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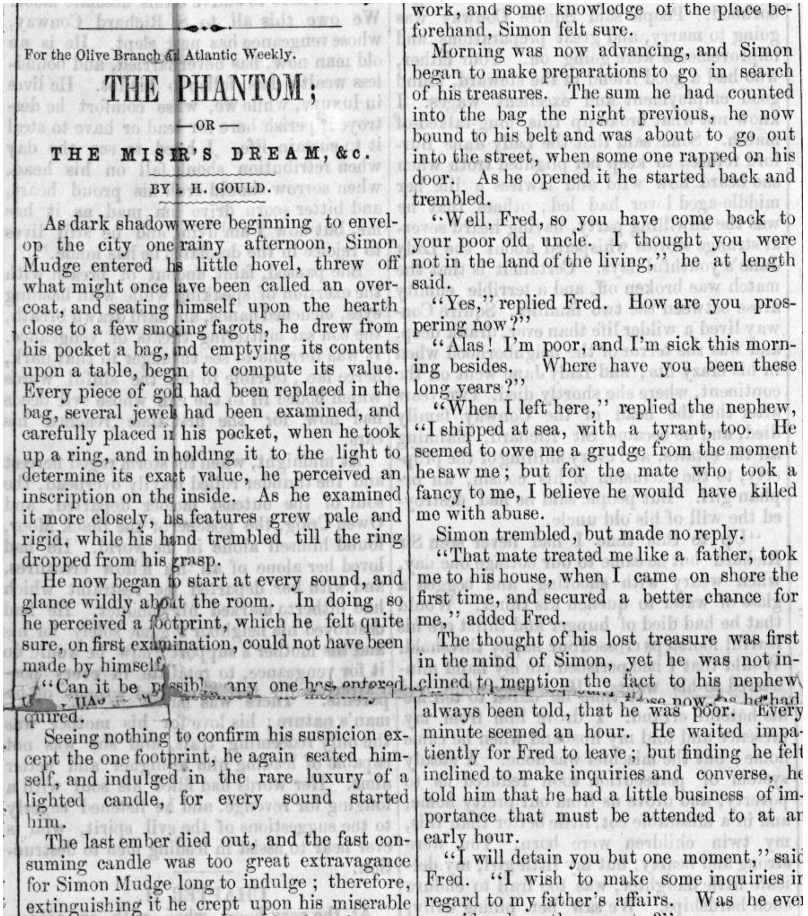


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The Phantom; Or, The Miser's Dream, &c.<sup>1</sup>By E. / I. H. Gould<sup>2</sup>

*The last of the stories published under the Gould pseudonym in March 1860, "The Phantom," traces, if it is indeed by Alcott, her maturing entry into the sensation mode—a mix of sentimentality and gothic—that earlier stories, like "The Painter's Dream," anticipate. For example, like "The Painter's Dream," this story notably turns on a phantasmic dream sequence; more broadly the story features tropes of gothic romance (previously artistic rivalry, here shipwreck) but hinges even more on the mundane questions of familial relations. Most obviously the story reads as a proto-feminist rewriting of Charles Dickens's Christmas Carol, an author and tale Alcott certainly knew well. One notices the playful coins speaking, a theatrical twist one might attribute to Alcott's many experiences adapting Dickens stories for the stage. But more importantly, the choice to accuse the old miser, and the Captain, not only of the crime of antisocial greed but of a sexual quid pro quo opens up new context in which to examine other works of Alcott's for their gothic-feminist critiques, if indeed this Gould story is hers.*



The first page of “The Phantom.” Image courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

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As dark shadows were beginning to envelop the city one rainy afternoon, Simon Mudge entered his little hovel, threw off what might once have been called an overcoat, and seating himself upon the hearth close to a few smoking fagots, he drew from his pocket a bag, and emptying its contents upon a table, began to compute its value. Every piece of gold had been replaced in the bag, several jewels had been examined, and carefully placed in his pocket, when he took up a ring, and in holding it to the light to determine its exact value, he perceived an inscription on the inside. As he examined it more closely, his features grew

pale and rigid, while his hand trembled till the ring dropped from his grasp.

He now began to start at every sound, and glance wildly about the room. In doing so he perceived a footprint, which he felt quite sure, on first examination, could not have been made by himself.<sup>3</sup>

“Can it be possible any one has entered [ . . . ]-quired.”<sup>4</sup>

Seeing nothing to confirm his suspicion except the one footprint, he again seated himself, and indulged in the rare luxury of a lighted candle, for every sound started him.

The last ember died out, and the fast consuming candle was too great extravagance for Simon Mudge long to indulge; therefore, extinguishing it he crept upon his miserable pallet. He slept at length, but he was troubled by dreams. A phantom stood beside him.

“Who are you, and what seek you in a poor man's hovel?” inquired the miser.

“You call yourself poor,” replied the phantom, “but you think yourself rich, sleeping as you do upon a bed of coins. I am come to give voice to each of these, and teach you how really poor you are, and how much more so you soon shall be.”

“O, no, no! let me not hear of the future,” pleaded Simon, “if I am to see the day when I shall have less possessions than now.”

“Do you remember your sister Alice?” inquired the phantom, pointing upwards.

“O, do not speak of her. She loved me, confided in me.”

“And you settled her husband's estate, and took her children as your own,” said the Phantom, inquiringly.

“And here is what ye gained by the benevolent act,” cried a large number of rusty coins.

“Have you forgotten your niece?” inquired the Phantom.

“Hold! hold!” pleaded the affrighted miser.

“Ah, then, you remember her, as on her knees she begged you to revoke the command, to wed an old gold hoarder like yourself. And you remember your reply.

“Go, then, from my presence, nor seek shelter beneath my roof, and food at my table, while you are unwilling to obey my reasonable command, and save your poor uncle from penury!”

“And here is what ye saved by it,” cried a few coins.

“Does the gingle of these coins make music like her voice? Does the sight of them make gladness like her presence?” inquired the Phantom.

“Merciful heaven! save me!” cried the miser.

“And her brother, ye have not lost all recollection of him, I ween,” continued the Phantom.

“O don’t mention his name; I wronged him.”

“Yes, you see the cruel Captain whom you hired to induce your nephew to run away from his tyrannical uncle.”

The Phantom continued to show him how by treachery, deceit, and pressing the poor, each coin had found its place in his hidden hoard, when gathering a large number from all the others, her voice sounded high, and a smile of triumph overspread her countenance and she said,<sup>5</sup>

“Know ye how these came here?”

“We are the price of your life,” cried the coins.

“Ay,” responded the Phantom, “ye saved all these by eating unwholesome food, and of that, too, sparingly; by sitting without fire in mid-winter, and wearing clothes unsuited to the season.

“O, spare me! I am sinking, dying!” cried the miser.

“Ay,” replied the Phantom, “and where are the friends ye have made, to come and comfort ye now, or drop the friendly tear upon your grave?”

“Merciful heaven! where am I?” exclaimed Simon Mudge now waking.

All was darkness, yet he still seemed to see the Phantom as in his dream; to hear her voice ringing in his ears. Every scene to which she had drawn his attention, seemed as vivid as when acted.

He was presently startled by the sound of footsteps, where he could scarce define. Again he heard the sound, apparently in his cellar.

“Good heavens! this place is haunted,” said Simon, as he raised himself in a sitting posture and listened, almost paralyzed by terror.

The secret door, which led to his hoarded wealth, now opened, and the figure of a man moved into the room.

Simon had been so terrified by his dream that he now trembled for his life, and dared not even attempt to arrest the progress of the intruder, lest death should be the consequence. This danger over, the man gone, he began to bemoan the loss of his treasures, and endeavor to conjecture who had thus obtained access to them. He rose and went immediately to the spot where they had been concealed. To his dismay every farthing was gone. His chest had been taken in pieces, so not a till remained unopened. The intruder must have had hours to do his work, and some knowledge of the place beforehand, Simon felt sure.

Morning was now advancing, and Simon began to make preparations to go in search of his treasures. The sum he had counted into the bag the night previous, he now bound to his belt and was about to go out

into the street, when some one rapped on his door. As he opened it he started back and trembled.

"Well, Fred, so you have come back to your poor old uncle. I thought you were not in the land of the living," he at length said.

"Yes," replied Fred. How are you prospering now?"

"Alas! I'm poor, and I'm sick this morning besides. Where have you been these long years?"

"When I left here," replied the nephew, "I shipped at sea, with a tyrant, too. He seemed to owe me a grudge from the moment he saw me; but for the mate who took a fancy to me, I believe he would have killed me with abuse.

Simon trembled, but made no reply.

"That mate treated me like a father, took me to his house, when I came on shore the first time, and secured a better chance for me," added Fred.

The thought of his lost treasure was first in the mind of Simon, yet he was not inclined to mention the fact to his nephew [ . . . ]<sup>6</sup> those now, as he had always been told, that he was poor. Every minute seemed an hour. He waited impatiently for Fred to leave; but finding he felt inclined to make inquiries and converse, he told him that he had a little business of importance that must be attended to at an early hour.

"I will detain you but one moment," said Fred. "I wish to make some inquiries in regard to my father's affairs. Was he ever considered worth property?"

"People that are very poor, are sometimes thought to be rich," was the evasive reply.

"Did he not, at the time of his death, own some real estate?"

"Have you not always been told, that your father died insolvent?" said the old man, effecting to be very calm.

Very<sup>7</sup> true, but a bit of paper which I found this morning seems to indicate the contrary."

He now presented a much worn and stained paper. Simon Mudge glanced at it, clenched his teeth, and came near falling from his chair. Fred seized him by the arm, and as he raised him up suddenly, something fell jingling upon the floor.

"How came you in possession of this?" inquired Fred, whose turn it was to be startled.

"I took it in payment of an honest debt."

"Of whom? Tell where he may be found, and let me fly!"

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James Hanscom sat bolstered up in his easy chair, regarding with a saddened expression his daughter, a young and beautiful being, as she removed the dishes after the morning meal. "Two years to-day, Annie," he said at length, "since my limbs have been be-numbered, since misfortune began to follow in my path, and what have I not suffered and you sacrificed during this time."

"I have but done my duty, father," was the gentle reply.

"Ah! your pale cheek but tells too plainly how stern have been her commands," said the rich man. "And now we are to be without even a shelter."

"Oh no!" replied the daughter smiling. "That is secure for another week and we have a few coins beside."<sup>8</sup>

"And you have sacrificed *that* jewel? Alcott's gift?"

"Yes, father, I could not keep even that, when I knew it would buy you so many comforts. Before another week has passed, we shall hear from the *Enterprize*, when I trust our prospects will be brighter," said the daughter encouragingly.

"We shall certainly hear from her soon, or never."

"I see Captain Melcher, father," said the girl, "and from his appearance he is coming here; but his visits do not seem to cheer you much. I wish he would discontinue them."

"I believe he gluts over my crushed situation," replied the father, "the rascal, to offer to mend my fortune, if I would consent to"—

Here we<sup>9</sup> was interrupted by the entrance of the captain. "Still here, hauled up for repairs, old fellow," said he. "Yes, and heaven only knows when I shall be fit for sea again," replied Hanscom. "Any news from the *Enterprize*?"

"Well, not such as you expect," said the captain, lowering his voice, and casting his eyes to the floor. "Let me hear it. It cannot be worse than I have feared." "Well, the cargo in which you owned largely is nearly all lost, and your protege with it." "My fortune, my protege, my child!" muttered Hanscom, "I was not prepared for all this."

Annie waited to hear no more, but left the room. Captain Melcher scarce waited for Hanscom to recover from the shock, which this sad news gave him, when he began rather in the tone of one who supplicates.

"Now old friend, I sail to-day at noon, therefore any arrangements you and I may make in business matters, or otherwise, must be done at once. You know the proposals I have made to you several times, and the

objections you have raised, which I considered equal to an acceptance, provided these obstacles were removed; that, now, being the case, I claim your daughter for my wife."

"Great God, what do I hear! You claim my daughter to be your future wife!"

"Yes, and dare you refuse me," hissed the captain. "Have I not claims against you?"

"Do you think to drive me to consent to this? By heavens! I would sooner be dragged to the stake than thus consign my child to a living death."

"What do you mean to insinuate?"

"That you are a tyrant, a villain, at the very sight of whom come to my recollection acts of cruelty which make my blood curdle."

"Scoundrel, liar! you have always tried to thwart my plans, but the girl shall be mine in spite of you." And he seized Annie, who had now entered the room, by the arm, and attempted to drag her to the door.

"Out of my presence you black fiend!" said Hanscom, and he actually stood upon his paralyzed limbs, and was in the act of rescuing his daughter, when Melcher hurled him to the floor. Two men at this moment entered the room, and one of them placed his hand on Melcher's shoulder and claimed him as his prisoner. And he was led away. When Hanscom awoke from the state of insensibility into which he had been thrown by his fall and gazed upon those who were bending fondly over him, he exclaimed,

"Has the sea given back its dead, or do I see the living form of Fred Alcott before me?" My<sup>10</sup> friend, my benefactor, thank God I have found you at last," was the reply.

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"How pleasant it is to have a home and everything that makes home happy," thought Edward Holman, a respectable merchant, as he bade his wife good morning and ran down the steps into the street.

"What is that black figure lying on the sidewalk adown the street?" inquired his wife, who still remained standing in the door. "It is the form of a man," replied her husband, after having examined the figure and returned to her, who has evidently fallen down from exhaustion, caused by hunger and cold, no doubt."

"O help him in here," said the wife quickly, and let us try to restore him.



Ere the husband, assisted by another gentleman returned, hearing his bu-[ . . . ],<sup>a11</sup> temporary bed was in readiness near the fire, and a cup of tea prepared for the stranger.

“Alas! That in the midst of plenty any should be reduced to such a state,” said Mr. Holman, as he laid the insensible man upon the bed prepared for him. His wife now bent over the stranger, and was in the act of putting some tea to his lips, when she started back. “What is the matter?” exclaimed her husband quickly, while he supported her by his arm. “This is indeed a sad sight, but I am sorry to see you so affected by it. Just see, Alice,” said the husband, “the poor man begins to revive even now under the influence of our warm room.”

“Yes, Edward, but to think what he has suffered. And he is my mother’s only brother.”

“Possible! But, you were unable to prevent this, not knowing his whereabouts,” said the husband. “Now he shall remain with us and we will make him comfortable and happy. I will call a physician at once,” he continued.

Mrs. Holman, happy in the thought that her husband would allow her destitute relative a home with them, immediately began to chafe his limbs and apply restoratives. Slowly the old man opened his eyes, and gazed about him, then fixing them upon her who bent over him for a moment, he exclaimed—

“Take me away, cast me into the street, I will not receive this kindness from *you*.

“Oh, uncle,” pleaded the woman, “forgive me that I disobeyed your commands in past years—that I left you; I *have* a husband who will provide for us both.”

“Forgive you!” he repeated, while an ashy paleness overspread his features, “O, that I could hope for forgiveness as free,” and he trembled in every limb.

His kind niece endeavored by every means to console him, but it only seemed to “heap coals of fire upon his head.”

The physician came, and though he gave little encouragement of his permanent recovery, he ordered a cordial, which seemed greatly to revive the poor man, and he soon slept quietly, to appearance.

“I told you before we were wedded” said the wife, as she and her husband sat near the bedside of the sick man, that I was an orphan, and poor, but—

(“You are a rich treasure to me,” said the husband interrupting her, and drawing her nearer his side.)

"I didn't tell you I had been disinherited by my uncle, because I refused to wed a man old enough to be my father, by which he said I should obtain wealth sufficient for my own wants, and could support him in his old age."

The old man, who had heard all, now raised himself up, clenched the bed-covering and exclaimed, while a maniac expression overspread his features—

"Great God! what have I not sacrificed for gain, and now I'm dying," and he sank back upon his pillow.

"Send for your brother," he said, when revived a little.

"My brother," repeated the niece, "would that I knew where I might find him. I've not heard from him for a whole year, and I fear"—tears choked her utterance. Her uncle, at length told her how he had seen him at an early hour in the morning, and whither he seemed bound.

O! what a joyous meeting was that between Fred and Alice, the brother and sister long separated. But at the sound of Fred's voice, the old man shook like an aspen leaf, and seizing his garments with a maniac grasp, he muttered in broken sentences through his clenched teeth—

"I'm dying, forgive me, Fred. I concealed your father's Will; I forged claims against his estate; I concealed the gains thereof, but I was robbed last night; it's all gone," and he sank back like a dying man.

Restoratives were applied, and when he returned to consciousness, Fred told him that Captain Melcher was arrested for assault that morning, and on his person was found a large amount of gold, and a crumpled paper with the name of Simon Mudge upon it.

"Great God, did *he* rob me, he whom I"—Fred interrupted him by words of soothing kindness; he knew what he would say.

After a time the old man related in substance the dream, which had so unmanned him, and added,

"Get money if you can, but never put a dollar in your pocket, which if voice were given it, could reproach you for the manner by which it was gained.<sup>12</sup>

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Simon Mudge lived long enough to identify the gold found upon Captain Melcher, and it was restored to its rightful owners, Fred and Alice.

Fred was soon wedded to Annie Hanscom. She was not a little surprised to receive as a present, the ring with which she had reluctantly parted to save a shelter for her sick father.

James Hanscom not only had the pleasure of welcoming his protege but of learning that the greater part of his fortune had been saved. He never recovered the use of his limbs, but he was happy in the thought that he had befriended the boy who had now become such a kind son to him, and such an excellent husband to his daughter.

### Notes

1. I. or E. H. Gould, "The Phantom; or, The Miser's Dream, &c," *Boston Olive Branch*, March 10, 1860.
2. The newspaper crease obscures the first letter of the byline. It could be either "I." or "E."
3. The "footprint" here recalls both the footprint of *Robinson Crusoe* and also the image of Marley that Scrooge sees in his door knocker.
4. About an entire line is indecipherable because of the newspaper crease.
5. Notice how the Phantom here has female pronouns; given the importance of the sexual crime, as well as the greed, to Mudge's recovery, that choice seems important.
6. Part of this line is indecipherable because of the newspaper crease.
7. There appears to be a missing quotation mark at the beginning of this sentence.
8. There appears to be a missing quotation mark at the end of this sentence.
9. It is likely that this should read "he."
10. There appears to be a missing paragraph break and quotation mark at the beginning of this sentence.
11. Part of this line is indecipherable because of the newspaper crease.
12. There appears to be a missing quotation mark at the end of this sentence.