

# In My Lady's Bedchamber

By H. Pease

'Well,' said Harry laughingly, as he showed me the family portraits, and more especially the ladies, on the wall of the panelled dining-room, 'which of them would you choose if you were, like Henry VIII., on the look-out for a fresh wife?'

'This one, I think,' I replied, as I gazed at a charming fragile beauty in a big bonnet, beneath which shy eyes looked bewitchingly; 'surely she was a Frenchwoman and painted by Fragonard?'

'Aha!' cried he, 'you are a bold man, for there are tales told of her—strange tales of feminine and deadly jealousy for all her soft demureness. She was French, as you say, and a devoted wife, I believe, but probably her *mari* was not as faithful as he should have been. She is said to haunt the house, but I haven't come across her yet myself. You are to sleep in her bed-chamber,' he added with a smile, 'so perhaps you may be favoured with the sight of your charmer.'

I pressed naturally for further information, but he put me off by saying it was too long a story, and that he had many other things to show me on this my first evening in the manor house.

I had only just arrived by motor. We had dined, and my friend was showing me round his possessions with all the pride of new and sudden inheritance. Harry had always been lucky; he had a talent for 'dropping in' for things unexpectedly. Thus at Eton, though really only thirteenth man, he had played against Harrow; and now owing to unexpected deaths he had become the possessor of a charming seventeenth-century manor house on the northern Border—a house that, lying in a deep crook of the Tweed and hidden by trees, had marvellously escaped the hand and torch of the raider.

He had succeeded to his great-uncle—an antiquary and recluse—a disappointed bachelor, and latterly, 'twas said, somewhat of a miser, which was fortunate for my friend, who had very little of his own.

Harry was soon to be married, and I was to be best man. He had come down to interview the agent and see what alterations and new furniture would be required, and had insisted on my joining him for a few days' fishing in the Tweed, while he was being inducted by agent and bailiff into his estate and introduced to the tenantry. After surveying his ancestors' portraits we adjourned to the hail, which was furnished with battle-axes, Jethart spears, basket-hilted swords, maces, salmon leisters, masks of otters and fougarts, foxes and badgers, and all the various trophies of Border sport and warfare of old time. This was the oldest part of the house, and proved by its stone-vaulted roof that it had belonged to the old peel tower on to which the manor had been engrafted; a fire of pine logs flamed in an open fireplace, gleaming and glancing on the copper drums that held relays of firewood on either hand.

Skins of red deer and the tufted pelts of kyloe cattle lay on the stone floor: there were massive black oak coffers and a great wardrobe like some huge safe for coats behind us, but two broad ancient leathern armchairs stood by the hearth invitingly, suggestive of unperturbed eighteenth-century ease, wherein we at once settled ourselves.

It was perhaps the absence of feminine taste and adornment that made the house seem older than it really was; apart from the charming portraits of the ladies in the dining-room the house resembled rather a Border strength than a Jacobean manor house.

However, the atmosphere was rendered all the more romantic thereby, and I lay back in my chair making believe to myself that I was staying with a Lord Warden of the Marches in the days of the ancient feud between England and Scotland.

We smoked and talked, however, not of the far, but of the immediate, past, of Eton and Oxford, and of mutual friends till twelve o'clock struck on the brazen rim of a Cromwellian clock, and we agreed that it was bedtime.

I had clean forgotten all about the reputed ghost till my host said 'good-night' at the door of my bedroom and bade me call him if I got a 'gliff' in the night from the apparition of 'Silkie'—so he informed me the lady was called locally. 'You've got your retriever with you,' he said, 'so no doubt you will feel protected.'

'Brenda,' I replied, 'is Scotch by birth, so possibly she may be superstitious. The event will determine. So long,' I said, as Harry went off to the room of his late bachelor great-uncle.

Though very sleepy after a long motor ride I could not 'turn in' till I had explored my bedroom, which was indeed a fascinating and enchanting chamber. It seemed to be a coign plucked out of an old French château, and inset here like a rare plant in an old stone wall. The panelling was of Italian intarsia work inlaid with a renaissance design portraying the tale of Cupid and Psyche; on the final panel Jupiter was handing the cup of ambrosia to Psyche with the words, '*Sume, Psyche, et immortalis esto, nec unquam digridietur a tuo nexu Cupido, sed istae vobis erunt perpetuae nuptiae*' ; the floor was formed of parquetry, and the rugs above were fine Persian workmanship. The curtains of the window were of purple silk, embroidered, I imagined, by the fair Frenchwoman herself, and the great four-poster bed was of fine walnut with deep mouldings, and adorned with the fleur-de-lys of France. The whole room seemed to be redolent of the grace of a charming *grande dame* of old France. I made up the fire with fresh pine logs upon the tiled hearth, settled Brenda upon a rug by the side of it, undressed and went to bed, enchanted by my surroundings, and very much inclined to envy my friend his good fortune.

I fell asleep at once, for the bed was luxuriously comfortable, and I was extraordinarily sleepy.

How long I slept I did not know, but when awoke I had an immediate and most lively intimation that some one was in the room. I drew myself noiselessly upward, and at once my eyes rested upon a dainty figure sitting in the chair by the dying fire, evidently engaged upon some absorbing occupation. It was a woman clad in a sprigged silk gown, the image of my lady of the dining-room portrait. What was she doing? Seemingly pounding some substance in a small mortar. As I gazed astounded a slight knock sounded on the door. My Lady seemed extraordinarily perturbed; she started violently, seemed to shake something white from the mortar as she gathered it hastily to her, moved swiftly with the slightest rustle as of a scurrying mouse and vanished through the door that led into the dressing-room.

I waited a few minutes to see if she would return, or perhaps some one else enter by the other door, but no sound greeted my ear, and my eyes could discover nothing unusual about the room.

I rose, and, moving on tiptoe, opened both doors, and with the light of an electric torch I always carried with me, investigated the corridor and dressing-room, but could make no discovery of any kind, nor perceive where my fair visitant had vanished.

When I returned to my room I found Brenda had been disturbed by my perambulation, for she was up and moving about restlessly. Giving her a pat I bade her lie down again, and went back to bed determined to stay awake for the chance of my Lady reappearing.

A few minutes after this Brenda seemed to be taken with a fit, for she got up suddenly, made a bolt, as it were, for the door, shook with some convulsive movements of her jaw, gave a horrible sort of strangled sob, and fell with a heavy thud on the floor.

I leapt out of bed, got some water in a basin and knelt down beside her, but she was already stiff, her teeth were clenched, and she showed a horribly distorted mask.

A horrid suspicion awoke in my mind. I searched with my torch on the floor where my Lady had dropped the powder, and I could plainly see the wet edge of Brenda's tongue and the smudge of the white powder which she had licked up.

I went back to where Brenda lay stiff and stark, and felt with a trembling hand for her heart.

It beat no more; my Brenda was dead—poisoned by the beautiful Lady.