

An Evening at Lucy Ashton's
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Compiled
by
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LUCY ASHTON

Painted by J. W. Wright Engraved by H. T. Ryall

AN EVENING OF LUCY ASHTON'S.

THE autumn wind swung the branches of the old trees in the avenue heavily to and fro, and howled amid the battlements — now with a low moan, like that of deep grief; now with a shrill shriek, like that of the sufferer whose frame is wrenched by sudden agony. It was one of those dreary gales which bring thoughts of shipwreck, — telling of the tall vessel, with her brave crew, tossed on the midnight sea, her masts fallen, her sails riven, her guns thrown overboard, and the sailors holding a fierce revel, to shut out the presence of Death riding the black waves around them; — or of a desolate cottage on some lone sea-beach, a drifted boat on the rocks, and the bereaved widow weeping over the dead.

Lucy Ashton turned shivering from the casement. She had watched the stars one by one sink beneath the heavy cloud which, pall-like, had spread over the sky till it quenched even that last and

lovely one with which, in a moment of maiden fantasy, she had linked her fate.

“For signs and for seasons are they,” said the youthful watcher, as she closed the lattice. “My light will soon be hidden, my little hour soon past.”

She threw herself into the arm-chair beside the hearth, and the lamp fell upon her beautiful but delicate face, from which the rose had long since departed; the blue veins were singularly distinct on the clear temples, and in the eye was that uncertain brightness which owes not its lustre to health. Her pale golden hair was drawn up in a knot at the top of her small and graceful head, and the rich mass shone as we fancy shine the bright tresses of an angel. The room was large, lofty, and comfortless, with cornices of black carved oak; in the midst stood a huge purple velvet bed, having a heavy bunch of hearse-like feathers at each corner; the walls were old; and the tapestry shook with every current of passing air, while the motion gave a mockery of life to its gaunt and faded group. The subject was mythological — the sacrifice of Niobe's children. There were the many shapes of death, from the young warrior to the laughing child; but all struck by the same inexorable fate. One figure in particular caught Lucy's eye; it was a youthful female, and she thought it resembled herself: the outline of the face certainly did, though “the gloss had dropped from the golden hair” of the pictured sufferer.

“And yet,” murmured Lucy, “far happier than I! The shaft which struck her in youth did its work at once; but I bear the arrow in my heart that destroys me not. Well, well, its time will come!”

The flickering light of the enormous chimney, whose hearth was piled with turf and wood, now flung its long and variable shadows round the chamber; and the figures on the tapestry seemed animate with strange and ghastly life. Lucy felt their eyes fix upon her, and the thought of death came cold and terrible. Ay; be resigned, be hopeful, be brave as we will, death is an awful thing! The nailing down in that close black coffin—the lowering into the darksome grave—the damp mould, with its fearful dwellers, the slimy worm and the loathsome reptile, to be trampled upon you—these are the realities of dread and disgust! And then to die in youth—life unknown, unenjoyed; no time to satiate of its pleasures, to weary of its troubles, to learn its wretchedness—to feel that you wish to live a little longer—that you could be happy!

“And,” added the miserable girl, “to know that he loves me—that he will kneel in the agony of a last despair by my grave! But no, no; they say he is vowed to another—a tall, dark, stately beauty:—what am I, that he should be true to me?”

She wrung her hands, but the paroxysm was transitory; and fixing her eyes on the burning log,

she sat listlessly watching the dancing flames that kept struggling through the smoke.

"May I come in, Miss Ashton?" said a voice at the door; and, without waiting for an answer, an old crone entered. She approached the hearth, placed in a warm nook a tankard of mulled wine and a plate of spiced apples, drew a low and cushioned settle forwards, seated herself, and whispered in a subdued, yet hissing tone, "I thought you would be lonely, so I came up for half an hour's chat: it is the very night for some of your favourite stories."

Lucy started from her recumbent position, cast a frightened glance around, and seemed for the first time sensible of her companion's presence.

"Ah! is it you, Dame Alison? sooth it is but a dreary evening, and I am glad of a companion — these old rooms are so gloomy."

"You may well say so, for they have many a gloomy memory; the wife has wept for her husband, and the mother for her child; and the hand of the son has been against his father, and that of the father against his son. Why, look at yonder wainscot; see you no dark stains there? In this very room —"

"Not of this room; tell me nothing of this room," half screamed the girl, as she turned from the direction in which the nurse pointed. "I sleep here; I should see it every night: — tell me of something far, far away."

"Well, well, dear; it is only to amuse you. It

shall not be of this room, nor of this house, nor even of this country; will that please you?"

Lucy gave a slight inclination of the head, and again fixed her gaze steadily on the bright and sparkling fire; meantime the old woman took a deep draught from the tankard, disposed herself comfortably in her seat, and began her story in that harsh and hissing voice which rivets the hearing whereon it yet grates.

THE OLD WOMAN'S STORY.

"Many, many years ago there was a fair peasant—so fair, that from her childhood all her friends prophesied it could lead to no good. When she came to sixteen, the Count Ludolf thought it was a pity such beauty should be wasted, and therefore took possession of it: better that the lovely should pine in a castle than flourish in a cottage. Her mother died broken-hearted; and her father left the neighbourhood, with a curse on the disobedient girl who had brought desolation to his hearth, and shame to his old age. It needs little to tell that such a passion grew cold—it were a long tale that accounted for the fancies of a young, rich, and reckless cavalier; and, after all, nothing changes so soon as love."

"Love!" murmured Lucy, in a low voice, as if unconscious of the interruption: "Love, which is our fate, like Fate must be immutable: how can the heart forget its young religion?"

“Many,” pursued the sibyl, “can forget, and do and will forget. As for the Count, his heart was cruel with prosperity, and selfish with good fortune; he had never known sickness which softens—sorrow which brings all to its own level—poverty which, however it may at last harden the heart, at first teaches us our helplessness. What was it to him that Bertha had left the home which could never receive her again? What, that for his sake she had submitted to the appearance of disgrace which was not in reality her's?—for the peasant-girl was proud as the Baron; and when she stepped over her father's threshold, it was as his wife.

“Well, well, he wearied, as men ever weary of woman's complaining, however bitter may be the injury which has wrung reproach from the unwilling lip. Many a sad hour did she spend weeping in the lonely tower, which had once seemed to her like a palace; for then the radiance of love was around it—and love, forsooth, is something like the fairies in our own land; for a time it can make all that is base and worthless seem most glittering and precious. Once, every night brought the ringing horn and eager step of the noble hunter; now the nights passed away too often in dreary and unbroken splendour. Yet the shining steel of the shield in the hall, and the fair current of the mountain spring, shewed her that her face was lovely as ever.

“One evening he came to visit her, and his manner was soft and his voice was low, as in the

days of old. Alas! of late she had been accustomed to the unkind look and the harsh word.

“ ‘ It is a lovely twilight, my Bertha,’ said he ; ‘ help me to unmoor our little bark, and we will sail down the river.’

“ With a light step, and yet lighter heart, she descended the rocky stairs, and reached the boat before her companion. The white sail was soon spread ; they sprang in ; and the slight vessel went rapidly through the stream. At first the waves were crimson, as if freighted with rubies, the last love-gifts of the dying Sun—for they were sailing on direct to the west, which was one flush, like a sea of blushing wine. Gradually the tints became paler ; shades of soft pink just tinged the far-off clouds, and a delicate lilac fell on the waters. A star or two shone pure and bright in the sky, and the only shadows were flung by a few wild rose-trees that sprang from the clefts of the rocks. By degrees the drooping flowers disappeared ; the stream grew narrower, and the sky became darker ; a few soft clouds soon gathered into a storm : but Bertha heeded them not ; she was too earnestly engaged in entreating her husband that he would acknowledge their secret marriage. She spoke of the dreary solitude to which she was condemned ; of her wasted youth, worn by the fever of continual anxiety. Suddenly she stopped in fear — it was so gloomy around ; the steep banks nearly closed overhead, and the boughs of the old pines which stood in some of the tempest-cleft hollows met

in the air, and cast a darkness like that of night upon the rapid waters, which hurried on as if they distrusted their gloomy passage.

At this moment Bertha's eye caught the ghastly paleness of her husband's face, terribly distinct: she thought that he feared the rough torrent, and for her sake; tenderly she leant towards him — his arm grasped her waist, but not in love; he seized the wretched girl and flung her overboard, with the very name of God upon her lips, and appealing, too, for his sake! Twice her bright head — Bertha had ever gloried in her sunny curls, which now fell in wild profusion on her shoulders — twice did it emerge from the wave; her faint hands were spread abroad for help; he shrunk from the last glare of her despairing eyes; then a low moan; a few bubbles of foam rose on the stream; and all was still — but it was the stillness of death. An instant after, the thunder-cloud burst above, the peal reverberated from cliff to cliff, the lightning clave the black depths of the stream, the billows rose in tumultuous eddies; but Count Ludolf's boat cut its way through, and the vessel arrived at the open river. No trace was there of storm; the dewy wild flowers filled the air with their fragrance; and the Moon shone over them pure and clear, as if her light had no sympathy with human sorrow, and shuddered not at human crime. And why should she? We might judge her by ourselves; what care we for crime in which we are not involved, and for suffering in which we have no part?

“ The red wine-cup was drained deep and long in Count Ludolf's castle that night ; and soon after, its master travelled afar into other lands — there was not pleasure enough for him at home. He found that bright eyes could gladden even the ruins of Rome — but Venice became his chosen city. It was as if revelry delighted in the contrast which the dark robe, the gloomy canal, and the death-black gondola, offered to the orgies which made joyous her midnights.”

“ And did he feel no remorse ?” asked Lucy.

“ Remorse !” said the crone, with a scornful laugh ; “ remorse is the word for a child, or for a fool — the unpunished crime is never regretted. We weep over the consequence, not over the fault. Count Ludolf soon found another love. This time his passion was kindled by a picture, but one of a most strange and thrilling beauty — a portrait, the only unfaded one in a deserted palace situate in the eastern lagune. Day after day he went to gaze on the exquisite face and the large black eyes, till they seemed to answer to his own. But the festival of San Marco was no time for idle fantasies ; and the Count was among the gayest of the revellers. Amid the many masks which he followed, was one that finally rivetted his attention. Her light step seemed scarcely to touch the ground, and every now and then a dark curl or two of raven softness escaped the veil ; at last the mask itself slipped aside, and he saw the countenance of his beautiful incognita. He ad-

dressed her; and her answers, if brief, were at least encouraging; he followed her to a gondola, which they entered together. It stopped at the steps of the palace he had supposed deserted.

“ ‘ Will you come with me?’ said she, in a voice whose melancholy was as the lute when the night-wind wakens its music; and as she stood by the sculptured lions which kept the entrance, the moonlight fell on her lovely face—lovely as if Titian had painted it.

“ ‘ Could you doubt?’ said Ludolf, as he caught the extended hand; ‘ neither heaven nor hell should keep me from your side!’

“ And here I cannot choose but laugh at the exaggerated phrases of lovers: why, a stone wall or a steel chain might have kept him away at that very moment! They passed through many a gloomy room, dimly seen in the moonshine, till they came to the picture-gallery, which was splendidly illuminated—and, strange contrast to its usual desolation, there was spread a magnificent banquet. The waxen tapers burned in their golden candlesticks, the lamps were fed with perfumed oil, and many a crystal vase was filled with rare flowers, till the atmosphere was heavy with fragrance. Piled up, in mother-of-pearl baskets, the purple grapes had yet the morning dew upon them; and the carved pine reared its emerald crest beside peaches, like topazes in a sunset. The Count and the lady seated themselves on a crimson ottoman; one white arm, leant

negligently, contrasted with the warm colour of the velvet; but extending the other towards the table, she took a glass; at her sign the Count filled it with wine.

“ ‘ Will you pledge me ? ’ said she, touching the cup with her lips, and passing it to him. He drank it — for wine and air seemed alike freighted with the odour of her sigh.

“ ‘ My beauty ! ’ exclaimed Ludolf, detaining the ivory hand.

“ ‘ Nay, Count, ’ returned the stranger, in that sweet and peculiar voice, more like music than language — ‘ I know how lightly you hold the lover’s vow ! ’

“ ‘ I never loved till now ! ’ exclaimed he, impatiently ; ‘ name, rank, fortune, life, soul, are your own. ’

“ She drew a ring from her hand, and placed it on his, leaving her’s in his clasp. ‘ What will you give me in exchange, — this ? ’ — and she took the diamond cross of an order which he wore.

“ ‘ Ay, and by my knightly faith will I, and redeem it at your pleasure. ’

“ It was her hand which now grasped his ; a change passed over her face : ‘ I thank you, my sister-in-death, for your likeness, ’ said she, in an altered voice, turning to where the portrait had hung. For the first time, the Count observed that the frame was empty. Her grasp tightened upon him — it was the bony hand of a skeleton. The beauty

vanished ; the face grew a familiar one— it was that of Bertha ! The floor became unstable, like water ; he felt himself sinking rapidly ; again he rose to the surface — he knew the gloomy pine-trees overhead ; the grasp on his hand loosened ; he saw the fair head of Bertha gasp in its death-agony amid the waters ; the blue eyes met his ; the stream flung her towards him ; her arms closed round his neck with a deadly weight ; down they sank beneath the dark river together — and to eternity.”