

Light at Eventide, by W. Fordyce Clark



The cottage stood by itself out on a bleak moor, and King Death was about to enter it. He had been expected for many days, but had made no haste, knowing well that his victim could not elude him.

The November night was fast closing in, and the north wind came in fitful gusts, shaking the rickety door, and whistling through the numerous chinks and crevices. Within this humble abode a strange scene was about to be enacted. Upon a bed in the inner apartment lay a woman worn with suffering, and hovering on the borderland between time and eternity. Her dark hair was plentifully streaked with grey, and her cheek was deeply furrowed; while the gnarled hands that lay nervelessly upon the spotless counterpane told of a life of unremitting toil.

Standing by the bedside were three women from the adjoining hamlet who had looked in to see the sufferer and minister to her - good Samaritans in very truth; for Barbara Mouat was lone and friendless, having neither kith nor kin left in the Isles. For well-nigh twenty years she had borne the burden of her loneliness and poverty with unruffled mind. Ever cheerful and self-reliant, taking a wholesome

view of life, and looking forward to the future hopefully, she was much esteemed by those with whom she came in contact. Her counsel was often sought by them in matters of difficulty; and few ever had cause to regret having taken her advice. A worthy daughter of her dauntless sires, she had framed her life by the law of her own strong soul. Fearing God, and serving her fellows ungrudgingly, she ever cherished in her heart the hope that He who had put her to the hard task of life would of His infinite goodness and mercy find some tranquil spot for her in the great Hereafter, where she would enjoy the rest and solace that had been denied her on earth.

And now that the end was near, her courage did not fail. To her Death was no dreaded destroyer of earthly happiness - no ruthless breaker of sacred ties. She regarded him rather as a well-disposed friend who would lead her away to fairer scenes, and bring her face to face with those she had loved and lost in bygone years. Though racked with pain she did not utter a murmur; indeed, it was hard to realise that her illness was mortal. She had lain thus for many days, and tonight she seemed much the same as yesterday; but to a close observer there was an indefinable change in her manner - a certain alertness and animation that had not been there before, and which could not be regarded without a vague feeling of apprehension.

As the evening wore on, the neighbours, with the exception of the woman who was to watch by the bedside during the night, prepared to take their departure. As they came forward to say goodnight, Barbara motioned to one of them to raise her up; and when the fit of coughing that immediately seized her had subsided, she whispered,-

"Bairns, ye might bide a little langer, for I wid laek you ta be wi' me till the end. Dis is my last night upo' eart', an' dir muckle ta be düne I' da short time 'at remains. First o' a', I want ane o' you ta geng and tell da minister 'at my 'oor is come, and dat I want him ta pray wi' me; dan I want you ta mak me ready for da grave. If ye'll open da box 'at's yonder afore da window, ye'll fin' a parcel wi' a' 'at's wanted. It's

been lyin' ready for mony a lang day. Noo, bear a haund, an' dü as I tell you, for da minutes ir fast slippin' awa'..."

The women looked at one another in bewilderment, and the same thought came to each. Poor Barbara's mind must be wandering. Whoever heard of putting grave-clothes on a living person? The idea was preposterous!

"Why dü ye hesitate?" murmured the sufferer in reproachful tones. "Ye manna tink 'at I'm ravin'. I ken ower weel what I'm sayin'. It's my last wish, an' surely ye winna refuse me?"

"Whatever has pitten it into your head 'at ye're gaun ta dee da night, Barbara?" said one of the women at length. "It's only a notion. Ye're nae waur dan ye wir last night. An' dinna ye tink it wid be a pity ta bring da minister oot at dis late 'oor?"

"Da minister, dear man, 'ill no mind comin' on sic an errand," said Barbara. "Noo, heest you, an' pit da things upo' me, so 'at I may be ready whin he comes."

The women still hesitated, for they could not rid their minds of the belief that Barbara was "fey."

By-and-by another of the women spoke.

"We're sorry ta vex you," she said, "bit we really canna dü what ye ask. It's sic a daft-like thing! But I'll go doon ta da manse an' tell da minister what ye say, and we'll be guided by him."

The dying woman sighed, and tears of disappointment came into her eyes.

"Ye've düne mair for me," she said; "ye might hae düne dis tü..."

Then she relapsed into silence; and the women withdrew to the other apartment to await the arrival of the minister, and discuss the strange request that had been put before them.

In a little while a footstep was heard on the path that led up to the cottage, and presently the minister raised the wooden latch and entered.

"Loard be praised for a sight o' your face!" murmured Barbara, as he bent over her. "My 'oor is come, an' I want you ta ask da Loard ta stretch out His haund and tak haud o' mine, say 'at I may no' stray I' da darkness 'at's gadderin' aroond me..."

"The Lord is ever ready to comfort and support His own through the valley of the shadow," said the minister. "If, as you say, you are about to leave us, it will only be to approach a little nearer to Him who has been your strength and song through the long journey of life, and to join those who were taken from you by the way."

"Ay! Blessed be His name for dat sweet hope!" said the dying woman with a radiant smile.

"And noo, Mr Grant," she continued, "afore ye read an' pray wi' me, I hae a last request ta mak. I've already mentioned it tad a lasses, but dey tink I'm ravin'. It's my wish 'at nae frem'd haund - hooever kind - sall handle my puir body after da spirit has fled, an' I want ta be made ready for da grave whaur I lie. I ken I wid dee easier dat w'y; for drest i' da clean white claes 'at's lyin' yonder, I feel I wid be better able to mak my peace wi' God. It wid be laek da robe o' Christ's righteousness, 'ithoot which I canna staund afore Him."

The minister regarded her earnestly for a moment; then turning to the women who stood by, he said, -

"You had better do as Barbara desires. I shall return presently."

When the minister again entered the room he found the dying woman dressed in the habiliments of the grave, with limbs composed, and hands clasped across her breast. The women standing round her were weeping, for she had just taken leave of them, invoking a blessing upon the head of each. Presently she opened her eyes, and murmured, -

"I'm ready noo...Ye might read me da twenty-third psalm."

As the minister took her well-worn Bible from the shelf and turned to the passage indicated, a feeling of spiritual elation began to steal over him. He had stood by many a death-bed, but had never witnessed anything like this before. The calmness and fortitude shown by this poor, unlettered woman were amazing; and he felt that the eyes of the heavenly host were turned toward that humble dwelling. There was a greatness and grandeur about it all that made him glow with the dignity of his high calling.

In tones that vibrated with emotion, he read the psalm that is so often on the lips of youth and age alike, and which is equally comforting to both - a psalm which voices the triumph-cry of man over all his enemies - yea, even over death itself. Thereafter he turned to the book of the Revelation, and read of the new heaven and the new earth, where there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, and of the Tree of Life whose leaves give eternal healing. Then, closing the Book, he knelt down and offered thanks for the Divine light that had been shed abroad in the heart of the woman before him, and commended her spirit to God.

For a space there was silence in the room. Barbara's eyes were closed, but from time to time the eyelids fluttered, and her lips moved as if in prayer. Suddenly she raised her right hand, and said in an audible voice, -

"Lord, receive my spirit!" And lo! Ere the words had well passed her lips, the great change came...

And those who stood by marvelled greatly.