

*Prelude, A Novel*

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By Helen Taylor Davidson

The 1854 Diary of Adeline Elizabeth Hoe

Edited by Richard Davidson and Helen Taylor Davidson

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# CHAPTER ONE

In the gathering darkness of a May evening, the blowing mist from the Delaware obscured the sign outside the Blue Anchor, an inn established by Quakers in the early days of Philadelphia. “Stay hidden,” said the driver, Joe Stewart, in muffled tones, directing his warning to a canvas-covered lump in the rear of the wagon. He peered up and down Dock Street to get his bearings, secured the horse’s reins, and made his way inside the tavern.

The dim interior contained a host of men conversing over mugs of ale, some at the bar, some on high-backed settles by the open fireplaces at either end of the tavern, and some gathered at the rough tables scattered about the cavernous room. Some, the young driver knew, were friends, that is, Friends, or Quakers. Amid the motley mix, others were not, and some might be foes.

Edging his way through the crowd of men ending their day in lively conversation, Joe approached the bar. Those working behind the oak slab were men he knew he could trust. In Philadelphia, barkeeps were Quakers.

“Is this where I might find Elihu Pierce?” he asked an old man with grizzled whiskers and a huge strawberry birthmark that engulfed his forehead and right cheek. Without turning, the aged man continued to draw ale from a cask and made no answer. When he turned to face him, again and more loudly Joe repeated his question. It was clear that the man was nearly deaf.

“Aye, Elihu is bringing new beer into the cellar. I believe he’ll likely return straightaway,” he responded testily, and then he returned to his task.

Joe removed his wet and dripping top hat, and slid onto a barstool. He realized, dressed as he was in greatcoat and top hat, he differed noticeably from the dockworkers and farmhands enjoying their pints. The tobacco smoke from men cradling clay pipes, combined with the wood smoke from the fireplaces, created a stifling haze. He hoped the Quaker would not be long. He did not want to draw any more attention to himself, to answer questions, or to have to fabricate a reason for his presence.

Alone in the parlor Addie finished dusting the piano and pulled the heavy velvet drapes aside. The wide expanse of Broadway before her afforded little to hold her attention. The 5 a.m. cars had passed through, wheels and harnesses creaking as the huge cart horses pulled the loads of servants and working men to their places of employment.

It was a scant five days before the whole house would be stored for the summer. Furniture would be removed to the attic, carpets beaten, and light fixtures stored. School was over for the year; no more Latin, French, or mathematics; and piano lessons were suspended until fall. Her older sister was through with school, “finished for good,” while Addie was not quite varnished. She needed another layer of learning.

At eighteen, she would be ready for the dash to find a suitable mate and then marry, as her father and stepmother would expect of her. All of these details of her life as a seventeen-year-old in 1854 in New York City meant little to her on this morning. She fed her baby half-sister’s pet canary. Carefully she carried the cage to the kitchen where the cook, Tilda, was preparing tea. They each were absorbed in the routine and barely greeted one another. After adding water and seeds to the tiny receptacles in the cage, Addie retreated to the front room to wait for the rest of the family to appear for breakfast.

The street was noisier now with carriages hastening past and drovers herding their livestock downtown. Addie sat down at the desk near the window. Taking pen and ink from the drawer, she set about to write to her friend Retta in Cream Ridge. In happy anticipation, she wrote of her pleasure at being invited to the Stewarts’, where there was always a stream of visitors and lively conversation. She paused, wondering how long her family might stay in the brownstone on Broadway. Ma, her stepmother, was expecting again. Already there were two baby girls: Annie, two years old, and Mary, an infant. Father would not want to give up his billiard room on the third floor for bedrooms. No, there might be the need to move soon. In any case, Addie could not wait to travel to New Jersey and several other summer destinations. Making plans to travel without parents would be a novel experience. June couldn’t arrive fast enough.

Sealing the letter, she placed it on a plate in the foyer. As she returned to the parlor, both her father and sister Emilie appeared, ready for the day. Soon after breakfast, her father would leave for the printing press factory, where he would remain until the late evening. When the family carriage arrived with Uncle Robert inside, the carriage driver rang for Father. After hearty halloos, they were off for Broome Street.

Emilie and Addie both donned aprons after clearing the table and spent an hour cleaning their closets, carrying winter clothing first to sun in the yard and then to be stored in the armoire in the garret. The tedious job, up and down the stairs, went quickly as the girls discussed their upcoming trips. Later they sewed in the parlor. There was a pile of mending to do, and since childhood they had always worked at projects creating embroidery or sewing a garment. This particular morning Emilie read aloud *Katherine Ashton* while Addie completed a petticoat.

The young women were the older daughters of Richard March Hoe, whose wife died when they were ages six and eight. After two years as a widower, he married Mary Say Corbin from Philadelphia, a physician's daughter only seventeen years older than Emilie.

"When do you expect we should go to sit for the daguerrean?" Addie inquired, snipping a thread.

"Ma made the appointment for next Tuesday, the day before we leave for Setauket."

"Let's ask Ellen to help arrange our hair on Monday. I need curls to give my face some character, don't you think?"

"Bah, your face is your face, but it won't hurt to look our best. A daguerreotype, after all, is as good as a painted portrait."

"We shall see."

"Good morning, girls."

"Ma, it's nearly noon. Are you well?"

"It was a terrible night. Mary would not nurse and cried. I never slept." Their stepmother, lovely under ordinary circumstances, looked haggard with dark circles under her eyes. Her thick brown hair was hastily caught up in a chignon with several locks escaping. She wore a blue woolen dressing gown, loosely tied.

Addie rose from the couch and volunteered to head upstairs to take over Mary's care.

"No, you're very kind, but she's finally drifted off to sleep. Today I plan to find a wet nurse. Perhaps Tilda or Ellen knows of someone."

From down the street, voices of vendors distracted the girls from their tasks. Suddenly Emilie remembered that her favorite teacher, Miss Clarke, would be coming to tea.

"Addie, come with me to Limherr's, will you? I need to pick up the breast pin I had them make of my hair for Miss Clarke. How I shall miss her now that I'm all through school. I'm glad you have another year there so you can tell me how she is."

Looking out at the street, Addie noted several cars waiting at the carriage stop nearby, while the horses nibbled at the tree branches near the curb.

"We'll have to hurry."

Taking off their aprons, grabbing their reticules and bonnets, the young women dashed to the kitchen to tell Ma where they were going and then rushed out the door.

One of the horse-drawn cars had left, but one remained, not half full. Breathing rapidly and still fastening their bonnets, the girls began to climb on. Then Emilie looked in and noted the sign on the side, "Colored People Only." Faces gazed out at them, some soberly, a few smiling.

“Let’s walk,” Addie suggested. “It’s only three blocks.”

Skirting debris and horse buns at the side of the street, they held their long dresses at ankle height and found their way to the store. Emilie examined the finished breast pin, fashioned of gold and woven with strands of her own hair. Deeming it perfect, she paid the dapper young clerk. Meanwhile, Addie looked about the shop and admired the elegant, custom-made jewelry in glass cases.

The May sunshine made the return trip warm. Emilie hoped to present her gift immediately and to deliver it herself to her friend. Addie urged her to wait and reminded her there was much to be done at home. They rode back in a car and arrived to find Joe Stewart on the front steps.

Joe was Father’s good friend, yes, and he was more than a billiard player, although he often spent the evening at their house with cue in hand. Joe was a buyer and merchant tailor at A. T. Stewart’s Store downtown. He traveled often, but when in town he spent time with the Hoe family. Ten years older than Addie, Joe was a loyal confidant of both girls.

“How are the young ladies this fine afternoon?”

“We are well.” Emilie unlocked the front door for him and he held it wide for both girls to pass.

“And the family?”

“Annie is fussy, and Mary, as you know, has the measles.”

“That’s a shame. Is your father in?”

“It’s not likely,” Addie said. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, and you?”

“No, come join us for tea.”

The girls removed their bonnets. Joe stretched his legs and loosened his cravat as he sank onto the sofa. Of medium height and with dark hair and eyes, he was handsome, self-effacing, and at home anywhere.

“Now, tell me if there is anything I can do to help. Your father mentioned he had a meeting about the telegraph and asked me to attend with him, but it won’t happen until this evening.”

“We are packing up the house. Painters will come next week. Roux and his men have been engaged for the redecoration. Let me see; you could help us take up the stair rods and roll up the carpet.”

“Gladly,” he replied.

They embarked on the task, beginning on the attic stairs. As Addie and Emilie removed the stair rods, Joe slowly loosened the carpet, pulled the runners down the staircases, and rolled them up, readying them to be taken to the back yard and beaten later. The girls stowed the heavy rods in the garret.

“Now, about the tea?” he reminded them.

In the dining room over shortbread and tea, the girls voiced their eagerness to visit Joe's sisters across the Hudson in Cream Ridge. What should they expect, what should they bring, who would be there? In addition to seeing Retta, Lydia, Charlie, and the elder Stewarts, they planned to travel on to Delaware City to visit Joe's older sister, Ann Reybold.

"How will we get to Delaware City?"

"Major Reybold," he said mysteriously.

"What do you mean? Who is he? Does he own a ketch or a schooner?" He so aroused their curiosity that their cheeks flushed with excitement.

"You will find that the *Major Reybold* is a steamboat named for Ann's father-in-law. It will take you from Philadelphia to Delaware City."

"Will you be there?" Addie asked.

"Part of the time."

Recalling a forgotten appointment, Joe drew his pocket watch from his vest. He rose and, making a hasty farewell, he left, promising to return later.

The girls filled the time until supper imagining the weeks ahead. They moved the furniture and, with Ellen's help, rolled up the carpets on the first floor. There were still the linens to be packed away and dishes and silverware to stow. The renovations required that all their possessions be out of the way.

"Did you look in on Ma? She must be resting. Neither she nor Mary nor Annie have made a peep."

Just then, Ma appeared on the landing, fully dressed and ready to go out. Although it was spring and a very warm afternoon, she was wearing her cape. Addie called up to her, "Where are you going?"

"To find a wet nurse."

"Oh no, you mustn't go by yourself. Father will find someone. You'll wear yourself out. Wait until he comes home, please."

In the morning Father would rush off to the factory, rarely taking time to comb his hair, and then, in the evenings, after a supper that often had to be re-heated or served cold, he either relaxed with friends at billiards or was off to a meeting of one of several organizations. One of them was the American Telegraph Society. If he stayed late, looking out for the printing press apprentices who remained at the factory at the end of the day, Father likely would share with them a meal that the company provided before their evening classes.

Joe returned at seven o'clock and, finding that Father still had not come home, he invited Emilie and Addie to join him for ice cream. The stroll to the café was pleasant, with the sun setting in the west and flights of pigeons silhouetted against the fading orange sky and seeking refuge for the night. They sat outside at tables to which identically clad waitresses brought their order.

Joe seemed preoccupied, Addie reflected, probably disappointed that Father was not available for their customary game of billiards.

“I won’t see you again until I see you in Cream Ridge,” he began. “I have some work in Philadelphia in the interim.”

“We understand, don’t we, Addie?” Emilie reassured him. Traveling by the cars, a ferry, and railroad would mean keeping alert, but the two young women were confident, anticipating the journey.

“Will we see you race while we are with Retta?”

“I hope there will be time for that. I understand there is a new filly with promise that my brother has been training.”

Cooler after having enjoyed the novelty of strawberry ice cream at the end of a very warm spring day, the girls thanked Joe for his kindness, and they all proceeded to 309 Broadway.

Father was at home at last after a long day and held little Annie in his arms as he gathered his wits in the parlor. He greeted Joe cheerfully and, although it was nearly eight o’clock, he was ready to head for the telegraph meeting.

“While dining with Ma,” he said, “I agreed to find a wet nurse, since her efforts proved fruitless earlier today. Girls, we must all give her help.” He looked at their kind, eager faces and added, “But, of course, I know you have and you will.”

Father was handsome in a robust, tousled way, with a cleft in his chin, merry blue eyes, and graying brown hair. He found time to question the older girls about their lives and treated them as gems in his crown.