

SOME STRANGE STORIES.

JULIAN HAWTHORNE TELLS OF HIS EXPERIENCE WITH SPIRITS.

Mary Rondel and Her Determination to be Heard—The Part She Played in the History of the Hawthorne's—The Way a Ghost Story Should be Told.



T often happens to people of my profession to be asked to tell a story—a ghost story by preference—and, it possible, a ghost story of their own experiencing. It has happened to me, at any rate; and I have uniformly failed to make a good showing. Whether this was because my material was worse than the average, I know not; but I incline to think it was more because I handled it badly. I am no hand to give *rien rare* narratives. My object is to reach the point of the story by the shortest route, and so have done with it. This is contrary to wise principle, especially in the case of ghost stories.

The effectiveness of a good ghost story lies always in the handling, never in the issue. The experience is a subjective one: it is a matter of nerves and obscure sensations—a state of feeling, not a fact of knowledge. You must put your auditors in a ghostly frame of mind: their magic or intelligence is the last thing to appeal to. They must be brought to the condition of the person described by Coleridge, who "turns no more his head, because he knows a frightful fiend close behind his tread." This state is to be enchanted by intonations of the voice, by a stern horror of the eye, and by ineffable pauses, judiciously administered. By and by there begins a trickling of cold electricity down the nerves of the spine, a perception that the hair has roots, an oppression of the lungs, a thumping of the heart, a parting of the lips, and a dilation of the eyes—all on the part of your audience, and having achieved this, the thing is done, whatever the particular composition of the story may be. Whether it is that the long, indistinct object dangles from the hook in the wall, where nothing was before, slowly yet unmistakably takes the outlines of a human figure, with head awkwardly bent to one side, and a distortion of the countenance, or whether, as you stand outside the door of a certain room that has been locked up for years, you hear on the other side the light patter of naked feet, and a stealthy breathing, followed by terrible screams and silence; or whether, awakening in a strange bedroom in the night, you are nervous of a queer light, which focuses on the wall, revealing the face of a portrait hanging there, which you had not noticed when you went to bed; or whether it be simply the impression of a presence squatting in the corner and raying out influences fatal to life . . . such details as those, I say, are unimportant. You have got your nerves where they will be scared by anything.

Now, to write is another thing than to talk. But ghost-stories can be conveyed by writing, after a fashion, and, inferior though it may be, it is better than my fashion of talking. Accordingly, not to seem dissembling, I am here going to recount my personal experiences in the supernatural by means of pen and ink. Should the result prove unsatisfactory, it must be laid to the entire and unexaggerated truth of the stories. They are more or less shapeless and anomalous events that have come under my observation. No doubt, any one can cap them with as good and better yarns of his own. I need hardly add, too, that I could greatly increase the impressiveness of my little assortment by occasional in-

dulgence in fiction; but that I shall religiously refrain from doing. These things happened precisely thus:

Put the shade over the lamp.—When I was a boy of twelve or thirteen, I used to sit and watch a hand, holding a pencil, moving to and fro over a sheet of paper. The place was suitable for ghosts and all who were familiar with it declared it to be haunted. It was an ancient Italian villa, or castle, perched on a hill of the town Apennines, overlooking a wide valley with a historic river winding through it. There was a tower at one end of it, in which a political captive had been imprisoned more than two hundred years before. An owl now occupies the gloomy chamber in which he used to languish; but after sunset it would flap noiselessly round the battlements of the tower, emitting its soft, long-drawn cry. And there were also in abundance.

up aloft, watching the great comet that arched across the horizon of the valley, I have heard my name called in the air, just over the parapet. There was a clean drop there of seventy feet to the ground.

In the body of the edifice there was a sort of cell, or oratory, massively constructed of stone, with grained ceiling. This was the special abiding place of the ghost. One night my sister, having occasion to go there, set the candle on the mantel-piece. As she was stooping over a chest in the corner she noticed her shadow glide along the wall. Turning, she saw that the candle had been placed on the table, several yards from its former position. But no one except herself was in that part of the house.

An immense place it was, with upwards of 40 large rooms. As there were only five of us in the family, we each had a suite of five or six apartments. My bedroom was at the end of the west wing—five rooms, opening into one another, intervened between that one and a huge reception hall in the centre of the building. Often, in the dark of the night, I have waked up and heard some one pacing to and fro in these rooms, and the rustle of a long skirt sweeping on the bare wooden floors. I used to suppose it was my mother, and it was not until some years later that I discovered that it was either my imagination—or something else. As to that, I can only say that none of us children had the least fear of ghosts, or knew that anybody feared them. We had never been frightened by injudicious means.

However, to go back to that hand. It was a white, well-shaped woman's hand, with long, slender fingers, and a turquoise ring on one finger. I must not make a mystery of this. It was the hand of a fair young American lady who, years afterwards leaped or fell from a steamboat in Long Island sound, and so vanished from this world. But at the time I write of, she was a woman of happy disposition and singular intelligence, and was a graduate of a famous western college. Greek, and the Calculus, was as familiar to her as figs and grapes were to me. Either her education, or a natural bias of mind, called rendered her rather skeptical in her views; nowadays, she might have been called an agnostic. Nevertheless she possessed (though she herself despised and ridiculed it) that still unexplained power or susceptibility that we have agreed to call "mediumistic." She was a "writing medium."

It was the era of the Fox Sisters, and of Home. Spiritualism has not lost its novelty. Science has delivered no verdict, and nobody knows whether to believe or not. But there was an English lady living near

other spiritual friends; it was in vain that they attempted to assure us that she was a had, improper, untruthful, ill-conditioned creature. In the midst of their pious homilies she would swoop down, snatch the pencil, and send it staggering in violent evolutions along the page; her language was anything but conventional; nay, it sometimes became indelicate, if not scandalous. Occasionally our refined little medium would protest and remove her hand from the table. But no sooner did she resume, then Mary was at it again. She would not be denied. She was a temperamental, a will, a person. Of all our long procession of communicants she alone showed an unmistakable and vivid individuality. We would have known her had we met her on the street. She had been waiting in the dark void of the unseen world, for the better part of a century, for an opportunity to speak and declare herself, and she was not going to let it go unimproved. And yet the poor creature knew not what to say—only that she admired Mr. Hawthorne's sympathy. But what good was it to do her, or by what right she demanded it, we were not informed.

He assured her that he would not and did not sympathize with her, hoping, thereby, to pacify her and so get rid of her. But no—she clung to us all the tighter. Having at length found a sympathizer, she would henceforth cleave to him. It soon became impossible to get communications from anybody except Mary Rondel; and, since the atmosphere she brought with her was clearly unwholesome, the seances were finally abandoned; and that was the end of Mary, so far as we were concerned.

Now the sequel was strange, we returned to America two or three years later, and four years after that my father died. Some venerable maiden cousins of ours sent us, some months subsequently, a box of old books and papers that had belonged to our family in the last century. Among the books was a dilapidated copy of Sir Philip Sydney's "Arcadia," bearing date of 1586. On the fly-leaves were the autographs of a number of our ancestors, from the first emigrant down to Daniel Hawthorne, who, history says, commanded a privateer during the Revolution. And on the broad margin at the bottom of the tenth page was inscribed, in faded brown ink, a woman's name: "Mary Rondel." It is before me as I write, an ill-formed name, but showing character.

After some reflection, I remembered the circumstances under which I had seen that name before. Searching further into the book, I came upon the love sonnets and stanzas in faded ink, a woman's name; but several of these had been marked round with a pen, and such glosses written in the margin as "Pray, mistress, read this;" or "Read this as if I myself spoke it." Some of these writings were in the chirography of Daniel Hawthorne; others, in another hand, and their graves drenched with the blood of as many slaves, while the vulgar herd have to be content with solitary sepulture, the corpse being placed in a sitting posture, with the right forefinger pointing heavenwards, just level with the top of the mound over the grave. Travelling a little out of the Lakes basin, we find the Mbinda of the Congo county covering their graves with crockery, gin and beer bottles, and, as we have seen it practised by other tribes, suspending in the branches of the neighboring trees the articles which were used by the deceased during life.—*The Peoples of the World.*

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THIS little novelty is indispensable to every man who has once used one. The advantage is that you can never lose your keys, never misplace them, never leave them at home or in the post office box; can never lose them through a hole in your pocket, or lose them in any way. It is neat, looks well, being nickel-plated.



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THE GHOSTLY PEN DRIVER.

us, whose poetry was read by all England and America, who was a believer, and often discoursed with earnestness on the subject; and one day she said, "If we only had a medium!" Whereupon, this American girl-graduate that I speak of, out of the kindness of her heart, but with some reluctance intimated that she believed she had some little faculty in that way . . . but that she could not, herself, place the least credence in the supernatural origin of the phenomena.

To make a long story short—for who could resist the urging of the little brown-eyed woman of genius, who was a lyric in herself?—our medium consented to an experiment; and for a couple of weeks thereafter, while seven or eight of us sat round the table in the great Italian hall, the pencil in her white hand would be driven along the paper, now under one unseen impulse, now under another, she regarding it with a look half apprehensive, half incredulous; but all of us hugely interested. Our deceased friends and relatives announced themselves, one after another, and expressed sentiments of unimpeachable morality and virtuous exhortation—just what anyone would have expected of such good and respectable persons; and the thing was becoming a trifle monotonous, and the medium was writing that more useful ways of employing one's leisure might be found: when, all of a sudden . . .

Draw up closer, the story begins here. Her hand which had been moving methodically along under the direction of the spirit of my maternal grandfather and had just written the words, "we study causes," was suddenly and violently seized upon, as it were, by a new and turbulent influence almost knocking the pencil out of her fingers and hurrying it onward in a quite original handwriting, uncouth and heedless, and moreover incorrect in orthography. The medium started and looked troubled: a wave of interest ran round the circle; she bent forward and spoke out the words, "I must speak with Mr. Hawthorne, I want his sympathy."

My father laughed. He had deprecated and made fun of the whole business from the beginning. But with the courtesy of a man of the world, and an ex-consul of the United States, he consented to listen to a communication which seemed to convey such urgency. Who was the vehement petitioner?

In the course of the next half hour we had as much of her history as she ever confided to us. Her name was Mary Rondel. She was born in Boston a hundred years before. She had died there, in pain and misery, while still a young woman. Her troubles had their source in a certain member of our own family, with whom she had been intimately acquainted. She was not happy even yet, and Mr. Hawthorne's sympathy she must now have.

But how shall I indicate the weird, curious and yet pathetic impression that was produced, not more by the matter than by the manner of her communications? Mary Rondel was bitterly in earnest; she would be heard; she upset the propriety of all our

BURIAL CUSTOMS IN AFRICA.

The Savage Ceremonies that Attend the Interment of Great Men.

Men of rank, after being attired with their common aprons, are interred either sitting on their benches or are enclosed in a kind of coffin made from a hollow tree. As already noticed in other tribes, the earth is not thrown on the corpse, which is placed in a niche in the side of the grave. Like the Bongo, the Niam-Niam bury their dead with a scrupulous regard to the points of the compass; but commonly enough they reverse the rule which prevails in the former tribe, the men being placed with their faces towards the east, the women towards the west. After the grave has been well stamped down, a hut is erected over it, though, owing to its fragile character, it rarely long survives the weather or the annual burning of the steppe pasture. A Wagogo chief, on dying, is washed—perhaps one of the few times in the course of his existence that such a treat is vouchsafed his body—and his corpse placed in an upright position in a hollow tree, to which the people come daily to mourn and pour their ashes on the corpse, indulging themselves meanwhile in a kind of wake. This ritual goes on until the body is thoroughly decomposed, when it is placed on a platform and exposed to the effects of the weather, which speedily reduces it to a heap of bones. These are then duly buried. At one time slaves were sacrificed to heighten the dignity of such occasions; but in marked contrast with the elaborate rites attending a great man's sepulture, the bodies of commoners are thrown into the nearest jungle to be devoured by beasts of the field and fowl of the air. Commander Cameron, from whom we glean these particulars, describes the burial of a chief in Urua as accompanied with practices almost unequalled in the annals of savagery. The first step taken when such a dignitary expires is to divert the course of a stream, and to dig an enormous pit in its bed. This cavern is then lined with living women. At one end a woman is placed on her hands and knees, and upon her back the corpse of the dead chief, covered with beads and other ornaments, is seated, supported on each side by one of his wives, while