

HAUNTED.

By NORMA LORIMER, Author of "A Sweet Disorder."

CHAPTER II.



DID not see Lucille Ivory until dinner-time; and even now, all these long years since, I can recall the surprise her beauty gave me. She was the most exquisite creature I had ever seen, but so fragile and childish for her years I could scarcely think of her as a woman. Her eyes had retained the pure expression of a child's, and her skin was delicately veined, but too clear for health. I was irresistibly drawn to her, for goodness and gentleness radiated from her in such a way that even the rough boys who were inclined to class such girls as 'muffs,' looked up to her with almost reverence. Of course no one expected much from Lucille but passive gentleness.

"After dinner she fluttered over to where I was sitting in a deep recess in the window and sat down beside me. 'You know my Robin,' she said, 'so we must be friends, and of course you are clever, for Robin always likes clever people, and I am so stupid.' She smiled with the shadow of a sadness in her great childish eyes, and sighed. 'I don't know why he wants to marry me, for I can't enter into any of the things he takes most interest in, and I sometimes feel jealous of girls I hear talking to him about things I don't understand; but perhaps love has nothing to do with that sort of thing, for I should love Robin just as much if he were deaf and dumb. Do you think men like clever women for their wives?' She said this with an expression in her voice which asked for a denial. 'No man could want anything better than you for a wife,' I said, 'your beauty would make up for everything.'

"We were almost strangers to one another, but here we were conversing as old friends, and, Lal dear, my heart had gone out to her, so that I scarcely grudged her the happiness that might have been mine. I made up my mind to write to Robin and implore him to forget all I had ever asked him. I could not be the means of breaking her poor simple heart, and so we sat and talked with the sympathy of old friends until the post came.

"In that out-of-the-world old place the daily post which did not come in until nine o'clock at night was the most important event of the day. Ah! how well I remember all the bright faces eagerly questioning my hostess as she unlocked the old leather bag and distributed the letters round to the different members of the household. That night there were only two letters, and some papers. One letter was for Lucille Ivory, and the other was for me. I little thought at that moment that they were both from Robin. I slipped mine into my pocket in case she should notice the handwriting, and I saw Lucille hold hers in both her hands like a child with a precious toy.

"'I know you want to go to bed now, Lucille,' my hostess said, smiling tenderly at the girl's happy face. 'That letter is much too precious to be read in public.'

"Lucille at once said good-night all round, like a child that has been sent to bed with something sweet to comfort it. And from the open door I watched her going slowly up the stairs, halting now and then to look at the

dear hand-writing; her beauty as the candle threw a bright glow over her face sent a cold thrill to my heart. Mine was nothing compared to hers, and Robin's admiration of it had taught me how much men love a beautiful woman. I looked at myself in a glass as I passed; how proud and cold I looked beside her, and my eyes had deepened into grey beside hers which were so rarely blue.

"When she had left her room my hostess said, half aloud, and half to herself, 'What a dainty thing it is to be sure, and yet I can quite understand.' She never said what, but I knew by the expression in her eyes.

"Then she turned to me—I was waiting to bid her good-night. 'Mind what I said, children, no one is to mention a word about the stupid ghost to Lucille. I had a letter from her doctor when she arrived, and he does not speak very hopefully about her health.'

"I started, for I had forgotten about the ghost, and my promise to sleep in the room. My hostess saw this, and asked me if I repented of my promise.

"There was an exclamation from the boys. 'No, you don't, do you? We know a promise from you is "plumb straight," you won't back out?' 'No, I won't back out,' I said, 'I don't care a rap for the ghost. I'll let it in if it knocks, and take a photograph of it for you.' Ah, my proud boast, when that awful moment came, how did I keep it? Not 'plumb straight' as Jack said, I'm afraid.

"When I said good-night the boys escorted me to my room. It was not a very inviting room, I must confess, for it was panelled with dark oak, and the light from the candles only gleamed up in the centre of the room, and left the corners in shadowy darkness. There was nothing modern in any way about the room, and I thought longingly of the brightly upholstered light little room I had vacated at the other end of the wing.

"The richly-carved four-poster looked like an ancient Gothic tomb in some side chapel of a cathedral. It was just the sort of room where an army of ghosts might lurk in every corner."

"Aunt Net," I interrupted, holding both her hands in mine, "I hate corners, I think round rooms are best for women, don't you?"

"Don't be nervous, child," she said, "what would Ned say?" And then with a deep sigh she went on. "After whispering a good deal so that Lucille should not hear what we were saying—I knew she would not, for I could picture her with her bright head bent near to the candle devouring Robin's letter—I put my hand in my pocket and touched mine, and then I grew impatient to be left with it alone. How I envied Lucille with her proud right to show her joy in receiving his letter. I said good-night."

"At last I was alone. The old oak-door shut so closely and so well did it fit, that it was difficult but for the bolt to find it in the panelling. I sat down to read Robin's letter, and, Lal dear, I shall never forget the agony of that moment. He had written to me not knowing that I was visiting at the old manor, and his letter had been forwarded to me.

"It was to tell me that he was going to write to Lucille to tell her that he could not marry her without first confessing to her that he had only a brotherly affection for her, and that he had given his heart to another woman. 'For it is impossible,' he said, 'to make love

obey one's commands. I will not marry any other woman but you, Lucille, for even if I wished to do so, she whom I love is too honourable for that, but I feel that it is my duty to tell you that my love for you has never been the love of a passionate lover.'

"That is almost word for word of what he told her, and I had urged him to say, 'I am willing to marry you and I will make you a good and true husband if you are still ready to be my wife.' There was little else in his letter to me except to bid me good-bye for ever. If Lucille gave him up, he was going out to X—. There was not one word of love in the letter, but, dear heart, I knew what suffering it had cost him to write it."

Tears were streaming down Aunt Netta's cheeks, and a bright flush had gathered on her cheeks.

"Don't tell me any more, sweet," I said, "if it grieves you so much; let me light the candles and I will play you something."

"No, Lal. It will do me good to tell it to some one, for the memory of it has been for me alone to bear all these years. I put the candle and the matches near my bed, and as I blew out the light I noticed how the moonlight filled the old room with weird shadows; but Robin's letter had driven the ghost almost out of my memory, and as I lay down to sleep I scarcely gave it a second thought. But I found it hard to sleep; I thought of Lucille and what misery Robin's letter must have caused her. No doubt now her pillow was wet with tears; then I wondered how long she would sorrow for him, and if her nature was capable of a lasting grief, or if like a child, she would turn over a new leaf in her life's scrap-book and smile sweetly at the next picture.

"And then at last I fell asleep and dreamt that Robin and I were floating down a rapid stream in a frail canoe, and that Lucille was left standing on the bank weeping and wringing her hands.

"I must have slept for more than two hours, for it was past eleven before I dozed off, and I was awaked suddenly by the church clock striking two. It was strange that the striking should have waked me that night, for my other room was much nearer the church, and the clock had never waked me before.

"My dream had made me nervous, and I woke with a disagreeable alertness, as if I was expecting something to happen. The moon had gone down and the sky was at its darkest before dawn. I had almost forced myself back into calmness, when I heard a gentle tap-tapping at the door. My heart for that moment stood still, and the next second began beating so violently I could almost hear it in the horrible stillness of the room. Then the second clear tap-tapping came, and my heart almost leapt out of my mouth. I had no power left to speak, and a deadly sweat was trickling over me; and now the third tap-tapping came, and an imploring voice said, 'It's only me, please let me in.' Then, child, I plunged below the clothes, far down in the big, carved bed, and stayed there panting like a frightened hare. Where had my courage flown? I could not think nor breathe. I almost suffocated, and yet I could not help listening. Gradually I calmed down, and shrinking with fear I put my head to get some air, dreading at the same time to meet the sound of the tap, tap, as to hear the pleading, gentle voice. But all was still, there was not a sound to be heard, and I turned heavily in the bed to make it creak, for I felt I must do something to break the stillness, or in my