

GLOWWORMS

by

Donald Loftus

Contact Information:

Donald Loftus
223 East 70th Street
New York, New York 10021
Phone: 646-752-4807
donaldjloftusnyc@gmail.com

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Cast of Characters

- OLD PROFESSOR:** Age: 70's British. An unhealthy, retired professor in need of full-time care.
- SARAH:** Age: 20's A Cockney servant girl.
- YOUNG PROFESSOR:** Age:20's A young version of the OLD PROFESSOR.
- THE WOMAN:** Age: 20's A mysterious British woman.

GLOWWORMS

SETTING: London: A stately study.

TIME: Early evening. August 1850.

AT RISE: *OLD PROFESSOR is asleep in a large wing chair. SARAH enters with a feather duster.*

SARAH

Good evening, Professor.

OLD PROFESSOR

What!?! Oh, Sarah. I didn't hear Mary leave. I didn't hear you come in. Is it Sarah time already?

SARAH

It is at that. It's nearly eight p.m. You was in quite a deep sleep... and from all the moanin', I could tell it was quite a dream you was havin'.

OLD PROFESSOR

Yes, I suppose it was at that. But unfortunately, I'm awake now and I've left the dream back in "Dreamland".

SARAH

Probably just as well. So... before I get started on my chores, is there anything you need Professor? Maybe a spot of gin to wash away whatever may have caused that dream?

OLD PROFESSOR

No, my dear... but perhaps you could sit with me.

SARAH

Sit with you Sir? No, I've no time for sittin'...

OLD PROFESSOR

Just for a minute. Really Sarah, I need to talk to you.

SARAH

You *need* to talk to me Sir? Is everything all right?

OLD PROFESSOR

Yes, everything is fine... well, sort of fine.

SARAH

What is it Professor?

OLD PROFESSOR

Sarah, I'm sorry, but tonight will be your last night here.

SARAH

What!?! But why? Did I do something wrong? Did I say something offensive? I know I can get ornery...

OLD PROFESSOR

No, no of course not. Tonight will be your last night, because this is going to be my last night.

SARAH

What??? But where are you going...?

OLD PROFESSOR

But I just want to make sure...before I go...I just want to make sure that you are going to be all right...financially I mean... once you are not working here...

SARAH

I will be fine Sir. The agency has more work than it's got girls for... but I loved working here. What do you mean it will be your last night? How could you leave here? This is your home. With all of your books...and your fine things... and your beautiful furniture..

OLD PROFESSOR

Please sit.

(SHE kneels on the floor near his chair)

You can sit on a chair Sarah.

SARAH

It's not my place to sit on a chair. I'm fine here, Sir.

OLD PROFESSOR

You really are something! You know Sarah, you've been here nearly a year and yet I barely know more than your name.

SARAH

Well, there ain't so much to know... but back to this...

OLD PROFESSOR

You are unmarried...is that correct?

SARAH

Yes, Professor. I am. And thank you for reminding me!

OLD PROFESSOR

It's nothing to be ashamed of. I too have remained unmarried. But surely a... what?... a *friendly* girl like you must have them lining up at your doorstep.

SARAH

Oh sure...I'm chasing them away with sticks! But truly no, nothing romantic has ever happened to me. But is this somehow leading us to what is happening here? Is it leading to why tonight is to be my last night...your last night...?

OLD PROFESSOR

Yes, it is. And actually, the dream that I was having also has much to do with it. You see, I have that same dream every night...and when I wake from it, it becomes more and more clear...more obvious to me... as to what I need to do.

(HE hands her framed picture from the table)

SARAH

I'm sorry... what becomes clearer to you? Who's this then? Ya know...I have dusted this photo hundreds of times and I never once thought to ask who she was.

OLD PROFESSOR

She was a lady. An enchanting lady who died long ago.

SARAH

A real beauty. Is she who you was dreaming about tonight?

OLD PROFESSOR

Yes. Tonight and every night.

SARAH

Was she *your* lady then? Was you in love with her?

OLD PROFESSOR

I was just a lad. What did I know of love? It was probably more folly and fancy, than it was love... but it was the closest feeling I've ever come to love in my long life.

(After a beat)

But it doesn't matter much now. Not anymore. Oh, listen to me going on! Forgive the rumblings of this old coot carrying on so. Maybe you should get on with your chores.

SARAH

No! The chores can wait on my last night... our last night!

SARAH (Continued)

If this dream is causing this to be the last night in a job that I love...I want to fully know the reasons! Now tell me!

OLD PROFESSOR

Well, okay, but please remember, I am an old man. I maybe don't remember very much... very clearly...

SARAH

You're havin' the dreams, so you must remember somethin'!

OLD PROFESSOR

I do remember...when I was a young man...I was very lonely.

(YOUNG PROFESSOR enters ghostlike from upstage and moves to the OLD PROFESSOR'S side. HE kneels facing the audience. SARAH only looks at OLD PROFESSOR)

YOUNG PROFESSOR

I'm very awkward. I'm ill-at-ease around others... and particularly ill-at-ease with others of the opposite sex.

OLD PROFESSOR

I never had a sweetheart. I was incredibly shy.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

The girls laugh at me for my shyness...my bashfulness.

OLD PROFESSOR

I just want to get away from everyone, so I would seek out places most folks considered... lonely and desolate places. One of my favorite remote retreats was a long-forgotten churchyard on the outskirts of a long-forgotten town.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

It sits silently still, high on a hill, in the middle of the marsh country. In the middle of nowhere.

SARAH

How was it you discovered such a far-off spot?

OLD PROFESSOR

I'm not entirely sure. It was as though I was drawn there... almost against my own free will at first...

YOUNG PROFESSOR

But I didn't resist.

OLD PROFESSOR

The local mill had closed. The town had become deserted.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

It's why I like it best. I've never seen anyone else there. It's a bit of a hike to get there from my home...but it is well worth it. I can be all alone there. Completely alone.

OLD PROFESSOR

Oh, but none of this really matters now. I'm going off in tangents. I really should stop...

SARAH

No, please go on! So, you liked it best when you was alone..

YOUNG PROFESSOR

Yes. And I hate those occasions, when I think I'm alone... but then I suddenly hear the rustle of dried leaves being tramped upon behind me or I hear the whisper of an unseen face from the other side of the brush.

SARAH

Well, of course you did. You was just wantin' to be alone.

OLD PROFESSOR

Yes. And I would sit alone in the churchyard for hours...

YOUNG PROFESSOR

Among the crumbling tombs and ancient decaying gravestones..

SARAH

Wait! There was graves there?!?

OLD PROFESSOR

Well, certainly! All churchyards at the time had graves.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

And this particular churchyard always smells sweet with thyme and it is surprisingly well-lit... on account of its being up so high. It would stay light long after the marshes that I had travelled through to get there were completely in the dark.

SARAH

So, you would go to this churchyard... with the ancient graves...and the crumbling tombs... in the evenings? In the nighttime? In the dark?

YOUNG PROFESSOR

Yes...

OLD PROFESSOR

Yes, mostly. Again, I didn't have much control over it. I was drawn there.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

And I love it. I love to watch the bats flitting about the graves in the red light of the setting sun.

OLD PROFESSOR

I'd watch and I'd wonder why God wanted me to be so friendless. Why he wanted me to be lonely.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

I don't mind it so much...but I have to wonder.

OLD PROFESSOR

By the time the sun had fully set, I had always worked through these questions and I could go home quietly and say my prayers before bedtime without any bitterness.

SARAH

Well, thank goodness for that. But what about the lady?

OLD PROFESSOR

I'm getting to it. It was on one very hot August night...

YOUNG PROFESSOR

After I had watched the sun fade and the crescent moon rise, I was just stepping over the jagged stone wall of the churchyard, when I heard a rustling behind me.

SARAH

Oh my. I'd be terrified...with the graves...and the bats.

(THE WOMAN enters from upstage and gazes out over the audience with a deadpan expression. When SHE speaks it is with a clipped and pointed British voice)

OLD PROFESSOR

I turned, assuming it was a rabbit or a bird, but instead, I saw it was her.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

It was the first time I saw her. Oh, my! You startled me!

THE WOMAN

Did you think I was a ghost?

YOUNG PROFESSOR

No, I just didn't expect to see. But you're not a ghost...are you?

SARAH

Oh dear! I would have been bricking myself. Oh, sorry sir. But please go on. So...what happened? Did you run!

OLD PROFESSOR

No. I stayed... and we talked. And we talked...

YOUNG PROFESSOR

We talked till it was quite dark. The glowworms were particularly bright that night...

OLD PROFESSOR

Brighter than ever in the wet grass. It was as if they were meant to light the way home for me.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

In fact, from that night on, the glowworms have lit my path to and from our churchyard.

SARAH

And so, you saw her again...after that first night?

OLD PROFESSOR

Oh, yes! I saw her again... and again.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

The next night and the next. And always at twilight time.

OLD PROFESSOR

It was all so long ago... but as I look back... I realize that it was exactly then... for the first time in my life... that I learned what happiness could mean. Even for one as painfully shy and awkward as I was...

YOUNG PROFESSOR

Even for someone who the girls laugh at...

SARAH

What was her name, Professor?

OLD PROFESSOR

I don't know. She wouldn't tell me her name. It didn't matter. I have names enough in my heart to call her by...

OLD PROFESSOR

And so, I met her night after night, in our churchyard...

YOUNG PROFESSOR

Near our graveyard wall, next to the same well-worn gravestone. It's there that we always met, and it's from there that we always parted.

SARAH

So, what happened? Why didn't this never go no further?

OLD PROFESSOR

Over time...my health took a terrible turn. I'd lost a great deal of weight. I didn't care. I was happy. But my family cared. They didn't know what was wrong with me. They decided I needed to get help. They sent me to live with my aunt and uncle...he was a doctor in the city.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

The last time I saw my lady of the churchyard... was the night before I went away. When I told her I had to go, she was very sad, and she said...

THE WOMAN

If you come back before the new moon, I shall meet you here just as usual. But if the new moon shines on this grave and you are not here...you will never see me again.

OLD PROFESSOR

She then laid her hand on the crumbling sandstone grave marker which read in fading, chiseled letters, "Elizabeth Newbury, 1730".

YOUNG PROFESSOR

I will be here. And with a firmness in her voice...a deep and sudden seriousness I had not heard before, she said...

THE WOMAN

This is not an idle threat. Do not test me on this!

(THE WOMAN turns upstage and exits)

OLD PROFESSOR

I promised and we parted. Time passed.

(HE pauses and looks again at the miniature)

I'd been at my uncle's for nearly a month.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

I had regained some weight and most of my strength.

OLD PROFESSOR

When I was packing to return home, I found this framed miniature of my lady from the churchyard among some antique family relics my aunt had displayed on a side table in the room I had been sleeping in. I hadn't seen it before.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

I couldn't speak. I rushed downstairs to find my Aunt. My heart beating like a jackhammer. "Who is this?" I said in a voice even I did not recognize. My auntie calmly said...

OLD PROFESSOR

(As the Aunt)

She was betrothed to one of your great uncles decades ago, but as the story goes...she died the night before the wedding was to take place.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

She died? How? How did she die?

OLD PROFESSOR

(As the Aunt)

He'd vowed to love her forever, but he ran off with another. She took her own life. She slit her own throat, they say.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

Oh my God!

OLD PROFESSOR

(As the Aunt)

Yes, it is a sad story...although legend has it, she was a bit of a witch. A pretty one, though...wasn't she?

(SHE sees he is upset)

OLD PROFESSOR (Continued)

(As the Aunt)

Oh, but that was years ago, dear boy. No sense in getting worked up over it. If I remember correctly, her name is on the back of the picture...along with the year of her death.

YOUNG PROFESSOR

I again studied the portrait of the the woman I was to meet when the new moon shone on that grave in our churchyard and I said under my breath, "And so she is dead".

SARAH

And what did it say? On the back...her name...the date?

YOUNG PROFESSOR

"Elizabeth Newbury, 1730".

(YOUNG PROFESSOR turns, moves upstage and exits)

OLD PROFESSOR

I suddenly felt dizzy and I fainted dead away. They thought I'd had some sort of fit. They put me to bed. I woke up several days later.

SARAH

So, you missed...?

OLD PROFESSOR

I missed the new moon on the grave. I never saw her again...

SARAH

But professor... do you really believe...do you really think...

OLD PROFESSOR

All I know is that for one moment in my long life... one brief moment, I understood what joy meant. And the dream has convinced me. I'm ready. Tonight... is my last night. Tonight... under the new moon... I will finally know.

SARAH

Oh, but Professor...

OLD PROFESSOR

Goodnight sweet Sarah.

(Blackout)

THE END