When That Sweet Child Lay Dead

A Vigil

By Barry Pain

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It was quite a little room. The window looked out on a garden, on an orchard beyond it, and on the old quiet hills that had made the child understand what "far away" meant. She had heard, months ago, the bees monotonously, musically busy among the garden flowers; she had watched in the orchard the blossoms delicate with the fragile grace of immaturity, and when the autumn came, she had seen the boughs twisted and bent with their effort to do good, with their burden of fruit; she had strayed through the park-land; she had seen the sun set over the hills, when far up the sky went the touch of pale gold on clouds that were like angels' wings. Her eyes had grown brighter, always, and her thoughts stranger as she watched; it had made her, the child of a musician, want to hear the music that in her serious moments had seemed to understand her best. She was not to see such things, nor hear them, nor understand any more. On this eve of the New Year she lay motionless, arranged with white hands crossed, on the bed in one corner of the room; the trees in the orchard were gaunt and black, mocked by cruel winds; the snow drove and drove; the year's last day died out in darkness.

Everything in the little room—a little room in a great house—was very neat and orderly. Some one had taken away from the low table by the bedside the row of medicine bottles—grim reminders of futile effort—and had placed there an old blue-and-white bowl, full of Christmas roses. In the fireplace the logs burned brightly. She did not need the grace of the flowers nor the warmth of the fire any more. But some one had seen to these things—had done them from a sentiment; nearly all the best things that one does are done from a sentiment. Flowers and fire were useless; but when that sweet child lay dead, to those in the great house all things had seemed useless. She had been very dear to all of them; they thought her lovelier, brighter, gentler than other children. Yet her chief charm was, perhaps, that she had returned their affection; she had loved people very easily—even unlikely people. Downstairs the servants who had waited on her were ludicrously pathetic; it was a chance whether one who had seen them would have laughed or felt like weeping. Two maids, who had known enmity from some jealousy about that child, now snuffled together in common sorrow, grotesquely genuine. "And Mr. Richards feels it too," said one of them, "though it's little as Mr. Richards ever shows." Richards was the old butler, a stern man, made cynical possibly by too intimate a knowledge of the wine trade. He was in his pantry, polishing silver very briskly, almost jauntily; ho caught sight of her cup, a christening gift; he recalled how she had once wrung from his sternness some slight concession about a new footman, really by no means up to his work; he began at once to whistle the gayest of tunes in a desperate whispered whistle, then stopped suddenly, made an involuntary curious sound in his throat, and went on polishing furiously. Later on his manner grew icy.

From her room one could now have heard very faintly the sound of the organ being played in the wide gallery which ran from wing to wing of the house. It was her father, the great composer, who was playing. She had been his only child, and her mother had died in her babyhood. So he was alone now. He had been saying that to himself during

the day: “I am quite alone now.” There were other people in the house, relations more or less near; but, as far as his sorrow was concerned, they were a hundred miles away. He had been happy, as some count happiness; he had loved his art and had been great in it; he had wealth, and could follow art for art’s sake. Only he was human. and had not escaped human joys, nor the sorrows that follow them so closely; he had loved a wife and child, and lie had lost them. That afternoon he had sat quite alone in his studio, thinking. A salver, laden with letters, was brought into the room. He opened a few of time letters. They were all well-meaning, and yet so futile. He felt that he could read no more of them, and that he could not keep quiet and inactive any longer. He went up into the long gallery and paced up and down. Then he arranged the mechanism which blew the organ, and opened the instrument, and lit the candles on either side of it. The rest of the gallery lay in darkness. And then he sat down to play. The music was sorrow without consolation; religion without hope.

In the little room the flicker of fire-light fell on the golden hair and delicate upturned face of that sweet child. Did it matter to the rest of the world—to things that are inarticulate, or even voiceless, and, as some think, inanimate? Were the flowers that she had loved sorry, or the winds that had played in her hair? Perhaps on that bleak eve of the New Year there was something said that one would not have heard as one hears a voice, which might through a dream have won its way to words. What did the Christmas roses think about it in that old blue-and-white bowl on the table by her side? Was it all nothing to them when that sweet child lay dead?

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It was sheer carelessness, of course, and had not been done with any evil intention at all. But that did not alter the facts of the case—his stem was not in the water, and he had felt a little wilted at the very outset.

Flowers choose their own names, and this one had called himself Wilkinson. He had seen the name on a scrap of newspaper that had been blown down the garden walk, and never ought to have been there, and was the under-gardener’s fault. Wilkinson knew that owing to sheer carelessness his death would be hastened by some few hours; he did not mind the death (flowers, possibly from vanity, love to be cut and put in vases; and it is heaven to them to be worn in a girl’s hair), but he did object to anything like carelessness. He liked people to do their whole duty. Even while selecting the name of Wilkinson he had deprecated the untidiness of the under-gardener.

“Cut me and put me in a bowl, if you like,” he remarked snappishly. “If you think me beautiful, you couldn’t do any better. Only *do* it. Don’t half do it. Don’t leave me with my stem out of the water in this sickening way. If you do, you commit sin; and I can’t bear to see it done.” He was not addressing any of the other flowers in particular, he was merely soliloquizing on the subject of strict duty, which was an unpleasing habit that he had. No flowers care in the least about death, except the sweet violets, who have some mysterious love secrets of their own, never properly understood, which they do not like to be interrupted. Few flowers are quite so strict or quite so sharp-tempered as Wilkinson was.

“It wasn’t *her* fault,” pleaded a little bud, called Candor, who had been looking at the sweet child motionless on her bed.

"My dear child," said Wilkinson, rather patronizingly, "how very young you are! Any one could tell you were a bud. Don't you know' that sweet child's dead? She's no use—can't put flowers in water any more—so they'll throw her away. They ought to have thrown her away before, I should have thought; but human beings are always so careless and untidy."

"She's very pretty," said Candor; "very pretty indeed. I wish they had put me in her hair. Who was it placed us in this bowl?"

"Ah! yes. You were too young to remember it. It was Richards who put us here—and left my stem out of the water. How *mad* such thoughtlessness does make me! You're too young to be worn in a girl's hair. But Richards might perhaps have selected something—something a little more full blown. I don't refer to myself in particular, of course, although for the matter of that, as far as mature beauty is concerned—well, well, it's not for me to say."

"Death is very beautiful. Do human beings like to die?"

Wilkinson shrugged his petals impatiently. "What a perfectly bud-like remark! Death is *not* beautiful. Death is nothing. You simply stop, that's all. As you are generally feeling rather faded, you're not sorry to stop. But you're not particularly glad. It's pleasanter, of course, to die in a girl's hair than to live in a garden, especially where the under-gardener's so grossly untidy. I believe you have been talking to those violets," he added, rather sharply.

"No, really, I haven't. Why did you ask that?"

"They've got some sentimental ideas about death. No, I don't suppose human beings mind it. I don't see how they can mind a thing which is of absolutely no importance."

"They live longer than we do."

"They live an unconscionable time, most of them, especially under-gardeners. That is probably because they have not our advantages, and do not understand. That child has stopped rather early—yes, she is a sweet child. I can remember when I was quite a bud, she went past laughing. You should have seen the sunlight on her hair!"

There was a long pause. Candor spoke at last:

"Wilkinson, do you think anything *really* stops, or is it just seeming? She is so pretty, and you remember her laughter, and any flower would have been glad to die in that beautiful hair. It can't have all been to no purpose."

Wilkinson was distressed—deeply distressed. "You pain and grieve me more than I can say. The old faiths are all going. Have you not been taught to believe in the nothingness of everything? Why do you listen to the hideous voice of emotion?"

Candor grew almost passionate. "I *must.'* If I did not listen I should not know what to do for sorrow! She is lovely. She is an angel's dream—not dead, but come true at last. Sweet child, speak to me and tell me that I am right. Speak only once and tell me this trifling—this life and death—is not everything. Tell me that there is more beyond—beyond."

"You are sickly and heterodox," said Wilkinson sternly. "There is nothing beyond. I believe—nay, I know—that death is entire cessation. And I am going to drop."

He dropped fragmentarily. It is ordained that in its last moments even the tidiest flower shall be untidy. And Candor still waited; but all was silent in that little room.

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Now, the winds are spirits, lost spirits; they never rest, and they ever long for rest.

That night a great wind swept past the house, ice-cold and howling with misery. It beat on the windows of that little room until they shook; and then it went flying onward through the driving snow. After it came another, softly pattering, like the pattering of a child's feet as it shuffles through the crisp, fallen leaves. These two winds were spirits, without shape to human eyes; and yet a dreamer—a musician, perhaps, seated at the organ, alone with sorrow—might have imagined something. He might have seen them—the first like a gaunt woman, with flying robes and hair; the second like a girl-child, with an old man's malice and a devil's cruelty in her look, and to the dreamer their voices might have grown articulate.

"Perdita," said the young wind, as side by side they sped onward into the night, "did you not see as we went past the house? In one of the rooms a child is lying; a beautiful child, and she is dead; I shook the window to frighten her, b,it she never moved. Can I not do anything to hurt her? I hate all beautiful things."

"No, we can do nothing, Ira. I, too, used to hate as you hate, but with me it has worn itself out. I am tired, and cold, and miserable. But there is no rest—no rest anywhere. We can do nothing to hurt that child and nothing to help her. She is dead."

"I would help no one, but I would hurt her. Can we not reach her, even though she be dead? What is death?"

Perdita seemed now to be speaking to herself rather than Ira. "It was a thousand years ago that they sent me here—they to whom a thousand years are but as a day. Beyond this world, beyond the tangle of which this world is a thread, I lived in broader space, in brighter light, in warmer, clearer air. I do not remember what it was that I did, but for my punishment they sent me here to roam forever up and down. For a thousand years I have never rested; I have' seen the children of men grow up, and fall, and die; and I have found out many secrets; but I do not yet know what death is."

"I too," said Ira, "came from that place of which you speak. With me it was but a day ago; yet I, too, cannot remember what it was that I did. But I have been punished—punished until there is nothing left in me but hatred. I long to wreck the slips and tear down the trees. Nothing will make me happy any., more, and I am most miserable when I destroy. Yet I cannot help longing to destroy."

"It does not matter," Perdita answered. "The longing will wear itself out. You may grow gentle and play with the flowers. That will not matter either. You will always be unhappy and you will never rest. Oh, if one could rest! If one could be still for a little while, only a little while!"

"In that great house the child that was dead was still—motionless. What is death?"

There was a pause—a long pause before the voice of Perdita spoke in reply:

"Can it be? Can it be that we are already dead? Can it be that the punishment of which we spoke was nothing else but death, and that death means the torture of endless unrest? Perhaps the spirit of that child is out in this lonely night, suffering as we suffer."

"I feared that you would say it," whispered Ira. "it is quite true. This night that child is with us. Did I want to hurt her? That was foolish of me." And Ira laughed savagely.

The two winds sped on together, past an iron coast, over a dark, desolate sea, and on and on. In the long gallery of the house the music was changed; into its sorrow had entered that tragic anger which knows its own impotence.

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The night had grown very quiet. The furious winds had passed; the sky had cleared. Over the wide lands lay the fallen snow. The child's father had risen from the organ and opened one of the windows. He stood there looking out. Perhaps it was because he thought of the gentleness of falling snow, or because its wonderful whiteness seemed almost like a conscious kindness: but as he looked out into the tranquil night his anger ceased. Far off he heard the flooded river sweep the base of the bridge, and the monotonous sound seemed to him like a consolation, like a consoling voice:

"I am glad because I draw near to the sea. I shall die, but I shall not be really lost. It is only change. I give myself to the sea, and in return I enter into its strength. The life of a man is but the bandage that blinds his eyes; and he shall never see the great secret until he himself is part of it. All the rivers run into the sea, and all the lives run into the life eternal. No gain is greater than that loss of self."

His own thoughts followed the voice of the river. Could it be that our identity, which we valued so much, was better lost? He had no patience to think the thing out, but he liked that idea of all the lives flowing into the life eternal. He found himself believing in the river's guess-work; or else he had grown tranquil under the tranquillity of the night; or else, perhaps, this quietness was but reaction following upon action, and the bitterness of sorrow had exhausted itself. He cared very little what the reason might be. He only knew that he was in some wonderful way consoled. Death was not annihilation. Death was not punishment. Death was just the loss of individuality and the gain of something far greater; something which possibly the saints thought when they spoke of perfect communion and of peace that cannot be understood.

He turned instinctively to symbolism and analogy. That thing for which lovers long—that total surrender of self to the beloved, which love ever desires and ever misses, is the gift that death has for us. By death we merge into that fulfilment which is past words.

And past music?

He turned once more to the organ—to that mysterious language that can be translated into no known tongue.

"And," said Richards, next morning, "as I stood at the fur end, he began to play. You won't believe me, Mrs. Smith, and I can't hardly believe myself, but it was one of the 'appiest toons I ever heard him play—regular light. Well, thinks I to myself, this is queer; and there, all of a sudden-like, 'e drops 'is 'ands and bends 'is 'ead low—this way—and begins sobbing—great, gaspin' sobs. I couldn't bear it. I come away. It was too awful!"