

The Storyteller

THE LAVENDER LADY,

(Conclusion).

II.

THAT night, at bedtime, Ethelberta loitered on the broad stairway, waiting for Betty to come and brush her hair. Somehow, she did not fancy walking through the picture-gallery alone. Through the long, narrow oriel window, half-way up the stair-case, the moon shone in such great brilliance that the dim hanging-lamp in the hall below did not deaden its beams.

Ethelberta put her face close to the glass as she waited, admiring the clear cold light glinting through the trees. Thinking of all she had heard that day, she looked toward the rhododendron thicket. Was she crazy? Had her senses deserted her? Surely, surely her eyes could not so deceive her! Just on the edge of the thicket stood a tall figure in lavender silk—none other than the ghostly lady! At that moment the moon sailed under a cloud. Ethelberta gave a stifled scream, and flew down two flights of stairs until she reached the servant's hall.

In her childhood's days, before she went off to school, she had preferred the brightness and life of the servants' hall to sitting alone with her father; and especially just before bedtime she would wander down and coax Foster away from his game of cards with the other servants to play a tune on the fiddle for her. Lately she had thought it beneath her dignity to do this, though more than once she had sighed regretfully after the warmth and brightness and chatter so attractive to her in her childhood's days. She was not far from being a child now; but when a girl first grows up it seems to her that between her present state and that from which she has barely emerged there is a great gulf fixed. Now, however, forgetting all this, she flew breathlessly into the servants' hall. She did not find them settled down to a game of cards as in old days, but all listening attentively to some thrilling tale that Betty, the young chambermaid, was relating. She stopped as Ethelberta came in.

Now that she was no longer alone, the girl began to feel half ashamed of her fear; so she merely said:

'Come, Betty: I want to go to bed, and am tired of waiting for you.'

'O Miss Ethelberta, I'm that flustered I don't know which way to look! Me and Mr. Foster have both seen the ghost. My mother says as I'll have to give notice, for she don't want no ghostesses casting spells over me.'

'You oughter be ashamed of yourself, Betty,' said the cook, 'frightening the poor dear young lady like that. I am ashamed of you!'

'I have seen it too,' said Ethelberta. And thereat she forgot all her newly assumed dignity and sat down as of old on the little hassock by the fireplace, with the brightly burnished copper cooking vessels ranged along the mantelshelf. There she stayed for two hours, hearing all that each one of them could tell of the Lavender Lady. Eleven o'clock struck, then twelve.

'How late it is! I must go to bed. Come, Betty!' she said.

The two of them walked slowly up the stairs, Ethelberta thinking to herself:

'Now I must show Betty that I am not afraid. She is only a poor ignorant country girl.'

As they neared the picture-gallery she would have given anything to scamper past the pictures as fast as she could, but desisted.

As they neared the Lavender Lady, Betty began to go very slowly, and Ethelberta had to wait for her and almost pull her past. As she took hold of the girl's hand she found she was trembling with fright. The moon was full on the picture, and the canvas shook perceptibly. The same heavy sigh, almost unmistakable, came from it. At this they both ran until they reached Ethelberta's room.

When she was ready for bed, and Betty stood with the lamp in her hand, the thought came to her: 'How can I stay alone to-night? Could Betty stay with me?' But there was only a single bed. So, with reassurances that there was no occasion to be frightened, which she herself was far from feeling, she bade Betty good-night and dismissed her.

She heard the maid's heavy shoes running along the corridor, and as the noise died away in the distance she heard a crash and a faint sound of falling glass. But not for anything would she get out of bed to see what had happened. Ethelberta was a devout Catholic. To-night she had taken her rosary to bed with her and held it in her hands; it seemed to make her feel safer.

After a while she fell asleep, but her sleep was troubled and fitful. An hour or two before dawn she woke, feeling terribly warm. She flung part of the bedclothes back, but the heat seemed only to increase. Her breath came fast, and presently she could hardly breathe at all: something seemed to choke her. She gave a little scream and stretched out her hand to the wall. It was so hot she pulled her hand away quickly. What could have happened?

She jumped up and lighted a lamp—the room was full of smoke! As she opened her door a cloud of smoke rushed past her. She fled, lamp in hand, in the direction of the stairway; but a gush of flames stopped her short as she reached the big window. Half paralyzed with fear, she looked out into the night, wondering if she should leap out of the window; then she turned and saw the flames burning up picture after picture. With a dread fascination, she watched them crawl on to the picture of the Lavender Lady, and the canvas burn up like paper. As she gazed, behind where the

picture had been a small, low, long room, with mouldy stone walls, more like a cave than a room, met her eyes.

'Is this real or am I dreaming?' she wondered.

Crouching on a stool in a corner of this cave-room she saw the figure of a woman. She had a child on her knee, and was leaning back toward a hole in the wall, calling in a distressed voice:

'Conrad, bring a light quick, till I find my little sister and get her out of these terrible flames. I cannot come without her!'

Thereupon the strange woman stood up, still holding her child. She was tall and dressed in lavender, with collar and cuffs of antique lace. She moved gently toward Ethelberta, and, taking her by the hand, said softly:

'Come, dear little sister! We have no time to lose. Follow me and all will be well.'

Holding the lamp in one hand, her other clasped in that of the strangely substantial ghost-lady, the young girl walked across the low room. As they reached the hole the lady bent her head slightly and walked into it, Ethelberta following—scarcely surprised any more now, but merely thinking, like Alice in Wonderland, 'Curiouser and curiouser!'

She found herself in a long, dank-smelling passage, declining in a gradual slope. The walls were damp and slimy, with a kind of whitish lichen growing on them. Ethelberta could not but think of Alice sinking down the interminable well. As she went she heard the chapel bell pulled violently, and shouts growing fainter and fainter. Still they plodded along this dark underground passage. It reminded Ethelberta more of the family vault than anything she had ever seen before. The strange lady said no more, but just walked on.

At last they came to some steep, mossy steps, and presently they emerged into the moonlight. Ethelberta rubbed her eyes and looked round her. They were in a dense thicket. She stretched out her hand and pulled at something—it was a rhododendron leaf. The sky all above her was lurid with flames. She pushed through the bushes till she could see the Hall, and then she knew in a moment where she was. Several men from the village had come up, and, with the servants, were doing their best to extinguish the flames.

Ethelberta stood watching them as one spellbound. But presently the flames seemed to dwindle and gradually die out. Stone does not easily burn, and though the fire had made some little headway unnoticed, they could extinguish it without great difficulty.

'Alas, alas for father's pictures!' said Ethelberta to herself. 'For he loves them as children.' Then for the first time she thought of her father.

Running quickly toward the house, she called out to everyone she met:

'Where is my father!'

For some time she could get no answer, but at last she met Foster, the butler. He was badly smirched and scorched by the fire and his face was full of trouble.

'My dear young lady, I cannot tell. The last time I saw him he was rushing through the flames to your room to save you. I went after him, but we found you gone. He was not satisfied though, and kept on looking and hunting. Then I lost sight of him.'

'O Foster, Foster, we must find him! Where can he be? Let us come and search for him everywhere.'

Poor Foster feared the worst, so he persuaded his young mistress to stay quietly while Betty brought her some warm clothing saying he could search better alone.

Ethelberta sank on an old carved oak bench in the hall. How glad was she to see Nana hurrying toward her, with a big warm shawl on her arm, which she wrapped round Ethelberta, taking the young girl's slender form on her knee and comforting her as though she were a little child!

The big arched door, studded with iron nails, was unbolted and flung wide open. The first grey streaks of coming dawn began to appear in the sky. The figure of a tall man struggling under some heavy burden was visible coming toward the door. As he came closer they saw that he carried in his arms a man whose garments were burned almost off him.

They passed through the doorway, and Nana whispered excitedly:

'As I live, Miss Ethelberta, that is Mr. Frondberg, who married your sister, Miss Ernestine!'

He seemed at first not to see them, and hurried by, bearing his burden straight to the library. Depositing it very gently on the sofa, he rang the bell loudly.

Foster, returning in great trouble from a fruitless search for his master, recognised the library bell with a bounding hope. Could it be the old squire himself? He entered the room just behind Nana and Ethelberta.

Stretched unconscious on the sofa lay Mr. Branscombe. His deliverer stood beside him, gently extricating his injured arm from the few remaining charred rags which clung around it.

'Thank God!' said the old servant. 'I had given him up for dead.'

Ethelberta knelt by her father, asking in a terrified voice:

'Oh, tell me he will not die. He cannot, must not die.'

Foster now noticed for the first time the other occupant of the room. Nana wondered would he recognise that face, so deeply impressed on her own memory. Apparently not; he had not had the opportunity to know it that she had.

'O sir,' said the old man, 'you have saved my master's life! Indeed it was bravely done. How can we thank you. You are burned yourself, sir, I can see. I will go at once for the doctor, to attend to both you and master.'

The stranger signified his assent, and Foster left the room.

As he did so the old squire opened his eyes. Seeing Ethelberta safe and sound beside him, they lighted up with joy, and he said, with a half smile: