



# The Boy

Natalia Lewis

## **Thursday 16th November, 11.34 p.m.**

I saw the figure in the window again last night.

Afterwards, I could not sleep. For several hours I sat at my own window looking out; all the lights were on in the church and I thought someone might come out, but no one did. At somewhere around 2 o'clock I fell asleep. It was 2 o'clock, I think, for I remember hearing the bells.

It is strange that there should be a figure at the window. I thought, and I'm sure I'm right, that the west wing had all been shut up. Emily has told me twice now my head is full of nonsense. Perhaps I should believe her.

We have been here only a week and I have seen the figure three times.

It is probably only one of the servants. I must ask them tomorrow.

It is just after half past eleven now, and quite dark outside. It must be a new moon, for there is almost no light at all.

## **1.20 a.m.**

I have just woken again; I do not know why or what caused me to start, but as I lay trying once again to sleep, I saw a light, moving in the west wing! Let me try and commit what passed to paper. Already I am beginning to doubt what I saw!

So –

I awoke. For a moment I was frozen and wished nothing more than to light my candle. I gathered myself and slipped over to the window. My every nerve stood on end, and I twisted more than once to make certain no intruder stood behind me, inside my own room.

A light in the west wing! It appeared in the same window as the figure, of that I am certain. It moved about a little, as if exploring the room, and then disappeared. Perhaps I dozed for a moment, for I was watching intently and then it was gone. It moved from one window and started towards the south. It should have appeared in the next window – but here perhaps I rested my eyes. I am much assured by the light of my own candle now to write by. I must blow it out soon, however, as Uncle Charles is somewhat of a miser.

## **Friday 17th, 11 a.m.**

A strange morning. Upon rising I could not shake the memory of the light from my mind and broached the matter immediately with Betty over breakfast. As I understand she was the kitchen maid originally, but now seems to do all sorts of things all over the house.

“Betty,” I asked. “Is there any sort of work taking place in the west wing at present?”

I watched closely for any alteration in her demeanour; and I was not disappointed. Her pale cheeks were coloured pink, and her dark eyes would not meet mine.

“Well, Betty?” I encouraged her.

The girl faltered slightly. I think she may have felt it was not her place to answer.

“I’m sure it’s only something routine, you see, but as you know my sister and I have only arrived very recently. The systems and schedules of the household are still a mystery.”

This little perambulation seemed to ease her somewhat; at least it unbent the tiny furrow in her brow. She shook her head.

“There’s no work taking place in the west wing, Sir.”

“Are you sure? I could have sworn I saw a light last night.”

She still would not meet my eye, but left me with this strange half-admittance:

“The west wing is all shut up – leastways, that is what’s told.”

!

What can she mean? I would have questioned her further; but the arrival of Emily put paid to my investigation. Then my trunk finally arrived from London and I was immediately distracted, because the contents had very clearly been disturbed. I have spent the better part of an hour going through it and I’m sure something is missing. Uncle Charles says he will question the driver and see if he or the stable boy can shed any light. Privately I do not hold out much hope; the driver is a drunk and the stable boy a loutish youth from the village.

Thank goodness my clothes are returned to me at least. I have been wearing borrowed robes since Thursday last. Now I will be able to dress properly for dinner. I shall ask Betty to draw me a bath.

### **6.12 p.m.**

Betty seems intent on avoiding me; at least, she will not be in the same room as me alone. My bath is ready, a fire roars in the grate, and my clothes have all been hung. The girl, however, has vanished.

### **6.18 p.m.**

It is not that I was disappointed not to see her. I merely wished to question her further.

### **10.18 p.m.**

I overindulged; I am a little dizzy. However, am in a far better mood now than that which I descended to dinner in.

I wore the blue damask, which suits me well no matter my mood. I did consider checking my ear with the pearl Johnathan gave me Christmas last but fear it would be too garish for Uncle Charles. We are here at his invitation, after all. In fact, Uncle C. seemed quite taken

by the change in my appearance. His gaze was preoccupied with me, and he pressed me continually for conversation. By the time Betty brought in the first course my mood had improved greatly; this I think due to the combined efforts of Uncle C. and the wine, which I indulged in quite immoderately. I did not deign to glance in Betty's direction.

**10.30 p.m.**

No sign of the figure tonight, or the light. It is brighter outside, and the silver of the moon on the lawn has turned it almost to a lake. It shivers.

**10.37 p.m.**

Uncle C. really did seem taken with the blue damask. He did not even challenge me when I took a fourth glass of wine.

**11 p.m.**

Cannot sleep. Dizzy. Longing for my pipe, though I cannot chance leaning out a window here –

**11.10 p.m.**

I am writing as fast as my hand will allow! I was stood just now by the window, in the hopes the fresh air would cool my head a little, when I saw Betty crossing to the west wing with a lantern! Despite my dizziness I am quite sure it was her. She entered and disappeared; I am going to follow her.

**1.30 a.m.**

I am full of the vigour of adventure! Now I understand what the greats wrote of when their heroes encountered the peril of war! My heart is racing; I may be sick.

**1.39 a.m.**

I have had some water; I feel calm enough to sit and write. Adrenaline courses through me still, but I must direct it!

I crossed the courtyard in pursuit of Betty. My attempt was almost frustrated by the dizzying layout of the house; I went wrong several times in the dark. Once outside my heart leapt; the night air nipped at my heels and spurred me across the courtyard to the west wing. Here I thought I might be stopped, but the door was unbolted. I did not bring my lantern, as I wished to pass unseen, and upon entering the wing I found myself in complete darkness.

I picked a direction and stepped on into the dark.

My every nerve stood on edge. The knowledge that I might encounter, in the next moment, upon some thing unseen did not escape me. If a mouse had scurried past behind me, I should have known it, my every sense amplified.

Soon a narrow beam of amber light presented itself at the end of the passage. I crept toward it, aware that the object of my pursuit must be close at hand. Wrestling to hold my curiosity in check, I moved silently to the door and pressed my eye to the keyhole.

A fire burned low in the grate. Betty's lantern sat close by, extinguished – of course, it was I who had indicated to her the light could be seen!

I waited impatiently for my eyes to adjust. A figure shifted in the bed, and Betty leant over them, something held in her hands. They were silhouetted against the slumbering coals and I could not make out the item, nor the figure – in frustration I tried the cracks at the side of the door; to no avail. When I resumed my post at the keyhole, Betty was gone – for a moment I was quite panicked, and on the verge of leaping back – but then she hurried back into view, murmuring something urgent to the bed's occupant. In the silence their voices carried clearly; this is what they said:

"I am instructed to speak with you, sir."

"Are you only instructed, Betty? I am so lonely."

Here there was a silence, and when Betty spoke next it was faltering – afraid.

"I am instructed to remind you not to stand too close by the windows, sir. Even at night."

"Even at night? Take pity on me, Betty. I am confined here all hours; why may I not even gaze upon the world at night?"

Betty did not answer; her hand was gripped firmly now on the lantern, as if she desired nothing more than immediately to take her leave.

"There has been some disturbance caused, sir. The master's ward has been asking questions."

"Has he?" Here I noticed a definite note of curiosity in the second voice; I am certain of it, for at the mention of myself I hung on their every word. How did he know it was I she referred to, and not my sister? Betty, too, must have noted this. When next she spoke, her words were pointed.

"Yes, sir. Have you seen him?"

"On the night he arrived. I was here, as I am always, and from my window I saw him pass from his carriage."

Betty shifted slightly; her desire to flee could not have been more evident. I braced myself to run – then the figure in the bed spoke again.

"He is quite striking, is he not?"

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Betty remained silent. This seemed to entertain the figure; his voice was quietly amused.

"Do you disagree?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

Silence fell; I waited impatiently for someone to speak. It was the figure who acquiesced; he sounded tired now.

"Alright, Betty. Don't look so frightened."

Betty's lantern flared.

I dared not stay. I fled back down the passage, through the door and over the courtyard. I did not look back over my shoulder until I reached this room, and turned, finally, to bar the door behind me. My heart is racing again just at the account of it.

A part of the mystery is solved. Uncle Charles is keeping a guest in the west wing; a secret guest, who may not be known even to Emily and myself. I cannot fathom why. Perhaps he is not fit for society; he seemed quite frail and unwell. Betty appeared to be feeding him. Maybe he is confined to bed, and his seclusion is in fact a kindness. I do not know.

There is one more thing I must write down before I sleep. The figure spoke with a voice so pure and beautiful it moved me almost to tears. As I knelt in the shadows at the keyhole, it is a wonder I did not spring through the door.

So why did Betty seem so frightened?

### **Saturday 18th, 11.03 a.m.**

Uncle C.'s garrulous mood continues. He is insisting on walking with me into the village; usually I would make some excuse but perhaps this is an Opportunity.

### **3 p.m.**

We passed the walk to the village in good conversation. Thankfully the rain held off; Uncle Charles' situation is not a pleasant one. Moorland lies to both the east and the west, and great banks of heather snap and whisper in the wind.

I wore the blue damask again, in the hopes of charming Uncle C, but he seemed on this occasion not to note it. I tried to steer the conversation to the occupant of the west wing, but could not think how to broach it without asking directly.

Uncle C. talked at length about the land, his youth, his travels. He seems much more comfortable with me now than when I first arrived; I think, perhaps, he is starting to think of me as the son he never had. I put this to him, and he fell silent for a time. Perhaps it was presumptuous of me.

We then passed a tedious hour with the curate. Uncle C. not as talkative on return home. Dinner soon. I wonder if the figure will heed Betty's warning tonight.

### **11 p.m.**

Nothing. I am going to bed.

### **Sunday 19th, 7 p.m.**

Today I walked beneath his window.

I did not wish to draw Uncle Charles' attention so I could not linger. I dared, as I passed, a glance up toward His room, and noted dust on the windowpane, cracks, even in the glass.

A forlorn climbing rose clings to the brick; in places it is torn and ruined. I note all this as a kind of evidence against Uncle Charles – the wing is clearly left to ruin. It would not strike anyone as a comfortable home for a weary invalid.

I was right not to linger. As I turned my steps back towards the house proper, I saw Uncle C., half-hidden in the library window, watching me.

### **Midnight**

Perhaps he is too unwell to reach the window.

### **1 a.m.**

I must sleep, but I cannot shake this curious feeling. Night is dark; clouds obscure the moon. My breath is short. My fingers tremble.

### **3.03 a.m.**

There is something in the room.

### **3.17 a.m.**

It is at the foot of the bed.

### **Sunday 19th, 8 a.m.**

I cannot lift myself off my pillows.

### **9.02 a.m.**

Uncle C. says I have a fever. It is true that I feel strange. When Betty took my temperature, she would not meet my eye. Uncle. C. hovered in the doorway. He would not come to me.

Now I am alone.

### **10.31 a.m.**

I have tried desperately to remember what happened.

### **1.13 p.m.**

Shocking news from an unlikely source! Emily sat with me this afternoon. I would rather sit alone than suffer her presence, and was doing my best to feign sleep, but she kept tutting and sighing until I had no choice but ask what the matter was. She widened her eyes at me owlishly before asking if I thought it strange Uncle. C. had not been to see me. I replied in the negative; he is a busy man. At this provocation her nostrils flared and she told me of Uncle Charles' son.

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I cannot believe it. At her words my heart quickened in my chest; could this be the man, confined like a prisoner in the west wing? But no. Tragically, Uncle C's son died, some twenty years ago. He was only my age. I copy the story here, as Emily delivered it.

In Uncle C's youth, he fell in love with a beautiful German woman. They were married, and celebrated the birth of their son some six months later. This point seemed important to Emily; she widened her eyes at me owlishly. Strange girl.

The boy, Albert, was as sweet as a cherub, though unfortunately sickly, and cared for by a carousel of doctors. His ailments only increased, and he entered his twenty-fourth birthday very ill. At this juncture his parents sent him to the care of a German monastery, in the hopes a change of circumstance should improve him. Alas, the opposite proved true, and the boy died there.

I cannot believe I did not know this. Emily blinked at me. The sight of me unwell, she said, would evoke too many unpleasant memories for Uncle C. I was on the brink of retorting that, to the contrary, Uncle C. has apparently taken a permanent invalid into his care. It would have been delightful to correct her – but then I bit my tongue. Why should I, too, not have secrets? No one ever tells me anything.

### **6.34 p.m.**

It is all too mysterious. Who is the figure in the west wing, if not Uncle C's secret son? I have realised though that they cannot be the same man; even if not for his untimely death, their ages are quite incongruent. Uncle C's son would be a man of middle age; the figure reclining in the shadows had the voice of a much younger man.

### **6.45 p.m.**

That beautiful voice! It came to me, last night, in the midst of my fever. I can recall, with much concentration, only glimpses of what passed. The dreadful feeling of a presence in my room. The pricking of fever coming on. A strange sensation, as of liquid fire, hot and wet, at my throat. And that voice.

In my fever, I must have imagined it, as in a dream.

I hope I dream of it again tonight.

### **9 p.m.**

Sleep beckons; I am blowing out my candle.

### **1.02 a.m.**

My hand shakes. Is this a dream? I cannot tell –



### **5.47 a.m.**

I am full of bliss. I feel dizzy with it; I am elated. The sun rises over the west wing and throws queer, soft beams over the courtyard. The statues! The damp roses! A cornucopia of beauty. My lips are tingling.

### **Tuesday 21st, 6 a.m.**

His name is Bertie. And he is Uncle Charles' son – I am sure of it!

He alighted beside me. I remember it, this time. He never meant to frighten me, he said. The deep, trembling beauty of his voice moved me once more; I flung my arms about him and held him to me. For his part, he seemed taken aback. He has been so long without human contact. But for Betty bringing him sustenance, he has seen no soul since his arrival almost a year ago.

I will admit I wept, for his loneliness and suffering. He called me by name and gave me his, and pressed his mouth to my chest. Dizzy, I surrendered to him absolutely.

There was blood on his shirt when he left me, patterning his ivory throat. I feel hungry, and giddy, and light. Dear God, let it be night once more.

### **Wednesday 22nd, 4 a.m.**

He wept tonight. The sound broke my heart. I must save him, from this confinement, from Uncle C., from the poor ministrations of Betty. He has told me the truth.

As he lay dying in Germany, he was tricked. A monk came to him, or so he thought. Some thing, only guessed at by the better-natured, had penetrated the ranks of the brotherhood there. A wolf in sheep's clothing – where better to hide than in the livery of God's own?

The creature saved him. In a manner most unholy, Bertie was reborn.

For a brief moment, he was imbued with hope. No ailments plagued him; the expense and grief of an invalid life need trouble him no more. All he wanted was to return to his home.

But Uncle Charles became ashamed of his son. Ashamed of that which gave him health! Allowed him life! Uncle C. forbid his return to England and mourned his son as dead.

Bertie remained in Germany nineteen years. Eventually his thoughts returned again to England, and the father who had forsaken him. Pining for the world and the company that had so long been kept from him, he returned here last year.

Alas, only confinement awaited him.

Uncle C. abhors the sight of him. He speaks to him only through the servants. He stops short of killing him and contents himself with keeping him feeble. The physical confinement

does not hold Bertie, but he is too weak to travel far – he did not want to hurt Betty, and as he put to me, where should he go?

He was inspired, he says, by my presence. My strength.

I must save him. He grows a little stronger every night.

**Thursday 23rd, 5.47 a.m.**

He lay beside me until the sun began to rise. I stole a kiss from him as he departed and promised to make good our escape. We are only waiting, now, for his strength to return completely.

I am stronger, now, too. This strange covenant we share runs in my veins like ichor. I no longer need a flickering candle by which to write. Something else guides me. My eyes glitter. I do not sleep.

**Friday 24th, 1 a.m.**

I feel we were always meant to meet this way, by some strange and divine guiding of the strings. I feel invincible at the thought of it. The date is set. Tomorrow.

The courtyard is in darkness. There are no stars, no moon. My heart is at my ribs.

He is here.

Let us go.

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**Natalia Lewis**