

# Priscilla

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

Priscilla was dead, and all the women of the village had come to her waking. They moved about the big house where she had lived so long and so quietly as though they had never seen it before; and they never had, without Priscilla.

They moved silently, or came together in little groups to talk about her. They seemed as much amazed as sorry. Who could imagine Priscilla dead? Surely she was the oldest woman in the village; and yet she seemed not so very old; but no one remembered the village without her, and no one remembered her young. Perhaps she had entered into their lives unnoticed and only when she came to her womanhood had taken her place in their sight, as a little unknown seedling will one day become a tree and a landmark.

Perhaps in the great house she had passed her shadowy girlhood, and only became a personage when her uncle died, leaving her his sole and only heir. Then she crept forth, and her fading hands drew the hearts of the people towards her.

Was she rich? Who can say? The black, barrack-like house, with its neglected garden, had no air of wealth about it; but never a child or woman came to Priscilla for help and went away empty-handed. Some said that for this latter reason the house grew more desolate as it grew old,—that pictures and silver and ornaments vanished one by one.

But others would have it that Priscilla had a box of money in her room, corded, sealed and locked. For true it was that such a box, to all appearance, was there, as Ann O'Ruark, who nursed her once in an illness, could tell.

Now she lay dead, and it seemed to the women of the little village as though something marvellous had happened,—as though the old round tower they looked upon every morning when they opened their doors had crumbled in the night, or as though the church bell they depended upon to awaken them at six had forgotten to ring, leaving them late and bewildered. True, she might have been ill or gone away on a visit, or vanished for a time. But to die! No one ever thought that of Priscilla after all those years. Why, even now the children from the cottages were running down the street on the stroke of five, to meet her coming from her Saturday's marketing with something hidden for them in her pocket. Yet they had been told she would come up the narrow street no more. Yes, even now poor cripple Janie Doyle was turning her face to the window to be ready for the smile and cheery word that always met her. Yet she too knew Priscilla would never pass again.

All the women there sitting at her wake felt that to-morrow they would put on their shawls and run to tell Priscilla their joys and sorrows, or to ask her advice, as they had done all the time since they became aware she was. And Priscilla would be lying with that strange smile upon her face, so far removed from them.

Was she so very old—Priscilla? Hers was a face you could not imagine had ever been young. Wrinkled and fallen away, you could not fix and fill it with youth.

Once she had said to a child, "I was light as a bird when I was young as you"; and the little one had gone away troubled at the lie. She knew, as all the children did, that Priscilla had never, never been young.

Though Priscilla knew everything of everybody, nobody knew anything of Priscilla, except, of course, that she was an old maid—as any one of the name of Priscilla must be. Why, the very

sound of it was enough to tell how prim, how neat, how old-maidish she was. No one could have imagined her with a lover. Many a time the village women had sat and talked of Priscilla, what she must have been like as a girl—if she ever had been a girl: the primmest of little girls, who always had her hair smooth and lessons learnt: a girl with large feet and high, buttoned boots, with every button fastened in its place; thin legs, of course; a waist that had never known tight-lacing; straight hair, first in a plait, and later a tight coil at the back of her smooth head; a high white forehead, intelligent grey eyes, a rather large and rather pink nose, a pleasant mouth, thin neck and breast, long arms, large nervous hands. Yes, that must have been Priscilla, if ever she had been a girl. But there was no lover in the setting of Priscilla's girlhood. No, she hated men, and rough boys the natty Priscilla must have always shunned, nor could she, with her cleverness, ever have admired the developing youth.

Yes, she hated men and all their sex; she was hardly kind to little boys—they were cruel to her cats, she would say. But the girl babies, how she loved them! There was never a birth in the village where she was not first visitor to the new arrival. And if it was a boy, she would look close into the little red face till he raised his voice and howled. Then she would laugh. "Shout for it and you will get it, my lad; only shout long enough and you will get it." Then she would press a golden pound into his little fist and leave him. But if it was a girl, she would take it in her arms, and if it was crying it would stop that minute. She would drop a tear upon it, perhaps, and whisper things into its little unconscious ears. When she was leaving she would put a guinea into its hands, with the words, "For your sad heart, my girl, for your sad heart." So the baby would be added to her list of loves.

But she liked best the lovelorn maidens who would come to her with their stories. They were indeed for her heart of hearts. Many a sorrowful soul that had forgotten how to be proud would after consulting with her become strong again, and win the lover back by flaunting who had grown weary of too patient a love.

The house was built like one that had never been intended to hold the young: dark, gloomy, rambling. Priscilla was the only one to whom it seemed a fitted background.

The little children who braved its awfulness would hasten, afraid of its silence, from passage to passage till they reached Priscilla, every minute expecting a horrible something belonging to the mould and age to spring upon them from each dark place. Only the mysterious cupboards with hidden sweets and jams, found nowhere else, could tempt them to come. And it took three of them to do it, clinging together, and stopping often with shrieks that were not all laughter, but served to fill the dusty silence.

When Priscilla died there turned up from somewhere a far-removed cousin—a stern, middle-aged woman, who looked at the world through smoked glasses; and no doubt the world looked grey to her. She had no tears, no smiles, no sentiments, only the hardness of middle life, which has left the softness of youth behind it and not yet reached the softness of age. She was a business-like person, and ordered everything and everybody as if she had lived all her life in Priscilla's house. The people wondered if she would get Priscilla's box of treasure; but, of course, there was no one else. The cousin was making herself busy, pretending to be concerned for Priscilla. Why had she not come before to take care of her? She wanted to blame somebody for not calling in a doctor. But she ought to know Priscilla would not have the doctor. She had a perfect horror of the doctor, and would never see him, or speak of him. There was only one doctor in the village—an old man, as old Priscilla, it might be—a married man with grown-up sons and daughters, now married themselves and doing well. Once a neighbour had spoken of the doctor to Priscilla. It was to repeat a story of his past, a story of a lonely girl he had jilted

almost on their wedding day; and how the girl had vanished and been heard of no more; but that had not happened in the village, and so the village was not interested in the particulars. When Priscilla heard the story she rose from her seat and went to the window without a word. So the neighbour thought she was weary, and changed the subject from men and their misdeeds, but she did make a parting remark to the effect that the doctor and his wife never got on together. She was surprised when Priscilla said, in a voice so sweet and far-away she hardly heard it, "Poor lad! poor lad!"

Priscilla would not have the doctor come near her when she lived, but when she died he had to be called in. People who watched him coming were surprised to see him falter, he ought to have been so used to death. And yet he came like one most cruelly afraid. He stood at the door of the room where she lay for a few moments, as though unable to enter. Then he pushed the door open and went as if with an effort. When he reached her bedside he stood silent, looking upon her face. And there were those there who thought they had heard him whisper, "Priscilla!" and then louder, as though she must hear, "Priscilla!"

But Priscilla was dead, and all the village had come to her wake; two nights they had sat up, and this was the third. The will had been read—such as it was. For there was little to leave to anybody. Yet every one had had a trifle, the house had gone to the cousin, but there was no money to speak of—nothing more except the little wooden box, corded, locked, and sealed—the box that must contain the body of the fortune. The cousin's fingers had been on the cords, the eyes of the village women had been turned to it, waiting for it to open, when they were told it was to be buried with her. What an idea! Whoever heard of a box being buried in a tomb? Who would ever have thought she would have carried away what she could no longer want? Who would have imagined Priscilla a miser?

The crowd had all gone to the dining-room at the end of the long passage in the west wing, and the cousin was sitting alone in the room with the box; upstairs Priscilla was lying, and she would never know—never know the seals were broken and the knots undone. Surely, it was no harm to open and look in—no, not to touch a single penny, since she was such a screw—only to open. No box was ever yet buried by a woman unopened. The lid lay loose.

The cousin sat back a moment, then went upon her knees and raised the cover. She saw the contents were wrapped in white paper. She pulled it off and drew forth what came to her hand. Astonishment was upon her face, for first there came a dress,—a white satin dress,—then a long veil, then a wreath of orange blossoms. Shoes, gloves, and underwear, all lace and ribbons, all sewn by hand in tiny stitches, surely Priscilla's own. What was this the cousin had stumbled on unawares? A wedding outfit, Priscilla's wedding outfit, breathing the breath of years, lavender and age. How time had ruined all, as it had destroyed Priscilla's love-story. How was it the cousin never knew of this prepared wedding? Where or who was the man? She had known little of Priscilla when she was young, only that she was fatherless and motherless, and that an uncle had taken charge of her; that she had grown up between the grey walls of her uncle's quiet, lonely house and a convent school, where she had spent half her time. Always unnoticed, silent, and companionless, was it because there was no one who cared enough about her to draw her from her solitude. There was something, the cousin fancied she half-remembered, something of a scandal of Priscilla and a young doctor, something about love-letters and stolen meetings discovered at the convent? Was it possible Priscilla had returned home to work her wedding outfit, while the young doctor had forgotten his promises and married money while she still was awaiting him? But it was a vague memory, and might not have been her.

The cousin bent above the box. Nothing else; no money—not a penny. Ah! here was a key to the story, a bundle of old letters—love-letters, for were they not tied by a silken bow? Poor Priscilla!

As she took them into her hands she fancied she heard the sound of a woman sobbing far away; it might be upstairs with the dead. Some friend of Priscilla's, no doubt. She turned the letters over in her hands. She wished that wild crying would stop. It disturbed her. She laid her fingers upon the beknotted strings, then hesitated. Should she dare spy into the secrets of the helpless dead? But curiosity was strong; she loosed the ribbons. At the same time a wild cry resounded through the room. She sprang to her feet, the letters in her hands, and looked fearfully around. There was no one there. It must have been outside. Yes; it came from the floor above—from Priscilla's room—long, sad, and awful: the sound of a woman's wild grief.

The cousin thrust the letters into her pocket, and ran down the hall, calling to the people to hurry to the room above. She called to them to bring hot blankets and restoratives, that Priscilla was not dead, that she had waked in terror, finding herself decked out for death. And all the time she was shouting to them she was running up the long staircase and down the corridors to the room where the crying came from. Then she called, "Priscilla, I am coming; don't be afraid; Priscilla, I am coming." She imagined Priscilla sitting up in her grave-clothes, half mad with terror at her position. When she touched the handle of the door the crying ceased. She opened it, and stood half-fainting upon the threshold. In her coffin lay Priscilla stiff and dead, her hands clasped as they had been when she was laid there, her face unchanged, the great room empty—death everywhere.

The cousin stood dumb at the door, the women crowding about her with hot blankets and restoratives. "It was a mistake," she said; and pushing them back, closed the door.

She went downstairs to the room where the trunk lay, and drawing the letters from her pocket placed them back unopened where she had found them. With reverent hands she laid the wedding things one by one in their place, and when she had finished she sealed and corded the box.

Priscilla went to her sleeping-place the next day, there was borne by her side a little trunk, and it was laid at her feet in the cold vault that held so many dead.