

My Hobby,—Rather

By N. P. Willis

‘Antonio. Get me a conjuror, I say! Inquire me out a man that lets out devils!’

Old Play

Such a night! It was like a festival of Dian,—burst of a summer shower at sunset, with a clap or two of thunder, had purified the air to an intoxicating rareness, and the free breathing of the flowers, and the delicious perfume from the earth and grass, and the fresh foliage of the new spring, showed the delight and sympathy of inanimate Nature in the night’s beauty. There was no atmosphere—nothing between the eye and the pearly moon,—and she rode through the heavens without a veil, like a queen as she is, giving a glimpse of her nearer beauty for a festal favour to the worshipping stars.

I was a student at the famed university of Connecticut, and the bewilderments of philosophy and poetry were strong upon me, in a place where exquisite natural beauty, and the absence of all other temptation, secure to the classic neophyte an almost supernatural wakefulness of fancy. I contracted a taste for the horrible in those days, which still clings to me. I have travelled the world over, with no object but general observation, and have dwindled my hour at courts and operas with little interest, while the sacking and drowning of a woman in the Bosphorus, the impalement of a robber on the Nile, and the insane hospitals from Liverpool to Cathay, are described in my capricious journal with the vividness of the most stirring adventure.

There is a kind of *crystallization* in the circumstances of one’s life. A peculiar turn of mind draws to itself events fitted to its particular nucleus, and it is frequently a subject of wonder why one man meets with more remarkable things than another, when it is owing merely to a difference of natural character. I have been thus a singular adventurer in the strange and unnatural. As I intend making my observations in this way the subjects of several papers, I will introduce them at present with my slighter beginnings.

It was, as I was saying, a night of wonderful beauty. I was watching a corpse. In that part of the United States the dead are never left alone till the earth is thrown upon them, and, as a friend of the family, I had been called upon for this melancholy service on the night preceding the interment. It was a death which had left a family of broken hearts; for, beneath the sheet which sank so appallingly to the outline of a human form, lay a wreck of beauty and sweetness whose loss seemed to the survivors to have darkened the face of the earth. The ethereal and touching loveliness of that dying girl, whom I had known only a hopeless victim of consumption, springs up in my memory even yet, and mingles with every conception of female beauty.

Two ladies, friends of the deceased, were to share my vigils. I knew them but slightly, and, having read them to sleep an hour after midnight, I performed my half-hourly duty of entering the room where the corpse lay, to look after the lights, and then strolled into the garden to enjoy the quiet of the summer night. The flowers were glittering in their pearl-drops, and the air was breathless.

The sight of the long, sheeted corpse, the sudden flare of lights as the long snuffs were removed from the candles, the stillness of the close-shuttered room, and my own predisposition to invest death with a supernatural interest, had raised my heart to my throat. I walked backwards

and forwards in the garden-path, and the black shadows beneath the lilacs, and even the glittering of the glow-worms within them, seemed weird and fearful.

The clock struck, and I re-entered. My companions still slept, and I passed on to the inner chamber. I trimmed the lights, and stood and looked at the white heap lying so fearfully still within the shadow of the curtains; and my blood seemed to freeze. At the moment when I was turning away with a strong effort at a more composed feeling, a noise like a flutter of wings, followed by a rush and a sudden silence, struck on my startled ear. The street was as quiet as death, and the noise, which was far too audible to be a deception of the fancy, had come from the side toward an uninhabited wing of the house. My heart stood still. Another instant, and the fire-screen was dashed down, and a *white cat* rushed past me, and with the speed of light sprang like a hyena upon the corpse. The flight of a vampyre into the chamber would not have more curdled my veins. A convulsive shudder ran cold over me, but, recovering my self-command, I rushed to the animal (of whose horrible appetite for the flesh of the dead I had read incredulously), and attempted to tear her from the body. With her claws fixed in the breast, and a *yowl* like the wail of an infernal spirit, she crouched fearlessly upon it, and the stains already upon the sheet convinced me that it would be impossible to remove her without shockingly disfiguring the corpse. I seized her by the throat, in the hope of choking her, but, with the first pressure of my fingers, she flew into my face, and the infuriated animal seemed persuaded that it was a contest for life. Half-blinded by the fury of her attack, I loosed her for a moment, and she immediately leaped again upon the corpse, and had covered her feet and face with blood before I could recover my hold upon her. The body was no longer in a situation to be spared, and I seized her with a desperate grasp to draw her off; but to my horror, the half-covered and bloody corpse rose upright in her fangs, and, while I paused in fear, sat with drooping arms, and head fallen with ghastly helplessness over the shoulder. Years have not removed that fearful spectacle from my eyes!

The corpse sank back, and I succeeded in throttling the insane monster, and threw her at last lifeless from the window. I then composed the disturbed limbs, laid the hair away once more smoothly on the forehead, and, crossing the hands over the bosom, covered the violated remains, and left them again to their repose. My companions, strangely enough, slept on, and I paced the garden-walk alone, till the day, to my inexpressible relief, dawned over the mountains.