

Not After Midnight

Mr Nightingale, of Hindholm, was the last of a great European family, though from where exactly, no one knew. His departed relatives had left him a vast estate which some in Hopley, the village below Hindholm, said brought him an income of ten thousand a year. Others argued this was but a modest estimate. He had always been a popular subject of conversation in the village, and lately he had become the only subject, particularly among mothers of daughters. For Mr Nightingale's wife, his second, had died, and he was looking for another.

Mr Nightingale was the guest of honour at the Guildlea September ball, and even as the evening waxed late without him, there was a general feeling that nothing could begin until he arrived. Among the expectant guests were Mr and Mrs Rowe and their youngest daughter, Harriet. They were well-liked in Hopley. Mrs Rowe had a cheerful spirit, and Mr Rowe was a fascinating conversationalist; most exhilarating were his stories of the family's time in Paris, and their escape to the country after the Revolution. It was there that Harriet, then just a child, was first struck by the illness that now dominated her adult life.

Harriet watched not the doors but the clock. Her health forbade her to stay after midnight, and with dances likely to be an hour or longer, she had to be judicious. Alas, it was however unlikely that she would be asked to dance at all. For though she was as wise and good-natured as her parents, their efforts to get her married had made no return, and now that she was thirty, there was no hope left.

She did not see Mr Nightingale at first, only the commotion around him, as many lovely girls resplendent in the season's gowns were urged into his eyeline. He bowed and made brief conversations as much as space allowed. Then with a mere wave of his hand the crowd parted for him, a sea of bodies, lace and velvet. It was not until he was before her that Harriet realised she was his target. His smile was broad and bright as the moon.

"Miss Rowe," he said, "Would you do me the honour of accompanying me in this first dance?"

They began with a lively Scotch reel. His steps were so quick he barely seemed to touch the ground. The Guildlea hall was lined with mirrors, and Harriet caught herself dancing in one of them. Her reflection was as plain as she had always known it to be. She could not believe he had truly intended to ask her, and told him so.

"But you are beautiful," he said. "I had thought your name was Miss Rose, so vivid is your complexion."

Mr Nightingale's own features were every thing a lord's should be, at once refined and amiable. He was thin, and pale, but this was compensated by his eyes, dark in colour with a feverish brilliance. When he drew her to him in the dance, she noticed his scent. She could not claim to know the Continental fashions for perfumes, but it struck her as odd that anyone would want to smell so poignantly of rust.

He asked her again for the third dance, but by this time eleven o'clock was approaching, and she needed to return home.

"Are you quite sure?" He smiled again, but nothing could overrule the tension she felt.

"With regret, I am."

"Then I relent," he said, bowing. "Until next time."

A few days later Mr Nightingale visited the Rowes for tea, and invited them to dinner shortly after that. His attention drew more interest from acquaintances than the family had seen in years. Harriet took the opportunity to investigate the fate of the late Mesdames Nightingales.

"Both of them went very sudden," the housekeeper reported, via the Campbells' driver. "Poor gentleman."

"They were both old maids," said Mr Grant, who boasted of a long acquaintance with Hindholm. "It appears he has a preference for them. I must say there is some sense in it. Young girls are far too silly."

Harriet asked the vicar, whom she expected must have encountered the deceased, and his answer was small but illuminating.

"The family have their own crypt, and the funerals were arranged privately. I offered my condolences to Mr Nightingale, but he positively ran from me."

Harriet decided he must preside over her wedding. For, the night before, over a glass of brandy, Mr Nightingale had asked Mr Rowe for Harriet's hand, and Mr Rowe had given it.

"I do not trust him," she insisted to her father. "No one knows what became of his first wives, and have you seen that he avoids the church?"

"My dear Harry," he said, "You cannot stay here forever. Your mother and I would have you loved and cared for."

Mr Rowe had never forgiven himself for what had befallen Harriet in France and all of its consequences, despite her endeavours to show him that she was happy just to be in his company. What had once been a powerful love between them had now faded to memory. It was to this memory that Harriet appealed.

"Papa, why do you put me in danger?"

He took her hand affectionately. "You are *not* in danger."

"How will he take care of me?"

"I have told him that you must have your own room, and that it must be locked to..." he sighed. "To prevent your terrors. There is more than ample space. You cannot do better, my love."

The ceremony took place after sunset, in the drawing room of Hindholm. It was brief, but long enough for Mrs Rowe to be overcome with excitement, forcing Mr Rowe to escort her home earlier than anticipated. Harriet was more bereft than most brides to see them go, but with little time before midnight, she vowed to hold her resolve.

"It would be a great comfort to me," she said, "if I could pay my respects to your late wives."

"Let it wait until to-morrow," he said, "We are just married."

"That is why it must be now," she insisted. "I must honour them."

The crypt was well tended; Harriet saw not a speck of dust on the coffins laid side by side. Those of Mesdames Nightingale were easily identified by their newness, and she placed a carnation from her bouquet on each. The flowers were white for pure love, but the dim light of this place cast them in yellow, the symbol of disappointment. Yet Harriet's griefs were invigorated by a more powerful understanding. She perceived something in the air that could not have been cleansed away: that scent again, of iron.

She had never been treated so well as Mr Nightingale treated her that evening. The dining table was replete with dishes, including several portions of Chateaubriand steak, served red and tender to the taste of both husband and wife. They sampled several fine wines, and though Harriet was cautious with her indulgence, giddy happiness stole over her. For the first time since her childhood, she almost forgot the time.

"I say, your hospitality has greatly restored me," she told her husband. "I do not need my room to-night."

He gave the same broad smile she had seen at the first ball. "I propose we seize the opportunity."

As they climbed the stairs, his hand slipped to her waist.

Though he had shown her much of the estate, the master bedroom was new, and she was shy to look at the bed. The bedclothes were so pure white that their brightness stayed with her when she closed her eyes.

"Please allow me to lock the door," she said.

"My dear -"

She flushed and hesitated. He smiled fondly and nodded his consent, and with shaking hands she locked the door.

His fingers were cold against the thin fabric of her dress, but quick, and deft. Only sparingly could she contain herself in the moment; her head was full of the tragic memory of his wives, but her heart strained for the fulfilment of the next seconds. All her life before this had been one long night of anticipation.

"My dear," Mr Nightingale repeated. She felt the heat of his breath on her skin. A sharp point nudged against her neck. Her blood surged with such passion she reached out to grasp the sheets.

Every muscle in her body tensed. The hairs on her arms bristled under the sleeves of her gown. Mr Nightingale drew back, a brutal horror dawning on his face. He had felt her pulse. It was not fear that quickened it, but hunger.

"Werewolf!"

From downstairs came the soft chimes of midnight. Mr Nightingale rushed to the door. Harriet smiled and threw the key aside. She placed a gentle hand on her husband's forearm, as her nails lengthened into claws.

