

THE DEVOTED

"I think," I said to myself, as I sat on the fence kicking my heels against the slats beneath me, "I think that those two people would bear watching."

The two people who were both women, were just moving into the old Risely house, a small, ramshackle cottage built in the middle of a lonely field, not far from where I was then living. I didn't envy the strangers their new home. The Risely house, which was supposed by folks who thought that way, to be haunted was pleasant enough in the summer, with its great elms closing it in on all sides, its tall grass waving to and fro before it, and the sea booming away behind. But it lost all its beauty in the winter. The great elms cast long, hideous shadows on the ground of a moonlit night, and the tall grass disappeared under huge drifts of snow. Not more than three or four hundred feet behind it was the sea, its ice cracking and breaking as the tide rose. People who passed the house on such a night in winter told strange stories about it, and swore that they had seen things.

I never believed them because I never believed very heartily in Ghosts. But I had a sort of sympathy for the two women, even though I didn't know much about them. They were sisters, as I had already learned from the talk which had gone about, before their coming. The old people in my family, my mother most of all, had a great deal to say about them, but they generally became quiet when I appeared. All that I knew about them when I first saw them was that they were sisters, and that the younger one had been engaged to be married, but had had her sweetheart die on her, before the wedding-day.

There was still some furniture piled up outside of the house and awaiting to be taken in. Something prompted me to get down from the fence, and walk over to the house, whistling away at a great rate, with my hands stuck in the pockets of my overalls. The sisters were sitting on the doorsteps, silently taking stock of their new home. At least I thought so at the time. Neither of them was very young. One of them, the one whose husband-to-be had died (I could tell by her hair which was very black, and by her eyes), was pretty enough for her age, but she was nearer thirty than

twenty, so far as I could guess. The other one was even older than that, and almost homely. I didn't like either of them at the beginning.

I passed through the trees, and stood before them. I was a nosey little fellow, I guess; at any rate I was determined to find out as much as I could about them.

"Might I help carry in the furniture?" I suggested, summoning up all my courage.

"You might if you were asked," replied the elder of the two, staring at me for a minute, and then turning abruptly away.

I was taken back for a while, and leaned against a tree, whistling again, waiting for my courage to return. Finally, I spoke up:

"But I'd like to help you, and I've got nothing else to do. It's vacation time now."

"Is it?" asked the older one, staring at me a second time

"Oh, yes, it is," I replied, hastily, knowing right well that the woman wasn't the least bit interested in what I had to say, but resolved just the same to start a conversation.

The older one said nothing. The young one, the one with the dark hair and the pretty eyes, turned to her, almost as if in reluctance, and said:

"Let him help. He can't hurt."

So I helped. There was not a great deal of the furniture waiting to be carried in, but I took my time about my job, hoping that one or the other of them would give me some bit of information about themselves. Neither said a word. The older one—I didn't even know her last name—got up when I started to work, and pointed out to me the pieces of furniture she wished moved into the house first. The younger one still sat in one corner of the doorstep, with her eyes half shut, looking out at the trees in front.

The inside of the house was no better than its outside. The rooms, of course, were bare and pretty unattractive. The wall-paper in the hall and in the dining-room was torn in a good many places. I looked for some sign of a ghost, but I found none. Even so, I was a bit timid as I passed through the vacant rooms, with the strange woman before me, giving me orders, and directing me where to place the furniture. Some sort of horror seemed to hang over the house.

I couldn't explain it, but I felt as though everything wasn't well.

I was glad when we came out in the open again. Just before I left to go home, the older sister called to me, and whispered to me:

"Come again, will you?"

"I'll come," I said, whispering back.

Then she gave me five coppers. The younger one saw us.

"Don't spend them all in one place," she called out.

"I'll try not to," I said, as pleasantly as I could, but I didn't like the way in which she had spoken to me.

It may have been the five coppers or it may have been just nosiness, that brought me back to the old house the next afternoon. Nobody was outside, and I didn't have the courage to knock at the door. So I lay down in the grass, to wait until someone appeared.

I remember thinking of Indians and planning to go to the Library that night, to borrow a good story. Then I fell asleep. I hardly know how long I slept. When I woke up, it was twilight. I started to get up, for it was cool lying there in the night, and I wanted to get home. Suddenly I heard voices.

"The dead know many things." It was the older sister speaking.

"The dead know nothing," the younger one replied.

"Perhaps." There was silence for a few moments; then the older one went on:

"A day will come."

"I don't know what you mean by 'a day will come.' Let me be. The man's dead, anyway."

I heard nothing more. I waited for ten or fifteen minutes to be sure that all was clear, and then I set out for home.

I was afraid to come back the next day. I thought that perhaps one of the sisters might have seen me the night before. The day after that, though, I decided to risk it, and I came to visit them.

The older sister was waiting for me.

"You should have come yesterday," she said to me, as soon as I arrived. "It's lonesome here."

"I'm sorry," terribly relieved to find out that she hadn't seen me the night when I heard them talking. "I thought you'd be busy."

"We're busy enough. But we can't work all the time." She smiled at me. Funny, I was beginning to like her, old as she was.

"I'll come after this. I'd like to help you."

"That's the good boy. Sit down and talk to me."

We talked for a while. I told her about school, and my mother, and about the city. As we talked, I began to like her looks. She was not pretty, not nearly so pretty as her younger sister, but she had a gentle face, and she smiled at me a good many times. I never saw the younger sister smile.

"Will you tell me something?" I asked her, just before I got ready to leave.

"I might," she said. "It all depends on what you ask."

"I'd like to know your name."

She laughed. "It's Mathieson. Lucy Mathieson. Satisfied?"

"Almost. What's *her* name?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Virginia." Then was silent.

"I guess you'd like to know mine," I suggested. She nodded. "It's Sutton, Henry Sutton. My mother calls me Bennie. I don't know why."

"I see. That's a nice name." She was going to say more, but the younger one, Virginia, came out of the house. She saw me, but she said nothing. Neither did I. She shook her head, as if to call her sister into the house. Lucy turned to me, with a smile on her lips, but I could see that her eyes were troubled. She said good-bye, and went into the house. Then I went home.

After that, I visited the Mathiesons at least once a day through the summer. Virginia never had much to do with me. She thought me too much of a boy, I guess. But I didn't mind. Lucy and I were getting along great. Every afternoon we talked together about all sorts of things. I never seemed to feel that she was older than me. She must have been about thirty-five. I was only twelve then, and I was a little bit proud that somebody so old could like me.

I didn't know what was between the sisters, but I just felt that they hated each other. They never said a kind

word to each other, at least not while I was round. Generally the Virginia one was scowling or dreaming. Lucy was always quiet, but she seemed happy enough. I liked her more and more all the time.

"School starts next week?" she said to me one day, just at the beginning of autumn.

"Yes," I growled back. "Five more days."

"You'll be round to see me still, will you?"

"I'll try. I guess I will, you know. Home lessons won't be so hard, after all."

"That's a good boy. I'll need you more after this."

I wished to ask her why, but I decided not to. I felt that some day she would tell me the whole story.

Every day after school, I used to come to see her. One afternoon, she was away, into town, I guess. Virginia opened the door when I knocked. When she saw me, she laughed.

"You'll not get in to-day, Lucy's pet," she called out to me, and shut the door in my face.

I felt my face burn, but it was more from shame than from anger, I think. I went home. The next day I came again, and found Lucy in. I told her the whole story.

She said nothing, but she seemed to me to be miserably unhappy.

"She'll not do it this time," she whispered, to herself. Then she spoke to me:

"Do the dead come back, Bennie?"

"I hope not," I answered her, startled.

"Sometimes it might do good, Bennie, don't you think?"

"It might," I agreed, but I didn't mean what I said.

A good many weeks later, just after the first snow-fall that winter, I brought my books to the Mathieson's, intending to study. It was after supper. I found Lucy crying in the parlor.

"Can I help?" asked her, almost crying myself.

"Oh, Bennie, I guess it's near the end. I can't stand it much longer."

"Tell me what's the matter, Miss Lucy, won't you? I cried. "Please let me help you."

It seemed terribly strange to me to see a grown up woman crying. My mother never cries. I did not know a thing to say or do.

She sat there crying for a little while longer; then she quieted down, and held me tight for a good many minutes.

"You can't help me much, Bennie," she said to me, finally. "If the dead don't return, nobody can help me."

"Please don't say that," I pleaded with her, almost crying again. "Please, I might help you."

"You're too young, Bennie," was all that she said. Then she put me aside and got up. She seemed to hesitate for a few seconds. At last she went to her writing-desk, and took from it a small parcel. She handed it to me. There were some letters and a picture in it.

"He was my sweetheart once," she said, showing me the picture.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"A long while now. He was to be married to Virginia."

"Oh!" I said, half understanding. "He loved you first?"

"He did."

She might have gone on speaking, but her sister came to the door of the parlor, and saw us. Miss Lucy tried to hide the picture, but she was too late.

"I think that I'd better go," I said to her, fearing that there would be words between them.

"All right, Bennie. Come back to-morrow."

I had just reached the front door, when they began. I stopped where I was, and listened.

"It's time you got over that, Lucy," said Virginia.

Miss Lucy said nothing.

"You're a pretty poor loser, after all," Virginia continued.

Still Miss Lucy made no reply.

"You loved him too much."

"He was worth it," said Miss Lucy.

"Hardly. There were better Sometimes I'm almost tempted to let you have him."

"That's no longer in your power, is it? He's dead now."

"Oh, I think it is," said Virginia, her voice rising a bit. She was beginning to get angry. "He's mine, dead or alive."

"Even if he knew—?"

"Knew what?" demanded Virginia.

"Knew of the other man."

There was silence for a minute or two. Then Virginia spoke:

"You're a very clever sister, aren't you? Yes, he's mine, even if he knew of the other man. He was mine alive, and he's mine dead. You're been so clever, perhaps you discovered one other thing. I never loved him, and I don't care who knows it. I didn't ask him to marry me. You could have had him, for all I cared. But you'll not get him now. You'll not get him, I tell you!"

I could hear Miss Lucy sobbing.

"And another thing," continued Virginia. "Stop that snivelling. I'm growing tired of it. You make me feel as though something funny were going to happen around here, and I don't like to feel that way."

Miss Lucy said nothing. Suddenly I heard Virginia moving as though she were about to leave the parlor. I opened the front door as easily as I could, and left the house. As I walked home that night through the heavy snow, my hands tucked away down into my pockets to protect them from the cold, all I could think of was dead men and sisters, sisters and dead men.

A week or so later, Miss Lucy changed. She began once again to smile at me when I came to see her, and she seemed almost happy. Virginia was the same as ever, scowling at me whenever she saw me, and acting as though she wished to whip me. I hardly worried about her, though. Miss Lucy was happy again, and that satisfied me.

I asked her one day, just before Christmas, I think, what was making her so cheerful.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "Perhaps my sweetheart has come to take me away."

"Perhaps he has," I said to her, thinking that she was joking with me, and trying to help the joke along. "When will you go?"

"Soon. First, there is work that must be done."

"Will you say good-bye to me before you go?"

"I'll try to, Bennie. You must forgive me, if I don't have the chance."

"I might," I said, and forgot all about the matter.

That very same night, just as I was about to leave for home, I noticed that a third plate had been laid on the dining-room table. I had never been asked to stay for supper at the Mathieson's, mostly, I suppose, because Virginia wouldn't have me. I wondered whether Miss Lucy was going to defy

her. The plate could be there for nobody else. Neither or the two sisters ever had visitors, at least none that I knew of. I waited ten minutes longer that night than I usually did, expecting my invitation. I didn't get it. Finally, I had to set out for home, pretty disappointed. It was plates that I thought of that night, as I plunged through the snow.

Every night after that a third plate was laid on the dining-room table. I was tempted time and again to ask Miss Lucy who was their guest, but I never had courage enough. Christmas came and went, and the plate still had its place on the table.

One terribly stormy night in the middle of January so cold that ice had just formed over the sea behind the Mathieson's house, and so snowy that I could hardly make my way along, I had visited Miss Lucy late in the afternoon. When I left to go home, I discovered that I had forgotten my school-books. I might have gone home without them; I hardly needed them for the next day. But I was curious about that third plate, and determined to return and find them at supper. Surely then I'd know who their guest was.

I turned back. When I knocked at the door, nobody answered, so I walked in. I remembered having left my books near the hat-rack in the hall, and so I went there to get them as easily as I could. Then I waited.

There was something queer about the house that night. The little wood-stove in the hall gave good heat, but I felt deathly cold. I could hear the wind shrieking outside, and not so very far away the cracking of the ice. I had never before been afraid of the sea; but that night I dreaded it, and hated to think of it, with its ice and snow. Things got so bad for me, as I stood there in the hall, that I half persuaded myself to leave, and solve the mystery of the third plate later on. Suddenly I heard Virginia speaking.

"I'd like the butter, please."

I knew then that they were eating supper, just like other people, and I felt comforted. I crept to the staircase that led to the second floor, and sat on a step not far from the bottom. From there I could see almost everything that happened in the dining-room, for the door was open.

Miss Lucy and Virginia were at supper. I could see nobody else. The third plate was still there, but nobody sat in the chair before it. The mystery was still unsolved.

For a few minutes nothing happened. I grew tired of watching them eat, and turned my head away, to look out at the snow through the panes of glass in the front door. When I looked again in the dining-room, I had to grab hold of one of the rails of the staircase, to keep from falling off the step.

A man was sitting at the table with the two sisters. At the first, I was so dumfounded at seeing him there that I didn't worry much who he was. Then I looked at him. He was smiling at Miss Lucy, and he seemed to be talking to her, but I could hear nothing that he said. For a while I hardly recognized him. Even when I did, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was the man of the picture, the man whom Miss Lucy loved, and whom Virginia was to have married. I began to pray.

I thought at first that Virginia saw him, too. But she didn't seem to be paying any attention to him. She went right on eating. Ever so often, she would say something to Miss Lucy, and not wait for a reply.

All of a sudden the man seemed to ask Miss Lucy a question. I heard her say, "Yes." Then he got up, and stood before Virginia.

I know that she didn't see him, for she looked right at him, and through him, and didn't even speak to him. Suddenly she sat bolt upright in her chair. I could hear her catch her breath.

"We'll have to move from this house, Lucy," she said, in a low whisper. "I'm beginning to see things."

"Is it the dead you see?" asked Miss Lucy, very quietly.

"Nonsense!" denied Virginia, but her voice trembled with fear. "It couldn't be!"

"It is," said Miss Lucy, as quietly as before.

Then the man spoke.

"I came, Virginia—"

Virginia shrieked.

"I came to break a promise."

"No, No!" cried Virginia. "Take your promise, take everything. Only go!"

"We must wait," the man said, almost in a whisper. "There are other things to be done."

I could see that Virginia was almost mad. She looked desperately at the open door, and then at the man. He began to speak. With a wild cry, Virginia ran into the hall.

For a second she remained there, as if helplessly trying to decide what to do. Then she turned, opened the back door, and rushed out into the night.

I could hear Virginia shrieking as she ran through the snow. Then there came to me through the open door the roar of the sea, and the sound of the ice. My heart leaped to my mouth. I forgot the man, forgot Miss Lucy, and ran out bareheaded after Virginia.

At first I couldn't see her. The snow was falling pretty heavy, and it blinded me. I could hear her, though, calling out strange things as she went along, and I followed her voice. I hardly think that she knew where she was going. Before I had run far enough to be tired, we were at the beach. Then I saw her for the first time.

She was on the ice-cakes that had formed near the beach. I don't know even now whether she realized her danger. She seemed not to. She was still calling out, but she whimpered more than shrieked. For the first time since I had known her, I pitied her, and almost liked her. Step by step I made my way down the beach, my eyes rooted to the ground, afraid that at any moment I might reach the ice, and make a false step. Suddenly I heard one terrible cry. I looked up. Virginia had disappeared. She rushed beyond the ice-cakes into the sea.

I felt miserable. It seemed to me that I might have saved her, and that my dislike for her had prevented me. I waited a while on the beach, hoping to see her, but I never saw her again. I turned about, and walked slowly back through the snow to Miss Lucy and the strange man.

The back door was still opened when I returned. I made immediately for the dining-room. The man had gone. Miss Lucy was sitting in her chair, her head resting on the table. I approached her.

"Miss Lucy," I said.

She made no move.

"Miss Lucy! Miss Lucy!" I called again.

Still no answer.

Suddenly a strange fear took hold of me. I reached for one of Miss Lucy's hands and felt it. It was as cold as ice. I knew as if by instinct that she was dead. Miss Lucy had left me without saying good-by.

R.B.D.