

Lucy Wren

By Ada Radford

A GREY scholarly little person.

She had no degree, but her testimonials were unusual. She would be an acquisition to any staff. Refined, cultivated, literary in her tastes, and above all thoroughly conscientious and reliable.

And so although her health and her means had allowed her to do comparatively little in preparation, and although she was beginning later than some women, Lucy Wren found herself teaching in a large school, with a salary of £95 a year, and a prospect of a rise of £5 at the end of the year.

She was very fortunate ; she recognised the fact, although she did not give thanks for it quite as often as her friend Katharine Grey, with whom she lived.

They sat one summer evening, exercise-books for correction piled in front of them.

“Our life,” said Katharine, “is so delightfully free. Think of being a governess in a family.”

Yes, Lucy Wren had been saved from that.

“Imagine being one of those girls in an idle rich family, with nothing to think about except dress and flirtations.”

Her healthy-minded brisk little comrade shuddered at the thought.

Yes,

Yes, she had been saved from that.

She thought little of clothes, although the soft grey dress she wore, made beautiful lines over her slight figure. And flirtations ! . . . All the satisfaction there is to be gained from having no flirtations was hers, and yet somehow she wished that Katharine would give her mind to her exercise-books, instead of sitting there thanking heaven that they were not as other women.

"I don't believe you would have lived long in a life of that kind," Katharine said, looking at her broad quiet brow and long sensitive hands. "It's impossible to imagine you without work and without a purpose."

"I confess there was a time when I liked a little of it ; a little, you know."

Lucy Wren smiled and asked, "Of which ? of dress, or of flirtation ?"

"Both I think," and the blue and red pencil remained idly balanced in Katharine's fingers, and the picture of good sense grew pensive.

"I always feel that it has been knowing you that has made me look at things differently. After I knew you things seemed almost vulgar, that before I had thought only fun. In fact there are things I've never dared confess to you ; they are nothing much, but I don't think you'd ever quite forgive or understand."

Lucy did not protest that she would, and so no confidence was given.

"I shan't get through these books if you will talk," was what she said, and she opened an exercise-book.

"That child's mind is a perfect chaos," she murmured as she wrote "Very poor work" across the page at the bottom.

Katharine had an unusual desire to talk ; she fidgeted, and at last, finding Lucy absolutely unresponsive she left the table and her
unfinished

unfinished work, and sitting in the horsehair easy chair, leant back, a volume of Browning in her hand.

When at last Lucy looked up, Katharine spoke at once.

"It's a glorious love poem," she said; her eyes shone, and the schoolmistress had disappeared. "Shall I read it to you?"

To listen to a glorious love poem read by Katharine, at any time required the same kind of composure as the dentist's chair, but to-night had she proposed to let loose the specimens of animal life she kept in bottles and boxes, all over the room, Lucy would have given the same involuntary shudder.

"My head aches so, I must go to bed; good night," she said firmly, and leaving her half-finished books on the table, she left the room, with what for her were rapid movements.

"Good night," said Katharine, and buried herself again in her book.

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"I know you'll be very angry," said Katharine the next afternoon, as Lucy stood in her hat and cloak ready to go out, "but I never can understand your friendship with that little Mrs. Dawson. She doesn't seem to me to have a thing in her."

Lucy smiled.

"And you frighten the very little she has out of her; but I—well, I like to go and hear about things outside the school."

"But it's all gossip, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's all gossip."

"How funny of you, Lucy. What kind of man is her husband?"

"We never get more than a few words together," said Lucy. Then she added. "He looks unhappy."

It was gossip, and yet Lucy listened. Ella (Mrs. Dawson's name was Ella) always apologised. "I know these things don't interest you,"

you," she said, "but then after all you get quite enough of clever people," and so she talked and Lucy listened, and learnt many things—to-day as usual. For instance :

If Ella were Mrs. Spooner, she wouldn't like her husband to spend so much of his time with Ethel Dayley. Not that she should be jealous, of course ; jealousy is a small feeling, and would show distrust in Tom ; still she should distinctly dislike it. "It depends so much on the woman," she said, and looking in a kindly way at Lucy, whose tired head was resting against the back of her chair, she added : "Now I shouldn't mind Tom being friends with you. But it isn't always safe."

A vision of Ethel Dayley rose before Lucy, and she understood that she was the safer.

Then she heard that Sophie Warren was engaged to marry a man years and years younger than herself. That his people were furious. That Ella herself thought it very wrong of Sophie.

Didn't Lucy think it a wrong thing to do ?

"I don't know," said Lucy.

"But imagine yourself in such a position."

"I can't," said Lucy.

With even so much encouragement Ella chatted and chattered.

"People think I'm older than Tom, but really I'm a week younger ; and I've always been so glad that it wasn't the other way, for people can say such nasty things if a woman's older than her husband."

"I wish Tom would come in," she said suddenly.

Lucy wished it too. She was not as good a listener to-day as usual.

"He likes so few of my friends," Ella sighed, "and when he doesn't like them, although he doesn't mean to be rude, he hardly speaks to them. He always has something to say to you. Really
Tom

Tom ought to have married a clever woman ;” and Ella mentally determined to read more, in case Tom took to talking to her ; but it is hard to work with such a remote end in view.

When Tom came he was very quiet, and Ella was disappointed.

“How very tired you look,” he said, fixing his eyes on Lucy’s face, as he gave her some tea.

“I am, very,” said Lucy.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” broke in Ella, “you never told me. Why ever didn’t you tell me ? And here I’ve been chattering and chattering, and you ought to have been on the sofa, quite quiet, with your feet up. Do put them up, now. Tom won’t mind, will you, Tom ?”

Ella was in such a charming little fuss that Tom and Lucy exchanged a smile.

“Fancy not telling me !” said Ella.

They smiled again. “To tell Ella you are tired,” the smile said, “is just putting a match to a dear little feminine bomb.” Lucy pacified Ella, then she looked at Tom again, and the smile died out of her face. She understood now Ella’s constant complaint that he never talked. Talk ! How could he ? And she ? Why had she spent so much time with Ella, week after week ?

Only because she was dead tired and only half alive, that was all ; but Tom was, and had to be, with her always.

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A leaden sky, a leaden river. Lucy stopped and looked over the bridge. In the river there was a just perceptible movement, in the sky a suppression that promised a storm, and, for who could look so far ahead, freshness after it.

Lucy thought of Katharine’s cheerful companionship and the cup of cocoa awaiting her, and still she lingered.

“Low spirits are mostly indigestion,” Katharine had said ;
Katharine,

Katharine, who was never original, but who threw down her commonplaces and let them ring.

Good sense, good sense.

Hadn't even Lucy nearly enough of it? Wasn't she earning her own living? Wasn't she saving a few pounds for her own enjoyable old age? Wasn't she frugal and quiet and hard-working, as any woman of the working classes? And this discontent that surged within her when she felt strong, that dragged at her spirits and clouded her brain when she was tired—it was just unreasoning womanish folly, and Katharine would say indigestion. Was it? Very well.

To-night she would not make the usual effort to throw it off. "I mustn't, I mustn't," she had always thought; "I shan't be fit for my work to-morrow." And resolutely she had turned and interested herself in some light book. To-night, in the leaden dulness, rebellion stirred.

"Good heavens! Haven't I even the right to be wretched!"

Her work constantly overtaxed her strength. Economy prevented her from getting proper rest in her holidays. But she was sensible, and rested all she could, so that although always tired and draggled, she might not be noticeably so, and lose her post.

That was the comfort common sense gave.

She looked forward. She would never get a head mistress-ship, she had neither the acquirements nor the personality; and year after year young girls came up with their degrees and their inexperience, and after a time—it was years yet—but after a time, perhaps before she was forty, she would be told she was too old to teach.

Then she would fall back on her savings. If she went on limiting her pleasures at the present rate they might be £50 by that time. Her prospects looked dark as the river.

But

But it was the present that goaded her thoughts into the even darker future.

She hated her work and the thought of to-morrow.

She saw the rows of girls, she heard the chalk against the black-board.

The girls, their often commonplace, heavy faces, their awkward, undeveloped figures, their dress already betraying vanity and vulgarity—she saw herself grinding them.

They liked her, of course; every one liked her. She wished they would hate her. She was lonely—desperate. For friends, her colleagues; their outlook, their common shop, stifled her. “What are we doing with all these girls?” she asked herself.

“We are making them upright, sensible women, who will not argue in a circle or manoeuvre to get husbands,” Katharine had said. Would Katharine never see that *not* doing things is not enough for a woman? She believed they were overworking these girls. “We are killing the spirit in them,” she thought, “as it has been killed in me.”

In the thought of her work there was no comfort.

And then, had her own nature no needs beyond being sensible? She thought of life as it had been in her imaginings, in her dreams, and as it even might be in reality. What was her part in it?

To be sensible.

There was love, and there was home, and there was reasonable rest, and there was the exaltation of spirit that art can give, and music and poetry and nature; and the voice of a hideous mockery said:

“You can be sensible.”

As she heard it more and more clearly, as a voice outside, she defied it from within, where something told her that the crowning

act of common sense would be a plunge, death and darkness in reality, not this horrible pretence.

And then she was walking along towards the station with Tom Dawson. Neither had spoken of the strangeness of meeting there. They were walking silently side by side. Neither spoke, but as they neared the station their steps grew slower and slower. In the light of a lamp she saw his face with sudden clearness.

"You too," she thought. "No, not you. I can bear it, but not you. Tom's moody. Tom's this and that"—came back to her in Ella's voice, with its shallow, pleasant little clang. They walked, thinking—he of her face as he had seen it before she saw him, she of him. Her heart was beating with sudden sympathy, but she was living. For him, every day, Ella's commonplaces—Ella's affection.

Every day to work hard at distasteful work, for an income barely sufficient for Ella's little fancies. How had it ever happened? With his face, with his mind!

On the short journey home they hardly looked at each other or spoke, but the few necessary words were spoken in the voices of loving friends.

He stopped at the garden gate of her lodgings.

"Is Miss Grey at home?"

"No, there is no light in our room."

And he followed her in, and stood close at her side while she lit the lamp. She thought she heard his heart beating.

Her common sense said "Speak—say anything—about Ella—about to-morrow, or yesterday, or the day before."

But she stood by him, motionless and trembling.

Then her common sense made a fresh effort.

"Speak"—it commanded: for the silence was drawing them closer each moment.

The commonplace words that divide were slipping further and further from her thought.

"Anything would do," she said, vaguely, to herself—"anything about the bazaar—about—the school."

But the command had become mere words in her brain. It was the evening of her revolt. Instead of speaking she lifted her eyes—and he had been waiting, knowing that she must, and that he would hold her in his arms. She had not resisted—she had leant her cheek against his, and put her arms around his neck. Not until they had moved apart for a moment, her cheeks flushed and she was frightened.

"Don't think, my darling," he said. "Don't, don't; we have such a little while together."

And he drew her close again.

"My little one—my love—my life," he murmured to her. "And I found you in all that darkness."

"And I you. The river was so dreadful, just as things are——"

"Yes, I knew—I saw what you were feeling, and I knew—because I too——"

"Yes—yes, I know—I knew——"

There was a footstep on the gravel path.

"Katharine," said Lucy, despairingly, but without a start; and not until she heard her hand on the door she rose and stood by the mantel-piece.

"May I introduce Mr. Dawson, Katharine?"

Katharine was pleased to meet him, and she had plenty to say.

Lucy picked her hat up from the floor, and stood silent. Katharine thought, as she had often thought, it was a pity Lucy would not talk to strangers; she did not do herself justice. She had said a good deal on several subjects, before Tom Dawson rose.

Public

Public spirit in girls' schools—vegetarianism—she wished to try it, as also, it seemed, rational dress and cremation. How long was he there? Neither he nor Lucy had the slightest idea, but he knew a moment would come when he must leave.

But he must ensure seeing Lucy to-morrow.

"We shall see you to-morrow," he said to her; "it is Ella's 'At-Home' day?"

"Yes, I will come," said Lucy.

He was gone.

"Well," said Katharine, "I don't think he's very entertaining, do you? I don't think he's a great improvement on his wife. I thought you said he was interesting?"

Lucy moved.

"Don't go to bed this minute," Katharine pleaded.

Standing, her cheeks still flushed, she heard, as though in the distance, Katharine's tales.

"I know it's no use paying you compliments, but you're looking wonderfully pretty to-night, Lucy; your hair suits you loose like that."

And then, at last, she let her shut her bedroom door and be alone.

Lucy was at school again at nine o'clock the next morning.

Four hours teaching, dinner, preparation, and then Ella's "At Home."

She was counting the hours to Ella's "At Home." Seven hours more, seven hours more, six hours and three quarters, she kept saying to herself, as she explained to the elementary Euclid class the curious things about right angles.

Five minutes between each lesson.

She did not to go the teachers' room, she stayed in the empty class-rooms, and whether she shut her eyes a moment, or whether they

they rested on the blackboard or the maps, or the trees outside, she was absurdly, childishly happy.

No questions—no conscience—she was Lucy Wren to-day—not the safe friend of Ella's husband—not the best companion for girls—not the woman every one was the better for knowing—she was just herself. She saw a child talking in class. She ought to give her a bad mark. She did not do it, and she revelled in her little injustice.

Another lesson and another little break.

If he had not come ! There by the river ! What would have happened ? She did not know. "Only if we had not found each other !" That was the thought that made her shudder. But they had ! They had ! Only five hours more to Ella's "At Home !"

It was Ella's "At Home," and Ella's husband. But what had Ella to do with either ? Ella, with her mind so full of little things, so content with herself and with Tom. Did she envy Ella ? Envy Ella ? What a funny idea, how had it come into her head ?

"Miss Wren, can I speak to you ! I want to give you the fifth form next term. They are nice girls, but their tone isn't just what I should wish. It's a difficult age, their home influences are bad, frivolous. It's more advanced work than you have had, I'm afraid you'll find it hard, but I feel so sure that your influence is the best they could have."

It was the head mistress, and it was settled that next term Lucy should have the fifth form, and her salary would be raised ; and there were only three hours now to get through before Ella's "At Home !"

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Ella was happy. She was having quite an intimate talk with one or two dear friends before the others came.

"How

"How shocking!" she said more than once, and when she said that, you might be sure that she was enjoying herself.

Lucy sat apart—turning over a book. Ella thought she was reading and let her alone.

Scraps of their talk reached her now and then—just now it was about some girl, a governess who had been flirting, and it seemed with somebody's husband.

"She was sent off at once."

That gave the dismayed ladies some small comfort.

"But fancy carrying on like that," one gasped.

"And trusted so, and recommended by a clergyman."

"What really happened?" asked Ella. In low tones Ella was told that some one came into the conservatory—and they were there, kissing each other.

"And recommended by a clergyman," Ella repeated.

"And dressing so quietly."

"Really one's never safe."

And tale after tale of the audacity of their sex went the round of the party.

It was a pity, even Ella thought it rather a pity, that just then Tom and a friend should come in, and the conversation should take another direction.

There was a buzz of talk, and tea-cups were handed round.

"If only she would undertake it, my friend, Miss Wren, would be an excellent person to take your girls abroad," said Ella to a lady who was making anxious inquiries for a suitable person, "but she's so much appreciated where she is. She's over there," she said in a lower voice glancing towards Lucy.

The lady looked.

"The girl your husband is standing by, a quiet reliable-looking little person?"

"Yes,

"Yes, that's Lucy."

"She looks the very thing. Not pretty, but not exactly a dowd. My girls wouldn't care to be sent off with a dowd."

"Sugar?" said Tom, slowly.

"No thanks," said Lucy.

He dropped a lump into her cup.

"Tom!" exclaimed Ella, whose eyes and ears were everywhere. "Lucy said no—give it me, dear, I'll take it out."