

The Jealousy of Beatrix

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

Beatrix sat at the window alone, watching the couple who were chatting at the fireside. She watched their faces keenly from the shadow, and every expression that passed over them found an answer in her eyes. Did they look glad, she was sullen; did they smile, she grew more angry. Sometimes her hands clenched unconsciously; in another moment her eyes filled with self-pitying tears. Once she raised her fingers before her face, as though to shut out an unpleasant sight, but again drew them quickly away, lest she should miss a glance or flush of the faces she watched.

Beatrix, looking upon the group, felt herself forsaken and forgotten. She watched the woman before her coquette and chatter with the man she loved, and felt powerless to enter the lists with her. "If she can take him, he is not worth keeping," she thought; and again, "What right have I to him? He has never said he loved me. Yet he did—he did." She rose from her place and slipped out into the garden through the open window. She thought for a moment she would go to her room, then listened; maybe he would follow her. She walked down the avenue full in the moonlight. For a time hope and rest came to her heart; he was sure to come, and all this horror of jealousy would be forgotten. She would know that he left the shining city woman for her, a country maid. The noise of a creaking window startled her. She sprang into the shadow and crouched.

No! he must not see her. Of course, he would guess that she intended him to follow. What if he did? Oh, unmaidenly conduct! She would sink into the ground with shame if she met him and read that he knew in his eyes.

She saw him saunter along the path towards her, and shrank back. If he found her now, hiding, all was over. What a fool she was to hide at all! How she wished she had never seen this man, who troubled her so; yet how his nearness thrilled her! The sound of his breathing gave her strange pleasure; to know he was so near seemed enough joy in the wide world. When he had gone she flew to her room. Had he been to seek her, or had he not? Still her heart was light that he had left that woman even for the moment. She lit a candle and looked at herself in the glass. The pretty picture did not please her. She opened a wardrobe and drew out a blue robe that it held; she hesitated, then threw it back. No, she dare not change now, every one would notice and guess what she was dressing for. Yet why had she put on that pink dress she now wore, to have it killed by the deeper rose of her rival's gown? She drew her hair more softly about her face and left the room. At the top of the stairs she listened for a while, then, hearing nothing, she tip-toed into the visitor's room. With candle in hand she stole like a thief to the dressing-table. There she lifted a powder-puff and passed it over her face. The effect pleased her, and she followed it by adding a faint rouge to her already burning cheeks.

"I will use your weapons," she said smiling, and left the room. When she entered the drawing-room she took a seat beside her rival as one who would say: "I am a worthy antagonist. My beauty is more young, more fresh than yours.

But the other, looking towards her for a moment, bent forward and whispered with a smile:

"*You* do not need it."

The girl, taking the compliment as a sneer, and abashed at being discovered, drew back into the shadow and silence, rubbing the powder angrily from her cheeks, her heart raging with fierce,

unreasonable jealousy. Her love making her self-conscious and suspicious, she took every glance of the innocent guest to be fraught with meaning, and the natural attention of the man she so loved to the stranger to be admiration and attraction.

In the flash of her rage and during the conversation a wish to be revenged on the woman grew within her. And soon a plan was suggested by words let fall by her companions.

“And so you are afraid of ghosts, Miss Marlow?” the young man said, smiling.

“I am truly, horribly afraid,” she answered, glancing round half fearfully. “If I saw anything that represented one, I am sure I should go raving mad.”

“This house is supposed to be haunted,” said Beatrix from her corner. “Isn’t that so, James?” She turned to the young man.

“It is,” he answered, laughing; “but no one has ever seen or heard anything yet, though mother and I have lived here for years.”

While he spoke his mother entered the room and begged for a song. Miss Marlow was a brilliant pianist, and James leaned over her, turning the leaves of her music. But all through the pauses of the tunes Beatrix sat silent, thinking: “I will frighten her to-night. How shall I frighten her?” She could hardly reply to the questions of the guest, or the good-natured attempts of James to draw her into the conversation. When Miss Marlow left the room to fetch some music she had forgotten, James came to Beatrix’s side, and spoke to her.

“What do you think of our visitor?” was the foolish question he asked.

Beatrix flashed an attempt at gaiety, but only succeeded in being bitter.

“*You* seem to like her,” she said, then flushed under his amused gaze. “She is painted and artificial,” she added.

“You are cross to-night, Trixy,” James answered, looking kindly at her. “Not like yourself. What is the matter?”

She did not answer, and the old lady looked at her inquiringly. She loved this orphan girl as she would have loved her own daughter—and, indeed, one day she hoped she would be one in truth.

“She is tired,” she said. “You must go to bed soon, dearie.”

“Miss Marlow has the haunted room, has she not?” Beatrix said; and as she spoke the door opened, and Miss Marlow entered. Beatrix felt glad she had overheard her.

“Oh, please, not the haunted room!” the visitor cried; then, laughing with them, continued, “Of course, I do not really mind.”

“It is all nonsense about the haunted room,” the old lady told her. “There was never heard nor seen such a thing as a ghost in the house.”

After a few chaffing words on the subject of ghosts and their doings, the little party broke up for the night, Beatrix going to her room first. She was really ill and tired. She flung herself on the bed, listening to the parting words and laughter of the others left below; and the sounds made her believe she was forgotten by those she loved. She rose and noisily shut the door, which she had only half-closed, and walked up and down the room in despair.

She was still dressed and awake hours afterwards, when the house was wrapped in sleep. Unable to rest, she looked from the open window into the night. As she did so, a dark form sprang upon the sill where she leaned. It was a huge black cat. “Tom,” she said, “you frightened me; I thought you were a ghost.” She started at her own suggestion, and an idea came to her. She tightened her hold on the cat, and with it in her arms stole out of her room along the passage. At the door of the haunted chamber she paused and listened. With one hand she softly turned the handle, and again paused, but there was no sound. In a moment she slipped the black cat inside the room, and, closing the door softly, hurried back to her own apartment, her heart beating

wildly. "She will think Tom is a ghost," she said, laughing. Then she was disgusted with herself. "How horrid I am!" she said, and threw herself on the bed, sobbing bitterly. After a short time she fell into a troubled slumber. She awoke with a shock, as though something had moved in the room. All her nerves in a strange quiver, she listened for some sound or sign of what had awakened her. In the dead silence she felt she must scream, such a terror surrounded and held her.

"Who's there?" she tried to cry, but her voice came in a husky whisper. Her eyeballs rolled round in the darkness, not knowing where to rest; her hands moved, not knowing on which side to repel the attack she felt was coming.

The room was quite black; not even a glimpse of light came through the heavy curtains she had drawn across the windows. One moment she thought of springing from her bed and trying to reach the door; the next that such a flight would bring the invisible horror upon her. She thought to put forth her hand to seek for a match-box on the table beside the bed, but feared that something would grasp it if she did. She heard a board creak in the floor, as though some foot had pressed upon it. She drew the blankets over her head, and lay panting beneath them, half-stifled. A cold sweat broke out over her; she shivered like one caught naked in the snow. All her nerves were alert for the next move of the unknown intruder; so she hardly could suffer more when it came like a hand passing over her feet. She thrust them down from their cramped position in a spasm of fear. For a moment there was stillness, then again the soft pressure was repeated, and she lay like one dead, bereft of movement. She felt the weight move upward, now on her knees, now along her side. Her benumbed intelligence guessed it was a hand—of what?—of whom?—stealing upward till it felt her head. "Then," she thought, "it will pull back the clothes, and I shall see—what?—whom?" She tried to move, but could not stir a finger. She tried to scream, but her voice would only whisper, "James, help! For God's sake, help!" And the weight crept up to her shoulder. She knew when it reached her head and drew back the clothes she would go mad, yes, raving mad. It was coming! She felt the pressure of it upon her cheek, and with the scream of a maniac thrust her arms out and caught at the horror. It was a black cat, gigantic, mad, its green eyes glittering, its red tongue hissing between its sharp white teeth. She could see it plainly, though the room was dark. Its claws clung tearing at her. She struck it, but it fell upon her, scratching, kicking, biting. To protect her eyes as long as possible from its ferocious rage she flung her head back sharply, striking it a terrible blow upon something that rendered her unconscious. When she woke she was lying on the floor completely dressed, the dawn shining in soft and fair through the open window, the first song of the birds coming to her upon the sweet early breeze. She sat up and gazed around, astonished and still terrified. "My God!" she said, "what a dream!—what a dream!" She went to the window trembling, and leaned out into the light, and as she did so the memory of the evening before came to her. She had put Tom into Miss Marlow's room. Was this what her dream meant? Was this dream an acting reality in the haunted room? What had happened there?

She rushed along the passage and stopped at the door. What would she see or hear there?

She listened for a moment, and heard no sound, and then, with a beating heart, shook the handle. "Millie, are you asleep? Millie, it is I, Beatrix." Her voice came in a hoarse whisper, but there was no answer or sound from within. She is mad, or dead, she thought, with the calmness of despair, then turned the handle. "Millie," she said again, afraid to look in, "Millie." The sound of an animal jumping from the bed answered her, and Tom bounded from the room, and commenced circling round her feet with glad caresses. She thrust him away, and hurrying

downstairs, opened the hall-door and ran into the garden. Unable to rest there, she went through the gates, out upon the moors that lay at the back of the house.

“I am a murderer,” she said, and ran on. She wanted to hide, but there was no shadow. The sun began to send his golden shafts over the world. “Don’t rise,” she wept, “don’t rise; give me darkness.” Fear was after her, and she ran like a hare before the hound. Why had such a thing happened to her?—she, who had been always gentle, kind, and loving to all things. Was it love that had made a devil of her? Then she hated love. “What are you shining for,” she shrieked at the sun, “now the world has come to an end?” She hurried on stumbling, tripped, and would have fallen, but stretching out her arms, she was caught.

“Why, Beatrix, poor child, what has happened? What are you doing out so early? What is the matter?”

She looked up, her brain clearing at the sight of another human being. James stood before her, his gun upon his shoulder, tall, strong, and alarmed.

She gasped out her story, hoping for help.

“I put Tom into Miss Marlow’s room last night to frighten her. I think she is dead, for she did not answer my knocking.”

The young man looked at her a moment, as if not quite understanding, then laughed.

“Miss Marlow slept with mother last night,” he said; “she was afraid of the visitors’ room when she heard you say it was haunted.”

Beatrix closed her eyes, and would have fallen, only he held her hands. She opened them, and found him staring sternly at her.

“It was a dangerous trick for you to play,” he said, “and unlike you. Why did you do it?”

The girl looked at him a moment, and read the dawn of a discovery in his eyes. She hid her face in her hands, and burst into tears. “I hate you!” she said, as if answering a question, “I hate you!”

He took her quickly into his arms with a strong, passionate embrace.

“You foolish child!” he whispered; “you foolish little child!”