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THE HAUNTING EYES



by Eudora
Ramsay
Richardson

Author of "The Voice of Euphemia"

OUTSIDE, the winter wind howls its way across the prison walls and beats against my casement. The cell is cold and damp. The smoking lamp intensifies the shadows that lurk above me, beneath me, about me. The march of the death watch past my door is the only sound within this dark, dank hole. I am alone, alone; but it is not loneliness I fear. It is Lucretia—the Lucretia I loved, betrayed and murdered. God! I feel the grip of her power reaching from the world beyond, wreaking its terrible vengeance. Her eyes, those limpid, mild blue eyes of hers! How they search my very soul tonight! How they have always searched me, accused me, cursed me! Lucretia! I must write to break the spell. I must write or I shall go mad, mad; and it is madness I fear, not the death that awaits me. Lucretia, Lucretia, spare me! I have told it all. I will tell it again. Will that not be atonement sufficient? God in heaven, who gave me the sinister power that wrought my destruction and Lucretia's, hold off for tonight the spirit that possesses me! Let me forget! For a moment let me forget!

While I write, I am calmer. Lucretia does not reach me. How many times by the ghastly light of this lamp I have written the story, to destroy it the next morning! At daybreak tomorrow death will bring surcease; so tonight I write for the last time, and the record will remain to purge my soul of its guilt. I write to speed by the hours that must pass before I am led to the death chamber and set free from this anguish. What lies beyond I do not know, but it will not be this. Merciful God, it cannot be this!

What a simple, happy thing was that youth of mine spent in the little town that progress passed by! In the center of my life, as far back as I can remember, was Lucretia. A boxwood hedge separated our ancestral homes, but nothing came between our love. Here in the midnight quiet of this cell, it does not seem possible that the man who committed the crime for which I am to die at daybreak could once have been the boy who loved Lucretia with all the purity of his boy heart. And yet in that boy lay the roots of the power that has brought me to this wretched end. All my life I had loved and

feared those eyes of Lucretia, but little did I dream back in boyhood days that they could drive me to the direst crime man can commit and then return after death to condemn me.

IT WAS the coming of Franz Larue, the hypnotist, that marked the turning point in my life. How well I recall now the incident! Lucretia and I went together to the hypnotist's entertainment and sat in the third row, that we might discover what trickery the man employed.

The program followed the lines of the hypnotist's usual performance, but to our town it was absorbing and mysterious. From the beginning I felt within me gropings toward a power of which I had never before been conscious, though I had always known I was different from other boys, singled out by the gods, as it were, for a higher destiny. During the evening I became convinced that I could hypnotize, and earnestly I watched every movement of the man before me. At length Larue fixed me with his piercing eyes, and said, "Young man, you have the genius. I bow before ability I cannot equal. Come to the stage."

I went, impelled not by the hypnotist's will but by a sense of my own power. A lad I had known all my life was on the stage, ready at the entertainer's command to perform antics for the amusement of the spectators.

"Hypnotize this subject," Larue urged. "You can do it."

I fixed my eyes upon the boy, and in a moment I knew that his will was yielding to mine. Soon he was completely in my power.

That night marked the fatal beginning. Before leaving, Franz Larue gave me books to read and told me where to order others.

"I charge you, my boy," the man said, "to use wisely this God-given

gift. It can mean much for good. It may mean much for evil."

I laughed then, but now, as I look back over the agony of spirit I have endured, over the misery I have brought others, and the ghastly horrors that have tormented me, I weep to think how lightly I took Larue's counsel. "God-given," Larue called the gift. Devil-sent it must have been, bestowed by all the furious fiends of darkness.

After the boy I found on the stage, my next subject was Lucretia, and naturally so; for what could be more fitting than that she should put herself in the hands of the one who through the years was to be the custodian of all the love she had to give? But as I hypnotized her, I feared those eyes of hers; feared them often until my very soul grew cold. Nevertheless, as I went deeper into the mysteries of the science, it was Lucretia upon whom I demonstrated each new thing I learned.

"Why, dearest," I remember saying about six weeks after the visit of Larue, "I can hypnotize you with a look, with a glance."

The girl's clear blue eyes met mine. "I would not yield my will like this to any one else," she said, "but it is bliss, George, to know that I am so utterly yours."

"May I always be worthy of the trust!" I said, as I pressed Lucretia against my heart.

That was one George. Another from the depths of degradation sits shivering in his cell, writing, writing lest the spirit of Lucretia come to tear asunder the tattered remnants of his mind, lest those eyes of Lucretia pierce the darkness to freeze the very marrow of his bones.

Because of me, Lucretia developed an interest in hypnotism and zealously read the books I ordered. Though lacking in talent, she learned enough to hypnotize a weak subject,

or a strong subject that would yield his will to hers. Finally, however, to my amazement, she met me one night in tears.

"George," she pleaded, "give this up. As I read, I become terrified by a premonition of trouble. Hypnotism is dangerous, and I begin to believe that it is also wrong."

In vain I tried to soothe her, to make light of her fears.

"It's no use," she said, "I feel the power growing within me. I am through with it forever."

I KNOW now that Lucretia's sudden reversal was a prescience of the double tragedy to follow.

It was not long after that night that I felt the stir of a new ambition. I could achieve something more than our town had to offer. When I told Lucretia of my thoughts, she urged me on.

"Go to the city, George," she said. "I can wait until you return for me."

I went. At first came disillusion. The positions I held seemed to offer no chance for promotions, and, full of discontent, I passed from one kind of work to another. At length, I fitted into a vacancy in a real estate broker's office, doing clerical work that I detested. One Saturday afternoon, as I sat poring over my books long after the other clerks had gone, from the president's office I heard voices and from time to time snatches of conversation. The two heads of the firm were discussing their inability to get hold of some valuable property they wanted.

"He won't sell at any price," I heard. "I tell you argument does no good. We're beaten, that's all."

Into my mind an idea sprang full grown. Why not capitalize the hypnotic power that was mine? If I could get permission to try, I could

make that sale. Permission to try! Why, through hypnotism I could secure that permission. I waited until the junior member of the firm went out, and then I entered the sanctum of Henry Demar, the president.

"I couldn't help," I said, "but hear that you are trying to make a difficult deal. I know that I can get the property for you."

The man looked at me in amusement.

"You, boy!" he laughed. "Run along and play marbles."

I fixed my eyes upon him and began talking slowly and monotonously. At first I held the man's eyes because my audacity interested him. In a moment, I was getting control of his mind, and I knew that I could command him as I chose. The upshot was that I got the information necessary and a signed check for the first payment to be made on the property.

That afternoon I found the man who had so tenaciously held the wanted property, consummated the deal and delivered the papers to my employer. As I look back, I know in anguish of soul that hereupon began not only my business success but also the disintegration of my character. I was at once elevated to a position of importance, which led soon to membership in the firm.

I could not be happy, however, for I could not forget the eyes of Lucretia. Constantly they reproved me, constantly searched the innermost depths of my mind. Did ever living woman possess such eyes as did Lucretia? Had it not been for those eyes, and I say it tonight in shame, I think I should have felt no remorse. It seems strange to me now that my victims after their defeats gave so little trouble. One or two protests came, it is true, but in the face of signed contracts, they amounted to little. In the majority of cases,

pride sealed the lips of those from whom I had wrested cherished possessions.

RETURNING to my room after my first triumph, I felt my spirit strangely remote from Lucretia's. Day by day my interest in this girl I had always loved lagged. I wanted to forget her, but those eyes followed me accusingly, menacingly. I was becoming a considerable man in the city. Lucretia was a girl molded to the life in the village in which she had always lived. Why should the affair continue? I stopped writing, and made no explanation. Letters came from Lucretia. Everything depended upon my forgetting her; so I burned those letters unopened. In time I who had never known failure would banish from my mind her haunting presence, from my memory her eyes.

I boarded next to an old church, the quaintness of whose cemetery attracted me. Though Lucretia had my address, it did not occur to me that she would come to the city. Consequently, when at dusk I returned one spring evening, I was amazed to find her lingering near the gate of my boarding place. She was still beautiful, still appealing, and I was surprised to find that the old desire for her was not dead. I wanted to feel her soft cheek against mine, to hold her close, and hear the quickened beat of her heart.

"Oh, George," she said, coming toward me with outstretched hands, "I was so afraid something had happened to you."

"Come into the churchyard," I said; "we can't talk here."

I led her through the half closed iron gate, into the cemetery fragrant with magnolias and cape jessamine.

"I have been so unhappy," she said. "My father died a month ago,

and now I have no one. What has been the matter, George?"

"You'll understand when I have had a chance to explain," I said. "Can't you trust me a little longer?"

Her hand curled into mine, and she was silent. What a soft, sweet thing Lucretia was that night! She came of the race of women made to be loved—and I loved the velvet of her cheek, the curve of her breast, the cling of her body against mine. Beyond this, I had throttled my ability to love. That night alone with Lucretia in the gathering dark of the old cemetery, I was conscious only of the passion that surged through me. I wanted Lucretia, and through hypnotism, and hypnotism alone, I could at that moment gratify my desire. I looked into her eyes and for a moment saw mirrored there the man I might have been. Then I drew down the lids and kissed them. Lucretia and I alone in the deserted cemetery! Mine, mine! In ecstasy I strained her to me. Oh, the blissful sweetness of her! Even tonight I thrill again as I remember the warmth of her body against mine. And her eyes were closed, closed and unseeing!

Oh, demons that possessed me, how could man be capable of so foul a deed? Or, having robbed Lucretia of all that she held most dear, how could I have taken her, still under the spell I had cast, to the train and sent her home with assurance that soon I would come for her!

WHEN Lucretia awoke from the trance, full realization of what had happened must have come to her. Months passed, and I had no word. I was glad, and yet a strange fear would creep into my mind, a fear born of those eyes that would not leave me, that would not let me forget. There were times, too, when the aching longing to have Lucretia

again in my arms grew almost more than I could bear. I was not sorry I had wronged her. I was glad, glad for the moment of happiness I had had. I did not care whether or not she suffered. My whole being cried out for Lucretia—again, again—and then those eyes would come with their endless, senseless accusations, those eyes I was beginning to hate with a fiend's unreasoning rage.

There was nothing I could not accomplish. Perhaps, perhaps by mental telepathy I could bring Lucretia back to me, back where she would come always at my call. Other women I found unsatisfying. I wanted Lucretia. Day after day, night after night, I willed that she should come, willed with all the intensity of the mind I was convinced was more than human.

Then one night I returned to my boarding place to find Lucretia at the gate again awaiting me. She had come to answer my call, I thought triumphantly. Miles of space were as naught before my power.

"George," she said, "you have wronged me, and you have wronged another yet unborn. I have come to make you atone."

In derision I laughed and felt no pity. To make me atone! Me the unconquered and unconquerable! Through my laughter I heard Lucretia still speaking.

"I have been here several days, long enough to know the deceptions by which you have climbed the ladder, the wreckage that lies along your path. Others hate you, but I alone know the means you have employed. If in one week you have not begun to make amends, in justice to those you have injured, I will expose you."

Lucretia's eyes were upon me, driving me to frenzy, her innocent, blue eyes that told of the wrong I had done her. What could I do but close them forever? I must act be-

fore it was too late. I must hypnotize Lucretia. I must silence her. Looking at her, for the first time I felt the wall of her resistance.

"Don't try that," she cried. "You cannot do it now."

Lucretia turned and was about to flee when I caught her by the wrist and drew her toward the cemetery. Within the enclosure we were alone. Against her defiance, I could place my months of study and experience. I would succeed. I must. Twisting her hands behind her until she winced with pain, I held my face close to hers.

"Look at me," I commanded. "Look!"

After minutes that for Lucretia must have been fraught with physical agony as my grip tightened, her eyes, flaming with defiance, met mine.

"You cannot do it," she said over and over, first with emphasis, then more and more faintly. Finally the words died on her lips, and again Lucretia was in my power. Soft southern breezes blew through the magnolias, soothing my senses with the fragrance of roses and wild honeysuckle. Again I was alone with Lucretia. Mine, mine, was this Lucretia whose body I loved, this Lucretia whose eyes fascinated and terrified me. Once again I crushed her to me. Once again I knew the joy of possessing her. Foul fiend that I was, once again I defiled her. Then in very madness I kissed for the last time her lips, her eyelids, her cheeks, her neck. I could not possess her again. I must destroy her. In the name of sanity, what else was I to do? From the churchyard I led her toward the river. It was dark, and I passed no one I recognized. When we reached the iron rail of the battery, I looked into the waters below. For a moment I shuddered, but only for a moment. What else was I to do, in heaven's name, what else?

"When I have been gone ten minutes," I said, "jump over the rail. Now say this after me: 'I am going to jump.' Say it again and again."

Lucretia repeated the words in a slow monotone. "I am going to jump. I am going to jump."

As I walked rapidly home, the sound of those words followed me like a dirge, the last words I shall ever hear from the living lips of Lucretia: "I am going to jump. I am going to jump." Tonight, how those words scream within my cell, how they reverberate down the echoing prison halls! My words on the lips of Lucretia, my words—Lucretia's death knell and my own! Tonight I would gladly give all my worldly success for the chance to call them back.

SOME days later Lucretia's body was found, and, without identification, it was buried. I was safe, safe! Instead of remorse, I felt complete satisfaction. I was not merely clever. I was invincible. My hypnotic power rendered men my helpless prey. Indeed, there seemed no height of human achievement I could not scale. In the city no one knew I was a hypnotist. The town of my youth where I had made on the night of Franz Larue's visit my public demonstration of power did not know of my pursuance of the study. Besides, the town was remote and isolated. Safe, safe! In my very exultation of spirit I went my iniquitous way.

But at night alone in my room the eyes of Lucretia would come to haunt me. Sometimes when I sat bending over my desk I would feel them above me. At length everywhere the eyes of Lucretia! Increasingly their ghastly presence marred my happiness. Now I knew that Lucretia's eyes were not mortal, but celestial—the eyes of an angel,

not of a woman. I feared, I feared, but through my fear came the assurance that I, the invincible, could conquer the spell they cast about me.

One month to the day after the drowning of Lucretia I came home from my office at the accustomed time. The day had held a new victory in the form of a property transfer that brought many thousands into the coffers of our company. Favorite of the gods I was, a superman indeed. Passing the old cemetery, I entered. It was pleasant to return to the spot where had been enacted two crucial scenes in my career. Here had stood Lucretia. Here I had stood. How well I remembered the night I had betrayed her! Without remorse I lived again with a return of the moment's ecstasy the touch of her body, the cling of her lips to mine, the fragrance of her shoulders, as I buried my face in their velvet curves. Demon that I had become, I was glad that I had had those moments of love's consummation, glad that the victim of my base passion had gone whence she could not return to taunt me.

As I stood thus engaged in pleasant retrospect, suddenly I knew that Lucretia's eyes were upon me. Then there came to my ears, as though wafted on the wings of the night, a memorable voice. Was madness assailing me? It was Lucretia speaking those futile words with which she had fought my unconquerable power.

"You cannot do it. You cannot do it," the voice repeated over and over, and, instead of growing weaker, the tones gained each time in strength and resonance. As the monotonous repetition continued, I stood horrified. Suddenly I was aware not only of a voice but also of a presence. Lucretia was with me, bending above me, closer, closer. Infernal horrors! The spirit of Lucretia was accomplishing that in which the living woman had failed.

Lessons I had helped her learn she was using from the spirit world to entrap me, to enslave me. I was being hypnotized here on the spot where twice I had hypnotized Lucretia. There were, however, no hands to hold me in their iron grip. From the churchyard I fled to my room, locked the door and remained all night in an agony of fear. The next day, instead of going to my office, I went to the country, dreading the return of darkness, haunted by forebodings horrible, torturing. Before dusk I returned to my room, having approached the house from the side that did not lead by the cemetery. In my room, however, as I sat beneath the glare of lights, there came to me no sense of safety. I do not know just what time it was that I heard again the dirgelike voice of Lucretia.

"You cannot do it. You cannot do it," came the ghastly chant, and I felt in the room a pervading presence, a force against which I battled in vain. "Confess, confess!" I heard in terror. "Repeat these words, 'I murdered . . .!'"

With a gigantic effort, I threw open the door, sped down the steps and out into the night. Like a madman I ran through the streets of the city, disdaining public conveyances. Almost swooning from exhaustion, I reached at last my office building, and, fearing to encounter the operator of the lift, climbed the eight flights of stairs that led to the suite occupied by our firm. Not for a moment during that wild rush for safety had I not been aware of the tenacious presence of Lucretia. Her power was increasing, increasing. Despite my confused mental state, I seemed to know that my only hope lay in reaching the office before my will completely succumbed to the force sending its tentacles from beyond to destroy me. With clammy,

trembling fingers, I fitted my key into the lock. Then, banging the door behind me, I locked it from within and threw the inner key out of the window.

For the present at least, the spirit of Lucretia was powerless to make me confess my deed to others. It was not likely that at this hour knocking or calling from the great height at which I had placed myself would attract either passers-by or the operator who snoozed in his lift. This the spirit seemed to know, for, though in a moment I must have been completely in its power, I remained all night in the office, evidently quiescent. When I awoke from the trance, the first I had ever experienced, I lay huddled on the floor, stiff and miserable, my heart pounding, my nerves jangling. What happened during the unconscious hours I do not know, though, like a horrible nightmare, I seemed to remember rehearsing again and again the details of the crimes I had committed. Waves of anguish swept over me as I realized how helpless I, the invincible, the superman, had become. The spirit that had conquered my will would come again, and ultimately there would be revealed to the world all the baseness I had kept behind the portals of my consciousness.

"O, GOD!" I tried to pray, but the words choked me. What right had the murderer of Lucretia to ask to be spared the fury of her vengeance? At the lavatory I bathed my eyes, and when the first clerk opened the door of the office, I descended, this time by way of the lift. In the alley that separated our office building from another, I found the key I had thrown out of the window. All day I walked the streets, trying to clear my mind for the ordeal of the night. Twice now the spirit had returned, each time at precisely the

hour that Lucretia was drowned. Perhaps at no other hour could the return be effected. Working on this theory, I snatched an early supper somewhere and re-entered the office just before the last employee was leaving for the night.

Once more I locked the door on the inside and threw the key out of the window. Oh, the unspeakable horrors of that night! Again came the spirit of Lucretia, filling the room with a presence firm, effectual, but, like Lucretia, ever gentle.

"Ah, George," said the voice of the woman I had loved and murdered, "if it were not for those you are wronging, I would spare you, but because of them you must confess. Confess it all, confess it all!"

As my reeling senses sank me into oblivion, I heard through the mist that enveloped me the soothing chant, terrible in its portent. Other days, other nights followed — horrible, ghastly, enough to drive me mad, mad! My associates, seeing the waneness of my countenance, were alarmed, and in their solicitude I faced a new danger. Living hourly a thousand deaths, yet I fought for life. At length came a day when Henry Demar would not leave me.

"You are not staying at your boarding house," he said. "Where do you spend the nights?"

"At a hotel nearer the downtown district," I lied.

Demar made himself my shadow. He went to lunch with me, took me to his club for dinner. When I gave some unfinished work as excuse for returning to the office, he accompanied me. He would not leave. The shadows lengthened. Dusk approached, and with it the hour for Lucretia's coming. God, what could I do? I wanted quiet, I said, for my work was difficult, yet Demar remained. I was ill—nerves, fatigue, I

pleaded. I needed solitude, but Demar was adamant. It was dark. In a moment—in a moment I should know that Lucretia had come.

"As you value my friendship, go!" I shrieked. "Go!"

Like a fiend, he smiled and was immovable. In my frenzy I had forgotten the power that once would have saved me. Like a child I sobbed, "Oh, leave me, leave me!"

Then, above my hysteria came the voice of Lucretia.

"The time has come. The time has come," the spirit chanted. "Confess, confess!"

BEFORE my will had made its final surrender, I saw the door open and others of the office force enter. A conspiracy! Lost, lost! Then oblivion.

When I awoke, I found that I had been taken to the police headquarters. The story I am writing now they told me I had given with all its incriminating details. I was glad, glad, for freedom loomed in sight. The trial, the conviction, had no terror for me. But why, God in heaven, why has Lucretia continued to come? Why, why are those eyes ever searching the innermost recesses of my soul? Is there, is there no atonement?

Ah, in the east, the first gray streaks of the morning. Steps in the hall! They are coming to lead me to the death chamber. Come, come quickly, death for which I have waited!

Again the presence of Lucretia—and now at daybreak. Strange it is, very strange. She speaks, and I do not fear her words.

"George, my dear one, you have atoned, and I am waiting for you."

Ah, Lucretia beloved!

The iron door swings open. Executioner, I am ready.