

THE GHOST FLOWER



CHILLED and sodden company sat about the fireplace in the much-varnished Adirondack hotel parlour. Miss Bascom, the art student with slovenly hair and uncertain belt ribbon, played airs from the *Sultan of Sulu* at the piano, while a slabby girl from Montreal danced a two-step by herself, heavily and without rhythm. Mrs. Sylvester Banks, of Brooklyn, embroidered a centrepiece with yellow roses. Mrs. Thompkins, of Elmtown, St. Lawrence County, sat in the window seat watching the storm come up over the lake, and was in Mrs. Banks's light. Mrs. Thompkins had even drawn the red chenille curtains about her shoulders, so secluding herself that her presence was indicated only by the foot of one of her crutches protruding from the fringe.

Mr. Clancy Barnes, entering, remarked, "You look as if you had all eaten blue-berry pie for dinner and were sorry."

"We did." Mrs. Sylvester Banks's chin became triple with mirth.

"And we are," sighed Miss Bascom.

"I had sandwiches," said Mr. Barnes, unbuckling his knapsack and laying it on the big table among old papers, magazines and embroidery floss. "Sandwiches—and my conscience is clear. And I got back just in time, didn't I?"

The storm flashed and gloomed at the window as he spoke.

"Mrs. Thompkins," called Mrs. Banks nervously, "don't you know it's dangerous to sit by a window in a thunder storm?"

But the sullen lady, wrapped in red chenille curtains, made no reply.

Mr. Barnes took charge of the fire, which was spilling smoke lazily under the mantel, and fed it with the old papers until he had directed a neat column of smoke at the flue. He cosily touched the embers here and there and eased the logs to a comfortable position.

"There," he said, standing off and dusting his palms, "now we'll do."

The red curtains stirred. Mrs. Thompkins, hearing the cheerful crackle, and seeing the reflected dance of flames on the darkened walls, rose painfully to her feet and tapped with her crutches across the slippery floor, but Mrs. Banks, with a certain suave rigidity that suggested a person quite aware of what she was doing and why, established herself in the one easy-chair by the fire before Mrs. Thompkins had covered half of her slow journey. Mrs. Thompkins's scowl in the mingled firelight and rainy dusk was ferocious, but it faded to dull wistfulness and then to indifference. She looked backward at the window seat, but the girl from Montreal had promptly taken that. Mr. Barnes, however, who had briefly disappeared, entered with a big porch rocker, which he placed opposite Mrs. Banks; then, with smiling apologies to the girl from Montreal, he took the cushions from the window seat, arranged them cosily in the rocker and bowed to Mrs. Thompkins.

She sank into it, saying nothing, but looking up with a softened expression in her scornful black eyes before she settled down to studying the fire as she had studied the storm, as if planning some sombre line of action, building something definite out of indefinite smoke and flame.

Then Mr. Barnes undid his knapsack like a jovial Santa Claus, so confident of interest and applause that it came hypnotically when only a messy lot of herbs tumbled out.

"I'm just taking it up"—meaning botany. "You've no idea how fascinating it is. You get acquainted with plants as if they were people. You wouldn't suppose these were related, now, would you?"

He held some Prince's pine in one big hand and in the other a waxen, pearly, leafless thing with bent head like a novice at prayer.

"They both belong to the heath family," he went on cheerfully.

Mrs. Thompkins spoke: "That's an Indian pipe. I used to find them when I was a girl."

He dragged the great table up to her chair at once.

"Have you studied botany?"

"A little—at the old academy and by myself. Another name is 'corpse plant.' You see they are blackening already, and they are cold and clammy to the touch."

"Ugh! What a name!" shuddered Mrs. Banks, her manner implying that Mrs. Thompkins in mentioning it had committed a solecism.

"They call them 'ghost flowers,' too," said Mrs. Thompkins. She examined the confused mass in the knapsack, and collected a dozen or so of the Indian pipes thoughtfully. There was a suggestion of dead and gone romance, of something that these flowers had once meant. The art student, with a soul for the beautiful, clasped her hands and shrieked:

"Oh, don't *move!* I want you just like that—the pearl-grey shawl and the grey dress and those dead-looking flowers and the firelight just touching it here and there. Oh, what an inspiration!"

Mrs. Thompkins threw aside the flowers, turned her back to the table and once more paid attention to the coals, Miss Bascom, unabashed, looking at her through the telescope of her half-shut hands, ejaculating now and then, "Perfect!" and at last, with dreamy ecstasy, "How would 'The Ghost Flower' do as a title?"

"Bully!" This was the comment of Mr. Thompkins. He was wiping his little oily wisp of a moustache as he stood in the doorway, and brought with him a powerful fragrance of cloves and peppermint. Mrs. Thompkins did not raise her eyes. She was busied stirring the fire with her crutch. A log fell, and a sudden blaze lit all corners of the dusky room. The rain was for the moment withheld, but the clouds crouched thick and dark on the lake and in the forest until even Mrs. Banks had to lay aside her embroidery.

"C-call it Ghosh Flow'r. M-make it portrait. *I'll buy it!*" said Mr. Thompkins, approaching unsteadily, beaming loving kindness on every one. Mr. Clancy Barnes, intent upon placing his treasures between sheets of blotting paper, did not look up or give place, but Mrs. Banks at once swept from the room, thus leaving her chair for Mr. Thomp-

kins, who promptly dropped into it, first thanking her profusely.

Mrs. Thompkins rose then, looking down at the outspread plants. The firelight so sported with her thin face that it seemed to wear a grimace of pain.

"I used to be interested in them when I was young."

"You are not a centenarian," said Clancy Barnes with a bright, forced smile.

Mrs. Thompkins looked up at him dreamily under her heavy eyelids, frowning, not at him, but at some far-off idea or memory. When she frowned her eyebrows had a sinister way of meeting in a broad, black band. Perhaps Clancy Barnes, like the ghost flowers, was a symbol to her of something that she had once thought about or hoped for. With the same slow stare she contemplated her crutches.

"These are the same as age."

She pinned a ghost flower in her pearl-grey shawl and went toward the door.

"You goin' off shust because I came?" shouted her husband. When she made no reply, and he jumped up to pursue her, it was noticed by all the women in the room that Mr. Clancy Barnes also made a sudden motion as if to follow, then pulled himself together and stood quite still, looking at nothing but his plants.

They all listened to the slow, steady tapping of the crutch, which did not falter because of the scrambling pursuit and angry incoherence of Mr. Thompkins. Afterward the women of the hotel evolved quite a romance out of that spasmodic start of Mr. Clancy Barnes, but Miss Bascom would say, "Don't you remember those bands of grey in her hair and the wrinkles? She looked old enough to be his mother."

And Mrs. Banks would further elucidate, "He comes from a good New York family, you know, and, of course, he is chivalrous. Very likely he was afraid that Thompkins, in that condition, might strike her. Still"—there was a vague contradictoriness about Mrs. Banks's remarks, which yet passed for worldly wisdom, unquestioned—"still, women like Mrs. Thompkins are strangely attractive to a certain class of men."

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The rain became terrific with lightning, thunder and the uprooting of trees, but by supper-time the darkness rolled aside and a tearful sunset filtered through the still mottled dining-room windows.

On each table was a trim bouquet of nasturtiums, sweet-peas, petunias and candytuft. There were fresh blueberries, chocolate cake, hot biscuit, slices of cold ham, tea, and cocoa, all touched with tender pink light from the glorified storm clouds. Everybody was in rare good humour. But there was a shocked and virtuous tone to this good humour as of partisans in some good cause; or was it more the attitude of people who criticise a popular play or book? A violent storm had been raging audibly in-doors.

Mrs. Banks welcomed Mr. Clancy Barnes, who sat at her table, with a forgiving and indulgent smile, but as he was unconscious of any need for indulgence or forgiveness, he merely bowed as usual, and made comments on the beauty of the sunset.

"Did you get the full benefit of the *matinée*?"

Mrs. Banks spoke in a significantly lowered voice, lifting her eyebrows correspondingly.

"May I offer you these biscuit?" said Mr. Barnes. "They look delicious and one can digest anything in this air." But while he hesitated for further change of subject Mrs. Banks slumped stubbornly back into the line she had chosen.

"It was certainly the most disgraceful thing I've ever known—that is, so close at hand. Of course, in settlement work we hear that kind of thing now and then, but to be under the same roof with it——"

Mr. Barnes half shut his eyes, recalling the careworn, cowed demeanour of this lady's husband.

"Yes. We are more quiet about it, aren't we?"

"Oh! to be sure. Their room is next to mine, you know. I gathered that her lameness was due to his having thrown her downstairs some years ago when he was drunk, and that he is driven to drink by her temper. Lovely, isn't it?"

The door opened and Mr. Thompkins appeared alone, sleek, fat, loose-mouthed,

the same jovial leer in his little black eyes, a baby-blue tie under his triple chin.

"Sweet creature!" murmured Mrs. Banks. "But as I started to tell you, I think they won't stay. I spoke to the proprietor about it, and so did Mrs. Irwin, and I think they will be requested to leave. At least"—her own chin became triple with firmness—"if they don't leave *we will!*"

Then Mr. Thompkins's voice where he sat alone at his table rose up in jolly anecdote and personal witticism, rendering further conversation difficult even for Mrs. Banks.

"Wonder where *she* is?" that lady murmured.

The same idea seemed to occur at that instant to Mr. Thompkins.

"Where's my better half?" he inquired with loud cheerfulness. There was arrested attention throughout the room. The woman at the next table said, "Mrs. Thompkins hasn't come into the dining-room yet."

"Why, she knows supper's ready, doesn't she?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say. I don't think any of us have seen her this afternoon since—she went upstairs."

"Huh! that's funny!" Mr. Thompkins seemed actually a little troubled, finished his meal without further conversation and went out on the veranda. They heard him walk slowly about its three sides and then go down the long board walk toward the forest-bordered lake. At the edge of the trees he stopped and called, "All All!"

"I believe I like him better than I do her," said Mrs. Banks. Miss Bascom went to the piano and began to sing, "She's my Mary contrary." Barnes lit his pipe and strolled down the walk after Thompkins. He was not anywhere in sight, but his voice was audible from a distance. "All All!" He seemed to be skirting the lake shore.

Barnes followed slowly, running over in his mind such disagreeable things as he had ever heard of suicides, mysterious disappearances, bizarre acts of people out of patience with the world, showing their resentment hysterically.

The wet air blew up from the lake; to Barnes it seemed invigorating, but little Mrs. Thompkins, lame, feeble, should

be in her accustomed place by the wood fire in the hotel parlour, wrapped in her pearl-grey shawl, and if she must look like those dreadful little ghost flowers, at least doing so in comfortable surroundings. He considered different pleasant ways of exterminating Thompkins, yet that persistent call of "All All" rather disarmed him. The fellow seemed genuinely anxious. Probably he was merely a stupid brute and not a malicious one.

The calling stopped at last and the swift crackling of the branches showed that Thompkins was returning.

"I say," he observed as he emerged face to face with Barnes, "would you mind helping me hunt a little? She's sulky, I guess, and hiding. She couldn't 'a gone very far, now could she?"

"One wouldn't suppose so."

"You see, we had a flare-up this afternoon. She's enough to provoke a saint, anyway. You've no idea what I've had to put up with from that woman. Lots of men would 'a run off before. My gracious, I——"

"We would better get other men, too, I think. She must be found as soon as possible. Perhaps you would better inquire at the cottages around the lake. I will get the others."

"Well, I dunno——" said Thompkins, but Barnes was already striding back to the hotel.

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The distant tops of the trees shut out what little light there might be left in the sky, and Clancy Barnes with his lantern passed here and there among their great trunks like a will-o'-the-wisp, calling now and then, echoed for a time by the other searchers, but at last his cries were unanswered, and the solitude of the forest shut in upon him. Once he was startled by the glow of two great eyes in the shine of his lantern, then there was a snort and a light patter of feet as a deer dived into the darkness. Once an owl with a mournful cry flew so near his head that he felt the wind from its noiseless wings.

"Mrs. Thompkins!" he called at intervals. Yet how was it possible she could have come so far! Had she started on her tempestuous journey during the fury of the rain that afternoon? It must have been so. The wretched quarrel had taken

place directly after she had gone upstairs. Then that brute had slept off his drink, and while he slept she had escaped, and the rain had effaced all mark of her pathetic little crutches and destroyed the trail for the dog which had been brought with many boasts by the guide.

One party was searching the lake. In his heart Barnes believed that theory to be the correct one. Poor, harassed soul, who could blame her? One could tell by the lines of her face how she had been fiercely active once. He recalled one story she had told of her youth, of a horseback ride at night for a doctor, and another about climbing Mount Powasket alone for the fun of the thing. He could imagine the lake and the storm might have seemed attractive enough under present circumstances. But to think of that was the duty of those who were about it; his was to search and call among the sombre tree trunks, to keep sharp lookout for a pearl-grey shawl and gown, huddled and pallid, like the Indian pipes he had found that morning half hidden under dead leaves. And suddenly, as he held up his lantern and looked into the hollow of an old tree he saw her, silent, cowering, the light gleaming in her eyes as it had done in the deer's.

She remained perfectly quiet while he came up to her with the lantern. Her crutches were at her feet and her shawl was drawn closely about her. He thought swiftly of Miss Bascom and her ecstatic remarks. Poor ghost flower! The resemblance was striking enough as she crouched in the hollow tree, wet and cold.

"Poor child!" he said—and that seemed hardly the proper remark to a woman with grey streaks in her hair. He put his brandy flask to her lips; she swallowed a little obediently, but when he took her hand to help her to rise she moaned and shook her head.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "let's have a fire and then we'll see what next."

It was not so easy to gather dry material in the dripping woods, but at last from under logs and roots he collected several armfuls of leaves, and on these placed dead twigs, which dried quickly in their heat and then took up the blaze in their turn, so that at last there was a

fire—the second made that day for Mrs. to appearances as to be willing to stalk Thompkins's comfort.

"Come up and get dry," he said as it roared. He held out his hand again to help her up, but she shook her head, glancing at her crutches.

"You are in pain?" His tone was infinitely gentle. She put her hands over her face and nodded convulsively.

"Will you let me carry you?"

She made no gesture of refusal, so he bent down and she put her arms about his neck. Her hands had the clammy chill of death as he carried her the few paces to the fire. But when he would have laid her down on the cedar couch he had prepared she still clung in a childish way, her little cold hands clasped behind his neck.

"The pain is very great?" he suggested, waiting patiently to be released. Her colourless lips silently repeated, "Very great!" and she made no motion to let him go.

"Can I ease it, do you think, by holding you up a little as I am doing now?"

She answered "Yes" voicelessly as before.

So he carefully adjusted himself to her slight weight, and when he had thus made it plain that she might stay as she was, her cold hands relaxed at last and were folded under her chin, and she sighed a long, deep, shuddering sigh of relief. Her black hair with its white bands was loosened, so that its ends coiled on the ground, and the fire-light lit up the silver in it till it shone like metal.

"The rest will find us soon," said Clancy Barnes, "then you can be more comfortable."

"The rest?" It was the first time she had spoken. "My husband?"

"Yes. They are all hunting, you know. I sort of got lost from them myself, you see."

One hand twisted firmly into his coat lapel.

"I don't want him to come."

Clancy Barnes had a well-bred dislike of unconventionality. It was an article of his belief that if people were unhappy they should clothe their unhappiness as decently as possible in polite phrases. The savage misery that is so indifferent

to appearances as to be willing to stalk naked he did not understand.

"Oh, now, Mrs. Thompkins, you don't mean that, you know!"

"Mrs. Thompkins," she repeated reflectively. "I've been Mrs. Thompkins ten years. It's an ugly name. Since I came into the woods this afternoon I've been 'Alice' again. Call me that."

"If you wish it—Alice." Poor Clancy Barnes blushed to his polite ears. He felt as sick with pity as he remembered feeling once when he was a boy and his pony had broken a leg and had to be shot. There were potential tears within him and he was horribly uncomfortable.

"It wasn't so easy getting here," went on Alice, "that I should want to go back now. I wish we could stay here. This going back—isn't it something like the fugitive slave law? I don't want to."

The great trees stirred softly now and then, sending hissing drops into the fire. The world of convention appeared infinitely remote and foolish. The kind forest seemed to say that if this maimed and unhappy Alice wanted to spend the rest of her life in a hollow tree with birds and squirrels, why, then, let her. There was plenty of room and it was more natural and right than Thompkins, anyway.

And Alice twisted her slim fingers into Clancy Barnes's coat lapel, fixed him with her great unhappy eyes and argued the matter until the forest seemed sensible and towns foolish.

"If you had known me when I was a girl you would understand. There's Indian in me, way back, and so it's wicker for me to be lame than for most people. So long as I could ride and walk I didn't mind, but now— I was going to the lake, but the woods looked so kind and peaceful in spite of the storm—I wanted to be out in it alone again. And now I'm glad I did, for you came—you came—and—you are keeping the pain away, and just now I am happy. I don't care now about all those other years."

"Is she in love with me?" thought the dismayed Clancy Barnes. But he kept on looking at the pale face resting against his shoulder and the dismay disappeared. A wounded dryad, when the world was young and unconventional, might have

thus been succoured by a faun in such a forest as this.

Alice suddenly put up a hand and stroked Clancy Barnes's cheek and smiled—a smile so young and innocent that the white bands in her hair seemed unreal.

"How lovely it would have been," she said, "if we could have been young together—and—all that. I don't believe we'd have got tired of each other, do you? But I suppose you're engaged to some nice girl, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Clancy Barnes, fumbled at his vest pocket and brought out a miniature. Alice looked at it eagerly and critically, then handed it back with a smile.

"She is nice, and you'll be happy, and I'm glad; but just for now help me to dream how it would have been—" She broke off with a moan and hid her face against his breast.

"It's no use dreaming, one can't get rid of the truth, but hold me like this while you can. O God! God!"

There were long shuddering sobs gradually decreasing. Was it an hour of this pitiful companionship?—then silence—and drowsiness—then a shout and a sudden sensation of something gone from his arms—was there a kiss on his forehead first?—and Thompkins and the other searchers were standing over him

in the grey light of dawn, while from high up came the busy sound of waking birds.

"Been making yourself comfortable, eh?" sneered Thompkins.

"But," gasped Barnes, staring about him, "she was here!"

"Huh! She'd be here now, I guess, if she'd ever been."

A small dog chained to the guide's wrist was straining away from the group, his nose to the ground.

"Toby know," said Pete. "She been here—she go—Toby find him."

Toby led eagerly through tangled underbrush, stopped and whimpered. The guide lifted his lantern, then crossed himself—"Nom de Dieu!"

An answering light seemed to come up from over the bank as his lantern swung out over it, but it was only the reflection from black, still water. They crowded up to the shore and strained their eyes into the darkness. Some sleeping pond lilies floated nearer the shore. A little further out—was it a branch? Too symmetrical for a branch—more like a crutch—yes, both of them.

Thompkins sat down and cried, but Clancy Barnes waded in. The pool was slimy and opaque, but shallow, so that it was easy enough to find what he sought.

Georgia Wood Pangborn.

