

THE GHOST WIDOW

by KATHERINE HALE



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THE GHOST WIDOW

by KATHERINE MAISON

A Story of Tea-Cups
and Shells--The Human
Element in the Great
Romance of Munitions



*"Through the enchantment
of the mid-summer
evening,
the girl felt the ghost draw
nearer."*

OVER the lawns of “Stonehurst,” past the beautiful old house, through the latticed garden gate and among thick grasses that prefaced the orchard crept the ghost. A hammock seemed to swing lifeless in the bloomy dusk. It was a wide mauve strip between dark apple trees. The girl it contained was shadow-slight, and she lay there as motionless as the still evening. A tent of trees stretched to the brow of the hill beneath which lay the town. Sometimes her eyes followed the lights in this gleaming valley, but for the most part she looked up into a sky where the first stars gleamed.

And always, through the enchantment of the mid-summer evening, the girl felt the ghost draw nearer. Her spirit went out to meet him as involuntarily as goes out the salutation of a wife in greeting to her husband after each day’s adventure. She was used to his coming, for this special evening of mid-August was an anniversary. Always it seemed to be a night of fair weather. So softly the years had gone by that she did not stop to count them since that twilight in this spot under this sky, when all the beautiful youth in the world seemed to be concentrated in one hour—a lover’s moment—pulsing in the still dial of sunny days.

Seventeen years ago from nearly every Canadian town a group of boys went out to fight for England at South Africa. Who recalls the gallant company now? Only mothers perhaps, and these ghost-widows who keep a shadowy tryst.

As this girl looked into the deep-hued sky her thoughts like white clouds drifted to and fro. She went far back in memory to a night when they two had danced the nineteenth century out and had seen the twentieth come in, standing on the steps of the town hall in the heart of the little town. That was an hour of moonlight and strange clouds.

“The birth-moment of a new century is rather awful. Do those piled up clouds look very important to you?” she had asked the boy beside her, who had answered, “Not half as important as the dance together we are missing.”

It was the September after that he had left for camp. And then came South Africa, and death.

And time had passed; little-town years, divided between vague and sometimes restless dreams and the easy security of every day life. One danced and played bridge, and as years went on one learned to drive motors instead of horses and gradually the girls of the little social set who had not married drifted off to hospitals and learned to be nurses, or to business colleges and learned to be stenographers, or else they surrendered themselves to somnolence, and pretended that life anywhere else would be ugly.

Then came 1914.

Looking over the rim of the orchard into the gleaming valley town, the girl saw in a blaze of light the windows of the great munition works, an adjunct to her father's own mill where so many women were employed.

The war had taken this town like other places and twisted it into new shapes under its burning fingers. The going out of the men, the levelling of social laws, the incomes wrecked, the fortunes made, these were inevitable. But the significance of the new time lay, for Edith Morse, in that glowing centre of light, an industry never dreamed of before in Brockton—the making of munitions.

Persistently the brilliant windows drew her eyes back from the home-sick contemplation of stars, the far-off road of youth, to the present so sharply dramatic. And is it strange, in an almost early Victorian heroine, that she longed, as she tore herself from the persistent lonely dream to come nearer to those lights, to creep a little closer to the angry heart of the war, to feel for herself what the great thing is that, two decades ago, had reached out its tentative fiery finger to take away her lover, to touch this thing, to work in it, to fight on the burning decks, not to wave farewell to an out-going vessel from the shore?

Across her dreams strode, in the familiar way that unfamiliar figures take in dreams, a man who was working on the deck of this blazing vessel of war. He had come that day to a Red Cross meeting in the interests of a possible hostel for the workers, many of them strangers in the town, and he had seemed to her a singularly forceful person. His strength, his poise, his easy sureness were unlike those of the young men, bank clerks, factory and foundry owners, the few wealthy business men and their sons, that in the ordered orbit of a country town life she habitually met. Into her mind had flashed the chance remark of somebody's frank brother when an intimate group had been discussing the limitations of Brockton society.

“You girls in small places are all cooped up, like little old-fashioned hens. You never have a chance to meet the right sort of men. They are certainly not to be found in ‘our set,’ as you call it.”

Asked to verify this bold statement, he added that his greatest pal was a good example of the kind of man he meant. Originally a foundry man, now an expert in his own line of business, which was distinctly a scientific business; “an incredibly clever chap” who probably didn't know the name of a new dance.

A request to produce this valuable product for inspection brought forth the unpardonable verdict. “Not on your life. You'd be mutually bored.” And there the matter ended.

The little episode drifted through Edith's consciousness, tormented by memories. It was as though the vault of velvet, the tiny stars, the bloomy tree tops, all drew her mind away on a tidal wave that went out yearningly towards youth while the near lights of the town, and above all the insistence of that semi-circle of blazing windows, was the return of the tide pounding in on the actual sands of to-day.

And at last she left the song of stars and listened only to the return of the tide.

"To-morrow," she decided, "I shall see if they can give me any work at munitions."

II.

The manager of the works seemed to be in no whit surprised, or, indeed, gratified, at her business-like application. He told her that the job was not a difficult one, and that when she had learned the process of manufacture he would not waste her time as a mechanic. He was badly in need of inspectors.

“If you really mean to help us,” he said, “I would like you to go in with the girls and see the game from beginning to end. I am aware that there are improvements to be made. The truth is we’ve been so busy that the main thing is speed. We need a few people like you who will work with their eyes open, educated women who can help us. You had better take the night shift from eleven p.m. to seven a.m.—easiest hours for you at first.”

John Morse felt that it was his patriotic duty to leave his daughters free to do theirs as they saw it. He did not see any particular object in Edith’s learning to make munitions. Two years ago the very thought of her entering a factory on any business whatever would have been intolerable. But the war had changed everything and everybody. He was her not unwilling escort on the night of her initiation.

“Only this once,” she protested, as they walked down the winding path that rambled through the grounds. “You know it’s absurd for a ‘new woman’ to have her father take her to business.”

She turned to him in the moonlight and her slim fairness made her look very young.

“Takes me back to a September night when you started off to boarding school, and we took the longest road to the station to put off the evil moment, do you remember, Edie?” he asked her.

“Yes, you and I walked this way and mother and Fan drove over,” she answered softly, and gave his arm a little squeeze.

“Your mother used to be interested in the people in these cottages,” he remarked. They were out beyond the garden gate at the bottom of the hill where a collection of small buildings stood. Edith stooped to tie her shoe lace, and as she did so she noticed a ray of light across the road from an open door, also the raucous voice of a gramophone grinding out “Tipperary,” and the wail of a small child with a good-sized grievance. A girl in a vivid yellow sweater came out of the small garden and hurried on in front of them.

“No gramophones in mother’s time, were there Dad, or any silk sweaters emerging from these cottages? I remember Mrs. Murphy lived in this very one; she used to come up for milk, bare-footed.”

“They’re all at work now, the war is making ’em rich,” he returned. And in a moment he had left her at the door of the factory.

McAinsh, the manager, met her at the door and she crossed into a world whose ways and language she did not know.

At first, as she learned the various processes of shell-making, she was so engaged with minutiae that her fellow-workers were shadowy. For the first time in her life she turned the entire force of her will into the attainment of mechanical detail, and to do this it was necessary to concentrate every moment of the long nights and to sleep nearly every hour of the summer days. And because of an inherent power of concentration she attained this new knowledge quickly, though on the day that she was appointed an inspector it seemed that she had been years instead of days in the acquirement of what she had to know.

Then she came back to life again—the life of the people all about her. But still through the never-ceasing din, the ringing voice of the steel, the lower voice of the machines—these fellow-workers seemed shadowy.

Everything was thrown into high lights, the light that casts deep shadows. As at night she went to work alone through the familiar streets, these lights seemed to beckon her on, out of the valley of recollection to this vivid reality.

The girls she met in the cloak room were formerly mill hands, seamstresses, servants, small workers in small places, Jews and Gentiles, black and white, bond and free. They all shouted, they all joked, they all chewed gum. Gum, indeed, seemed to be one of the necessities of life. It was sold on the premises. Working with them Edith was so keen on her own apprenticeship that she did not notice the quality of theirs. Having to inspect the work, she felt at once, notwithstanding, their response to the requisite exactness, that, for the most part, they were slovenly in technique, lacking in discipline, and always self-conscious.

An Inspector of shells examines twelve different processes, each one of which must be exact, from the tap at the top to the base. Edith, going over hundreds of shells a day, found very few that were defective, yet the women had conquered the process without a ray of joy in the work.

“I tremble as I touch them, so strange they are, and bright;
Each one will be a comet to break the purple night.
Gray Fear will ride before it and Death will ride behind,
The sound of it will deafen, the sight of it will blind.”

The lines haunted her as she watched the transformation of these “weapons of the Lord” from their dark beginning to the shining finish.

Gradually certain forms detached themselves from the crowd of workers as the nights went on; those strange nights of rapid movement, peopled by denizens of another world.

At four in the morning work stopped for twenty minutes and there was tea and food in the main workroom.

Edith persistently sought for acquaintance with her fellows, but as persistently it was denied, and what mutual ground there was seemed to slip from under her feet.

At patriotic meetings in the town all sorts and conditions of women foregathered and you could talk bandages, and kit bags, and last news from the trenches as eagerly with one as with another. The social restraints of generations were in a moment discarded. But this was a different phase. Here work was a topic taboo. These women were plainly tired of work and their personalities were too formidable for a delicate touch to unlock. The conversation was of “movies” and “dates” and “men” and “rides” and, among the married women, of pensions and separation allowances, and our fraudulent Government which seemed to them compounded chiefly of those knavish tricks which we so deeply deplore in our enemies. These matters were *terra incognita* to the newcomer. In fact, she heard more about self-protection and “getting it out of them” in one of these lonely, ostracised twenty minute “lunches” than she ever had before in her life.

“And everyone seems to get what she is fighting for,” she thought as Mary somebody told Belle somebody else how she just ordered Lucy to “leave go where No. 782 was concerned. ‘Hands off,’ says I, an’ she quit her foolin’.”

Contrasted with this robust life in the raw, Edith felt herself a colorless and middle-aged person. They were either young and free, or young and married, with a husband in the trenches, and a baby or two, and a gramophone, and a bank account.

“Do you mind leaving your family most of the time like this?” Edith asked the lively wife of a warrior one day, and her “I should worry! It’s grandma’s job,” was prompt and cheerful.

To an ardent wayfarer into life this was not exactly progression. Then one day she seemed to reach her goal at a bound.

She had finished her cup of tea and was looking out of the wide window where the dawn lay white as snow on the ground; the strange, mysterious dawn that threw its unearthly arabesques of early light in vain before the eyes of these chattering women. She rose to return her cup to the tray, and said to her neighbor as she did so, "Look at the star in my cup! Isn't it perfect?"

"Say! I knew a girl once could read tea-cups," vouchsafed the neighbor.

"I know several," returned Edith. "I myself once studied the meaning of most of the signs that tea leaves form, and it was great fun."

"You don't say!" exclaimed the neighbor raptly. "Say, girls, Miss Morse can tell fortunes out of tea-cups! Gee, I wish time wasn't up. Will you read mine to-morrow? There's something I want awful to know."

And that was the beginning of fame, not to speak of popularity. It was the beginning also of a strange friendship with Sadie. Behold, then, the well-known Edith Morse—have I told you that she used to be the belle of the county?—eagerly working her entrance to the heart of her compatriots for twenty minutes at the hour of four a.m. each morning in an annex of her father's foundry.

Refreshments were bolted by the seer and the lady whose fortune was to be told, the crowd eating and drinking languorously while they listened to little stories from a far-away country. Only one girl's cup was done each night. Let us come to the fortune of Sadie.

Sadie was short and stocky and Scotch, and vulgar a little, and witty a good deal. Edith had discovered that it was she who had darted out of the cottage below her garden gate on that first night. The yellow silk sweater, first fruits of a separation allowance, identified her, that and a certain good nature and friendliness, and a story about a neighbor's child that she "kept," so that the neighbor might work out all day. Edith had seen it once in the garden, this neighbor's child, with the identical, rosy, crinkly hair of Sadie herself. She had asked if it were a little niece, and Sadie answered her "No." Anything else she knew was that her husband, "Andy," was at the war.

Sadie bolted her tea and handed the coarse cup to Edith with a sigh. "It's a smudge of leaves—that. I shouldna hav' drunk it so fast, maybe," she lamented.

All eyes were fixed upon the seer, who was now on the highest pinnacle of that lusty wave, Success. Moreover, there was a certain curiosity about the

amiable but enigmatic Sadie.

Edith began to decipher slowly, but with the same power of concentration that had helped her to inspect shells after ten days.

“An uneven line away at the side of a cup; mountains, Sadie—I don’t know—Highlands, I think. I went there once to the Highlands. The long purple twilights, do you remember? Is it the Highlands. Sadie? Am I right?”

“Richt you are, wuman. Go on—as fast as you can,” said Sadie, with a rigid arm about the speaker’s waist. Admiration, unlike familiarity, does not breed contempt.

“Well, that jerky mass of leaves is just the Highlands where you once spent a summer, before you came out here to Canada. I think it was a perfectly wonderful summer, because I see two tiny bits of leaves fluttering along just under the hills here, so tiny and alone under those hills. Fast together. Close together.”

She felt the rigid arm relax.

“And then, below that, you see quite a straight line of leaves. That generally stands for a lonely path. It almost seems as if the two little leaves had parted. And here, below, is the parallel line, also straight. A little wiggly, perhaps. That space between them might be anything—just sheer, clear, emptiness, or the sea, or time, or distance, anything you like. And on and on go the two lines. But see, Sadie, see, just at the end, here, they falter—they meet, then they go wide again.”

“I didna hae ma postcard last week,” broke in Sadie, trembling in every fibre of her being. “I hadna a letter since June. But the cards come. There’s none since a fortnight past. What about that? There’s a wee leaf, do you see? Do you no’ see, just above yon line? Can that be the card I’m no’ getting?”

“Look with me,” said Edith gently, so gently, indeed, that no most eager, crowding listener could hear.

She took a thin little hairpin and made it into a pointer, and touched the companion leaves and then the “wee” one that Sadie was watching.

“You see,” she said, “here it is, that tiny little leaf! The answer to time and distance and the sea! Something always yours. A postcard? Yes, if you like. An answer, anyway. Will you walk home with me this morning?”

To the others she added: “That’s what I see in Sadie’s cup! The Highlands and two roads below. Of course, everybody has to read a lot into their own fortune. Wasn’t yours wonderful, Miss Turner? Did you get the gloves? You

saw for yourself how plainly they were to be seen, so I'm really expecting that they have arrived."

"Bet your life they did, after he got my letter," replied Miss Turner. "I told him all about my cup. Him forgetting my birthday like that!"

III.

Through the radiance of a heavenly September morning Edith Morse and Sadie of the cottage walked slowly home. You know not the Scotch if you think her emotion was still trembling on the surface. It had been sent away back where it belonged, out of Sadie's way.

"No one," observed Edith rather wistfully, as they began their walk through the silent, sleeping streets, "no one would ever think of reading my cup for me."

"Because they havna the sicht for it!" declared Sadie. "You're 'fey.' You could do mony a thing if you tried," she continued darkly. "I kenned when I laid my eyes on you that you were no fine body buttin' in on us girls. You came to work, and you came to learn. So did I. I've a muckle of money to make. You see, Andy, ma lad, he's not a bad chap if once he comes through this—and to tell ye the truth. I've had ma doots since there's been no card. But he couldna make a living for twa before. He's a Highland lad, a sheep boy. I had the siller, and he knew it. Not that he didna care for me. He did, wuman. But you see"—and her astounding statement was really made very naturally—"you see, I couldna tell him aboot the bairn. We were marrit all richt, and I get my separation allowance from hame, but I just came away to work for mysel'. The war came that summer, and he went with the Colonel's men from Aberfairlie, where we was marrit, but if he once kenned he had the two of us to support, he'd never take a look at me again! And it's nabody's business here whether the bairn is mine or no, I'm only here for the munitions. I'll be awa' again. News travels awful fast, and they micht tell him in the trenches. Noo, what have ye got to say about the wee leaf?"

They had almost reached the cottage door, and there, blazing in the sunlight like any autumn marigold, shone the small head of crinkly, rosy red bending over a toy on the doorsill. With ill-disguised complacency, Sadie gave the small child a little proprietary shake and set her on her two fat feet. Edith, following, held out a bright bag, which the baby instantly appropriated.

"The little leaf! Does she want my money bag?" she smiled, and looked at Sadie with rueful eyes. "You see, she has already an eye for what you call 'the siller.' Well, here's a proposition. My sister and I live alone with my father in that big house on the hill. My mother died long ago. I shall not marry. Sell me

this little leaf to be my very own, and then write and tell your Andy all about it! You say he won't care!"

The baby, who had found a tiny mirror within the green bag, looked from its delights to Edith with a heavenly light in her eye, and made a faltering step towards her. Edith held out her arms, and the child went instantly to her embrace.

"You see!" she nodded gayly to the mother. "She's mine."

"Dinna talk nonsense, ma lass," said Sadie imperatively. "I maun to the breakfast!"

Thus dismissed, the lady rather wearily began the long ascent of the winding path that led up the hill to the broad lawns on which slept "Stonehurst," vine-clad, awning-gay, charming as the autumn morning itself.

Seven o'clock was such an unearthly hour that bed usually seemed a natural refuge after the breakfast that old Margaret had ready for her. But today the call of the garden was too strong. She was just going out when the telephone rang, and she turned to the usual telegraphic conversation with McAinsh, to whom she reported the episodes of the night, before he went on duty shortly after she left. They had met once or twice in the course of a month. This morning he asked her to sum up a list of suggestions as to certain matters about which they had exchanged ideas.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. McAinsh, I wrote that out days ago," she replied, "and failed to bring it down."

"May I send for it, or come for it?" he asked. "It's important to get it soon."

She assented, and went out into the garden. The loveliness of cool lawns and late flowers refreshed her. The smell of red apples in the orchard lured her. In the most beautiful time of the year she had been away from the garden, drugged with weariness by day, abnormally alert all night. This morning she would deliberately keep awake and enjoy herself. The nasturtiums were growing wild, and there was a deal of small weeding that the ancient gardener overlooked.

Weariness forgotten, she was working very industriously when she heard a step on the gravel behind her, and turning, saw, instead of a messenger, McAinsh himself.

"Heavens! I can't get up!" she exclaimed. "I'm firmly rooted in mother earth, and my hands are hands of clay."

She smiled up at him, and in spite of fatigue, she looked at that moment as fresh as the hour itself.

His assistance was immediate, and it was what might be called a “hearty” assistance. Miss Morse had turned out to be an unqualified success. And until this moment he had not known that she was beautiful.

To be muscularly gripped and literally set on your feet by a powerful masculine person had the same effect on Edith as her mother’s possessive shake had on Sadie’s baby—it wakened her up and set in motion what kindergarten teachers annoyingly call “the play sense.” She was, in fact, distinctly amused that a worthy person should set her on her feet, very much, indeed, as her father might have done. She encouraged the person to further exploits by what is femininely known as “drawing him out”; in other words, she became consciously interested. She showed him lawns and flower beds, sun-dial and arbor, but only as a back-ground, mere scenic effect, to the relation of his own plans and hopes and achievements in regard to munitions and munition work. Edith smiled and nodded and agreed and disagreed. And especially he enjoyed her disagreements, for they were practical and, on the whole, decidedly usable.

“And while we are talking about it, I would keep the foreman out of the way as much as possible,” she said, “and I would look for more suggestion from your women Inspectors—or else get a different type of foreman. I feel that this one retards the work. The girls are too conscious of him.”

He looked at her with amazement.

“My dear lady,” he said, “you’ve certainly hit the nail on the head. This man is a recent importation, as you know. He understands munitions, but he’s half-mesmerist, half-brute.”

“Well,” she replied, “I can’t do a thing with them for half an hour after he’s been in. The work goes on, of course, apparently the same as ever, but it’s not the same. If I have any discards, that half hour is the time they occur. You see, they’re very self-conscious, these girls; they’re not merely pieces of machinery yet.”

“There’s something in all this,” he replied thoughtfully, “and we’ve got to look into it together. To tell the truth, you’ve made me forget that I myself am a machine. I should be at the works this minute. But I wanted that paper. Look here! May I come again?”

“Yes,” she answered, “if you’ll talk munitions. I’m getting very much interested. Not altogether so much in munitions as in workers. Shells are

fiercely interesting, but I have some odd little seances over tea-cups at lunch time. Some day I must tell you about it.”

As he went sharply down the beautiful, winding garden path, something elusive and extraordinary seemed to be happening in the commonplace world all about him. But it was only that he was discerning his fate—in the woman he barely knew, up there in that old-world garden. Also he recognized, because his heart was as sensitive to immediate impression as was his finely balanced brain, that she was like a sleep-walker suddenly aroused to the fact that during the short night of youth the world had changed. How the new conditions would mould her, he did not know. Of one thing only he seemed to be sure in this early-morning moment, and that was that, whether or not she was for him, he was eternally hers.

IV.

And Edith made her way to the hammock deep in the orchard, where the early apples shone in the sun and she could stare through the leaves, already golden, up into the bright, bright sky.

To her shortly came her little sister, Fan, knitting bag under her arm, on patriotic purpose bent.

“Just to say that you should be in bed, dear, and I’m off to the Red Cross. Who on earth was the man you were stalking about with at all hours this morning?”

“McAinsh, the manager down there. Quite a nice person, and I *am* sleepy, Fan. Suppose I sleep out here? I seem to be lazy and happy. Munitions agree with me. And guess what I do at four in the morning? Read their tea-cups. Do you remember how they used to hang on the fortunes I read that winter in Boston? Well, my dear, these girls exhibit the same glorious faith in my powers. It’s exciting, because one has to draw on that dream quality—what is it?—letting go of one’s self? Anyway, it’s the only key I have to unlock these people to me. And I find that I care about that, Fan—getting to know life as other people do. We’ve been so shut in here. The house, the garden, our friends. All the time we were waiting for this awful war, which has torn down our little enclosures. Do you know what the whole world means to the sort of women I am working with? It means expression. Utterly selfish expression mostly, but certainly not a ‘community’ feeling. Do you remember Dick Stratford saying once that we girls in Brockton reminded him of a lot of old-fashioned little hens all cooped up together? These women, who have always had to work, are making shells to confound our enemies, but every one of them is vindicating herself, her man, her freedom. I nearly bought a baby to-day—a pet with red hair. Her mother preferred freedom—at least, she thinks she does. In the end, of course, she’ll win back her man, if he gets through, by dint of the child. I suppose one could hardly hope to do more than borrow such a wonderful thing as a baby. In the meantime,” she smiled at Fanny’s reproachful face, “I know you think I’m quite mad, darling, and I suppose I’m making you late for your meeting.”

Fanny nodded her agreement to both charges and made a hasty exit.

“Tea-cups or shells? I wonder which sort of woman I really am,” she murmured, and looking up at the bright sky of morning, felt her eyes suddenly

grow heavy with sleep.

And for the first time in all the years of her dreamy tryst with love, she slept in that hammock without a ghostly kiss upon her lips.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Ghost Widow* by Amelia Beers Warnock Garvin (as Katherine Hale)]