

1st in Series

# Hetty



Written and Illustrated by  
Martha Sears West

PREVIEW

# Hetty

by

Martha Sears West



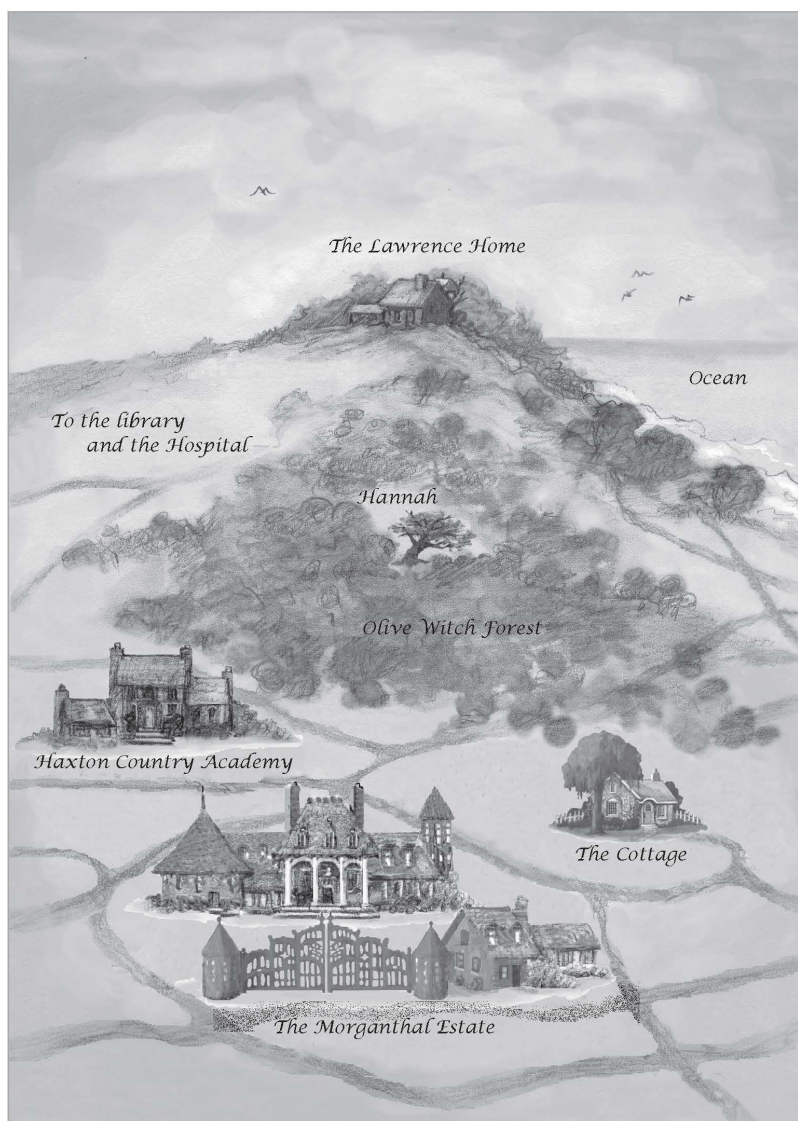
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*In the past, Hetty had found comfort in Hannah's  
welcoming branches.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Hetty and Her Hypotenuse Day*

Hetty began counting the number of hissing sounds that came through her math teacher's long white teeth with every "s" she pronounced. Her lips were absolutely, positively fire engine-red, and her hair was black as India ink, except for the path that divided her thin strands in the exact mathematical center of her scalp.

When Miss Hacket turned her back to write the day's questions on the blackboard, Hetty decided to attempt a more mathematical appearance herself.

She thought perhaps she would appear better at calculating if the laces of her father's oversized boots looked precisely the same length, so she tucked the two longer ends down into the tops of her socks.

The pencils and books on her desk could use some organizing too. Hetty had discovered the eraser end of a pencil to be the more useful of its two extremes, for math. There-



fore, except for the ones she had whittled into totem poles, she zipped the worn ones into her Smokey the Bear pencil case.

*Now for the books...would it look better if the blue history book is over or under my French book? It depends on where Miss Hacket's looking from. The red French book should be on top if she's looking down...like if she's on the ceiling or something.*

It was easy to picture Miss Hacket's rounded form bouncing aloft against the ceiling panels from where she could peer down at the girls. If she hissed too many s-words, very likely she would gradually deflate, then flop down like a circus tent after the elephants have pulled out the stakes. Hetty hoped Miss Hacket wouldn't use a lot of words like *sassafras* or *Mississippi* if she should happen to be floating directly overhead.

Hetty smoothed the pleats of her plaid uniform and hoped Miss Hacket would notice that she was the most attentive girl in the whole entire sixth grade. She had resolved to keep her eyes absolutely and positively glued to her teacher's lips for the entire fifty-five minutes of class. So Hetty was startled by the squeak of the floorboards as Miss Hacket approached from the left rear. She advanced, wielding a wondrous word.

The word was *Hypotenuse*. Hetty thought it had something to do with triangles or right angles, but it was hissed forth with no accompanying explanation that she could detect. What a grand addition to the day's vocabulary collection! Hetty found such words were infinitely more en-

tertaining when they were allowed to decide their own meaning and usage. She mused on some of the possibilities:

*"My, my, what a lovely arrangement of chrysanthemum and hypotenuse blossoms!"*

*"Waiter, a tall glass of hypotenuse juice, please."*

*"Take one hypotenuse by mouth, and call me in the morning."*

*"I apologize for being late for class, Miss Hacket, but you see, my hypotenuse escaped."*

*"I won't tolerate your constant hypotenusing around, Hetty Annette Lawrence."*

"Hetty Annette!" Miss Hacket repeated, "We're on number twelve. Do you know it's your turn?" Hetty wasn't particular about what name people used. She didn't mind being called Hetty or even Netty. It didn't much matter as long as the voice was pleasant.

"Well, I," answered Hetty. "I...um..."

Miss Hacket directed the question to Melinda instead. This gave Hetty a moment to work out a math question of her own: How many minutes would have to pass before the end of the day and time to go home? She had to be content just imagining herself on the way to her house, until at last classes were dismissed in the afternoon.

While approaching her home, Hetty slowly breathed in the soft sea air. She always looked for the small blue patch of ocean that was barely visible through the thick foliage. This time she sang as she walked up the familiar hill, making up a name for each of the tall elm trees that arched over the

driveway. It always felt to her as though they had planted themselves there especially to welcome her.

Hetty knew her parents kept her in their thoughts, even though they would still be at work when she got home. Today was no exception. When Hetty reached the sunny brick porch at the back of the house, she peeked through the Dutch door into the kitchen. She could see a blue flowered china plate on which five freshly baked oatmeal cookies awaited her. Folded under it, there was a note on a small scrap of paper.

After opening the icebox door, she pulled out a cream-top milk bottle by its narrow middle, shaking it to mix the rich cream into the skim below, then poured it into a cool glass tumbler.

The best part of her daily routine was reading the message between sips and nibbles. Papa often polished a copper penny and taped it to the note just below where he had scrawled, "To H.A.L.D.W.W.L.," which meant, "To Henrietta Annette Lawrence Dear Whom We Love." Whatever the origin of this custom, Hetty enjoyed it. The rest of the message might be a riddle, a quotation, or something to convey affection.

She read the note:

*"The farmer must transport a goat, a wolf and a bale of hay across the river in a rowboat. How must he do it to prevent the wolf from devouring the goat, and the goat from eating the hay?"*

Hetty put it in her pocket to consider later. She ran upstairs to her bedroom and opened the window.

Before the Lawrence family had finished settling in their home, Hetty and her father worked together to build a tree house she could reach by crawling out her bedroom window. They spent hours at the basement workbench, whitening little hooks and knobs to look like squirrel tails. And to cover the floor of the little hut, Mother helped Hetty weave a grass mat edged with plaid ribbons. She had hoped Hetty might bring a friend home after school to see it. It seemed the perfect place for twelve-year-old girls to enjoy milk and cookies and talk about the school day the way she had done at that age.

Hetty loosened the strap around her books, resolving to begin her homework. However, after crawling out through the window, she realized she had left the books back on the bed. If the books should levitate and magically follow her to the tree house on their own, Hetty would absolutely, positively see it as a sign that she was supposed to do her homework right now.

She waited dutifully, but when the books had not delivered themselves to her side within a respectable length of time, there was nothing to prevent her from making other plans. Besides, it would be several hours before her parents would drive up the hill in their new 1949 Studebaker. She could still do her homework after that. Now she was free to go see Hannah.

Hetty gazed out over the deep woods and thought of how she had discovered Hannah, the giant oak tree, shortly after they had moved near the new school. Her love for Hannah eased the loneliness she might have otherwise felt in this unfamiliar place. Hetty shared many of her most personal thoughts with Hannah, and she spent many hours read-

ing on her broad horizontal limbs. High among the leaves, Hetty often lost all awareness of time.

### *Hannah*

It was a woodpecker drumming on a hollow tree that had first drawn Hetty into the forest. After she had waded for some time through tangled underbrush in a broad ravine, the confusion of echoes she was following seemed to come from everywhere. Hetty had no idea where she had been, or even whether she had doubled back over her own steps. She found herself on a narrow path made by the paws of many unseen creatures. The route meandered through the dark underbrush until it led her to the edge of the shadows.

There was a whirring of wings, then stillness broken only by the beating of her heart. Or was that really what she heard? A faint rustle now and again made her halt, holding her breath to hear what or who could be watching nearby. She carefully skirted a cluster of fiddlehead ferns and reached forward to sweep aside a barrier of foliage. Suddenly she fell forward and found herself face down on the ground, her hands digging into a soft carpet of leaves.

Her eyes opened to reveal an enchanted clearing, dominated by an immense tree. Years had woven a network of vines that clung to one side of its trunk. Like a tangle of ropes, they heaved up from under the brittle leaves of the forest floor, extending high into the canopy. She slowly inhaled their sweet scent and blinked at the brightness. Hetty feared what she was seeing was only imagined, and the magnificent sight might disappear just as suddenly as she had found it.

The raucous call of a blue jay signaled that all was real. Her left boot had come off when a root snagged her toe.

Turning onto her back, Hetty began to laugh. Above her, the branches seemed to sway in response to her obvious pleasure. She gazed up in wonder at the height and spread of the great oak. The light from the sun was still dancing through the leaves of the upper limbs. With a boot in one hand, she approached to press the open palm of the other against the rough bark.

*With this solemn ceremony, I christen thee "Hannah." Actually, I don't have a really true ceremony in mind, but if we can be best friends, I promise I will absolutely, positively never tell anyone about you. I think you must be very old and very, very important, and on the occasion of our ceremony, I hereby bequeath to you this token of grave importance. It's a brand new 1950 penny. Actually, I should have brought a streetcar token. We can't use them now anyway since we moved. That would have been really good to be using a token for a token!*

*I won't be swearing to anything. Papa says he gets his fill of swearing when he goes to court. That's because he's an attorney.*

*I wish Mother and Papa could see you, too. But here's the way it is: if they happen to decide they don't want me coming this far into the woods, I couldn't keep my pledge to be your best friend any more. And Papa says whether or not people can keep promises tells a lot about their character.*

*Papa isn't much of a tree climber, anyway. Neither is Mother. Papa's leg was wounded by an ax when he was fighting fires in the Forest Service. He had two really good buddies. The one named Leaf even saved Papa's life, and Mother limps too because she had polio when she was little. Papa says they were absolutely, positively meant for each other, since they can run a perfect three-legged race.*

*Melinda and Louisa aren't allowed to come in the woods. I heard them say so in biology class. The others said it's scary in here, and that lots of strange things happen in the forest. But if the woods really are haunted, I know you will be my Protector. It looks really comfortable up there on your broadest branch where we can be together and talk.*

Hetty took the penny from the note, wedged it into a crevice of the bark, and considered a variation on the riddle.

*A girl has to carry a cookie, a glass of milk and a book up a tree. The girl can't carry both the cookie and the milk unless she puts it—no, wait. It would dissolve in the milk—and no, it won't work to fold the cookie in the pages—Actually, if she eats the cookie, then technically, she has carried it up the tree, even if it is in her tummy.*

### *Inky Begins With P*

Both Hetty's parents seemed fearless to her, but in different ways. Neither Mother nor Papa feared wild or unknown places. And like her parents, Hetty felt at home in the woods. It surprised them that she was afraid of the dark. She had also been afraid of dogs when she was younger, but to help Hetty get over it, they had brought home a gentle female from the dog pound. She was completely black. Hetty gave her the name Pinky, which was actually inky, except for starting with a "P."

Curled up in the shadows, Pinky had been hard to see. All too often someone stepped on one of her paws. It was almost instinctive to apologize to Pinky and try to comfort the poor thing after such accidents. However, it was pitiful the way she

would cower under the hand that stroked her, as if she thought some punishment had been intended and there was more to come.

As they couldn't use words to explain things to a dog, they settled on a better way to handle it. When Pinky yelped in pain, they would do something nice for her. Papa might put on his liveliest grin and say, "Go get your ball, Pinky!" The exciting invitation always worked. Pinky would completely forget to limp. With her squeak-ball in her mouth, she would race for the door to play with her best friend.

Hetty watched and wondered. The questions she collected were always saved for bedtime.

*"Papa, how can you tell what Pinky's thinking? Is Pinky old in dog years?"*

*"Why is it scary at night, even when the lights are on? How old do trees get?"*

### *The Defective Heart*

Hetty was born with a defective heart. With the slightest activity she would become very tired and pale. For years nothing could be done for such patients except to keep them warm and comfortable. But her parents wanted her to live as normal a life as possible.

"She'll never feel independent if we are watching her every minute," Papa had said, "so we must encourage her to do the things she can."

When Hetty was seven years old, the doctor told her parents about a hospital in Boston where heart operations were being performed. As he thought it could be more dangerous to do nothing, the decision was made to take her there for surgery.



Hetty had become somewhat aware of the risk to her life. The night before they left, her mother tucked the covers around Hetty, and Papa smoothed back her hair. Hetty had just one question. “What is it like, Papa, going to Heaven?”

“It would be a good thing to talk about another time, Hetty. We’ll be getting up very early,” Papa answered. After he went downstairs, Hetty heard him honk his nose. Every time he blew it, his nose made an impressive honking sound.

Hetty’s parents often said, “Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it gets you nowhere.” Even so, Dan and Dora Lawrence both spent that night worrying about their daughter’s surgery. Unable to sleep, Dan composed a poem before morning.

Just as the ocean was beginning to reflect the morning sun, Mother awakened Hetty by singing the jingle from a radio show in her off-key warble.

When Hetty followed the scent of sizzling bacon downstairs to the kitchen, she found an envelope peeking out from under her bowl of Cream of Wheat. Inside the envelope was a soft handkerchief with delicate embroidery and a note that read, “To our Hetty. We hope this handkerchief will bring you good luck. Love, Mother and Papa.”

Even after the operation, there were many more sleepless nights. Finally, to their great relief, it was confirmed that Hetty was out of danger. Her heart would mend. Before Hetty left the hospital, she found a bright penny on her breakfast tray, taped to a sheet of stationery. Below it, there was a message from Papa:

Dear Hetty,

I’ve thought a lot about your question. I’m glad you don’t need to know about Heaven just yet. Here is what I think, anyway.

WHAT IS IT LIKE, PAPA, GOING TO HEAVEN?

*What is it like, Papa, going to Heaven?*

*I know I'm very ill.*

*What if I die while I'm only seven,*

*To lie forever still?*

Someone who loves you will carry you home

To the place where you belong

Gently cradled in His arms,

All to an angel song.

He'll make you well with the power of love,

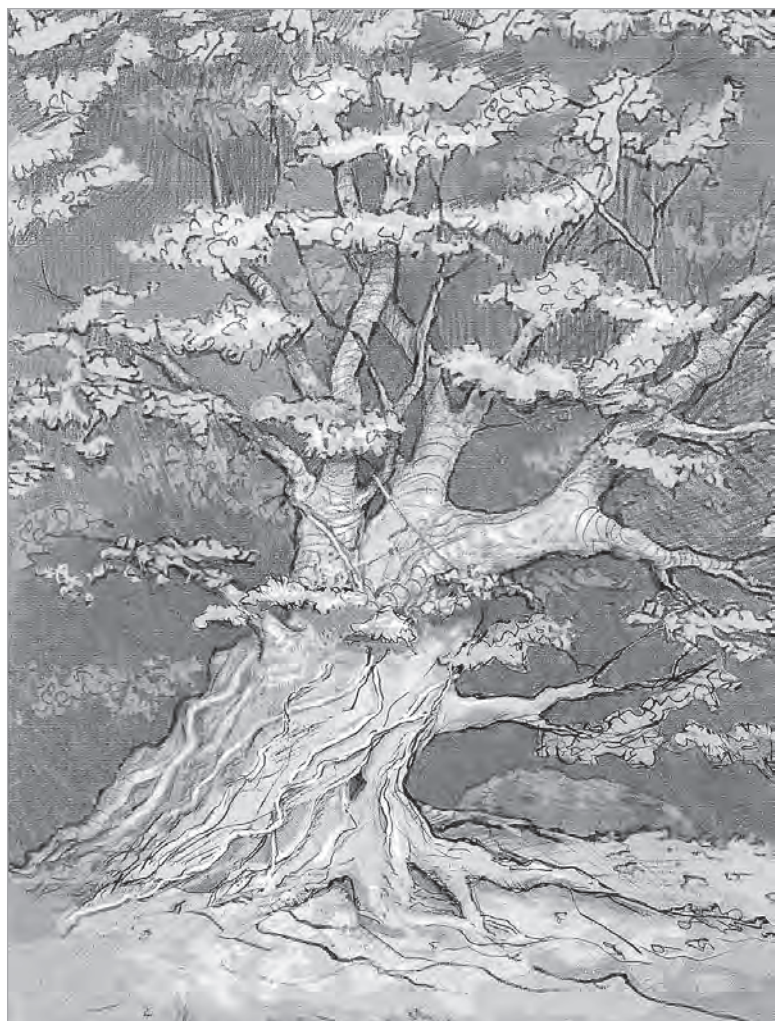
And touch your cheek like me.

You'll fly with Him among the stars;

That's how Heaven will be.

All my love,

Papa XOXO



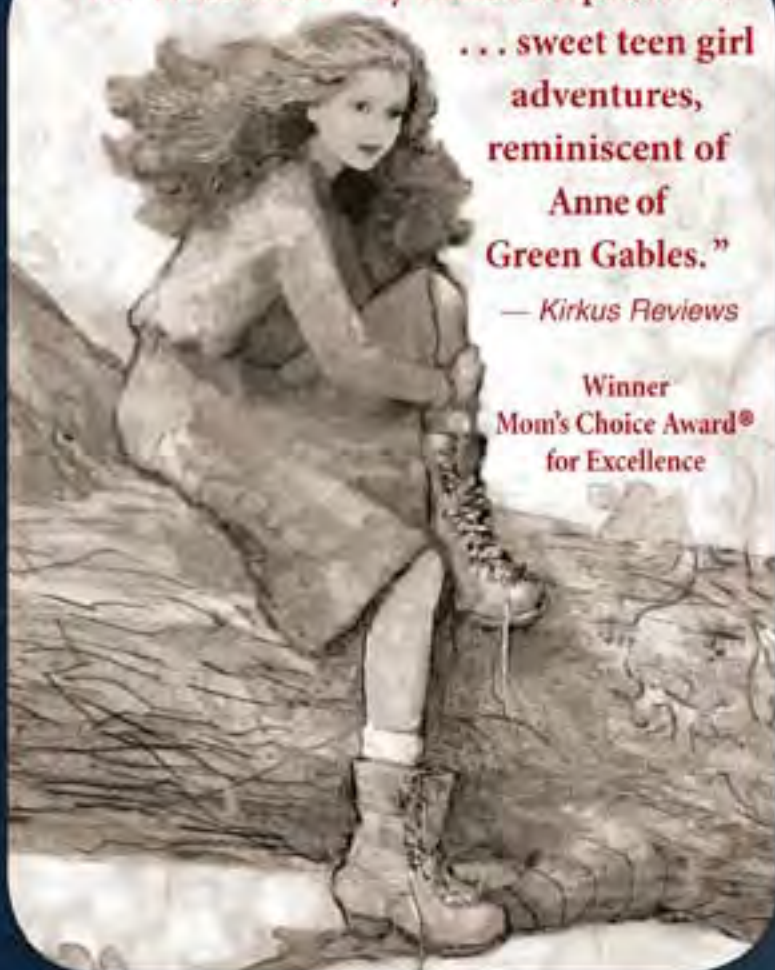
*She swayed gracefully as if to join in all the flying.*

"... West effectively builds suspense ...

... sweet teen girl  
adventures,  
reminiscent of  
**Anne of  
Green Gables."**

— *Kirkus Reviews*

Winner  
Mom's Choice Award®  
for Excellence



**G**entle, imaginative Hetty feels at home with her kindly parents but struggles to find her place in a new school. She takes refuge in her secret forest hideaway. When an accident forces her to rely on others, will Hetty find what it takes to grow up and fit in? And is a mysterious stranger watching over her?

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