

Poor Lucy Rivers

By Bernard Capes

The following story was told to a friend—with leave, conditionally, to make it public—by a well-known physician who died last year.

I was in Paul's typewriting exchange (says the professional narrator), seeing about some circulars I required, when a young lady came in bearing a box, the weight of which seemed to tax her strength severely. She was a very personable young woman, though looking ill, I fancied—in short, with those diathetic symptoms which point to a condition of hysteria. The manager, who had been engaged elsewhere, making towards me at the moment, I intimated to him that he should attend to the newcomer first. He turned to her.

'Now, madam?' said he.

'I bought this machine second-hand of you last week,' she began, after a little hesitation. He admitted his memory of the fact. 'I want to know,' she said, 'if you'll change it for another.'

'Is there anything wrong with it, then?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said; 'No!' she said; 'Everything!' she said, in a crescendo of spasms, looking as if she were about to cry. The manager shrugged his shoulders.

'Very reprehensible of us,' said he; 'and hardly our way. It is not customary; but, of course—if it doesn't suit—to give satisfaction—' he cleared his throat.

'I don't want to be unfair,' said the young woman. 'It doesn't suit *me*. It might another person.'

He had lifted, while speaking, its case off the typewriter, and now, placing the machine on a desk, inserted a sheet or two of paper, and ran his fingers deftly over the keys.

'Really, madam,' said he, removing and examining the slip, 'I can detect nothing wrong.'

'I said—perhaps—only as regards myself.'

She was hanging her head, and spoke very low.

'But!' said he, and stopped—and could only add the emphasis of another deprecatory shrug.

'Will you do me the favour, madam, to try it in my presence.'

'No,' she murmured; 'please don't ask me. I'd really rather not.' Again the suggestion of strain—of suffering.

'At least,' said he, 'oblige me by looking at this.'

He held before her the few lines he had typed. She had averted her head during the minute he had been at work; and it was now with evident reluctance, and some force put upon herself, that she acquiesced. But the moment she raised her eyes, her face brightened with a distinct expression of relief.

'Yes,' she said; 'I know there's nothing wrong with it. I'm sure it's all my fault. But—but, if you don't mind. So much depends on it.'

Well, the girl was pretty; the manager was human. There were a dozen young women, of a more or less pert type, at work in the front office. I dare say he had qualified in the illogic of feminine moods. At any rate, the visitor walked off in a little with a machine presumably another than that she had brought.

'Professional?' I asked, to the manager's resigned smile addressed to me.

'So to speak,' said he. 'She's one of the "augment her income" class. I fancy it's little enough without. She's done an occasional job for us. We've got her card somewhere.'

‘Can you find it?’

He could find it, though he was evidently surprised at the request— scarce reasonably, I think, seeing how he himself had just given me an instance of that male inclination to the attractive, which is so calculated to impress woman in general with the injustice of our claims to impartiality.

With the piece of pasteboard in my hand, I walked off then and there to commission ‘Miss Phillida Gray’ with the job I had intended for Paul’s. Psychologically, I suppose, the case interested me. Here was a young person who seemed, for no *practical* reason, to have quarrelled with her unexceptionable means to a livelihood.

It raised more than one question; the incompleteness of woman as a wage earner, so long as she was emancipated from all but her fancifulness; the possibility of the spontaneous generation of soul—the *divina particula aerae*—in man-made mechanisms, in the construction of which their makers had invested their whole of mental capital. Frankenstein loathed the abortion of his genius. Who shall say that the soul of the inventor may not speak antipathetically, through the instrument which records it, to that soul’s natural antagonist? Locomotives have moods, as any engine-driver will tell you; and any shaver, that his razor, after maltreating in some fit of perversity one side of his face, will repent, and caress the other as gently as any sucking-dove.

I laughed at this point of my reflections. Had Miss Gray’s typewriter, embodying the soul of a blasphemer, taken to swearing at her?

It was a bitterly cold day Snow, which had fallen heavily in November, was yet lying compact and unthawed in January. One had the novel experience in London of passing between piled ramparts of it. Traffic for some two months had been at a discount; and walking, for one of my years, was still so perilous a business that I was long in getting to Miss Gray’s door.

She lived West Kensington way, in a ‘converted flat’, whose title, like that of a familiar type of Christian exhibited on platforms, did not convince of anything but a sort of paying opportunism. That is to say, at the cost of some internal match-boarding, roughly fitted and stained, an unlettable private residence, of the estimated yearly rental of forty pounds, had been divided into two ‘sets’ at thirty-five apiece— whereby fashion, let us hope, profited as greatly as the landlord.

Miss Gray inhabited the upper section, the door to which was opened by a little Cockney drab, very smutty, and smelling of gas stoves.

‘Yes, she was in.’ (For all her burden, ‘Phillida,’ with her young limbs, had outstripped me.) ‘Would I please to walk up?’

It was the dimmest room I was shown into—really the most unattractive setting for the personable little body I had seen. She was not there at the moment, so that I could take stock without rudeness. The one curtainless window stared, under a lid of fog, at the factory-like rear of houses in the next street. Within was scarce an evidence of dainty feminine occupation. It was all an illustration of the empty larder and the wolf at the door. How long would the bolt withstand him? The very walls, it seemed, had been stripped for sops to his ravening—stripped so nervously, so hurriedly, that ribbons of paper had been flayed here and there from the plaster. The ceiling was falling; the common grate cold; there was a rag of old carpet on the floor—a dreary, deadly place! The typewriter—the new one—laid upon a little table placed ready for its use, was, in its varnished case, the one prominent object, quite healthy by contrast. How would the wolf moan and scratch to hear it desperately busy, with click and clang, building up its paper rampart against his besieging!

I had fallen of a sudden so depressed, into a spirit of such premonitory haunting, that for a moment I almost thought I could hear the brute of my own fancy snuffling outside. Surely there was something breathing, rustling near me—something——

I grunted, shook myself, and walked to the mantelpiece. There was nothing to remark on it but a copy of some verses on a sheet of notepaper; but the printed address at the top, and the signature at the foot of this, immediately caught my attention. I trust, under the circumstances (there was a coincidence here), that it was not dishonest, but I took out my glasses, and read those verses—or, to be strictly accurate, the gallant opening quatrain—with laudable coolness. But inasmuch as the matter of the second and third stanzas, which I had an opportunity of perusing later, bears upon one aspect of my story, I may as well quote the whole poem here for what it is worth.

Phyllis, I cannot woo in rhyme,
As courtlier gallants woo,
With utterances sweet as thyme
And melting as the dew.

An arm to serve; true eyes to see;
Honour surpassing love;
These, for all song, my vouchers be,
Dear love, so thou'lt them prove.

Bid me—and though the rhyming art
I may not thee contrive—
I'll print upon thy lips, sweetheart,
A poem that shall live.

It may have been derivative; it seemed to me, when I came to read the complete copy, passable. At the first, even, I was certainly conscious of a thrill of secret gratification. But, as I said, I had mastered no more than the first four lines, when a rustle at the door informed me that I was detected.

She started, I could see, as I turned round. I was not at the trouble of apologizing for my inquisitiveness.

'Yes,' I said; 'I saw you at Paul's Exchange, got your address, and came on here. I want some circulars typed. No doubt you will undertake the job?'

I examined her narrowly while I spoke. It was obviously a case of neurasthenia—the tendril shooting in the sunless vault. But she had more spirit than I calculated on. She just walked across to the empty fireplace, collared those verses, and put them into her pocket. I rather admired her for it.

'Yes, with pleasure,' she said, sweetening the rebuke with a blush, and stultifying it by affecting to look on the mantelpiece for a card, which eventually she produced from another place. 'These are my terms.'

'Thank you,' I replied. 'What do you say to a contra account—you to do my work, and I to set my professional attendance against it? I am a doctor.'

She looked at me mute and amazed.

'But there is nothing the matter with me,' she murmured, and broke into a nervous smile.

‘O, I beg your pardon!’ I said. ‘Then it was only your instrument which was out of sorts?’
Her face fell at once.

‘You heard me—of course,’ she said. ‘Yes, I—it was out of sorts, as you say. One gets fancies, perhaps, living alone, and typing—typing.’

I thought of the discordant clack going on hour by hour—the dead words of others made brassily vociferous, until one’s own individuality would become emerged in the infernal harmonics.

‘And so,’ I said, ‘like the dog’s master in the fable, you quarrelled with an old servant.’

‘O, no!’ she answered. ‘I had only had it for a week—since I came here.’

‘You have only been here a week?’

‘Little more,’ she replied. ‘I had to move from my old rooms. It is very kind of you to take such an interest in me. Will you tell me what I can do for you?’

My instructions were soon given. The morrow would see them attended to. No, she need not send the copies on. I would myself call for them in the afternoon.

‘I hope *this* machine will be more to the purpose,’ I said.

‘I hope so, too,’ she answered.

‘Well, she seems a lady,’ I thought, as I walked home; ‘a little anaemic flower of gentility.’ But sentiment was not to the point.

That evening, ‘over the walnuts and the wine’, I tackled Master Jack, my second son. He was a promising youth; was reading for the Bar, and, for all I knew, might have contributed to the ‘Gownsmen’.

‘Jack,’ I said, when we were alone, ‘I never knew till today that you considered yourself a poet.’

He looked at me coolly and inquiringly, but said nothing.

‘Do you consider yourself a marrying man, too?’ I asked.

He shook his head, with a little amazed smile.

‘Then what the devil do you mean by addressing a copy of love verses to Miss Phillida Gray?’

He was on his feet in a moment, as pale as death.

‘If you were not my father’—he began.

‘But I am, my boy,’ I answered, ‘and an indulgent one, I think you’ll grant.’

He turned, and stalked out of the room; returned in a minute, and flung down a duplicate draft of *the* poem on the table before me. I put down the crackers, took up the paper, and finished my reading of it.

‘Jack,’ I said, ‘I beg your pardon. It does credit to your heart—you understand the emphasis? You are a young gentleman of some prospects. Miss Gray is a young lady of none.’

He hesitated a moment; then flung himself on his knees before me. He was only a great boy.

‘Dad,’ he said; ‘dear old Dad; you’ve seen them—you’ve seen her?’

I admitted the facts. ‘But that is not at all an answer to me,’ I said.

‘Where is she?’ he entreated, pawing me.

‘You don’t know?’

‘Not from Adam. I drove her hard, and she ran away from me. She said she would, if I insisted—not to kill those same prospects of mine. My prospects! Good God! What are they without her? She left her old rooms, and no address. How did you get to see her—and my stuff?’

I could satisfy him on these points.

‘But it’s true,’ he said; ‘and—and I’m in love, Dad—Dad, I’m in love.’

He leaned his arms on the table, and his head on his arms.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘how did *you* get to know her?’

‘Business,’ he muttered, ‘pure business. I just answered her advertisement—took her some of my twaddle. She’s an orphan—daughter of a Captain Gray, navy man; and—and she’s an angel.’

‘I hope he is,’ I answered. ‘But anyhow, that settles it. There’s no marrying and giving in marriage in heaven.’

He looked up.

‘You don’t mean it? No! you dearest and most indulgent of Dads! Tell me where she is.’

I rose.

‘I may be all that; but I’m not such a fool. I shall see her tomorrow. Give me till after then.’

‘O, you perfect saint!’

‘I promise absolutely nothing.’

‘I don’t want you to. I leave you to her. She could beguile a Saint Anthony.’

‘Hey!’

‘I mean as a Christian woman should.’

‘O! that explains it.’

The following afternoon I went to West Kensington. The little drab was snuffling when she opened the door. She had a little hat on her head.

‘Missus wasn’t well,’ she said; ‘and she hadn’t liked to leave her, though by rights she was only engaged for an hour or two in the day.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I’m a doctor, and will attend to her. You can go. She gladly shut me in and herself out. The clang of the door echoed up the narrow staircase, and was succeeded, as if it had started it, by the quick toing and froing of a footfall in the room above. There was something inexpressibly ghostly in the sound, in the reeling dusk which transmitted it.

I perceived, the moment I set eyes on the girl, that there was something seriously wrong with her. Her face was white as wax, and quivered with an incessant horror of laughter. She tried to rally, to greet me, but broke down at the first attempt, and stood as mute as stone.

I thank my God I can be a sympathetic without being a fanciful man. I went to her at once, and imprisoned her icy hands in the human strength of my own.

‘What is it? Have you the papers ready for me?’

She shook her head, and spoke only after a second effort.

‘I am very sorry.’

‘You haven’t done them, then? Never mind. But why not? Didn’t the new machine suit either?’

I felt her hands twitch in mine. She made another movement of dissent.

‘That’s odd,’ I said. ‘It looks as if it wasn’t the fault of the tools, but of the workwoman.’

All in a moment she was clinging to me convulsively, and crying— ‘You are a doctor—you’ll understand—don’t leave me alone—don’t let me stop here!’

‘Now listen,’ I said, ‘listen, and control yourself. Do you hear? I have come *prepared* to take you away I’ll explain why presently’

‘I thought at first it was my fault,’ she wept distressfully, ‘working, perhaps, until I grew light-headed’ (Ah, hunger and loneliness and that grinding labour!); ‘but when I was sure of myself, still it went on, and I could not do my tasks to earn money. Then I thought—how can God let such things be!—that the instrument itself must be haunted. It took to going at night; and in the morning’—she gripped my hands—‘I burnt them. I tried to think I had done it myself in my sleep, and I always burnt them. But it didn’t stop, and at last I made up my mind to take it back and ask for another—another—you remember?’

She pressed closer to me, and looked fearfully over her shoulder.

‘It does the same,’ she whispered, gulping. ‘It wasn’t the machine at all. It’s the place—
itself—that’s haunted.’

I confess a tremor ran through me. The room was dusking—hugging itself into secrecy over its
own sordid details. Out near the window, the typewriter, like a watchful sentient thing, seemed
grinning at us with all its ivory teeth. She had carried it there, that it might be as far from herself
as possible.

‘First let me light the gas,’ I said, gently but resolutely detaching her hands.

‘There is none,’ she murmured.

None. It was beyond her means. This poor creature kept her deadly vigils with a couple of
candles. I lit them—they served but to make the gloom more visible—and went to pull down the
blind.

‘O, take care of it!’ she whispered fearfully, meaning the typewriter. ‘It is awful to shut out the
daylight so soon.’

God in heaven, what she must have suffered! But I admitted nothing, and took her
determinedly in hand.

‘Now,’ I said, returning to her, ‘tell me plainly and distinctly what it is that the machine does.’

She did not answer. I repeated my question.

‘It writes things,’ she muttered—‘things that don’t come from me. Day and night it’s the same.
The words on the paper aren’t the words that come from my fingers.’

‘But that is impossible, you know.’

‘So I should have thought once. Perhaps—what is it to be possessed? There was another
typewriter—another girl—lived in these rooms before me.’

‘Indeed! And what became of her?’

‘She disappeared mysteriously—no one knows why or where. Maria, my little maid, told me
about her. Her name was Lucy Rivers, and—she just disappeared. The landlord advertised her
effects, to be claimed, or sold to pay the rent; and that was done, and she made no sign. It was
about two months ago.’

‘Well, will you now practically demonstrate to me this reprehensible eccentricity on the part of
your instrument?’

‘Don’t ask me. I don’t dare.’

‘I would do it myself but of course you will understand that a more satisfactory conclusion
would be come to by my watching your fingers. Make an effort—you needn’t even look at the
result—and I will take you away immediately after.’

‘You are very good,’ she answered pathetically; ‘but I don’t know that I ought to accept.
Where to, please? And—and I don’t even know your name

‘Well, I have my own reasons for withholding it.’

‘It is all so horrible,’ she said; ‘and I am in your hands.’

‘They are waiting to transfer you to mamma’s,’ said I.

The name seemed an instant inspiration and solace to her. She looked at me, without a word,
full of wonder and gratitude; then asked me to bring the candles, and she would acquit herself of
her task. She showed the best pluck over it, though her face was ashy, and her mouth a line, and
her little nostrils pulsing the whole time she was at work.

I had got her down to one of my circulars, and, watching her fingers intently, was as sure as
observer could be that she had followed the text verbatim.

‘Now,’ I said, when she came to a pause, ‘give me a hint how to remove this paper, and go you
to the other end of the room.’

She flicked up a catch. 'You have only to pull it off the roller,' she said; and rose and obeyed. The moment she was away I followed my instructions, and drew forth the printed sheet and looked at it.

It may have occupied me longer than I intended. But I was folding it very deliberately, and putting it away in my pocket when I walked across to her with a smile. She gazed at me one intent moment, and dropped her eyes.

'Yes,' she said; and I knew that she had satisfied herself. 'Will you take me away now, at once, please?'

The idea of escape, of liberty once realized, it would have been dangerous to balk her by a moment. I had acquainted mamma that I might possibly bring her a visitor. Well, it simply meant that the suggested visit must be indefinitely prolonged.

Miss Gray accompanied me home, where certain surprises, in addition to the tenderest of ministrations, were awaiting her. All that becomes private history, and outside my story. I am not a man of sentiment; and if people choose to write poems and make general asses of themselves, why—God bless them!

The problem I had set myself to unravel was what looked deucedly like a tough psychologic poser. But I was resolute to face it, and had formed my plan. It was no unusual thing for me to be out all night. That night, after dining, I spent in the 'converted' flat in West Kensington.

I had brought with me—I confess to so much weakness—one of your portable electric lamps. The moment I was shut in and established, I pulled out the paper Miss Gray had typed for me, spread it under the glow and stared at it. Was it a copy of my circular? Would a sober 'First Aid Society' Secretary be likely, do you think, to require circulars containing such expressions as '*William! William! Come back to me! O, William, in God's name! William! William! William!*'—in monstrous iteration—the one cry, or the gist of it, for lines and lines in succession?

I am at the other end from humour in saying this. It is heaven's truth. Line after line, half down the page, went that monotonous, heartbreaking appeal. It was so piercingly moving, my human terror of its unearthliness was all drowned, absorbed in an overflowing pity.

I am not going to record the experiences of that night. That unchanging mood of mine upheld me through consciousnesses and subconsciousnesses which shall be sacred. Sometimes, submerged in these, I seemed to hear the clack of the instrument in the window but at a vast distance. I may have seen—I may have dreamt—I accepted it all. Awakening in the chill grey of morning, I felt no surprise at seeing some loose sheets of paper lying on the floor. '*William! William!*' their text ran down, '*Come back to me!*' It was all that same wail of a broken heart. I followed Miss Gray's example. I took out my match-box, and reverently, reverently burned them.

An hour or two later I was at Paul's Exchange, privately interviewing my manager.

'Did you ever employ a Miss Lucy Rivers?'

'Certainly we did. Poor Lucy Rivers! She rented a machine from us. In fact—'

He paused.

'Well?'

'Well—it is a mere matter of business—she "flitted", and we had to reclaim our instrument. As it happens, it was the very one purchased by the young lady who so interested you here two days ago.'

'The first machine, you mean?'

'The first—and the second.' He smiled. 'As a matter of fact, she took away again what she brought.'

‘Miss Rivers’s?’

He nodded.

‘There was absolutely nothing wrong with it—mere fad. Women start these fancies. The click of the thing gets on their nerves, I suppose. We must protect ourselves, you see; and I’ll warrant she finds it perfection now.’

‘Perhaps she does. What was Miss Rivers’s address?’

He gave me, with a positive grin this time, the ‘converted’ flat.

‘But that was only latterly,’ he said. ‘She had moved from—’

He directed me elsewhere.

‘Why,’ said I, taking up my hat, ‘did you call her “poor Lucy Rivers”?’

‘O, I don’t know!’ he said. ‘She was rather an attractive young lady. But we had to discontinue our patronage. She developed the most extraordinary—but it’s no business of mine. She was one of the submerged tenth; and she’s gone under for good, I suppose.’

I made my way to the *other* address—a little lodging in a shabby-genteel street. A bitter-faced landlady, one of the ‘preordained’ sort, greeted me with resignation when she thought I came for rooms, and with acerbity when she heard that my sole mission was to inquire about a Miss Lucy Rivers.

‘I won’t deceive you, sir’ she said. ‘When it come to receiving gentlemen privately, I told her she must go.’

‘Gentlemen!’

‘I won’t do Miss Rivers an injustice,’ she said. ‘It was *a* gentleman.’

‘Was that latterly?’

‘It was not latterly, sir. But it was the effects of its not being latterly which made her take to things.’

‘What things?’

‘Well, sir, she grew strange company, and took to the roof.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘Just precisely what I say, sir; through the trap-door by the steps, and up among the chimney-pots. *He’d* been there with her before, and perhaps she thought she’d find him hiding among the stacks. He called himself an astronomer; but it’s my belief it was another sort of stargazing. I couldn’t stand it at last, and I had to give her notice.’

It was falling near a gloomy midday when I again entered the flat, and shut myself in with its ghosts and echoes. I had a set conviction, a set purpose in my mind. There was that which seemed to scuttle, like a little demon of laughter, in my wake, now urging me on, now slipping round and above to trip me as I mounted. I went steadily on and up, past the sitting-room door, to the floor above. And here, for the first time, a thrill in my blood seemed to shock and hold me for a moment. Before my eyes, rising to a skylight, now dark and choked with snow, went a flight of steps. Pulling myself together, I mounted these, and with a huge effort (*the bolt was not shot*) shouldered the trap open. There were a fall and rustle without; daylight entered; and, levering the door over, I emerged upon the roof.

Snow, grim and grimy and knee-deep, was over everything, muffling the contours of the chimneys, the parapets, the irregularities of the leads. The dull thunder of the streets came up to me; a fog of thaw was in the air; a thin drizzle was already falling. I drove my foot forward into a mound, and hitched it on something. In an instant I was down on my knees, scattering the sodden raff right and left, and—my God!—a face!

She lay there as she had been overwhelmed, and frozen, and preserved these two months. She had closed the trap behind her, and nobody had known. Pure as wax—pitiful as hunger—dead! Poor Lucy Rivers!

Who was she, and who the man? We could never learn. She had woven his name, his desertion, her own ruin and despair into the texture of her broken life. Only on the great day of retribution shall he answer to that agonized cry.