

# Le Femme Noir

By Ann Maria Hall

People find it easy enough to laugh at “spirit-stories” in broad daylight, when the sunbeams dance upon the grass, and the deepest forest glades are spotted and checkered only by the tender shadows of leafy trees; when the rugged castle, that looked so mysterious and so stern in the looming night, seems suited for a lady’s bower; when the rushing waterfall sparkles in diamond showers, and the hum of bee and song of bird tune the thoughts to hopes of life and happiness; people may laugh at ghosts then, if they like, but as for me, I never could merely smile at the records of those shadowy visitors. I have large faith in things supernatural, and cannot disbelieve solely on the ground that I lack such evidences as are supplied by the senses; for they, in truth, sustain by palpable proofs so few of the many marvels by which we are surrounded, that I would rather reject them altogether as witnesses, than abide the issue entirely as they suggest.

My great grandmother was a native of the canton of Berne; and at the advanced age of ninety, her memory of “the long ago” was as active as it could have been at fifteen; she looked as if she had just stepped out of a piece of tapestry belonging to a past age, but with warm sympathies for the present. Her English, when she became excited, was very curious—a mingling of French, certainly not Parisian, with here and there scraps of German done into English, literally—so that her observations were at times remarkable for their strength. “The mountains,” she would say, “in her country, went high, high up, until they could look into the heavens, and *hear* God in the storm.” She never thoroughly comprehended the real beauty of England; but spoke with contempt of the flatness of our island—calling our mountains “inequalities,” nothing more—holding our agriculture “cheap,” saying that the land tilled itself, leaving man nothing to do. She would sing the most amusing *patois* songs, and tell stories from morning till night, more especially spirit-stories; but the old lady would not tell a tale of that character a second time to an unbeliever; such things, she would say, “are not for make-laugh.” One in particular, I remember, always excited great interest in her young listeners, from its mingling of the real and the romantic; but it can never be told as she told it; there was so much of the picturesque about the old lady—so much to admire in the curious carving of her ebony cane, in the beauty of her point lace, the size and weight of her long ugly earrings, the fashion of her solid silk gown, the singularity of her buckled shoes—her dark-brown wrinkled face, every wrinkle an expression—her broad thoughtful brow, beneath which glittered her bright blue eyes—bright, even when her eyelashes were white with *years*. All these peculiarities gave impressive effect to her words.

“In my young time,” she told us, “I spent many happy hours with Amelie de Rohean, in her uncle’s castle. He was a fine man—much size, stern, and dark, and full of noise—a strong man, no fear—he had a great heart, and a big head.

“The castle was situated in the midst of the most stupendous Alpine scenery, and yet it was not solitary. There were other dwellings in sight; some very near, but separated by a ravine, through which, at all seasons, a rapid river kept its foaming course. You do not know what torrents are in this country; your torrents are as babies—ours are giants. The one I speak of divided the valley; here and there a rock, round which it sported, or stormed, according to the season. In two of the defiles these rocks were of great value; acting as piers for the support of bridges, the only means of communication with our opposite neighbors.

“Monsieur, as we always called the count, was, as I have told you, a dark, stern, violent man. All men are wilful, my dear young ladies,” she would say; “but Monsieur was the most wilful: all men are selfish, but he was the most selfish: all men are tyrants—” Here the old lady was invariably interrupted by her relatives, with “Oh, good Granny!” and, “Oh fie, dear Granny!” and she would bridle up a little and fan herself; then continue—“Yes, my dears, each creature according to its nature—all men are tyrants; and I confess that I do think a Swiss, whose mountain inheritance is nearly coeval with the creation of the mountains, has a *right* to be tyrannical; I did not intend to blame him for that: I did not, because I had grown used to it. Amelie and I always stood up and when he entered the room, and never sat down until we were desired. He never bestowed a loving word or a kind look upon either of us. We never spoke except when we were spoken to.”

“But when you and Amelie were alone, dear Granny?”

“Oh, why, then we did chatter, I suppose; though then it was in moderation; for monsieur’s influence chilled us even when he was not present; and often she would say, ‘It is hard trying to love him, for he will not let me!’ There is no such beauty in the world now as Amelie’s. I can see her as she used to stand before the richly carved glass in the grave oak-panelled dressing-room; her luxuriant hair combed up from her full round brow; the discreet maidenly cap, covering the back of her head; her brocaded silk, (which she had inherited from her grandmother,) shaded round the bosom by the modest ruffle; her black velvet gorget and bracelets, showing off to perfection the pearly transparency of her skin. She was the loveliest of all creatures, and as good as she was lovely; it seems but as yesterday that we were together—but as yesterday! And yet I lived to see her an old woman; so they called her, but she never seemed old to me! My own dear Amelie!” Ninety years had not dried up the sources of poor Granny’s tears, nor chilled her heart; and she never spoke of Amelie without emotion. “Monsieur was very proud of his niece, because she was part of himself; she added to his consequence, she contributed to his enjoyments; she had grown necessary; she was the one sunbeam of his house.”

“Not the *one* sunbeam, surely, Granny!” one of us would exclaim; “you were a sunbeam then.”

“I was nothing where Amelie was—nothing but her shadow! The bravest and best in the country would have rejoiced to be to her what I was—her chosen friend; and some would have perilled their lives for one of the sweet smiles which played around her uncle, but never touched his heart. Monsieur never would suffer people to be happy except in his way. He had never married; and he declared Amelie never should. She had, he said, as much enjoyment as he had: she had a castle with a draw-bridge; she had a forest for hunting; dogs and horses; servants and serfs; jewels, gold, and gorgeous dresses; a guitar and a harpsichord; a parrot—and a friend! And such an uncle! he believed there was not such another uncle in broad Europe! For many a long day Amelie laughed at this catalogue of advantages—that is, she laughed when her uncle left the room; she never laughed before him. In time, the laugh came not; but in its place, sighs and tears. Monsieur had a great deal to answer for. Amelie was not prevented from seeing the gentry when they came to visit in a formal way, and she met many hawking and hunting; but she never was permitted to invite any one to the castle, nor to accept an invitation. Monsieur fancied that by shutting her lips, he closed her heart; and boasted such was the advantage of his good training, that Amelie’s mind was fortified against all weaknesses, for she had not the least dread of wandering about the ruined chapel of the castle, where he himself dared not go after dusk. This place was dedicated to the family ghost—the spirit, which for many years had it entirely at its own disposal. It was much attached to its quarters, seldom leaving them, except for the purpose

of interfering when anything decidedly wrong was going forward in the castle. 'La Femme Noir' had been seen gliding along the unprotected parapet of the bridge, and standing on a pinnacle, before the late master's death; and many tales were told of her, which in this age of unbelief would not be credited."

"Granny, did you know why your friend ventured so fearlessly into the ghost's territories?" inquired my cousin.

"I am not come to that," was the reply; "and you are one saucy little maid to ask what I do not choose to tell. Amelie certainly entertained no fear of the spirit; 'La Femme Noir' could have had no angry feelings towards her, for my friend would wander in the ruins, taking no note of daylight, or moonlight, or even darkness. The peasants declared their young lady must have walked over crossed bones, or drank water out of a raven's skull, or passed nine times round the spectre's glass on Midsummer eve. She must have done all this, if not more; there could be little doubt that the 'Femme Noir' had initiated her into certain mysteries; for they heard at times voices in low, whispering converse, and saw the shadows of two persons cross the old roofless chapel, when 'Mamselle' had passed the foot-bridge alone. Monsieur gloried in this fearlessness on the part of his gentle niece; and more than once, when he had revellers in the castle, he sent her forth at midnight to bring him a bough from a tree that only grew beside the altar of the old chapel; and she did his bidding always as willingly, though not as rapidly, as he could desire.

"But certainly Amelie's courage brought no calmness. She became pale; her pillow was often moistened by her tears; her music was neglected; she took no pleasure in the chase; and her chamois not receiving its usual attention, went off into the mountains. She avoided me—her friend! who would have died for her; she made no reply to my prayers, and did not heed my entreaties. One morning, when her eyes were fixed upon a book she did not read, and I sat at my embroidery a little apart, watching the tears stray over her cheek until I was blinded by my own, I heard monsieur's heavy tramp approaching through the long gallery; some boots creak—but the boots of monsieur!—they growled!

'Save me, oh save me!' she exclaimed wildly. Before I could reply, her uncle crashed open the door, and stood before us like an embodied thunderbolt. He held an open letter in his hand—his eyes glared—his nostrils were distended—he trembled so with rage, that the cabinets and old china shook again.

"'Do you,' he said, 'know Charles le Maitre?'"

"Amelie replied, 'She did.'"

"'How did you make acquaintance with the son of my deadliest foe?'"

"There was no answer. The question was repeated. Amelie said she had met him, and at last confessed it was in the ruined portion of the castle! She threw herself at her uncle's feet—she clung to his knees; love taught her eloquence. She told him how deeply Charles regretted the long-standing feud; how earnest, and true, and good, he was. Bending low, until her tresses were heaped upon the floor, she confessed, modestly, but firmly, that she loved this young man; that she would rather sacrifice the wealth of the whole world, than forget him.

"Monsieur seemed suffocating; he tore off his lace cravat, and scattered its fragments on the floor—still she clung to him. At last he flung her from him; he reproached her with the bread she had eaten, and heaped odium upon her mother's memory! But though Amelie's nature was tender and affectionate, the old spirit of the old race roused within her; the slight girl arose, and stood erect before the man of storms.

"'Did you think,' she said, 'because I bent to you that I am feeble? because I bore with you, have I no thoughts? You gave food to this frame, but you fed not my heart; you gave me not

love, nor tenderness, nor sympathy; you showed me to your friends, as you would your horse. If you had by kindness sown the seeds of love within my bosom; if you had been a father to me in tenderness, I would have been to you—a child. I never knew the time when I did not tremble at your footstep; but I will do so no more. I would gladly have loved you, trusted you, cherished you; but I feared to let you know I had a heart, lest you should tear and insult it. Oh, sir, those who expect love where they give none, and confidence where there is no trust, blast the fair time of youth, and lay up for themselves an unhonored old age.’ The scene terminated by monsieur’s falling down in a fit, and Amelie’s being conveyed fainting to her chamber.

“That night the castle was enveloped by storms; they came from all points of the compass—thunder, lightning, hail, and rain! The master lay in his stately bed and was troubled; he could hardly believe that Amelie spoke the words he had heard: cold-hearted and selfish as he was, he was also a clear-seeing man, and it was their truth that struck him. But still his heart was hardened; he had commanded Amelie to be locked into her chamber, and her lover seized and imprisoned when he came to his usual tryste. Monsieur, I have said, lay in his stately bed, the lightning, at intervals, illumining his dark chamber. I had cast myself on the floor outside her door, but could not hear her weep, though I knew that she was overcome of sorrow. As I sat, my head resting against the lintel of the door, a form passed through the solid oak from her chamber, without the bolts being withdrawn. I saw it as plainly as I see your faces now, under the influence of various emotions; nothing opened, but it passed through—a shadowy form, dark and vapory, but perfectly distinct. I knew it was ‘La Femme Noir,’ and I trembled, for she never came from caprice, but always for a purpose. I did not fear for Amelie, for ‘La Femme Noir’ never warred with the high-minded or virtuous. She passed slowly, more slowly than I am speaking, along the corridor, growing taller and taller as she went on, until she entered monsieur’s chamber by the door exactly opposite where I stood. She paused at the foot of the plumed bed, and the lightning, no longer fitful, by its broad flashes kept up a continual illumination. She stood for some time perfectly motionless, though in a loud tone the master demanded whence she came, and what she wanted. At last, during a pause in the storm, she told him that all the power he possessed should not prevent the union of Amelie and Charles. I heard her voice myself; it sounded like the night-wind among fir-trees—cold and shrill, chilling both ear and heart. I turned my eyes away while she spoke, and when I looked again, she was gone! The storm continued to increase in violence, and the master’s rage kept pace with the war of elements. The servants were trembling with undefined terror; they feared they knew not what; the dogs added to their apprehension by howling fearfully, and then barking in the highest possible key; the master paced about his chamber, calling in vain on his domestics, stamping and swearing like a maniac. At last, amid flashes of lightning, he made his way to the head of the great staircase, and presently the clang of the alarm-bell mingled with the thunder and the roar of the mountain torrents: this hastened the servants to his presence, though they seemed hardly capable of understanding his words—he insisted on Charles being brought before him. We all trembled, for he was mad and livid with rage. The warden, in whose care the young man was, dared not enter the hall that echoed his loud words and heavy footsteps, for when he went to seek his prisoner, he found every bolt and bar withdrawn, and the iron door wide open: he was gone. Monsieur seemed to find relief by his energies being called into action; he ordered instant pursuit, and mounted his favorite charger, despite the storm, despite the fury of the elements. Although the great gates rocked, and the castle shook like an aspen-leaf, he set forth, his path illumined by the lightning; bold and brave as was his horse, he found it almost impossible to get it forward; he dug his spurs deep into the flanks of the noble animal, until the red blood mingled

with the rain. At last, it rushed madly down the path to the bridge the young man must cross; and when they reached it, the master discerned the floating cloak of the pursued, a few yards in advance. Again the horse rebelled against his will, the lightning flashed in his eyes, and the torrent seemed a mass of red fire; no sound could be heard but of its roaring waters; the attendants clung as they advanced to the hand rail of the bridge. The youth, unconscious of the *pursuit*, proceeded rapidly; and again roused, the horse plunged forward. On the instant, the form of 'La Femme Noir' passed with the blast that rushed down the ravine; the torrent followed in her track, and more than half the bridge was swept away forever. As the master reined back the horse he had so urged forward, he saw the youth kneeling with outstretched arms on the opposite bank—kneeling in gratitude for his deliverance from his double peril. All were struck with the piety of the youth, and earnestly rejoiced at his deliverance; though they did not presume to say so, or look as if they thought it. I never saw so changed a person as the master when he reentered the castle gate: his cheek was blanched—his eye quelled—his fierce plume hung broken over his shoulder—his step was unequal, and in the voice of a feeble girl he said—'Bring me a cup of wine.' I was his cupbearer, and for the first time in his life he thanked me graciously, and in the warmth of his gratitude tapped my shoulder; the caress nearly hurled me across the hall. What passed in his retiring-room, I know not. Some said the 'Femme Noir' visited him again; I cannot tell; I did not see her; I speak of what I saw, not of what I heard. The storm passed away with a clap of thunder, to which the former sounds were but as the rattling of pebbles beneath the swell of a summer wave. The next morning monsieur sent for the pasteur. The good man seemed terror-stricken as he entered the hall; but monsieur filled him a quart of gold coins out of a leathern bag, to repair his church, and that quickly; and grasping his hand as he departed, looked him steadily in the face. As he did so, large drops stood like beads upon his brow; his stern, coarse features were strangely moved while he gazed upon the calm, pale minister of peace and love. 'You,' he said, 'bid God bless the poorest peasant that passes I you on the mountain; have you no blessing to give the master of Rohean?'

“ 'My son,' answered the good man, 'I give you the blessing I may give:—May God bless you, and may your heart be opened to give and to receive.'

“ 'I know I can give,' replied the proud man; 'but what can I receive?'

“ 'Love,' he replied. 'All your wealth has not brought you happiness, because you are unloving and unloved!'

“The demon returned to his brow, but it did not remain there.

“ 'You shall give me lessons in this thing,' he said; and so the good man went his way.

“Amelie continued a close prisoner; but a change came over monsieur. At first he shut himself up in his chamber, and no one was suffered to enter his presence; he took his food with his own hand from the only attendant who ventured to approach his door. He was heard walking up and down the room, day and night. When we were going to sleep, we heard his heavy tramp; at daybreak, there it was again; and those of the household, who awoke at intervals during the night, said it was unceasing.

“Monsieur could read. Ah, you may smile; but in those days, and in those mountains, such men as the master did not trouble themselves or others with knowledge; but the master of Rohean read both Latin and Greek, and commanded THE BOOK he had never opened since his childhood to be brought him. It was taken out of its velvet case, and carried in forthwith; and we saw his shadow from without, like the shadow of a giant, bending over THE BOOK; and he read in it for some days; and we greatly hoped it would soften and change his nature—and though I cannot say much for the softening, it certainly affected a great change; he no longer stalked moodily

along the corridors, and banged the doors, and swore at the servants; he the rather seemed possessed of a merry devil, roaring out an old song—

Aux bastions de Genève, nos canons  
Sont branquez;  
S'il y a quelque attaque nous les feront ronfler,  
Viva! les cannoniers!

and then he would pause, and clang his hands together like a pair of cymbals, and laugh. And once, as I was passing along, he pounced out upon me, and whirled me round in a waltz, roaring at me when he let me down, to practise *that* and break my embroidery frame. He formed a band of horns and trumpets, and insisted on the goatherds and shepherds sounding reveilles in the mountains, and the village children beating drums; his only idea of joy and happiness was noise. He set all the canton to work to mend the bridge, paying the workmen double wages; and he, who never entered a church before, would go to see how the laborers were getting on nearly every day. He talked and laughed a great deal to himself and in his gayety of heart would set the mastiffs fighting, and make excursions from home—we knowing not where he went. At last, Amelie was summoned to his presence, and he shook her and shouted, then kissed her; and hoping she would be a good girl, told her he had provided a husband for her. Amelie wept and prayed; and the master capered and sung. At last she fainted; and taking advantage of her unconsciousness, he conveyed her to the chapel; and there beside the altar stood the bridegroom—no other than Charles Le Maitre.

“They lived many happy years together; and when monsieur was in every respect a better, though still a strange man, ‘the Femme Noir’ appeared again to him—once. She did so with a placid air, on a summer night, with her arm extended towards the heavens.

“The next day the muffled bell told the valley that the stormy, proud old master of Rohean had ceased to live.”