

The Giant Wistaria

By Charlotte Perkins Gilman

“Meddle not with my new vine, child! See! Thou hast already broken the tender shoot! Never needle or distaff for thee, and yet thou wilt not be quiet!”

The nervous fingers wavered, clutched at a small carnelian cross that hung from her neck, then fell despairingly.

“Give me my child, mother, and then I will be quiet!”

“Hush! hush! thou fool—some one might be near! See—there is thy father coming, even now! Get in quickly!”

She raised her eyes to her mother’s face, weary eyes that yet had a flickering, uncertain blaze in their shaded depths.

“Art thou a mother and hast no pity on me, a mother? Give me my child!”

Her voice rose in a strange, low cry, broken by her father’s hand upon her mouth.

“Shameless!” said he, with set teeth. “Get to thy chamber, and be not seen again to-night, or I will have thee bound!”

She went at that, and a hard-faced serving woman followed, and presently returned, bringing a key to her mistress.

“Is all well with her—and the child also?”

“She is quiet, Mistress Dwining, well for the night, be sure. The child fretteth endlessly, but save for that it thriveth with me.”

The parents were left alone together on the high square porch with its great pillars, and the rising moon began to make faint shadows of the young vine leaves that shot up luxuriantly around them: moving shadows, like lit-tie stretching fingers, on the broad and heavy planks of the oaken floor.

“It groweth well, this vine thou broughtest me in the ship, my husband.”

“Aye,” he broke in bitterly, “and so doth the shame I brought thee! Had I known of it I would sooner have had the ship founder beneath us, and have seen our child cleanly drowned, than live to this end!”

“Thou art very hard, Samuel, art thou not afeard for her life? She grieveth sore for the child, aye, and for the green fields to walk in!”

“Nay,” said he grimly, “I fear not. She hath lost already what is more than life; and she shall have air enough soon. To-morrow the ship is ready, and we return to England. None knoweth of our stain here, not one, and if the town hath a child unaccounted for to rear in decent ways—why, it is not the first, even here. It will be well enough cared for! And truly we have matter for thankfulness, that her cousin is yet willing to marry her.”

“Has thou told him?”

“Aye! Thinkest thou I would cast shame into another man’s house, unknowing it? He hath always desired her, but she would none of him, the stubborn! She hath small choice now!”

“Will he be kind, Samuel? can he—”

“Kind? What call’st thou it to take such as she to wife? Kind! How many men would take her, an’ she had double the fortune? and being of the family already, he is glad to hide the blot forever.”

“An’ if she would not? He is but a coarse fellow, and she ever shunned him.”

“Art thou mad, woman? She weddeth him ere we? sail to-morrow, or she stayeth ever in that chamber. The girl is not so sheer a fool! He maketh an honest woman of her, and saveth our house from open shame. What other hope for her than a new life to cover the old? Let her have an honest child, an’ she so longeth for one!”

He strode heavily across the porch, till the loose planks creaked again, strode back and forth, with his arms folded and his brows fiercely knit above his iron mouth.

Overhead the shadows flickered mockingly across a white face among the leaves, with eyes of wasted fire.

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“O, George, what a house! what a lovely house! I am sure it’s haunted! Let us get that house to live in this summer! We will have Kate and Jack and Susy and Jim of course, and a splendid time of it!”

Young husbands are indulgent, but still they have to recognize facts.

“My dear, the house may not be to rent: and it may also not be habitable.”

“There is surely somebody in it. I am going to inquire!”

The great central gate was rusted off its hinges, and the long drive had trees in it, but a little footpath showed signs of steady usage, and up that Mrs. Jenny went, followed by her obedient George. The front windows of the old mansion were blank, but in a wing at the back they found white curtains and open doors. Outside, in the clear May sunshine, a woman was washing. She was polite and friendly, and evidently glad of visitors in that lonely place. She “guessed it could be rented—didn’t know.” The heirs were in Europe, but “there was a lawyer in New York had the lettin’ of it.”

There had been folks there years ago, but not in her time. She and her husband had the rent of their part for taking care of the place. “Not that they took much care on’t either, but keepin’ robbers out.” It was furnished throughout, old-fashioned enough, but good; and “if they took it she could do the work for ’em herself, she guessed—if he was willin’!”

Never was a crazy scheme more easily arranged. George knew that lawyer in New York; the rent was not alarming; and the nearness to a rising sea-shore resort made it a still pleasanter place to spend the summer.

Kate and Jack and Susy and Jim cheerfully accepted, and the June moon found them all sitting on the high front porch.

They had explored the house from top to bottom, from the great room in the garret, with nothing in it but a rickety cradle, to the well in the cellar without a curb and with a rusty chain going down to unknown blackness below. They had explored the grounds, once beautiful with rare trees and shrubs, but now a gloomy wilderness of tangled shade.

The old lilacs and laburnums, the spirea and syringa, nodded against the second-story windows. What garden plants survived were great ragged bushes or great shapeless beds. A huge wistaria vine covered the whole front of the house. The trunk, it was too large to call a stem, rose at the corner of the porch by the high steps, and had once climbed its pillars; but now the pillars were wrenched from their places and held rigid and helpless by the tightly wound and knotted arms.

It fenced in all the upper story of the porch with a knitted wall of stem and leaf; it ran along the eaves, holding up the gutter that had once supported it; it shaded every window with heavy green; and the drooping, fragrant blossoms made a waving sheet of purple from roof to ground.

“Did you ever see such a wistaria!” cried ecstatic Mrs. Jenny. “It is worth the rent just to sit under such a vine,—a fig tree beside it would be sheer superfluity and wicked extravagance!”

“Jenny makes much of her wistaria,” said George, “because she’s so disappointed about the ghosts. She made up her mind at first sight to have ghosts in the house, and she can’t find even a ghost story!”

“No,” Jenny assented mournfully; “I pumped poor Mrs. Pepperill for three days, but could get nothing out of her. But I’m convinced there is a story, if we could only find it. You need not tell me that a house like this, with a garden like this, and a cellar like this, isn’t haunted!”

“I agree with you,” said Jack. Jack was a reporter on a New York daily, and engaged to Mrs. Jenny’s pretty sister. “And if we don’t find a real ghost, you may be very sure I shall make one. It’s too good an opportunity to lose!”

The pretty sister, who sat next him, resented. “You shan’t do anything of the sort, Jack! This is a real ghostly place, and I won’t have you make fun of it! Look at that group of trees out there in the long grass—it looks for all the world like a crouching, hunted figure!”

“It looks to me like a woman picking huckleberries,” said Jim, who was married to George’s pretty sister.

“Be still, Jim!” said that fair young woman. “I believe in Jenny’s ghost as much as she does. Such a place! Just look at this great wistaria trunk crawling up by the steps here! It looks for all the world like a writhing body—cringing—beseeching!”

“Yes,” answered the subdued Jim, “it does, Susy. See its waist,—about two yards of it, and twisted at that! A waste of good material!”

“Don’t be so horrid, boys! Go off and smoke somewhere if you can’t be congenial!”

“We can! We will! We’ll be as ghostly as you please:’ And forthwith they began to see bloodstains and crouching figures so plentifully that the most delightful shivers multiplied, and the fair enthusiasts started for bed, declaring they should never sleep a wink.

“We shall all surely dream,” cried Mrs. Jenny. “and we must all tell our dreams in the morning!”

“There’s another thing certain,” said George, catching Susy as she tripped over a loose plank; “and that is that you frisky creatures must use the side door till I get this Eiffel tower of a portico fixed, or we shall have some fresh ghosts on our hands! We found a plank here that yawns like a trap-door—big enough to swallow you,—and I believe the bottom of the thing is in China!”

The next morning found them all alive, and eating a substantial New England breakfast, to the accompaniment of saws and hammers on the porch, where carpenters of quite miraculous promptness were tearing things to pieces generally.

“It’s got to come down mostly,” they had said. “These timbers are clean rotted through, what ain’t pulled out o’ line by this great creeper. That’s about all that holds the thing up.”

There was clear reason in what they said, and with a caution from anxious Mrs. Jenny not to hurt the wistaria, they were left to demolish and repair at leisure.

“How about ghosts?” asked Jack after a fourth griddle cake. “I had one, and it’s taken away my appetite!”

Mrs. Jenny gave a little shriek and dropped her knife and fork.

“Oh, so had I! I had the most awful—well, not dream exactly, but feeling. I had forgotten all about it!”

“Must have been awful,” said Jack, taking another cake. “Do tell us about the feeling. My ghost will wait.”

“It makes me creep to think of it even now,” she said. “I woke up. all at once, with that dreadful feeling as if something were going to happen, you know! I was wide awake, and hearing every little sound for miles around, it seemed to me. There are so many strange little noises in the country for all it is so still. Millions of crickets and things outside, and all kinds of rustles in the trees! There wasn’t much wind, and the moonlight came through in my three great windows in three white squares on the black old floor, and those fingery wistaria leaves we were talking of last night just seemed to crawl all over them. And—O, girls, you know that dreadful well in the cellar?”

A most gratifying impression was made by this, and Jenny proceeded cheerfully:

“Well, while it was so horridly still, and I lay there trying not to wake George, I heard as plainly as if it were right in the room, that old chain down there rattle and creak over the stones!”

“Bravo!” cried Jack. “That’s fine! I’ll put it in the Sunday edition!”

“Be still!” said Kate. “What was it, Jenny? Did you really see anything?”

“No, I didn’t, I’m sorry to say. But just then I didn’t want to. I woke George, and made such a fuss that he gave me bromide, and said he’d go and look, and that’s the last I thought of it till Jack reminded me—the bromide worked so well.”

“Now, Jack, give us yours,” said Jim. “Maybe, it will dovetail in somehow. Thirsty ghost, I imagine; maybe they had prohibition here even then!”

Jack folded his napkin, and leaned back in his most impressive manner.

“It was striking twelve by the great hall clock—” he began.

“There isn’t any hall clock!”

“O hush, Jim, you spoil the current! It was just one o’clock then, by my old-fashioned repeater.

“Waterbury! Never mind what time it was!”

“Well, honestly, I woke up sharp, like our beloved hostess, and tried to go to sleep again, but couldn’t. I experienced all those moonlight and grasshopper sensations, just like Jenny, and was wondering what could have been the matter with the supper, when in came my ghost, and I knew it was all a dream! It was a female ghost, and I imagine she was young and handsome, but all those crouching, hunted figures of last evening ran riot in my brain, and this poor creature looked just like them. She was all wrapped up in a shawl, and had a big bundle under her arm,—dear me, I am spoiling the story! With the air and gait of one in frantic haste and terror, the muffled figure glided to a dark old bureau, and seemed taking things from the drawers. As she turned, the moonlight shone full on a little red cross that hung from her neck by a thin gold chain—I saw it glitter as she crept noiselessly’ from the room! That’s all.”

“O Jack, don’t be so horrid! Did you really? Is that all! What do you think it was?”

“I am not horrid by nature, only professionally. I really did. That was all. And I am fully convinced it was the genuine, legitimate ghost of an eloping chambermaid with kleptomania!”

“You are too bad, Jack!” cried Jenny. “You take all the horror out of it. There isn’t a ‘creep’ left among us.”

“It’s no time for creeps at nine-thirty A.M., with sunlight and carpenters outside! However, if you can’t wait till twilight for your creeps, I think I can furnish one or two,” said George. “I went down cellar after Jenny’s ghost!”

There was a delighted chorus of female voices, and Jenny cast upon her lord a glance of genuine gratitude.

“It’s all very well to lie in bed and see ghosts, or hear them,” he went on. “But the young householder suspecteth burglars, even though as a medical man he knoweth nerves, and after Jenny dropped off I started on a voyage of discovery. I never will again, I promise you!”

“Why, what was it?”

“Oh, George!”

“I got a candle—”

“Good mark for the burglars,” murmured Jack.

“And went all over the house, gradually working down to the cellar and the well.”

“Well?” said Jack.

“Now you can laugh; but that cellar is no joke by daylight, and a candle there at night is about as inspiring as a lightning-bug in the Mammoth Cave. I went along with the light, trying not to fall into the well prematurely; got to it all at once; held the light down and then I saw, right under my feet—I nearly fell over her, or walked through her, perhaps,—a woman, hunched up under a shawl! She had hold of the chain, and the candle shone on her hands—white, thin hands—on a little red cross that hung from her neck—ride Jack! I’m no believer in ghosts, and I firmly object to unknown parties in the house at night; so I spoke to her rather fiercely. She didn’t seem to notice that, and I reached down to take hold of her—then I came upstairs!”

“What for?”

“What happened?”

“What was the matter?”

“Well, nothing happened. Only she wasn’t there! May have been indigestion, of course, but as a physician I don’t advise any one to court indigestion alone at midnight in a cellar!”

“This is the most interesting and peripatetic and evasive ghost I ever heard of!” said Jack. “It’s my belief she has no end of silver tankards, and jewels galore, at the bottom of that well, and I move we go and see!”

“To the bottom of the well, Jack?”

“To the bottom of the mystery. Come on!”

There was unanimous assent, and the fresh cambrics and pretty boots were gallantly escorted below by gentlemen whose jokes were so frequent that many of them were a little forced.

The deep old cellar was so dark that they had to bring lights, and the well so gloomy in its blackness that the ladies recoiled.

“That well is enough to scare even a ghost. It’s my opinion you’d better let well enough alone?” quoth Jim.

“Truth lies hid in a well, and we must get her out,” said George. “Bear a hand with the chain?”

Jim pulled away on the chain, George turned the creaking windlass, and Jack was chorus.

“A wet sheet for this ghost, if not a flowing sea,” said he. “Seems to be hard work raising spirits! I suppose he kicked the bucket when he went down!”

As the chain lightened and shortened there grew a strained silence among them; and when at length the bucket appeared, rising slowly through the dark water, there was an eager, half reluctant peering, and a natural drawing back. They poked the gloomy contents. “Only water.”

“Nothing but mud.”

“Something—”

They emptied the bucket up on the dark earth, and then the girls all went out into the air, into the bright warm sunshine in front of the house, where was the sound of saw and hammer, and the smell of new wood. There was nothing said until the men joined them, and then Jenny timidly asked:

“How old should you think it was, George?”

“All of a century,” he answered. “That water is a preservative—lime in it. Oh!—you mean?—Not more than a month: a very little baby!”

There was another silence at this, broken by a cry from the workmen. They had removed the floor and the side walls of the old porch, so that the sunshine poured down to the dark stones of the cellar bottom. And there, in the strangling grasp of the roots of the great wistaria, lay the bones of a woman, from whose neck still hung a tiny scarlet cross on a thin chain of gold.