

Was She Mad?
by Jenny Wren

Why do I write? Because, perhaps, in looking all about my poor, bare room, I find they still have left me pencil and paper I can call my own; because I must shut out the horrid sights and sounds which are my portion whene'er I cross my threshold; because when I close eyes and ears to these present horrors, other pictures come to haunt me, and I fly from myself. They call me mad. As if they knew. They have brought me here among these poor creatures, who know not what they do, nor where they are, and tell me that were I not with them I should occupy a *felon's cell*. What can they mean? How well I remember the day Thornton Fairleigh came first to Arden Manor, nominally on a visit to its young master, in reality to woo and wed its heiress. I was but Corinne Arden's companion, the humble dependant who shared her gracious favors. She had learned to love me. I was her confidante, perhaps her friend, but mindful always of the gulf that lay between us, though in my veins, too, flowed the blue blood of many centuries.

It was a warm, sunny afternoon in early June, when, having seen that all was in readiness for the stranger, I took my seat idly in the broad, low window-seat of the library window and fell asleep. A voice roused me. The sound came from the outside lawn, and raising my head I saw that the expected guest had arrived—in fact, had not yet relinquished the fair, welcoming hand of his young hostess. A sudden pang shot through me as I looked. In that moment I loved him. In that moment I knew that he loved her. The tell-tale blush with which she had announced to me his coming already had betrayed *her* secret.

From where I sat my eye swept the vast expanse of park, the grand old trees, the artificial pond, with its boats and bridges. All this was hers. I had not envied her before. I had gloried in my stronger nature, smiling in my heart at her weakness; but now I envied her as Lucifer might envy. She had all—I nothing. Did I determine even then to steal from her her prize? I do not know. I can only state what followed. That evening she asked me to sing. I had been presented to Mr. Fairleigh at dinner, and my heart echoed the verdict of my eyes, that never had I seen a handsomer man. He had acknowledged the introduction with a polite indifference, which had stung more than wanton rudeness. He should at least be made conscious of my presence.

My voice was my one accomplishment. Heretofore music had been my all; now it should serve but as a means to the end. Ere I had finished my song he was standing by my side, and glancing up from the music-written page our eyes met, and *his* fell. I have not said before that Lionel Arden loved me; nay more, that spite of the fact that I was a poor dependant, his sister's salaried companion, he would have placed me on an equal footing with her by making me his wife. The fact seemed of so little moment, simply the weak fancy of a boy, that I cared not to jot it down; but it now took different shaped and meaning—in the days that followed. He grew jealous, and would spring up here and there when I thought him far away. Sometimes during the morning hours I would sing to Mr. Fairleigh, Corrine flitting in and out of the room, always thanking me so sweetly for entertaining her guest; but there were moments when she left us, and I would let my hands rest on the keys and we would drift into idle talk, when each word to me was more precious than the jewels from Golconda's mine. Then, as I said before, Lionel's jealousy was aroused. I no longer saw Thornton alone. Our mornings were shared, and I grew to hate this constant intruder—yes, hate him until I could wish him dead. How could I dream my rash wish

should meet with its fulfillment! Am I to be branded with the mark of Cain because I wished it so?

Well, one morning there was hurrying to and fro of many feet, and sounds of bitter weeping, for pale and lifeless lay the young master, foully murdered. He had been found dead in his bed, and, strange to say, the assassin had taken one from his own case of pistols, which he kept, as we all well knew, beside his bedside.

How could it have happened? Entrance to the house from outside seemed impossible. Everything was securely barricaded, as it had been the night before. Indeed, it would seem as though the murderer must have forced his way through my chamber, as the doors communicating upon a common corridor, always locked, were found wide open. Yet, no one in the house could be suspected. The servants had been attached in the household for years. The detectives sent from London acknowledged themselves baffled, and retired discomfited.

It was at this time that an old habit of my childhood I had thought cured returned—the habit of walking in my sleep. Once I awakened to find myself standing in Lionel's room, now closed and deserted, standing by the vacant bed and groping with my hands for the case of pistols in the spot where they used to lie. An ague fit seized me when I realized my position. A wild scream of terror rose to my lips, but I forced it back and fled—fled as though demons were pursuing me. So perhaps had the murderer fled after the fatal deed. Oh, the misery of the days that followed! I could not even win a smile from Mr. Fairleigh, who still stayed with us at Corrine's earnest request. All his thoughts were now centered on her. Since her brother's death she had slowly faded and clung to his love which had now avowed itself, as though she might, through it, win back her lost happiness. It seemed as though he avoided me. I dared no longer sing and thus again allure him, for music in that grief-stricken house would have been insulting alike to dead and living. Then the long tension upon Corrine's nerves suddenly snapped and severe and dangerous illness ensued.

She would allow no one to nurse her save Thornton and myself. Even in her delirium she would call upon us, but in those long, silent night-watches I learned the fatal truth—his heart, I might once have won, had turned from me forever to that poor, helpless child. Could it be I learned to hate her too? I know not; but when the physician gravely put into my hand a little vial with these words: "When she wakens to-night she must have so many drops; no more, no less, or the effect would be fatal,"—something impelled me to carry it to Mr. Fairleigh, repeating the instruction. "Your hand is steadier than mine," I added—"I dare not trust myself." Then feeling relieved from the duty, I lay down and slept; but in the morning, when I entered the sickroom, the patient turned from me in horror.

She was worse, far worse than on the previous day. The delirium had fled, but for hours they battled inch by inch with death for victory—battled and won. From her side, where heretofore she could not rest without me, I was banished. Even the sound of my voice would throw her into such agitation that I could not let it reach her ear. At length it grew unbearable. Thornton was shut up there with her. At any cost I must once more allure him to my side. I descended to the deserted drawing-room. I threw wide open every casement, letting in the bright, warm sunlight

so long shut out. Then, wandering into the garden, I gathered my arms full of choicest flowers, which, returning, I scattered everywhere about the room.

My next step was to throw wide open the piano—then, seating myself, to pour out my soul in song. I sang as I had never sung before. I sang *to him*. The very birds paused in their warblings to listen. Would he hear? Would he come? My voice might kill her with its sweetness. What cared I, so it but sent him to my side? He would come! I knew it, I felt it. Higher and higher rose the clear, full notes—a shadow fell across the threshold. It was *he*. I would not turn my head to welcome him. Others were with him. Why had he not come alone? Nearer and nearer he approached me, when, as in a dream, I heard some one say:

“No earthly justice can reach her; she is mad,” and so I swooned away.

It was all a sick girl’s fancy—a dream—that on that night that I resigned my care to her lover, Corrine awakened to find me holding a glass to her lips and commanding her to drink. She refused. I forced her, and in the struggle half the liquid was spilled. To this accident she thought she owed her life.

“She would have been my murderess. She was my *brother’s*,” she cried, and wakened.

This was her dream. This the cause of her aversion to me. Strange that I, too, should have dreamed just such an one. Strange that each night now I live it over, even here where they have placed me, where I sit and think and live again that dream, until in time, I fear—I shall—*go mad*.

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