Wilkie Collins

John Jago's Ghost

original

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Аннотация

William Wilkie Collins was an English novelist, playwright, and short story writer. His best-known works are The Woman in White (1859), No Name (1862), Armadale (1866) and The Moonstone (1868). Collins's works were classified at the time as «sensation novels», a genre seen nowadays as the precursor to detective and suspense fiction.

Содержание

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Chapter I
The Sick Man

"Heart all right," said the doctor. "Lungs all right. No organic disease that I can discover. Philip Lefrank, don't alarm yourself. You are not going to die yet. The disease you are suffering from is – overwork. The remedy in your case is – rest."

So the doctor spoke, in my chambers in the Temple (London); having been sent for to see me about half an hour after I had alarmed my clerk by fainting at my desk. I have no wish to intrude myself needlessly on the reader's attention; but it may be necessary to add, in the way of explanation, that I am a "junior" barrister in good practice. I come from the channel Island of Jersey. The French spelling of my name (Lefranc) was Anglicized generations since – in the days when the letter "k" was still used in England at the end of words which now terminate in "c." We hold our heads high, nevertheless, as a Jersey family. It is to this day a trial to my father to hear his son described as a member of the English bar.

"Rest!" I repeated, when my medical adviser had done. "My

good friend, are you aware that it is term-time? The courts are sitting. Look at the briefs waiting for me on that table! Rest means ruin in my case."

"And work," added the doctor, quietly, "means death."

I started. He was not trying to frighten me: he was plainly in earnest.

"It is merely a question of time," he went on. "You have a fine constitution; you are a young man; but you cannot deliberately overwork your brain, and derange your nervous system, much longer. Go away at once. If you are a good sailor, take a sea-voyage. The ocean air is the best of all air to build you up again. No: I don't want to write a prescription. I decline to physic you. I have no more to say."

With these words my medical friend left the room. I was obstinate: I went into court the same day.

The senior counsel in the case on which I was engaged applied to me for some information which it was my duty to give him. To my horror and amazement, I was perfectly unable to collect my ideas; facts and dates all mingled together confusedly in my mind. I was led out of court thoroughly terrified about myself. The next day my briefs went back to the attorneys; and I followed my doctor's advice by taking my passage for America in the first steamer that sailed for New York.

I had chosen the voyage to America in preference to any other trip by sea, with a special object in view. A relative of my mother's had emigrated to the United States many years since,

and had thriven there as a farmer. He had given me a general invitation to visit him if I ever crossed the Atlantic. The long period of inaction, under the name of *rest*, to which the doctor's decision had condemned me, could hardly be more pleasantly occupied, as I thought, than by paying a visit to my relation, and seeing what I could of America in that way. After a brief sojourn at New York, I started by railway for the residence of my host – Mr. Isaac Meadowcroft, of Morwick Farm.

There are some of the grandest natural prospects on the face of creation in America. There is also to be found in certain States of the Union, by way of wholesome contrast, scenery as flat, as monotonous, and as uninteresting to the traveler, as any that the earth can show. The part of the country in which M. Meadowcroft's farm was situated fell within this latter category. I looked round me when I stepped out of the railway-car-riage on the platform at Morwick Station; and I said to myself, "If to be cured means, in my case, to be dull, I have accurately picked out the very place for the purpose."

I look back at those words by the light of later events; and I pronounce them, as you will soon pronounce them, to be the words of an essentially rash man, whose hasty judgment never stopped to consider what surprises time and chance together might have in store for him.

Mr. Meadowcroft's eldest son, Ambrose, was waiting at the station to drive me to the farm.

There was no forewarning, in the appearance of Ambrose

Meadowcroft, of the strange and terrible events that were to follow my arrival at Morwick. A healthy, handsome young fellow, one of thousands of other healthy, handsome young fellows, said, "How d'ye do, Mr. Lefrank? Glad to see you, sir. Jump into the buggy; the man will look after your portmanteau." With equally conventional politeness I answered, "Thank you. How are you all at home?" So we started on the way to the farm.

Our conversation on the drive began with the subjects of agriculture and breeding. I displayed my total ignorance of crops and cattle before we had traveled ten yards on our journey. Ambrose Meadowcroft cast about for another topic, and failed to find it. Upon this I cast about on my side, and asked, at a venture, if I had chosen a convenient time for my visit The young farmer's stolid brown face instantly brightened. I had evidently hit, haphazard, on an interesting subject.

"You couldn't have chosen a better time," he said. "Our house has never been so cheerful as it is now."

"Have you any visitors staying with you?"

"It's not exactly a visitor. It's a new member of the family who has come to live with us."

"A new member of the family! May I ask who it is?"

Ambrose Meadowcroft considered before he replied; touched his horse with the whip; looked at me with a certain sheepish hesitation; and suddenly burst out with the truth, in the plainest possible words:

"It's just the nicest girl, sir, you ever saw in your life."

"Ay, ay! A friend of your sister's, I suppose?"

"A friend? Bless your heart! it's our little American cousin, Naomi Colebrook."

I vaguely remembered that a younger sister of Mr. Meadowcroft's had married an American merchant in the remote past, and had died many years since, leaving an only child. I was now further informed that the father also was dead. In his last moments he had committed his helpless daughter to the compassionate care of his wife's relations at Morwick.

"He was always a speculating man," Ambrose went on. "Tried one thing after another, and failed in all. Died, sir, leaving barely enough to bury him. My father was a little doubtful, before she came here, how his American niece would turn out. We are English, you know; and, though we do live in the United States, we stick fast to our English ways and habits. We don't much like American women in general, I can tell you; but when Naomi made her appearance she conquered us all. Such a girl! Took her place as one of the family directly. Learned to make herself useful in the dairy in a week's time. I tell you this – she hasn't been with us quite two months yet, and we wonder already how we ever got on without her!"

Once started on the subject of Naomi Colebrook, Ambrose held to that one topic and talked on it without intermission. It required no great gift of penetration to discover the impression which the American cousin had produced in this case. The young fellow's enthusiasm communicated itself, in a certain tepid

degree, to me. I really felt a mild flutter of anticipation at the prospect of seeing Naomi, when we drew up, toward the close of evening, at the gates of Morwick Farm.

Chapter II
The New Faces

Immediatly on my arrival, I was presented to Mr. Meadowcroft, the father.

The old man had become a confirmed invalid, confined by chronic rheumatism to his chair. He received me kindly, and a little wearily as well. His only unmarried daughter (he had long since been left a widower) was in the room, in attendance on her father. She was a melancholy, middle-aged woman, without visible attractions of any sort – one of those persons who appear to accept the obligation of living under protest, as a burden which they would never have consented to bear if they had only been consulted first. We three had a dreary little interview in a parlor of bare walls; and then I was permitted to go upstairs, and unpack my portmanteau in my own room.

"Supper will be at nine o'clock, sir," said Miss Meadowcroft.

She pronounced those words as if "supper" was a form of domestic offense, habitually committed by the men, and endured by the women. I followed the groom up to my room, not over-well pleased with my first experience of the farm.

No Naomi and no romance, thus far!

My room was clean – oppressively clean. I quite longed to see a little dust somewhere. My library was limited to the Bible

and the Prayer – Book. My view from the window showed me a dead flat in a partial state of cultivation, fading sadly from view in the waning light. Above the head of my spruce white bed hung a scroll, bearing a damnatory quotation from Scripture in emblazoned letters of red and black. The dismal presence of Miss Meadowcroft had passed over my bedroom, and had blighted it. My spirits sank as I looked round me. Supper-time was still an event in the future. I lighted the candles and took from my portmanteau what I firmly believe to have been the first French novel ever produced at Morwick Farm. It was one of the masterly and charming stories of Dumas the elder. In five minutes I was in a new world, and my melancholy room was full of the liveliest French company. The sound of an imperative and uncompromising bell recalled me in due time to the regions of reality. I looked at my watch. Nine o'clock.

Ambrose met me at the bottom of the stairs, and showed me the way to the supper-room.

Mr. Meadowcroft's invalid chair had been wheeled to the head of the table. On his right-hand side sat his sad and silent daughter. She signed to me, with a ghostly solemnity, to take the vacant place on the left of her father. Silas Meadowcroft came in at the same moment, and was presented to me by his brother. There was a strong family likeness between them, Ambrose being the taller and the handsomer man of the two. But there was no marked character in either face. I set them down as men with undeveloped qualities, waiting (the good and evil qualities alike)

for time and circumstances to bring them to their full growth.

The door opened again while I was still studying the two brothers, without, I honestly confess, being very favorably impressed by either of them. A new member of the family circle, who instantly attracted my attention, entered the room.

He was short, spare, and wiry; singularly pale for a person whose life was passed in the country. The face was in other respects, besides this, a striking face to see. As to the lower part, it was covered with a thick black beard and mustache, at a time when shaving was the rule, and beards the rare exception, in America. As to the upper part of the face, it was irradiated by a pair of wild, glittering brown eyes, the expression of which suggested to me that there was something not quite right with the man's mental balance. A perfectly sane person in all his sayings and doings, so far as I could see, there was still something in those wild brown eyes which suggested to me that, under exceptionally trying circumstances, he might surprise his oldest friends by acting in some exceptionally violent or foolish way. "A little cracked" – that in the popular phrase was my impression of the stranger who now made his appearance in the supper-room.

Mr. Meadowcroft the elder, having not spoken one word thus far, himself introduced the newcomer to me, with a sideglance at his sons, which had something like defiance in it – a glance which, as I was sorry to notice, was returned with the defiance on their side by the two young men.

"Philip Lefrank, this is my overlooker, Mr. Jago," said the old

man, formally presenting us. “John Jago, this is my young relative by marriage, Mr. Lefrank. He is not well; he has come over the ocean for rest, and change of scene. Mr. Jago is an American, Philip. I hope you have no prejudice against Americans. Make acquaintance with Mr. Jago. Sit together.” He cast another dark look at his sons; and the sons again returned it. They pointedly drew back from John Jago as he approached the empty chair next to me and moved round to the opposite side of the table. It was plain that the man with the beard stood high in the father’s favor, and that he was cordially disliked for that or for some other reason by the sons.

The door opened once more. A young lady quietly joined the party at the supper-table.

Was the young lady Naomi Colebrook? I looked at Ambrose, and saw the answer in his face. Naomi Colebrook at last!

A pretty girl, and, so far as I could judge by appearances, a good girl too. Describing her generally, I may say that she had a small head, well carried, and well set on her shoulders; bright gray eyes, that looked at you honestly, and meant what they looked; a trim, slight little figure – too slight for our English notions of beauty; a strong American accent; and (a rare thing in America) a pleasantly toned voice, which made the accent agreeable to English ears. Our first impressions of people are, in nine cases out of ten, the right impressions. I liked Naomi Colebrook at first sight; liked her pleasant smile; liked her hearty shake of the hand when we were presented to each other. “If I get on well with

nobody else in this house," I thought to myself, "I shall certainly get on well with *you*."

For once in a way, I proved a true prophet. In the atmosphere of smoldering enmities at Morwick Farm, the pretty American girl and I remained firm and true friends from first to last. Ambrose made room for Naomi to sit between his brother and himself. She changed color for a moment, and looked at him, with a pretty, reluctant tenderness, as she took her chair. I strongly suspected the young farmer of squeezing her hand privately, under cover of the tablecloth.

The supper was not a merry one. The only cheerful conversation was the conversation across the table between Naomi and me.

For some incomprehensible reason, John Jago seemed to be ill at ease in the presence of his young countrywoman. He looked up at Naomi doubtingly from his plate, and looked down again slowly with a frown. When I addressed him, he answered constrainedly. Even when he spoke to Mr. Meadowcroft, he was still on his guard – on his guard against the two young men, as I fancied by the direction which his eyes took on these occasions. When we began our meal, I had noticed for the first time that Silas Meadowcroft's left hand was strapped up with surgical plaster; and I now further observed that John Jago's wandering brown eyes, furtively looking at everybody round the table in turn, looked with a curious, cynical scrutiny at the young man's injured hand.

By way of making my first evening at the farm all the more embarrassing to me as a stranger, I discovered before long that the father and sons were talking indirectly *at* each other, through Mr. Jago and through me. When old Mr. Meadowcroft spoke disparagingly to his overlooker of some past mistake made in the cultivation of the arable land of the farm, old Mr. Meadowcroft's eyes pointed the application of his hostile criticism straight in the direction of his two sons. When the two sons seized a stray remark of mine about animals in general, and applied it satirically to the mismanagement of sheep and oxen in particular, they looked at John Jago, while they talked to me. On occasions of this sort – and they happened frequently – Naomi struck in resolutely at the right moment, and turned the talk to some harmless topic. Every time she took a prominent part in this way in keeping the peace, melancholy Miss Meadowcroft looked slowly round at her in stern and silent disparagement of her interference. A more dreary and more disunited family party I never sat at the table with. Envy, hatred, malice and uncharitableness are never so essentially detestable to my mind as when they are animated by a sense of propriety, and work under the surface. But for my interest in Naomi, and my other interest in the little love-looks which I now and then surprised passing between her and Ambrose, I should never have sat through that supper. I should certainly have taken refuge in my French novel and my own room.

At last the unendurably long meal, served with ostentatious

profusion, was at an end. Miss Meadowcroft rose with her ghostly solemnity, and granted me my dismissal in these words:

"We are early people at the farm, Mr. Lefrank. I wish you good-night."

She laid her bony hands on the back of Mr. Meadowcroft's invalid-chair, cut him short in his farewell salutation to me, and wheeled him out to his bed as if she were wheeling him out to his grave.

"Do you go to your room immediately, sir? If not, may I offer you a cigar – provided the young gentlemen will permit it?"

So, picking his words with painful deliberation, and pointing his reference to "the young gentlemen" with one sardonic side-look at them, Mr. John Jago performed the duties of hospitality on his side. I excused myself from accepting the cigar. With studied politeness, the man of the glittering brown eyes wished me a good night's rest, and left the room.

Ambrose and Silas both approached me hospitably, with their open cigar-cases in their hands.

"You were quite right to say 'No,'" Ambrose began. "Never smoke with John Jago. His cigars will poison you."

"And never believe a word John Jago says to you," added Silas. "He is the greatest liar in America, let the other be whom he may."

Naomi shook her forefinger reproachfully at them, as if the two sturdy young farmers had been two children.

"What will Mr. Lefrank think," she said, "if you talk in that

way of a person whom your father respects and trusts? Go and smoke. I am ashamed of both of you."

Silas slunk away without a word of protest. Ambrose stood his ground, evidently bent on making his peace with Naomi before he left her.

Seeing that I was in the way, I walked aside toward a glass door at the lower end of the room. The door opened on the trim little farm-garden, bathed at that moment in lovely moonlight. I stepped out to enjoy the scene, and found my way to a seat under an elm-tree. The grand repose of nature had never looked so unutterably solemn and beautiful as it now appeared, after what I had seen and heard inside the house. I understood, or thought I understood, the sad despair of humanity which led men into monasteries in the old times. The misanthropical side of my nature (where is the sick man who is not conscious of that side of him?) was fast getting the upper hand of me when I felt a light touch laid on my shoulder, and found myself reconciled to my species once more by Naomi Colebrook.

Chapter III
The Moonlight Meeting

"I want to speak to you," Naomi began "You don't think ill of me for following you out here? We are not accustomed to stand much on ceremony in America."

"You are quite right in America. Pray sit down."

She seated herself by my side, looking at me frankly and fearlessly by the light of the moon.

"You are related to the family here," she resumed, "and I am related too. I guess I may say to you what I couldn't say to a stranger. I am right glad you have come here, Mr. Lefrank; and for a reason, sir, which you don't suspect."

"Thank you for the compliment you pay me, Miss Colebrook, whatever the reason may be."

She took no notice of my reply; she steadily pursued her own train of thought.

"I guess you may do some good, sir, in this wretched house," the girl went on, with her eyes still earnestly fixed on my face. "There is no love, no trust, no peace, at Morwick Farm. They want somebody here, except Ambrose. Don't think ill of Ambrose; he is only thoughtless. I say, the rest of them want somebody here to make them ashamed of their hard hearts, and their horrid, false, envious ways. You are a gentleman; you know

more than they know; they can't help themselves; they must look up to *you*. Try, Mr. Lefrank, when you have the opportunity – pray try, sir, to make peace among them. You heard what went on at supper-time; and you were disgusted with it. Oh yes, you were! I saw you frown to yourself; and I know what *that* means in you Englishmen."

There was no choice but to speak one's mind plainly to Naomi. I acknowledged the impression which had been produced on me at supper-time just as plainly as I have acknowledged it in these pages. Naomi nodded her head in undisguised approval of my candor.

"That will do, that's speaking out," she said. "But – oh my! you put it a deal too mildly, sir, when you say the men don't seem to be on friendly terms together here. They hate each other. That's the word, Mr. Lefrank – hate; bitter, bitter, bitter hate!" She clinched her little fists; she shook them vehemently, by way of adding emphasis to her last words; and then she suddenly remembered Ambrose. "Except Ambrose," she added, opening her hand again, and laying it very earnestly on my arm. "Don't go and misjudge Ambrose, sir. There is no harm in poor Ambrose."

The girl's innocent frankness was really irresistible.

"Should I be altogether wrong," I asked, "if I guessed that you were a little partial to Ambrose?"

An Englishwoman would have felt, or would at least have assumed, some little hesitation at replying to my question. Naomi did not hesitate for an instant.

"You are quite right, sir," she said with the most perfect composure. "If things go well, I mean to marry Ambrose."

"If things go well," I repeated. "What does that mean? Money?"

She shook her head.

"It means a fear that I have in my own mind," she answered – "a fear, Mr. Lefrank, of matters taking a bad turn among the men here – the wicked, hard-hearted, unfeeling men. I don't mean Ambrose, sir; I mean his brother Silas, and John Jago. Did you notice Silas's hand? John Jago did that, sir, with a knife."

"By accident?" I asked.

"On purpose," she answered. "In return for a blow."

This plain revelation of the state of things at Morwick Farm rather staggered me – blows and knives under the rich and respectable roof-tree of old Mr. Meadowcroft – blows and knives, not among the laborers, but among the masters! My first impression was like *your* first impression, no doubt. I could hardly believe it.

"Are you sure of what you say?" I inquired.

"I have it from Ambrose. Ambrose would never deceive me. Ambrose knows all about it."

My curiosity was powerfully excited. To what sort of household had I rashly voyaged across the ocean in search of rest and quiet?

"May I know all about it too?" I said.

"Well, I will try and tell you what Ambrose told me. But you

must promise me one thing first, sir. Promise you won't go away and leave us when you know the whole truth. Shake hands on it, Mr. Lefrank; come, shake hands on it."

There was no resisting her fearless frankness. I shook hands on it. Naomi entered on her narrative the moment I had given her my pledge, without wasting a word by way of preface.

"When you are shown over the farm here," she began, "you will see that it is really two farms in one. On this side of it, as we look from under this tree, they raise crops: on the other side – on much the larger half of the land, mind – they raise cattle. When Mr. Meadowcroft got too old and too sick to look after his farm himself, the boys (I mean Ambrose and Silas) divided the work between them. Ambrose looked after the crops, and Silas after the cattle. Things didn't go well, somehow, under their management. I can't tell you why. I am only sure Ambrose was not in fault. The old man got more and more dissatisfied, especially about his beasts. His pride is in his beasts. Without saying a word to the boys, he looked about privately (*I* think he was wrong in that, sir; don't you?) – he looked about privately for help; and, in an evil hour, he heard of John Jago. Do you like John Jago, Mr. Lefrank?"

"So far, no. I don't like him."

"Just my sentiments, sir. But I don't know: it's likely we may be wrong. There's nothing against John Jago, except that he is so odd in his ways. They do say he wears all that nasty hair on his face (I hate hair on a man's face) on account of a vow he made

when he lost his wife. Don't you think, Mr. Lefrank, a man must be a little mad who shows his grief at losing his wife by vowing that he will never shave himself again? Well, that's what they do say John Jago vowed. Perhaps it's a lie. People are such liars here! Anyway, it's truth (the boys themselves confess *that*), when John came to the farm, he came with a firstrate character. The old father here isn't easy to please; and he pleased the old father. Yes, that's so. Mr. Meadowcroft don't like my countrymen in general. He's like his sons – English, bitter English, to the marrow of his bones. Somehow, in spite of that, John Jago got round him; maybe because John does certainly know his business. Oh yes! Cattle and crops, John knows his business. Since he's been overlooker, things have prospered as they didn't prosper in the time of the boys. Ambrose owned as much to me himself. Still, sir, it's hard to be set aside for a stranger; isn't it? John gives the orders now. The boys do their work; but they have no voice in it when John and the old man put their heads together over the business of the farm. I have been long in telling you of it, sir, but now you know how the envy and the hatred grew among the men before my time. Since I have been here, things seem to get worse and worse. There's hardly a day goes by that hard words don't pass between the boys and John, or the boys and their father. The old man has an aggravating way, Mr. Lefrank – a nasty way, as we do call it – of taking John Jago's part. Do speak to him about it when you get the chance. The main blame of the quarrel between Silas and John the other day lies at his door, as I think.

I don't want to excuse Silas, either. It was brutal of him – though he *is* Ambrose's brother – to strike John, who is the smaller and weaker man of the two. But it was worse than brutal in John, sir, to out with his knife and try to stab Silas. Oh, he did it! If Silas had not caught the knife in his hand (his hand's awfully cut, I can tell you; I dressed it myself), it might have ended, for anything I know, in murder —"

She stopped as the word passed her lips, looked back over her shoulder, and started violently.

I looked where my companion was looking. The dark figure of a man was standing, watching us, in the shadow of the elm-tree. I rose directly to approach him. Naomi recovered her self-possession, and checked me before I could interfere.

"Who are you?" she asked, turning sharply toward the stranger. "What do you want there?"

The man stepped out from the shadow into the moonlight, and stood revealed to us as John Jago.

"I hope I am not intruding?" he said, looking hard at me.

"What do you want?" Naomi repeated.

"I don't wish to disturb you, or to disturb this gentleman," he proceeded. "When you are quite at leisure, Miss Naomi, you would be doing me a favor if you would permit me to say a few words to you in private."

He spoke with the most scrupulous politeness; trying, and trying vainly, to conceal some strong agitation which was in possession of him. His wild brown eyes – wilder than ever in

the moonlight – rested entreatingly, with a strange underlying expression of despair, on Naomi's face. His hands, clasped lightly in front of him, trembled incessantly. Little as I liked the man, he did really impress me as a pitiable object at that moment.

"Do you mean that you want to speak to me to-night?" Naomi asked, in undisguised surprise.

"Yes, miss, if you please, at your leisure and at Mr. Lefrank's."

Naomi hesitated.

"Won't it keep till to-morrow?" she said.

"I shall be away on farm business to-morrow, miss, for the whole day. Please to give me a few minutes this evening." He advanced a step toward her; his voice faltered, and dropped timidly to a whisper. "I really have something to say to you, Miss Naomi. It would be a kindness on your part – a very, very great kindness – if you will let me say it before I rest tonight."

I rose again to resign my place to him. Once more Naomi checked me.

"No," she said. "Don't stir." She addressed John Jago very reluctantly: "If you are so much in earnest about it, Mr. John, I suppose it must be. I can't guess what *you* can possibly have to say to me which cannot be said before a third person. However, it wouldn't be civil, I suppose, to say 'No' in my place. You know it's my business to wind up the hall-clock at ten every night. If you choose to come and help me, the chances are that we shall have the hall to ourselves. Will that do?"

"Not in the hall, miss, if you will excuse me."

“Not in the hall!”
“And not in the house either, if I may make so bold.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.