

LITERARY.

JOHN WILLOW'S GHOST.

BY ROSE HAWTHORNE LATHROP

"Well, John, what's the matter?" exclaimed Peter Nasserol one morning, showing his polished countenance through the partly opened door, whose handle he had noiselessly turned after a light knock.

John Willow raised his pale face to look at his friend suspiciously. With the favorable opportunities for perfect isolation which, a poor young man in a large city enjoys, he could boast of but one friend, or even acquaintance, and that one was Nasserol. But this morning Willow had received a severe shock. Everything upon his heavily laden writing-table had been moved from its accustomed place overnight. Manuscript, newspapers, books, and blank paper were all neatly separated, and piled in orderly fashion upon the broad mahogany. But as the young writer who controlled all this material did not believe in superficial order in regard to it, but in the order which, for deep thinkers, underlies the medley of a composing desk, he could hardly be accused of having set the table to rights with his own hands. The question was, had Nasserol got into his writing room early in the morning, and in the fulness of that humor for which he was noted, taken upon himself to pay a practical joke in this form? But as Nasserol stood at the door he looked so entirely innocent and good-natured that Willow said, albeit coldly, "come in."

"Have you any malady to day?—cramps for instance?" asked Peter, coming in slowly, and taking a chair, as if he begged its pardon for the liberty. This was mere latest fun on his part, for his gayety leaped and flickered alternately like the flame of a hearth fire, now un-suppressed, and again subdued as a lamb. His bright eyes, rather prominent, observed restlessly the orderly writing paraphernalia, and the dejection of his friend. Willow's whole figure, which was strongly outlined by the light from a large window on one side of him.

"You are always here before I am quite awake," said Willow shortly, but with a more gentle glance. He was naturally the very soul of hospitality.

Peter stroked his chin and whiskers looked at him, at the great window, and back again at the table. He read Willow's thoughts, and remarked, "The janitor—"

"It wasn't the janitor!" cried Willow, banging his thin white fist upon the table angrily. "I never allow him to come into this room but once a week, and then I stand over him. He would not dare to put anything in order on this table any more than if it was covered with hot lava. Besides, this is not all."

"Not all?" repeated Nasserol with a start.

Willow rose, made a slight motion, which induced Nasserol to rise also, and went over to the darker side of the room. Over the clock standing on the mantelpiece, was slung a rich lace handkerchief. It was one which the young writer had bought for its exquisite delicacy, at the expense, of course, of considerable comfort, but it was like him, he possessed the large hearted recklessness of a lonely being. As Nasserol's eyes rested upon this dainty object, a thousand fancies hurried through his mind. He transferred his gaze to his friend's face with a bird-like scrutiny, which seemed to see nothing in particular, but lay in wait for it.

Willow reached out, not very steadily, and lifted the ethereal covering from the clock's face. He

sprung back, his lips parted. The hands of the clock had been removed.

"Nasserol!" he cried, striking his friend roughly upon the chest with the back of his hand. "how dare you mock me?"

"I" exclaimed Nasserol, in astonishment, color and vivacity flushing his face.

"You must play your merry tricks upon a less lonely man," said Willow bitterly. "I am in no mood to bear them."

"Then you think I came in here over night and touched things up all around, do you?" asked Peter, beginning to smile roguishly. "My dear fellow, I was sound asleep, I assure you."

The young writer stood looking at him sternly, with his hands upon his hips.

"Who did it, then?" "The janitor—or—I don't know." Nasserol looked at the handkerchief, hanging at Willow's side from his hand. The latter held it up, and then stepped to the table and dropped it upon it.

"I bought it myself for myself," he said. He half sat upon the table as if exhausted.

"I have done with time, have I?" he queried sadly. "But I never had any youth worth speaking of, so I suppose I must be rather old by this time. A pretty dry story mine. First born into a circus troupe, and then an obscure literary man. I might as well have done with time. See my pen turned in its sheath, and lying upon my unfinished page, as if I were already dead!"

Nasserol sank into a chair, and assumed an expression of sympathy which was genuine.

"I have always borne the time-piece a grudge," Willow went on, his full lips curving sadly. "It either measured out too much of life, according to one mood, or struck my hours away too mercilessly, according to another. But silent it is like a corpse."

Willow's visitor interrupted with a deep groan. Then he said, "I am persuaded, John, you are indulging in instalments of opium. Listen to the words of mother, and make those instalments beautifully less, or I shall have my darling boy ill of brain fever on my hands."

"You call me a misanthrope and all that," continued the young writer, "but you know very well I have no means for going into society. You do not know how much sympathy I have for the world about me, how every kind of interest which the world feels—the ambition, the joy of success, the love—seems to glide past me, or even through me, as if I were a ghost. I am so human, so lonely, so buried, that I am haunted, Nasserol—haunted!" He covered his face with his hands, shuddered, and ran his fingers up through his dark hair.

"By Jove!" muttered Nasserol, and beat his toe with his cane.

"I suppose you are just playing upon me as you would upon an old musical instrument," said Willow. "My jangling notes amuse you, and are no doubt sufficiently ridiculous to make it worth your while."

They looked at each other for half a dozen breaths. Then Nasserol calmly replied: "Do you think I could come through the keyhole, John? even if I wished to make game of your den here? The playful camel may pass through the eye of a needle, but I should not attempt it."

Willow walked away toward the window. "It is as if I were a waste of snow," he said, "freezing to death, slowly losing my instinct of self-preservation, and soon to be buried forever in this unutterable singleness."

"Oh, now I understand these tremendous blues better," ejaculated Nasserol. "It is that Miss Graeme in fatuation again."

"That is my greatest cause of desolation, certainly," said Willow. "I love her, and she is as unapproachable as the sky. Nasserol, if you would only make her acquaintance! You are so much in society that I should think, with some effort, you might meet her. Then you could introduce me into her family."

"You might as well talk of the Queen of Sheba!" cried Nasserol, angrily, or as angrily as the most genial man in the world could. Miss Graeme's father—they are all alike, these rich merchants. Their daughters must marry follows made of gold to the very teeth. Go into the country, you moil about the candle, with your one grain of gold dust. Marry some village beauty."

John Willow glanced upward through the high window, which was a picturesque one, crossed with fantastic traceries of metal, and opening down the centre like a French casement; for the room had originally been constructed for a studio.

"How you always gaze at those walls opposite!" said Nasserol. He looked quite stern and displeased, as he addressed the following question to Willow's back: "Do you ever see her at those windows?"

The other did not answer. "If any one wants to know a good way to fall in love," Nasserol went on, trying to console himself for a disagreeable thought with a dash of ill-humor, "I'll give him a letter of introduction to the eminent Professor John Willow, Fellow of Venus College, and Master of Amatory Arts. You will tell the novice to pick out some exquisite girl to be met daily on the promenade, and then to make the most of utterly hopeless conditions."

"You are very facetious," assented Willow, with a shrug of his shoulders, still staring out of the window. He now saw a figure at one of those across the intervening enclosure.

"One of the most exciting diversions in your college course," continued Nasserol, "is the purchasing, at the expense of dinner for the day, a bunch of passion flowers like those I found you gloating over the other evening. But I must be going to business."

"My passion is beyond these humorous allusions and attacks," said Willow turning. "I could wish the only man I know and care for in this city—that is to say you—were more interested in my most vital concerns."

"I'm afraid I'm not strong enough; I suffer from a malaria of the sympathies," replied Nasserol, pursing up his mouth; and saying "Good-morning," he departed.

"How can it be Nasserol who has done this thing?" thought Willow, half aloud. He sat down before his unfinished page of manuscript, and then rapidly changed his position to one full of fierceness, as if ready to spring upon some invisible being, whom he imagined to be confronting him. "If I could only lay hands upon you!" he growled, in the deep hollow tones of a trembling dog preparing to leap forward.

"Persecutor and demon, who has come to me when my courage has reached a human ardor, and remind me that a curse has stamped me for its own! I wish I could tear you limb from limb! But," he added, thoughtfully, "can it be that my strangely secluded life and introverted musings have rendered me susceptible to the visits of ghosts—disembodied spirits—and that their communications find a medium in my fading vitality and thin-spun mental imaginings? Can they come nearer to life through me, an unwitting medium, and even touch and move what is real in their mad strange way?"

These suppositions cooled Willow's anger, at the mischievous interference of some human fellow-being as effectually as if a spirit from the unseen world had in fact laid a chilling hand

upon his shoulder sarcastically reproving him.

He went again to the church-like window, and laid his burning forehead against the cool pane. The gray light without made his gray eyes gleam with an unearthly light. How strange it was, thought he, that, already suppressed by poverty and inherited obscurity, he must be crushed down still further with a persecution which he could only explain by the deadly means of spiritualism.

It was because his room was in a block of buildings which adjoined at an angle the one in which Miss Graeme lived that the young man never changed his abode for sunnier quarters.

He could sometimes see her in an attitude of meditation at the window, in contrast to the swift encounter upon the street, which came more frequently, and was the one full enjoyment of his life. He had first seen Miss Graeme a year before, emerging from a florist's shop with a fresh bunch of violets at her, so fragrant, so full of the beautiful pale blooms, that he wondered if she would ever need flowers again. It is so hard to believe that beautiful things will pass away! He loved the girl with the intensity of a wholly undivided interest. His literary work clustered about thoughts of her, as bees about a garden. Sometimes he had found her eyes resting upon him, with a growing responsiveness, a responsiveness so ethereal that it brought her no nearer to his life, but enabled him to understand her life with a touch of reality.

With set lips and stormy thoughts he now turned back to his unaccountably invaded chamber, and braving the uneasiness which he felt, he endeavored to pursue his work.

That night he spent in watching, but with no disturbance or discovery. The next night he again watched, falling asleep with the table for a pillow. He had the third night decided to give his peculiar intimate another chance. He slept deeply. In the morning he awoke terribly fatigued—terribly fatigued. Anxiety and unaccustomed hours of rest had given his sleep a poisoned heaviness. He dragged himself eagerly and fearfully to the curtain which shut off his sleeping alcove from the rest of the room. Could he believe his eyes? His invisible guest had made the best of his opportunity.

Confusion instead of order had this time been the prevailing motive. Most noticeable among the debris were the unhinged sides of this lofty window, which opened, as has been said, perpendicularly. They stood phantom-like against the table, between Willow and the gray light without. And upon the window-sill, taken from the open hearth in uncouth jesting, hung the iron fire-fender, bent nearly double by unusual force—perhaps the last feat of Willow's ghost or spirit: before it dissolved into the congenial atmosphere of the early dawn.

No one saw the young writer that day. At the first rush of horror he lay senseless upon the floor, and then, recovering, shrank into the darkest depths of his room in utter despair. Several knocks at his door, which summoned him to admit both Nasserol and the janitor, were like dreams of sound to him. He did not respond even by a movement of his eyelids. At evening as he fell back in his chair in the presence of the gaping window, overcome by fasting and excitement, but prepared to rouse himself to the attack of any one who should enter to torment him, he murmured: "O lovely girl, a look, a touch of yours might kill the demon in me!" Then he slept. Before his sleeping form lay a letter which he had written during the day.

Nasserol had become much alarmed for his friend. His inability to rouse Willow gave him increasing anxiety. The afternoon of the next day he de-