



' PICTURE MY AGONY AT FINDING THAT YOU HAD FORGOTTEN.'



THE LADY AND THE GHOST

By ROSE CECIL O'NEILL

Illustrated by the Author

IT was some moments before the Lady became rationally convinced that there was something occurring in the corner of the room, and then the actual nature of the thing was still far from clear.

“To put it as mildly as possible,” she murmured, “the thing verges upon the uncanny;” and, leaning forward upon her silken knees, she attended upon the phenomenon.

At first it had seemed like some faint and unexplained atmospheric derangement, occasioned, apparently, neither by an opened window nor by a door. Some papers fluttered to the floor, the fringes of the hangings softly waved, and, indeed, it would still have been easy to dismiss the matter as the effect of a vagrant draught had not the state of things suddenly grown unmistakably unusual. All the air of the room, it then appeared, rushed even with violence to the point, and there underwent what impressed her as an aerial convulsion, in the very midst and well-spring of which, so great was the confusion, there seemed to appear at intervals almost the semblance of a shape.

The silence of the room was disturbed by a book that flew open with fluttering leaves, the noise of a vase of violets blown over, from which the perfumed water dripped to the floor, and soft

touchings all around, as of a breeze passing through a chamber full of trifles.

The ringlets of the Lady's hair were swept forward toward the corner upon which her gaze was fixed, and in which the conditions had now grown so tense with imminent occurrence, and so rent with some inconceivable throes that she involuntarily rose, and, stepping forward against the pressure of her petticoats, which were blown about her ankles, she impatiently thrust her hand into the —

She was immediately aware that another hand had received it, though with a far from substantial envelopment, and for another moment what she saw before her trembled between something and nothing. Then from this precarious situation there slowly emerged into dubious view the shape of a young man dressed in evening clothes, over which was flung a mantle of voluminous folds such as is worn by ghosts of fashion.

“The very deuce was in it!” he complained; “I thought I should never materialise.”

She flung herself into her chair, confounded; yet, even in the shock of the emergency, true to herself, she did not fail to smooth her ruffled locks.

Her visitor had been scanning his person in a dissatisfied way, and with some vexation he now ejaculated: “Beg your pardon, my dear, but are my feet

on the floor, or where in thunder are they?"

It was with a tone of reassurance that she confessed that his patent leathers were the trivial matter of two or three inches from the rug. Whereupon, with still another effort, he brought himself down until his feet rested decently upon the floor. It was only when he walked about to examine the *bric-à-brac* that a

Life is not, I assure you, all beer and skittles for the disembodied."

He drew a long breath, and his gaze upon her and the entire chamber seemed to envelop all and cherish it.

"Little room, little room! And so you are thus! Do you know," he continued, with vivacity, "I have wondered about it in the grave, and I could hardly sleep for this place unpenetrated.



"IN AN INSTANT HE HAD HER IN HIS ARMS. . . ."

suspicious lightness was discernible in his tread.

When he had composed himself by the survey, effecting it with an air of great insouciance, which, however, failed to conceal the fact that his heart was beating somewhat wildly, he approached the Lady.

"Well, here we are again, my love!" he cried, and devoured her hands with ghostly kisses. "It seems an eternity that I've been struggling back to you through the outer void and what not. Sometimes, I confess, I all but despaired.

Heigho! What a lot of things we leave undone! I dashed this off at the time, the literary passion strong in me, thus:—

"Now, when all is done, and I lie so low,
I cannot sleep for this, my only care;
For thought of that dim place I could not know;
That where my heart was fain I did not go,
Nor saw you musing there!"

"Well, well, these things irk a ghost so. Naturally, as soon as possible I made my way back—to be satisfied—to be satisfied that you were still mine." He bent a piercing look upon her.

"I observe by the calendar on your



"OH, DO NOT LEAVE ME," SHE CRIED, "OR MY LOVE WILL KILL ME!"

writing-table that some years have elapsed since my—um—since I expired," he added, with a faint blush. It appears that the matter of their dissolution is, in conversation, rather kept in the background by well-bred ghosts.

She drew herself splendidly up, and he was aware of her beauty in the full of its tenacious excellence—of the delicate insolence of Life looking upon Death—of the fact *that she had forgotten him*.

He rose, and confronted this, his trembling hands thrust into his pockets, then turned away to hide the dismay of his countenance. He was, however, a spook of considerable spirit, and in a jiffy he met the occasion. To her blank, indignant gaze he drew a card from his case, and, taking a pencil from the secretaire, wrote beneath the name:—

" Quiet to the breast,
Wheresoe'er it be,
That gave an hour's rest
To the heart of me.
Quiet to the breast
Till it lieth dead,

And the heart be clay
Where I visited.
Quiet to the breast,
Though forgetting quite
The guest it sheltered once:
To the heart, good-night!"

Handing her the card he bowed, and, through force of habit, turned to the door, forgetting that his ghostly pressure would not turn the knob.

As the door did not open, with a sigh of recollection for his spiritual condition, he prepared to disappear, casting one last look at the faithless Lady. She was still looking at the card in her hand, and the tears ran down her face.

"She has remembered," he reflected; "how courteous!" For a moment it seemed he could contain his disappointment, discreetly removing himself now at what he felt was the vanishing point, with the customary reticence of the dead, but feeling overcame him. In an instant he had her in his arms, and was pouring out his love, his reproaches, the story of his longing, his doubts, his dis-

content, and his desperate journey back to earth for a sight of her. "And, ah!" cried he, "picture my agony at finding that you had forgotten. And yet I surmised it in the gloom. I divined it by my restlessness and my despair. Perhaps some lines that occurred to me will suggest the thing to you—you recall my old knack for versification?"

"Where the grasses weep
O'er his darkling bed,
And the glow-worms creep,
Lies the weary head
Of one laid deep, who cannot sleep:
The unremembered dead."

He took a chair beside her, and spoke of their old love for each other, of his fealty through all transmutations; incidentally of her beauty, of her cruelty, of the light of her face which had illumined his darksome way to her—and of a lot of other things—and the Lady bowed her head, and wept.

The hours of the night passed thus; the moon waned, and a pallor began to tinge the dusky cheek of the east, but the eloquence of the visitor still flowed on, and the Lady had his misty hands clasped to her reawakened bosom. At last a suspicion of rosiness touched the curtain. He abruptly rose.

"I cannot hold out against the morning," he said; "it is time all good ghosts were in bed."

But she threw herself on her knees before him, clasping his ethereal waist with a despairing embrace.

"Oh, do not leave me," she cried, "or my love will kill me!"

He bent eagerly above her. "Say it again—convince me!"

"I love you!" she cried, again and again and again, with such an anguish of sincerity as would convince the most sceptical spook that ever revisited the glimpses of the moon.

"You will forget again," he said.

"I shall never forget!" she cried. "My life will henceforth be one continual remembrance of you, one long act of devotion to your memory, one oblation, one unceasing penitence, one agony of waiting!"

He lifted her face, and saw that it was true.

"Well," said he, gracefully wrapping his cloak about him, "well, now I shall have a little peace."

He kissed her, with a certain jaunty grace, upon her hair, and prepared to dissolve, while he lightly tapped a tattoo upon his leg with the dove-coloured gloves he carried.

"Good - bye, my dear!" he said; "henceforth I shall sleep o' nights; my heart is quite at rest."

"But mine is breaking," she wailed, madly trying once more to clasp his vanishing form.

He threw her a kiss from his misty finger-tips, and all that remained with her, besides her broken heart, was a faint disturbance of the air.

