

**RALPH WILTON'S
WEIRD; A NOVEL**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649256556

Ralph Wilton's weird; a novel by Annie French Hector

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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ANNIE FRENCH HECTOR

**RALPH WILTON'S
WEIRD; A NOVEL**

LEISURE HOUR SERIES

RALPH WILTON'S WEIRD

A NOVEL

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER

AUTHOR OF "THE WOODING-O'Y" AND "WHICH SHALL IT BE?"



NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

1875

PR
4779
H.354 ~

RALPH WILTON'S WEIRD.

CHAPTER I.

THE yellow sunlight of a crisp October day was lighting up the faded though rich hangings, and the abundant but somewhat blackened gilding, of a large study or morning-room in one of the stately mansions of Mayfair, nearly fourteen years ago.

Bookcases and escritaires, writing-tables and reading-tables more or less convenient, easy-chairs, print-stands furnished with well-filled portfolios, pictures, bronzes, all the signs and tokens of wealth, were there, but nothing new. An impress of extinct vitality was stamped upon the chamber and all it contained. The very fire burned with a dull, continuous glow, neither flaming nor crackling.

On one side of this fire, his back to the light, in a high leathern chair, sat an old man. Originally slight in frame, he now looked attenuated. His blue, brass-buttoned coat, though evidently from the hands of an artist, hung loosely upon him. His thin gray hair

was carelessly brushed back from a brow not high but peculiarly wide, a straight, refined nose, a square-cut chin, a thin-lipped, slightly cruel mouth, a tint of the deadliest pallor—all these combined to make his countenance at once attractive and repellent. There was a certain dignity in his attitude as he leaned against the side of the large chair, in which he was almost lost, one thin, small white hand resting on the arm of his seat, the other playing, in a manner evidently habitual, with a couple of seals hanging in by-gone fashion from a black ribbon.

He was gazing at the fire, and listening to a meek looking semi-genteel young man, who, seated at a table with a neatly folded packet of papers before him, was reading aloud from a letter. But the lecture was interrupted.

The door was thrown open by an archdeaconal butler, who announced, in a suppressed voice and impressive manner, "Colonel Wilton, my lord."

—Whereupon entered a soldierly looking man, above middle height, his broad shoulders and compact waist, duly displayed by an incomparably fitting frock-coat, closely buttoned, and worn with the indescribable carriage that life-long assured position and habitual command only can bestow. A bold, sunburnt, and somewhat aquiline face, a pair of eagle-like brown eyes, and plenty of red-brown wavy hair, whisker, and

moustache, entitled the possessor to be termed by partial comrades "a good-looking fellow."

The old nobleman stood up, and, raising his cold, steely, keen blue eyes, with an extension of his thin lips intended for a smile, held out his slight, fine hand.

"I am glad to see Colonel Wilton," he said, in a low, sweet voice, which must have been peculiarly charming before age had thinned its tones.—"You may leave us, Mr. Robbins," he added; whereupon the young man at the writing-table took up his papers and departed.—"I am obliged to you," continued Lord St. George, "for obeying my summons so promptly; it was more than I expected, considering how often you must have been in town without calling upon your recluse kinsman."

"My dear lord," said Colonel Wilton, with a frank smile, taking the chair placed for him, "I never thought a visit from me would be acceptable. I supposed that I must excite the natural aversion which is generally felt for junior and unendowed relatives, so I kept out of the way." Colonel Wilton's voice was not unlike his host's, though deeper and richer.

"Unendowed or not, you are almost the only relative who has never asked me a favor," returned the old man.

"Had I wanted anything I suppose I should have

asked for it," said Colonel Wilton, good-humoredly ; "but my ambition is professional, and fortune has favored me beyond my deserts."

"You are a young colonel."

"Only brevet."

"Ay, I remember ; you got your first step after that affair of the rifle-pits."

"Exactly ; then I volunteered for our second battalion when the mutiny broke out, saw a good deal of very unpleasant service, was slightly hit, got fever, more from fatigue than wounds, was ordered home on sick leave, and found my brevet awaiting me. I have just returned from the German baths—and now, my lord, I am at your service."

"You want to know why I sent for you—you shall hear presently ;" the old man paused abruptly. "You are like, and yet unlike, your father," he resumed ; "you know, I suppose, that, although but first-cousins, we might have been brothers, we hated each other so well?"

"I have heard something of it," returned Wilton, coolly, though the smiling, frank expression passed from his face ; "but I have lived so much among strangers that I am lamentably ignorant of the family hatreds."

Lord St. George looked up, and played more rapidly with his seals. "I have been a broken man for

many years," he resumed, after a short pause, "and latterly a complete recluse. Men are such knaves, and life is such a round of folly, amusement, and ambition, and 'lofty aspirations,' as modern scribblers have it, such dust and ashes, that I can with unusual truth say I am weary! I dare say you are wondering why I inflict this Jeremiad upon you—I hardly know myself; however, it is finished. I suppose you are aware that a very small portion of my property is attached to the title of St. George?"

Colonel Wilton bowed, and listened with increasing interest. "My Werzelshire estates and Welsh mines," continued the old lord, "came to me through my mother, and are to dispose of as I choose. A ruined tower and some worthless moorland is all that will come by right to you. It is in my power to make you that most wretched of failures—a poor nobleman, or to bequeath you means to ruffle it with the best."

"You must do as seems best in your eyes," said Colonel Wilton, with the same good-humored, well-bred independence which had characterized his manner all through the interview, when the peer stopped, as if for a reply.

"I am by no means inclined to separate my property from my title—but it is all in my own hands—I have no claims upon me—no nearer relative than yourself. All that I have heard of you is tolerably

creditable to the family name, and I am inclined to give you the means to keep up the old title. There is one point, however, on which I should like you to understand and conform to my wishes. You are, of course, aware of the circumstance which has blighted my life—the latter half of it?”

Although it seemed impossible that any living cheek could be paler than Lord St. George's, it grew a shade more ghastly as he spoke.

“Yes, yes,” returned Colonel Wilton, with a sort of quick sympathy. “Do not, if possible, distress yourself by alluding to it.”

“I must, Ralph—I must!” It was the first time the viscount had called him by his name; and he continued, in a firm but low voice: “When my daughter, my only child, flung herself into an abyss of infamy by her disgraceful marriage, I at once and forever renounced her. Now I only care that the inheritors of my name and property may at least be free from the taint of inferior race: promise me you will marry a gentlewoman, a girl of some unblemished family, which, though they are few, can still be found—promise me this, and I will leave you all I possess.”

“My dear lord, it is not necessary to promise. Poor as I am, I should never dream of marrying a plebeian; but I would rather not marry for some years