

Lucy's Secret
W.C. Bennett

Lucy's secret was not at all the sort of thing that most young ladies' secrets are apt to be. And yet it was worth knowing—eminently so to me.

A very plain and uninteresting girl might have ever so many secrets, and few, of the opposite sex at least, would care to know anything about them. But Lucy was a very pretty girl, and that altered the case. Many a young fellow would have given anything almost, but his whiskers, for a peep into the charming bosom where such things were deposited.

With the exception of her mother, I had the good fortune to know more of Lucy's heart than anyone else. For more than a year we had been betrothed, and as soon as I could manage to scrape together the wherewithal to "keep the pot boiling," we were to be married. But in spite of all this, to my intense mortification, I was unacquainted with Lucy's secret. She was very frank and free and confiding about everything else, but this one thing she obstinately kept from me; and why she did so, was to me the greatest and the most troublesome secret of all.

Mrs. Vernor, with her daughter Lucy, occupied three rooms and a kitchen in the house which was their chief possession. The rest was rented out. They had a sufficient income, with care and economy, to enable them to live comfortably. Very soon after the period of our engagement, I thought I observed that there was something wrong about Lucy. Her spirits were certainly not so good as they had been. Fits of unusual depression, without any apparent cause; and she would start and look frightened at the most trifling noise.

I took an opportunity to speak with her on the subject; but she would not admit that there was anything wrong, and made light of the matter so pertinaciously that my fears were quieted for the time, and soon afterwards the thing seemed to wear off, and she became to all appearance as cheerful and even as gay as she had ever been.

This improvement lasted several months—all the winter, indeed; but with the flowers of May, which used to rejoice her heart so greatly, the old trouble seemed to return. The same low sprits, the same fits of abstraction, the same long and apparently painful reveries; and it became more than ever manifest that Lucy had a secret, and that it was as much a secret for me and her mother as for anybody else.

As the summer advanced, Lucy's mysterious trouble became more and more manifest. I could see that she had been taking great pains to conceal it from her mother; but that had now become impossible. Not only her spirits but her health also was affected; and that was a circumstance which could not for any length of time remain a secret from her ever watchful parent.

At length the poor mother's anxiety reached a pitch where it could no longer be blinded or pacified; and failing to elicit any satisfactory explanation from Lucy herself, she came in the greatest trepidation, to consult me on the subject.

I told her that her own anxieties on this score were almost an exact counterpart of my own, except that I had been the first to notice that something was wrong. I had felt the same fears, expressed the same to Lucy, and with equal astonishment observed her strenuous effort to persuade me that it was all a mistake; that there was really nothing the matter with her.

It was at length agreed between Mrs. Vernor and myself that we would not importune Lucy on the subject any more for the present, but that we would redouble our watchfulness and our efforts to discover where the difficulty lay. These efforts, it would seem, could hardly fail to be successful. She went almost nowhere, and saw almost nobody; her life's circle, in fact, seemed so contracted, that it would appear to be impossible that any part of it could escape our vigilant, unceasing scrutiny.

For several weeks, we kept the object of our anxiety under the strictest surveillance, so that hardly a word or deed escaped us; and yet all our investigations ended in nothing. Her melancholy increased, her health declined everyday; and all without the shadow of a shade of a cause, that we could see.

It was manifest that the state of her feelings varied very materially; but this only made the mystery deeper, since we could see no cause whatever for such variation. Sometimes she would become more cheerful, and lead us to hope that the cloud was about to pass away; but the very next day perhaps would find her struggling so fearfully with her divulged sorrow as to make me actually tremble for her safety, both mental and corporeal. At last I felt that I could positively stand it no longer. There must be an end to this miserable state of things, at all hazards. One day, I found Lucy sitting by her mother, with her hands over her face. I removed them, exercising some force in doing so, and found her, as I expected, all bathed in tears.

“Dear Lucy,” cried I, warmly, “there must be an end of this! Do you know that you are not only rendering me most unhappy, but actually injuring your poor mother's health, by your strange secretiveness?”

With a startled look, and a face pale as ashes, she rose from her seat, gazed intently at her mother, and then burst into a paroxysm of convulsive weeping, so violent that it seemed to be tearing her delicate frame to pieces. It was a long time before she could be soothed in the least. At last when she had become somewhat quieted, she sobbed out these words:

“If that is really so, I must tell you all; for the fear of making you and my dear mother unhappy has been the sole reason why I have prolonged this silence, which has of itself caused me to suffer so terribly.”

As she said this, her agitation increased to a fearful extent, and her mother, from sympathy, became similarly affected; so that it was a long time before I could soothe them, and get Lucy sufficiently composed to make the revelation which she had resolved upon. At last she said:

“What I am about to tell you is so extraordinary, that I am afraid you will not believe me. It may be that you will think I am afflicting myself and annoying you with that which has no existence except in my own imagination.

“This dread has conspired with my great unwillingness to distress and annoy you both, and caused me to cling to the hope of being able to confine my troubles to my own breast.

“Though I have suffered so much and so really, for more than a year, there are still moments when I half believe that the whole thing is a delusion—so difficult is it to account for what I have seen and suffered upon any natural, rational principle. And the idea of burdening you with such a weight of horrible but intangible mystery sickens my very soul.

“But I am forced to the conclusion that further silence on my part would be worse for you than a revelation of the whole truth. Reluctantly, therefore, I feel compelled to tell it, leaving the issue with Providence.

“What I have to report to you is a succession of strange things which have happened to me in my own bed-chamber, in the third story. If there is a room in the house perfectly safe from anything like intrusion or annoyance from without, it ought surely to be this. And yet I know from sad experience that this is far from being the fact—unless, as I sometimes think, I have been insane for twelve months or more.

“The first time anything remarkable occurred, was in the month of May last year. My little nieces were going to have a party, and I had brought some cake and fruit which I meant to send to them. Being obliged to keep it over night, I thought it would be perfectly safe on the table in my own room. I therefore placed it there, and retired to bed, at the usual hour.

“I generally sleep very soundly, and that night I made but one nap between half-past ten and broad daylight. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes in the morning was the dishes on which the things for the children had been placed. Imagine my astonishment when I perceived that they were nearly empty. Somebody had been there during the night, and eaten or carried off all but a few crumbs, and a few remnants of fruit.

“Though it was now after sunrise, I looked anxiously and fearfully around, in the expectation that the gluttonous intruder might still be there. I could see no one, however, and everything was perfectly quiet; so that I at last summoned up resolution enough to leave the bed.

“My supposition was that I must accidentally have forgotten to lock the door; but I soon made the discovery that it was fast, as usual. I looked under the bed, in the closets—everywhere; but there was no one to be seen, and no trace of anyone’s presence, except the absence of the eatables and some disorder in the furniture, etc.

“Even if the door had been left unlocked, anyone coming to my room would have had to travel so far and come necessarily in contact with so many people that the reaching my apartment without discovery would be regarded by any one as an impossibility. How then did the intruder get there? I thought, and thought, and thought, and thought, till my brain fairly reeled with the effort—yet I could hit upon no possible clue to the mystery.

“Could it be Sallie? It was impossible for me to believe that she would be guilty of such a thing; and even if she were to attempt it, the difficulties in her way were very nearly as great as in the case of one coming from without. It was impossible to believe that she could have done it.

“Could anyone come from another house, over the roofs, and get down the chimney? For a moment, I thought this might be possible; but soon I recollected that our house was perfectly isolated—separated from the adjoining buildings, on both sides. To reach a roof as high as ours from the ground would be a greater feat, I suppose, than to get up through the building without discovery.

“I next thought of the inmates of the house itself; but the wildest imagination would never accuse old Mr. Barker, or Mr. Thomson, of such a freak as that. Besides, if anybody could have unlocked the door and afterwards relocked it, they could not surely have so manipulated the bolt inside, which was as fast as the lock.

“I brooded over the thing for a long time, and the more I reflected on the subject, the more impossible did it seem to imagine any means whatever by which the phenomenon could be explained. If the cake and fruit had not been such tangible realities, I would certainly have set down the whole affair as a vision or dream. I might have thought it possible that I could have eaten them myself in my sleep, but it is certainly evident that I never could have gormandized to that extent, either sleeping, or waking, without being made unpleasantly conscious of it afterwards. It was all a mystery, as impenetrable, as inscrutable as the decrees of fate.

“Considering the extremely precarious state of my mother’s health, how easily she might be alarmed, and with what disastrous effect such alarm might be attended, I determined on no account to allow her to become acquainted with what had happened, if I could possibly help it. I did all I could, therefore, to conceal my trouble and anxiety, endeavoring to appear to others just as I had always done.

“For about two weeks nothing occurred to disturb me. But one morning in the early part of June, I discovered that my chamber had been visited again. I did not observe it until I began to dress. I then saw that almost every article in the room had been disarranged during the night. My clothes had been scattered about, the drawers of my bureau had been opened and rummaged over, my work-basket treated in the same way, and the things on my dressing-table turned all topsy-turvy and tumbled about, as if some one had been trying to see how much confusion it was possible to produce. There was no great harm done, nor could I ascertain that anything had been carried off; but the great point to me was the confirmation of the terrible truth that I was at the mercy of some mysterious, nameless visitor, who could enter my room at pleasure, without any one’s knowing how or for what purpose.

“In constant fear and trembling, the nights of the summer wore on. More than a month, however, elapsed without any further interruption, and I began to hope that the mysterious visitor would return no more. But the hope soon proved to be a delusive one.

“One very warm night, I was much troubled with unpleasant dreams, and a feeling of annoyance, I could not tell what, nearly woke me more than once. Towards morning, however, I fell into a

very sound sleep, which was prolonged till a later hour than usual. Soon after I rose, I happened to pass by a looking-glass, and catch a glimpse of the reflection of my face. For a moment I was perfectly horror-struck. I could not imagine what terrible thing had befallen me. A large part of my face was as black as charcoal! After the first shock had somewhat subsided, I examined myself closely, and then I saw that it was ink, daubed on my face by somebody while I was asleep. I had felt the annoyance, but not sufficiently to cause me to awake.

“The inkstand was on the chair by the bedside, and lying alongside of it was a quill, the feather end of which was saturated with ink. This was also the condition of my night-dress and a portion of the bed-clothes. There was some disorder besides in the room, but not much. This, even more than the other tricks, seemed to show that no serious harm was meant; and the idea was something of a relief to me. But I was wholly in the power of the individual, whoever he might be, and what moment his caprice might incline him to the commission of some terrible act of violence, who could say?

“The next visitation I had I was terribly frightened. On waking in the morning, I found my candle burning, with a pile of newspapers and other combustible rubbish carelessly heaped up around it in such a way that if it had burned down but half an inch further, it must inevitably have set fire to the whole mass, which would probably have caused the destruction of the house. Whether this had been done with the intention of burning us up or not, I could not tell. It frightened me, however, dreadfully—more than anything that had occurred, and for a long time afterward, I had not a single peaceful moment. I took good care after this, to lock up my candles, matches, etc., as I had previously done most of my valuables.

“One more such fright, and I think I should have spoken out at all hazards. But, for some reason known only to himself, my tormentor thought proper, for that year at least, to make an end of his antics, which, like the stoning of the poor frogs in the fable, were apparently ‘sport to him,’ while they were ‘death to me.’ During the remainder of the fall, the whole of the winter, and the greater part of the following spring, I was left wholly unmolested.

“It was the month of May. I had come to look upon my nocturnal adventures as a thing of the past, almost forgotten. One night (you may possibly remember it), we sat up singing and playing till quite a late hour. There was no light at hand, and I went to my room without one. As I was passing on to the closet where I kept my matches, I saw by the dim moonlight that there was someone in my bed, rolled all up in the bed-clothes! I was rooted to the spot with terror, while my eyes were fastened on the heap of clothes, which I now saw move, and eventually roll over; and then out sprang something from the midst of them, directly towards me. I did not see what it was, except that it appeared to be a human figure, for I immediately fell fainting to the floor, and must have lain there some time.

“When my consciousness returned, all was quiet. I rose, tottered to the closet, struck a light. I was all alone. The mysterious intruder had vanished, and except the tumbled bed and some slight disorder in the furniture, everything was in its ordinary condition. But my heart was sinking within me at the thought that all the horrors of the preceding summer were probably to be renewed. And so it happened. This visitation proved to be the prelude to others similar to those of last year. I need not give you the particulars of all of them. Some disturbances in the night

which partially awakened me, but not sufficiently for me to be conscious that there was anyone in the room, and some trifling disorder of the furniture—these were in several instances the only signs that my privacy had been invaded.

“Last night, or rather this morning, between two and three o’clock, I awoke, and soon afterwards became conscious that someone was in the room. It was a sort of innate consciousness rather than an absolute knowledge of the fact; yet ocular demonstration itself could not have made me more certain of it. I could neither see nor hear anything, but that something was there I felt positively sure. I lay thinking, trembling, for many minutes. There was no moon, but the night was a clear one, and after a while I saw between me and the light of the window a figure wrapped in something like a dressing-gown glide noiselessly across the room. I did not faint, but I could not repress a smothered shriek which burst forth before I was aware of it. A light, shuffling, scuffing, scratching noise instantly followed, and then all was still. I had of late kept a box of matches and a taper under my pillow. Though much flurried and frightened, I had nevertheless presence of mind enough to strike a light immediately. But, as I expected, the intruder had disappeared. How, I could not form any idea. I was greatly frightened and bewildered for a minute or two, but I did not lose consciousness. I did not see the thing depart, nor had I any knowledge of its disappearance.

“After some length of time, I summoned up courage enough to leave the bed and look about the room. But the most careful scrutiny threw no light whatever upon the manner of my persecutor’s escape. I was about to return to the bed, when my foot struck against something which lay upon the floor. I picked it up, and found it to be a gentleman’s hat—a silk hat, very nearly new. It is above stairs, in the closet. I will show it to you to-morrow. There seems to be no longer any doubt, then, that this midnight intruder is a man, and a man who wears the garb of a gentleman; but in what mysterious manner he comes and goes, or what motive he can have for so relentlessly persecuting an unoffending female, are still enigmas, and as far from solution as ever. The man may be insane. His conduct certainly looks like it. That is the only rational conjecture I can make with regard to this mysterious affair.

“I hope you will pardon me for the trouble I have caused you both. I did the best I knew how, and how sorely perplexed and tortured I have been, no heart can conceive, no tongue can ever tell!

“Dear, dear mother, do not let it trouble you! The truth *must* soon be discovered!”

With these words, the poor girl threw herself into her mother’s arms, sobbing as if her heart would break. I made a vow upon the spot, that the truth should be discovered, if mortal man could do it. My first object was to see the hat, and then if possible to discover its owner. Lucy brought it down the next morning, and at the first glance I recognized it as *my own property!* I had lost it some two months before. It had been sent home to my lodgings from the railroad depot, with a number of other articles. It was in an ordinary hat-box. A week or more afterwards, having occasion to use it, I went to the box and found it empty. My supposition was that it had been lost through the carelessness of the porter, in coming from the depot; and through my carelessness the loss had never been noticed till that moment. At all events, I never saw the hat again, till I saw it in Lucy’s hands. Another link in the protracted chain of mysteries. I gave

myself but little trouble about all those wonders. My determination was to cut the Gordian knot, rather than to strive to untie it. I was resolved to take up my abode in Lucy's room, and occupy it till this waking mystery should make another visit, when I would capture him if possible, and serve him as they did Proteus of old, compelling him to show us his real nature and condition.

Having overruled some objections on the part of Lucy and her mother, I at length established myself in the mysterious chamber. At first I was very wakeful, sometimes not sleeping at all till the approach of daylight. As nothing occurred, however, to rouse my vigilance, or to attract my attention in any way, this strict watchfulness gradually relaxed, and I eventually found myself snoring away as lustily as if peripatetic prowlers and midnight mysteries were things unheard of. Every morning I made a resolution to be more wakeful and watchful, and every night regularly I broke it. The spirit was (lukewarmly) willing, but the flesh was weak, lamentably so.

On the morning of the tenth of August, I think it was, I rose as usual, and was proceeding to dress myself, when I suddenly made the discovery that I had no breeches—not even a fig-leaf was to be seen anywhere. I had hung them over the back of a chair close to the head of the bed, the night before; but they most assuredly were not there now, nor anywhere else, as far as my ingenuity could discover. I made a strict examination of the room, not with the hope of finding the missing article, but in order to discover, if possible, some trace of the ways and means of its abstraction, but all to no purpose.

In the meantime, however, how was I to get along without that eminently necessary garment? The question was an embarrassing one. While ruminating upon it, I chanced to hear Sallie's voice, and it suggested an idea—an article which seemed to be particularly scarce with me that morning.

“Sallie,” cried I, “I want a pair of breeches!”

“Lor' bless your soul!” replied Sallie, “I don't wear no sich things, sir.”

“No, no, Sallie. Heaven forbid that I should insinuate anything of the sort, particularly as you are a married woman. I merely want you to ask Mr. Thomson to lend me a pair of his pants.”

After a multitude of exclamations and wonderings, Sally at length departed on her errand, and in due time returned with the needful article, which enabled me to make a shift to get along until I could get access to my own wardrobe.

After this, I spent a considerable portion of every night out of bed. After undressing and making myself cool and comfortable, instead of “turning in,” I would set myself in an armchair, and keep awake as long as possible. Sooner or later, to be sure, I would go to sleep, but I thought I would be better able to take advantage of any sudden emergency in that position than if I were in bed.

One very dark night in September, having gone to sleep in the chair, I was very suddenly and rudely awakened by a sense of impending suffocation. I could see nothing. Putting up my hands, I felt a pair of arms wound tightly round my neck, and a pair of legs embracing my body and limbs in the same manner. Both arms and legs were cased in some kind of loose stuff, having the

feel of a dressing-gown or wrapper, beneath the folds of which I could distinguish limbs of great tenacity, but of almost iron hardness.

Being very loth to disturb the inmates of the house, I resolved to try no noisy means of getting rid of my uncomfortable necklaces. But I need not have made myself at all uneasy on that score. My tormentor had no idea of giving me the opportunity of doing anything of the sort. Every effort I made to release myself, to get a light, to get my revolver, to back up against the wall, to kick up behind—all were cut short in embryo by such horrible squeezings of the wind-pipe as made my very eyes start from their sockets. I once heard an individual with an inquiring mind say he “did wish he could know how a man felt when he was hanging.” A bystander thought it quite probable that he would some day find out. But if he had been in my place he would have gained that experience without any of the annoyance of a criminal prosecution. As long as I remained perfectly quiet, I was suffered to remain in a state of tolerable comfort, but the moment I made a movement of any sort, those terrible claws closed upon my trachea like an iron vice worked by a steam engine. So tremendous was the pressure, in fact, that I more than once thought all was over with me.

And there I sat in my shirt and drawers, with this inexorable, iron-armed enigma riding me like a nightmare, and not allowed to budge one inch, on pain of instant suffocating. I thought of the “old man of the mountain,” in the “Arabian Nights” and felt that I was quite as badly off as “Sinbad the Sailor.” The sole condition of existence being a perfect oyster-like quiescence, as quiet as an oyster I therefore remained, with my persecutor’s iron arms about my neck, and his hot breath fanning my cheek. So long did this last, that, in spite of my extraordinary situation, I eventually began to nod, and then to doze, and at last to sleep and snore outright. I did not even dream, I believe. Suddenly I awoke again, with a scuffling, scrambling noise in my ears, similar to those Lucy had described, and then all was still again.

I was free; and by striking a light I soon discovered that I was alone. The monster had departed. But this time *I had a clue to his identity*. I had felt a face beside my own, too hairy, too ape-like in its contour even to be that of a modern dandy. It certainly was an ape, a monkey, an ourang-outang, or something of that nature. Nothing else could have come down the chimney, as I was sure this thing had done; nothing else could have leaped the chasm which separates Mrs. Vernor’s house from those of the adjoining row, as I felt that it must have done repeatedly. There was a stout iron beam descending from the fireplace up to the top of the chimney, put there, I suppose, to strengthen the brick-work. Aided by this, one of the monkey tribe might ascend or descend from the fireplace to the roof, and vice versa, with great rapidity. There was also a tree so close to the window that such a creature might easily have ascended and entered the room in that way, when the window was open; and there was little doubt that this creature had done so. The first visit had probably been accidental, and the good cheer found on that occasion had no doubt been the chief inducement for a repetition of the visits. In cool weather, when any of the flues connected with the chimney were filled with smoke, and when the windows were all down, the visits of the course would be interrupted and discontinued till the return of warm weather. A little investigation the next day enabled me to verify all these suppositions, and clear up the mystery entirely. I found that just such an animal as I have imagined did really exist in one of the houses in the neighboring block of buildings. He belonged to a certain Captain Worcester, who

spent most of his time at sea, leaving the *Chimpanzee* in the care of his sons, lads of fifteen and seventeen.

Though I had never heard of him, it seems that this brute had acquired quite a reputation in the neighborhood, from his funny pranks and his excessive mischievousness. He was famous for imitating what he saw others do, and Lucy was not the first person he had lathered with ink preparatory to shaving. The children had taught him to ride on each other's backs, with his paws round their necks, and more than one person had narrowly escaped strangulation in this way, from his powerful hug. He had often been known to ignite matches, and light candles with them, to the great danger of papers, furniture, etc. He was usually confined at night in the garret, from which he would sometimes escape through a trap-door carelessly left open, and would roam about over the roofs, or descend to the ground and scamper about till morning. Having been severely chastised for these escapades, he would generally go back again before daybreak, and look as demure and innocent if he had been asleep all night. He had often been known to descend chimneys and climb in at windows, and frighten people almost out of their wits by his extraordinary antics. He had learned to fear discovery, and to be exceedingly stealthy in his movements. He was generally made to wear a sort of loose gown (for warmth's sake) in the summer nights, but he would often appropriate articles of clothing found in his travels, and carry them off to his garret. In consequence of the complaint which I lodged against him, his haunts were overhauled, and a secret hoard discovered in the garret, where many missing articles were found stowed away. My hat had no doubt once been among them.

It is unnecessary for me to follow up this explanation any further. I need only add that as I was suspected of an intention to commit *simian-side*, it was thought best to send Jocko out of the country. He was accordingly exported to England; and with him disappeared all the troubles which had originated from LUCY'S SECRET.

The Flag of our Union, Feb. 11, 1860