

Transmigration

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

I

Many men have tasted Hell some moments of their lives—a Hell of their own making, perhaps; but I, oh God! I have been in the Hell of the damned.

I cannot remember my father or my mother; oh, wretched that I am! Had I either to love one whom no man loves? No, I cannot remember. My memory goes back three months—no further. Every day I live those three months over and over again.

I had too much money when I came of age. I knew not how to use it. I threw it here and there, ever indulging in my own pleasure. Playing in the world till the dust of it rose up and clouded my eyes—till the hand of innocence I held in mine was changed for the hand of sin.

Playing in a world that I was sent to work in, I forgot I had a soul or that there was a God who had given it to me. I played until my selfish indulgences brought upon me the sickness of death. And then my three months of Hell commenced. Unloved, unfriended, I tossed upon my bed, blaspheming a God I did not believe in, swearing I would not die. Shrieking in my terror of that Hell, I felt myself approaching a Hell I had so often scoffed at. I heard my screams re-echo through the empty house, unreplied to, making my desolation complete. Then I lay still, gasping on my bed; so would my prayers soar up to Heaven, I thought, unanswered, unheard. But stay! a step on the stairs—nearer, nearer; the door has opened, and a man stands upon the threshold. Oh, eyes that beamed peace and love, you saved me from Heaven's vengeance for the moment—at what a cost! He came forward into the room when he saw me, and I thought for an instant it was an angel sent to comfort my misery.

"I heard you call," he said; "and, fearing you were ill, I entered. I am your neighbour, my latch-key fits your door. You must pardon my coming, but, thinking you were ill—and alone—"

"I am alone," I said—"alone, alone, deserted alike by God and man. Body and soul I am alone, and sick unto death."

"Despair not, my friend," said he. "I will attend you; you are sick, and morbid from being left alone. Rouse yourself, and I will try and help."

"Help me! no man can help me; I have helped no man. Unless you can give me another life to live with the knowledge I have of this."

"My dear friend, God alone can do that," his voice went on soothingly; "but you are truly sorry for your past?"

"Man," I cried, "there are no such things as death-bed repentances. Death is ever beside us a yawning precipice; as we walk along its edge we *know* that it is there. We look at the sky above it, at the flowers by its brink, but we never look at it; we turn our heads away, but we know that it is there. We feel the chill of it in the heat of the sun. We see its shadow on the petals of the flowers. We know that a false step, a stumble, and we are gone, plunged into Eternity in a moment. We say that sometime this path must come to an end, as we but follow it to our extermination, and when we see before us the black doors of death, *then* will we lay aside our flowers, and still our songs and laughter. And Heaven will pity our prayers and sighs. Talk not to me of such repentances; I believe them not, nor you, nor any man."

"You are very ill," the stranger said, as I raved on.

“I will not die, I must live, though Heaven itself has shut its gates upon me. Hell—if such is my destination—must give me a year of life. I say, I will not die.” A strange strength seemed to flow through my veins. I raised myself on my elbow. The stranger was standing at my bedside looking with divine pity at my convulsed face.

“You,” I said. Oh, the horror of it! “You must die, you with your life of purity behind you; death should have no fears for you. The gates of Heaven are open for you; give me your body, your life, and let me live.”

“Friend,” he said, as though humouring me, “I cannot die; I have a mother who is old and requires my care, and a child, a darling little child.”

“You must die!” I cried again. “I will care for your mother and child. You must die and let me live—I say, I will not die.”

“You are very ill,” was all he said, laying his hand upon my brow. And then, I know not how it came to pass, whether my cry to Heaven or Hell had been answered, or, whatever it was, by some great effort of my will, *but I stood by the bed looking down at my own sleeping body*. I dashed across the room to the glass. It was the stranger it reflected back—yes, the same high forehead, with fair, wavy hair, the same large, dreamy eyes; but his soul, ah! his soul lay sleeping in that motionless form upon the bed. I turned and left the haunted room, living, living, living!

II

Living, living—oh, the joy of it! I had died and was born again. How it came about, what cared I? “Who,” I thought, as I bounded down the stairs, “so fortunate as I?” What man or woman thinking over the past has not said—“Oh, could I but live my life over again, I would not have done this thing or that”? And I, with my evil past laid out before me, could live it again, casting out the weeds and cultivating the trodden flowers; with nothing to hinder me, not even the sensual flesh that lay upstairs, a prison-house for the spirit of that good man whose body I was inhabiting and whose life I proposed to live.

I closed the door of my own house and went up the tiny garden to the next; as I did so, I heard the patter of little feet and a childish voice calling, “Here’s papa! Here’s papa!”

I opened the door and took the little darling into my arms. Never had I felt such happiness as when the innocent parted lips met mine and the soft baby-hands went round my neck. I stood still to take in the joy of it, but the child drew back in my arms and for a moment she sat quite quiet, and then she struggled until I had to let her down.

“It’s not my papa!” she sobbed, running into the little sitting-room. “Oh, gran’ma, ’tis not my own papa!”

Mechanically I hung my hat upon the rack in the hall and followed the child. The room was small, but very bright and cosy; an old lady was seated in an arm-chair before the blazing fire; one withered hand was laid caressingly upon the golden head of the little girl, the other shaded her eyes as she anxiously watched the door. When I entered she smiled and turned to the weeping child.

“Why, what ailed you, darling? Look, Rosy, it is your own papa.”

Rosy looked up through her tears, and, seeing me standing in the full glare of the lamp and fire, ran to me again. I sat down in a low chair opposite the old woman, and the little child climbed on to my knees.

“It’s my dood papa,” she said, laying her wet cheek against mine.

For an hour I sat thus tasting for the first time the joy of a home, and listening to the old woman as she told me tales of her son's youth—my youth now.

For some time she rambled on, in the fashion of the old, and at last for very joy I laughed aloud, waking the child, who had fallen asleep in my arms.

“Will you take her up to bed, Gilbert,” said her grandmother; “she sat up for you that you might put her to sleep to-night.”

I raised the child in my arms, the pretty little babe with her soft curls falling across her face, and she laid her drowsy head upon my shoulder. I pressed her with joy to my breast as I turned up the narrow, dark stairs; at my movement she sat up suddenly and pushed me from her with both her tiny hands. Oh, wonderful instinct of the child that in the light beheld her father, but in darkness knew me for a stranger!

“You're not my papa! Oh, I want papa!”

“Hush, hush!” I whispered; “I am your papa.”

“You're not, you're not!” and she beat upon my breast with both her tiny fists.

“Give me my own papa, you bad, bad man!”

Then a great fury seized me, and I held her over the banisters.

“Call me your father, or I let you go.”

“No, no; I want my own papa!”

“Call me your father, or I let you go.”

“I want my dood papa!”

I did not mean it, Heaven knows I did not mean it, but my fingers loosed their hold. I shook the little hands from their terrified grasp upon my coat. The hall echoed the screams of a child and a sickening thud on the flags beneath. A terrible laugh followed, a laugh that might have come from the lowest pits of Hell. Was it I who uttered it? I looked into the hall beneath me. A trembling old woman knelt there, and, at her side, a servant with a lighted candle, but their white faces were not turned to the motionless body at their feet, but towards me, unspeaking, as though they were frozen by some terrible sight or sound. Had a devil entered into the body Gilbert Graham during the time my spirit was passing from my own to it—a devil who, making me work its will, thus laughed in its hideous triumph. Surely devils were many round my bed when I lay dying. Its power had left me now, and I went, in bitter remorse, to the little child.

“She slipped from my arms,” I whispered. “She slipped, mother.”

She answered me nothing; but, as I raised the senseless babe, the servant sobbed, “Oh, Master Gilbert, we thought the shock had sent you mad!”

I laid the child upon the sofa, while the girl ran for a doctor. I stood as though stunned until he came, watching him then in a dream as he examined the soft limbs of the poor babe, and he shook his head as he arose.

“I am sorry to have to tell you that if she lives she will be a cripple all her life.”

“Tell my mother,” I whispered. I was not the one to tell her this.

“I am sorry,” he said; “I am very sorry, Madam.”

“Hush!” the old woman answered; “hush! You will waken her.”

“She may never waken,” he whispered. “Bear up, dear Madam.”

“Hush!” the old woman said again, touching the golden curls that were stained with blood. “Hush! The fairies have come to her and laid red poppies in her hair.”

And thus had I fulfilled my trust to care for his mother and child—one a cripple or dead, the other a muttering idiot.

I had launched my new life, and the waters that bore it were red human blood; but who or what was the dread pilot that guided it?

III

I stole out into the dimly lighted street. Of what use was I at home?

The little child still lingered. The old woman was still happy in her ignorance, babbling of fairies and red poppies. My hands were the fairies that had laid those terrible flowers on her babe's fair head, the sleep-giving poppies on her eyes.

The paper-boys were shouting in my ears as I passed, but I paid no attention to them. Their "terrible tragedies" could not equal mine; their cries of "Murder!" woke no horror in my heart; they only cried aloud the word that echoed there. I dare not think of the imprisoned soul that lay as dead in my room—the only one who sought me out in my hour of death's despair. My horrible cries, that had frightened the very servants from my house, but hastened his feet to my side; and now he slept, a thin wall between him and the reward I had given him—a ruined home.

Oh, how could I hear the city noises and a thousand cries within my breast—a thousand little hands beating upon my heart, "Give back! give back!"

And so I strode through the damp fog, caring not, thinking not where I was going. At last a bright light flashed in my eyes, and I started as though awaking. Before me was a lighted doorway, and above it, in the light of the lamp, hung a board, and upon it in red letters the word "Billiards." The place was a gambling-hell. I had known it but too well in the old days. I gazed about, half-hearing some one speaking, and saw a young man before me, his face flushed and his eyelids drooping.

"I could not help it, Graham; indeed I could not! I tried to keep away because of my promise to you and for my mother's sake."

His promise to me! I almost laughed aloud. Yes, I knew that boyish, effeminate face. It had been often opposite to me at the gambling-table inside. I had seen it grow white and tortured as the game went on. I had made its hairless lips grow sweet in a smile, or quiver pathetically like a girl's, by the turn of my hand; I had lured him on night after night with a hope I held between my fingers. His promise to me! I had forgotten. Something evil was rising in my heart. I felt it would claim my lips if I did not speak. I seized his arm.

"Go home," I said; "heed not what I may say to you after this, heed not what I may seem to you. The most beautiful statue is but hollow and moulded in common clay. The tiger's claws are soft as a lady's cheek, but they will tear you to pieces if you trust them. The moth sees the candle's flame, and, thinking it fair, he dies. I am not as you think—"

"I do not know what you mean, Graham. If you mean this den has any fairness for me, it is not so, unless it be the fascination of the bird to the serpent's eye."

"Leave me!" I cried despairingly, for devils' words were rising to my lips; and as he did not heed me, I turned and spoke them.

"Come in with me," I said, and laughed. "Come in with me, and I shall see fair play."

"With you!" He started. "With you, Graham! you who have preached of its dangers to me and its temptations and wickedness; you to whom I looked to save me from where it will lead me. Oh, Graham! I could laugh, 'tis so absurd!"

"I'll see fair play," I said again; "besides, you could not break yourself of the habit so easily and abruptly—I will wean you from it by degrees."

I took his arm, and we passed inside. No one took any notice of me when we entered, but they all gathered around my companion.

“Why, Varen, we thought you were going to leave us?”

“Did you hear of the discovery in Harrington Street last night? Poor Bulger! You remember Bulger, don’t you? You lost a cool hundred to him one night here over the cards, eh? Got a cataleptic fit, they say; most interesting case. Went home in a most distressing state of mind the other night, commenced shouting like the devil, frightened the servant out of her wits and out of the house—says she hid in a doorway till dawn, afraid to go back; then she screwed up her courage and stole to the house; finding no answer to her knocks, and being unable to open the door, became alarmed, started for the police-station, and returned with some of the force. One got into the house by a low window and opened the door to the rest; they found poor Bulger lying on his bed—they thought—dead as a herring, but the doctors say ’tis a most interesting case of catalepsy.”

I listened without speaking. “What a queer old world it is!” I thought; “we must have a name for everything, no matter how wonderful, or where would our doctors and men of science be? Nothing is left to the God who designed the whole. Our beliefs are superstitions, we laugh them away; we would explain the very law of life itself.”

A hand was laid upon my arm.

“Play a game of cards, Graham? The fellows are asking me.”

“No, no; this is no place for you—for me. Come out of it quickly.”

But the men surrounded us.

“You are not going yet? just one game, then?”

Fool that I was, I complied, and took my seat at the table. They thought I was a “green one,” as was evident from their surprised looks when I swept up their little pile of silver at the end of the first game.

“You would think it was old Bulger himself,” I heard one say; “he seems to have his accursed luck.”

One game led to another; my companion’s face grew pale; some demon arose within me, and I took a pleasure in its paleness.

Why is it innocence attracts the guilty so? Behind the bar connected with this card-room there was a young girl serving. I heard men make rude jests that brought the colour to her cheeks; she would hang her head if they called her endearing names, and the angry tears would spring to her eyes: she would shake off their hands with passion. For this girl they would leave their billiards and their cards to watch the red and white fly to her face; and now, when they speak to her, she answers their jests with similar ones; she answers their calls with a simper; she courts their caresses and their company; she is no longer attractive to them—she is one of themselves.

Why did I not pick out my prey among those evil, coarse faces—why did I seek to destroy the one exception? I know not; life preys upon that which is weaker than itself, not that which is its equal.

I swept pile after pile of silver into my pockets, Varen’s white face growing whiter and whiter. At last he started to his feet—

“I’m cleared out—I have only a shilling left; I’m going home.”

“Put it down,” I said to him. “Why, man, you may win a pile on it yet. Finish this round, anyway.”

Sullenly he sat down again and took up his cards.

I let him win game after game, and when he rose to depart he had won back a third of his losses.

“I’ll come again to-morrow night and win the rest,” he said, with a smile.

Why follow the downfall of that young life? Night after night we met in the same place, I hastening away from the ceaseless crying of a little, suffering child, calling for the father I had robbed her of; he from the complaints of a broken-hearted mother, powerless to draw her only son from the snare I had set for him. Night after night I robbed him of his earnings, leaving him to win back a third, to lure him with a hope, never to be fulfilled, that the next time he might win a fortune.

Paler each night grew the young face, shabbier the clothes, thinner the hands that grasped the cards so eagerly. Now he spoke no word of greeting to me; only his eyes revealed his thoughts: therein I could see the light of hope gleam faintly each night, fading, fading to give place to despair, returning again as the closing hours approached and the waiter’s voice warned us it was time to stop.

One night Varen came hastily in, staggering as though he were drunk. Flinging himself down in a chair, he took his cards. There was no hope in his eyes; I saw only terrible anguish and despair. On one sleeve of his shabby coat I saw a broad band of crape.

He played wildly—and won. I had slain my devil; he won again; I was glad. I saw his silver flow back to him; I was happy for the first time in many a weary hour. “I shall no longer be his curse,” I thought; “through me he shall win back his fortune, his mother’s blessing, his lost youth. I shall restore all.”

A cry recalled me. I had been dreaming. I gazed around bewildered; the candles were spluttering in their sockets, and on the side of one was a great roll of wax. It was turned towards Varen—I had heard old wives call it a winding-sheet. The dust of the day before lay white on the sideboard and table, disturbed only where the cards fell and by the track of our fingers. The dawn was creeping through the half-closed shutters of the window, making our faces grey and ghastly in the two lights.

Young Varen was staring at me with mad eyes, and on the table at my side lay a heap of silver. It was I who had been winning.

Varen leaned across the table and gazed into my face.

“Are you a man,” he said, “or are you a devil?”

I did not answer, but that terrible thing within me broke into a laugh. The men beside me started in horror as the sound came forth and echoed round the room as though a demon were in each corner to repeat it.

Varen’s hand went to his breast.

“Devil in the shape of a man,” he said, “your work is done! Cruellest of enemies in the guise of a friend! You won my trust and led me to this. What is pure, since you I believed so pure are as you are? What is the reward of love, since you I have loved reward me so? Through your aid I was fighting the old life from me, and rising to honour and esteem, to the knowledge of a mother’s proud heart. And through your aid I fell to meanness and disgrace, to see a mother robbed of her necessaries, and worse—to lose her son’s love and care and to die broken-hearted alone. Your hand had saved me from the precipice of Hell, and your hand it is that flings me into its hottest fire. Finish, then, your devil’s work, for I dare not!”

He drew a pistol from his breast and handed it to me. I felt the cold steel in my hand, and saw the horrified looks of the men around us; they seemed powerless to cry out or interrupt us; before

me the ghastly face of young Varen. A wild rage rose up in my heart; I panted like a mad dog, and foam fell from my mouth. I tried to pray, but could not.

A pistol-shot rang through the room, and the white face before me vanished. There was hot blood upon my hands; a terror seized me—what had I done? Hands were upon my shoulders. But I escaped them. I flew down the creaking stairs. People were shouting. Steps were coming after me. I flung wide the door and flew wildly, blindly, down the street. Feet were repeating the echo of mine. People were calling “Murder! murder!” Windows were flung open, men joined in the chase. People were calling “Murder!”—and my hands were red with blood. Ha! the well-known door—it was my own; *his* latch-key opened it. I let myself in and flew upstairs; there was a light in my old room; a nurse sat nodding over the fire. I saw my old form lying motionless upon the bed. I sprang to its side. Voices were calling at the hall-door—men were breaking it in. They had tracked me.

I seized the hand that lay upon the counterpane; a shudder ran through it. Steps were at the door, “Murder” ran through the house. There was a moment of nothingness and I woke.

It was all a terrible dream; I lay upon my own bed. The kind neighbour, hearing my cry, had called in to see if I needed anything; he was looking down with pity in his eyes, his hands cooling mine—he had dipped them in water. No! it was blood, BLOOD! and the room rang with the cries of “MURDERER!” I started up; they were putting manacles on his wrists. He was stunned, he knew not what to say; he answered not their insinuations, but passed his manacled hands now and again across his eyes, like a man who had been long sleeping.

A terrible laugh sounded round the room; it seemed to float through the doorway, and we heard it echo down the house, fading away into stillness. I tried to rise and speak, but fell back unconscious.

IV

I awoke to misery and despair. Lying still a moment, to gather my thoughts together, I heard some persons talking at the head of my bed. It was the nurse and a couple of men, doctors I soon knew them to be. They were talking excitedly, but in subdued voices; I heard every word distinctly: “Graham is to be hanged for the murder of young Varen.” I started up, gazing at them in agony.

“He did not do it. I, and I alone, am guilty.”

They had started back when I moved, in astonishment; but when I spoke they came beside me, trying to soothe me and make me lie down and rest again. To rest! O Heaven! there was no more rest for me in this world.

I told them I would explain, but they would not let me speak. I heard them whisper of my most extraordinary case. They thought I had gained consciousness while they were speaking of Graham, and, hearing their words at that critical moment, took the idea into my head that I had committed the crime.

“Let me go!” I moaned; “let me go!”

But they held me down in their cruel kindness till I had to do their bidding from very weakness.

But when the night came on, and when the old nurse was nodding in her chair, I arose in the darkness and went from the house. Up and down the streets I wandered till dawn grew grey, but no dawn arose in my heart, only black night for ever. Through the streets, never stopping, I walked till the sun grew hot and bright, and people crowded out into the pathways. I bought a

paper from a news vendor, and read the trial of Gilbert Graham. It was nearly over; all the evidence was against him. He had nothing to say for himself; once he spoke to ask if he might see his little child, and he was told she was dead. They said he seemed stunned, or as though in a dream. I read no more.

When the court was opened, and the trial came on again, I hid myself among the crowd that attended it. I saw the prisoner at the bar; he was not pale; a colour tinged his cheeks. He seemed as if he were asleep. I do not think he heard anything of what was going on. Witness after witness came to condemn him. I could not bear it. I put myself forward as a witness for the defence. They allowed me into the box. I tried to tell my story, but they would not listen to me; some laughed; some pitied me; but they would not let me speak.

“Will you not hear me?” I cried. “You cannot understand, but do not laugh; there are so many things men know nothing of, but do not scorn them because you do not understand them. Can you know what gives life to the smallest insect living on this earth? Can you explore a step beyond the grave? You cannot. I alone am guilty of this murder; by my own act, or by the act of Heaven or Hell, I know not.”

A gentleman rose in the court; he sent a message to the Judge, whispered to a constable, and I was dragged out of the house. I heard a murmur of excited voices and a whisper.

“’Tis that poor fellow Bulger; they say his brain is turned since he had his cataleptic attack.”

I was forced along by my doctor, his arm linked in mine. Calling a cab, he put me inside, and was about to follow, when a friend of his came up and spoke to him.

“Oh, yes,” he answered, “I thought I’d find him there. He woke to consciousness just as Dr. Gill and myself were speaking of young Varen’s death, and he seemed to get it into his head that he was the murderer. He escaped from the house last night, but from his ravings I thought it probable I should find him at court to-day.”

I heard no more. Silently opening the door furthest from the speaker, I slipped out, and in the dusk of the evening made my escape.

How the night passed I know not, but, when the light came, I had but one thought: to seek out Graham and beg his forgiveness. Again I bought a morning paper, and read the finish of the trial. Graham was condemned to death.

After a day’s wandering, or maybe more—I knew nothing of time in those blank hours—I found out the prison where he lay awaiting his doom, and craved admittance, saying I was a particular friend—a friend!

They let me see him for a moment, but he did not know me. He even smiled when I asked his forgiveness; even he would not believe me.

“I do not understand it at all,” he said, laying his head on his hand wearily. “I cannot think, I cannot even feel these last few days,” and then raised his head and gazed at me eagerly. “Do you know anything of my mother?”

I did not know of her, and turned away my face.

“I had a child!” he cried. “Oh, tell me of my little child!”

“Do you not remember?—she is dead,” I told him, weeping.

He leaned his head upon his hand again. “I had forgotten.”

He spoke no more to me, and I was taken out of the place. “He will forgive me tomorrow,” I said.

But, hidden away in a low lodging-house, I was too ill to stir for many days; then early one morning I found myself at the prison door again; it opened for me readily, and when it closed I found myself confronted by my doctor and some of his friends.

“I thought our patient would turn up sooner or later,” he said. “How fortunate you should choose the time we are here!”

“I will go anywhere you will if you but let me see him once again,” I cried; “only once till he forgives me. Let me go! I must!” I cried, fighting them. “I cannot live unless I get his pardon.”

“You cannot see him,” they said.

“ But I will—I must!

“You cannot—he was hanged this morning at seven.”