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May 2, 77 [Established 1819] 1-387

## CHRISTMAS STORY.

Continued from Fifth Page.

while the pulsations of his heart appeared to grow weaker and less distinct, as he sat spell-bound with fear.

Raising his eyes again with great effort, he could see no one there now. The apparition had vanished as noiselessly as it had come, and he was free to ponder over the strange sight he had seen. Was it all a dream, arising from an excited brain? Perhaps only a phantom caused by impaired health acting on a too credulous mind. He laid his finger on his pulse, it beat healthily. No, it could not be that. He never felt healthier or less excited.

"Why was this being induced to leave the sacred rest of the tomb and wander about this hoary building?" he mentally asked himself. Perhaps it was on this spot that some ruthless prowler had laid his profane hand upon her. He could feel in what a strange penetrating manner she had fastened her eyes on him, as if reading his soul. Could she have mistaken him for the murderer?

Such were some of the thoughts which passed rapidly through Walter Hastings' mind. Had he spoken to and questioned his strange visitor, all might have been explained, but now he was lost in a sea of doubt. The cynicism, too, with which he always assailed anything pertaining to the supernatural, was gone. What were all the arguments and fine-spun theories in favor of materialism when arrayed against this stern fact—that a few short hours ago, and in that very spot on which he was now gazing, he beheld a being that no possible strength of reasoning could assume to be mortal. Time fled by unheeded, as he sat turning over the strange events of the night, nor did he become conscious of the hour till the sun came out brightly and pleasantly, to bid the world "good morning." From every tree the birds sent up a joyous song to heaven. Everything was bright, cheerful and happy on this delightful morning. Walter Hastings alone was gloomy and sad. Bending his steps towards the house, undetermined whether or not to divulge what he had seen, he was startled to hear his name called out familiarly. Turning round, he recognized his old friend Fred Osborne.

"The top of the morning to you, Walter," he said, wringing Walter's hand warmly. "But what on earth is the matter, old fellow? You look as moody as the compiler of a homily. Surely that little bit of luck you have lately had has not robbed you of all your gaiety and humor?"

"No, no Osborne. You do me great injustice in fancying that money has the power of turning my mental faculties upside down."

"Well, well, old fellow, that is not my meaning. What I really meant to say was that you are looking a little gloomy, quite different to the Walter Hastings of three years ago. You must give up horse-riding, active out-door sports—but hold, I'm prescribing for you gratis."

"It would be hardly fair to charge for a useless prescription," Walter said, attempting to smile.

"Just put a query after those two last words, and I will forgive your presumption," he said laughing.

"By the way, Walter," he continued in a more serious tone, "I have something exciting to tell you. You can hardly prove a skeptic this time, as I assure you, on my word of honor, I witnessed what I am about to relate."

"I cannot for the life of me guess, Fred, why you and everybody else call me a skeptic. It was only the other day my father almost gazed me to madness for not believing with him in shadows, genii, spirit-rapping, and heaven knows what."

"The world is going ahead, Walter," Fred Osborne remarked sagely. "The notions of twenty years ago are scoffed at to-day, and in twenty to come you will find that spirit-rapping will not be looked upon as a myth, but—"

"But your story, Fred, does it in any way relate to spirit-rapping?" interrupted Walter.

"You shall see. He drew himself back a few paces, slightly elevated his right arm in stage fashion, and proceeded, 'Late last night, or rather early this morning, as I was returning from Lieutenant Cole's, where I had spent a thorough jolly night, I saw on this road, skirting this garden, the form of a young woman. I caught a glimpse of her features with the light full upon them. A profile so grand I never beheld. Gladly would I have gone closer to feast my eyes on such rare charms, but a something undefinable in her repelled me. Walter, you may laugh at me, still I am convinced, here he shuddered, that what I saw was not mortal.'

"You are sure you did not have too much wine? Walter suggested, pretending to treat the whole story with careless ease.

"I was as sober as a judge should be, I assure you and noticed everything carefully, but above all her eyes. They shone with a luminous splendor, which convinced me that the object on which I was gazing was not flesh and blood."

"Just come inside, Fred, and we will chat the whole thing over," Walter Hastings said, while a look of trouble and perplexity fell like a shadow across his handsome features. "You will breakfast with me this morning? I am so sadly off for company here."

"I am afraid, Walter, I must be ungracious enough to give you a flat refusal. I have an appointment for nine exactly."

"Well upon my word, you are possessed of a delicate conscience. You run across from Elbridge, and after frightening one almost to death, refuse him your company for half-an-hour."

"I cannot help it, Walter. This note is imperative," he said, pulling from his pocket a neat and highly scented billet.

"A lady?" Walter said inquiringly, as he regarded his interlocutor.

"Yes. I always am punctual in my appointments. So were you with my cousin Helena, when she was alive."

"The color came and went from Walter Hastings' cheeks as that name, now so sacred, was recalled. Fred Osborne did not notice, or did not heed the pain his words were causing, but went on: 'You and Sir Lionel had a row, had you not, before leaving? He and I could never agree. He proposed on one occasion to kick me down stairs. I remarked quietly that he was standing by a window thirty feet from the ground. He discreetly took the hint and said no more.'

"That accounts for your absence from Essex House, during my short day, I suppose," Walter said, sighing.

"Yes, that was the reason. I and my ferocious relative have made it up since then. But I must not stay a minute longer," he said, glancing hurriedly at his watch. "Good-bye; you and I shall meet ere long in happier time; and shaking hands warmly, he proceeded with a brisk pace towards Elbridge.

"Alas, Fred, the happier times you speak of will never again come back to me!" Walter Hastings said sadly, as he watched the receding figure of his light-hearted friend.

Shortly after Fred Osborne's departure Walter Hastings retired to his room, stretched himself on a couch, and lay for some time wrapt in the deepest thought. He was more than ever resolved not to reveal anything of the strange occurrence. He now found fault with himself for the cowardice he had displayed in failing to address his unearthly visitor. "To-night I shall unravel this mystery," he said with a determined air. "I shall sit in the same spot, and if that mysterious form again appears, I shall certainly ask the object of her visit."

## CHAPTER IV.

"In me is no delay; with thee to go is to stay here; without thee here to stay is to go hence unwilling; thou to me art all things under heaven."

It was a long wearisome day to Walter Hastings. The sun appeared sluggish in performing his daily journey through the heavens, and his declining rays lingered provokingly long before taking their final farewell.

Soft twilight lingered for a while, and was followed by the more sombre shadows of night. Mrs. Parr, after wishing Walter good night, retired to rest, taking care to fortify herself internally and externally, as before.

The solemn hour of midnight approached, and Walter, too, repaired to his room, but not to sleep. Anxiously and wound up to a pitch of excitement, he paced the floor, glancing ever and anon at the clock. "It wants but twenty minutes to the time now," he muttered, in a half fearful manner. Taking his hat from the peg on which it was hanging, and lowering the light in his room, he left the house and turned slowly to the spot he had occupied on the previous night. His heart beat quickly as he approached that little seat. He was by no means a coward, but he could not resist the feeling of dread that stole over him. All alone he stood in that dreadful spot, with not a human being near, except the half-witted old woman sleeping in the house.

It was a lovely night. A soft flood of light pervaded the garden, making every object as easily discernible as in the noon-day. Not a breath of air moved a single leaf in the whole place—everything was fixed and motionless—a strange, an awful silence prevailed everywhere, while the trees, tall, erect, and exaggerated in that dim light, resembled mute guardians watching over the silent dead. Tall gaunt shadows flitted in a weird and fantastic fashion along the garden walks, making the stillness more oppressive by their silent movements. The ticking of his watch was the only sound that broke the dead silence of the night. He took it from his pocket and placed it on the palm of his hand, while he watched the movements of the second hand, endeavoring by this means to dispel, if possible, the horrid gloom fast settling upon him. He kept his eyes fixed on the minute hand as it moved with slow precision round the dial. Tick, tick, tick. It wanted now but ten minutes to the time. He placed the watch in his pocket, and tried to summon up all his courage, but his heart sank within him while he fervently hoped this ghastly figure would not again appear. Taking the watch again from his pocket, he saw that it wanted but four minutes to three o'clock.

"Will she come?" he asked himself, feverishly. The little chapel bell, hard by, chimed thrice, slowly and sadly, while each intonation seemed to say in answer to his query, "She will."

The last echo had just died away when, in the self-same spot, leaning in the same attitude as on the previous night, with her eyes fixed upon him, he again beheld the vision of the previous night.

"All his courage, his fixed determination to address and question her, forsook him. She bent her clear eyes upon him, and seemed as if about to approach him. Intently he gazed. Did she move from the spot on which she was standing? Was she about to depart? No; merciful heaven, she was coming towards him. His brain reeled; he felt powerless to say or do anything.

Slowly she glided towards him, and laying one of her lovely hands lightly on his shoulder, looked lovingly into his face, and whispered the one word "Walter."

The magic of those soft musical tones revived him; all his courage returned; he raised his head to answer her, but she had vanished in the same mysterious manner as before. Puzzled and bewildered, he got up from the seat, muttering something like a lament for his want of courage. Standing on the spot she had occupied but a few moments before, he made the sign of the Cross, and silently prayed that she might again appear. He looked eagerly for her coming, but the longing of his heart was not gratified, and heart-sick, dejected and utterly lonely, he turned his steps towards the house.

Walter Hastings' sleep on that night was one continuous dream. The soft, luminous eyes, the faultless figure and sweet voice of that mysterious being, chased themselves in quick succession through his imaginations; nor did the morning in any way efface the memory of his nocturnal adventure. He awoke with a fresh determination to unravel the dark secret involved in the visit of this lovely spectre.

That night he seated himself in the accustomed spot, and anxiously waited for the chapel bell to peal out three o'clock. It struck at last. The tones faded away on the breeze, but its summons remained unheeded. Nothing save echo answered to its call.

But stop! a dark shadow flits along the gravel walk. Can it be? No, he is deceived; it is only a cloud shrouding the moon's pale light for a few minutes, and then pursuing its onward way through infinite space. In an agony of despair he leaned against one of the trees, and passionately implored her presence, but as before, his prayer remained unanswered.

CHAPTER V.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamed of in our philosophy."

AN EXPLANATION OF THE "GHOST."

That strange mysterious dream of Helena Wardbrook now came back to Walter's memory with wonderful distinctness. In his mind's eye he saw her just as she appeared when, bidding him good-bye, standing under the shadow of the huge old tree, with a tiny foot placed forward, a flash on her pale cheek, and an unnatural brilliancy in her blue eyes, she looked like a prophetic as she revealed to him her ominous dream. Two long tedious years had rolled away since then, yet every word she had spoken he now remembered.

"I approached you joyfully, but you turned coldly away. I knew you did not recognize me, so like had I grown to the spirits I had only just left."

Had she not spoken these words, and how strangely were they now fulfilled. "Yes, yes," he muttered impatiently, "the apparition in the garden is nothing else than the spirit of Helena Wardbrook. Fear prevented me from recognizing her at first, but now I am convinced. I am convinced." Taking a turn up and down the garden to allay his excitement, he went on talking to himself. "And she called me Walter in her own sweet way, as she used to do when on earth. Oh, why have I not spoken to her, and told her how I long to be with her. The opportunity for doing so has now passed away, perhaps, forever." Overcome with these painful reflections, he could not say or think any more, but dropping his head on his hands he abandoned himself to his grief. Starting up again like a man whose mind has been deranged with sorrow, he paced the garden with a rapid step. Stopping suddenly he exclaimed fervently and thoughtlessly, "O Heaven, life has no charm for me since she has gone. I pray that I may be taken to her."

A faint rustling was heard among the trees as he spoke.

"Helena! Helena!" he cried, throwing his arms outward towards the spot from which the noise proceeded, "reveal yourself but once again, and I promise that no human fear shall prevent my speaking to you."

The words of a magician could not have had a

greater effect. As he uttered them the leaves parted slowly, and Helena Wardbrook stood before him astonished eyes.

For a moment he stood petrified and irresolute, but former experience had taught him the danger of delay.

"I shall speak to her this time," he said resolutely, walking rapidly up to the spectre. The spirit awaited his advance in dead silence.

"Oh, Helena! my lost darling," he exclaimed, on reaching it he succeeded in touching the supposed shadow. "But what in heaven's name does this all mean?" he said, as he felt there was a warm reality, and no unsubstantial spirit before him.

A low sweet voice replied to his excited query, "Oh, Walter, I can see you have suffered greatly. But you will now be happy will you not?"

"Some sweet delusion—a dream—madness," he muttered to himself, shuddering at the thought, as his eyes rested on the features of Helena Wardbrook.

"You are neither dreaming nor mad, Walter," she said very quietly. "I am not a ghost at all. I have only personated one."

"Personated one?" he said dreamily.

"Yes."

"But you died of heart disease, and I read of your death in a leading paper."

"Newspapers only pretend to infallibility. That was a cruel hoax of the papers, she said, looking up with pity at his pale features.

"Dr. Reunie told me plainly you died of heart-disease, he continued, still doubting the reality of what he saw."

"He, too, was in the plot, Walter."

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