

# Schalcken the Painter

Adapted from the Ghost Story

by Joseph Sheridan LeFanu

Dublin, Ireland

(1814-1873)

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## **CHARACTERS**

### **THE LIVING:**

GODFREY SCHALKEN, an art student, age 22

MASTER GERARD DOWLE, a painting teacher, age 50

ROSE RAVENSHAW, Master DOWLE's niece, age 19

WILLIAM HORTON, an art student, age 20s

JASON WELLER, an art student, age 20s

NICHOLAS SPAIGHT, an art student, age 20s

### **THE DEAD:**

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN, a grotesque elderly Dutch woman

DIETER VANDERHEUSEN, her equally grotesque son, age 30

### ***NOTE:***

The living characters speak with British accents; the dead speak with Dutch accents.

The role of Dieter Vanderheusen can be played by one of the art students, thereby reducing the cast to seven.

### **TIME:**

1820

### **PLACE:**

London, England. An artist's studio with several easels and stools for the students, a chair for the model, and a functional door.

**SCENE 1**

(GODFREY SCHALKEN, an unkempt but handsome student, is earnestly painting the beautiful ROSE RAVENSHAW posed on a chair.)

ROSE

Enough, Godfrey! I've been sitting patiently for two full hours, and you haven't spoken a single word. Are you always so serious or am I a challenging subject?

GODFREY

For me, a platter of fish is a challenge.

ROSE

Oh, don't be so discouraged; all artists with discernment are dissatisfied.

GODFREY

Your nose is hooked, your mouth pinched, and you have the blind unfocused stare of a lunatic!

ROSE

Oh, please, Godfrey, may I look?

GODFREY

No! Absolutely not! Not until I've finished.

ROSE

Well, then, I'm going home. It's getting dark, and Uncle Gerard will be wondering where I've been. I do wish you weren't so secretive with him. He's mentioned you often; I'm certain he's fond of you.

GODFREY

Not fond enough to let me marry his niece.

ROSE

Nonsense, you don't know that.

GODFREY

He has no respect for me as a painter, a fellow artist.

ROSE

But he rarely praises anyone, and he spent years painting before becoming a master.

GODFREY

Yes, but we mustn't tell him till the time is right. I'll wait until the portrait's completed and I'm satisfied he has a high opinion of it. At the rate I'm progressing, that should be at least twenty years.

ROSE

Well, you've certainly taken extraordinary pains. It ought to be a masterpiece.

GODFREY

It's not even a fair likeness. I could never do you justice; I shall never do anyone justice!

(GODFREY covers the canvas with a cloth.)

ROSE

Godfrey, you may be struggling now, but your industry will be rewarded. Trust that your efforts will be rewarded; try to be patient.

GODFREY

My patience is exhausted! I sometime wonder if I'm really destined to be a painter. It doesn't come naturally to me the way it would if I were truly gifted. I'd give anything on earth to be an artist -- a real artist.

ROSE

To me you're the greatest artist in the world! Now that should raise your spirits! Oh, don't be so morbid!

(FRAU VANDERHEUSEN enters silently, wearing a black cloak and broad-brimmed hat which shadows her features. SHE utters a short, sudden sniff, causing ROSE and GODFREY to turn abruptly. SHE speaks with a Dutch accent.)

ROSE  
(*gasping*) Oh!

GODFREY  
Good God!

ROSE  
Excuse me, madam, you quite startled us.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN  
I beg your pardon. I am Frau Vanderheusen of Rotterdam. I must speak with Godfrey Schalken upon matter of importance.

GODFREY

I am he, madam.

ROSE

Please excuse me, I was just taking my leave.

(GODFREY escorts ROSE to the door.)

ROSE

Good day, madam.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Good day, miss.

GODFREY

Won't you please be seated?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

I prefer to stand, thank you. I see you are a painter, sir.

GODFREY

Yes, madam, a pupil of Master Dowle's.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Indeed, I met him when he visited Rotterdam as a boy. Were you ever there yourself?

GODFREY

No, but my father was born in Leyden.

(FRAU VANDERHEUSEN moves to lift the cloth covering Godfrey's canvas.)

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Might I have a look?

GODFREY

Well, I...I suppose.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Who is she?

GODFREY

The lady who just left. I dare say the likeness isn't worthy enough to discern that.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

The artist has not yet been born who can depict Rose Ravenshaw with any accuracy.

GODFREY

I...I was hoping to be that artist.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

A pity, sir, you are not; it is mediocre by any standards.

GODFREY

Well, I would not be justified in defending my merits; however, I would like to inquire how you are acquainted with Miss Ravenshaw when she did not recognize you?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

You may inquire, sir, but I feel no obligation to answer.

GODFREY

Then what business brings you here?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Why do you think I am here?

GODFREY

Obviously not to commission a portrait. If you're having a collection valued, you should inquire after Master Dowle.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

No, sir, I am here to discuss my son's future.

GODFREY

Then you should still speak to Master Dowle.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Nonsense, I should speak with you.

GODFREY

I'm afraid I don't understand. Is your son a painter?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

My son is an artist; *you* are a painter. You would serve the world better to paint landscapes or the sea, and leave the portraits for those with the vision to penetrate the flesh. Your painting has no soul.

GODFREY

And you, madam, have no heart.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Tsk, tsk, is our tempestuous painter in a pet?

GODFREY

Please, madam, I beg of you, tell me your business so I may continue my work.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Your work is my business. I desire to place in your hands a gift in value a thousand times that which you have the right to expect. It shall be yours exclusively while you live. Is that liberal?

GODFREY

Madam, I'm sure your offer is extremely liberal, and whatever hesitation I feel arises solely from my not having the foggiest notion of what you're talking about!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

If I satisfy you that my gift is what you wish and you approve my proposal, you must close with it here and now, for I cannot wait for calculations and delays.

GODFREY

How can I approve of your proposal when I don't know what it is?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

It is an alliance which will prove alike advantageous and honorable to my son.

GODFREY

But I've never met your son.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

As to him and my own respectability, you must take that for granted at present -- for you can discover nothing more about us than I choose to reveal. If the gift I leave in your hands satisfies you, and if you don't wish my proposal to be at once withdrawn, you must write your name to this covenant.

(FRAU VANDERHEUSEN draws forth a contract, and hands it to GODFREY who reads it.)

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Are you content?

GODFREY

This is impossible! Who are you?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

You shall have sufficient security for my respectability: if you are honorable, my word; if you are sordid, my gold, and of that you will have more than you can possibly imagine.

GODFREY

But how...? How can you even suggest such a thing?!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Tsk, tsk, sir painter, I have seen your work and am merely offering you a gift. You are a poor painter who wishes to become an artist; my son is an artist who wishes to become a collector.

GODFREY

But talent is acquired by ardent labors, not given by one person to another by means of a...a contract.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Nonsense! I've bargained with scores of artists, many whose names would astonish you. Really, Mr. Schalken, you are not justified in declining my offer.

GODFREY

Madam, I will not pledge myself unnecessarily.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

You need not, but I will show you that I consider it indispensable -- for if you do not sign immediately, I shall leave.

GODFREY

Frau Vanderheusen, I...I must have another day to decide.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Not an hour.

GODFREY

Well, then, I...I must think.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Please sign at once for I am weary.



(FRAU VANDERHEUSEN produces a quilled pen which GODFREY reluctantly accepts.)

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Hereafter, you will see the object of our contract come to light, "Master Schalken."

GODFREY

I cannot; take back your pen!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Ah, so you still have doubts?

GODFREY

It's against nature, against God. I...I cannot sign.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Then go back to your portrait, sir painter.

(FRAU VANDERHEUSEN moves to depart, but lingers unseen by the door. GODFREY, returns to his painting, but after a few moments, thrashes the canvas with violent stokes of his brush.)

GODFREY

Damnation! All right, all right! Yes, Frau Vanderheusen! Frau Vanderheusen!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Yes...?

GODFREY

If it's not too late, then we have a bargain!!

(FRAU VANDERHEUSEN returns the contract to GODFREY the contract as lights dim to black.)

## SCENE 2

(Six months later, bright lights reveal the studio where GODFREY and three fellow students: JASON WELLER, NICHOLAS SPAIGHT, and WILLIAM HORTON, are gathered around his easel.)

WILLIAM

Fancy that: Lady Heydukes in a crimson shawl, and I hear she's commissioning two more.

JASON

Not of herself, I hope. I'll wager ten guineas that someday Godfrey will be a richer man than Dowle!

(MASTER GERARD DOWLE, age fifty, enters.)

MASTER DOWLE

And I'll wager the same!

JASON

I beg your pardon, sir, I only meant...

MASTER DOWLE

So, so, never mind what you meant. Get back to your painting!

(MASTER DOWLE strolls about the studio, stopping at Godfrey's easel.)

MASTER DOWLE

Ah, a curious management of light there, Godfrey. I must say the chief merit of the picture is in its handling and not in its subject, eh? Ha, ha! Remember, gentlemen: a great painting must have more than charm of subject. It must have aesthetic values as well: wholeness, harmony, and the radiance of light. A very cunning work, Godfrey, very cunning indeed.

(MASTER DOWLE strolls around the studio, examining the other students' paintings.)

MASTER DOWLE

Good heavens, Jason, Saint Anthony was portly, but not obese! And Nicholas, those apples are the color, texture, and weight of bricks. For heaven's sake, eat the damn things or start again!

NICHOLAS

Ah, yes, yes, sir, Master Dowle.

(MASTER DOWLE notices a covered canvas on an easel near Godfrey.)

MASTER DOWLE

Ah, what have we here?

GODFREY

Oh, nothing, sir. I'd meant to put it away. Please, keep the canvas covered, sir.

MASTER DOWLE

Oh, come now.

GODFREY

Please! Leave it be! I shall be happy to show it to you when it's completed.

MASTER DOWLE

Good heavens, Godfrey, I merely thought my opinion could be of use to you. After all, you're still my pupil.

GODFREY

Of course, sir, no offense was intended, but this painting is rather special. I...I had hoped to present it as a gift.

MASTER DOWLE

A gift?

GODFREY

Yes, sir, to you sir.

MASTER DOWLE

Ah, very well then.

(MASTER DOWLE moves to WILLIAM'S easel.)

MASTER DOWLE

So, so, William, I rather like the asymmetrical placing of the bowls. Quite skillful, but too restrained. Let's see you fill up the canvas! *(pause)* Yes, that's it, very good, very good. Well, gentlemen, I'm afraid I must leave you to your labors, but I should return in an hour or so. Good day until then.

NICHOLAS  
Good day, sir.

WILLIAM  
Good day, Master Dowle.

JASON  
Good day, sir.

(MASTER DOWLE departs.)

JASON

See here, Schalken, about that painting of yours: let's have a look at it.

NICHOLAS

Yes, let's!

WILLIAM

Please.

GODFREY

No!

JASON

We know damn well it's Rose. We're just curious to see how magnificent she is.

NICHOLAS

Come now, don't hoard your masterpiece.

GODFREY

Leave me alone!

(JASON winks at WILLIAM and whispers to NICHOLAS to distract GODFREY.)

NICHOLAS

Blast! I can't seem to get these damnable shadows. Schalken, come here, will you? I need a fresh eye. Look here...

(As GODFREY approaches NICHOLAS, JASON whips the cover off Godfrey's canvas!)

JASON

Ah, hah!

(JASON instantly realizes the portrait is primitive, covered by violent streaks of color. GODFREY rushes to the canvas, but is pinned back by NICHOLAS.)

NICHOLAS

William! Help me!

WILLIAM

I will not!

GODFREY

Let me go, damn you to hell!

WILLIAM

Let him go!

GODFREY

How dare you!?

JASON

Sorry, old chum, I thought we'd get a preview of another Galatea.

(GODFREY throws the cloth back on the portrait.)

NICHOLAS

It's certainly not up to your usual standards.

JASON

Well, you know what they say about painting your loved ones: the objective eyes is clouded by the heart so to speak.

GODFREY

Yes, it's a very poor piece and I'm well aware of it, but you've no right to judge it!

JASON

Oh, dash it all, Schalken, don't get so wrought up! But why in heaven's name did you paint those horrid slashes across her eyes?

NICHOLAS

They must have had a lover quarrel, ha, ha!

JASON

Ha, ha, ha!

GODFREY

I know you think you're damned clever, but you're nothing but a pathetic pack of incompetent dilettantes, and I'd pity you if I thought it was worth the effort. In any case, I'm off to my afternoon sittings: first Cornelius Mayfield and later Henrietta Hughes. But don't let me discourage you. Do keep painting, and perhaps someday you'll win commissions of your own -- if anyone's in the market for tawdry kitsch. How tragic really, such wasted aspirations, such misguided ambitions. Good heavens, Nicholas? Did I give you a start? Has the truth struck you dumb? And Jason, you look positively verdant! Do I detect a shade of envy? How unbecoming.

(JASON is ready to spring, but WILLIAM restrains him. GODFREY, snatches his paint box and leaves with a malicious smile.)

NICHOLAS

He's a brute, an arrogant brute!

JASON

A ruthless bastard!

WILLIAM

Yes, but he's right. Compared to him we are incompetent amateurs. He does win commissions, and he seems to be improving every day. We can't deny the obvious.

JASON

Then there's some insidious law that claims the more accomplished a man's talent, the more degenerate his character!

NICHOLAS

I can't believe our little deception set off such a...a monster. Did you see his eyes? He was lit up like the devil himself!

WILLIAM

Your mischief brought out the dark side of his nature, and I for one, would like to have been spared the view.

JASON

*(mumbling)* Damn him.

NICHOLAS

I'm going out for a glass of port

JASON

Damn him to hell!

NICHOLAS

He's actually given me indigestion.

WILLIAM

Perhaps you deserve it.

JASON

Oh, don't be so smug, you old prig. Come, Nicholas, let's get drunk--- you too William!

(THEY leave together as lights dim to black.)

**SCENE 3**

(A week later. WILLIAM is alone in the studio, painting. There is a rapping at the door, then ROSE enters.)

WILLIAM

Ah, Rose, what a pleasure. Please come in.

ROSE

I didn't mean to disturb you, William. I thought Godfrey was here.

WILLIAM

Well, he isn't, so you'll have to put up with me instead, and I'm in the mood to be disturbed. *(pause)* You're always welcome, Rose, you know that. Please sit down.

ROSE

I was visiting Lady Pearmeyer, and left early. Oh, William, she looks dreadful, and Doctor Glendower says she hasn't long to live. She's so thin, her bones are protruding.

WILLIAM

She was a nice old prune at heart, wasn't she?

ROSE

Yes, yes, she was, I mean she is -- she isn't dead yet! Oh, dear, it's so depressing.

WILLIAM

Perhaps we shouldn't talk about it -- if it upsets you.

ROSE

*(pause, gesturing to a painting)* Who's this handsome fellow?

WILLIAM

Captain Bellemount. Godfrey's painting, of course.

ROSE

Did he finish Sir Gregory?

WILLIAM

Oh, yes, weeks ago.

ROSE

I had hoped to see the finished work.

WILLIAM

Then you haven't seen Godfrey for quite some time?

ROSE

No.

WILLIAM

Well, he so occupied, rushing hither and tither with all his sittings. Good heavens, he must have ten portraits going at once. Frankly, I don't see how he does it. Really, I doubt if he has time to eat. In fact, he's rarely here -- except for when your uncle lectures, I don't see him myself.

ROSE

It's just that...well, we were such close friends, and I...I haven't even received a note. Has he said anything?

WILLIAM

Not to me, but then I'm not his confidant. No one is, really. I can't think of anyone he has any personal regard for -- except for your uncle and you, of course.

ROSE

And he no longer speaks to me.

WILLIAM

Well, he's a damn fool if he doesn't. All his pompous flippery won't be worth a fig to him or anyone else when he comes home to an empty house. He's totally preoccupied with his own selfish ambitions!

ROSE

William!

WILLIAM

Forgive me, Rose, but he's bloody insufferable, ignoring everyone like he's great God Almighty. He'll be a bitter old man.

ROSE

Please, let's not speak unkindly of him. After all, he's a fine artist. Someday history may judge him a great one, so we should forgive his...temperament.

WILLIAM

Fine, then the subject is closed.



ROSE

Well, I ought to be going. I only stopped by to tell Godfrey I saw an old friend of his.

WILLIAM

Anyone I know?

ROSE

I doubt it. She's a gloomy old woman from Rotterdam who visited him some time ago. I saw her this morning with a tall gentleman, probably her son. They were at Lord Harmony's funeral. It was frightfully crowded and poor Lady Harmony was weeping uncontrollably, and at one point howled. They say she can't bear to have his portrait about the house so she's given it to his sister.

WILLIAM

What a pity. It was one of Godfrey's best.

(JASON enters.)

WILLIAM

Hello, Jason, have you seen Godfrey?

JASON

No, he comes here mostly at night now -- since he can't abide the company of Philistines like us.

ROSE

Whatever do you mean?

JASON

You mean he hasn't told you what dilettantes we are?

ROSE

Godfrey would never say anything so unkind!

JASON

I wish you had said "untrue."

WILLIAM

Jason doesn't mean a word he says, Rose, isn't that right Jason?

JASON

Oh, yes, it's just a malicious fabrication.

ROSE

Well, I...I must be going. Uncle Gerard will be waiting supper.

WILLIAM

Please, Miss, permit me the honor of escorting you home.

ROSE

Why thank you, sir.

JASON

And leave me here alone with this drudgery?

WILLIAM

Gladly, old boy.

(ROSE and WILLIAM leave while JASON stares at Godfrey's portrait of Captain Bellemount.)

JASON

You're not a bad looking chap, Captain, but you're awfully dull company. So what do you think of my cornucopia of fruit? Rather unappetizing, isn't it?

(Lights dim to darkness.)

#### SCENE 4

(Two weeks later. MASTER DOWLE is lecturing his students: JASON, WILLIAM, NICHOLAS and GODFREY. ROSE is seated quietly to the side.)

MASTER DOWLE

Art, gentlemen, whatever it is, does contain certain indisputable elements. What elements, William?

WILLIAM

Well, color for one, form for another.

MASTER DOWLE

So, so, color and form. All of life, all of nature, contains these elements. But the artist is born to choose and arrange these elements so that the result might be... enchantment! In other words, gentlemen, the artist takes the elements of nature and reorders her in a sublimer way, thereby rising above the petty cares of the rest of humanity. Do you believe that, Nicholas?

NICHOLAS

I...I beg your pardon, sir?

MASTER DOWLE

Pat attention! Jason, what do you think?

JASON

Yes, sir, I agree with that statement, sir.

MASTER DOWLE

Godfrey?

GODFREY

Yes, on some occasions -- depending on the execution. If the artist achieves perfection in his work, then he has created something extraordinary and beautiful, something above the rest of humanity.

MASTER DOWLE

What do you think of that, William?

WILLIAM

I think it's blasphemous. If the artist creates something beautiful, it doesn't mean it's virtuous. It's still an object, perhaps even a perfect object, but creating something beautiful does not render the creator a god. In fact, he may be a cad.

(NICHOLAS and JASON laugh.)

GODFREY

I didn't say he was a god, but *like* one, superior to most people because he has the gift to improve on nature, or at least alter nature, and this gift makes a man immortal.

WILLIAM

Immortal perhaps, as all men are immortal, but not necessarily better or good.

GODFREY

Perhaps not, but nature isn't all good either. Sometimes she's indifferent or...evil.

MASTER DOWLE

So, nature is not always good or bad, but necessary and useful, and everything proceeds from her. But what about art? Is art useful? Well, is it? Come now, who has a tongue?

WILLIAM

I don't think so, sir. I believe people think art should be useful in that they will be better off for having been in its presence. They may attempt to look past the surface of a painting, striving to elevate themselves to a better mental or moral state, but I don't really think it performs that function.

MASTER DOWLE

So you don't think art is useful? Well, perhaps that's your curse, William -- and it's reflected in your less inspired work. You see, even if art isn't useful, you must try to believe you can capture unique harmonies not yet imagined by Nature, assuming Nature is a power that imagines. If you don't dream you're a god, or a least a creator capable of elevating mankind, then your paintings will be mere paintings. Godfrey, let me see that portrait of Captain -- what's his name?

GODFREY

Bellemount. I'm sorry, sir, I completed it last week.

MASTER DOWLE

So, so, we've all seen it and remarked how handsome he is. Well, just yesterday I actually saw the man, and by God, I recognized him-- from the back of his head! Now I ask you, gentlemen, isn't it incredible that Godfrey here captured enough of the man's spirit for me to recognize a chap I'd never seen before -- from the back of his head!

JASON

Excuse me, sir, was he wearing his cap and uniform?

NICHOLAS

Ha, ha, ha!

MASTER DOWLE

Ha, ha! A good question, Jason, but as a matter of fact he was not! Enough! I now propose that we end this lecture and begin a fresh project, together, as a class. Now, as you know, we usually go our separate ways, painting subjects of our own choosing. Today, however, I have deigned to choose our subject: my lovely niece, Rose, whom you all know, has graciously agreed to pose for us.

(WILLIAM looks pleased while NICHOLAS and JASON glance at Godfrey.)

MASTER DOWLE

Now, gentlemen, remember that your function as artists is not merely to copy nature, but to capture that particular quality which makes a subject recognizable from the back of the head!

JASON

Her auburn curls?

NICHOLAS

Ha, ha, ha!

(NICHOLAS and JASON laugh as GODFREY approaches MASTER DOWLE.)

GODFREY

I beg your pardon, sir? I'm afraid I'm feeling rather ill. If you don't mind, I'd prefer to go home.

MASTER DOWLE

Of course, but you must stop painting by lamp light; it's ruinous to your health!

GODFREY

Yes, sir.

MASTER DOWLE

And for godssake, see a doctor! We don't want to lose our star pupil, eh, gentlemen?

JASON

No, sir, Master Dowle.

NICHOLAS

Certainly not, sir.

MASTER DOWLE

Nothing is more important than a man's health! Now Rose, sit straight, and don't look so gloomy. Give us your most radiant smile. Ah, my dear, that face of yours will make your fortune. Such faces and tempers seldom go together, and when they do, the compound is a love charm few heads and hearts can resist, eh, gentlemen?

(ROSE blushes as GODFREY exits and SHE stares longingly after him as lights dim to black.)

**SCENE 5**

(Later that night. The studio is lit by several lamps casting long eerie shadows. GODFREY is painting, then footsteps are heard, and a tap at the door.)

WILLIAM

Psssst, Godfrey, are you in there? It's William! *(opening the door, entering)* Good God, man, how can you paint in this dismal light? You'll be blind before you're thirty.

GODFREY

I can't sleep, and I seem to paint better at night.

WILLIAM

*(approaching Godfrey's painting)* She's quite lovely. Who is she?

GODFREY

Charlotte Fannon's daughter, Felicity. Come now, William, we both know you didn't come here to admire my portrait, so get on with it so I may continue.

WILLIAM

There is something I think you ought to know. *(pause)* Rose Raven haw is an extremely sensitive woman who cares deeply for you -- God knows why, I certainly can't fathom it. I don't even know why I feel compelled to tell you this, but she happens to be a very dear friend and you're causing her considerable anguish by ignoring her. Well, that's all I have to say. Not that it matters one way or the other. After all, nothing is more precious to Godfrey Schalken than the beloved Godfrey Schalken.

GODFREY

Please leave!

WILLIAM

Oh, I'll leave, gladly. Maybe you don't care that you're breaking her heart, but I do, and believe me, henceforth, I shall do everything possible to make Rose see you for the selfish, uncouth ingrate that you are!

GODFREY

Get the hell out!

WILLIAM

What astounds me is how you can paint with such incredible sensitivity while in life you have the soul of a sewer rat. All your talent isn't worth a whit compared to the kindly tenderness of Rose Ravens haw. You're not fit to shine her boots!

GODFREY

Stop it! Don't you think I know that?! Do you really think I'm such a foul, insensitive cad? *(starting to weep)* God help me, I don't know what's happening to me. I don't feel anything anymore.

WILLIAM

*(pause, gently)* Listen, Godfrey, a man who can weep at least feels something. Thank heaven for it. Don't be afraid, and don't throw it all into your paintings. Save some for yourself and for Rose. She loves you, Godfrey; believe me, I know.

GODFREY

You're a fool if you think I don't know that! Of course I know, and it causes me great... anguish.

WILLIAM

But why? Why are you suffering?

GODFREY

Is it wrong to suffer, to feel such...passion?

WILLIAM

No, of course it's not wrong. It's the one thing that separates one man from another more than anything else -- even more than talent. At least I think so, but Godfrey, you don't need to suffer. Rose loves you. Good heavens, man, you should be the happiest fellow in all Christendom!

GODFREY

No, it's not possible...

WILLIAM

For godssake, why not? Are you one of those boorish aesthetes who think they have to endure unspeakable misery to create? That's ridiculous!

GODFREY

How dare you call my suffering ridiculous! You don't know a damn thing about it! You couldn't touch my pain, you couldn't live a single moment with it much less endure it day after day, hour after hour. My God, it's unspeakable!

WILLIAM

Why? What is it? Are you ill? Please, Godfrey, confide in me.

GODFREY

No, I...I can't. Just believe me. And William, will you do me a great kindness, a favor as a friend, though I know I haven't the right to call you that -- or anyone for that matter.

WILLIAM

Nonsense, we are friends, and I thank God for it.

GODFREY

Then do this for me: tell Rose I no longer love her. Tell her! And don't badger me with questions. Believe me, William, if you knew my reason, you would gladly comply.

WILLIAM

You can't ask me to do such a vile thing without explanation! It's against all reason!

GODFREY

That is precisely why: it's against all reason, all conscience, and all that is good in heaven and on earth.

WILLIAM

I don't understand.

GODFREY

Please, just promise me, and leave.

WILLIAM

No, Godfrey, I could never promise anything so cruel and untrue.

GODFREY

Then get out!

WILLIAM

Before I go, at the risk of sounding like Master Dowle, I'd like to make a suggestion: seek a doctor; you're not a well man. Good night.

(WILLIAM departs.)

GODFREY

I don't need a doctor, do I? I need a priest.

DIETER

I'm afraid it would not do you much good, Master Schalken.



(From the shadows steps DIETER, FRAU VANDERHEUSEN'S son. He is elegantly dressed, has a pale pallor, and also speaks with a Dutch accent. FRAU VANERHEUSEN joins him.)

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Tsk, tsk, we've certainly heard an earful tonight, haven't we, Dieter? Really, such a temperamental display, such theatrics!

GODFREY

You wretched witch! You didn't tell me it would be like this! I can't sleep, I can't eat, all I can do is paint, paint, paint!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Well, you do it very well at any rate. That's little Felicity Fannon, isn't it? She will be an exquisite addition to our assemblage, don't you agree, Dieter?

DIETER

You do choose some charming quarry, Master Schalken. And you have such perceptive instincts. I quite concur with Poussin that the grand manner of painting requires that the subject be divine. In time we may form a collection rivaling the best in all of Europe.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

I do like that touch of carmine in the nostrils and the corner of her eye.

DIETER

Yes, and the skin tones are so delicately combined, as if she were flushed by the flow of blood beneath the flesh.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

What about Rose? Are we going to add an enchanting maiden to our acquisitions?

GODFREY

Never!

DIETER

He is not prepared to relinquish her yet, but when he does, I'm certain it will be virtuoso performance.

GODFREY

I shall never paint her -- ever!

DIETER

Just think, Master Schalken, how many families, decades from now, will owe their fortunes to the wisdom with which their ancestors selected you as their portraitist.

GODFREY

As their murderer!

DIETER

We Dutch have always had a taste for connoisseurship, coupled with an instinct for possession. My own cultivated tastes tend towards the works of Van Dyke and Vermeer.

GODFREY

Then why have you come to London to plague me?! Oh, God, what I'd give to never lay eyes on a canvas again!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

My dear, Master Schalken, we made a covenant and a bargain is a bargain, as they say.

DIETER

And you can't break a covenant with mother.

GODFREY

God, how you disgust me.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Tsk, tsk, how ungrateful you are, Master Schalken, What a pity you don't have a more philosophical attitude. Perhaps if you had more imagination, you might learn to enjoy your situation. Many do, you know.

DIETER

Tell me, mother, will anyone be joining us tonight?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Louisa Ashton. Godfrey painter her last May.

DIETER

Ah, yes, a rather repulsive woman, corpulent and bovine by any standards.

GODFREY

Tell me, Frau Vanderheusen, is there anything left of myself?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Only some of that mawkish sentimentality you so rudely displayed tonight.

GODFREY

Well, it seems that there's not much worth preserving -- in which case, I'd be better off dead than alive. Certainly my subjects would be better off.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

You haven't the constitution or courage for suicide. Massage the back of my neck, will you, Dieter?

(DIETER rubs the his mother's neck.)

GODFREY

It's true, I haven't the courage, but I do have the talent. What would you think if I painted a self-portrait? Then you could add me to your collection.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Shush, dear boy, and continue painting. Dieter and I take great pride and pleasure in observing you.

(Music is heard as FRAU VANDERHEUSEN speaks with a hypnotic cadence, drawing GODFREY into a trance.)

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Paint, paint, Godfrey Schalken, that's a good boy, keep painting until you've captured Felicity's likeness. Then Dieter and I will capture her soul. (*touching Godfrey's cheek*) There, that should silence him for a while.

DIETER

Now about the fate of our voluptuous Louisa -- should she tumble down a flight of stairs? It's rather undignified, but quite effective.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

No, dear, poison would be better. It's more depressing, prolongs the pain.

DIETER

What about drowning? She does bathe, doesn't she?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Yes, but we just drowned Sir Victor Rhodes.

DIETER

Ah, yes. Rat-bite then?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Really, Dieter, you are disgusting, ha, ha!

DIETER

Ha, ha, ha!

(THEY laugh hideously as a sickly fog envelopes them and lights fade to black.)

### SCENE 6

(A week later in the studio where ROSE is seated, posing. JASON and NICHOLAS are putting away their brushes, but WILLIAM is still painting.)

JASON

Dash it all, Rose, it's a difficult to do you justice, so impossible, that I'm giving it up!

NICHOLAS

It's true, even if we were to capture a likeness, nothing would compare to the real object.

WILLIAM

Hah! They're using your beauty as an excuse for their laziness.

JASON

Nonsense, I'm using her beauty as an excuse for a drink! Come, Nicholas, you too, William!

WILLIAM

No, thanks. I'd like to paint a bit longer. Do you mind, Rose?

ROSE

Not at all.

((JASON and NICHOLAS exit, and WILLIAM paints in silence for a moment, then puts down his brush.))

WILLIAM

Rose, I've spoken with Godfrey.

ROSE

Oh, William, where is he?! How did he look; what did he say?!

WILLIAM

He was unkempt and thinner. He didn't say much worth repeating, except that he wanted to be left alone -- by everyone.

ROSE

Where is he?

WILLIAM

He was here. He comes in late at night. In fact I've been observing his progress. His new portraits are quite splendid. He stores them against the wall over there.

ROSE

You know, he...he started a portrait of me once, quite some time ago.

WILLIAM

Yes, I know, I've seen it.

ROSE

Has he...? Has he worked on it?

(WILLIAM retrieves the portrait from against the wall.)

WILLIAM

Here it is. He's painting another portrait over it -- one of his pie-faced aristocrats.

ROSE

Well, there will be three fine portraits of me from your class.

WILLIAM

Hardly. You know, it struck me as very odd that he absolutely refused to paint you.

ROSE

Oh, William, I'm so worried. When I last saw him, he looked so pale, even his eyes had lost their shine.

WILLIAM

I'm worried too. He claims he wants me as a friend, and yet he pretends I don't exist. And he says he doesn't care for you knowing full well he does.

ROSE

He said that.. ? He actually said he doesn't care.

WILLIAM

Yes, but it's a lie as we all know. Damn, but he confounds me, he really does! Still, I'm glad we spoke for I do have a higher regard for him. I was wrong, you know. He's very sensitive. In fact,...well, I wasn't going to tell you this, but he actually wept.

ROSE

Did he really? But why?

WILLIAM

I'm not sure; he wouldn't say.

ROSE

Oh, my poor, dear Godfrey.

(Pause as ROSE walks to one of the covered canvases, and lifts the cloth.)

ROSE

Isn't this his?

WILLIAM

Yes, it's one of the Carrington sisters, the spinster, I think.

ROSE

I thought I recognized her, but isn't she dead? She died last week. Uncle Gerard went to her funeral. Yes, I'm certain it was she.

WILLIAM

Then I suppose the old girl didn't live to enjoy it. What a pity.

ROSE

You know, William, I...I had an odd notion once. It's foolish, really. In fact, it's cruel and unchristian -- one of those dreadful little thoughts that flies in and out of the mind, but still manages to leave an impression.

WILLIAM

I know what you mean. Godfrey told me something that seems to have had the same effect.

ROSE

What? What did he say?

WILLIAM

Something very cryptic. I can't make heads or tails out of it myself.

ROSE

What...?

WILLIAM

Let's make a bargain: you tell me your odd notion and I'll tell you what Godfrey said.

ROSE

Alright, but you tell first.

WILLIAM

Well, he asked me to tell you that he didn't love you, but I told him I wouldn't because it's a damn lie. I even told him I thought he was ill and should see a doctor. Then I said his request was beyond all reason, and he said that's precisely why he requested it.

ROSE

I don't understand.

WILLIAM

He said it was beyond all reason, all conscience, and all that was good in heaven and on earth. Then he refused to explain any further, and told me to leave.

ROSE

What does it mean?

WILLIAM

I haven't the foggiest, but he's become compulsive about his painting. The man never sleeps -- no wonder he's daft.

ROSE

He needs a long rest. We must devise a way of getting him away from this dreary studio.

WILLIAM

How? He won't acknowledge our existence much less listen to our advice. Now it's your turn. Tell me that notion of yours.

ROSE

All right, but you must swear to never tell a living soul, and to drive it out of your mind as soon as I speak it.

WILLIAM

I swear.

ROSE

First I must say that it's perfectly natural that once people reach a certain age they should die, and yet it's odd, you know, but...

WILLIAM

What...?

ROSE

Well, I've noticed, and even Uncle Gerard mentioned it in an off hand manner -- of course, it is nonsense. *(she sighs)* This is difficult...

WILLIAM

Come on now, out with it!

ROSE

Oh, it's really so foolish, William, but it seems that many of Godfrey's subjects are... deceased. Of course it's absurd. You can't cause someone's death by painting them.

WILLIAM

You're right, but still... I confess I had a similar notion once, when you said something about Lady Harmony giving her husband's portrait to her sister -- as if it were too alive with his spirit to endure, as if it had a soul. But that's not what you're saying, is it? You're implying that there's some sort of connection between the person Godfrey paints and the fact that sooner or later they... Well, let's see, he's painted Lady Pearmeyer...

ROSE

Deceased. Cornelius Mayfield: deceased; Lady Henrietta Hughes: deceased; Sir Victor Rhodes: drowned at sea; Horace Dunlap: influenza; Louisa Ashton: an infected tooth; Captain Bellemount...

WILLIAM

Captain Bellemount...?

ROSE

He fell off his horse and isn't expected to survive the week.

WILLIAM

Good heavens, Rose, have you kept an ongoing account of all Godfrey's commissions?



ROSE

Yes, and it frightens me because it's not...natural.

WILLIAM

But they don't all die in the same way.

ROSE

No, never! They die of illnesses, accidents, and Lady Heydukes in her sleep.

WILLIAM

I hadn't heard about Captain Bellemount...

ROSE

It's tragic. He has four children, all of them young.

WILLIAM

You don't think Godfrey...?

ROSE

No! Of course not! It's not something simple; it's something unnatural, something...evil.

WILLIAM

*(pause)* "Something beyond reason, beyond conscience." No, it can't be true; it's an incredible coincidence, that's all. Otherwise, why haven't we made the connection before now? Why hasn't anyone else?

ROSE

Because it's too unthinkable, too wicked! You know, William, sometimes I think Godfrey refuses to paint me because he's afraid.

WILLIAM

Have you considered confronting him yourself?

ROSE

Yes, but I...I can't, not alone.

WILLIAM

You know when I went to see him, I was at my wit's end. I don't know why really, but suddenly I couldn't breathe and my heart started racing in a panic. Once I started speaking, I felt better, but it was hellish at first. Of course, the studio is dismal at night, but honestly, I thought I'd faint, and I'm not that sort. I've never fainted in my entire life.

ROSE

William, we must speak with him.

WILLIAM

But what can we say? What we're suggesting is...well, it's absurd, preposterous!

ROSE

But you believe in God.

WILLIAM

Yes, but not devils or curses! I'll grant that Godfrey does have a way of looking bedeviled, but I think it's...well, it's not likely to be what we're thinking it could be.

ROSE

Oh, so you admit you think it?!

WILLIAM

No, no! Oh, damn, I don't know what I think!

ROSE

William, listen: Uncle Gerard is visiting his cousin, so he won't know if I stay out later. I want to wait here in the studio until Godfrey arrives.

WILLIAM

But what if he doesn't come?

ROSE

He will. If we turn out the lamps, he won't see us. It's our duty as his friends to help him. Please, say you'll stay here with me, please, William.

WILLIAM

Of course, Rose, whatever you wish.

ROSE

Oh, bless you, William. You are my truest and dearest friend.

(ROSE clasps WILLIAM'S hand as lights dim to black)

**SCENE 7**

(Bells chime nine o'clock. It's still pitch black in the studio where ROSE and WILLIAM are waiting in the shadows.)

WILLIAM

I feel a damn fool, sitting in the dark like this. Really, Rose, let's at least light a lamp so we can see each other. Nicholas keeps a pack of cards in his paint box.

ROSE

No! If he sees the light, he won't come in.

WILLIAM

The longer I sit here, the more preposterous this vigil seems. I know he'll laugh at us.

ROSE

Shush, I hear something.

WILLIAM

Oh, damn, he's coming. I wish to God I could disappear!

ROSE

Shush!

(The door opens and GODFREY entersm approaching his canvas.)

ROSE

Godfrey? Is that you?

GODFREY

Who's here?! Speak up!

ROSE

Rose.

WILLIAM

William.

(WILLIAM lights a lamp.)

GODFREY

What the devil do you want?

ROSE

We want to see you, Godfrey. We...we were worried about you.

WILLIAM

Good God, man, you're looking horrid.

GODFREY

If that's what you came to tell me, I'm quite aware of it, thank you.

ROSE

Godfrey, we're your friends; we miss you.

GODFREY

I don't want your friendship. In fact, I don't want to see either of you ever again, so please leave.

(GODFREY pulls out the canvas that was once Rose's portrait and sets it on his easel.)

ROSE

That was a portrait of me once, wasn't it? I can tell by that bottle green dress I was wearing. Who are you painting over it?

GODFREY

Myself. Now get out of here!

WILLIAM

Come, Rose, we'd better leave.

ROSE

No! Now listen to me, Godfrey Schalken: something horrible is happening to you. William and I know it. We don't know what it is, but we want to help you. We want to help you be yourself again.

GODFREY

Myself is vile and loathsome and no longer worth the effort. Your sympathy may be well intentioned, but believe me, you're wasting your time and mine. Now go!

ROSE

You'll die soon after you finish your portrait, won't you? You're under some kind of curse, aren't you?

(Pause as GODFREY begins to paint, ignoring Rose.)

ROSE

Oh, please, Godfrey, for the sake of your immortal soul, let me call a priest!

GODFREY

Nothing can help me; I'm beyond redemption.

ROSE

No one is beyond redemption! Please, William, go find a priest. I'm staying here and I won't leave him for an instant!

GODFREY

Priests! Hah! The time for priests has long since past. Just get the hell out!

ROSE

Let's go, William!

WILLIAM

*(attempting to open the door)* I can't! The door's locked!. Christ, the damn thing's bolted shut. But it can't be; there's no outside bolt!

ROSE

Godfrey, for godssake, help him!

GODFREY

Fools! Fools!

WILLIAM

Damn! It won't budge!

*(GODFREY resumes painting his portrait as ROSE and WILLIAM heave their weight against the door.)*

WILLIAM

Hello! Is someone out there?!

ROSE

Godfrey, stop painting and help us!

GODFREY

I am helping -- the only way I can!

ROSE

No, Godfrey, look at me. Oh, dearest, please look at me! Oh, William! William! Look at his eyes! William, stop him, stop him!

No! Don't!

GODFREY

(WILLIAM snatches the brush from Godfrey's hand.  
At that instant two lamps seem to light themselves  
revealing the faces of FRAU VANDERHEUSEN  
and DIETER as ROSE screams!)

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Oh, do shush, child!

ROSE

Go away!!

DIETER

Really, how ungracious.

GODFREY

Let them go! For godssake, let them go!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Please calm yourself, Godfrey, and you too, child. Sit down, that's a good girl.

WILLIAM

Who...who are you?

GODFREY

Foul fiends from hell, that's who!

ROSE

You're the woman from Rotterdam...

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Indeed. Frau Vanderheusen, Godfrey's patroness. And this is my son, Dieter. Now, please, calm yourself, my dear Rose. You're trembling.

ROSE

How...how do you know my name?

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Every portrait in our collection has a name. You're Rose and you're William.

ROSE

What...what have you done to Godfrey?

DIETER

We've inspired him, immortalized him, given him an honored place in history.

GODFREY

In hell!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Tsk, tsk. Dieter, dear, I'm afraid you'll have to remove your gloves.

GODFREY

No!

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Oh, shush! He'll be gentle, I promise.

(DIETER removes his gloves and swiftly places his bare hand on ROSE and WILLIAM'S heads, rendering them immobile. FRAU VANDERHEUSEN swings her lamp gently as WILLIAM and ROSE fall into deep hypnotic stupors.)

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Now, relax my dears. There now, rest your eyes, your tired and weary eyes. Yes, you're very sleepy, very sleepy indeed.

GODFREY

Please, Frau Vanderheusen, I implore you to let them go. They haven't harmed a soul. They're good, decent people with their lives before them.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Dieter, dear, replace his canvas with a fresh one.

GODFREY

I beseech you, madam, if you have a shred of humanity...

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Ha! What nonsense, Godfrey! You know me better than that. Now please, dress your palette, You have one more portrait left in you -- before the last. Help him, Dieter, darling.

GODFREY

No, noooo!!

(DIETER approaches Godfrey from behind, placing his hands over his ears, and GODFREY succumbs.)

DIETER

He'll obey you now, mother, but I really hate it when I'm forced to expend my energies in such unseemly ways. It makes us look like such vulgarians.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

You're much too fastidious, Dieter. Now, shall we make it a classic family portrait?

DIETER

Certainly. I'll stand here behind Rose with my hand on her shoulder. You stand there, behind William. Drape your cape to one side.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

These sumptuous materials should create a very dramatic effect.

DIETER

The planes of lamp light could pose quite a challenge for Godfrey.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

You don't think we'll appear too postured?

DIETER

No, I think Master Schalken will agree: This is one of those rare moments when all action has ceased, when everything is held together by an ephemeral adjustment of forces -- an aesthetic allegory of balances so to speak.

FRAU VANDERHEUSEN

Oh, do be still, Dieter, while I compel him to his final vision.

(FRAU VANDERHEUSEN raises her hand like a conductor as GODFREY begins brushing the paint with swift strokes, and the lights fade to black.)

*End of Play*



## Joseph Sheridan LeFanu

Joseph Sheridan LeFanu (1814-1873), a Dubliner and great grandnephew of the dramatist, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, was a lifelong melancholic who in later years became a recluse. Although LeFanu was a graduate of Trinity College in Dublin and studied for the bar, he renounced law for journalism and was the editor of several newspapers and periodicals. He married, but when his wife died, withdrew completely from society, refusing to see even his closest friends.

LeFanu was a successful and prolific author, but is most remembered for his supernatural stories. He is considered to be the father of the psychological ghost story, the first to realize that the personality of the beholder of a supernatural manifestation is as relevant as the manifestation itself. LeFanu was interested in fathoming the hidden psyches of his characters, of mapping out the boundaries of their realities, both perceived and imagined.

*Schalken The Painter* is freely adapted. Liberties have been taken with regard to the plot, characters, and much of the dialog is inspired by the story rather than quoted directly.