

LITERATURE, &c.

FROM THE NEW YORK MIRROR.

AMERICAN GHOST STORY.

BY MR. PAULDING.

Who is she that standeth at the open window, shaded by the spreading branches of the old tree, which hath long since disappeared from the hallowed spot, modestly taking the morning air at home instead of gadding up and down the streets, and exhibiting her glowing beauties at the window, as becomes a modest virgin, instead of in the glare of Broadway? The sight of her warms my heart, and recalls the memory of youthful hopes and disappointments. Beautiful little Marian, thou at least deservest a biography, and thou shalt have it before I go to sleep. I am determined to rescue thee from oblivion, let what will be the consequence. If half a hundred dandies die of love of thy posthumous beauties, and half a thousand belles of envy, I cannot help it. Thy memory shall not perish, beautiful damsel!

Marian was the only child of a most respectable widow lady who inhabited the identical house where the artist has represented her as standing at the window in the prime of womanhood. She was destined to be a great fortune; and of the crowd of cocked hats exhibited by the artist, in the street and on the pavement, not one came there but with a view of casting a sheep's eye at the charming little Marian. I will not deny that I myself was predisposed to mount my steed and curvet before her, as may be seen in the picture, with a view to exciting her approbation of my horsemanship.

The household of the old lady was composed of three or four ebony domestics, such as the cook, a female, the coachman, the chambermaid, and the lady's own man, as gray as a badger and as black as anthracite coal. They were all old; for it seems to me there were no young servants in those days, except the humble servants of the ladies. There was a distant kinsman of the old lady who resided with her, said grace at dinner, cut up the tough geese, and made himself useful in all the multifarious ways that the ingenuity of patronage devises to enable such persons to repay their obligations. He was known by the name of Herman; and his character partook largely of that trickery and cunning, interested hypocrisy, which is so often engendered by a life of dependence. He had cherished a secret yet vehement desire toward the beautiful Marian, and appropriate her fortune to himself, and for this purpose used every art of subserviency to make himself, by slow, inexpressible degrees, an interest in her heart, without alarming either herself or her mother.

But the young lady suspected not his attachment to her, or rather to her fortune; for, indeed, she felt no interest in him sufficient to make her either watchful or clear-sighted as to his sentiments or actions. The good lady-mother still less had an idea of his plans; for, in the first place, she considered him entirely out of the question, and, in the second, she was gradually becoming a strict devotee, as is often the case with elderly ladies in want of excitement. Of late she had become very superstitious; and there was not a dream, a ghost story, or a supernatural visitation that she did not believe as true as the gospel. But, notwithstanding all this, she would have bounced at the very idea of marrying her daughter to a thing less than a little great man, and of this Herman was perfectly aware. All that he could do, therefore, was to assail the young lady by silent attentions and grateful assiduity, waiting patiently till the chapter of accidents might pave the way to the success of his wishes. But the prospect of this became every day apparently more distant. Marian was surrounded by admirers, and now a new one entered the lists, who seemed destined to prevail over all his rivals. His name was Arthur Wittingham, and my readers will know more of him anon. It is sufficient for my purpose to say, that he gained a deep interest in the heart of Marian, and that he merited such a distinction. Herman watched the progress of this attachment with a degree of ravenous jealousy, which every day became the more virulent from the necessity of repressing it in his own bosom. He dared not enter the lists with his rival; he dared not exhibit his feelings, and they preyed upon him like so many concealed vultures. He thought of nothing but how to thwart this growing attachment, and his solitary hours by day and by night were spent in devising plans which reason told him it was impossible to execute.

Matters were in this state when the spirit of improvement, which at that time began to awaken in our city, prompted the old lady to change the location of the kitchen, which tradition said had originally been in the cellar, under the west end of the house, and had many years before removed to the east. An ambitious neighbour had built a five-story house adjoining that

end of the old lady's mansion, which, overlapping her chimney, caused it to smoke in such wise that the black cook was afraid it would spoil her complexion, and never rested until she persuaded her mistress to remove the kitchen to the old place it had occupied before the revolutionary war.

This was accordingly done, to the great content of aunt Dinah, who excelled in pepper-pots; but she might better have staid where she was at the other end of the house. She had scarcely lighted the fire in her new dominion when there commenced a rattling of chains, and an infernal roaring in the premises, that sent aunt Dinah out of the kitchen ten times faster than she came in. She ran to her mistress, and told her the old boy, or something worse, was in the kitchen. By this time Prince and Cuffee and the whole household had evacuated the lower region, and ran together to tell their mistress what was going on, each in his own way, and all talking together.

The good old lady was frightened almost out of her wits, and, calling Herman, proceeded at the head of the household troops, to investigate the mysterious affair. The rattling of chains, and the roaring noises still continued, and seemed to increase in violence, to the utter consternation of all parties. The old lady retreated into her strong hold, took down the Bible, and, putting on her spectacles, began reading the story of Saul and the witch of Endor. Old Dinah declared she would not cook at such a diabolical fire, and Cuffee and the Black Prince swore they would not eat the dinner if she did. Herman proceeded to examine the premises, for the purpose of ascertaining the cause of this incomprehensible uproar, but without success. It continued during the whole day, until the fire went out in the evening, and was heard no more that night.

The next day Dinah emigrated back to the kitchen in the east wing, but the smoke was so intolerable that she declared the roaring noises and rattling chains were more tolerable, and again retreated to the diabolical region. The moment the fire began to burn the noises commenced; and again the whole household was thrown into confusion and consternation. But aunt Dinah had seen a good many witches in her day, and had once put a whole bevy of them to flight with a red-hot poker. She was, therefore, not so easily frightened as some inexperienced people, and always kept the poker heated for any emergency, determined rather to stand her ground than to go back to her old quarters and be smoked to death. I ought to mention that recourse was had to an experienced chimney-doctor, who tried his hand at remedying the matter, but, like many other doctors, had only made bad worse.

In the mean time the report got abroad, and the whole neighbourhood first, and the whole city by degrees, rang with the story of the haunted house. It was said that it had been used during the occupancy of the town by the British as a place of confinement for prisoners, and that a mysterious man, with an iron-bound physiognomy, had been kept there in chains, and finally disappeared in an unaccountable manner. People began to hear groans in the middle of the night, and glimmering lights were sometimes seen by the watchmen, whose duty it was to guard the precincts of the city-hall from nightly intruders. The venerable Skaats was also frequently disturbed by dreams and nightmares, which rode him so hard that he sometimes waked panting for breath. Finally, the whole affair got into the newspapers, and the whole country talked of nothing else. It should be borne in mind, that people had neither railroads, internal improvements, tariffs, nor nullifications to stultify them at that period, and were, therefore, right glad of something to talk about.

The old lady became ten times more devout than ever, and was often closeted with a mysterious person skilled in the "gramary" of the famous pow-wowers at old Hadley, who had been recommended to her by Herman as a most skilful exorciser of evil spirits and layer of ghosts. This cunning varlet by degrees insinuated himself into her confidence, insomuch that it was not long before he got the entire direction of the old lady's conscience, and could almost persuade her to any thing. He and Herman occasionally watched at night in the kitchen, where every day the same rattling of chains and accompanying noises were heard, from the time of the lighting the fire in the morning to its going out at night, when all became quiet. The old lady would question the crafty varlet as to the cause of these untoward disturbances, but he only shook his head in a significant manner, and answered vaguely, on purpose to excite her curiosity. At length, one day she insisted on his being more explicit, when, as if with great tribulation and reluctance, he told her that he had twice seen the ghost of her deceased husband appear immediately after the rattling of chains had ceased, and advance towards him as if to say something, but at each time the voice of a watchman "Past twelve o'clock, and all's well," had stopped his mouth, and caused him to vanish up the chimney, whence the rattling of chains seemed to come.

The good old lady was so frightened at this relation that she made little Marian sleep in the room with her from that time, justly concluding that no ghost, however mischievously inclined, would find it in his heart to injure such an innocent little darling. She also enjoined upon the pow-wowing varlet to watch the next night to see if the ghost would make his appearance again, and speak to him, at the same time exacting a solemn promise that he would repeat to her every word he said, without addition or diminution. Accordingly, the next day he asked a private audience of the old lady and locking the door inside, communicated the following intelligence, every word of which she most potently believed:—"About twelve o'clock," said he, "when the rattling of the chains and roaring sounds had ceased, and all was silent as the churchyard, I heard three taps against the chimney-back, followed by three hollow groans and three loud sneezes." "My poor dear husband always sneezed three times in succession," thought the good lady. "I sat still and said nothing, but kept my eye steadily on the spot whence the groans proceeded, when all at once a figure seemed to come out of the wall, with a long Meershaum pipe in his mouth, dressed in a cocked hat, a sky-blue birds-eye silk coat, and gold laced waistcoat, and breeches of the same colour, a long queue, and powdered curls." Here the old lady screamed, "the very dress my poor dear husband always wore! Did you ever see my husband when alive?" "No," "Wonderful!" exclaimed she again, forgetting that he might see his picture, dressed exactly as he described, hanging up in the hall every day. "Well, and what did he say?" "Why luckily the watchman happened to be asleep this time, and omitted to call out 'Past twelve o'clock.' The figure advanced slowly upon me, with a gold snuff box in his left hand, out of which ever and anon he took a pinch, and then sneezed three times." "Just like my poor dear husband," sighed the disconsolate widow. "Well, when he came within two paces, he cried out in a low, solemn, sepulchral voice, 'Hem!' I answered him in a voice equally solemn and sepulchral, 'Hem!' 'Listen!' said the voice. 'Say on,' replied I. 'My dearly beloved wife, who could never rest content without getting at every body's secrets—' 'Tis a scandalous insinuation," cried the old lady, in a pet; "but it is just like my foolish husband—' 'My dearly beloved wife,' said the ghost. 'Well, well you need not repeat that over again.' 'My dearly beloved wife would know the occasion of these mysterious voices—listen! Know that on the birth of Herman and of my daughter Marian, which happened on the same day, I entered into a solemn agreement with his father, who was then a wealthy merchant, that, if they both lived to the age of twenty-one, they should be joined in lawful wedlock. I cannot rest in my grave till this promise is complied with, nor will these noises ever cease till then. Report this to my dearly beloved wife, and tell her, as she values the repose of my body and my soul, to fulfil my engagement without delay. I know she is an obstinate sort of an old lady; but it shall go hard but I worry her at last, or my name is not—'"

"Will he?" quoth the widow to herself; "I'm not quite so sure of that." She was not a little nettled at these posthumous reflections of her spouse.

"Here," continued the pow-wower, "the poor ghost was interrupted by the voice of the watchman, who had just walked up, and, seeing the windows reddening with the rising sun, began to cry 'Fire, fire!' with all his might. 'Farewell,' quoth he; 'I hear the milkman's summons, the morning salutation of the chimney-sweeper, the rattling of the carman's cart, and the noise of opening doors. Farewell!—the grave is open to receive me. Let not the day pass without communicating this to my dear wife.' Saying this, he deliberately took another pinch of snuff, sneezed three times, and disappeared. You now know all, madam, and must act according to your best discretion." So saying, he unlocked the door, and left the widow to her reflections.

These were by no means enviable. She was not a little affronted at the irreverent manner in which the ghost had spoken of her, and the thought of marrying her rich, beautiful daughter to such a poor sinner as Herman, was gall, wormwood, and aloes. But then the commands of her dead husband, the repose of his body and his soul, and the horrible noises which beset her and her husband from morning till night, furnished her counterpoise to all her objections. After a hard struggle, she determined to comply with the injunctions of the ghost.

When this was communicated to Marian, she turned pale, and wept her unwillingness to offer herself up as a sacrifice to the repose of her deceased parent's remains. The existence of these mysterious and appalling sounds she could not doubt, for she had often heard them; but the appearance of the ghost she did not entirely believe. She communicated the whole to White-tingham, who scouted the story of the pow-wower, and attempted to persuade her either to consent to a