Many Waters Cannot Quench Love

Louisa Baldwin

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Did I not know my old friend John Horton to be as truthful as he is devoid of imagination, I should have believed that he was romancing or dreaming when he told me of a circumstance that happened to him some thirty years ago. He was at that time a bachelor, living in London and practising as a solicitor in Bedford Row. He was not a strong man, though neither nervous nor excitable, and as I said before singularly unimaginative.

If Horton told you a fact, you might be certain that it had occurred in the precise manner he stated. If he told it you a hundred times, he would not vary it in the repetition. This literal and conscientious habit of mind, made his testimony of value, and when he told me a fact that I should have disbelieved from any other man, from my friend I was obliged to accept it as truth.

It was during the long vacation in the autumn of 1857, that Horton determined to take a few weeks' holiday in the country. He was such an inveterate Londoner he had not been able to tear himself away from town for more than a few days at a time for many years past. But at length he felt the necessity for quiet and pure air, only he would not go far to seek them. It was easier then than it is now to find a lodging that would meet his requirements, a place in the country yet close to the town, and it was near Wandsworth that Horton found what he sought, rooms for a single gentleman in an old farm−house. He read the advertisement of the lodgings in the paper at luncheon, and went that very afternoon to see if they answered to the tempting description given.

He had some little difficulty in finding Maitland's Farm. It was not easy to find his way through country lanes that to his town eyes looked precisely alike, and with nothing to indicate whether he had taken a right or wrong turning. The railway now runs shrieking over what were then green fields, lanes have been transformed into gas−lighted streets, and Maitland's Farm, the old red brick house standing in its high walled garden, has been pulled down long ago. The last time Horton went to look at the old place it was changed beyond recognition, and the orchard in which he gathered pears and apples during his stay at the farm, was now the site of a public house and a dissenting chapel.

It was on a hot afternoon early in September when Horton opened the big iron gates and walked up the path bordered with dahlias and hollyhocks leading to the front door, and rang for admittance at Maitland's Farm. The bell echoed in a distant part of the empty house and died away into silence, but no one came to answer its summons. As Horton stood waiting he took the opportunity of thoroughly examining the outside of the house. Though it was called a farm it had not been built for one originally. It was a substantial, four−storey brick house of Queen Anne's period, with five tall sash windows on each floor, and dormer windows in the tiled roof. The front door was approached by a shallow flight of stone steps, and above the fan−light projected a penthouse of solidly carved woodwork. On either side were brackets of wrought iron, supporting extinguishers that had quenched the torch of many a late returning reveller a century ago. Only the windows to right and left of the door had blinds or curtains, or betrayed any sign of habitation. 'Those are the rooms to be let, I wonder which is the bedroom,' thought my friend as he rang the bell for the second time. Presently he heard within the sound of approaching footsteps, there was a great drawing of bolts and after a final struggle with the rusty lock, the door was opened by an old woman of severe and cheerless aspect. Horton was the first to speak.

'I have called to see the rooms advertised to be let in this house.' Thc old woman eyed him from head to foot without making any reply, then opening the door wider, nodded to him to enter. He did so and found himself in a large paved hall lighted from the fan−light over the door, and by a high narrow window facing him at the top of a short flight of oak stairs. The air was musty and damp as that of an old church.

'A hall this size should have a fire in it,' said Horton, glancing at the empty rusty grate.

'Farmers and folks that work out of doors keep themselves warm without fires,' said the old woman sharply.

'This house was never built for a farm, why is it called one?' inquired Horton of his taciturn guide as she opened the door of the sitting−room.

'Because it was one,' was the blunt reply. 'When I was a girl it was the Manor House, and may be called that again for all I know, but thirty years since, a man named Maitland took it on a lease and farmed the land, and folks forgot the old name, and called it Maitland's Farm.'

'When did Maitland leave?'

'About two months ago.'

'Why did he go away from a nice place like this?'

'You are fond of asking questions,' remarked the old woman drily. 'He went for two good reasons, his lease was up, and his family was a big one. Nine children he had, from a girl of two−and− twenty down to a little lad of four years old. His wife and him thought it best to take 'em out to Australia, where there's room for all. They were glad to go, all but the eldest, Esther, and she nearly broke her heart over it. But then she had to leave her sweetheart behind her. He's a young man on a dairy farm near here, and though he's to follow her out and marry her in twelve months, she did nothing but mourn, same as if she was leaving him altogether.'

'Ah, indeed!' said Horton, who could not readily enter into details about people whom he did not know. 'So this is the sitting−room; it's large and airy, and has as much furniture in it as a man needs by himself. Now show me the bedroom, if you please.'

'Follow me upstairs, sir,' and the old woman preceded him slowly up the oak staircase, and opened the door of the back room on the first floor.

'Then the bedroom that you let is not over the sitting−room?'

'No, the front room is mine, and the room next to it is my son's. He's out all day at his work, but he sleeps here, and mostly keeps me company of an evening. I'm alone here all day looking after the place, and if you take the rooms I shall cook for you and wait on you myself.'

Horton liked the look of the bedroom. It was large and airy, with little furniture in it beyond a bed and a chest of drawers. But it was delicately clean, and silent as the grave. How a tired man might sleep here! The walls were decorated with old prints in black frames of the 'Rake's Progress' and 'Marriage à la Mode', and above the high carved mantelpiece hung an engraving of the famous portrait of Charles the First, on a prancing brown horse.

'Those things were on the walls when the Maitlands took the place, and they had to leave 'em where they found 'em,' said the old woman. 'And they found that sword too,' she added, pointing to a rusty cutlass that hung from a nail by the head of the bed; 'but I think they'd have done no great harm if they'd sold it for old iron.'

Horton took down the weapon and examined it. It was an ordinary cutlass, such as was worn by the marines in George the Third's reign, not old enough to be of antiquarian interest, nor of sufficient beauty of workmanship to make it of artistic value. He replaced it, and stepped to the windows and looked into the garden below. It was bounded by a high wall enclosing a row of.poplars, and beyond lay the open country, visible for miles in the clear air, a sight to rest and fascinate the eye of a Londoner.

Horton made his bargain with the old woman whom the landlord had put into the house as caretaker, pending his decision about the disposition of the property. She was allowed to take a lodger for her own profit, and as soon as Mrs Belt found that the stranger agreed to her terms, she assured him that everything should be comfortably arranged for his reception by the following Wednesday.

Horton arrived at Maitland's Farm on the evening of the appointed day. A stormy autumnal sunset was casting an angry glow on the windows of the house, the rising wind filled the air with mournful sounds, and the poplars swayed against a background of lurid sky.

Mrs Belt was expecting her lodger, and promptly opened the door, candle in hand, when she heard the wheels stopping at the gate. The driver of the fly carried Horton's portmanteau into the hall, was paid his fare, and drove away thinking the darkening lanes more cheerful than the glimpse he had had of the inside of Maitland's Farm.

Horton was thoroughly pleased with his country quarters. The intense quiet of the almost empty house, that might have made another man melancholy, soothed and rested him. In the day time he wandered about the country, or amused himself in the garden and orchard, and he spent the long evenings alone, reading and smoking in his sitting−room. Mrs Belt brought in supper at nine o'clock, and usually stayed to have a chat with her lodger, and many a long story she related of her neighbours, and the Maitland family, while she waited upon him at his evening meal.

On several occasions she told him that Esther Maitland's sweetheart, Michael Winn, had come to talk with her about the Maitlands, or to bring her a newspaper containing tidings that their ship had reached some point on its long voyage in safety.

'You see the Petrel is a sailing vessel, sir, and there's no saying how long she'll take getting to Australia. The last news Michael had, she'd got as far as some islands with an outlandish name, and he's had a letter from Esther posted at a place called Madeira. And now he gives himself no peace till he can hear that the ship's safe as far as somewhere, I think he said, in Africa.'

'It would be the Cape, Mrs Belt.'

'That's the name, sir, the Cape, and he werrits all the time for fear of storms and shipwrecks.

But I tell him the world's a wide place, and the sea wider than all, and very likely when the chimney pots is flying about our heads in a gale here, the Petrel's lying becalmed somewhere.

And then he takes up my thought and turns it against me. "Yes," he says, "and when it's a dead calm here on shore, the ship may be sinking in a storm, and my Esther being drowned."'

'Michael Winn must be a very nervous young man.'

'That's where it is, sir, and I tell him when he follows the Maitlands it's a good job that he leaves no one behind him that'll werrit after him, the same as he's werrited after Esther.'

It was the middle of October, and Horton had been a month at the farm. The weather was now cold and wet, and he began to think it was time he returned to his snug London home, for the autumn rain made everything at Maitland's Farm damp and mouldy. It had blown half a gale all day, and the rain had fallen in torrents, keeping him a prisoner indoors. But he occupied himself in writing letters, and reading some legal documents his clerk had brought out to him, and the time passed rapidly. Indeed the evening flew by so quickly he had no idea it was nine o'clock, when Mrs Belt entered the room to lay the cloth for supper.

'It's stopped raining now, sir,' she said, as she poked the fire into a cheerful blaze, 'and a good job too, for Michael Winn brings me word the Wandle's risen fearful since morning, and it's out.in places more than it's been for years. But there's a full moon tonight, so no one need walk into the water unless they've a mind to.'

Horton's head was too full of a knotty legal point to pay much heed to Mrs Belt, and the old woman, seeing that he was not in a mood for conversation, said nothing further. At half−past ten she brought her lodger some spirits and hot water, and his bedroom candle, and wished him good night. Horton sat reading for some time, and then made an entry in his diary concerning a day of which there was absolutely nothing to record, lighted his candle, and went upstairs. I am familiar with the precise order of each trifling circumstance. My friend has so often told me the events of that night, and never with the slightest addition or omission in the telling. It was his habit, the last thing at night, to draw up the blinds. He looked out of the window, and though the moon was at the full, the clouds had not yet dispersed, and her light was fitful and obscure. It was twenty minutes to twelve as he extinguished the candle by his bedside. Everything was propitious for rest. He was weary, and the house profoundly silent. The rain had stopped, the wind fallen to a sigh, and it seemed to him that as soon as his head pressed the pillow he sank into a dreamless slumber.

Shortly after two o'clock Horton awoke suddenly, passing instantaneously from deep sleep to the possession of every faculty in a heightened degree, and with an insupportable sense of fear weighing upon him like a thousand nightmares. He started up and looked around him. The perspiration poured from his brow, and his heart beat to suffocation. He was convinced that he had been waked by some strange and terrible noise, that had thrilled through the depths of sleep, and he dreaded the repetition of it inexpressibly. The room was flooded with moonlight streaming through the narrow windows, lying like sheets of molten silver on the floor, and the poplars in the garden cast tremulous shadows on the ceiling.

Then Horton heard through the silence of the house a sound that was not the moan of the wind, nor the rustling of trees, nor any sound he had heard before. Clear and distinct, as though it were in the room with him, he heard a voice of weeping and lamentation, with more than human sorrow in the cry, so that it seemed to him as though he listened to the mourning of a lost soul.

He leaped up, struck a match, and lighted the candle, and seizing the cutlass that hung by the bed, unlocked the door, and opened it to listen.

So far as all ordinary sounds were concerned, the house was silent as death, and the moonlight streamed through the staircase window in a flood of pale light. But the unearthly sound of weeping, thrilling through heart and soul, came from the hall below, and Horton walked downstairs to the landing at the top of the first flight. There, on the lowest step, a woman was seated with bowed head, her face hidden in her hands, rocking to and fro in extremity of grief.

The moonlight fell full on her, and he saw that she was only partly clothed, and her dark hair lay in confusion on her bare shoulders.

'Who are you, and what is the matter with you?' said Horton, and his trembling voice echoed in the silent house. But she neither stirred nor spoke, nor abated her weeping. Slowly he descended the moon−lit staircase till there were but four steps between him and the woman. A mortal fear was growing upon him.

'Speak! if you are a living being!' he cried. The figure rose to its full height, turned and faced him for a moment that seemed an eternity, and rushed full on the point of the cutlass Horton involuntarily presented. As the impalpable form glided up the blade of the weapon, a cold wave seemed to break over him, and he fell in a dead faint on the stairs.

How long he remained insensible he could not tell. When he came to himself and opened his eyes, the moon had set, and he groped his way in darkness to his room, where the candle had burnt itself out.

When Horton came down to breakfast, he looked as though he had been ill for a month, and his hands trembled like a drunkard's. At any other time Mrs Belt would have been struck by his appearance, but this morning she was too much excited by some bad news she had heard, to notice whether her lodger was looking well or ill. Horton asked her how she had slept, for if she had not heard the terrible sounds that waked him, it still seemed impossible she should not have heard his heavy fall on the stairs. Mrs Belt replied, with some astonishment at her lodger's concern for her welfare, that she had never had a better night, it was so quiet after the wind fell.

'But did your son think the house was quiet, did he sleep too?' asked Horton with feverish eagerness.

Mrs Belt was yearning to impart her bad news to her lodger, and remarking that she had something else to do than ask folks how they slept o' nights, she said a neighbour had just told her that Michael Winn had fallen into the Wandle during the night no one knew how and was drowned, and they were carrying his body home then.

'What a terrible blow for his sweetheart,' said Horton, greatly shocked.

'Aye! there's a pretty piece of news to send her, when she's expecting to see poor Michael himself soon.'

'Mrs Belt, have you any portrait of Esther Maitland you could show me? I've heard the girl's name so often I'm curious to know what she is like.' And the old woman retired to hunt among her treasures for a small photograph on glass, that Esther had given her before she went away.

Presently Mrs Belt returned, polishing the picture with her apron.

'It's but a poor affair, sir, taken in a caravan on the Common, yet it's like the girl, it's very like.'

It was a miserable production, a cheap and early effort in photography, and Horton rose from the table with the picture in his hand to examine it at the window. And there, surrounded by the thin brass frame, he recognised the face of all faces that had dismayed him, the face he beheld in the vision of the preceding night. He suppressed a groan, and turned from the window with a face so white, that, as he handed the picture back to Mrs Belt, she said, 'You're not feeling well this morning, sir.'

'No, I'm feeling very ill. I must get back to town today to be near to my own doctor. You shall be no loser by my leaving you so suddenly, but if I am going to be ill, I am best in my own home.' For Horton could not have stayed another night at Maitland's Farm to save his life.

He was at his office in Bedford Row by noon, and his clerks thought that he looked ten years older for his visit to the country.

A little more than three weeks after Horton returned to town, when his nerves were beginning to recover their accustomed tone, his attention was unexpectedly recalled to the abhorrent subject of the apparition he had seen. He read in his daily paper that the mail from the Cape had brought news of the wreck of the sailing vessel Petrel bound for Australia, with loss of all on board, in a violent storm off the coast, shortly before the steamer left for England. By a careful comparison of dates, allowing for the variation of time, the conviction was forced upon

John Horton that the ill−fated ship foundered at the very hour in which he beheld the wraith of Esther Maitland. She and her lover, divided by thousands of miles, both perished by drowning at the same time Michael Winn in the little river at home, and Esther Maitland in the depths of a distant ocean.