, in civil administration in political life and in the architectural preservation of all France's ancient monuments. I also note the other side of his past as a frequenter of brothels and a serial adulterer. His attempt from the outset, via audacious wit, to break through Jeanie Senior's moral defences, making adultery rather than fidelity seem normative for all intelligent, sophisticated people. Was he 'grooming' her for an affair which would have been merely another episode in his life while socially devastating hers? The temptation for Jeanie Senior was to try to redeem this Rochester-figure. She counters his epistolary attack by entreating him to read Elizabeth Gaskell's recently published *Ruth* – a novel which takes the part of the seduced, abandoned girl. His insensitive, cavalier response and further sexually suggestive letters dared her to be less conventional as he confides in her about his past love affairs and current deep depression. His invitation to her to stay in his Paris apartment and her refusal. The unexplained cessation of the correspondence. Jeanie is left trapped in her unfulfilling marriage, caught between two impossible alternatives - the sexless spiritual devotion of Watts and the adulterous adventure hinted at by Merimee. She turns away from both of them.

## Chapter Five: Surviving the Difficult Years December 1856 - December 1860

‘I am grieved to see you so much changed’ (Watts to Jeanie, late 1857)

The first death in the next generation - Thomas Hughes’ eldest daughter, Jeanie’s niece Evie, dies from scarlet fever aged six . That tragedy is immediately followed by the slow mental and physical breakdown of Jeanie’s father who dies, nursed by Jeanie, at the end of 1857. Then the publication of the hugely successful *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and Jeanie’s response to it.

G.F.Watts returns to England to find Jeanie’s looks changed by a new gravity; his famous portrait of her and its coded symbolic meaning explained in a letter never before published in full, where again he begs her, when tempted to be ‘reckless’, to think of her child, her mother and her brothers and not fail in her ‘ordeal’ - i.e. her disillusioned marriage. Her inability to bear another child after Walter and her ‘adoption’ of a motherless girl, Helen to be his little sister. Walter, now the emotional centre of her life, is sent away before he is eight to board at Preparatory School and the 20 years of her intimate letters to him begin, telling the inner story of her life. In 1858 her husband Nassau loses his post in the office of the Lord Chancellor and never has ‘a proper job’ again. Jeanie is then laid prostrate by a devastating, unnamed illness, possibly following a mishandled miscarriage. Helen is sent away for a time, and soon, at Nassau’s insistence, permanently. There is another terrible child death - Thomas Hughes’ eldest son Maurice is drowned in 1859 while visiting Jeanie and her mother. Jeanie’s only recourse is her belief in immortality, but she is in deep shock and bedridden once more. At the end of 1859 she is told that she most probably has cancer of the womb, a terminal condition but with long periods of remission - if she rests. She is 31. Her husband becomes a reluctant and inactive partner in her younger brother Hastings’ wine import business. Her mother solves the problem of their being unable to afford a home of their own by leasing Elm House in Wandsworth and then paying Jeanie £300 a year to live there with them. A new life begins.

## **Chapter Six : `Come to us!` Life at Elm House in the early 1860s**

Jeanie's immediate project of making her new large home a refuge for tired friends, sick old servants, all kinds of needy `lame dogs`, as well as a base from which to reach out to help the local poor. Her energetic, multi-faceted personal intervention, especially on behalf of the navvies building the rail system at Clapham and their families. Harry Hughes, Jeanie's beloved second youngest brother breaks a blood vessel in his lung and dies in Algiers, aged 25, nursed to the end by his mother, Margaret Hughes in November 1861. Once again Jeanie survives only through her desperately needed faith in immortality. The political context of the American Civil War 1861-1864 and Jeanie's ardent political partisanship on the side of the North. Her important encounter with Abraham Lincoln's backer, the railway magnate John Forbes, on his secret political mission to London. In December 1863, Jeanie's young sister-in-law, Hastings' wife, dies in childbirth in Spain. Jeanie's mother, 67 year-old Margaret Hughes, then sails to Cadiz to rescue the family and bring back Hastings' four `bairns`, aged 4 months to 6 years, for Jeanie to bring up at Elm House. Why did her husband Nassau agree to this? Nassau's confident expectation of soon inheriting from his father, Nassau William Senior an income that will enable him to live like a gentleman of independent means; he plans then to take his wife back to his old home in Kensington, while leaving Hastings and his family behind with old Mrs. Hughes in Elm House.

## **Chapter Seven: A Will and its Aftermath, 1864-1867**

`I think Father will go on trying for places till he gets one`  
(Jeanie to Walter, 3 Dec. 1865)

In June 1864 wealthy Nassau William Senior died and cut his only son and eldest child out of his Will. Nassau John Senior, far from being energized by this shock, grows increasingly self-pitying, bad-tempered and more of a hypochondriac. Sensing that his lack of occupation embarrasses his contemporaries with their confounded work ethic, he becomes increasingly reclusive. By 1865 the Seniors fall into debt and Jeanie has to write letter after letter to influential friends in the hope that they might support her husband in being appointed to some congenial post. To no avail. Her own hands are more than full, nursing both her mother and one or other of her brother Hastings' motherless children, aged 1-7, whom she has now taken in at Elm House. In February 1866 she has her life-changing encounter with the young housing reformer Octavia Hill. Although her elder by ten years, Jeanie becomes Octavia's eager disciple and will soon become one of her foremost helpers. In 1867 Nassau is still unemployed and Jeanie is once again exhausted in writing letters to influential connections in the hope of getting him a salaried `place`. His one guaranteed solace is the newly introduced Turkish Bath, and relaxing in its hot vapour becomes his regular occupation.

How did having this corpulent problem child for a husband affect Jeanie Senior's relationship with their only son?

## Chapter Eight: Walter at Rugby, 1864-1867

‘Without you I feel like “half a pair of scissors “ (Jeanie to Walter, 20 Sep. 1865)

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The tough physical and academic regimen, bleak living conditions and unremitting, monotonous classical ‘grind’ of Rugby School. Walter does not shine at lessons, his Headmaster calling him ‘a dead weight’ and his mother becomes increasingly alarmed lest he may be growing up into an indolent Nassau John the Second. Her long weekly ‘journal letter’ to him mingles exhortations to try to work his best with (to us) shockingly open expressions of her intense love for him: ‘I tell you everything that is in my mind and heart...’. Post-Freudian mothers nowadays are supposed to maintain their emotional distance from their adolescent sons, lest they do them irreparable psychological harm. But Jeanie is blithely pre-Freudian.

1866-7 a crisis arises over Walter’s school friendship circle which impinges on her own, since Walter’s closest friends are the sons of her closest friends. The boys’ debts, bullying, alcohol, gambling and their visit to Kahn’s prurient sexology Museum, all rear their ugly heads, threatening to destroy Jeanie’s friendship with the other mothers, Adelaide Sartoris and Jane Brookfield – the former beloved of Thackeray. Jeanie begins to confide in Walter about her worry and disillusionment over Nassau. Summer 1867 – a new tragedy: Jeanie’s youngest brother Arthur dies in India. Yet again she has to comfort her mother and herself with the hope of eternal reunion. Fifteen year-old Helen now at last returns to live with Jeanie, who earns her first £50 for teaching and taking care of her quasi-adoptive daughter. The chapter ends with Walter at last beginning to do better at school to Jeanie’s relief and delight - ‘all my earthly joy is centred in you’.

## Chapter Nine – Jeanie in the world of politics and social intervention 1865-1869

‘It makes my blood boil’

Jeanie’s domestic situation – trying to cheer her bereaved mother, caring for Hastings’ four motherless children and still lobbying in vain for her husband Nassau to be appointed to a salaried ‘place’. She literally ‘sings for their supper’, to get the Lord Chief Justice to give him two months’ work, and at last Jeanie writes to her 18 year-old son how disillusioned she has been by marriage to a man without a backbone. All this time there hangs over her the prospect that her sick, elderly mother-in-law will also have to be taken in at Elm House. Despite these wearing domestic preoccupations, Jeanie still finds energy to respond to the social and political world. She is an ardent supporter of her Radical MP brother Thomas Hughes, then campaigning for the legalization of Trades Unions, and, very unusually for a Victorian lady, she is an outspoken anti-Imperialist regarding India and Ireland; she is an anti-racist in the notorious Governor Eyre of Jamaica case, and an anti-militarist. Nearer home, she intervenes actively in three different areas of social need – the local Workhouse infirmary for the destitute aged sick, the local industrial school for delinquent girls and most important, in the new project of ‘social housing’ management. She becomes a pioneer social worker under Octavia Hill and even undertakes the financial overseeing of the latter’s experiment in the regeneration of ‘slum’ housing. Her competence proves essential to the experiment’s success as a model for reform. So appalled is she by working-class living conditions in London, that she writes a long letter in the *South London Chronicle*, a radical weekly owned by her brother Hastings, - ‘Our Labouring Poor and Their Dwellings’, setting out the disgraceful situation especially as it affected the families of London’s casual and seasonal workers: ‘Either rents are too high or wages are too low’. In the midst of all these daily battles with others’ heartbreaking problems, she always has one sure source of joy – music.

### Chapter 10: ‘I sang’

This ‘Music Chapter’ begins by evoking the 19<sup>th</sup> C. ‘Renaissance’ in English musical life that coincided with Jeanie’s adult life, when she herself was an eager concert-goer, performer and voice teacher. The highlights of her concert – going life in London centred on the Symphony orchestral concerts, the Handel and Beethoven Centenary Festivals at the vast new Crystal Palace and on the ‘Monday Popular’ Chamber Music Concerts in St. James’ Hall. The stars in her firmament are Charles Halle, Joseph Joachim, Jenny Lind and Clara Schumann, all friends of hers; she delights both to hear them and to perform with them in the drawing-rooms of other, wealthier friends. Unable, because of her status as a married lady, to become a professional *diva*, she is acclaimed by Joachim as ‘by far the best amateur singer in England’. Her voice, a warm, thrillingly powerful mezzo-soprano, is called on to test the acoustics of the new Albert Hall. Her wide repertoire ranges from Irish, Scottish and English folksongs, some pathetic, some downright earthy, to the summits of Handel, Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. Sometimes the words of the great arias she sang were passionate and even erotic, for she can *sing* what no Victorian lady could ever say. Her audience too ranges widely, from aristocrats and royalty to Charity concerts, ‘penny gaffs’, navvies eating their ‘snap’ in the street and even

paupers from the local Workhouse. Finally, given Nassau's non-earning of an income, she has to become a professional voice teacher, shocking some in her own circle by willingly losing caste as a Victorian lady of leisure to become a paid working woman. The chapter ends by discussing whether her achievement as an acclaimed singer emboldened her, and earned her `Stimmrecht`, `the right to a voice`, thus contributing to her later political `speaking-out`, finally even championing women's suffrage.

## Chapter Eleven: Friends

‘..there was singing and laughing and talking ...and then we had to leave’

Nassau's reclusiveness drives Jeanie increasingly to seek companionship within her exceptionally varied friendship circle. Her men friends are of two kinds – needy depressives like Watts, W.R.Greg and Sir Edward Strachey or else dynamically attractive like her physician Dr. Guineau de Mussy, or the playwright Tom Taylor or the violin maestro Joachim. Nassau tolerates them (reserving his jealousy for their son and her surviving Hughes brothers) and she in turn tolerates his occasional flirtations with young girls. More important to her, however, are her friendships with women. Many of these women were figures in the world of music, art and literature, for instance Adelaide Kemble Sartoris, Jenny Lind, Julia Margaret Cameron, Marie Spartali, and Anny Thackeray. Gradually Jeanie becomes involved with a very different kind of woman friend, the social interventionists like Octavia Hill, Marianne Thornton and Caroline Stephen. They will provide the essential network, both theoretical and practical, which will make her own ground-breaking social intervention possible in the 1870s. She appeals to all her friends at different times for help in trying to solve the problem of Nassau's continued non-employment and she in her turn responds with all her powers of sympathy to each and every trouble suffered by her friends. It is the sympathy she feels when Octavia Hill first tells her of George Eliot's social isolation as a notorious woman, `living in sin`, that makes her embark on her deeply (and mutually) significant relationship with `the author of *Adam Bede*`.

## Chapter Twelve: George Eliot's Dorothea?

‘I am much drawn to her... you must not tell anyone’. (Jeanie to Walter, Oct. 1866)

How the two women saw each other on first meeting; their developing correspondence, (many of G.E.'s letters to J.S. never before published). These letters have only recently, in 2001, been acquired by the British Library after an Export Ban prevented their leaving the country. The relationship graduates from `My dear Mrs. Senior` in 1866 to `My dear Friend` as G.E. responds to Jeanie's tenderness and beneficence: `It is good to know that your tender heart is beating in the world`. `She [Jeanie] is a woman who tries to put her beliefs into action`. Jeanie confesses her `longing for a wider existence`; she sings to G.E. and to her dying stepson and inspires G.E. to say to her, gratefully, `One lives by faith in human goodness`. Jan 1869-Nov. 1870 G.E. is writing her first version of *Middlemarch* – without Dorothea. But she comes to a halt. She needs a positive heroine, someone who, unlike Lydgate, will not succumb to social pressure and commonplace egoism. I argue that she found the soul and voice for that heroine in listening to Jeanie Senior. Through

close textual analysis of the novel and Jeanie Senior's correspondence I show that the stylistic correlations between Jeanie talking aloud to Walter in her letters (the best indication we have of her intimate conversation with others) and Dorothea's speech and thought patterns are too frequent and too significant to be mere coincidence. The two women, one fictional, one `real`, share the same values, the same out-going, beneficent nature. The very words used by G.E. for her Dorothea - `ardent`, `diffusive`, are also those she uses about Jeanie. She actually thanks Jeanie for having strengthened her optimism: `you have entered into my more cheerful beliefs and made them stronger because of the glimpses I have had of your character and life`. And I have even found one contemporary reader who exclaims in delighted recognition to Jeanie in 1873: `Dorothea is *you!*` Ironically, Jeanie herself never perceives this. And there is a further irony – at the very time that G.E. is writing of a modern St. Theresa, forced, by her early 19<sup>th</sup> century social circumstances to be a `foundress of nothing`, Jeanie Senior is actually co-founding something – a great humanitarian organization that still exists today.

### **Chapter 13 : `This most wicked war`**

‘The misery and suffering haunts me day and night’ (27 August, 1870)

1870 begins with no hint of imminent war in Europe. Jeanie is preoccupied by fear of another war – that inside her own home between the two sick, elderly grandmothers, both of whom she has now taken into Elm House. Nassau's debts have accumulated so alarmingly that Jeanie has to beg her friend, the iron and steel magnate Benzon, to give her husband work. His office manager is young Alfred Vickers who will eventually become Britain's answer to Krupp. Meanwhile Krupp is arming Prussia and Bismarck masterminding his trap for the French who duly fall into it and declare war in July 1870. The appalling casualties on both sides so horrify onlookers in Britain that a huge, urgent relief effort is got under way. Jeanie answers the call to serve on the Ladies' Committee of what will become the British Red Cross. By late October she has become its *de facto* Chair, overseeing the collection, acknowledgement and dispatch of millions of £s' worth of voluntarily donated relief supplies ranging from amputation instruments to bullet-extractors, chloroform, disinfectant, blankets and food parcels, impartially to the sick and wounded of both sides. Her hitherto unpublished correspondence with Florence Nightingale and with Queen Victoria's daughter Princess Christian attests to her tireless commitment and in 1871 she is awarded one of the first medals of the British Red Cross. The ensuing horrors of the Paris Commune, especially the massacre of the defeated Communards, so appal her that she plans to visit surviving prisoners and sends money to the imprisoned women Communards in Paris. 1871 ends with Jeanie worn out and in despair over the quarrels between the two grandmothers, Nassau's renewed unemployment and her brother Hastings' money troubles. Her only relief is music and the cheering example of her reformer friend Octavia Hill who will soon point the way for her to go next.

## Chapter Fourteen: Britain's first woman Civil Servant

'I only wish I knew enough of official work and were clever enough to do it'  
(13 Nov. 1872)

Jeanie's normal life of sick nursing in the family, voluntary social work and professional voice teaching takes over once more until another terrible blow strikes. This time it is her charming, beloved eldest brother George Hughes who suddenly dies in May 1872. For months she is inconsolable, even beginning to doubt the reality of her faith in immortality and eternal reunion. But by 27 August she has recovered sufficiently to re-emerge into the public domain, provoked by the controversy in *The Times'* correspondence columns over the welfare of Workhouse children. Jeanie argues, (using her own name for the first time), in opposition to the views of Workhouse administrators and Chaplains, for the preferability of supervised fostering to the incarceration of pauper children in 'Barrack Schools'. She is also concerned about the fate of vulnerable Workhouse girls once they are sent out to survive in the world outside. 'What becomes', she asks in *The Times'* of the girls who "pass out of sight"? On 11 Nov. the social reformer Octavia Hill visits Elm House and makes the momentous suggestion that Jeanie should apply for the post that the Cabinet Minister James Stansfeld has just offered to her, Octavia. She herself could not accept it because of her prior commitment to housing reform but she believes Jeanie to be the right person to examine the whole issue of the Boarding-out of pauper children. As excited as she is nervous, Jeanie allows her name to go forward on 18 November.

But on 22 November she suffers a return of the pain of her uterine cancer. Desperately she puts herself to bed and rests - 'I *must* get well by the 28<sup>th</sup> as on no account must I miss [the interview] with Stansfeld'. She successfully conceals her illness, and, at the age of 44, Jeanie Senior, undereducated and untrained, is appointed the first woman Civil Servant in Britain, deputed to investigate the education of pauper girls and report to the Government's Poor Law Board. The male Inspectorate reacts with foreboding and resentment. But James Stansfeld is a determined man. A lifelong feminist and radical, the courageous champion of Josephine Butler's crusade to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, he recognizes that Jeanie has just the qualities of intelligence and ardent humanity that he is looking for. Theirs is a meeting 'of true minds'.

## Chapter Fifteen: The Government Inspector goes on a Girl Hunt

'If you cannot do it, no-one can' (Octavia Hill to Jeanie Senior)

Men wish Jeanie Senior to fail. Women, including Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler and Harriet Martineau urge her on to succeed and demonstrate that women *are* capable of professional public work. She immediately calls an unofficial committee of her women social reformer friends to advise and assist her. Together they establish that she has to do two things: (a) inspect the Metropolitan Workhouse Schools, noting the girls' physical and psychological well-being as well as their competence at the 3Rs and (b) trace the fate of as many as possible of the hundreds of girls who have recently left the Workhouse Schools. She decides that

she would also investigate *alternative* ways of rearing destitute children in Britain. Throughout 1873 she visits not just the Workhouse Schools but kindergartens, reformatories, industrial schools, orphanages, boarded-out children in the countryside and at least 50 girls' work placements all over London. In addition, after listing the 600 names and last known addresses of girls who had left the Metropolitan Schools the previous year, she analyses the questionnaire returns from her team of amateur helpers who have tried to trace the girls' current employers. She herself writes case history notes on `her` 50 girls who had left school five years before. Thus her approach is both quantitative and qualitative. She travels over England, Wales and Scotland but once in Edinburgh disaster strikes. Her young adoptive sons Gerard and Harry, who are at school there, go down with measles, complicated in Harry's case by fever and acute bronchitis. His life is in danger and Jeanie has to face the near-impossibility of reconciling the demands of public work with her personal responsibilities. Nassau makes matters still worse by demanding her immediate return to London, in order to look after *him*. Once Harry is out of danger, she takes up her work again in London until the end of July when she suffers an internal haemorrhage from her uterine cancer and collapses. At the beginning of October she resumes work, even travelling to Paris to compare the education of destitute children there. From October to December she writes up her findings, encouraged always by a supportive, sympathetic Stansfeld, who now knows her medical condition. The moment then comes when she has to emerge from the protection of her allies and submit her *Report* to the world.

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## Chapter Sixteen: Mrs Senior's Report

‘What is wanted in the education of the girls is more *mothering*’

Her *Report* begins by criticizing the lumping together of the permanent Workhouse Schoolgirls (orphan or deserted girls) with the brutalized ‘casual’ children of vagrants who would deposit and then remove them from the Workhouse several times a year. Secondly it highlights the plight of physically disabled children unable ever to leave the Workhouse because unemployable and of the mentally disabled girls who are especially sexually vulnerable. Jeanie Senior advocates the introduction of a new ‘family structure’ within much smaller schools than the current ‘Barracks’, stressing the little Olive Twists’ fundamental need for smaller groups and individual attention - ‘more *mothering*’. She is more interested in developing their intelligence and capacity for sympathy than in their rote learning of mere academic facts. She also sharply criticizes the deplorable sanitary conditions in the boarding ‘Barracks’ and the girls’ inadequate, unhealthy diet that has caused their stunted stature, weak eyesight and poor health. She is most eloquent on the children’s need for play and stimulation, ‘a hearty laugh is a great help to growth and health’. And she insists on the immediate abolition of corporal punishment for the girls. Part Two of her *Report* follows the girls out into the world where all too often they fail to keep their jobs as maids of all work and end up the poorest of street walkers. Her Appendix F reports what had happened to 670 girls who had left the Metropolitan Schools the previous year – 180 of whom could not even be traced. Her Appendix G gives detailed case histories of 50 pauper girls who had left school 5 years earlier. All too frequently a story of neglect, seduction, prostitution, disease and even death. Too late to save them, all Jeanie Senior can now do is propose measures that might prevent more such tragedies. She therefore advocates Legal Guardianship for the girls until 18 or 20, better selection of their first place of employment, careful monitoring of their progress in employment, and protective provision, for instance of safe housing during periods of unemployment. Her Conclusion makes the revolutionary proposal that *all* pauper orphans be fostered individually in rural families, under careful supervision. Was she ahead of her time? How would the world respond?

## Chapter Seventeen: The Report's Reception, 1874

‘There is nothing to be done but to suppress the *Report* entirely’  
(Tufnell to Jeanie Senior, 27 April, 1874).

The initial response to the (still unpublished mss.) Report is highly favourable. Stansfeld accepts it and makes her appointment as Government Inspector permanent. (Private Treasury Memoranda in the National Archives reveal official concerns over this precedent for the professional employment of ‘ladies’.) Florence Nightingale salutes her as her dear ‘Senior General of Female Infantry’ and George Eliot judges the Report ‘admirable for fullness, clearness and wisdom’. Chief Inspector Tufnell, however, totally repudiates her critique of ‘his’ Barrack Schools and tries to intimidate her into releasing the names of all the girls in the Report, thus breaching her promise of confidentiality. Gladstone is then defeated in the election of Feb. 1874 so the Liberal Stansfeld is reduced to an Opposition backbencher and

there is real doubt as to whether the Tories will publish Jeanie Senior's *Report* at all. Tufnell tries to make Jeanie withdraw her Report before publication, causing her to feel tortured by indecision. Should she barter withdrawal of her Report for concessionary reforms of the worst abuses in the Workhouse Schools or should she refuse to withdraw, knowing that none of the reforms she has advocated may then be implemented? Stansfeld and her women friends urge her to stand firm. Despite being put under unremitting hostile pressure, amounting to harassment, she continues with her public work that has now been greatly enlarged in scope to inspect every aspect of Poor Law administration affecting women and girls. She is also founding a voluntary organization to protect vulnerable young servant girls in London, and establish a 'safe house' for them whenever unemployed. (On the home front her mother has now left Elm House to old Mrs. Senior and established a separate base in Colwell Bay, Isle of Wight for herself, Hastings' children and Jeanie when she needs rest.) Belatedly, in late Sep. 1874 the *Report* is finally published to immense press acclaim. But Jeanie herself is barely able to register this because early in October she had nearly died. Exhausted by all the stress of the previous months, she has suffered a renewed attack of her cancer and collapsed from a massive internal haemorrhage. Bitterly disappointed in herself, she is forced to resign from the Civil Service. Florence Nightingale calls her resignation 'a national misfortune'. Weak, nauseous with pain and bedridden for the foreseeable future, Jeanie Senior will now show what she is made of.

## Chapter Eighteen: Birth of a 'New Woman'

'I can do little to help on the cause [Women's Suffrage]...but I should like to have any petitions sent me to sign' (9 April, 1875)

January 1875 sees the publication of Carleton Tuffnell's hostile (and defamatory) *Observations on the Report of Mrs. Senior to the Local Government Board*, followed immediately by a supercilious leader in *The Times*, attacking Jeanie for allegedly having been 'irresponsible' and 'too zealous' in believing scandal about ex-Workhouse girls. The leader writer is especially scathing about her advocacy of fostering placements for all pauper orphans. In her letter replying to *The Times* she declares: 'I shall fight both for my method and my conclusions' - cheered on by Stansfeld and George Eliot. Even *Punch* weighs in on her side. Tuffnell's *Observations*, accusing her of 'bad faith', 'untruthfulness' 'universal fault-finding', and 'wild speculations' i.e. and concluding sneeringly 'how unfitted ladies are to superintend matters of this sort' - i.e. the welfare of destitute infants and girls in domestic service, have to be answered. She struggles to write her official Reply to him from her sickbed and finally sends it off on 16 March. Jeanie Senior is now 'born again' as a feminist at last. The Women's Suffrage Bill, moved by Stansfeld but defeated in the Commons in April 1875, triggers her public declaration of support for the campaign for the Vote and she will thereafter be invoked as an icon by the early British Women's Movement. She spends summer 1875 masterminding the funding and draft constitution of her newly-founded voluntary organisation, the Metropolitan Association for the Befriending of Young Servants (M.A.B.Y.S) but is then ordered by her doctor to seek rest in Colwell Bay. Her brother Hastings and her son Walter accompany her, carrying her on and off the train, while her husband remains behind in London. At the end of that year yet another blow strikes the family - her brother

Hastings is declared bankrupt and many of his Hughes relatives, including Jeanie, plunge financially in his wake.

**Chapter Nineteen: 'No earthly losses matter one straw'**  
(Jeanie to her brother Thomas Hughes, 9 February, 1876)

This is the longest chapter, taking the story to the end of Jeanie's life and including many quotations from her passionate, eloquent letters which are now her only way of interacting with the world. She begins 1876 by trying to reassure Hastings and Tom (whose investment in Cooperative enterprises had all failed) that she is not devastated by the loss of the family money. She pleads desperately with Tom not to give up his allegiance to Christian Socialism - 'liberty, fraternity, equality, co-operation...brotherly love, must at last come to be the guiding ideas and principles'. In addition to this domestic crisis there is a public crisis over the M.A.B.Y.S now threatened by encroachment from the Anglican Girls' Friendly Society, whose evangelical foundress can not tolerate Jeanie's non-denominationalism. Jeanie suffers another stress-related acute relapse. Stansfeld's solicitous letters and frequent visits are almost her only consolation. Before she is taken back to Colwell to recuperate at the end of May, her husband tells her that he will not be coming to visit her. A new family row erupts, this time between her rich, will-brandishing maternal Uncle, 86 year old Tom Wilkinson and his brother. Jeanie, very upset, tries to mediate and offers to renounce any bequest to herself. There is an unforgettable short visit from Stansfeld, when they 'talked and talked and talked' and amazingly, by late August she seems greatly recovered. Back in London her medical specialist promises that she would 'gradually get better and better' and allows her to leave her bedroom; she even looks forward to resuming her public work eventually once the Liberals are in power again 'not only for the love of it but also for the pay'. She is able to nurse her sick elderly mother, their roles suddenly reversed. But Christmas finds her back in Colwell, weak, exhausted and brooding on Christmases past when all the beloved dead were still alive. Watts is seeing her every day and his painting, a female Pieta called 'The Return of Godiva', it has been convincingly suggested, was inspired by his grief over the slowly dying Jeanie. She returns to London on 19 February, 1877, determined yet again that she is 'much, much better'. But she collapses and the chapter ends with anxious notes from some of those who love her most - Stansfeld, Octavia Hill and Anny Thackeray, all desperately enquiring after her.

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## Chapter Twenty: The night of 27 March, 1877

Her last night alive - a one and a half page interior monologue.

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### Conclusion

'Her premature death was a national and irreparable loss' (Florence Nightingale).

The Conclusion begins with the private and public tributes to Jeanie Senior. Her 'incalculably diffusive', Dorothea-like nature is invoked again and again. But the public, national loss is also registered: Watts writes that her death 'will affect thousands, perhaps thousands unborn'.. Most unusually for a Victorian woman, she is given a long obituary in *The Times* as 'the first woman who ever filled a salaried office in a most important central ...[and] difficult department of Government.

I then acknowledge Jeanie Senior's areas of failure – in not effecting the reforms she wanted in the 'Barrack' Schools, in not substituting fostering for the institutionalisation of pauper orphans and in not establishing a successful precedent for the employment in Britain of (married) women as Civil Servants. But were her failures her fault or the fault of the intransigent opposition of her male colleagues, headed by a Tory government? Her successes included her work in social housing finance, in pioneering social work by women and in co-founding the British Red Cross. Her embattled *Report*, was also a great achievement both as a significant work of empirical sociology and as a landmark text in child-centred educational and social reform that would be realized only in the 20th century. Her immediate positive legacy was the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants which, less than 20 years after her death, had 1,000 women volunteers helping 8,000 girls, with 32 free registries, 7 training homes, a convalescent home and 13 servants' lodging houses. For 25 years after her death she would be cited as a great pioneer of the Women's Movement in Britain, the ideal exemplar of what a woman employed in a position of responsibility could effect in the humanizing of society. Then she was more or less forgotten.

Her private life had been an on-going struggle between her vital, positive personality, and the sequence of life's crushing blows - family bereavements and conflicts, her unhappy mis-marriage, her long, painful terminal illness. Even her creativity had been in part frustrated, her marvellous voice confined largely to recitals in the drawing-room. What had sustained her was loving and being loved, her humour, her music and her faith in eternal reunion in Heaven. Inside 'Mrs Nassau Senior' there always remained fiery, idealistic, irrepressible Jeanie Hughes. If she was such a heroine, why has she been forgotten?

- a) She died before she could become a leader of the Women's Movement.
- b) It was 125 years after her death before the materials for her biography became available.
- c) History is pre-occupied with the powerful; hence the most powerless of all, abandoned babies and stunted little girl paupers, have been left out of the record, together with their champion, 'the Friend of the Workhouse Girl'.

At the centre of Jeanie's life had been her empty union to a man who shut himself away from any risk of work, from every emotional demand and from the attention of disapproving eyes. Her consequent emotional dependence on her son challenges

the 21<sup>st</sup> Century reader`s assumptions. Did her `need-love` in fact cripple Walter? No, he survived her as normal a human being as anyone else. But should her nakedly personal letters to him have been quoted here? He preserved her every word in the hope that they would, one day, bring her back to life again. Hence this book.

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