

# A Ghost

By Lafcadio Hearn

## I

Perhaps the man who never wanders away from the place of his birth may pass all his life without knowing ghosts; but the nomad is more than likely to make their acquaintance. I refer to the civilized nomad, whose wanderings are not prompted by hope of gain, nor determined by pleasure, but simply compelled by certain necessities of his being—the man whose inner secret nature is totally at variance with the stable conditions of a society to which he belongs only by accident. However intellectually trained, he must always remain the slave of singular impulses which have no rational source, and which will often amaze him no less by their mastering power than by their continuous savage opposition to his every material interest. These may, perhaps, be traced back to some ancestral habit—be explained by self-evident hereditary tendencies. Or perhaps they may not,—in which event the victim can only surmise himself the *Imago* of some pre-existent larval aspiration—the full development of desires long dormant in a chain of more limited lives.

Assuredly the nomadic impulses differ in every member of the class, take infinite variety from individual sensitiveness to environment—the line of least resistance for one being that of greatest resistance for another; no two courses of true nomadism can ever be wholly the same. Diversified of necessity both impulse and direction, even as human nature is diversified! Never since consciousness of time began were two beings born who possessed exactly the same quality of voice, the same precise degree of nervous impressibility, or, in brief, the same combination of those viewless force-storing molecules which shape and poise themselves in sentient substance. Vain, therefore, all striving to particularize the curious psychology of such existences; at the very utmost it is possible only to describe such impulses and preceptions of nomadism as lie within the very small range of one's own observation. And whatever in these is strictly personal can have little interest or value except in so far as it holds something in common with the great general experience of restless lives. To such experience may belong, I think, one ultimate result of all those irrational partings, self-wrecking, sudden isolations, abrupt severances from all attachment, which form the history of the nomad—the knowledge that a strong silence is ever deepening and expanding about one's life, and that in that silence there are ghosts.

## II

Oh! the first vague charm, the first sunny illusion of some fair city, when vistas of unknown streets all seem leading to the realization of a hope you dare not even whisper; when even the shadows look beautiful, and strange façades appear to smile good omen through light of gold! And those first winning relations with men, while you are still a stranger, and only the better and the brighter side of their nature is turned to you! All is yet a delightful, luminous indefiniteness—sensation of streets and of men—like some beautifully tinted photograph slightly out of focus.

Then the slow solid sharpening of details all about you, thrusting through illusion and dispelling it, growing keener and harder day by day through long dull seasons; while your feet

learn to remember all asperities of pavements, and your eyes all physiognomy of buildings and of persons—failures of masonry, furrowed lines of pain. Thereafter only the aching of monotony intolerable, and the hatred of sameness grown dismal, and dread of the merciless, inevitable, daily and hourly repetition of things; while those impulses of unrest, which are Nature's urgings through that ancestral experience which lives in each one of us—outcries of sea and peak and sky to man—ever make wilder appeal. Strong friendships may have been formed; but there finally comes a day when even these can give no consolation for the pain of monotony, and you feel that in order to live you must decide, regardless of result, to shake forever from your feet the familiar dust of that place.

And, nevertheless, in the hour of departure you feel a pang. As train or steamer bears you away from the city and its myriad associations, the old illusive impression will quiver back about you for a moment—not as if to mock the expectation of the past, but softly, touchingly, as if pleading to you to stay; and such a sadness, such a tenderness may come to you, as one knows after reconciliation with a friend misapprehended and unjustly judged. But you will never more see those streets—except in dreams.

Through sleep only they will open again before you, steeped in the illusive vagueness of the first long-past day, peopled only by friends outstretching to you. Soundlessly you will tread those shadowy pavements many times, to knock in thought, perhaps, at doors which the dead will open to you. But with the passing of years all becomes dim—so dim that even asleep you know 'tis only a ghost-city, with streets going to nowhere. And finally whatever is left of it becomes confused and blended with cloudy memories of other cities—one endless bewilderment of filmy architecture in which nothing is distinctly recognizable, though the whole gives the sensation of having been seen before, ever so long ago.

Meantime, in the course of wanderings more or less aimless, there has slowly grown upon you a suspicion of being haunted—so frequently does a certain hazy presence intrude itself upon the visual memory. This, however, appears to gain rather than to lose in definiteness; with each return its visibility seems to increase. And the suspicion that you may be haunted gradually develops into a certainty.

### III

You are haunted—whether your way lie through the brown gloom of London winter, or the azure splendor of an equatorial day—whether your steps be tracked in snows, or in the burning black sand of a tropic beach—whether you rest beneath the swart shade of Northern pines, or under spidery umbrages of palm—you are haunted ever and everywhere by a certain gentle presence. There is nothing fearsome in this haunting—the gentlest face, the kindest voice—oddly familiar and distinct, though feeble as the hum of a bee.

But it tantalizes—this haunting—like those sudden surprises of sensation *within* us, though seemingly not *of* us, which some dreamers have sought to interpret as inherited remembrances, recollections of preexistence. Vainly you ask yourself, "Whose voice? Whose face?" It is neither young nor old, the Face; it has a vapory indefinableness that leaves it a riddle; its diaphaneity reveals no particular tint; perhaps you may not even be quite sure whether it has a beard. But its expression is always gracious, passionless, smiling—like the smiling of unknown friends in dreams, with infinite indulgence for any folly, even a dream-folly. Except in that you cannot permanently banish it, the presence offers no positive resistance to your will; it accepts each caprice with obedience; it meets your every whim with angelic patience. It is never critical, never

makes plaint even by a look, never proves irksome; yet you cannot ignore it, because of a certain queer power it possesses to make something stir and quiver in your heart—like an old vague sweet regret—something buried alive which will not die. And so often does this happen that desire to solve the riddle becomes a pain; that you finally find yourself making supplication to the Presence; addressing to it questions which it will never answer directly, but only by a smile or by words having no relation to the asking—words enigmatic, which make mysterious agitation in old forsaken fields of memory, even as a wind betimes, over wide wastes of marsh, sets all the grasses whispering about nothing. But you will question on, untiringly, through the nights and days of years:

“Who are you? What are you? What is this weird relation that you bear to me? All you say to me I feel that I have heard before, but where? But when? By what name am I to call you, since you will answer to none that I remember? Surely you do not live; yet I know the sleeping-places of all my dead, and yours I do not know! Neither are you any dream—for dreams distort and change; and you, you are ever the same. Nor are you any hallucination; for all my senses are still vivid and strong. This only I know beyond doubt—that you are of the Past; you belong to memory—but to the memory of what dead suns?”

Then, some day or night, unexpectedly, there comes to you at least, with a soft swift tingling shock as of fingers invisible, the knowledge that the Face is not the memory of any one face; but a multiple image formed of the traits of many dear faces, superimposed by remembrance, and interblended by affection into one ghostly personality—infinately sympathetic, phantasmally beautiful—a Composite of recollections! And the Voice is the echo of no one voice, but the echoing of many voices, molten into a single utterance, a single impossible tone, thin through remoteness of time, but inexpressibly caressing.

#### IV

Thou most gentle Composite!—thou nameless and exquisite Unreality, thrilled into semblance of being from out the sum of all lost sympathies!—thou Ghost of all dear vanished things, with thy vain appeal of eyes that looked for my coming, and vague faint pleading of voices against oblivion, and thin electric touch of buried hands—must thou pass away forever with my passing, even as the Shadow that I cast, O thou Shadowing of Souls?

I am not sure. For there comes to me this dream—that if aught in human life hold power to pass, like a swerved sunray through interstellar spaces, into the infinite mystery, to send one sweet strong vibration through immemorial Time, might not some luminous future be peopled with such as thou? And in so far as that which makes for us the subtlest charm of being can lend one choral note to the Symphony of the Unknowable Purpose—in so much might there not endure also to greet thee, another Composite One—embodying, indeed, the comeliness of many lives, yet keeping likewise some visible memory of all that may have been gracious in this thy friend?