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A portrait of Lucy Deane

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A PORTRAIT OF LUCY DEANE

By Barbara Hardy

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Night Music

The young woman lifted her hands from the keys, and swivelled on her piano-stool to smile at the large bald-headed man comfortable in a crimson armchair.

'Well, sir, was that to your liking?'

'I seem to remember the piece, my dear, but not the composer. Is it something you haven't played for a long time? By one o' your Germans? You know I never was musical, though I played the flute when I was a young man. Trade opened my eyes and sharpened my wits but I didn't have your expensive schooling.'

'No, papa, not one of my Germans but an Englishman, who lived in the seventeenth century. Henry Purcell. It *is* something I haven't played for a long time. I'm pleased you remember. And flattered you stayed awake. I'll make a music-listener of you yet.'

'Lucy, you learned puss, playing your old music has brought back your old laugh and that is the sweetest music to my old ears. You have put off the dismal look with the black dresses.'

'Yes, papa, it was time to shed mourning. Mourning garments.'

She left the grand piano to kneel on a footstool by her father.

'Bless me, child, I remember you sitting on that stool with the purple pansies and trying to open this silver box, when you could scarcely talk. It seems like yesterday. You used to make faces when I took my snuff.'

'I still do. I always detested the smell, and the dirty bits on your red whiskers.'

'Yes, they were red.'

'I remember. I remember stroking this prickly velvet on your chair – I'm still not sure if I like or dislike it. But Papa, please to take your second glass of port wine, and tell me why you're fretting instead of having your nap. I know it's not Purcell keeping you awake. I can always tell when there's something on your mind, you know.'

He put out a hand to touch her glossy light-brown ringlets.

'Yes, I know. So – since you can read minds, I don't need to tell you my news.'

'It is Stephen.'

'Yes. He is back from Italy and today he came into the bank to speak to me. But his father had prepared me.'

'And now you are preparing me.'

She got up to sit on the footstool. He turned her averted face towards him and gently pinched her chin.

'Lucy, you don't need me to tell you. He wants to see you.'

'And you don't need to tell me why. Yes, papa, I will see him. I'm perfectly willing to see him. But it won't make any difference. All that is over. There are some things you cannot go back to.'

'Lucy, my dear, all I want in this life is your happiness. But I am surprised you are so unforgiving.'

She rose and walked down the long drawing-room to the window and drew back the

curtain, facing her image in the lamplit room, behind it the objects she had turned her back on, chairs, sofa, tables, carpet, all gleaming reflections. Outside were the garden, the boathouse and the river, all in darkness. After a few minutes she let the curtain fall, went back to the piano-stool, and sat still, looking at her father.

'Dearest papa, it has nothing to do with forgiveness. I am not unforgiving. I forgave him long ago. I forgave him even before the flood. It is true that I thought then we might be together again one day. A poor silly dream – a dream that cannot come true, but not because I can't forgive. If Maggie had not been drowned it might have been different – she would have survived the scandal, recovered from her feeling for him, left St Oggs, found work ....

'Work! What work could the wench ha' done? No, she would be bound to ha' married someone or other.'

'She would never have married Stephen, because of me and Philip, and she would never have married Philip, because of Stephen. No, I don't think she would have married. And you know women who don't marry can only teach, nurse or write, papa. She'd tried teaching and disliked it. I don't know. She was a great story-teller as a child. I loved her stories, about the books she read, about what we would do when we grew up, about the earwigs and ladybirds. She made a story out of everything. I can't. I can't imagine the life she might have led. But I feel sure of one thing – that she would have outgrown Stephen, grown away from her feeling for him. She had left him, don't you see? And I suppose after a while he might have turned back to me, as he has done now, and I might have accepted him – I might even have felt grateful to him for coming back. But Maggie was drowned. And everything was changed.'

Mr Deane gave his snuffbox a sharp tap. 'What do you mean by saying she would have outgrown him? Stephen Guest is a man of ideas, a great reader, a clever speaker.'

'It was Philip who put that into my mind. He once said Stephen was too shallow to understand Maggie – something like that – and I was angry with him for criticizing Stephen, whom I thought so brilliant, so superior to me. But Philip's words went on echoing in my mind. I have come to feel that Stephen is not superior to me. I have come to think I too would have outgrown him – if that is the word. Perhaps I already have. It is difficult to say just what I mean, but I no longer look up to him. For my part, I am very sorry for him. I wish him well, but I do not want to share my life with him. I am sorry to disappoint you.'

'Yes, Lucy. I am disappointed.'

'Now, papa, please listen. Perhaps one of the hardest things I shall ever have to do is to tell Stephen this. Not my reasons – of course I cannot tell him what I have said to you – but my decision. Please let him know that he can call; of course I will see him. It will do no good – I cannot do as he wishes, but I will not make you my messenger. I must tell him myself. I won't like it but Maggie sent him away and I can too.'

'Well, Lucy, I don't profess to understand all you say about your poor cousin and Stephen – that's going into deep waters, that is – but you've made your feelings about him clear. His father will be disappointed too. He had set his heart on you two marrying, Stephen settling down here and standing for parliament.'

'Ah, papa, we all set our hearts on things we cannot have. Mr Guest will not be disappointed for ever. I'm sure he will have a daughter-in-law one day though I do not think she will be Lucy Deane. Dear papa, it was hard when I knew Stephen loved Maggie but it was not as terrible as the flood, the drownings, the loss – the loss of my dear cousins, the loss of my childhood. It broke my heart. Losing Stephen has not broken my heart. Discovering that

has made me understand myself better.'

'Child, I must accept all you say about your feelings. There's no use arguing about feelings. But I can't help being sad. You were such a happy child. I want you to be happy again.'

'Papa, once there was nothing in my world to make me unhappy, you know. You will think it strange but now I am not only heart-whole, but happy – happier – almost happy – to have told you all this. You see, I always knew he would come back and ask me and I dreaded it. Now it is come. It is over. Poor Stephen, he is predictable. In a way Maggie never was. Or Tom.'

'Now I have wondered, Lucy. Did that poor lad have a liking for you?'

'Yes, papa, I'm afraid he did, though he never said anything about it. He was very proud. I was sorry for Tom. In a way I never was for Maggie. She never found life easy, even as a little girl, and her death was an appalling waste but there was much more in her life than in Tom's. He had all that schooling in Latin and history and Euclid – so dull and meaningless to him – but she had music ... books ... Scott and Shakespeare ... her friendship with Philip – even her sense of duty. I think her religion meant a lot to her though she never talked about it to me. No, Tom never said anything about being fond of me but I think he was. When I lost Lolo he brought my poor darling Minny, and I remember how pleased he looked when I picked him up and said he was just what I wanted.'

'Lucy, I am a lucky man. I used to be sorry I didn't have a son, but I am luckier than Guest or Wakem. Now don't frown, my dear. You are too young for care-lines. Your life is before you. You have your Brussels trip to look forward to. I shall miss you but perhaps it is a good thing that you are going away just now. And Lucy, I hope I'll live to see you a happy woman some day.'

'Some day, yes, perhaps. I was frowning at the thought of Tom – how little he had in his short life. But he had the satisfaction of his work – as you know – paying off his father's creditors, and then getting the Mill back. Some day... I have learnt not to look very far ahead. But I want to say one more thing. I have thoughts – oh, notions, vague and unformed, you know – of being wiser and more active than I have been or might have been. More like Maggie. Or what she might have been. Look papa, I'm smiling, so do smile back or I'll hide your snuffbox as I used to when I was little, and ask Dr Matthew to forbid port-wine. I am going to help Ellen to start her school, but I'm not going into a nunnery, you know.'

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In a Painting-Room

'It's Lucy, Philip. Good morning! What a bright light from that glassed roof!'

'Yes, Father had it put in. What a pleasure to see you! Did you come alone?'

'Of course not. Papa happened to say at breakfast that he was calling on Mr Wakem, and I took advantage of an escort. Observing the proprieties. Otherwise, I should have sent to ask you to come to me. I wanted to see you. Your father said I should just come up. They need to talk about business so there is no hurry, as long as you can spare the time.'

'Of course I can. Welcome to my painting-room – you have never been here before. Thank you for climbing all the stairs. Please forgive me if I go on painting ... just for a few minutes. You can choose between my painting-stool and the visitor's armchair.'

He went on talking as he added strokes to the canvas before him. 'Not that I have visitors,

except for Father, and he did not come often until he was house-bound by this illness. He complains about the stairs but he comes for his sittings.'

'May I look, please?'

'Yes. It is nearly finished.'

The deep eyes in the heavy lined face looked at her with assurance but the smile on the full red lips made her turn to the painter.

'I never realized before that you look alike. It is not so much the features as that smile, amused but wry, a little melancholy. Is he pleased with his likeness?'

'He is. He says the smile in the portrait is one that only I see. We've grown closer since his illness. Well, it goes back earlier ... since I told him I loved Maggie. That was not long before the flood. I can't talk about it; it aroused my hopes. In spite of his hatred of Tulliver, I had brought father round to the idea of my loving her, even marrying her, and I showed him her portrait. Then he talked to her once, at the bazaar.'

'I didn't know you had ever painted her.'

'She never sat to me for her portrait, of course. It was done from memory. Let me bring it into the light.'

'Ah, that dear old limp merino gown. And the golden light on her face and the folds of the dress. And that dark Scotch fir behind her. Philip, it is beautiful.'

'She was beautiful.'

'Yes, she was, but that is not what I mean. Your painting is beautiful. It has something new about it. I only saw some small water-colours you once gave to the church bazaar. They were charming, but these are different. Strange. You have seen a sadness, perhaps a softness – in your father. And Maggie – you have caught the wildness in her. Her mother was always saying she was half-wild. What is she looking at? Did you know she ran away to the gypsies when she was a little girl?'

'Yes, she told me the story one afternoon in the Red Deeps, talking about Scott and Meg Merrilees. I remember she laughed a little sadly, as she talked about the troubles and tantrums of her childhood days. She said she was a queer little girl. Wildness. I suppose I know what you mean. I never thought of it like that. I don't know what she is looking at, but I remembered that look when I painted her face. I had asked her to stand still for a moment, by the tree. She is looking rapt ... she is looking past me.'

'I remember her once talking about Purcell's wild passion and fancy. I see a wildness in that portrait – in her eyes, her faraway look. Don't you see it? You painted it!'

'I don't know. I know she tried to repress her imagination, her poetry. I didn't think of it as wildness.' He laughed, and the laugh was not a happy one, 'Perhaps I didn't want to. I could not accept her feeling for Stephen, and I could not accept that something was lacking in her affection for me. I felt her capacity for poetry – for joy. I feared the way she stifled her instincts, or tried to stifle them. Her austere religion was no good to her. And when those feelings – that wild passion, perhaps – was roused, it was roused by him.'

'Philip, is it painful for you to talk about her?'

'No, indeed, it is almost a pleasure. You are the only one I can talk to about her, Lucy. Father never knew her – he only talked to her a few minutes. Not long before the flood. But I am an insensitive brute. It must be painful for you.'

'No, it's not. And you are the only one *I* can talk to about her. Except her Aunt Gritty – Mrs Moss, whom I visit now and then. One of her children – Lizzy – reminds me of Maggie. Bright

and dark, though smaller and slighter than Maggie. And not so dreamy. But, Philip, now I want to talk to you about myself, and about my plans. You and I have not met for such a long time. The old days of our glees – our trios and duets – seem like another life. As they were. Life was so easy.'

A flush came over Philip's pale face. 'You are come to tell me you are going to marry Stephen.'

'No indeed, Philip. You are quite wrong. I am not going to marry Stephen.'

'I am glad – very glad – you are not going to marry him, Lucy.'

The morning light streamed down on the pale stooped man holding his brush, the fair woman looking at him, and the dark-haired dead woman on the easel.

'Glad? Ah, he was fond of you but you never really liked him, Philip. I remember when we talked once, after the flood. You said he wasn't worthy of Maggie.'

'He was not. I wrote to tell her so. She had been blind – you might say wild – with passion. I was not blind, though wild with jealousy. Liked him? I liked him once, but I loved Maggie. I think it was not only jealousy. I thought and think he was unworthy of her. I cannot like him.'

'Perhaps that's why you are relieved I am not going to marry him.'

Philip flushed again. 'You mean I don't want him to be happy. I haven't thought about that. No, I am no longer bitter, but I don't want him here, in this town, in my eye. I am surprised, Lucy. You loved him. You broke down when they went off together.'

'But I recovered – recovered from the shock and loss and jealousy. Philip, I think you are surprised because you think I am a suitable wife for Stephen – decorative, conventional, adoring, a sweet little thing. Are you not? I may be little but I am not as sweet as I used to be. You are right about me as I was once. After the flood, when you told me how much you loved Maggie, you said Stephen was fortunate in his good looks and charm but selfish and unimaginative, and I was hurt. I loved him. I told myself it was your pain and jealousy speaking, but the words cut deep into me, and when I looked back – not just at Stephen but at myself – I began to see that his love for me was shallow – and so was my love for him. Life was a dream. Singing and boating and riding and dancing and dressing, and being the belle of St Oggs – oh, I enjoyed all that but I am more like Maggie than you think. Just before the flood I went to see her – without telling Father – to say I didn't believe the wicked gossip – I knew she never wanted to betray and hurt me, and I was not going to die of a broken heart. I said I was weak, because I couldn't stop loving Stephen, and she had the strength to send him away. But I was wrong. I did stop loving him. You'll think it singular – no, perhaps you won't – but I thought the less of him for coming back and asking me to marry him.'

'Because you thought he was insincere?'

'Because I thought he was sincere.'

'Ah, I see. Yes, I see you have changed, Lucy. But if he was sincere, he must have been hurt.'

'Perhaps he was. But don't you see, he recovered from loving Maggie – recovered enough to want to marry me – and he can recover from this setback, and find someone else.'

'You're right. He will tell his bride the tragic story of his first love and bring her to put sweet spring-flowers on Maggie and Tom's grave.'

'Don't be harsh, Philip. It could never be like that. I am critical of Stephen but I believe there was something tragic for him in loving Maggie and losing her, so terribly. After our meeting last week, he wrote to say he understood my decision. He saw that I had changed, he

said, and he respected the change, but he was not taking my answer as final. Not because he was vain or stupidly hopeful, but because he believed we cannot predict our futures. He had changed too, he said, more than I knew. Perhaps that is true. I don't know. And I didn't mean to tell you all this.'

She got up. 'Philip, I came to say goodbye. I am going away, to Brussels, where an old friend of mine lives – she was at school with me and Maggie, before Uncle Tulliver lost the lawsuit. Ellen's father died and left her a little money and she has started a school there: I am going to teach the little ones English and music, and try to be a useful woman. I haven't any experience but I like the Sunday school, and I've always liked looking after little animals! I am cautious and only planning a short stay. Papa isn't getting any younger, but Miss Mills – you know she came to keep house after Aunt Tulliver died – will take good care of him. I'll come home for Christmas. In the New Year I may take Lizzy Moss back with me if there is an opening for her to help and learn. There's nothing but drudgery for her at home.'

'I feel even more surprised, Lucy, but I think I'll be glad for you as well as for myself when I have thought more about it. Thank you for telling me. Perhaps you will be a good friend and write to me.'

'I will. And in the summer I'll come to see the portrait of your father in the Academy.'

'Who knows, perhaps you will. You see, I can look forward too. I find myself a little less inclined to burn my canvasses. You know, some day I should like to paint you, Lucy.'

'Really? "A Portrait of Lucy Deane?" Perhaps. When I may have grown a little wiser. With time-lines on my face. Thought-lines too, I hope. Perhaps my face will have become more interesting.'

'It is interesting now.'

'I am more interesting to myself than I was once. I was always busying myself with plans for other people – Maggie, you, Stephen, Aunty – without knowing enough about them – or about myself. Fancying futures for other people was easier than thinking about life, which I took for granted. I don't know myself much better now, but I have begun to think more – about myself, Stephen, my father – today, you and your father – and in new ways. About what we are and what makes us what we are. But I don't feel familiar enough with myself, to be confident about the future. All I know is that anything can happen except what you think will happen. Do you know what I mean? I'm not sure I do myself!'

'I think perhaps I do.'

'So goodbye, Philip, for a while.' Lucy looked up at the sky-light. 'From my window at home I see the river, while here you see sky – its light pouring down on your painting. No, please don't come down all those stairs. Go back to the easel while the light lasts. I can manage on my own.'