

## THE CHILDHOOD OF LUCY NEWCOME



THE house which Lucy Newcome remembered as her home, the only home she ever had, was a small house, hardly more than a cottage, with a little, neat garden in front of it, and a large, untidy garden at the back. There was a low wooden palisade cutting it off from the road, which, in that remote suburb of the great town, had almost the appearance of a road in the country. The house had two windows, one on each side of the door, and above that three more windows, and attics above that. The windows on each side of the door were the windows of the two sitting-rooms; the kitchen, with its stone floor, its shining rows of brass things around the walls, its great dresser, was at the back. It was through the kitchen that you found your way into the big garden, where the grass was always long and weedy and ill-kept, and so all the pleasanter for lying on; and where there were a few alder-trees, a pear-tree on which the pears never seemed to thrive, for it was quite close to Lucy's bedroom window, a flower-bed along the wall, and a great, old sun-dial, which Lucy used to ponder over when the shadows came and stretched out their long fingers across it. The garden, when she thinks of it now, comes to her often as she saw it one warm Sunday evening, walking to and fro there beside her mother, who was saying how good it was to be well again, or better: this was not long before she died; and Lucy had said to herself, what a dear little mother I have, and how young, and small, and pretty she looks in that lilac bodice with the bright belt round the waist! Lucy had been as tall as her mother when she was ten, and at twelve she could look down on her quite protectingly.

Her father she but rarely saw; but it was her father whom she worshipped, whom she was taught to worship. The whole house, she, her mother, and Linda, the servant, who was more friend than servant (for she took no wages, and when she wanted anything, asked for it), all existed for the sake of that wonderful, impracticable father of hers; it was for him they starved, it

was to him they looked for the great future which they believed in so implicitly, but scarcely knew in what shape to look for. She knew that he had come of gentlefolk, in another county, that he had been meant for the Church, and, after some vague misfortune at Cambridge, had married her mother, who was but seventeen, and of a class beneath him, against the will of his relations, who had cast him off, just as, at twenty-one, he had come into a meagre allowance from the will of his grandfather. He had been the last of eleven children, born when his mother was fifty years of age, and he had inherited the listless temperament of a dwindling stock. He had never been able to do anything seriously, or even to make up his mind quite what great thing he was going to do. First he had found a small clerkship, then he had dropped casually upon the post which he was to hold almost to the time of his death, as secretary to some Assurance Society, whose money it was his business to collect. He did the work mechanically; at first, competently enough; but his heart was in other things. Lucy was never sure whether it was the great picture he was engaged upon, or the great book, that was to make all the difference in their fortunes. She never doubted his power to do anything he liked; and it was one of her privileges sometimes to be allowed to sit in his room (the sitting-room on the left of the door, where it was always warmer and more comfortable than anywhere else in the house), watching him at his paints or his manuscripts, with great serious eyes that sometimes seemed to disquiet him a little; and then she would be told to run away and not worry mother.

The little mother, too, she saw less of than children mostly see of their mothers; for her mother was never quite well, and she would so often be told: "You must be quiet now, and not go into your mother's room, for she has one of her headaches," that she gradually accustomed herself to do without anybody's company, and then she would sit all alone, or with her doll, who was called Arabella, to whom she would chatter for hours together, in a low and familiar voice, making all manner of confidences to her, and telling her all manner of stories. Sometimes she would talk to Linda instead, sitting on the corner of the kitchen fender; but Linda was not so good a listener, and she had a way of going into the scullery, and turning on a noisy stream of water, just at what ought to have been the most absorbing moment of the narrative.

Lucy was a curious child, one of those children of whom nurses are accustomed to say that they will not make old bones. She was always a little pale, and she would walk in her sleep; and would spend whole hours almost without moving, looking vaguely and fixedly into the air: children ought not

to dream like that! She did not know herself, very often, what she was dreaming about; it seemed to her natural to sit for hours doing nothing.

Often, however, she knew quite well what she was dreaming about; and first of all she was dreaming about herself. Really, she would explain if you asked her, she did not belong to her parents at all; she belonged to the fairies; she was a princess; there was another, a great mother, who would come some day and claim her. And this consciousness of being really a princess was one of the joys of her imagination. She had composed all the circumstances of her state, many times over, indeed, and always in a different way. It was the heightening she gave to what her mother had taught her: that she was of a better stock than the other children who lived in the other small houses all round, and must not play with them, or accept them as equals. That was to be her consolation if she had to do without many of the things she wanted, and to be shabbily dressed (out of old things of her mother's, turned and cut and pieced together), while perhaps some of those other children, who were not her equals, had new dresses.

And then she would make up stories about the people she knew, the ladies to whom she paid a very shifting devotion, very sincere while it lasted. One of her odd fancies was to go into the graveyard which surrounded the church, and to play about in the grass there, or, more often, gather flowers and leaves, and carry them to a low tomb, and sit there, weaving them into garlands. These garlands she used to offer to the ladies whose faces she liked, as they passed in and out of the church. The strange little girl who sat among the graves, weaving garlands, and who would run up to them so shyly, and with so serious a smile, offering them her flowers, seemed to these ladies rather a disquieting little person, as if she, like her flowers, had a churchyard air about her.

Blonde, tall, slim, delicately-complexioned, with blue eyes and a wavering, somewhat sensuous mouth, the child took after her father; and he used to say of her sometimes, half whimsically, that she was bound to be like him altogether, bound to go to the bad. The big, brilliant man, who had made so winning a failure of life, so popular always, and the centre of a little ring of intellectual people, used sometimes to let her stay in the room of an evening, while he and his friends drank their ale and smoked pipes and talked their atheistical philosophy. These friends of her father used to pet her, because she was pretty; and it was one of them who paid her the first compliment she ever had, comparing her face to a face in a picture. She had never heard of the picture, but she was immensely flattered; for she did not think a painter

would ever paint any one who was not very pretty. She listened to their conversation, much of which she could not understand, as if she understood every word of it; and she wondered very much at some of the things they said. Her mother was a Catholic, and, though religion was rarely referred to, had taught her some little prayers; and it puzzled her that all this could be true, and yet that clever people should have doubts of it. She had always learnt that cleverness (book-learning, or any disinterested journeying of the intellect) was the one important thing in the world. Her father was clever: that was why everything must bow to him. There must be something in it, then, if these clever people, if her father himself, doubted of God, of heaven and hell, of the good ordering of this world. And she announced one day to the pious servant, who had told her that God sees everything, that when she was older she meant to get the better of God, by building a room all walls and no windows, within which she would be good or bad as she pleased, without his seeing her.

Lucy was never sent to school, like most children; that was partly because they were very poor, but more because her father had always intended to teach her himself, on a new and liberal scheme of education, which seemed to him better than the education you get in schools. And sometimes, for as much as a few weeks together, he would set her lessons day by day, and be excessively severe with her, not permitting her to make a single slip in anything he had given her to learn. He would even punish her sometimes, if she still failed to learn some lesson perfectly; and that seemed to her a mortal indignity; so that one day she rushed out into the garden, and climbed up into a tree, and then called out, tremulously but triumphantly: "If you promise not to punish me, I'll come down; but if you don't, I'll throw myself down!"

She always disliked learning lessons, and those fits of scrupulousness on his part were her great dread. They did not occur often; and between whiles he was very lenient, ready to get out of the trouble of teaching her on the slightest excuse: only too glad if she did not bother him by coming to say her lessons. Both were quite happy then; she to be allowed to sit in his room with her lesson-book on her knees, dreaming; he not to be hindered in the new sketch he was making, or the notes he was preparing for that great book of the future, perhaps out of one of those old, calf-covered books which he used to bring back from secondhand shops in the town, and which Lucy used to admire for their ancient raggedness, as they stood in shelves round the room, brown and broken-backed.

And then if she had not her geography to learn by heart ; those lists of capes and rivers and the population of countries, which she could indeed learn by heart, but which represented nothing to her of the actual world itself ; she had of course all the more time for her own reading. When she had outgrown that old fancy about the fairies, and about being a princess, she cared nothing for stories of adventure ; but little for the material wonders of the "Arabian Nights ;" somewhat more for the "Pilgrim's Progress," in which she always lingered over that passage of the good people through the bright follies of Vanity Fair ; but most of all for certain quiet stories of lovers, in which there was no improbable incident, and no too fantastical extravagance of passion ; but a quite probable fidelity, plenty of troubles, and of course a wedding at the end. One book, "Young Mrs. Jardine," she was never tired of reading ; it was partly the name of the heroine, Silence Jardine, that fascinated her. Then there was a little book of poetical selections ; she never could remember the name of it, afterwards ; and there were the songs of Thomas Moore, and, above all, there was Mrs. Hemans. Those gentle and lady-like poems "of the affections," with their nice sentiments, the faded ribbons of their secondhand romance, seemed to the child like a beautiful glimpse into the real, tender, not too passionate world, where men and women loved magnanimously, and had heroic sufferings, and died, perhaps, but for a great love, or a great cause, and always nobly. She thought that the ways of the world blossomed naturally into Casabiancas and Gertrudes and Imeldas who were faithful to death, and came into their inheritance of love or glory beyond the grave. She used to wonder if she, too, like Costanza, had a "pale Madonna brow ;" and she wished nothing more fervently than to be like those saintly and affectionate creatures, always so beautiful, and so often (what did it matter?) unfortunate, who took poison from the lips of their lovers, and served God in prison, and came back afterwards, spirits, out of the angelical rapture of heaven, to be as some rare music, or subtle perfume, in the souls of those who had loved them. Many of these poems were about death, and it seemed natural to her, at that time, to think much about death, which she conceived as a quite peaceful thing, coming to you invisibly out of the sky, and which she never associated with the pale faces and more difficult breathing of those about her. She had never known her mother to be quite well ; and when, on her twelfth birthday, her mother called her into her room, where she lay in bed now so often, and talked to her more solemnly than she had ever talked before, saying that if she became very ill, too ill to get up at all, Lucy was to look after her father as carefully as she herself had looked

after him, always to look after him, and never let him want for anything, for anything; even then it did not seem to the child that this meant more than a little more illness; and it was so natural for people to be ill.

And so, after all, the end came almost suddenly; and the first great event of her childhood took her by surprise. The gentle, suffering woman had been failing for many months, and when, one afternoon in early March, the doctor ordered her to take to her bed at once, life seemed to ebb out of her daily, with an almost visible haste to be gone. Whenever she was allowed to come in, Lucy would curl herself up on the foot of the bed, never taking her eyes off the face of the dying woman, who was for the most part unconscious, muttering unintelligible words sometimes, in a hoarse voice broken by coughs, and breathing, all the time, in great, heavy breaths, which made a rattle in her throat. When she was in the next room, Lucy could hear this monotonous sound going on, almost as plainly as in the room itself. It was this sound that frightened her, more than anything; for, when she was sitting on the bed, watching the face lying among the pillows (drawn, and glazed with a curious flush, as it was) it seemed, after all, only as if her mother was very, very ill, and as if she might get better, for the lips were still red, and sucked in readily all the spoonfuls of calvesfoot jelly, and brandy and water, which were really just keeping her alive from hour to hour. On Friday night, in the middle of the night, as Lucy was sleeping quietly, she felt, in her dream, as it seemed to her, two lips touch her cheek, and, starting awake, saw her father standing by the bedside. He told her to get up, put on some of her things, and come quietly into the next room. She crept in, huddled up in a shawl, very pale and trembling, and it seemed to her that her mother must be a little better, for she drew her breath more slowly and not quite so loudly. One arm was lying outside the clothes, and every now and then this arm would raise itself up, and the hand would reach out, blindly, until the nurse, or her father, took it and laid it back gently in its place. They told her to kiss her mother, and she kissed her, crying very much, but her mother did not kiss her, or open her eyes; and as she touched her hair, which was coming out from under her cap, she felt that it was all damp, but the lips were quite dry and warm. Then they told her to go back to bed, but she clung to the foot of the bed, and refused to go, and the nurse said, "I think she may stay." The tears were running down both her cheeks, but she did not move, or take her eyes off the face on the pillow. It was very white now, and once or twice the mouth opened, with a slight gasp; once the face twitched, and half turned on the pillow; she had to wait before the next breath came; then it paused again;

then, with an effort, there was another breath ; then a long pause, a very slow breath, and no more. She was led round to kiss her mother again on the forehead, which was quite warm ; but she knew that her mother was dead, and she sobbed wildly, inconsolably, as they led her back to her own room, where, after they had left her, and she could hear them moving quietly about the house, she lay in bed trying to think, trying not to think, wondering what it was that had really happened, and if things would all be different now.

And with her mother's death it seemed as if her own dream-life had come suddenly to an end, and a new, more desolate, more practical life had begun, out of which she could not look any great distance. After the black darkness of those first few days : the coming of the undertakers, the hammering down of the coffin, the slow drive to the graveside, the wreath of white flowers which she shed, white flower by white flower, upon the shining case of wood lying at the bottom of a great pit, in which her mother was to be covered up to stay there for ever ; after those first days of merely dull misery, broken by a few wild outbursts of tears, she accepted this new life into which she had come, as she accepted the black clothes which Linda, the servant, now more a friend than ever, had had made for her. Her father could no longer bear to sleep in the room in which his wife had died, so Lucy gave up her own room to him, and moved into the room that had been her mother's ; and it seemed to bring her closer to her mother to sleep there. She thought of her mother very often, and very sadly, but the remembrance of those almost last words to her, those solemn words on her twelfth birthday, that she was to look after her father as her mother had looked after him, and never let him want for anything, helped her to meet every day bravely, because every day brought some definite thing for her to do. She felt years and years older, and quietly ready for whatever was now likely to happen.

For a little while she saw more of her father, for they had their mid-day meal together now, and she used to come and sit at the table when he was having his nine o'clock meat supper, with which he had always indulged himself, even when there was very little in the house for the others. He still took it, and his claret with it, which the doctor had ordered him to take ; but he took it with scantier and scantier appetite ; talking less over his wine, and falling into a strange brooding listlessness. During his wife's illness he had let his affairs drift ; and the society of which he was the secretary had overlooked it, as far as they could, on account of his trouble. But now he attended to his duties less than ever ; and he was reminded, a little sharply, that things could not go on like this much longer. He took no heed of the

warning, though the duns were beginning to gather about him. When there was a ring at the door, Lucy used to squeeze up against the window to see who it was ; and if it was one of those troublesome people whom she soon got to know by sight, she would go to the door herself, and tell them that they could not see her father, and explain to them, in her grave, childish way, that it was no use coming to her father for money, because he had no money just then, but he would have some at quarter-day, and they might call again then. Sometimes the men tried to push past her into the hall, but she would never let them ; her father was not in, or he was very unwell, and no one could see him ; and she spoke so calmly and so decidedly that they always finished by going away. If they swore at her, or said horrid things about her father, she did not mind much. It did not surprise her that such dreadful people used dreadful language.

In telling the duns that her father was very unwell, she was not always inventing. For a long time there had been something vague the matter with him, and ever since her mother's death he had sickened visibly, and nothing would rouse him from his pale and cheerless decrepitude. He would lie in bed till four, and then come downstairs and sit by the fireplace, smoking his pipe in silence, doing nothing, neither reading, nor writing, nor sketching. All his interests in life seemed to have gone out together ; his very hopes had been taken from him, and without those fantastic hopes he was but the shadow of himself. It scarcely roused him when the directors of his society wrote to him that they would require his services no longer. When they sent a man to unscrew the brass plate on the door, on which there were the name of the society and the amount of its capital, he went outside and stood in the garden while it was being done. Then he gave the man a shilling for his trouble.

Soon after that, he refused to eat or get up, and a great terror came over Lucy lest he, too, should die ; and now there was no money in the house, and the duns still knocked at the door. She begged him to let her write to his relatives, but he refused flatly, saying that they would not receive her mother, and he would never see them, or take a penny of their money as long as he lived. One day a cab drove up to the door, and a hard-featured woman got out of it. Lucy, looking out of the bedroom window, recognized her aunt, Miss Marsden, her mother's eldest sister, whom she had only seen at the funeral, and to whose grim face and rigid figure she had already taken a dislike. It appeared that Linda, unknown to them, had written to tell her into what desperate straits they had fallen ; and her severe sense of duty had brought her to their help.

And the aunt was certainly good to them in her stern, unkindly way. The first thing she did was to send for a doctor, who shook his head very gravely when he had examined the patient ; and spoke of foreign travel, and other impossible, expensive remedies. That was the first time that Lucy ever began to long for money, or to realize exactly what money meant. It might mean life or death, she saw now.

Her father now lay mostly in bed, very weak and quiet, and mostly in silence ; and whether his eyes were closed or open, he seemed to be thinking, always thinking. He liked Lucy to come and sit by him ; but if she chattered much he would stop her, after a while, and say that he was tired, and she must be quiet. And then sometimes he would talk to her, in his vague, disconnected way, about her mother, and of how they had met, and had found hard times together a great happiness ; and he would look at her with an almost impersonal scrutiny, and say : " I think you will live happily, not with the happiness that we had, for you will never love as we loved, but you will find it easy to like people, and many people will find it easy to like you ; and if you have troubles they will weigh on you lightly, for you will live always in the day that is, without too much memory of the day that was, or too much thought of the day that will be to-morrow." And once he said : " I hardly know why it is I feel so little anxiety about your future. I seem somehow to know that you will always find people to look after you. I don't know why they should, I don't know why they should." And then he added, after a pause, looking at her a little sadly : " You will never love nor be loved passionately, but you have a face that will seem to many, the first time they see you, like the face of an old and dear friend."

Sometimes, when he felt a little better, the sick man would come downstairs, and at times he would walk about in the garden, stooping under his great-coat and leaning upon his stick. One very bright day in early February he seemed better than he had been since his illness had come upon him, and as he stood at the window looking at the white road shining under the pale sun, he said suddenly : " I feel quite well to-day, I shall go for a little walk." His eyes were bright, there was a slight flush on his cheek, and he seemed to move a little more easily than usual. " Lucy," he said, " I think I should like some claret with my supper to-night, like old times. You must go into the town, and get me some : I suppose there is none in the house." Lucy took the money gladly, for she thought : he is beginning to be better. " Get it from Allen's," he called after her, as she went to put on her hat and jacket ; " it won't take so very much longer to go there and back, and it will be better

there." When she came downstairs, her aunt was helping him to put on his coat. "Don't wait for me," he said, smiling, and tapping her cheek with his thin, chilly fingers; "I shall have to walk slowly." She went out, and turning, as she came to the bend in the road, saw him come out of the gate, leaning on his stick, and begin to walk slowly along in the middle of the road. He did not look up, and she hurried on.

It was the last time she ever saw him. The house, when she returned to it, after her journey into town, had an air of ominous quiet, and she saw with surprise that her father's hat and coat were lying in a heap across the chair in the hall, instead of hanging neatly upon the hat-pegs. As she closed the door behind her, she heard the bedroom-door opened, and her aunt came quickly downstairs with a strange look on her face. She began to tremble, she knew not why, and mechanically she put the bottle of wine on the floor by the side of the chair; and her aunt, though she would always have everything put in its proper place, did not seem to notice it; but took her into the sitting-room, and said: "There has been an accident; no, you must not go upstairs;" and she said to herself, seeming to hear her own words at the back of her brain, where there was a dull ache that was like the coming-to of one who has been stunned: "He is dead, he is dead." She felt that her aunt was shaking her, and wondered why she shook her, and why everything looked so dim, and her aunt's face seemed to be fading away from her, and she caught at her; and then she heard her aunt say (she could hear her quite well now), "I thought you were going to faint: I'll have no fainting, if you please; I must go up to him again." So he was not dead, after all; and she listened, with a relief which was almost joy, while her aunt told her rapidly what had happened: how the mail-cart had turned a corner at full speed, just as he was walking along the road, more tired than he had thought, and he had not had the strength to pull himself out of the way in time, and had been knocked down, and the wheel had just missed him, but he had been terribly shaken, and one of the horse's hoofs had struck him on the face. They hoped it was nothing serious; he seemed to feel little pain; but he had said: "Don't let Lucy come in; she mustn't see me like this."

Lucy had been so used to obey her father, his commands had always been so capricious, that she obeyed now without a murmur. She understood him; the fastidiousness which was part of his affection, and which made him refuse to be seen, by those he loved, under a disfigurement which time would probably heal, was one of the things for which she loved him, for it was part of her pride in him.

The doctor had come and gone ; he had been very serious, she had seen his grave face, and had overheard one or two of his words to her aunt ; she had heard him say : " Of course, it is a question of time." Night came on, and she sat in the unlighted room alone, and looking into the fire, in which the last dreams of her childhood seemed to flicker in little wavering tongues of flame, which throbbed, and went out, one after another, in smoke or ashes. She cried a little, quietly, and did not wipe away the tears ; but sat on, looking into the fire, and thinking. She was crying when her aunt came downstairs, and told her that she must go to bed : he was resting quietly, and they hoped he would be better in the morning.

She slept heavily, without dreams ; and the hour seemed to her late when she awoke in the morning. It was Linda, not her aunt, who came into the room, and took her in her arms, and cried over her, and did not need to tell her that she had no father. He had died suddenly in his sleep, and just before he turned over on his side for that last rest, he had said to her (she thought, drowsily) : " I am very tired ; if anything happens, cover my face." When Lucy crept into the room, on tip-toe, his face was covered. It was a white, shrouded thing that lay there, not her father. The terror of the dead seized hold upon her, and she shrieked, and Linda caught her up in her arms, and carried her back to her room, and soothed her, as if she had been a little, wailing child.

At the funeral she saw, for the first time, her father's relatives, the rich relatives who had cast him off ; and she hated them for being there, for speaking to her kindly, for offering to look after her. She was rude to them, and she wished to be rude. " My father would never touch your money," she said, " and I am sure he wouldn't like me to, and I don't want it. I don't want to have anything to do with you." She clung to the severe aunt who had been good to her father ; and she tried to smile on her other uncle and aunt, and on her cousin, who was not many years older than she was : he had seemed to her so kind, and so ready to be her friend. " I will go with my aunt," she said. The rich relatives acquiesced, not unwillingly. They did not linger in the desolate house, where this unreasonable child, as they thought her, stood away from them on the other side of the room. She seemed to herself to be doing the right thing, and what her father would have wished ; and she saw them go with relief, not giving a thought to the future, only knowing that she had buried her childhood, on that day of the funeral, in the grave with her father.

ARTHUR SYMONS.