

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Thomas and Emma

by Ali Giles

They sat eating supper in their customary, disagreeable silence. The little parlour was cold, the oil lamps dimly low; Emma had 'one of her heads'. She had spoken too sharply to the new housemaid who could not light the fire. She had been derisive, too, with Mrs Pickles regarding the quality of the cold meats.

In the exhausted glow from the lamp Thomas fancied a demon now shone behind her eyes. Once upon a time, he thought, watching her darkly, he had penned a book in ode to those eyes.

"The girl could not light the fire with damp wood, Emma," he said suddenly. He did not know why he spoke – even knowing the maid to be young and terribly homesick, it was never wise to contradict his wife; least of all whilst she was in an already poor mood.

Emma picked at her food. "That girl is a particularly silly one. She dithers. She makes my nerves bad."

"But still. Must you mock and vilify everyone around you?"

"What is this, Thomas? Are you in love with the damnable maid now?" his wife said, smiling tightly. "Go write another book about it, why don't you; another book on another ghastly matter that will utterly humiliate and destroy me. You know, it is you *and* your books that have made my health so poor."

"I write about what matters to me. Not to deliberately make you ill. You're being ridiculous."

“Some ‘matters’ should be left alone. We all know they are there, Thomas. We don’t need them held up and...glorified. Your writing is obscene.” Spittle flew from her lips on this last word.

She returned to smugly chewing her cold meat. He looked at her; bitter discontent had left her mean and pinched, even in her movements. He hated the curl and twitch of her fingers resting on the table, the way she ate, the sounds she made.

“I try and remember you as the girl I met, but you have hardened so,” he whispered. “You have become cruel, spiteful. You ridicule everything I am; all I believe in. You try to take away my very sense of self.” How very strange this was, Thomas thought. His heart was beating dangerously fast, and his emotions were almost as a separate being, sitting outside himself, watching. “I regret having ever laid eyes on you,” he finished, quietly tearful. “I wish for a divorce.”

True regret is a canker; an insidious, spiritual canker. It can never be cut fully from the soul. It will always return.

Later, Thomas presses his wife’s face gently into her pillows and holds it there.

She is seventy-eight and she is not strong.

During her pitiful struggle she knocks a book from the nightstand, and afterwards he looks down to where it lays open and reads:

‘Did I tell my name to anyone last night, or didn’t I tell my name?’

It looks to be a well-read copy, and a pressed rose marks the page.