

THE ARTIST'S SPECTRE.

BY ROBERT DUNCAN MILNE.

I do not think that many "society" people, as the vocabulary of them is called, would find studio as well as they do the artist himself. In the first place, he only moved into it a week or two ago, and in the next it is somewhat inaccessible from the lower part of the city, the studio being a blank of Russian Hill. The invigorating air, however, and the magnificent view of the bay amply compensate for the paucity of visitors—in fact, I rather think that Digby's studio is renowned for its emptiness. The house goes gentry in order to isolate himself more effectually from the crowd of dawdlers and dilettantes who used to bore him to death, and, worse still, keep him coming; for, as Digby himself has said, "a blank of art for a living cannot afford to neglect it, however sociable and hospitable he may otherwise be. Another circumstance which may have influenced him in selecting his present location is that the house of patronage he desires is that which keeps its carriage, for Digby's forte is portraiture, and Russian Hill—that part of it in which his studio stands, at least—is easily accessible from the western residence quarter of the city.

Some of his old friends, however, myself among the number, have not been driven away by the dim light of approach to the studio, and so it so happened that, last Sunday afternoon, Fletcher and I resolved to pay our friend a visit. It was the first time we had done so, and even with the precise acquaintance we had, we were somewhat at a loss as to what to say. When we did so, we could not help complimenting Digby on the situation he had chosen. The lights of his studio, of which there are four, face westward, and, as the range of the Coast Range, the Golden Gate upon the west to the Contra Costa shores upon the east, except where intercepted for a little space by the buildings on Telegraph Hill.

It was about four o'clock when we rang the door-bell—which was answered by Digby himself, attired in a blouse and looking somewhat the worse for work and dust.

"Come in," he said, opening the door. "Glad you have just come. I have just been rearranging some of my properties, and would like your opinion on the effect."

If taste can be shown anywhere, it certainly can in the artist's studio, and the immense possibilities of the arrangement of *brica-brac*, of falling draperies, of *chiaroscuro*, of curtains, of *portieres*, of the numberless incidents which go to make up the effect of an interior of all things, are not to be taken advantage of to the utmost extent. A helmet, shield, and battle-axe grouped upon some antique chest in a corner, a bust on a pedestal, some tapestry against a wall, a sword, a lance, a helmet, a cornucopia, a Japanese screen—anything or everything, in short, suggestive of art or beauty can be so arranged as to impress the senses with lofty idealism, whereas if incongruously put together, the self-same objects are calculated to excite an irritating train of thought.

Digby had proved himself an adept in the art of arrangement. The apartment is a large one, having evidently been intended by the designer as a reception room or show-room of the house, which is one of those roomy, old residences of pioneer days, a few of which still remain in that quarter of the city. Being about twenty feet square, it was, of course, curtained by heavy curtains, so as to form two distinct apartments if so desired. There being two windows looking north and two west, this arrangement threw three of the four into the designer's hands, and the portion being lighted by only a single window on the east.

"That," explained Digby, "is where I keep my tools, my unfinished studies, with such paraphernalia and properties as I have not yet arranged, and which will be near the end of day."

So saying he drew the curtains apart at the centre, looping them up at either side so as to form a *portiere*, and led us in. The floor was uncarpeted, and littered with the heterogeneous articles of all sorts, antique lamps, Grecian urns, essels, paintings set face to the wall, and other nondescript matter, dimly seen in some corners, except for the slanting beam of light from the window that betwixt the chimneys of the one shattered window that looked toward the west.

"Why, I never knew you had such a collection," exclaimed Fletcher, a brother artist. "You certainly did not show your last studio—where did you get it all?"

"Oh, don't you know?" replied Digby. "I thought you knew about it. This was Averill's studio."

Averill's studio? I said. "Yes, the old fellow that used to walk along Montgomery street with a pipe in his mouth?"

"Yes; it is barely a month since he died. A great deal of that property is his, and I have been asked to let it remain there for a while, until he can make up his mind, if they ever do. So I concluded just to let it stay for the old chap's sake, for a time at least."

We went back into the front studio, sat down, lit

our pipes, and the conversation turned upon Averill. "Quite a genius," remarked Digby, "splendid hand at landscapes. Better known in the East than he was here, however."

"Sho! sho!" returned Fletcher. "The artist who has any other market is a fool for exhibiting in San Francisco."

"Not educated up to the appreciation of art," said Digby, "and a city of cynics and chromos. Didn't associate much with anybody, did he?"

"A recluse by nature as well as choice," returned Digby. "A believer in the spiritual philosophy—as perhaps you are aware I am myself. I was probably brought acquainted with him upon my wedding, and was the only one at his death bed except the nurse and doctor. I remember it well," he continued dreamily. "Averill lying on his back—his feeble arms reaching up to the ceiling—his eyes staring, and his luminous eyes fixed earnestly upon my face. His last words were: 'I will come and see you if I can, old fellow.' And," he added solemnly, "if spirits really do materialize, I believe they can, though I have never myself had personal experience of it—I verily believe that Averill's will."

"Old fellow," remarked Fletcher banteringly. "I wish you joy of your manifestation, and envy you your belief, and if Averill ever materializes or appears again, all I can say is, in the language of the poet, 'Heaven send him!'"

"You can count me in, too," said I. "I have seen many counterfeits presentments of the dead, but never under such conditions as would put them absolutely in question."

"Cavil as you please, gentlemen," returned Digby with some heat, "I believe spiritualism to be the coming and only rational religion. Close the shutters on the material world, and the spiritual is nearest to it, and that sun is getting unbearably hot."

Fletcher got up and closed the shutters on the western window, through which the sun, now not more than half an hour high, was streaming full upon us, before we returned to the studio. Digby went to a sideboard, spread some cold edibles on a table, and, with the help of some bottles of beer, we made an enjoyable supper, the sun just tipping the horizon, and the water with its white, and the waters of the bay rippling placidly beneath us. We relaxed into silence, contemplating the beauty and serenity of the scene. The table was a round one, and, as Digby was seated at the head, I sat on the right, myself to the left, and Fletcher in the centre, viewed relatively to the two windows on the north overlooking the bay, and the curtain partitioning the studio from the west, opposite the windows, and directly at Fletcher's back. While Fletcher's chair faced directly north, Digby's and my own faced only partially so. Thus my field of vision embraced Digby's position, and was, as the *portiere* was drawn, my attention of his arm faintly attracted my attention, and I was dimly conscious, in my reverie, that he was reaching with his left hand for his pipe which lay upon the table at his elbow.

As he did so, after a smothered exclamation made me instantly wide awake, and never shall I forget the expression upon Digby's face as my eyes, attracted by the sound, fell upon it. The expression, astonishment at my own lack of consternation, astonishment at my own features rigid, his eyes fixed upon some object at his left. Involuntarily my glance turned in the same direction, and there I saw something so utterly startling in shape, and so utterly inconceivable in other senses forsook me, and all I could do was to look.

There, in the aperture, or *portiere*, formed by the looping up of the two curtains that separated the studio from the rear dining room, stood a human figure. The figure was standing profile-wise, looking straight before it with an earnest, fixed expression, serious and grave in character. My own eyes instantly turned to the figure, and I found myself straining my eyes to the uttermost to scrutinize the lineaments of the face before me. Suddenly recollection came upon me like a flash. The features and figure were those of Averill, and as I had seen them some time and again upon the street. The clothes, the hat, the hair, the somewhat stooping posture habitual to the man, were certainly those of Averill and none else. And the appearance of the figure seemed to melt or dissolve in my gaze, and nothing remained but the dark aperture of the *portiere*.

My eyes, now released from the spell that had bound them, met those of Fletcher, which reflected the astonishment which must certainly have appeared in my own.

"You saw it?" whispered Digby. "You look anxious enough. I got up and went to the *portiere* and looked in. The obscurity was now much greater since the sun had set. There was nothing to be seen but the heterogeneous mass of the property there described. I went to the side of the canvases with their faces to the wall; a few feet from the opposite wall stood an easel with a canvas upon it, also turned face to the wall. Behind this again was an

antique *chiffonier* with a Grecian urn and some other smaller articles of antique *bric-a-brac* upon it. I turned back into the studio.

"Never was there a more signal rebuke administered to sleep than that of the apparition, who had now gained his equanimity," "than that which we have just now witnessed. Averill said upon his deathbed that he would come and see me if he could. He has done so. You both believe it to be true as it is at the manifestation. Your wish has been gratified."

The coincidence was so remarkable and inexplicable that for the moment we had nothing to say. There was no sleep doubt, until the apparition was seen, and agreed that it was the very imagine of Averill, with all his old personal characteristics just as he appeared in life. Fletcher and I took our departure that evening with something to think about. We felt that there must be some solution of the mystery, but what? That was the question.

As may be supposed, the apparition in Digby's studio did not remain a secret. It was divulged with inquiries, to which the only answer I could give was that I had seen it, and so had Fletcher, so that there could certainly be no personal occult delusion about the matter.

"And the spectre appeared about sunset, you say?" remarked Hayes, to whom I was narrating the occurrence the day after. Hayes prides himself on being something of a scientist, and seemed interested in the matter.

"Yes," said I. "We had closed the shutters of the west window about half an hour before to keep out the sun. It must have been just sunset."

"And the curtain placed at the back of the studio—the easel and all that—do you think your friend will have made any changes there yet?" he went on. I thought he was not to be taken seriously.

"Let me see—six o'clock," he went on, looking at his watch. "An hour and a quarter yet till sunset. Suppose we take some dinner and then go up there and see if there is anything to account naturally for this spectre."

At seven we called at Digby's studio and found him in a sober and serious mood. I introduced him to my friend Hayes, who asked to be permitted to examine the back studio. Nothing had been moved, and Hayes, after making a careful inspection of the premises, came back smiling through the *portiere* with the intelligence that the spectre would appear that evening without fail as usual. Digby looked at him as if undecided whether he was joking at his expense or not. However we all sat down at the table, in the positions of the night before, and awaited developments. Suddenly, about sunset, the spectre of Averill appeared in the *portiere* exactly as it did the night before in every respect.

"Come with me, gentlemen," said Hayes, rising up and walking straight to the *portiere*, to the intense horror of Digby, and right through the body of the spectre, disappearing into the obscurity beyond, the spectre remaining as visible as ever.

"Come here!" he cried from the back. I immediately went, and Digby mechanically followed. We found Hayes standing beside the easel, pointing to the canvas the back of which was turned to the wall. The face of the canvas bore a portrait of Averill, the *fine simile* of the spectre. Shining upon it through a chink in the shutter, and lighting it up the only object in the room, was the last effluence of the sun dying in the *centre* beyond, among the other *bric-a-brac*, stood an antique concave mirror, its face resplendent with the glow from the picture.

"That," said Hayes, pointing to the mirror, "is the way that he has raised this spectre. You know Mr. Digby, is merely a production of a common law of optics. This picture is in the focus of that mirror. Being upside down, as you see, upon the easel, it has been projected a few feet into the air, and, among your curtains. Had it not been for the darkness of the room and the brilliant sun light through the chink of the shutter, you would have had no ghost. I am afraid Mr. Digby, you must now seek for confirmation of your spiritual hypothesis."