

The Crimson Weaver

by R. Murray Gilchrist

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CONTENTS

Preface.....	2
Foreword.....	4
"The Crimson Weaver.....	6
Afterword.....	13

PREFACE

by Dana Inglehart

Gilchrist's characteristically atmospheric horror story, "The Crimson Weaver" was originally published in July 1895 in the sixth edition of *The Yellow Book*, the notable literary quarterly. *The Yellow Book* was a publication which followed in the tradition of its Victorian predecessors (the opulent 'gift books' of the mid nineteenth century) in its inclusion of well-known writers and artists which appealed to a highbrow, status-coveting readership.

The genesis of *The Yellow Book* came in 1894 when authors Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley had a conversation which lamented the rejection of their manuscripts by mainstream London publishing houses.¹ The two, in collusion with editor John Lane and publisher Elkin Matthews, decided to publish their own magazine as an outlet for theirs and others' otherwise unpublished works. The volumes were primarily focused on ushering in the new wave of literature and artwork which departed from the Victorian attitudes in favor of the new styles that were en vogue in the 1890's.

The Yellow Book, so-called for the color of its binding, is emblematic of the era in which it was published. Indeed, the 1890's were referred to as the 'yellow nineties' referencing the political, literary, and artistic inclination of the decade which criticized the prudish Victorian era and celebrated French culture; yellow was the representative color of the pre-Victorian regency in England and was also the color used for the bindings of French novels.² A total of thirteen volumes of *The Yellow Book* were published, each of them a collaborative effort to form a style for the modern generation. *The Yellow Book* made particular strides in evolving the genre of short story.³

Beardsley, who was chief illustrator of the quarterly for its first year, was considered risqué for his art which tended toward the grotesque and the erotic. However, despite the progressiveness of *The Yellow Book's* content, it was widely popular and attracted the contributions of highly acclaimed authors such as H.G Wells, W.B. Yeats, Henry James, Charlotte Mew and many more.⁴ *The Yellow Book* prided itself on publishing the works of female and unknown authors and artists.

¹ Mcgrath , Mary Beth, "The Yellow Book," 1991. found at <http://www.victorianweb.org/decadence/yellowbook.html>

²Ibid.

³ "Review of *The Yellow Book: A centenary exhibition*" The Victorian Web, 2000. <http://www.victorianweb.org/decadence/yellowbook2.html>

⁴ "The Yellow Book." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2008. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. (March 26, 2008) <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9002288>>.

Beardsley's run as artistic contributor and editor came to an unfortunate end in 1895 over a mix up involving Oscar Wilde. Wilde, a prominent and popular author who was markedly absent from *The Yellow Book* and openly criticized the publication, was arrested in April 1895 for indecency (homosexuality) and during his arrest was seen holding a book which happened to have a yellow binding. Although the book was in fact a French novel and not one of the volumes which Wilde detested, people assumed it was *The Yellow Book* thus inaccurately associating the 'indecent' Wilde with the publication. To save the reputation of the magazine, Lane fired Beardsley, who had illustrated a book for Wilde and whose own sexuality was ambiguous.⁵

Despite the loss of Beardsley, *The Yellow Book* continued to be published until 1897, and has since been considered the most influential literary and art publication of its time.

FOREWORD

By Stephen Seplowitz

"The Crimson Weaver" is an almost odd short story, told from the perspective of an indentured servant. We know nothing about this narrator: his time period, geographical whereabouts, or much about the man he calls "Master" other than that -- he repeatedly calls him "my Master," and the man seems to look out for him. The other information might be gleaned from the publishing of the story in the Yellow Book, since a "[Manor at] the Valley of the Willow Brakes" is referenced at both the beginning and end of the tale. This makes for an interesting read, since we have to create much of the characters and scenery ourselves.

The Weaver herself is seen as the paragon of the evil temptress, literally feeding on men to stay alive herself. Once the main characters meet her, whether or not they are physically capable of leaving her palace, their heartstrings are fed into her loom, and woven into her crimson dresses. The old master does not survive, but the servant manages to get back home; all he can do is lie in his master's manor and watch as his heart continues to be torn apart in front of his eyes. The theme of the perils of love is seen throughout the story, though, not just at the end. The protagonists' conversation in the forest turns to love, and we discover the unfortunate circumstances that the master has gone through. The warning as they are about to cross the bridge into the Weaver's domain is equally as chilling: a poor old woman lost her love within, and now she is a mere shell of herself, and disbelieved by the master.

This smacks of the instinct to warn others of perils in their relationships that seem like the ones that we have experienced, and the immediate gut reaction of those who have been blinded by love to claim that their case is somehow the exception, to hope for a fairy-tale ending like the servant does when his master repeatedly requests that they turn around. All warnings are ignored: the woman at the bridge, and the master's repeated feelings that there is something evil about the place. But in the end, both of them become her victims. It seems as though the old adage about history repeating itself equally, if not more so applies to love and relationships, but is just as resolutely ignored. Most people seem to play a mixed part of the master and servant: sensing something isn't right, but making excuses around it and heading on in the same direction. Only when it is too late do they attempt to turn and run, most often with little effect.

It is also interesting to note that the main focus of the evil in this story is a woman, while the lecherous tendencies of men are given only a passing glance, in the part of the guard-woman's lost love. But even then, the man is still the victim; he never returns, he just leaves more suffering in his wake than the master and servant presumably do. So are men not at fault when tempted by women? Are women the only ones responsible for love's blossoming? These are interesting questions that this story does not answer.

The Crimson Weaver

by R. Murray Gilchrist

My Master and I had wandered from our track and lost ourselves on the side of a great 'edge.' It was a two days' journey from the Valley of Willow Brakes⁶, and we had roamed aimlessly; eating at hollow-echoing inns where grey-haired hostesses ministered, and sleeping side by side through the dewless midsummer nights on beds of fresh-gathered heather.

Beyond a single-arched wall-less bridge that crossed a brown stream whose waters leaped straight from the upland, we reached the Domain of the Crimson Weaver. No sooner had we reached the keystone when a bedlam, wrinkled as a walnut and bald as an egg, crept from a cabin of turf and osier⁷ and held out her hands in warning.

"Enter not the Domain of the Crimson Weaver!" she shrieked. "One I loved entered.—I am here to warn men. Behold, I was beautiful once!"

She tore her ragged smock apart and discovered the foulness of her bosom, where the heart pulsed behind a curtain of livid skin. My Master drew money from his wallet and scattered it on the ground.

"She is mad," he said. "The evil she hints cannot exist. There is no fiend⁸."

So we passed on, but the bridge keeper took no heed of the coins. For awhile we heard her bellowed sighs issuing from the openings of the den.

Strangely enough, the tenour of our talk changed from the moment that we left the bridge. He had been telling me of the Platonists⁹, but when our feet pressed

⁶ A willow brake, reports the Welsh College of Horticulture newsletter from October 2003, is a metal tool used in basket weaving to scrape off the bark of a willow.

⁷ A variety of willow particularly valued in basket weaving.

⁸ An evil spirit or devil.

⁹ Either followers of Plato's doctrines in general or, as supports the final sentence in the paragraph, followers of his doctrines of love; nonsexual lovers.

the sun-dried grass I was impelled to question him of love. It was the first time I had thought of the matter.

“How does passion first touch a man's life?” I asked, laying my hand on his arm.

His ruddy colour faded, he smiled wryly.

“You divine what passes in my brain,” he replied. “I also had begun to meditate. . . . But may not tell you. . . . In true paragon. ’Twere sacrilege to speak of the birth of passion. Let it suffice that ere I tasted of wedlock the woman died, and her death sealed for ever the door of that chamber in my heart. . . . Yet, if one might see therein, there is an altar crowned with ever-burning tapers and with wreaths of unwithering asphodels.”

By this time we had reached the skirt of a yew-forest, traversed in every direction by narrow paths. The air was moist and heavy, but ever and anon a light wind touched the tree-tops and bowed them, so that the pollen sank in golden veils to the ground.

Everywhere we saw half-ruined fountains, satyrs vomiting senilely, nymphs emptying wine upon the lambent flames of dying phoenixes, creatures that were neither satyrs nor nymphs, nor gryphins, but grotesque adminglings of all, slain by one another, with water gushing from wounds in belly and thigh.

At length the path we had chosen terminated beside an oval mere that was surrounded by a colonnade of moss-grown arches. Huge pike quivered on the muddy ed, crayfish moved sluggishly amongst the weeds.

There was an island in the middle, where a leaden Diana, more compassionate than a crocodile, caressed Actaeon's horns ere delivering him to his hounds¹⁰. The huntress' head and shoulders were white with the excrement of a crowd of culvers¹¹ that moved as if entangled in a snare.

Northwards an avenue rose for the space of a mile, to fall abruptly before an azure sky. For many years the yew-mast on the pathway had been undisturbed by human foot; it was covered with a crust of greenish lichen.

My Master pressed my fingers. “There is some evil in the air of this place,” he said. “I am strong, but you—you may not endure. We will return.”

“’Tis an enchanted country, ” I made answer, feverishly. “At the end of yonder avenue stands the palace of the sleeping maiden who awaits the kiss. Nay, since we have pierced the country thus far, let us not draw back. You are strong, Master—no evil can touch us.”

So we fared to the place where the avenue sank, and then our eyes fell on the wondrous sight of a palace, lying in a concave pleasance¹², all treeless, but so

¹⁰ Referencing the Greco-Roman myth in which a skilled hunter comes upon the goddess as she bathes nude. Ashamed she turns him to a stag and leaves him to be hunted by his own party.

¹¹ A race of dove.

¹² A fine gauzelike fabric.

bestarred with fainting flowers, that neither blade of grass nor grain of earth was visible.

Then came a rustling of wings above our heads, and looking skywards I saw flying towards the house a flock of culvers like unto those that had drawn themselves over Diana's head. The hindmost bird dropped its neck, and behold it gazed upon us with the face of a mannikin¹³!

“They are charmed birds, made thus by the whim of the Princess,” I said.

As the birds passed through the portals of columbary¹⁴ that crowned a western tower, their white wings beat against a silver bell that glistened there, and the whole valley was filled with music.

My Master trembled and crossed himself. “In the name of our Mother,” he exclaimed, “let us return. I dare not trust your life here.”

But a great door in front of the palace swung open, and a woman with a swaying walk came out to the terrace. She wore a robe of crimson worn in tatters at skirt-hem and shoulders. She had been forewarned of our presence, for her face turned instantly in our direction. She smiled subtly, and her smile died away into a most tempting sadness.

She caught up such remnants of her skirt as trailed behind, and the glossy fabric I saw eyes inwrought in deeper hue.

My Master still trembled, but he did not move, for the gaze of the woman was fixed upon him. His brows twisted and his white hair rose and stood erect, as if he viewed some unspeakable horror.

Stooping, with sidelong motions of the head, she approached; bringing with her the smell of such an incense as when amidst Eastern herbs burns the corpse. . . . She was perfect of feature as the Diana, but her skin was deathly white and her lips fretted with pain.

She took no heed of me, but knelt at my Master's feet—a Magdalene before an impregnable priest.

“Prince and Lord, Tower of Chastity, hear!” she murmured. “For lack of love I perish. See my robe in tatters!”

He strove to avert his face, but his eyes still dwelt upon her. She rose and shook her nut-brown tresses over his knees.

Youth came back in a flood to my Master. His shrivelled skin filled out; the dying sunlight turned to gold the whiteness of his hair. He would have raised her had I not caught his hands. The anguish of foreboding made me cry:

“One forces roughly the door of your heart's chamber. The wreaths wither, the tapers bend and fall.”

He grew old again. The Crimson Weaver turned to me.

¹³ A brown, black, and white tropical bird, popular among the Victorians as house pets.

¹⁴ A pigeon-house or dove-cote.

“O marplot¹⁵!” she said laughingly, “think not to vanquish me with folly. I am too powerful. Once that a man enter my domain he is mine.”

But I drew my Master away.

“’Tis I who am strong,” I whispered. “We will go hence at once. Surely we may find our way back to the bridge. The journey is easy.”

The woman, seeing the remembrance of an old love was strong within him, sighed heavily, and returned to the palace. As she reached the doorway the valves opened, and I saw in a distant chamber beyond the hall an ivory loom with a golden stool.

My Master and I walked again on the track we had made in the yew-mast. But twilight was falling, and ere we could reach the pool of Diana all was in utter darkness; so at the foot of a tree, where no anthill rose, we lay down and slept.

Dreams came to me—gorgeous visions from the romances of old. Everywhere I sought vainly for a beloved. There was the Castle of the Ebony Dwarf, where a young queen reposed in the innermost casket of the seventh crystal cabinet¹⁶; there was the Chamber of Gloom, where Lenore¹⁷ danced, and where I groped for ages around columns of living flesh; there was the White Minaret, where twenty-one princesses poised themselves on balls of burnished bronze; there was Melisandra's arbour, where the sacred toads crawled over the enchanted cloak.

Unrest fretted me: I woke in spiritual pain. Dawn was breaking—a bright yellow dawn, and the glades were full of vapours.

I turned to the place where my master had lain. He was not there. I felt with my hands over his bed: it was key-cold. Terror of my loneliness overcame me, and I sat with covered face.

On the ground near my feet lay a broken riband¹⁸, whereon was strung a heart of chrysolite¹⁹. It enclosed a knot of ash-coloured hair—hair of the girl my Master had loved.

The mists gathered together and passed sunwards in one long many-cornered veil. When the last shred of had been drawn into the great light, I gazed along the avenue, and saw the topmost bartizan of the Crimson Weaver's palace.

It was midday ere I dared start on my search. The culvers beat about my head. I walked in pain, as though giant spiders had woven about my body.

On the terrace strange beasts—dogs and pigs with human limbs,—tore ravenously at something that lay beside the balustrade. At sight of me they paused and lifted their snouts and bayed. Awhile afterwards the culvers rang the silver bell, and

¹⁵ A person who spoils a plot.

¹⁶ Blake's "The Crystal Cabinet" worth reading for an added context to this strange dream, the seventh and final stanza of which delivers us back from the dreamlike world of the bulk of the poem back to the natural world.

¹⁷ A reference to Poe's poem "Lenore", in which a speaker laments the premature death of his young lover and promises he will meet her once again in the afterlife.

¹⁸ ribbon

¹⁹ a green-colored gemstone

the monsters dispersed hurriedly amongst the dropping blossoms of the pleasaunce, and where they had swarmed I saw naught but a steaming sanguine pool.

I approached the house and the door fell open, admitting me to a chamber adorned with embellishments beyond the witchery of art. There I lifted my voice and cried eagerly: "My Master, my Master, where is my Master?" The alcoves sent out a babble of echoes, blended together like a harp-chord on a dulcimer: "My Master, my Master, where is my Master? For the love of Christ, where is my Master?" The echo replied only, "Where is my Master?"

Above, swung a globe of topaz, where a hundred suns gambolled. From its centre a convoluted horn, held by a crimson cord, sank lower and lower. It stayed before my lips and I blew therein, and heard the sweet voices of youths chant with one accord.

"Fall open, oh doors: fall open and show the way to the princess!"

Ere the last of the echoes had died a vista opened, and at the end of an alabaster gallery I saw the Crimson Weaver at her loom. She had doffed her tattered robe for one new and lustrous as freshly drawn blood. And marvelous as her beauty had seemed before, its wonder was now increased a hundred fold.

She came towards me with the same stately walk, but there was now a lightness in her demeanor that suggested the growth of wings.

Within arm's-length she curtsayed, and curtsaying showed me the firmness of her shoulders, the fullness of her breast. The sight brought no pleasure: my cracking tongue appealed in agony:

"My Master, where is my Master?"

She smiled happily. "Nay, do not trouble. He is not here. His soul talks with the culvers in the cote. He has forgotten you. In the night we supped, and I gave him of nepenthe."

"Where is my Master? Yesterday he told me of the shrine in his heart—of ever-fresh flowers—of a love dead yet living."

Her eyebrows curved mirthfully.

"'Tis foolish boys' talk," she said. "If you sought till the end of time you would never find him--unless I choose. Yet—if you buy of me—myself to name the price."

I looked around hopelessly at the unimaginable riches of her home. All that I have is this Manor of the Willow Brakes—a moorish park, an ancient house where the thatch gapes and the casement swings loose.

"My possessions are pitiable," I said, "but they are all yours. I give all to save him."

"Fool, fool!" she cried. "I have no need of gear. If I but raise my hand, all the riches of the world fall to me. 'Tis not what I wish for."

Into her eyes came such a glitter as the moon makes on the moist skin of a sleeping snake. The firmness of her lips relaxed; they grew child-like in their softness. The atmosphere became almost tangible: I could scarce breathe.

"What is it? All that I can do, if it be no sin."

“Come with me to my loom,” she said, “and if you do the thing I desire you shall see him. There is no evil in’t—in past times kings have sighed for the same.”

So I followed slowly to the loom, before which she had seated herself, and watched her deftly passing crimson thread over crimson thread.

She was silent for a space, and in that space her beauty fascinated me, so that I was no longer master of myself.

“What you wish for I will give, even if it be life.”

The loom ceased. “A kiss of the mouth, and you shall see him who passed in the night.”

She clasped her arms about my neck and pressed my lips. For one moment heaven and earth ceased to be; but there was one paradise, where we were sole governours. . . .

Then she moved back, drew aside the web and showed me the head of my Master, and the bleeding heart whence a crimson cord unravelled into many threads.

“I wear men’s lives,” the woman said. “Life is necessary to me, or even I—who have existed from the beginning—must die. But yesterday I feared the end, and he came. His soul is no dead—’tis truth that it plays with my culvers.”

I fell back.

“Another kiss,” she said. “Unless I wish, there is no escape for you. Yet you may return to your home, though my power over you shall never wane. Once more—lip to lip.”

I crouched against the wall like a terrified dog. She grew angry; her eyes darted fire.

“A kiss,” she cried, “for the penalty!”

My poor Master's head, ugly and cadaverous, glared from the loom. I could not move.

The Crimson Weaver lifted her skirt, uncovering feet shapen as those of a vulture. I fell prostrate. With her claws she fumbled about the flesh of my breast. Moving away she bade me pass from her sight. . . .

So, half-dead, I lie here at the Manor of the Willow Brakes, watching hour by hour the bloody clew even unwinding from my heart and passing over the western hills to the Palace of the Siren.

THE END

AFTERWORD

by Carolyn Burns

After being forgotten for decades, the name R. Murray Gilchrist reappeared in the 1970s, when Hugh Lamb included works by Gilchrist in several of his anthologies. Two of these collections, *A Bottomless Grave and Other Victorian Tales of Terror* (originally published in 1977) and *Tales from a Gas-lit Grave* (originally published in 1979) have been re-released in the last seven years. In *A Bottomless Grave*, Lamb begins his description of Gilchrist with a 1926 quote by Eden Phillpotts. Phillpotts said that Gilchrist was “an artist too little known and valued by his own generation, yet no record of the English short story would be complete without a study of his contributions” (*Bottomless*, 43). Lamb agrees with Phillpotts and goes on to say that despite having been ignored for thirty years, Gilchrist is a noteworthy story teller. In *Tales from a Gas-lit Grave*, he calls Gilchrist “an unrecognized master of the macabre story” (*Tales*, 142).

In 1993, Barnes and Nobles released a collection by the name of *100 Ghastly Little Ghost Stories*, which included works by a number of authors, including Gilchrist. Gilchrist’s short story collection, *The Stone Dragon*, which was originally published in 1894, was revived in 1998, when USA Charon House released a limited edition of the collection. This edition was a facsimile of the first edition. In 2003, Ash-Tree Press of Canada released *The Basilisk and Other Tales of Dread*, a collection of Gilchrist’s stories. This collection included “The Crimson Weaver.” Another Collection *A Night on the Moor and Other Tales of Dread*, was published in 2006 as part of Wordsworth’s Mystery and Supernatural series. This collection also included “The Crimson Weaver.”

The Wordsworth series is described as “featuring classic spine chilling tales, some previously unavailable for many years” (Amazon 1). The series seems to be using the idea of reviving forgotten stories as a means to attract an audience. Readers posting in online forums have had mixed opinions. One user, going by the name “Calenture” posted on a forum called “British Horror Anthology Hell” that at first he was not impressed by the book. However, as he made his way through, he was suddenly caught by it. He said: “It’s actually very readable stuff, but refuses to be

hurried” (British). The user “Davywavy2” posted a review of the collection on amazon.com. This reader had a problem with the vocabulary Gilchrist used. He said:

“The problem with reading literature long after it was written and away from the original publication medium is that you lack the context the author intended and so may miss something. It may be, therefore, that Gilchrist, writing at the turn of the C20, was a writer of skilled parody and pastiche and was skillfully sending up the overblown gothic romances and horrors of the Victorian era. Alternatively, it may be that he just wasn't a very good writer. I just don't know” (Amazon 2)

He went on to say that he did not recommend the book, except maybe for “a pretentious, poetry-writing goth” (Amazon 2). This issue with the language was echoed by Livejournal user “melmoththelost.” He said of the two Vampire stories, “The Crimson Weaver” and “The Lover’s Ordeal,” that “it's their overblown and very Victorian lyricism and rampant use of archaism rather than any (absent) sense of "dread" which freezes the blood” (Live Journal 2) Livejournal user “joysilence” had a slightly more positive, although not completely so view of the collection. She posted that she thought that some of them were okay but she found some of the stories to be a bit silly. “They're written more as 'drolls' than straight-up fiction, so it's intentional, but still a bit contrived and silly” (Livejournal 1). It is interesting to see that these stories which were forgotten for decades are now being discussed in modern forums.

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