

THE DEAD LADY

IT was one night a hundred and thirty years ago. The lady lay upon her bed, her breath came in heavy gasps, and she spoke with difficulty. When at times her faltering tongue failed her, her large eyes, fixed upon her husband, spoke the words she could not utter.

She knew that she was dying, and she told him once again her last desire. She feebly raised her left hand to her lips. On it were two rings, the gifts of her husband, an enamel posy ring on the little finger, a ruby on the third. She kissed them both. She murmured to herself: "True love doth last for ever." It was the motto engraved at the back of the ruby ring, which he had given her on her wedding day.

"Let them be buried with me," she said to her husband.

He promised her.

"Where is Nurse?"

"Mrs. Cummins is very ill, my lady," said Mrs. Barbery, her woman, who stood at the foot of the bed.

"Nurse ill," she said, hardly comprehending. "And I can't say goodbye to her."

She again looked at her husband.

“It is *very* hard to part,” she said.

He hid his face, and shook convulsively from head to foot.

“But the time has come,” she continued, breathing with more difficulty. “Before I die, I thank you, dear, dear husband, for all your goodness. I have been a happy wife.”

“I have not been good enough, not worthy of you.” He pressed her to his heart.

“Do not grieve for me too much. I could not bear it. I should have to come back to you.” A smile, a faint, faint reflection of the transporting smile of her youth rested on her face an instant and faded away. What more last whispering words she essayed were hardly audible. She lay speechless with her hand in his; he watched her silently. The heart grew feebler, at length it stopped entirely.

“Mrs. Barbery,” he said, “give her something to drink.” She put the cup to her lips in vain.

“Let me give it to her,” said he, “she will drink it then.”

“It is no use, Sir Harry.”

“What are we to do?” he cried.

At this moment the door opened, and Doctor Mimm was ushered in.

“Grieved to have been so long delayed, Sir Harry. My horse cast a shoe coming across the moor. I had to walk to Padewy

Forge before I could get another.”

“Come here, Doctor, come here quickly,” said Sir Harry. “Look at her.”

The doctor came, walking heavily and uncertainly. He gazed upon the lady. He took her hand and felt the pulse. His eye rested on the ruby, and his thoughts may have been more intent on that than on his patient.

“Umm,” said he. “I was afraid, Sir Harry, I was very much afraid. Alas, her ladyship has paid the debt to nature. What I anticipated has occurred.”

“Why didn’t you come before?” said the husband turning angrily upon him.

“Nothing could have saved her,” replied Doctor Mimm, solemnly shaking his head. “It was decreed. And now, my dear sir, let me persuade you to come with me. I have Mrs. Tibbits below. Let her come up and perform her sad office.”

The husband went with him as in a dream.

“In such melancholy circumstances,” said the doctor, when they had reached the dining-room, “I invariably recommend a little nourishment to the bereaved survivor. It is particularly necessary that they should be sustained. A glass of port wine, or two or three or more, as the physician advises. You will allow me, Sir Harry.” He rang the bell and ordered the butler

to bring up wine. "The best you have in the house. On this distressing occasion Sir Harry must have nothing but the best."

While he regaled himself in the dining-room, Mrs. Tibbits fortified herself upstairs in a like manner with gin. Two hours later the doctor left for home. He spoke to the butler at the door.

"Where is Mrs. Tibbits? I wish to speak to her."

"Mrs. Tibbits is gone, sir."

"The devil she has, and I ordered her not to stir from here till I'd seen her. Out of my way, you blockhead. Let me pass, sir. Can't you see I want to get out at the door?"

"You're to step round at once to my master's, Mrs. Tibbits," said the doctor's man late in the afternoon, "and I wouldn't be in your shoes, my lady, for you're out of favour."

"Now then, you," said the doctor when Mrs. Tibbits appeared, "what did you promise me?"

"Oh, sir, I tried so faithful, I did indeed, but how could I get the ring when Mrs. Barbery was there watching of me? She's a very proud prying woman, sir. Mrs. Cummins herself couldn't have been more so. She has locked the door, took the key, and give it to Sir Harry."

"Very well, Mrs. Tibbits, if you can't perform your promise,

nor can I. No cash.”

“Oh, sir,” falling on her knees, “and when I put the powder you give me for Mrs. Cummins so comfortable in her tea, just as you bid me, and she was very upset, so that every one of them thought she was dying, and I have not a penny to pay the rent.”

He dismissed her with imprecations.

“I must have the cursed ring,” said he. “It’s my one hope. If Dallas doesn’t get his money, he’ll expose me. Let no man hope for a grain of mercy from Dallas.” He sat lost in cogitation.

Sir Harry sent for his man of business that night, and asked that arrangements should be made for the funeral at the earliest date.

“But, Sir Harry, you will hardly allow time to make your more distant neighbours acquainted with the sad intelligence. His Grace for instance would wish to be represented at the obsequies.”

“Then we must dispense with their kind attention. I would rather have it over and done with. What care I for my neighbours?”

Mrs. Barbery inquired whether he wished to take a last farewell before the coffin was closed down.

“No, no,” he replied hastily. “Do not ask me.”

Lady Wild was laid in the mausoleum of the family, which was situated in the park adjoining the church. After the ceremony, when all had dispersed, the sexton locked the gates and made his way home.

But at ten o'clock that night, when the village was asleep, he rose up softly, put on his clothes, took the key from its place, with a crowbar, a lantern and a small sharp knife, and hastened back to the park. It was midsummer, and there was still a faint aftermath of light in the horizon, by which he was able to see his way without the aid of his lantern. As he reached the gate of the mausoleum, the moon rose in the heavens. He stood and waited, his knees shook, and he would fain have turned back home. At length he unlocked the gate and the inner door, and went in. He put down his lantern, and began with determined haste to unfasten the lid of the coffin.

The moon to his guilty eyes shone with a baleful light. It illumined the interior of the mausoleum, and cast long, curious, and very black shadows upon the statuary and memorial tablets of the family, so that it seemed to the impious intruder that the effigies of the deceased gazed upon his wicked design.

When he had exposed the body, he took the left hand, which lay upon the breast, and began fearfully to cut at the finger on which was the ruby ring. As he proceeded, it seemed to him that a tremor passed through the body. He threw down the hand in terror, drank at his brandy, murmured it was strange what a man could fancy there alone at night, and braced himself anew to his task. Blood came oozing forth; then there rose a faint cry from the coffin. He tugged violently at the ring and wrenched it off; he sprang affrighted to the door; he fled into the park, and in his extremity he dropped the ring and the key.

The lady, roused from the long deathlike trance into which she had fallen, stirred and opened her eyes. At first her confused senses refused to aid her; she knew nothing. She spoke faintly. "Where am I? Tell me, where am I?" Again her senses travelled far away, her eyes closed. The pain she was suffering recalled her to life. She saw that blood was flowing; she endeavoured to staunch the wound. She shuddered, she was cold as marble. She struggled, she extricated herself and stepped forth. She drank some of the brandy left by the sexton. This gave her strength to look round, and at length to recognize with horror where she was. She knew not how she had penetrated to that sad abode. By degrees memory

returned. Now she recollected what had happened. She uttered a piercing cry: "Alas, I am dead." As she glanced fearfully round that place of terror, she caught sight of the ring which glittered in the moonlight. She picked it up and put it on her right hand. She found she could walk with tottering steps. She struggled to the door. There the balmy air of night fanned her cheeks and gave her strength. She stepped out into the park. The full and radiant moon shed its beams abroad. Their light seemed friendly to her. The path to the house was clear as day and bright like silver. Long and painful was her journey. Her feeble limbs sank beneath her, often she must stop to recover her breath, but love urged her on, the picture of her husband forlorn and solitary.

The small door which led to his private apartment was open to the garden. He was in the habit of walking late. How often had she on those fair mild nights of June paced the lawns with him, leaning on his arm. She went in, she hastened along the little passage, she opened his door.

"My dearest one," she cried, but the words died on her lips, for she saw her husband was not alone. Kate Wicks the daughter of the innkeeper was on his knee.

He caught sight of her though the girl did not. He cried loudly: "*You!*" His face turned ashy pale. The lady saw his

expression of horror. She stepped back instantly into the darkness and shut the door. As she did so, she heard the rude, untutored accents of the woman. "Why, Sir Harry, what ails you?"

"Nothing ails me," he said, "but it's chill, though it's June. Fill up my glass."

The lady sped on. The moonlight streamed through the great window on the staircase, and lighted her way along the corridor upstairs. She did not know how she reached her own room. There she could sit for a brief space, and bewail her misery.

But she saw that she was not alone; her old nurse was kneeling by her bed weeping and crying out:

"Oh, my lady, my own sweet lady, what can I do without you?"

She came near and said: "Nurse."

The old woman shrank from her with a cry.

"Do not turn from me, Nurse, do not be afraid. I am not dead, alas, I am not dead. Kiss me nurse, and warm me, for I am perished with the cold."

Then the nurse kissed her. "Oh, my own sweet dear lovely lady, oh, my lamb. Oh, thank God you have come back to me. But there's blood on your dear hand and blood stains on your

gown. Come and I'll put you in your bed. Barbery shall get it ready for you."

"No, stop, Nurse. No one must know I am here. Let me go to your room, there we shall be undisturbed."

The nurse lit the fire, undressed the lady, wrapped her in blankets, gave her hot wine to drink, and dressed her wound, weeping and wailing over it.

"But what have they done to you? Who has done it? Some wicked wretch has torn your poor finger."

"I know nothing. I came to myself, and I was alone."

"Alas, that I should have been ill that night of all nights. I thought I should have been the one to go first. I warrant I shouldn't have allowed them to nail you down in a coffin."

Lady Wild accepted the ministrations and caresses of the nurse in silence. She said no word of her husband, nor did the nurse dare to say a word of him to her.

"Now I must sleep," said the lady, "but promise me to wake me at dawn, for there is much I have to do." The nurse sat by her bed, and when the first light began peering through the windows, she woke the lady according to her promise.

"You were sleeping so deeply, my poor lamb, I could not bear to rouse you."

"I shall soon have a long rest," said Lady Wild.

She looked earnestly at the nurse, and said:

“How is my husband, Nurse?”

“Poor man, he’s sleeping. I heard him go to his room very late. These last two nights he has been walking up and down his room for many hours together. Shall I call him?”

“No, why should you trouble him? I know how he has consoled himself. I saw him with her. It is my fit punishment. I would not resign myself to leave my husband. I rebuked the summons of my Maker. Therefore He has let me return to life, to see that in no more than twenty-four hours my place has been filled. Perhaps I was mistaken, perhaps in life already I had no place. My son and my daughter with families of their own do not need me. My work was over.”

“Oh, there are many, many, that need you. All the village are speaking of you,” cried the nurse.

Lady Wild shook her head.

“Tell me the truth as you love me: was this the first time he ——?”

“Oh, my lady, don’t ask me.”

“It was not the first time.”

“You know the Wilds have always been followers of women.”

“Yes, I should not have deemed myself exempted.”

“But this night of all nights in the year, and to bring her into the house. They are saying that he means to marry her. Some say that——”

“It is not for them or for you to discuss your master and my husband. Now attend to me carefully. I am going away. I shall never trouble my husband again, and he must not know I came back. He thinks he saw my spirit. Give me a dress and cloak of yours, Nurse. No one must recognize me on my journey. But first you must go to the mausoleum and take a hammer with you and set all in order, so that nothing may be suspected. There is no time to lose. Get me the dress at once.”

“Dearest Madam, stay and rest a little longer. Where are you going?”

“A long journey, I don’t know where, but I believe I shall find home at last. Kiss me, dear, faithful, kind friend of all my life, and, Nurse, stay with him always, and love him for my sake, as you know how dearly I loved him. Go now, I shall not rest till you return.”

She lay back upon the bed.

But when the nurse was gone, she rose up quickly, took the ruby ring from her finger and found some ink and paper. She wrote this one sentence: “Doth true love last for ever?” She wrapped the ring in the paper. Then she went into the

corridor and down the great stairs to Sir Harry's room. She listened at the door. He was breathing loudly; he was a heavy sleeper, difficult to rouse. She stole in and came to his bedside; he was in a profound sleep. She took his hand which lay on the counterpane; she softly opened it, put the paper containing the ring within it, and closed the fingers. She looked upon him for the last time, kissed him, and left him. She hastened away, she went out at the little garden door and walked as rapidly as she could towards the lake.

It shone like bright gold, and the birds all around her sang with joy. The merry morning smiled upon her. She bade it and earth farewell, and with one prayer for her husband she commended her soul to God, and threw herself into the lake.

Very early that morning Dr. Mimms was at the sexton's cottage.

'I was expecting you last night,' said he.

'Oh, sir, I can't justly bear to tell you, but I haven't nothing for you.'

'Nothing, curse you. How's that?'

'I carried out your instructions, Doctor. I took with me that little knife you give me, Sir, but as true as there's stars in the sky, when I begin, that moved, yes, that moved, Doctor. I wa'nt daunted, I'm a man no one can daunt, on I went again.'

The blood came out, and oh, she gave a screech, such as you never heard. I had the ring, Sir, don't you think that I didn't take it, but something in white came and spirited it out of my hand, and I was driven forth out at the door."

"You liar, you're keeping the ring."

"No, Sir, as far as my knowledge is concerned, the ring's left in the mausoleum, and you can fetch it yourself, Dr. Minims, for I wouldn't go back to the place for a sight more money than you can give me."

"Give me the key of the mausoleum."

"So I would, Sir, willing, but I haven't got it. It dropped from my hands, as I went out of the tomb, Sir, and I haven't had the heart to seek for it."

"You and Tibbits are the choicest couple of rogues it's been my fortune to meet."

Dr. Mimms went immediately to the park. He looked about him carefully to see that he was not observed. Then he hurried to the mausoleum, but the door was locked. In despair he searched for the key, crawling on his hands and knees in the long grass. He searched in vain. Mrs. Cummins had brought it back with her to the house.

When Sir Harry woke, he found the packet in his grasp. He read the words written by the hand of her who was lately

dead. Sweat poured from his face and he shook like a leaf. He rang his bell violently.

“Someone entered this door last night, Greaves,” said he to his man. “Who was it?”

“No one has been here to my knowledge, Sir Harry.”

“Send Mrs. Barbery to me.”

“Was not the ruby ring on her ladyship’s finger when she was laid in the coffin, Mrs. Barbery?”

“Indeed it was, Sir Harry, to my certain knowledge, for I watched beside her to the last.”

Then he sent for Mrs. Cummins, but to his questions she only answered, “I can tell you nothing, I know nothing.”

He shuddered, he put the ring carefully away, and he told himself that it must be returned to the hand which had worn it faithfully for five and thirty years.

He sent to the vicarage that afternoon, and requested the attendance of the incumbent.

“I had the intention of waiting upon you today, Sir Harry,” said Mr. Grisby, “to offer my sincere condolences on the decease of her ladyship. I would endeavour to direct your thoughts to those heavenly consolations which are provided by religion, and also to urge that the blow with which the Almighty has smitten you may be turned to your soul’s profit

by an amendment of your life, of which, Sir Harry, if report speaks truly, there is, even at this solemn and melancholy hour, a serious necessity.”

“I am grateful to you, Mr. Grisby. You see before you one who is sincerely affected. And I ask your counsel, sir, in a special and private matter in which I could consult no other than a minister of religion.”

“What of ghostly aid I can give is at your disposal.”

“Do the spirits of the dead revisit this earth?”

“You ask me a question to which no certain answer has been vouchsafed. Such visitants, it is true, are mentioned in the Scriptures and were known among the ancients. In the time of their ignorance God winked at them, but in these less enthusiastic and more rational days such appearances rest on the evidence of the rude and vulgar. The uneasy conscience can, however, of itself create an airy vision, which is alike a punishment and an admission.”

The words of the austere clergyman alarmed Sir Harry, but in spite of them he was cherishing a secret guilty purpose in his heart. There was another who hankered after the ring besides the doctor. The designing Kate Wicks had desired it from the first moment she saw it on Lady Wild’s finger in church. When it was known in the village that the lady was

dying, she set her heart on extracting it from Sir Harry, over whom by her impudent boldness and coarse flattery and handsome person she exerted an unbounded influence.

By noon a strange tale went about the village. Mrs. Barbery whispered to the housemaid that she had spied the ring that very morning on Sir Harry's bed. In the evening Kate Wicks again came privately to Sir Harry through the little garden door. She used all her wiles and begged and prayed.

"I haven't got it," said he, "you know already that I haven't got it."

"But I know that you have," said she.

"The devil you do. How do you know it?"

She laughed and begged him the more.

"Not tonight," he answered. She entreated him still further.

"Tomorrow, possibly tomorrow," he said in a low voice. "Leave me to myself."

He went to his room, he opened the drawer and took out the paper. He read again the sentence his wife had written; "Doth true love last for ever?" He tore it into a hundred pieces and threw them out of the window. But the words rang in his ears all the more. He went to bed and slept. He opened his eyes, and it seemed to him that he was in the park and in front of him he saw the mausoleum. The door opened, the

gate opened, his wife came forth in her shroud. It was night, but he could see her clearly. She walked past him, moving slowly; she made her way in the moonlight to the house. He saw her face, she was smiling, and immediately he was in his room with Kate Wicks. His wife opened the door and looked upon him. Again he was with her, as she mounted the great staircase and went weeping to her room. Then he saw the nurse with her, but though he listened intently he could not hear what they said to one another. She came out and down the stairs, and now he was in his bed, and she was bending over him, touching his hand, and giving him the ring. He felt her kiss on his brow, he tried to take her hand, but she was gone, and he caught sight of her in a bonnet and cloak. Her countenance was mournful as he had never known it, her eyes were wild. She was walking swiftly along the woodland path which led to the lake. He tried in vain to overtake her. He called, she neither turned nor answered. She seemed to him to walk still faster. She came to the lake, she stood at the brink. He heard a loud noise; it was morning, and his man was knocking at the door.

Throughout the day the remembrance of his dream oppressed him. A hundred times he asked himself, "What was she doing at the side of the lake? Had my dream lasted

but an instant longer, what should I have seen? ”

His bailiff desired to see him, his steward, there were urgent matters he must decide; he dismissed them, he was very much occupied with business. He sat in his chair doing nothing. Late in the afternoon the butler came to him: “Goodrich is below, Sir Harry, he begs leave to speak to you.” Goodrich was the gamekeeper.

“Send him away, I am too busy.”

“He asks very particular to see you, Sir Harry; there is something it is his duty to tell you.”

“I can see no one.”

The butler went out, and returned.

“He begs leave very earnest indeed. He asks me to give you this.”

He put in Sir Harry’s hand the posy ring which Lady Wild had worn on her little finger.

“Great God,” cried Sir Harry, “Am I to have no peace, no peace to the end of my days? Send Goodrich here.”

“This morning,” said the gamekeeper, “so please your honour, me and Bill Haynes rowed over to the island to see his traps. The boat was clogged in some weeds and when we tried to get her off—not to take up your valuable time, Sir Harry—there was a dead body in the way. We lifted it out,

there was no recognising the face, but the dress was a woman's black cloak and bonnet, and on the little finger there was her ladyship's ring."

He gave them money for their services and sent them away.

"That is what she had in her mind," said he to himself. "I knew it, I knew it was so."

He sent for Mrs. Cummins.

"Her ladyship came back here," said he, "the very night of her burial, and you saw her. You swore to me you knew nothing."

"How did you hear she came back, Sir Harry? Not a soul saw her save myself. I alone knew. She made me promise so solemn I would never tell."

"It is no concern of yours how I heard. Tell me all you know."

Then the nurse related her story. "She kissed me, she bid me come back to her as soon as possible, but, though I made all speed, when I returned she was gone."

When he was alone Sir Harry suffered the agony of profound remorse.

This was the hour Kate Wicks would come stealing to the little garden door; now Greaves discreetly whispered she was waiting.

“Curse the woman,” said Sir Harry. “Let her not venture to set foot within this house again.”

That very night the body of the lady was again carried to the mausoleum. The door was ajar, and a light could be seen shining within. The doctor was already there. He had at length with Tibbits' aid secured the key. He was bending down intently searching for the ring, with his back towards them, but at the sound of their entrance he turned round sharply. At the sight of Sir Harry he became white as ashes.

“What business have you here, Sir?” cried Sir Harry.

For answer Doctor Mimms whipped out a pistol, fired, and hit Sir Harry in the leg. Sir Harry fell, and in the confusion which followed the doctor was able to make his escape into the park. He fled from the village that night. His whereabouts were eagerly enquired after by the many to whom he was in debt, but he was never more heard of.

From that time Sir Harry fell into a melancholy, never going outside the gates of the park, refusing to see anyone, turning from the door the friends that visited him. The once jovial house, the merriest in the neighbourhood, became silent and forlorn. Sir Harry was to be met walking continually from the mausoleum to the lake and back again, retracing the steps his wife had taken on her last journey. He

talked to himself ceaselessly on his way, ever murmuring the sentence she had written on the paper: "Doth true love last for ever?" And: "Do not grieve for me too much, I should have to come back to you," her last conscious words to him. Then he would answer: "Alas, my wife, you should not have come back," and begin again his melancholy discourse.

Thus he passed long fair summer days and no one could rouse him. Now came the great gales of autumn, the dark rushing rain, and the grey impenetrable mist, never lifting from the dark wood. His servants entreated him to stop indoors. Mr. Grisby exhorted him to face with more manly fortitude the portion meted out to him by Providence. He heeded not. "My wife is gone," he said frequently, "and I am hurrying fast to follow her. Do not delay me."

He shrank into a bent, infirm old man; it was clear that his time would not be long. Then winter came, and thick snow covered the bleak flat expanses of that desolate portion of the Midlands. A harsh iron frost bound the land.

His body was found one morning close to the spot where his wife had drowned herself. The son in India, hearing of the sad fate of both his parents, made no haste to come home and take possession of his inheritance, so that the house, the park and the gardens fell into decay, and the village people

shunned the place, and said Sir Harry might be seen at nights walking by the lake. And mother after mother, as generations followed each other, related the strange story of the lady who returned to life, and concluded with: “They say, those that know, that it’s wonderful unlucky for any to come back when their time has come. It’s better to lie quiet and at peace.”

From THE ROOM OPPOSITE

by FLORA MAYOR

THE SUNDIAL PRESS