The Lady of Shalott

ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS

Table of Contents

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It is not generally known that the Lady of Shalott lived last summer in an attic, at the east end of South Street.

The wee−est, thinnest, whitest little lady! And yet the brightest, stillest, and ah, such a smiling little lady!

If you had held her up by the window—for she could not hold up herself—she would have hung like a porcelain transparency in your hands. And if you had said, laying her gently down, and giving the tears a smart dash, that they should not fall on her lifted face, "Poor child!" the Lady of Shalott would have said, "Oh, don't" and smiled. And you would have smiled yourself, for very surprise that she should outdo you; and between the two there would have been so much smiling done that one would have fairly thought that it was a delightful thing to live last summer in an attic at the east end of South Street.

This, perhaps, was the more natural in the Lady of Shalott because she had never lived anywhere else.

When the Lady of Shalott was five years old, her mother threw her down−stairs one day, by mistake, instead of the whiskey−jug.

This is a fact which I think Mr. Tennyson has omitted to mention in his poem.

They picked the Lady of Shalott up and put her on the bed; and there she lay from that day until last summer, unless, as I said, somebody had occasion to use her for a transparency.

The mother and the jug both went down the stairs together a few years after, and never came up at all; and that was a great convenience, for the Lady of Shalott's palace in the attic was not large, and they took up much unnecessary room.

Since that the Lady of Shalott had lived with her sister, Sary Jane.

Sary Jane made nankeen vests, at sixteen and three−quarter cents a dozen.

Sary Jane had red hair, and crooked shoulders, and a voice so much like the snap of a rat−trap which she sometimes set on the stairs, that the Lady of Shalott could seldom tell which was which until she had thought about it a little while. When there was a rat caught, she was apt to ask, "What?" and when Sary Jane spoke she more often than not said, "There 's another!"

Her crooked shoulders Sary Jane had acquired from sitting under the eaves of the palace to sew. That physiological problem was simple. There was not room enough under the eaves to sit straight.

Sary Jane's red hair was the result of sitting in the sun on July noons under those eaves, to see to thread her needle. There was no question about that. The Lady of Shalott had settled it in her own mind, past dispute. Sary Jane's hair had been—what was it? brown? once. Sary Jane was slowly taking fire. Who would not, to sit in the sun in that palace? The only matter of surprise to the Lady of Shalott was that the palace itself did not smoke. Sometimes, when Sary Jane hit the rafters, she was sure that she saw sparks.

As for Sary Jane's voice, when one knew that she made nankeen vests at sixteen and three−quarter cents a dozen, *that* was a matter of no surprise. It never surprised the Lady of Shalott.

But Sary Jane was very cross; there was no denying that; very cross.

And the palace. Let me tell you about the palace. It measured just twelve by nine feet. It would have been seven feet post—if there had been a post in the middle of it. From the centre it sloped away to the windows, where Sary Jane had just room enough to sit crooked under the eaves at work. There were two windows and a loose scuttle to the palace. The scuttle let in the snow in winter and the sun in summer, and the rain and wind at all times. It was quite a diversion to the Lady of Shalott to see how many different ways of doing a disagreeable thing seemed to be practicable to that scuttle. Besides the bed on which the Lady of Shalott lay, there was a stove in the palace, two chairs, a very ragged rag−mat, a shelf, with two notched cups and plates upon it, one pewter teaspoon, and a looking−glass. On washing−days Sary Jane climbed upon the chair and hung her clothes out

through the scuttle on the roof; or else she ran a little rope from one of the windows to the other for a drying−rope. It would have been more exact to have said on washing−nights; for Sary Jane always did her washing after dark. The reason was evident. If the rest of us were in the habit of wearing all the clothes we had, like Sary Jane, I have little doubt that we should do the same.

I should mention that there was no sink in the Lady of Shalott's palace; no water. There was a dirty hydrant in the yard, four flights below, which supplied the Lady of Shalott and all her neighbors. The Lady of Shalott kept her coal under the bed; her flour, a pound at a time, in a paper parcel, on the shelf, with the teacups and the pewter spoon. If she had anything else to keep, it went out through the palace scuttle and lay on the roof. The Lady of Shalott's palace opened directly upon a precipice. The lessor of the house called it a flight of stairs. When Sary Jane went up and down, she went sideways to preserve her balance. There were no banisters to the precipice. The entry was dark. Some dozen or twenty of the Lady of Shalott's neighbors patronized the precipice, and about once a week a baby patronized the rat−trap, instead. Once, when there was a fire−alarm, the precipice was very serviceable. Four women and an old man went over. With one exception (she was eighteen, and could bear a broken collar−bone), they will not, I am informed, go over again.

The Lady of Shalott paid one dollar a week for the rent of her palace.

But then there was a looking−glass in the palace. I think I noticed it. It hung on the slope of the rafters, just opposite the Lady of Shalott's window,—for she considered that her window at which Sary Jane did not make nankeen vests at sixteen and three quarter−cents a dozen.

Now, because the looking−glass was opposite the window at which Sary Jane did *not* make vests, and because the rafters sloped, and because the bed lay almost between the looking−glass and the window, the Lady of Shalott was happy. And because, to the patient heart that is a seeker after happiness "the little more, and how much it is!" (and the little less, what worlds away!) the Lady of Shalott was proud as well as happy. The looking−glass measured in inches ten by six. I think that the Lady of Shalott would have experienced rather a touch of mortification than of envy if she had known that there was a mirror in a house just around the corner measuring almost as many feet. But that was one of the advantages of being the Lady of Shalott. She never parsed life in the comparative degree.

I suppose that one must go through a process of education to understand what comfort there may be in a ten by six inch looking−glass. All the world came for the Lady of Shalott into her little looking−glass,—the joy of it, the anguish of it, the hope and fear of it, the health and hurt,—ten by six inches of it exactly.

"It is next best to not having been thrown down−stairs yourself!" said the Lady of Shalott.

To tell the truth, it sometimes occurred to her that there was a monotony about the world. A garret window like her own, for instance, would fill her sight if she did not tip the glass a little. Children sat in it, and did not play. They made lean faces at her. They were locked in for the day, and were hungry. She could not help knowing how hungry they were, and so tipped the glass. Then there was the trap−door in the sidewalk. She became occasionally tired of that trap−door. Seven people lived under the sidewalk; and when they lifted and slammed the trap, coming in and out, they reminded her of something which Sary Jane bought her once, when she was a very little child, at Christmas time,—long ago, when rents were cheaper and flour low. It was a monkey, with whiskers and a calico jacket, who jumped out of a box when the cover was lifted; and then you crushed him down and hasped him in. Sometimes she wished she had never had that monkey, he was so much like the people coming out of the sidewalk.

In fact, there was a monotony about all the people in the Lady of Shalott's looking−glass. If their faces were not dirty, their hands were. It they had hats they went without shoes. If they did not sit in the sun with their heads on their knees, they lay in the mud with their heads on a jug.

"Their faces look blue!" she said to Sary Jane.

"No wonder!" snapped Sary Jane.

"Why?" asked the Lady of Shalott.

"Wonder is we ain't all dead!" barked Sary Jane.

"But we ain't, you know," said the Lady of Shalott, after some thought.

The people in the Lady of Shalott's glass died, however, sometimes,—often in the summer; more often last summer, when the attic smoked continually, and she mistook Sary Jane's voice for the rat−trap every day.

The people were jostled into pine boxes (in the glass), and carried away (in the glass) by twilight, in a cart.

Three of the monkeys from the spring−box in the sidewalk went, in one week, out into foul, purple twilight, away from the looking−glass, in carts.

"I'm glad of that, poor things!" said the Lady of Shalott, for she had always felt a kind of sorrow for the monkeys. Principally, I think, because they had no glass.

When the monkeys had gone, the sickly twilight folded itself up, over the spring−box, into great feathers, like the feathers of a wing. That was pleasant. The Lady of Shalott could almost put out her fingers and stroke it, it hung so near, and was so clear, and brought such a peacefulness into the looking glass.

"Sary Jane, dear, it's very pleasant," said the Lady of Shalott. Sary Jane said, it was very dangerous, the Lord knew, and bit her threads off.

"And Sary Jane, dear!" added the Lady of Shalott, "I see so many other pleasant things."

"The more fool you!" said Sary Jane.

But she wondered about it that day over her tenth nankeen vest. What, for example, *could* the Lady of Shalott see?

"Waves!" said the Lady of Shalott, suddenly, as if she had been asked the question. Sary Jane jumped. She said, "Nonsense!" For the Lady of Shalott had only seen the little wash−tub full of dingy water on Sunday nights, and the dirty little hydrant (in the glass) spouting dingy jets. She would not have known a wave if she had seen it.

"But I see waves," said the Lady of Shalott. She felt sure of it. They ran up and down across the glass. They had green faces and gray hair. They threw back their hands, like cool people resting, and it seemed unaccountable, at the east end of South Street last summer, that anything, anywhere, if only a wave in a looking−glass, could be cool or at rest. Besides this, they kept their faces clean. Therefore the Lady of Shalott took pleasure in watching them run up and down across the glass. That a thing could be clean, and green, and white, was only less a wonder than cool and rest last summer in South Street.

"Sary Jane, dear," said the Lady of Shalott, one day, "how hot *is* it up here?"

"Hot as Hell!" said Sary Jane.

"I thought it was a little warm," said the Lady of Shalott. "Sary Jane, dear? Isn't the yard down there a little—dirty?"

Sary Jane put down her needles and looked out of the blazing, blindless window. It had always been a subject of satisfaction, to Sary Jane somewhere down below her lean shoulders and in the very teeth of the rat−trap, that the Lady of Shalott could not see out of that window. So she winked at the window, as if she would caution it to hold its burning tongue, and said never a word.

"Sary Jane, dear," said the Lady of Shalott, once more, "had you ever thought that perhaps I was a little—weaker—than I was—once?"

"I guess you can stand it if I can!" said the rat−trap.

"Oh, yes, dear," said the Lady of Shalott. "I can stand it if you can."

"Well, then!" said Sary Jane. But she sat and winked at the bald window, and the window held its burning tongue.

It grew hot in South Street. It grew very hot in South Street. The lean children, in the attic opposite, fell sick, and sat no longer in the window making faces, in the Lady of Shalott's glass.

Two more monkeys from the spring−box were carried away one ugly twilight in a cart. The purple wing that hung over the spring−box lifted to let them pass; and then fell, as if it had brushed them away.

"It has such a soft color!" said the Lady of Shalott, smiling.

"So has nightshade!" said Sary Jane.

One day a beautiful thing happened. One could scarcely understand how a beautiful thing *could* happen at the east end of South Street. The Lady of Shalott herself did not entirely understand.

"It is all the glass," she said.

She was lying very still when she said it. She had folded her hands, which were hot, to keep them quiet, too. She had closed her eyes, which ached, to close away the glare of the noon. At once she opened them, and said:—

"It is the glass."

Sary Jane stood in the glass. Now Sary Jane, she well knew, was not in the room that noon. She had gone out to see what she could find for dinner. She had five cents to spend on dinner. Yet Sary Jane stood in the glass. And in the glass, ah! what a beautiful thing!

"Flowers!" cried the Lady of Shalott aloud. But she had never seen flowers. But neither had she seen waves. So she said, "They come as the waves come;" and knew them, and lay smiling. Ah! what a beautiful, beautiful thing!

Sary Jane's hair was fiery and tumbled (in the glass), as if she had walked fast and far. Sary Jane (in the glass) was winking, as she had winked at the blazing window; as if she said to what she held in her arms, Don't tell! And in her arms (in the glass), where the waves were—oh! beautiful, beautiful! The Lady of Shalott lay whispering: "Beautiful, beautiful!" She did not know what else to do. She dared not stir. Sary Jane's lean arms (in the glass) were full of silver bells; they hung out of a soft green shadow, like a church tower; they nodded to and fro: when they shook, they shook out sweetness.

"Will they ring?" asked the Lady of Shalott of the little glass.

I doubt, in my own mind, if you or I, being in South Street, and seeing a lily of the valley (in a ten by six inch looking−glass) for the very first time, would have asked so sensible a question.

"Try 'em and see," said the looking−glass. Was it the looking−glass? Or the rat−trap? Or was it—

Oh, the beautiful thing! That the glass should have nothing to do with it, after all! That Sary Jane, in flesh and blood, and tumbled hair, and trembling, lean arms, should stand and shake an armful of church towers and silver bells down into the Lady of Shalott's little puzzled face and burning hands!

And that the Lady of Shalott should think that she must have got into the glass herself, by a blunder,—as the only explanation possible of such a beautiful thing!

"No, it isn't glass−dreams," said Sary Jane, winking at the church towers, where they made a solemn green shadow against the Lady of Shalott's poor cheek. "Smell 'em, and see! You can 'most stand the yard with them round. Smell 'em and see! It ain't the glass; it's the Flower Charity."

"The what?" asked the Lady of Shalott, slowly.

"The Flower Charity. Heaven bless it!"

"Heaven bless it!" said the Lady of Shalott. But she said nothing more.

She laid her cheek over into the shadow of the leaves. "And there'll be more," said Sary Jane, hunting for her wax. "There'll be more, whenever I can call for 'em—bless it!"

"Heaven bless it!" said the Lady of Shalott again.

"But I only got a lemon for dinner," said Sary Jane.

"Heaven bless it!" said the Lady of Shalott, with her face hidden under the leaves. But I don't think that she meant the lemon, though Sary Jane did.

"They *do* ring," said the Lady of Shalott, by and by. She drew the tip of her thin fingers across the tip of the tiny bells. "I thought they would."

"Humph!" said Sary Jane, squeezing her lemon under her work−box. "I never see your beat for glass−dreams. What do they say? Come, now!"

Now the Lady of Shalott knew very well what they said. Very well! But she only drew the tips of her poor fingers over the tips of the silver bells. Never mind! It was not necessary to tell Sary Jane.

But it grew hot in South Street. It grew very hot in South Street. Even the Flower Charity (bless it!) could not sweeten the dreadfulness of that yard. Even the purple wing above the spring−box fell heavily upon the Lady of Shalott's strained eyes, across the glass. Even the gray−haired waves ceased running up and down and throwing back their hands before her; they sat still, in heaps upon a blistering beach, and gasped for breath. The Lady of Shalott herself gasped sometimes, in watching them.

One day she said: "There's a man in them."

"A *what* in *which*?" buzzed Sary Jane. "Oh! There's a man across the yard, I suppose you mean. Among them young ones, yonder. I wish he'd stop 'em throwing stones, plague on 'em! See him, don't you?"

"I don't see the children," said the Lady of Shalott, a little troubled. Her glass had shown her so many things strangely since the days grew hot. "But I see a man, and he walks upon the waves. See, see!"

The Lady of Shalott tried to pull herself up on the elbow of her calico night−dress, to see.

"That's one of them Hospital doctors," said Sary Jane, looking out of the blazing window. "I've seen him round before. Don't know what business he's got down here; but I've seen him. He's talking to them boys now, about the stones. There! He'd better! If they don't look out, they'll hit"—

"Oh the glass! the glass!"

The Hospital Doctor stood still, so did Sary Jane, half risen from her chair; so did the very South Street boys, gaping in the gutter, with their hands full of stones,—such a cry rang out from the palace window.

"Oh, the glass! the glass! the glass!"

In a twinkling the South Street boys were at the mercy of the South Street police; and the Hospital Doctor, bounding over a beachful of shattered, scattered waves, stood, out of breath, beside the Lady of Shalott's bed.

"Oh the little less and what worlds away."

The Lady of Shalott lay quite still in her brown calico night−gown [I cannot learn, by the way, that Bulfinch's studious and in general trustworthy researches have put him in possession of this point. Indeed, I feel justified in asserting that Mr. Bulfinch never so much as *intimated* that the Lady of Shalott wore a brown calico night−dress]—the Lady of Shalott lay quite still, and her lips turned blue.

"Are you very much hurt? Where were you struck? I heard the cry, and came. Can you tell me where the blow was?"

But then the Doctor saw the glass, broken and blown in a thousand glittering sparks across the palace floor: and then the Lady of Shalott gave him a little blue smile.

"It's not me. Never mind, I wish it was. I'd rather it was me than the glass. Oh, my glass! My glass! But never mind. I suppose there'll be some other—pleasant thing."

"Were you so fond of the glass?" asked the Doctor, taking one of the two chairs that Sary Jane brought him, and looking sorrowfully about the room. What other "pleasant thing" could even the Lady of Shalott discover in that room last summer, at the east end of South Street?

"How long have you lain here?" asked the sorrowful Doctor, suddenly.

"Since I can remember, sir," said the Lady of Shalott, with that blue smile. "But then I have always had my glass."

"Ah!" said the Doctor, "the Lady of Shalott!"

"Sir?" said the Lady of Shalott.

"Where is the pain?" asked the Doctor, gently, with his finger on the Lady of Shalott's pulse.

The Lady of Shalott touched the shoulders of her brown calico night−dress, smiling.

"And what did you see in your glass?" asked the Doctor, once more, stooping to examine "the pain."

The Lady of Shalott tried to tell him, but felt confused. So she only said that there were waves and a purple wing, and that they were broken now, and lay upon the floor.

"Purple wings?" asked the Doctor.

"Over the sidewalk," nodded the Lady of Shalott. "It comes up at night."

"Oh!" said the Doctor, "the malaria. No wonder!"

"And what about the waves?" asked the Doctor, talking while he touched and tried the little brown calico shoulders. "I have a little girl of my own down by the waves this summer. She—I suppose she is no older than you!"

"I am seventeen, sir," said the Lady of Shalott. "Do they have green faces and white hair? Does she see them run up and down? I never saw any waves, sir, but those in my glass. I am very glad to know your little girl is by the waves."

"Where *you* ought to be," said the Doctor, half under his breath. "It is cruel, cruel!"

"What is cruel?" asked the Lady of Shalott, looking up into the Doctor's face.

The little brown calico night−dress swam suddenly before the Doctor's eyes. He got up and walked across the room. As he walked he stepped upon the pieces of the broken glass.

"Oh, don't!" cried the Lady of Shalott. But then she thought that perhaps she had hurt the Doctor's feelings; so she smiled, and said, "Never mind."

"Her case could be cured," said the Doctor, still under his breath, to Sary Jane. "The case could be cured yet. It is cruel!"

"Sir," said Sary Jane,—she lifted her sharp face sharply out of billows of nankeen vests,—"it may be because I make vests at sixteen and three−quarter cents a dozen, sir: but I say before God there's *something* cruel *somewhere*. Look at her. Look at me. Look at them stairs. Just see that scuttle, will you? Just feel the sun in t' these windows. Look at the rent we pay for this 'ere oven. What do you s'pose the merkiry is up here? Look at them pisen fogs arisin' out over the sidewalk. Look at the dead as have died in the Devil in this street this week.

Then look out here!"

Sary Jane drew the Doctor to the blazing, blindless window, out of which the Lady of Shalott had never looked.

"Now talk of curin' *her*!" said Sary Jane.

The Doctor turned away from the window, with a sudden white face.

"The Board of Health"—

"Don't talk to *me* about the Board of Health!" said Sary Jane.

"I'll talk to *them*," said the Doctor. "I did not know matters were so bad. They shall be attended to directly. To−morrow I leave town"—He stopped, looking down at the Lady of Shalott, thinking of the little lady by the waves, whom he would see to−morrow, hardly knowing what to say. "But something shall be done at once. Meantime, there's the Hospital."

"She tried Horspital long ago," said Sary Jane. "They said they couldn't do nothing. What's the use? Don't bother her. Let her be."

"Yes, let me be," said the Lady of Shalott, faintly. "The glass is broken."

"But something must be done!" urged the Doctor, hurrying away. "I will attend to the matter directly, directly."

He spoke in a busy doctor's busy way. Undoubtedly he thought that he should attend to the matter directly.

"You have flowers here, I see." He lifted, in hurrying away, a spray of lilies that lay upon the bed, freshly sent to the Lady of Shalott that morning.

"They ring," said the Lady of Shalott, softly. "Can you hear? ' *Bless*—it! *Bless*—it!' Ah, yes, they ring!"

"Bless what?" asked the Doctor, half out of the door.

"The Flower Charity," said the Lady of Shalott.

"*Amen*!" said the Doctor. "But I'll attend to it directly." And he was quite out of the door, and the door was shut.

"Sary Jane, dear?" said the Lady of Shalott, a few minutes after.

"Well!" said Sary Jane.

"The glass is broken," said the Lady of Shalott.

"Should think I might know that!" said Sary Jane, who was down upon her knees sweeping shining pieces away into a pasteboard dust−pan.

"Sary Jane, dear?" said the Lady of Shalott again.

"Dear, dear!" echoed Sary Jane, tossing purple feathers out of the window and seeming, to the eyes of the Lady of Shalott, to have the spray of green waves upon her hands. "There they go!"

"Yes, there they go," said the Lady of Shalott. But she said no more till night.

It was a hot night for South Street. It was a very hot night for even South Street. The lean children in the attic opposite cried savagely, like lean cubs. The monkeys from the spring−box came out and sat upon the lid for air. Dirty people lay around the dirty hydrant; and the purple wing stretched itself a little in a quiet way to cover them.

"Sary Jane, dear"? said the Lady of Shalott, at night. "The glass is broken. And, Sary Jane, dear, I am afraid I *can't* stand it as well as you can."

Sary Jane gave the Lady of Shalott a sharp look, and put away her nankeen vests. She came to the bed.

"It isn't time to stop sewing, is it?" asked the Lady of Shalott, in faint surprise. Sary Jane only said:—

"Nonsense! That man will be back again yet. He'll look after ye, maybe. Nonsense!"

"Yes," said the Lady of Shalott, "he will come back again. But my glass is broken."

"Nonsense!" said Sary Jane. But she did not go back to her sewing. She sat down on the edge of the bed, by the Lady of Shalott; and it grew dark.

"Perhaps they'll do something about the yards; who knows?" said Sary Jane.

"But my glass is broken," said the Lady of Shalott.

"Sary Jane, dear!" said the Lady of Shalott. "He is walking on the waves."

"Nonsense!" said Sary Jane. For it was quite, quite dark.

"Sary Jane, dear!" said the Lady of Shalott. "Not that man. But there *is* a Man, and he is walking on the waves."

The Lady of Shalott raised herself upon her calico night−dress sleeve. She looked at the wall where the ten by

six inch looking−glass had hung.

"Sary Jane, dear!" said the Lady of Shalott. "I am glad that girl is down by the waves. I am very glad. But the glass is broken."

Two days after, the Board of Health at the foot of the precipice which the lessor called a flight of stairs, the one that led into the Lady of Shalott's palace, were met and stopped by another board.

"*This* one's got the right of way, gentlemen!" said something at the brink of the precipice, which sounded so much like a rat−trap that the Board of Health looked down by instinct at its individual and collective feet, to see if they were in danger, and dared not by instinct stir a step.

The board which had the right of way was a pine board, and the Lady of Shalott lay on it, in her brown calico night−dress, with Sary Jane's old shawl across her feet. The Flower Charity (Heaven bless it!) had half−covered the old shawl with silver bells, and solemn green shadows, like the shadows of church towers. And it was a comfort to Sary Jane to know that these were the only bells which tolled for the Lady of Shalott, and that no other church shadow fell upon her burial.

"Gentlemen," said the Hospital Doctor, "we're too late, I see. But you'd better go on."

The gentlemen of the Board of Health went on; and the Lady of Shalott went on.

The Lady of Shalott went out into the cart that had carried away the monkeys from the spring−box, and the purple wing lifted to let her pass; then fell again, as if it had brushed her away.

The Board of Health went up the precipice, and stood by the window out of which the Lady of Shalott had never looked.

They sent orders to the scavenger, and orders to the Water Board, and how many other orders nobody knows; and they sprinkled themselves with camphor, and they went their ways.

And the board that had the Right of Way went its way, too. And Sary Jane folded up the shawl, which she could not afford to lose, and came home, and made nankeen vests at sixteen and three−quarter cents a dozen in the window out of which the Lady of Shalott had never looked.