



# HAGAR, New Edition

*Mary Johnston*

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“Low Braidge!” The people on deck bent over, some until heads touched knees, others, more exactly calculating, just sufficiently to clear the beams. The canal-boat passed beneath the bridge, and all straightened themselves on their camp-stools. The gentlemen who were smoking put their cigars again between their lips. The two or three ladies resumed book or knitting. The sun was low, and the sycamores and willows fringing the banks cast long shadows across the canal. The northern bank was not so clothed with foliage, and one saw an expanse of bottom land, meadows and cornfields, and beyond, low mountains, purple in the evening light. The boat slipped from a stripe of gold into a stripe of shadow, and from a stripe of shadow into a stripe of gold. The negro and the mule on the towpath were now but a bit of dusk in motion, and now were lit and, so to speak, powdered with gold-dust. Now the rope between boat and towpath showed an arm-thick golden serpent, and now it did not show at all. Now a little cloud of gnats and flies, accompanying the boat, shone in burnished armour and now they put on a mantle of shade. A dark little girl, of twelve years, dark and thin, sitting aft on the deck floor, her long, white-stockinged legs folded decorously under her, her blue gingham skirt spread out, and her Leghorn hat upon her knees, appealed to one of the reading ladies. “Aunt Serena, what is ‘evolution’?” Miss Serena Ashendyne laid down her book. “‘Evolution,’” she said blankly, “‘what is evolution?’” “I heard grandfather say it just now. He said, ‘That man Darwin and his evolution’--” “Oh!” said Miss Serena. “He meant a very wicked and irreligious Englishman who wrote a dreadful book.” “Was it named ‘Evolution’?” “No. I forget just what it is called. ‘Beginning’—No! ‘Origin of Species.’ That was it.” “Have we got it in the library at Gilead Balm?” “Heavens! No!” “Why?” “Your grandfather wouldn’t let it come into the house. No lady would read it.” “Oh!” Miss Serena returned to her novel. She sat very elegantly on the camp-stool, a graceful, long-lined, drooping form in a greenish-grey delaine picked out with tiny daisies. It was made polonaise. Miss Serena, alone of the people at Gilead Balm, kept up with the fashions. At the other end of the long, narrow deck a knot of country gentlemen were telling war stories. All had fought in the war—the war that had been over now for twenty years and more. There were an empty sleeve and a wooden leg in the group and other marks of bullet and sabre. They told good stories, the country gentlemen, and they indulged in mellow laughter. Blue rings of tobacco-smoke rose and mingled and made a haze about that end of the boat. “How the gentlemen are enjoying themselves!” said placidly one of the knitting ladies. The dark little girl continued to ponder the omission from the library. “Aunt Serena--” “Yes, Hagar.” “Is it like ‘Tom Jones’?” “‘Tom Jones’! What do you know about ‘Tom Jones’?” “Grandfather was reading it one day and laughing, and after he had done with it I got it down from the top shelf and asked him if I might read it, and he said, ‘No, certainly not! it isn’t a book for ladies.’” “Your grandfather was quite right. You read entirely too much anyway. Dr. Bude told your mother so.” The little girl turned large, alarmed eyes upon her. “I don’t read half as much as I used to. I don’t read except just a little time in the morning and evening and after supper. It would kill me if I couldn’t read--” “Well, well,” said Miss Serena, “I suppose we shall continue to spoil you!” She said it in a very sweet voice, and she patted the child’s arm and then she went back to “The Wooing O’t.” She was fond of reading novels herself, though she liked better to do macramé work and to paint porcelain placques.

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