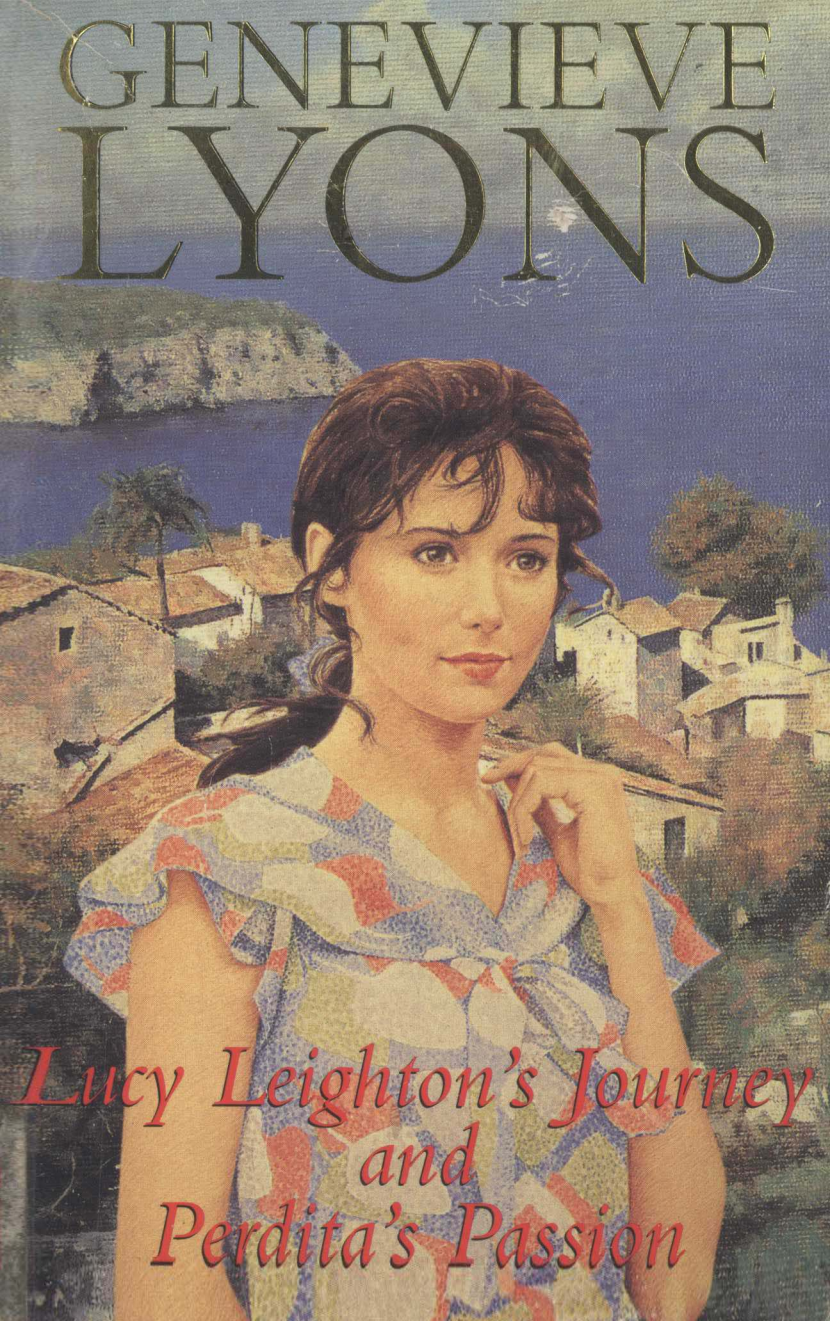
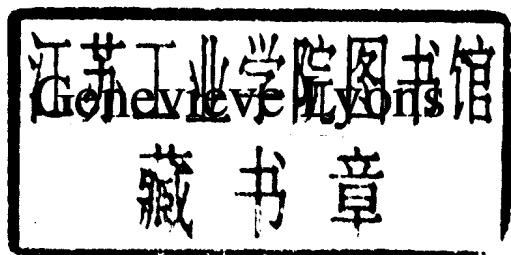


GENEVIEVE LYONS



*Lucy Leighton's Journey
and
Perdita's Passion*

LUCY LEIGHTON'S JOURNEY



PAN BOOKS

**This edition published 1999 by Pan Books
an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Ltd
25 Eccleston Place, London SW1W 9NF
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.macmillan.co.uk**

**This first world edition published in Great Britain 1996 by
SEVERN HOUSE PUBLISHERS LTD of
9-15 High Street, Sutton, Surrey SM1 1DF
First published in the USA 1996 by
SEVERN HOUSE PUBLISHERS INC of
595 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10022.
Copyright © 1996 by Genevieve Lyons.**

All rights reserved. The moral rights of the author has been asserted.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Lyons, Genevieve**

Lucy Leighton's Journey

1. English fiction – 20th century

1. Title

823.9'14 [F]

ISBN 0 330 39651 X

**All situations in this publication are fictitious and
any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.**

**Typeset by Hewer Text Composition Services, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent**

**This book is for my dear little
Aussie friend Lynette, with my love
And Michele**

Chapter One

Hardly anyone came to the funeral. In the big echoing church the coffin stood, candle-lit in solitary splendour on the catafalque and there was only Lucy. There was only one meagre and mean wreath, isolated on the polished lid.

The church was empty except for Lucy, the vicar and the men from the funeral parlour who seemed like gaunt shadows lurking in the darkness, hovering like vultures near the coffin. Mercedes Marchant had drawn her smallest crowd ever. She would have been mortified.

Not that Lucy expected a crowd. But she could think of a few neighbours who should have bothered, local people who might have made the effort. In the event no one turned up, and she, and the men from the undertakers shivered in the vastness of the vaulted grandeur of St Luke's Methodist Church. Her mother, Lucy had to accept, had not been a popular woman with the few she saw during her last days. She had not, to be fair, consorted much with the locals. She had mainly kept the neighbours at arm's length deeming them inferior. "They're my *audience*

darling," she would tell Lucy. She had been frosty with the greengrocer, cool with the chemist, arrogant with the girls in the supermarket, and positively rude to the woman in the off-licence. She considered them *hoi polloi* and far beneath her.

Lucy's mother had been on the London stage. She had shone brilliantly, a big name for a time and since then Mercedes Marchant tended to get her status slightly out of proportion.

In those far-off days stage stars were goddesses, worshipped and adored. They were the idols of their time, revered and courted and Mercedes Marchant had glittered brighter than most. That was before actresses ceased to be glamorous.

Lucy sighed in the cold church. She had only the most faded memories of her mother in her grander days. Her pre-multiple sclerosis days. Mercedes Marchant had reached the height of her fame in the late Fifties and early Sixties. Lucy was born in nineteen sixty-eight. The halcyon days of Mercedes' adulation, her champagne days at the Ritz, *foie gras* in the Caprice, dancing in Annabels or Tramp were well and truly over when Mercedes began to show signs of her illness which struck in actuality when Lucy was thirteen.

Lucy blamed herself, albeit obliquely, for her mother's demise from popular star to helpless invalid, even though she knew quite well it had nothing whatsoever to do with her. Nevertheless she felt guilty in the presence of that piteous decline and the flashes of anger that shot every

so often like poison darts from her mother's eyes.

Sadly for Lucy she had not known the shining woman in the sequined strapless figure-hugging ball gown in the blown-up *Vogue* portrait that hung on the wall of their house in St John's Wood. Lucy could not imagine her mother as that exquisite goddess. The mother she attended had a slack-muscled, square body, sexless and helpless. Her sagging face, her crippled limbs were familiar to her daughter and bore no resemblance to the beautiful noble-faced girl, slim as a reed in the photo of her in lawyer's robes as Portia. Or the proud figure in tights as a radiant and mischievous Rosalind in *As You Like It*. Mercedes Marchant was to Lucy a loved mother certainly, but a woman prematurely aged by pain, someone who had to be handled tactfully, for the agony of multiple sclerosis had made her temper uncertain and her body a tormented battlefield.

Yes, Lucy had looked after her mother from the age of thirteen. She had been nurse, minder, cleaner, cook and carer as her mother's strength declined slowly but surely into total dependence on her daughter. Lucy nursed her willingly, almost with relief. She was a shy girl, fearful of life, its demands and responsibilities and she found her sick mother a convenient excuse for opting out. When faced with the challenge of growing up she hid behind the role of minder and avoided the experience entirely. Her mother had to be looked after and it was Lucy's duty to do so.

Her dedication to the task had forged a resilient

spirit, a character both courageous and patient and yet someone totally ignorant of the world. Lucy Leighton was, at twenty-eight, as innocent as a Victorian maiden yet wise as many a learned sociologist or Sister in charge of a geriatric ward. She was prematurely older than her years yet in some respects guileless and trusting as a nun.

Now her mother lay dead and she was on her own. A merciful release, Dr Wilton had described it. But Lucy had been too busy arranging the funeral according to her mother's wishes to sort out her feelings then. She had put the announcement in *The Times*, gone to the funeral parlour of her mother's choice and talked to the vicar of St Luke's where her mother wished to be buried. She had managed, as usual, entirely on her own.

She had been her mother's only child. Brent Leighton, Lucy's father, had deserted them when Lucy was only three years old. He claimed that with the advent of Lucy the romance had gone out of his life with Mercedes. He said he could not compete with a baby, so he had left them. He had also broken Mercedes' heart and she never divorced him.

A dramatically good-looking actor of mediocre talent, he had run away from the shackles of family life and the very high standard of acting on London's West End stages. He fled to Rome and Cinecittà and got small parts with Fellini, de Sica and Antonioni, ending up in Spaghetti Westerns in Spain's Andalucía. He had a sudden heart attack on the set of a Western and died there under the

klieg lights with a hundred extras dressed as Red Indians and Cowboys around him. Mercedes had wept all night – the only time Lucy had seen her mother cry.

Lucy had thought that some relative, some long forgotten aunt or uncle might pitch up for the funeral having read the obituary in *The Times*, but no. So she was alone in the church, the vicar droning on about 'eternal Life' and 'crossing the great divide' and 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' in an emotionless voice that revealed a familiarity with death bordering on the monotonous.

She felt uncomfortable in the black suit, bought for the occasion. She wore a hat, which she hated and her scalp was itching unbearably underneath it and she could not reach up far enough under it to scratch, so she shifted uneasily in her seat and the Funeral Director and his men and the vicar all glanced at her as if she was a time bomb about to go off. What were they expecting of her? Dry-eyed she stared back at them.

As Lucy sat there, she was trying to understand her emotions which, to add to her discomfort, seemed to consist primarily of a mixture of relief and excitement and not the grief of loss that she had expected, and that she felt would have been more appropriate.

Lucy stared at the vicar's nose which glowed red against the white of his cassock and felt strangely elated. It suited her that the day was so rotten, the church so cold. It made her feel less guilty about

the surges of excitement that coursed through her like electric currents.

She felt that morning as if she'd been released from bondage and although it was a frightening sensation it was exhilarating as well.

Not that she hadn't loved her mother. On no, Lucy had absolutely adored Mercedes. She had been glad to devote her life to her mother, without reserve and with unstinting generosity. Her exhilaration came from the realisation of a job well done, a job she had completed to the very best of her ability and which was now over.

People in this psychologically oriented age had tried to foist upon Lucy feelings of resentment and the shadow of exploitation. Some insisted that she was 'in denial', saying that she should, if she was normal, *hate* her mother. They insisted that her mother had spoiled her life and she had every reason to loathe her. She *had* to be damaged, they said, repressed and deprived, but she shrugged off their psychoanalysing which at best was amateur and told them she had *chosen* her path. Her mother had always made it clear to her that she would cheerfully go into a home if necessary; it was Lucy who insisted that she wanted to do the job. It made her happy. It was what she wanted to do. Any other course would have made her miserable. The so-called experts sighed, shook their heads and left her alone.

Lucy had felt no desire to break loose from the bonds of love and duty that held her to her mother. She had rarely yearned for the umbilical cord to be cut

and had perplexed those people, eager to categorise and pigeon-hole, who felt that the least she could do as a teenager was to rebel. But Lucy didn't. She had no desire to rebel. In her quiet accepting way she had early on decided that it was her duty to look after her mother and although she was no long-suffering saint she actually enjoyed her usefulness and the fact that her mother found her essential.

"She looked after me," she told anyone who tried to sort her out. "All those years, without help from my father. She put me through school when she was sick, when the illness must have been debilitating and exhausting. She never let me down. I am only too proud and honoured to look after her now that she needs me. It's the least I can do." They shook their heads and babbled clichés. If she wanted to give up her young life to care for an ailing mother then who were they to stop her?

The vicar was nodding to the Funeral Director and four of his assistants were shouldering the black coffin. The Funeral Director removed Lucy's wreath from the coffin and a shower of petals billowed to the stone floor leaving ugly brown dead-heads amid the greenery. The flowers could not have been fresh. She frowned. She thought 'I'll have to complain', but in her heart knew that she wouldn't.

The vicar indicated that she should follow as they proceeded to the closed doors of the church. Then, as with most funerals, there followed a moment of comic relief. As they waited in front of the closed doors a soft snore broke the eerie silence in the church. The

verger had been dozing near the door and now they all turned to look at him. The vicar prodded him and he snorted awake, leapt to his feet, shook himself and as they waited he began to open the door under the frowning gaze of the Funeral Director with a huge old-fashioned key. He obviously found it difficult to manage and kept dropping it as he glanced around fearfully at his impatient boss and the little cortège at the doors.

Lucy felt a giggle rise. She was not a giggly person and at first could not identify what it was that tickled her throat and she had to swallow hard to suppress it, deciding in her own mind that it must be hysteria, not laughter that had overcome her. She pressed her handkerchief to her lips as they waited and the poor vergers wrestled with his keys and the vicar tapped his foot and the undertakers' men sweated and hoped they would not drop the casket.

The funeral cortège finally emerged into the grey day.

Lucy blinked her eyes. It was classic funeral weather: howling winds that sucked umbrellas inside out and moaned through the trees like a banshee. It cut like a sharp knife slicing into Lucy's cheeks. The driving rain slanted towards the graveyard at the back of the church, turning the leaves all in the same direction, pale side out. It drove the cat out of the cemetery into the parsonage and the warmth of the blazing fire and the vicar's wife's lap.

They walked with dignity to the open graveside and Lucy watched as the men lowered the coffin into

it. She shivered. It was an awe-inspiring moment and sudden tears darkened her eyes. There was no sound except the vicar's drone and the tattoo of the rain on the foliage.

A wave of sadness hit her. It was the emotion she had expected to feel but had up to now eluded her, leaving her perplexed. Now, looking into the clayey receptacle her mother's coffin was going to be neatly tucked into, the space having been marked out years ago, and paid for, Lucy felt an overwhelming sense of loss and horror and grief at the reality of it all. Gone forever. The end. Finito. She pressed her handkerchief to her nose, which was watering in the wind and glanced up at the dancing branches of the trees.

As her eyes descended she realised that there was someone standing beneath the chestnut tree over to her right. A tall man, coat collar turned up, he was trying to shelter from the drenching rain and wind. He was hatless, silver-haired, distinguished and handsome and she wondered who he was. He was, she deduced, obviously someone paying their last respects to her mother for he was facing the grave and looking directly at her. She met his eyes and saw in them a responsive sympathy, and as their glances held, her attention was caught by a movement, another on the other side of the tree, near a lichen-covered tombstone.

They could have been brothers; maybe they were. They seemed reflections of each other, mirror images. They both wore camel coats and were good-looking

men, well-groomed, middle-aged, probably pushing sixty, and they stood facing the little group at the graveside: Lucy and the undertakers' men.

Another movement to her right caught her attention and there in that grey day, in the sleeting rain was yet another, this time a fedora-hatted elderly gentleman sheltering under an umbrella that he was desperately trying to hold on to in the raging wind.

And there another, a little behind the fedora-hatted man, this one holding a bowler against his chest. He had a swatch of silver hair carefully draped across his bald pate but as she looked it rose and stood up like a flag, vertical in the wind. Lucy reflected idly that he really should not have taken his hat off though he had obviously done so out of respect for her mother.

She knew they were her mother's friends and reason told her that they were probably old theatre buddies, but how odd, she thought, her mother had not been in contact with any of the old crowd for years.

The thunk of the sods on the coffin brought her attention back to the ceremony. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . ." *Again!* Oh the dreary old words to comfort but rather terrified the mourner. The inevitability of one's own mortality. The vicar intoned the unarguable words and the wind increased in velocity, whistled and screamed around the church belfry and black blankets of clouds scudded across the stormy sky like angry barges intent on war.

She looked to her left, averting her face from the fierce bite of the wind and to her amazement saw at least four or five other men, all elderly, all dapper, though revealing in their garb varying degrees of prosperity. They were standing about under the trees and around the tombstones and she glanced over her shoulder and there, behind her, stood yet another group. So her mother had not been forgotten after all.

"Amen!" The vicar looked at her deeply and with great sincerity He pressed her hand and murmured, "She's at peace now." How on earth did he know that? His nose was dripping and his eyes watering and he was obviously torn between the desire to do his duty to the best of his ability while filled with an overwhelming longing to go home.

She nodded. "Thank you," and looking about added, "why don't you go home. It's all over now."

He nodded to her and went. The undertakers' men were drifting, trying not to rush *too* eagerly to the limousines. The Funeral Director was sitting in the hearse smoking surreptitiously. The strange groups of elderly gentlemen were dispersing. Lucy hurried over towards the first man she had spotted who was also the nearest.

"Excuse me! Excuse me." She touched his arm and he glanced at her. "Do you mind me asking, who you are?"

"Eh?" He'd looked away from her towards the bleak landscape and the new grave. The trees were

bending over it in the velocity of the wind as if making obeisance to her mother.

"My turn soon," he murmured.

"Oh nonsense!" Lucy cried in the brisk nursing voice she'd used to curb her mother's worst excesses of self-pity. "You're hale and hearty. It will be a long time yet."

He shook his head and to her horror replied, "No my dear. They've given me, maximum, a year."

She pressed her gloved hand to her cheek. "Oh gosh! Oh I'm so sorry."

He smiled. "Don't be. You couldn't have known."

"It was tactless though, really gross of me."

He smiled again at her. It was a charming smile, a practised smile, a professional smile. "No, no. But let it be a lesson to you. Enjoy life while you can. It's a gift and it's a crime to waste it."

"Who are you though? I hope you don't mind my asking, but . . ."

"You're wondering what I'm doing here?"

"Yes. And the others. It's so odd . . . I . . ."

"I'm Barry Bröcklehurst. An actor. The others too. Theatre folk."

"But it's been years since Mother . . ."

He smiled again. "Oh we never forget. Certainly not *her*. Not Mercedes. You're her daughter I take it. Most of us knew you when you were a baby. Most of us are members of the Green Room Club. An actor's club. Private." He grinned. "Oh it sounds very grand but it is really a place where us old pros can meet and jaw over the good old days. Word went

around there of Merry's death. Someone read it in *The Times*."

She frowned. "Merry?" She could not imagine her mother being called Merry. Not in a million years. The pale ghost of a woman, bitter and in constant pain was very far away from such a diminutive.

"Yes. We called her Merry. Well," he waved his hand, "we all came to say, 'Farewell, let flights of angels sing thee to thy rest'." He gave her a wry glance and pulled his coat closer around him adding, "Though the demons of hell seem to have been let loose this ghastly day."

"How kind of you all," she said.

The man with the bald head and the fluttering flag of hair had replaced his bowler and was gesturing to Barry Brocklehurst. Some of the others had joined him and he was mouthing something about a jar and miming quaffing a drink.

Barry said, "I'd ask you to join us, only the Green Room Club is all male. Women are allowed only on sufferance. Mind you, I think it is still that way in this day and age because no woman in her right mind would want to join or spend time there." He looked at her quizzically. "Let me take you for a drink before I join the others. I take it there's no wake?"

She shook her head. "I didn't expect anybody," she murmured helplessly, feeling she'd somehow let her mother down though she could not think how or why. She could not have expected such an abundance of gentlemen at the graveside and, even if she had, she