

All Souls' Eve

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

The darkness had come; the night she had prayed for so long was here at last. With trembling hands she swept the hearth again and stirred the fire to brightness. It was All Souls' Eve.

A year to-morrow the blow had fallen which had swept joy and hope from her heart, and to-night happiness would be hers once more, for a few brief hours at least. He would return with the darkness; he would return whom the seas had drowned. The dead would rise again. Upon the waters he had gone to seek a fortune, that it might be possible for them to marry, for he was poor. But the waters had dragged him down. What fortune had he found—the best be-loved—among the strange sea-creatures?

She pulled the heavy curtains across the windows and put the door upon the latch. She drew two chairs to the fire, and set a low table between them. She spread the spotless table-cover with a feast—the best the little cabin could afford—and her eyes shone all the time in her sad, worn face with the happiness of the blest.

She thought of his warm hand-clasp; of his bright gaze; his beautiful, proud head; his strong limbs and their joy of living; the hot blood that pulsed so red in his cheek. She forgot that he was now so cold. Then she remembered that he was dead. Would she fear his spirit—the ghost of her lover? She laughed at the thought. To see him again! to see him again! Oh, the longing of the past year! the passionate, hopeless, maddening longing to see him again—only once more!

“Pulse of my heart,” she whispered, “hurry and come!”

She knelt by the fire and cleared the white dust from each bar. She dusted the stove and polished it till she could see her face in the shine. She rose and drew the chairs closer together, and then stood on tip-toe to see herself in the glass above the fire. She brushed the thick hair from off her forehead, and, dissatisfied, drew it back again in heavy waves about her face.

She could hear the boys and girls running to and fro from their homes, loud in their laughter and fun. There was dancing at the cross-roads to-night. The old piper was there with his pipes, the boys and girls jigging before him. Last year she danced also with her lover, and her heart was as light as a thistle-seed. And the next morning he sailed away, and was drowned.

To-night no one spoke to her or came to her door, save one; for they said, “She is fretting, poor colleen, thinking of last year. Leave her in peace.” But one young girl, hearing them, in her pity pressed upon the latch of the door and looked in. But, seeing the glory in the woman's face, the girl fell back. “She is not fretting,” she told the others; “she is the gladdest of us all.”

When the shadows advanced, and the evening grew late, the young people gathered at their firesides to burn nuts and find their fortunes. The woman in her lonely cottage seated herself upon one of the chairs by the earth. She sat motionless, listening with her heart in her eyes. But nothing came to her from the night but the call of some far-off voice, or a closing door, and then all was silent. When would the long-lost one be restored to her? When would the dead have their hour? It was drawing late.

“Hush!” She heard a dog bark far out in the darkness. She listened. Something was happening—something was coming. Who? What? There was no sound of footsteps. Only she *knew*. Now the neighbour's dog was pulling at his chain and howling. Her heart beat fast. She looked around. Nothing was there! Was she afraid of what was coming—her own beloved?

“Pulse of my heart, come quickly!” she said, and turned her face to the fire.

Now the dog next door whined as though in the near presence of something he feared. She could hear his chain drag as he went moaning into his kennel. Her heart beat until she could hardly breathe. And then she heard a finger press upon the latch. She half rose, and, looking behind her, saw the opening door and no hand upon it.

“Pulse of my heart, come quickly!” she said, and, crouching down, hid her face in her hands.

She knew something had entered—something eager and swift. There was no sound of footsteps, but she heard the door close softly, and then the chair beside her creaked. She shut her hidden eyes and pressed her hands hard upon them. In the long silence that followed she could hear her heart beating wildly. He was there, sitting beside her, and she dared not open her eyes. The whole cabin seemed full of his presence. She felt what she dared not see. She knew that his eyes were upon her, his dear eyes. They were caressing her bent head, that would not rise to welcome him. They were on her stiff, hidden hands, that would not go to greet him, and on all the crouching body that shrank away from him.

If he would only lay his hand upon her, he would seem more human, she thought. Then she felt a faint breath upon her hair, and she crouched lower and screamed,—

“If you touch me, I shall die!” Why did he not speak? The sound of his dear voice would shatter her fears. She heard his chair move towards her, and she cried,—

“Do not speak to me, for God’s sake! I could not bear it!”

Oh, her coward flesh! What was it making her say to him? Could he read her thoughts—that silent and unusual visitor? “Go,” her body said; “go quickly. My mate was warm and living and lovely. You are not he—cold, stiff, and horribly strange being, whom I dare not see.” Could he guess that her thoughts were these? Where was her love that it could not cast out fear? She heard a far cock-crow, and the clock behind the door prepared to strike. There was a moment’s silence, and then the chair beside hers was pushed back. She heard a long-drawn sigh, that was half a sob, echo through the room, and then the door opened and closed again—he had gone.

She sprang up and looked around the warm, lighted room. What had she feared? There was the fire leaping in the grate. There the familiar face of the clock and the red curtains on the window. There was the untasted food upon the table. The other chair was pushed back from the hearth. He had come and gone; unwarmed, unwelcomed, and unfed. He had come, the lonely ghost, for human sympathy and love, and he had gone back to his cold grave without it. He had bent above her head, yet never touched her, for fear of frightening her. She moved her hand upon her hair, and found it dewed with his tears. She heard her neighbour’s dog drag on his chain and howl again. She ran to the door and flung it wide—only the darkness. She would never see him again; she would never have the courage, even if he came.

She flung herself, face downwards, in the grass before her door—and the clock in the room behind her struck twelve.