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### The Flame of the Candle

Valentine Ackland\*

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# The Flame of the Candle

*Valentine Ackland*

## Abstract

A short story by Valentine Ackland published in the *New Statesman*, 24 July 1954.

**Keywords** Valentine Ackland; short story; old age; memory.

As I opened the door into the garden that night a shadow rushed in, brushing past me, through the passage, up the stairs, into the dark, uncurtained bedroom. Standing myself beside the opened door I knew its progress exactly, although it made no sound and I had not stirred.

This was my fancy, I said; nothing more. The garden wore an air of solemn security as I looked out on it from the threshold. A night in early autumn is not completely dark; I could see willow trees, and the jagged outlines of the holly bush beside the door.

That was it! But who had said, 'It is more like the holly than any other tree. Keep a leaf of the holly, if you want to remember how it was between us—'? Many leaves were on the holly now, as I could see against the sky; but not one had been kept by me.

Why should such a shadow rush into my house? Why had it waited so long—pressed, I daresay, to the very wood of the door? (For it had shown a desperate impatience, a frenzy which drove it over the threshold like a flurry of rain driven on a winter gale.)

Pity in my heart, I suppose, made me turn about and walk along the passage to the foot of the stairs.

Perhaps if I had not paused then I should not have been defeated; but it needed courage, even stupid insensibility (as cowards call

courage) to continue straightway up the stairs and into that once-empty, once-not-empty bedroom.

For the building in which I had been alone now held another being. In stillness, in dark silence, as I stood there in the hall, I knew that someone else, now, inhabited my house. And I did not at once dare to go up the stairs.

But at last I did, going quickly and carrying the candle in my hand, with my own shadow wavering on the wall beside me. I went straight to the bedroom and turned the handle of the door; but the sound it made was the sound it had made years ago. I had not heard it since, in all the times I had turned it unremembering. How strangely it troubled my heart to recognise the rasp of the latch, to remember entering that room, to remember the fever of joy that had shaken me then.

It was a different fever, cold as ice, that took me now, and I did not open the door. Instead, I walked quickly to my own room and locked myself in. I put down the candle carefully, and stood, staring at the flame and listening— listening until I had almost deafened myself on the silence.

Then—then, as if I had heard a cry, or seen an expression of anguish on a face—suddenly pity returned, and I snatched up the candle and opened the door of my room. I hurried out, along the landing, and stopped at the head of the stairs.

I heard the latch of that door lift again; I saw it swing back, and saw nothing else. The flame of the candle still burned brightly and did not waver. There can have been nothing to see.

And yet I knew that the shadow was coming; and slowly, mournfully now, all its wild urgency gone, it passed by me; went downstairs, along the passage, out through the open doorway, and into darkness.

What can have summoned that wraith, from so far away in space and in time? Left alone in my house, I thought of that desperate sortie out of the dark, of the hushed, expectant stillness inside the room, while I stood there with my hand on the latch of the door. And I thought of the grieving departure, the slow retreat from light to darkness; and the flame of the candle that had not stirred as the wraith passed by.

But who, then, passed?

After so long apart, I thought, it may be that we had lost our separate selves; and like the lovers in the ballad, long buried and lost in death, we had grown ghosts like trees from our graves; tree-ghosts which met in the air above, so twined together that one could not be known apart from the other.

Perhaps, indeed, not that other, but I myself had returned, driven on some chance wind of despair—a wind that might well blow now, at the beginning of the fall of the year. Perhaps I, and not another one, had gone, after that brief, hopeless visit, back into the empty night, without stirring the flame of the candle.

*Housewife*<sup>1</sup>

## Note

- 1 On 28 November 1950 Olive Jones of *Housewife* magazine wrote to Ackland accepting the story for a fee of 12 guineas (Dorset History Centre item STW.2012.125.3711).