

Gothic Horror

By Lafcadio Hearn

Long before I had arrived at what catechisms call the age of reason, I was frequently taken, much against my will, to church. The church was very old; and I can see the interior of it at this moment just as plainly as I saw it forty years ago, when it appeared to me like an evil dream. There I first learned to know the peculiar horror that certain forms of Gothic architecture can inspire. . . . I am using the word "horror" in a classic sense,—in its antique meaning of ghostly fear.

On the very first day of this experience, my child-fancy could place the source of the horror. The wizened and pointed shapes of the windows immediately terrified me. In their outline I found the form of apparitions that tormented me in sleep;—and at once I began to imagine some dreadful affinity between goblins and Gothic churches. Presently, in the tall doorways, in the archings of the aisles, in the ribbings and groinings of the roof, I discovered other and wilder suggestions of fear. Even the façade of the organ,—peaking high into the shadow above its gallery,—seemed to me a frightful thing. Had I been then suddenly obliged to answer the question, "What are you afraid of?" I should have whispered, "*Those points!*" I could not have otherwise explained the matter: I only knew that I was afraid of the "points."

Of course the real enigma of what I felt in that church could not present itself to my mind while I continued to believe in goblins. But long after the age of superstitious terrors, other Gothic experiences severally revived the childish emotion in so startling a way as to convince me that childish fancy could not account for the feeling. Then my curiosity was aroused; and I tried to discover some rational cause for the horror. I read many books, and asked many questions; but the mystery seemed only to deepen.

Books about architecture were very disappointing. I was much less impressed by what I could find in them than by references in pure fiction to the awfulness of Gothic art,—particularly by one writer's confession that the interior of a Gothic church, seen at night, gave him the idea of being inside the skeleton of some monstrous animal; and by a far-famed comparison of the windows of a cathedral to eyes, and of its door to a great mouth, "devouring the people." These imaginations explained little; they could not be developed beyond the phase of vague intimation: yet they stirred such emotional response that I felt sure they had touched some truth. Certainly the architecture of a Gothic cathedral offers strange resemblances to the architecture of bone; and the general impression that it makes upon the mind is an impression of life. But this impression or sense of life I found to be indefinable,—not a sense of any life organic, but of a life latent and dæmonic. And the manifestation of that life I felt to be in the *pointing* of the structure.

Attempts to interpret the emotion by effects of altitude and gloom and vastness appeared to me of no worth; for buildings loftier and larger and darker than any Gothic cathedral, but of a different order of architecture,—Egyptian, for instance,—could not produce a like impression. I felt certain that the horror was made by something altogether peculiar to Gothic construction, and that this something haunted the tops of the arches.

"Yes, Gothic architecture is awful," said a religious friend, "because it is the visible expression of Christian faith. No other religious architecture symbolizes spiritual longing; but the Gothic embodies it. Every part climbs or leaps; every supreme detail soars and points like fire. . . ." "There may be considerable truth in what you say," I replied;—"but it does not relate to the

riddle that baffles me. Why should shapes that symbolize spiritual longing create horror? Why should any expression of Christian ecstasy inspire alarm ? . . .”

Other hypotheses in multitude I tested without avail; and I returned to the simple and savage conviction that the secret of the horror somehow belonged to the points of the archings. But for years I could not find it. At last, at last, in the early hours of a certain tropical morning, it revealed itself quite unexpectedly, while I was looking at a glorious group of palms.

Then I wondered at my stupidity in not having guessed the riddle before.

II

The characteristics of many kinds of palm have been made familiar by pictures and photographs. But the giant palms of the American tropics cannot be adequately represented by the modern methods of pictorial illustration: they must be seen. You cannot draw or photograph a palm two hundred feet high.

The first sight of a group of such forms, in their natural environment of tropical forest, is a magnificent surprise,—a surprise that strikes you dumb. Nothing seen in temperate zones,—not even the huger growths of the Californian slope,—could have prepared your imagination for the weird solemnity of that mighty colonnade. Each stone-grey trunk is a perfect pillar,—but a pillar of which the stupendous grace has no counterpart in the works of man. You must strain your head well back to follow the soaring of the prodigious column, up, up, up through abysses of green twilight, till at last—far beyond a break in that infinite interweaving of limbs and lianas which is the roof of the forest—you catch one dizzy glimpse of the capital: a parasol of emerald feathers outspread in a sky so blinding as to suggest the notion of azure electricity.

Now what is the emotion that such a vision excites,—an emotion too powerful to be called wonder, too weird to be called delight? Only when the first shock of it has passed,—when the several elements that were combined in it have begun to set in motion widely different groups of ideas,—can you comprehend how very complex it must have been. Many impressions belonging to personal experience were doubtless revived in it, hut also with them a multitude of sensations more shadowy,—accumulations of organic memory; possibly even vague feelings older than man,—for the tropical shapes that aroused the emotion have a history more ancient than our race.

One of the first elements of the emotion to become clearly distinguishable is the æsthetic; and this, in its general mass, might be termed the sense of terrible beauty. Certainly the spectacle of that unfamiliar life,—silent, tremendous, springing to the sun in colossal aspiration, striving for light against Titans, and heedless of man in the gloom beneath as of a groping beetle,—thrills like the rhythm of some single marvellous verse that is learned in a glance and remembered forever. Yet the delight, even at its vividest, is shadowed by a queer disquiet. The aspect of that monstrous, pale, naked, smooth-stretching column suggests a life as conscious as the serpent's. You stare at the towering lines of the shape,—vaguely fearing to discern some sign of stealthy movement, some beginning of undulation. Then sight and reason combine to correct the suspicion. Yes, motion is there, and life enormous—but a life seeking only stin,—life, rushing like the jet of a geyser, straight to the giant day.

III

During my own experience I could perceive that certain feelings commingled in the wave of delight,—feelings related to ideas of power and splendor and triumph,—were accompanied by a faint sense of religious awe. Perhaps our modern æsthetic sentiments are so interwoven with various inherited elements of religious emotionalism that the recognition of beauty cannot arise independently of reverential feeling. Be this as it may, such a feeling defined itself while I gazed;—and at once the great grey trunks were changed to the pillars of a mighty aisle; and from attitudes of dream there suddenly descended upon me the old dark thrill of Gothic horror.

Even before it died away, I recognized that it must have been due to some old cathedral memory revived by the vision of those giant trunks uprising into gloom. But neither the height nor the gloom could account for anything beyond the memory. Columns tall as those palms, but supporting a classic entablature, could evoke no sense of disquiet resembling the Gothic horror. I felt sure of this,—because I was able, without any difficulty, to shape immediately the imagination of such a façade. But presently the mental picture distorted. I saw the architrave elbow upward in each of the spaces between the pillars, and curve and point itself into a range of prodigious arches;—and again the sombre thrill descended upon me. Simultaneously there flashed to me the solution of the mystery. I understood that the Gothic horror was a *horror of monstrous motion*,—and that it had seemed to belong to the points of the arches because the idea of such motion was chiefly suggested by the extraordinary angle at which the curves of the arching touched.

To any experienced eye, the curves of Gothic arching offer a striking resemblance to certain curves of vegetal growth;—the curves of the palm-branch being, perhaps, especially suggested. But observe that the architectural form suggests more than any vegetal comparison could illustrate! The meeting of two palm-crests would indeed form a kind of Gothic arch; yet the effect of so short an arch would be insignificant. For nature to repeat the strange impression of the real Gothic arch, it were necessary that the branches of the touching crests should vastly exceed, both in length of curve and strength of spring, anything of their kind existing in the vegetable world. The effect of the Gothic arch depends altogether upon the intimation of energy. An arch formed by the intersection of two short sprouting lines could suggest only a feeble power of growth; but the lines of the tall mediæval arch seem to express a crescent force immensely surpassing that of nature. And the horror of Gothic architecture is not in the mere suggestion of a growing life, but in the suggestion of an energy supernatural and tremendous.

Of course the child, oppressed by the strangeness of Gothic forms, is yet incapable of analyzing the impression received: he is frightened without comprehending. He cannot divine that the points and the curves are terrible to him because they represent the prodigious exaggeration of a real law of vegetal growth. He dreads the shapes because they seem alive; yet he does not know how to express this dread. Without suspecting why, he feels that this silent manifestation of power, everywhere pointing and piercing upward, is not natural. To his startled imagination, the building stretches itself like a phantasm of sleep,—makes itself tall and taller with intent to frighten. Even though built by hands of men, it has ceased to be a mass of dead stone: it is infused with Something that thinks and threatens;—it has become a shadowing malevolence, a multiple goblinry, a monstrous fetish!