

MILES WALLINGFORD

By James Fenimore Cooper

CHAPTER VIII

"There have been sweet singing voices in your walks that now are still; There are seats left void, in your earthly homes, Which none again may fill."

Mrs. Hernans

I never saw the body of my sister, after I handed it, resembling a sleeping infant, to the arms of Lucy. There is a sort of mania in some, a morbid curiosity to gaze on the features of the dead; but with me it has ever been the reverse. I had been taken to the family room to contemplate and weep over the faces of both my parents, but this was at an age when it became me to be passive. I was now at a time of life when I might be permitted to judge for myself; and as soon as I began to think of all on the subject, which was not for some hours, however, I resolved that the last look of love, the sweet countenance, sinking in death it is true, but still animate and beaming with the sentiments of her pure heart, should be the abiding impression of my sister's form. I have cherished it ever since, and often have I rejoiced that I did not permit any subsequent imagines of a corpse to supplant it.

As respects both my parents, the images left on my mind, for years and years, were painful rather than pleasing. Grace's body was no sooner out of my arms, I had scarcely imprinted the last long kiss on the ivory cheek, but still warm, Clawaybonny had no impertinent eyes to draw a mourner to his closet, and I felt as if it were impossible to breathe unless I could obtain the freedom of the open air. As I crossed the little lawn, the walls from the kitchen reached me. Now that the invalid could no longer be attended by their lamentations, the unsophisticated negroes gave vent to their feelings without reserve. I heard their outcries long after every other sound from the house was lost on my ear.

I held my way along the road, with no other view but to escape from the scene I had just quitted, and entered the very little wood which might be said to have been the last object of the external world that had attracted my sister's attention. Here everything reminded me of the past; of the days of childhood and youth; of the manner in which the four Clawaybonny children had lived together, and romped about the thickets in confidence and love. I sat in that wood an hour; a strange unearthly hour it seemed to me! I saw Grace's angel countenance imprinted on the leaves, heard her low, but gay laugh, as she was wont to let it be heard in the hours of happiness, and the tones of her gentle voice sounded in my ears almost as familiarly as in life. Rupert and Lucy were there, too. I saw them, heard them, and tried to enter into their innocent merriment, as I had done of old; but fearful glimpses of the sad truth would interpose in time to break the charm.

When I left that little wood, it was to seek a larger cover, and fields farther removed from the house. It was dark before I thought of returning; all that time was passed in a species of mystical hallucination, in which the mind was lost in scenes foreign to those actually present. I saw Grace's sweet image everywhere; I heard her voice at every step. Now she was the infant I was permitted to drag in her little wagon, the earliest of all my impressions of that beloved sister; then she was following me as I trundled my hoop; next came her little lessons in morals, and warnings against doing wrong, or some grave, but gentle reproof, or some actual committal; then she was in the pride of young womanhood, lovely and fitted to be loved, the snarer of my confidence, and one capable of entering into all my plans of life. How often that day did the humming of a bee, become blended in my imagination with the call of that beloved sister whose spirit had ascended to heaven, and who was no more to mingle in my concerns or those of life!

At one time I had determined to pass the night abroad, and commune with the stars, each of which I fancied, in turn, as they began slowly to show themselves in the faint above, might be the hiding-place of the departed spirit. If I thought so much and so intensely of Grace, I thought also of Lucy. Nor was good Mr. Hardinge entirely forgotten. I felt for their uneasiness, and saw it was my duty to return. Neb and two or three others who had been looking for me in all directions but that in which I was; and I felt a melancholy pleasure as I occasionally saw these simple-minded creatures meet and converse. Their gestures, their earnestness, their tears, for I could see that they were often weeping, indicated all that they were speaking of their "young mistress"; how they spoke, I wanted no other communications to understand.

Others had ever been a family of love. My father, manly, affectionate and strongly attached to my mother, was admirably suited to sustain that dominion of the heart which the last had established from her earliest days at Clawaybonny. This power of the feelings had insensibly extended itself to the slaves, who seldom failed to manifest how keenly all they were to the interests and happiness of their owners. Among the negroes, there was but one who was considered as fallen below his proper level, or who was regarded as an outlier. This was an old fellow who bore the name of Vulcan, and who worked as a blacksmith on the skirts of the farm, having been named by my grandfather with the express intention of placing him at the anvil. This fellow's trade caused him to pass most of his youth in an adjacent village, or hamlet, where unfortunately he had acquired habits that unsuited him to live as those around him were accustomed to live. He became in a measure alienated from us, drinking, and otherwise living a life that brought great scandal on his sable connections who were gathered more closely around the homestead. Nevertheless, a death, or a return home, or any important event in the family, was sure to bring even Vulcan back to his allegiance; and for a month afterwards, he would be a reformed man. On this occasion he was one of those who were

out in the fields and woods in quest of me, and he happened to be the very individual by whom I was discovered. The awe-struck, solemn manner in which the reckless Vulcan approached, were all other proofs wanting, would have proclaimed the weight of the blow that had fallen on Clawaybonny. The eyes of this fellow were always red, but it was easy to see that even he had been shedding tears. He knew he was no favorite; seldom came near me, unless it were to excuse some of his neglects or faults, and lived under a sort of ban for his constantly recurring misdeeds. Nevertheless, a common cause of grief now gave him confidence, and Neb himself could hardly have approached me with a manner of more ease, but respectful familiarity.

"Ah! Masser Mile! Masser Mile!" Vulcan exclaimed, certain that we felt all on this topic, if on no other; "your young mistress! when we eber got 'noder like she?"

"My sister is in heaven, Vulcan, where I hope all at Clawaybonny, blacks as well as whites, will endeavor to meet her, by living in a manner that will improve the mercy of God."

"All things are possible with God, Vulcan. Keeping 'im and 'is comings constantly in mind, you may still hope to see your young mistress, and to share in her happiness."

"Wonerful!" exclaimed the old man; "dat would be a great consolation. Ah! Masser Mile, how often she come when a little lady to my shop door, and ask to see 'e spark fly. Miss Grace has a great taste for blacksmithin' and a great knowledge too. I do 'tink, dat next to some oder 't'ing, she lub to see 'e spark fly, and 'e horse shod!"

"You have come to look for me, Vulcan, and I thank you for this care. I shall return to the house presently; you need give yourself no further trouble. Remember, old man, that the only hope that remains of either of us ever seeing Miss Grace again, is in living as Mr. Hardinge so often tells us all we ought to live."

"Wonerful!" repeated old Vulcan, whose mind and feelings were in a happy condition to receive such a lesson. "Yes, Masser Mile, I shall come to my shop to see 'e spark fly; I shall miss her like a darter."

This was a specimen of the feelings prevailed among the negroes, though the impression on most of the others was more lasting than that made on the blacksmith, whom I now dismissed, taking the path myself that led to the house. It was quite dark when I crossed the lawn. A figure was just visible in the shadows of the piazza, and I was on the point of turning in the direction of a side door, in order to avoid the meeting, when Lucy advanced eagerly to the edge of the steps to receive me.

"Oh, Miles! dear Miles, how happy I am to see you again!" the precious girl said, taking my hand with the warmth and frankness of a sister. "My father and myself have been very uneasy about you; my father, indeed, has walked toward the rectory, thinking you may have gone thither."

"I have met with a great loss, Miles; one that even time cannot repair. Neither of us can ever find another to fill the place that Grace has occupied. Our lives cannot be the same again; I never return to my hand with the same children; love as children; live as children; and grow up together, as it might be, with one heart, with the same view, the same wishes, the same opinion; I hope it is not presuming on too great a resemblance to the departed angel, if I add, the same principles."

"No, Miles, the past for us, is gone forever. Clawaybonny will never again be the Clawaybonny it was."

interest that each man bowed to me reverently, and each woman courtesied, as if he or she left the room. As for Chloë, she sobbed freely, and the poor girl having refused to quit the body of her mistress except for that short moment, I thought Lucy would have remained with her father, for a few minutes, but the necessity of removing this poor heart-stricken creature, who really felt as if the death of her young mistress was a loss of part of her own existence.

I have already dwelt on the circumstances attending the death of Grace longer than I intended, and shall now pass on to her own feelings, or to distress those of my readers, by unnecessarily enlarging on more of the details. The next three or four days produced the usual calm; and though it was literally years ago, Lucy and myself ceased altogether to weep; for her loss we both obtained the self-command that was necessary for the discharge of our ordinary duties. Grace, it will be remembered, died on a Sunday, about the usual hour for dinner. Agreeably to the custom of the country, in which there is usually a little too much of an indecent haste in disposing of the deceased, owing to some degree of climate, however, the funeral would have taken place on Wednesday, and that would have been delaying twenty-four hours longer than might have been granted in most cases; but Mr. Hardinge, who gave all the directions, had named Thursday noon as the hour for the interment. We had few relatives to expect; most of those who would have been likely to attend, had circumstances admitted of it, living in distant places that rendered it inconvenient, and indeed scarcely possible.

I passed most of the intervening time in my study, reading and indulging in such contemplations as naturally suggest themselves to the mourner. Lucy, dear girl, had written to me two or three short notes, asking my wishes on various points, among other things when I wished to pay a last visit to the body. My answer to this question brought her to my room with some little surprise of manner; for she had been so much with Grace, living and dead, as to think it strange one who had loved her so well while living should not desire to take a final look at the beautiful remains. I explained my feelings on this head, and Lucy seemed struck with them.

"I am not sure you will not have decided wisely, Miles," she said, "the picture being one too precious to destroy. You will be gratified in knowing, however, that Grace resembles an angel quite as much in death as she did in life; all who have seen her being struck with the air of peaceful tranquillity her features now present."

"Bless you, bless you, Lucy, this is all-sufficient. I did wish for some such assurance, and am now content."

"Several of your family are now in the house, Miles, in readiness to attend the funeral. A stranger has just arrived who seems to have some such desire, too, though his face is unknown to all at the place; he has asked to see you with an earnestness that my father scarce knows how to refuse."

"Let him come here, then, Lucy. I can only suppose it to be some of the many persons Grace has served; her short life was all activity in that particular."

Lucy's face did not corroborate that notion; but she withdrew to let my decision be known. In a few minutes a large, hard-featured, but not ill-looking man approaching fifty, entered my room, and stepped up to me with his eyes, gazed at me with the air of a man who seated himself without ceremony. He was attired like a thriving countryman, though his language, accent, and manner denoted one superior to the ordinary run of those with whom he was otherwise associated in externals. I had to look at him a second time ere I could recognize Jack Wallingford, my father's bachelor cousin, the western land-holder.

"I see by your look, cousin Miles, that you only half remember me," my visitor remarked; "I deeply regret that I am obliged to renew our acquaintance on so melancholy an occasion."

"There are so few of us left, Mr. Wallingford, that this kindness will be doubly appreciated," I answered. "If I did not give orders to have you apprised of the loss we all sustained, it is because your residence is so far from Clawaybonny as to render it improbable you could have received the intelligence in time to attend the ceremony that remains to be performed. I did intend to write to you, when a little better fitted to perform such a duty."

"I thank you, cousin. The blood and name of Wallingford are very near and dear to me, and Clawaybonny has always seemed a sort of home."

will, in order to bequeath him the place in the event of my dying without heirs, as I now imagined most sooner or later occur. As Lucy was not likely to be my wife, no one else, I fancied, ever should be. I had nearer relations than Jack Wallingford, some of whom were then in the house, remaining by both father and mother; but they were not of the direct line; and I knew that Miles the First would have made this disposition of the place, could he have foreseen events, and had the law allowed it. Then Grace had wished such an arrangement, and I had a sad happiness in executing all the known wishes of my sister.

The funeral did not occur until the day after the arrival of John Wallingford, who accidentally heard of the death that had occurred in the family, and came uninvited to attend the obsequies, as have been mentioned. I passed most of the evening in the company of this relative, with whom I became so much pleased as to request he would walk with me next day as second nearest of kin. This arrangement, as I had reason to know in the end, gave Grace offence to several who stood near in disposing of the deceased, though not of her name. Thus are we constituted!—we will quarrel over a grave even, a moment that should lay open eternally to our view, with all its immense consequences and accompaniments, in order to vindicate feelings and passions that can only interest us, as it might be, for a day. Fortunately, I knew nothing of the offence that was taken at the time, nor did I see any of my kinsmen but John Wallingford that evening; his presence in my room being owing altogether to a certain self-possession and an aplomb that caused him to do very much as he pleased in such matters.

I rose on the following morning at a late hour, and with a heaviness at the heart that was natural to the occasion. It was a lovely summer's day, but all in and around Clawaybonny wore the air of a Sunday. The procession was to form at 10 o'clock, and as I cast my eyes from the window, I could see the negroes moving about on the lawn, and in the lanes, attired in their best, but wearing no holiday faces. It seemed to me to be a species of unnatural Sabbath, possessing all its solemnity, its holy stillness, its breathing calm, but wanting in that soothing spirit of peace which is so apt to be imparted to the mind when we are in the country, most particularly at that season of the year. Several of the neighbors who did not belong to Clawaybonny were beginning to appear; and I felt the necessity of dressing in order to be in readiness for what was to follow.

I had eaten alone in my little study or library from the time my sister died, and had seen no one since my return to the house, the servants excepted, besides my guardian, Lucy, and John Wallingford. The last had taken a light supper with me the previous night, but he was then breakfasting with the rest of the guests in the family eating-room, Mr. Hardinge doing the honors of the house.

For myself, I found my own little table prepared with its coffee and light meal, as I had ordered before retiring. It had two cups, however, and a second plate had been laid in addition to my own. I noticed the arrangement, and demanded of the old white-headed house-servant, who was in waiting, what it meant.

"Miss Lucy, sah; she say she mean to breakfast wid Masser Mile, dis mornin', sah."

Even the accents of this negro were so kind, and so full of this familiar explanation, like those of a man who was conscious of having reached an hour and an occasion that called for peculiar awe. I bade him let Miss Lucy know that I was in the study.

"Ah, Masser Mile," added the old man, with tears in his eyes, as he left me to go to his work. "Your young mistress, sah!"

In a few minutes Lucy joined me. She was in deep black, of course, and that may have added to the appearance of paleness, but no one could be deceived in the manner in which the dear girl had mourned and wept since we parted. The subdued expression of her face gave it peculiar sweetness, and in spite of the absence of color, I thought, as Lucy advanced toward me, both hands extended, and a smile of anxious inquiry on her lips, that she had never appeared more lovely. I did not hesitate about pressing those hands with fervor, and kissing the warm though colorless cheek. All this she might have done between an affectionate brother and sister, neither of us thinking, I am persuaded, of aught but the confidence and friendship of childhood.

"This is kind of you, dear Lucy," I said, as we took our seats at the little table; "my cousin John Wallingford, though a good man in the main, is scarcely near enough, or dear enough, to be admitted at a time like this."

We knew the last sad offices were to be performed, and had braced ourselves to the discharge of this melancholy duty. It was not customary with the families of the Hardinges, to be present at the performance of the funeral rites; but Lucy told me she intended to be in the little church, and to share in as much of the religious offices as were performed within the building. In a population as mixed as ours had become, it is not easy to say what is and what is not a national or state usage, on such an occasion; but I knew this was going further than was usual for one of Lucy's habits and opinions, and I expressed a little surprise at her determination.

"Were it any other funeral, I would not be present, Miles," she said, the tremor of her voice sensibly increasing; "but I cannot divest myself of the idea that the spirit of Grace will be hovering near; that the presence of her mother and sister will be acceptable. Whatever the providence of God may have ordered for the dear departed, I know it will be grateful to myself to join in the prayers of the Church—besides, I am not altogether without the womanly feeling of wishing to witness once the form of Grace while it remains above ground. And now, Miles, brother, friend, Grace's brother, or by whatever endearing term I may address you," added Lucy, rising, coming to my side of the table, and taking my hand, "I have one thing to say that I alone can say, for it would be useless to myself as necessary to my dear father."

I looked earnestly at Lucy's sweet countenance, and saw it was full of concern—I had almost said of alarm.

"I believe I understand you, Lucy," I answered, though a sensation at the throat, nearly choked me; "Rupert is here?"

"He is, Miles; I implore you to remember what would be the wishes of her who is now a saint in heaven—what her entreaties, her tears would implore of you, had not God placed a barrier between us."

"You will see as little of him as possible, Miles—bless you, bless you, for this farewell."

I felt Lucy's heavy but warm kiss on my forehead as she quitted the room. It seemed to me a seal of a compact between us that was for too sacred ever to allow me to dream of violating it.

I pass over the details of the funeral procession. This last was ordered as is usual in the country, the friends following the body in vehicles or on horseback, according to circumstances. John Wallingford went with me agreeably to my own arrangement, and the rest took their places in the order of consanguinity and age. I did not see Rupert in the procession at all, though I saw little besides the hearse that bore the body of my only sister. When we reached the churchyard, the blacks of my family pressed forward to bear the coffin into the building. Mr. Hardinge met us there, and then commenced those beautiful and solemn rites which seldom fail to touch the hardest heart. The rector besides the hearse that bore the body of my only sister, when we reached the churchyard, the blacks of my family pressed forward to bear the coffin into the building. Mr. Hardinge met us there, and then commenced those beautiful and solemn rites which seldom fail to touch the hardest heart. 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