

The True Story

Helen always dreamed that she could fly. But it had not turned out that way. The true story was that she served the old woman upstairs. The world has never been kind to those without the money to make their dreams come true. And so it was with Helen. Her situation was unkind and earthbound.

The old woman upstairs had been dying since Helen could remember. She had lain like a wax woman in her sheets since Helen was a child coming with her mother to bring fresh fruit and vegetables to the dying. And now Helen was a woman under her apron and dress, and her pale hair was bound in a bunch behind her head. Still she served the dying. She could feel their death just as she felt her life. And something was wrong.

Each morning, she got up with the sun, lit the fire, let in the red-eyed cat. She made a pot of tea, and, going to the bedroom at the back of the cottage, bent over the old woman whose unseeing eyes were never closed. Each morning she looked over the hollows of the eyes and passed her hands over them. But the lids did not move, and she could not tell whether the old woman breathed.

"Eight o'clock, eight o'clock now," she said to the dying woman.

And at once the eyes smiled. A ragged hand came out from the sheets and stayed there until Helen took it in her padded hand and closed it round the cup. When the cup was empty, Helen filled it, and when the pot was dry, she pulled back the white sheets from the bed. There the old woman was, stretched out in her nightdress; the color of her flesh was as grey as her hair. Helen tidied the sheets and attended to the old woman's wants. Then she took the pot away.

Each morning she made breakfast for the boy who worked in the garden. She went

to the back door, opened it, and saw him in the distance with his spade. "Half past eight, now," she said.

He was an ugly boy, and his eyes were redder than the cat's - two crafty cuts for eyes that were forever spying on the first shadow of her breast. But he was young and strong and filled with animal life. She put his food in front of him. When he stood up, he always said, "Is there anything you want me to do?"

She had never said, "Yes."

The boy went back to dig potatoes out of the garden patch or to count the hen's eggs, and if there were berries to be picked off the garden bushes she joined him before noon. Seeing the red berries pile up in the palm of her hand, she would think of the money under the old woman's mattress.

If there were hens to be killed, she could cut their throats far more cleanly than the boy, who let his knife stay in the wound and wiped the blood on the knife on his sleeves. She caught a hen and killed it, felt its warm blood, and saw it run headless up the path. Then she went in to wash her hands and think of the dying woman's money.

It was in the first weeks of spring that she made up her mind to kill the old woman upstairs. She was twenty years old. There was so much that she wanted. She wanted a man of her own and a black dress for Sundays a hat with a flower. She had no money at all. The old woman was almost there. She needed just a little push.

On the days that the boys took the vegetables and the eggs to market, she gave him sixpence that the old woman gave her, and the money that the boy brought back in his handkerchief she put into the old woman's dying hand. She worked for her food and shelter as the boy worked for his, though she slept in a room upstairs and he slept in a straw bed over the empty sheds.

On a market morning, she walked into the garden so that the plan might be cooler in her head. It was a fine May day with no more than two clouds in the sky, two unshapely hands closing around the head of the sun.

"If I could fly," she thought, "I could fly in at the open window and fix my teeth in her throat." But the cool wind blew her thought away.

She knew that she was no common girl, for she had read books in the winter evenings when the boy was dreaming in the straw and the old woman was alone in the dark. She had read of a god who came down like money, of snakes with the voices of men, and of a man who stood at the top of a hill with a piece of fire.

At the end of the garden where the fence kept out the wild green fields, she came to a mound of earth. There she had buried the dog she had killed for catching and killing the hens. "I could bury her here," said Helen to herself, "by the side of the grave, so that nobody could find her." And she patted her hands and reached the back door of the cottage before the clouds wrapped around the sun.

Inside there was a meal to be prepared for the old woman. There were potatoes to be cut and mashed. With the knife in her hand and the potato skins in her lap, she thought of the murder she was about to do. The knife made the only sound. The wind had dropped down. Her heart was as quiet as though she had wrapped it up. Nothing moved in the cottage. Her hand was dead on her lap. Her mind, alone in the world, was ticking away.

Then, when all things were dead, a cock crew, and she remembered the boy who would soon be back from the market. She had made up her mind to kill before he returned, but the grave must be dug and the hole filled up. Helen felt her hand die again in her lap. And in the middle of death she heard the boy's hand lift the latch. He came into

the kitchen, saw that she was cleaning potatoes, and dropped his handkerchief on the table. Hearing the rattle of money, she looked up at him and smiled. He had never seen her smile before.

Soon she put his meal in front of him, and sat sideways by the fire. As he raised the knife to his mouth, he felt the full glance of her eyes on the sides of his eyes. "Have you taken up her dinner?" he asked. She did not answer. When he had finished, he stood up from the table and asked, "Is there anything you want me to do?" as he had asked a thousand times.

"Yes," said Helen.

She had never said "Yes" to him before. He had never heard a woman speak as she did then. The first shadow of her breast had never been so dark. He stumbled across the room to her and she lifted her hands to her shoulders. "What will you do for me," she said, and loosened the straps of her frock so that it fell about her. She took his hand. He stared at her, then said her name and caught hold of her. She held him close. "What will you do for me?" She let her dress fall. "You will do what I want," she said as his hands dropped on her.

After a minute, she struggled out of his arms and ran softly across the room. With her back to the door that led upstairs, she beckoned him and told him what he was to do. "You help me, and we shall be rich," she said. He smiled and nodded.

She caught his hand and opened the door and led him upstairs. "You stay here quiet," she said.

In the old woman's room, she looked around her as if for the last time. She looked at the cracked jug, the half open window, the bed, and the writing on the wall. "One o'clock now," she said into the old woman's ear, and the blind eye smiled. Helen

put her fingers round the old woman's throat. "One o'clock now," she said and with a sudden movement knocked the old woman's head against the wall. It needed but three little knocks, and the head burst like an egg.

"What have you done?" cried the boy. Helen called for him to come in. He stared at the naked woman who cleaned her hands on the bed and at the blood that made a round red stain on the wall, and screamed out in horror.

"Be quiet," said Helen, but he screamed again at her quiet voice and scurried downstairs.

"So Helen must fly," she said to herself, "fly out of the old woman's room." She opened the window wider and stepped out. "I am flying," she said.

But she was not flying - and this was the true story. All too true.