

A TELL-TALE WIDOW.

From Peterson's Magazine.

"Lucia must lead a dull life," I said.

"A fearful life, poor thing! She's their half-sister, you know. They always kept her away from other young people. She was sent one year to a boarding school; but Dr. Haldane went before the session was half over and brought her home, and since then the child has never spent even a whole day outside this horrid tumble-down old house. She slips away when ever she can, but Miss Haldane is sure to go after her, and watches her like a hawk. Indeed, it looks as if they feared she would tell something about them! And, since the old gentleman died, they've all kept indoors more than ever."

"Who was he?" I inquired. "He was their great-uncle—no old as the hills—who lived here, and died so suddenly last summer. And of all the strange doings! Well—if it had been anyone but the Haldanes!"

"What did they do?" I inquired, with trembling eagerness. "Why, nobody was asked to the funeral—not a soul even saw the old gentleman's corpse. It got out by accident at the very last—just before they buried him."

"Was he poor—dependent on them?" I asked. "Oh dear no! He had money, but was the greatest of misers. A wicked old wretch he was, and I reckon they were glad enough when he died, as they got all his money; and Dr. Haldane has no practice—is over head and ears in debt."

"How long ago did the old gentleman die?" I asked. "Let me see! July, was it? Yes; about the middle of July."

"Was it the 17th?" I put the question with a thrill of apprehension. "Why, yes, it was—the night of the 17th. He died in a fit, they said. How did you know?"

"Oh—I remember hearing something about it," I stammered. "They must be very strange, from what you tell me, but they are exceedingly kind to me. Lucia is beautiful and a sweet creature."

"Yes, she is, very different from the other two," the lady remarked, and soon after took her leave.

When she was gone, I left my easy chair and paced the floor, too excited to keep still. The dark question repeated itself again and again: "Was it a murder, a cruel fiendish murder, that I had caught a glimpse of that night?" Link after link had been unfolded unfolded by what my visitor had said; there was the motive, the probable crime, the hurried private burial, the dread of discovery, the secret?

Was she an unwilling witness—doomed to keep a hideous confidante? Poor, fluttering, timid thing! No wonder she looked so fearfully over her shoulder! What a clumsy, careless murder it was, too—though; at that time of night, a hundred people might have seen what I saw! But, good heavens! did I see it, after all, or was it fancy? The light was so dim, the time of passing so short, and yet—harassed by doubts as to my own course, I asked myself what should I do? Murder should be avenged—but what was this to me? These people had been kind to me; must I play the traitor—raking up their past—starting suspicion against them? Besides, what real proof had I? My wisest course would be to leave the house as soon as possible and let this matter alone; but the morbid fascination of it held me fast—I could not go.

Worn out, I threw myself back in my chair and lay with closed eyes—the twilight gathering around. Presently there was a soft step, a knock at the door, and Lucia came in. She seemed fitfully sad this evening, and, seating herself near me, covered her face with her hands—breathing a low sigh. I watched her a while in silence, then asked: "Lucia, do you ever see any ghosts here?"

She started, shuddering, and looked behind her, then at me. "Ghosts—ghosts?" she whispered, like a scared child. "Yes," I said. "Did you see one behind you just now?"

"No—no," she answered, shrieking close to my knees; "I can't see it. I know it's there—I feel it catching—catching at me—but when I look round it's gone."

"Why, Lucia, do you really have such fancies? What is it behind you?" "Dreadful things—horrible! Oh, if you knew—if I could tell you; but I can't—I can't!"

"Why not?" I asked. "Oh, I dare not—I can hear the voices—the cries—dreadful faces grin at me through the dark—oh, such sights! hush! what was that?" She rushed to the door and seemed to listen—while I, hearing nothing, looked at her amazed. I had never seen her so before. She came back to her seat at quietly and with a curious look—on an older face, it would have been cunning.

"She wants to tell me something," I thought, "but is afraid." "What is the matter, Lucia—what did you hear?" I asked. She laughed aloud, saying: "Have I scared you with my foolish fancies?" "Did your brother and sister forbid you to confide in me?" I demanded, quickly. She laughed again and shook her head.

"Mrs. Wake was telling me about your uncle who died. Did you miss him much?" "At this question, I saw her glance flash up and sink down, like a falling star in the twilight. She moved uneasily.

"My uncle, ah yes. He went away. One day, he was here, and then—I remember nothing more; he was gone."

A strange look came over her face. "Did you see him after he was dead?" "See him—see him? Yes, always!" she cried, in a low, wail, springing up with hands clasped over her forehead.

Should I question further? Surely this was the brink of discovery. But, as I hesitated, she flung up her hands, stared wildly around, and ran from the room.

For several days, I saw little of Lucia, and then she looked drooping and ill. Miss Haldane has a half-watery, constrained air ever. My arm was doing well—in a week or two, I would be able to travel, but I was not at all anxious to leave Black Rock.

One day, I awoke from a nap and found Miss Haldane, dark and gaunt as usual, sitting in my room. Looking at her, a sudden impulse possessed me. Could I shock that hard face into a betrayal of her secret? Could she falter and turn pale? If she were indeed a murderer, could I win some proof of it now? In a instant, I had spoken.

"I had a dream—such a strange dream—some time ago," I began. "Ah!" said Miss Haldane, frowning calmly. "I have strange dreams myself, if some times. Tell me yours."

What do you think of my dream, Miss Haldane?" I asked, looking at her steadily. "Something of a nightmare, I should say! Dreams would be dangerous sometimes—if they were realities."

She had risen as she spoke, and now walked abruptly out of the room. I was aware of danger, of my own imprudence in betraying what I knew or suspected to these people. "If they were murderers, what might I not dread—in their power as I was? Would not crime seek to conceal crime? I asked myself—and yet did not feel afraid."

The next day, I saw nothing of Lucia. Miss Haldane, who appeared as usual, brought me my breakfast and dinner—there seemed no servants employed—and she told me that Lucia was not well.

The day dragged slowly on. It was very warm for the season; there was an oppression, a sense of coming storm in the air, and late in the afternoon, black clouds came rolling up from the south—black and ominous. There was the usual dead calm, the stifling heat, the

sense of awful pause, then, with a fierce lightning glare and a burst of thunder, with howling wind and dashing rain, the storm was upon us. The house had been silent as a tomb all day, except for the noise of the passing trains. Now one flew shrieking by, adding its voice to the storm-din without, and at the same time I heard a scream within-doors and not far from me—like one that I had heard in the house once before. I sprang to the door and listened. There were hastily footsteps upstairs and down, the opening and shutting of doors, and their again, but further off a shrill. What was going on in this horrid house? My first thought was of Lucia—th t h was being ill-treated or perhaps murdered to—then that I would be the next victim. I was frightened, my knees shook, and a cold sweat broke out over me; but I did not shut up here I begged for it. Must find out what was going on—even at the risk of my life.

[To be continued.]

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