

IV. A Night-Piece

There came a night when the husband was alone in that street waiting. He can do nothing for you now, little nursery governess, you must fight it out by yourself; when there are great things to do in the house the man must leave. Oh, man, selfish, indelicate, coarse-grained at the best, thy woman's hour has come; get thee gone.

He slouches from the house, always her true lover I do believe, chivalrous, brave, a boy until to-night; but was he ever unkind to her? It is the unpardonable sin now; is there the memory of an unkindness to stalk the street with him to-night? And if not an unkindness, still might he not sometimes have been a little kinder?

Shall we make a new rule of life from tonight: always to try to be a little kinder than is necessary?

Poor youth, she would come to the window if she were able, I am sure, to sign that the one little unkindness is long forgotten, to send you a reassuring smile till you and she meet again; and, if you are not to meet again, still to send you a reassuring, trembling smile.

Ah, no, that was for yesterday; it is too late now. He wanders the streets thinking of her tonight, but she has forgotten him. In her great hour the man is nothing to the woman; their love is trivial now.

He and I were on opposite sides of the street, now become familiar ground to both of us, and divers pictures rose before me in which Mary A---- walked. Here was the morning after my only entry into her house. The agent had promised me to have the obnoxious notice-board removed, but I apprehended that as soon as the letter announcing his intention reached her she would remove it herself, and when I passed by in the morning there she was on a chair and a foot-stool pounding lustily at it with a hammer. When it fell she gave it such a vicious little kick.

There were the nights when her husband came out to watch for the postman. I suppose he was awaiting some letter big with the fate of a picture. He dogged the postman from door to door like an assassin or a guardian angel; never had he the courage to ask if there was a letter for him, but almost as it fell into the box he had it out and tore it open, and then if the door closed despairingly the woman who had been at the window all this time pressed her hand to her heart. But if the news was good they might

emerge presently and strut off arm in arm in the direction of the pork emporium.

One last picture. On summer evenings I had caught glimpses of them through the open window, when she sat at the piano singing and playing to him. Or while she played with one hand, she flung out the other for him to grasp. She was so joyously happy, and she had such a romantic mind. I conceived her so sympathetic that she always laughed before he came to the joke, and I am sure she had filmy eyes from the very start of a pathetic story.

And so, laughing and crying, and haunted by whispers, the little nursery governess had gradually become another woman, glorified, mysterious. I suppose a man soon becomes used to the great change, and cannot recall a time when there were no babes sprawling in his Mary's face.

I am trying to conceive what were the thoughts of the young husband on the other side of the street. "If the barrier is to be crossed to-night may I not go with her? She is not so brave as you think her. When she talked so gaily a few hours ago, O my God, did she deceive even you?"

Plain questions to-night. "Why should it all fall on her? What is the man that he should be flung out into the street in this terrible hour? You have not been fair to the man."

Poor boy, his wife has quite forgotten him and his trumpery love. If she lives she will come back to him, but if she dies she will die triumphant and serene. Life and death, the child and the mother, are ever meeting as the one draws into harbour and the other sets sail. They exchange a bright "All's well" and pass on.

But afterward?

The only ghosts, I believe, who creep into this world, are dead young mothers, returned to see how their children fare. There is no other inducement great enough to bring the departed back. They glide into the acquainted room when day and night, their jailers, are in the grip, and whisper, "How is it with you, my child?" but always, lest a strange face should frighten him, they whisper it so low that he may not hear. They bend over him to see that he sleeps peacefully, and replace his sweet arm beneath the coverlet, and they open the drawers to count how many little vests he has. They love to do these things.

What is saddest about ghosts is that they may not know their child. They expect him to be just as he was when they left him, and they are easily bewildered, and search for him from room to room, and hate the unknown boy he has become. Poor, passionate souls, they may even do him an injury. These are the ghosts that go wailing about old houses, and foolish wild stories are invented to explain what is all so pathetic and simple. I know of a man who, after wandering far, returned to his early home to pass the evening of his days in it, and sometimes from his chair by the fire he saw the door open softly and a woman's face appear. She always looked at him very vindictively, and then vanished. Strange things happened in this house. Windows were opened in the night. The curtains of his bed were set fire to. A step on the stair was loosened. The covering of an old well in a corridor where he walked was cunningly removed. And when he fell ill the wrong potion was put in the glass by his bedside, and he died. How could the pretty young mother know that this grizzled interloper was the child of whom she was in search?

All our notions about ghosts are wrong. It is nothing so petty as lost wills or deeds of violence that brings them back, and we are not nearly so afraid of them as they are of us.

One by one the lights of the street went out, but still a lamp burned steadily in the little window across the way. I know not how it happened, whether I had crossed first to him or he to me, but, after being for a long time as the echo of each other's steps, we were together now. I can have had no desire to deceive him, but some reason was needed to account for my vigil, and I may have said something that he misconstrued, for above my words he was always listening for other sounds. But however it came about he had conceived the idea that I was an outcast for a reason similar to his own, and I let his mistake pass, it seemed to matter so little and to draw us together so naturally. We talked together of many things, such as worldly ambition. For long ambition has been like an ancient memory to me, some glorious day recalled from my springtime, so much a thing of the past that I must make a railway journey to revisit it as to look upon the pleasant fields in which that scene was laid. But he had been ambitious yesterday.

I mentioned worldly ambition. "Good God!" he said with a shudder.

There was a clock hard by that struck the quarters, and one o'clock passed and two. What time is it now? Twenty past two. And now? It is still twenty past two.

I asked him about his relatives, and neither he nor she had any. "We have a friend--" he began and paused, and then rambled into a not very understandable story about a letter and a doll's house and some unknown man who had bought one of his pictures, or was supposed to have done so, in a curiously clandestine manner. I could not quite follow the story.

"It is she who insists that it is always the same person," he said. "She thinks he will make himself known to me if anything happens to her." His voice suddenly went husky. "She told me," he said, "if she died and I discovered him, to give him her love."

At this we parted abruptly, as we did at intervals throughout the night, to drift together again presently. He tried to tell me of some things she had asked him to do should she not get over this, but what they were I know not, for they engulfed him at the first step. He would draw back from them as ill-omened things, and next moment he was going over them to himself like a child at lessons. A child! In that short year she had made him entirely dependent on her. It is ever thus with women: their first deliberate act is to make their husband helpless. There are few men happily married who can knock in a nail.

But it was not of this that I was thinking. I was wishing I had not degenerated so much.

Well, as you know, the little nursery governess did not die. At eighteen minutes to four we heard the rustle of David's wings. He boasts about it to this day, and has the hour to a syllable as if the first thing he ever did was to look at the clock.

An oldish gentleman had opened the door and waved congratulations to my companion, who immediately butted at me, drove me against a wall, hesitated for a second with his head down as if in doubt whether to toss me, and then rushed away. I followed slowly. I shook him by the hand, but by this time he was haw-haw-hawing so abominably that a disgust of him swelled up within me, and with it a passionate desire to jeer once more at Mary A--

"It is little she will care for you now," I said to the fellow; "I know the sort of woman; her intellectuals (which are all she has to distinguish her from the brutes) are so imperfectly developed that she will be a crazy thing about that boy for the next three years. She has no longer occasion for you, my dear sir; you are like a picture painted out."

But I question whether he heard me. I returned to my home. Home! As if one alone can build a nest. How often as I have ascended the stairs that lead to my lonely, sumptuous rooms, have I paused to listen to the hilarity of the servants below. That morning I could not rest: I wandered from chamber to chamber, followed by my great dog, and all were alike empty and desolate. I had nearly finished a cigar when I thought I heard a pebble strike the window, and looking out I saw David's father standing beneath. I had told him that I lived in this street, and I suppose my lights had guided him to my window.

"I could not lie down," he called up hoarsely, "until I heard your news. Is it all right?"

For a moment I failed to understand him. Then I said sourly: "Yes, all is right."

"Both doing well?" he inquired.

"Both," I answered, and all the time I was trying to shut the window. It was undoubtedly a kindly impulse that had brought him out, but I was nevertheless in a passion with him.

"Boy or girl?" persisted the dodderer with ungentlemanlike curiosity.

"Boy," I said, very furiously.

"Splendid," he called out, and I think he added something else, but by that time I had closed the window with a slam.