

# Stories of Haunting

By Lacy Collison-Morley

In a letter to Sura the younger Pliny gives us what may be taken as a prototype of all later haunted-house stories. At one time in Athens there was a roomy old house where nobody could be induced to live. In the dead of night the sound of clanking chains would be heard, distant at first, proceeding doubtless from the garden behind or the inner court of the house, then gradually drawing nearer and nearer, till at last there appeared the figure of an old man with a long beard, thin and emaciated, with chains on his hands and feet. The house was finally abandoned, and advertised to be let or sold at an absurdly low price. The philosopher Athenodorus read the notice on his arrival in Athens, but the smallness of the sum asked aroused his suspicions. However, as soon as he heard the story he took the house. He had his bed placed in the front court, close to the main door, dismissed his slaves, and prepared to pass the night there, reading and writing, in order to prevent his thoughts from wandering to the ghost. He worked on for some time without anything happening; but at last the clanking of chains was heard in the distance. Athenodorus did not raise his eyes or stop his work, but kept his attention fixed and listened. The sounds gradually drew nearer, and finally entered the room where he was sitting. Then he turned round and saw the apparition. It beckoned him to follow, but he signed to it to wait and went on with his work. Not till it came and clanked its chains over his very head would he take up a lamp and follow it. The figure moved slowly forward, seemingly weighed down with its heavy chains, until it reached an open space in the courtyard. There it vanished. Athenodorus marked the spot with leaves and grass, and on the next day the ground was dug up in the presence of a magistrate, when the skeleton of a man with some rusty chains was discovered. The remains were buried with all ceremony, and the apparition was no more seen.

Lucian tells the same story in the *Philopseudus*, with some ridiculous additions, thoroughly in keeping with the surroundings.

An almost exactly similar story has been preserved by Robert Wodrow, the indefatigable collector, in a notebook which he appears to have intended to be the foundation of a scientific collection of marvellous tales. Wodrow died early in the eighteenth century. Gilbert Rule, the founder and first Principal of Edinburgh University, once reached a desolate inn in a lonely spot on the Grampiaris. The inn was full, and they were obliged to make him up a bed in a house near-by that had been vacant for thirty years.

“He walked some time in the room,” says Wodrow, “and committed himself to God’s protection, and went to bed. There were two candles left on the table, and these he put out. There was a large bright fire remaining. He had not been long in bed till the room door is opened and an apparition in shape of a country tradesman came in, and opened the curtains without speaking a word. Mr. Rule was resolved to do nothing till it should speak or attack him, but lay still with full composure, committing himself to the Divine protection and conduct. The apparition went to the table, lighted the two candles, brought them to the bedside, and made some steps toward the door, looking still to the bed, as if he would have Mr. Rule rising and following. Mr. Rule still lay still, till he should see his

way further cleared. Then the apparition, who the whole time spoke none, took an effectual way to raise the doctor. He carried back the candles to the table and went to the fire, and with the tongs took down the kindled coals, and laid them on the deal chamber floor. The doctor then thought it time to rise and put on his clothes, in the time of which the spectre laid up the coals again in the chimney, and, going to the table, lifted the candles and went to the door, opened it, still looking to the Principal, as he would have him following the candles, which he now, thinking there was something extraordinary in the case, after looking to God for direction, inclined to do. The apparition went down some steps with the candles, and carried them into a long trance, at the end of which there was a stair which carried down to a low room. This the spectre went down, and stooped, and set down the lights on the lowest step of the stair, and straight disappears.”

“The learned Principal,” continues Burton, “whose courage and coolness deserve the highest commendation, lighted himself back to bed with the candles, and took the remainder of his rest undisturbed. Being a man of great sagacity, on ruminating over his adventure, he informed the Sheriff of the county ‘that he was much of the mind there was murder in the case.’ The stone whereon the candles were placed was raised, and there ‘the plain remains of a human body were found, and bones, to the conviction of all.’ It was supposed to be an old affair, however, and no traces could be got of the murderer. Rule undertook the functions of the detective, and pressed into the service the influence of his own profession. He preached a great sermon on the occasion, to which all the neighbouring people were summoned; and behold in the time of his sermon, an old man near eighty years was awakened, and fell a-weeping, and before the whole company acknowledged that at the building of that house, he was the murderer.”

The main features of the story have changed very little in the course of ages, except in the important point of the conviction of the murderer, which would have been effected in a very different way in a Greek story. Doubtless a similar tale could be found in the folklore of almost any nation.

Plutarch relates how, in his native city of Chæronæa, a certain Damon had been murdered in some baths. Ghosts continued to haunt the spot ever afterwards, and mysterious groans were heard, so that at last the doors were walled up. “And to this very day,” he continues, “those who live in the neighbourhood imagine that they see strange sights and are terrified with cries of sorrow.”

It is quite clear from Plautus that ghost stories, even if not taken very seriously, aroused a widespread interest in the average Roman of his day, just as they do in the average Briton of our own. They were doubtless discussed in a half-joking way. The apparitions were generally believed to frighten people, just as they are at present, though the well-authenticated stories of such occurrences would seem to show that genuine ghosts, or whatever one likes to call them, have the power of paralyzing fear.

In the *Mostellaria*, Plautus uses a ghost as a recognized piece of supernatural machinery. The regulation father of Roman comedy has gone away on a journey, and in the meantime the son has, as usual, almost reached the end of his father’s fortune. The father comes back unexpectedly, and the son turns in despair to his faithful slave, Tranio, for help. Tranio is equal to the occasion, and undertakes to frighten the inconvenient parent away again. He gives an account of an apparition that has been seen, and has announced that it is the ghost of a stranger from over-seas, who has been dead for six years.

“Here must I dwell,” it had declared, “for the gods of the lower world will not receive me, seeing that I died before my time. My host murdered me, his guest, villain that he was, for the gold that I carried, and secretly buried me, without funeral rites, in this house. Be gone hence, therefore, for it is accursed and unholy ground.” This story is enough for the father. He takes the advice, and does not return till Tranio and his dutiful son are quite ready for him.

Great battlefields are everywhere believed to be haunted. Tacitus relates how, when Titus was besieging Jerusalem, armies were seen fighting in the sky; and at a much later date, after a great battle against Attila and the Huns, under the walls of Rome, the ghosts of the dead fought for three days and three nights, and the clash of their arms was distinctly heard. Marathon is no exception to the rule. Pausanias says that any night you may hear horses neighing and men fighting there. To go on purpose to see the sight never brought good to any man; but with him who unwittingly lights upon it the spirits are not angry. He adds that the people of Marathon worship the men who fell in the battle as heroes; and who could be more worthy of such honour than they? The battle itself was not without its marvellous side. Epizelus, the Athenian, used to relate how a huge hoplite, whose beard overshadowed all his shield, stood over against him in the thick of the fight. The apparition passed him by and killed the man next him, but Epizelus came out of the battle blind, and remained so for the rest of his life. Plutarch also relates of a place in Bœotia where a battle had been fought, that there is a stream running by, and that people imagine that they hear panting horses in the roaring waters.

But the strangest account of the habitual haunting of great battlefields is to be found in Philostratus’s *Heroica*, which represents the spirits of the Homeric heroes as still closely connected with Troy and its neighbourhood. How far the stories are based on local tradition it is impossible to say; they are told by a vine-dresser, who declares that he lives under the protection of Protesilaus. At one time he was in danger of being violently ousted from all his property, when the ghost of Protesilaus appeared to the would-be despoiler in a vision, and struck him blind. The great man was so terrified at this event that he carried his depredations no further; and the vine-dresser has since continued to cultivate what remained of his property under the protection of the hero, with whom he lives on most intimate terms. Protesilaus often appears to him while he is at work and has long talks with him, and he keeps off wild beasts and disease from the land.

Not only Protesilaus, but also his men, and, in fact, virtually all of the “giants of the mighty bone and bold emprise” who fought round Troy, can be seen on the plain at night, clad like warriors, with nodding plumes. The inhabitants are keenly interested in these apparitions, and well they may be, as so much depends upon them. If the heroes are covered with dust, a drought is impending; if with sweat, they foreshadow rain. Blood upon their arms means a plague; but if they show themselves without any distinguishing mark, all will be well.

Though the heroes are dead, they cannot be insulted with impunity. Ajax was popularly believed, owing to the form taken by his madness, to be especially responsible for any misfortune that might befall flocks and herds. On one occasion some shepherds, who had had bad luck with their cattle, surrounded his tomb and abused him, bringing up all the weak points in his earthly career recorded by Homer. At last they went too far for his patience, and a terrible voice was heard in the tomb and the clash of armour. The offenders fled in terror, but came to no harm.

On another occasion some strangers were playing at draughts near his shrine, when Ajax appeared and begged them to stop, as the game reminded him of Palamedes.

Hector was a far more dangerous person. Maximus of Tyre says that the people of Ilium often see him bounding over the plain at dead of night in flashing armour—a truly Homeric picture. Maximus cannot, indeed, boast of having seen Hector, though he also has had his visions vouchsafed him. He had seen Castor and Pollux, like twin stars, above his ship, steering it through a storm. Æsculapius also he has seen—not in a dream, by Hercules, but with his waking eyes. But to return to Hector. Philostratus says that one day an unfortunate boy insulted him in the same way in which the shepherds had treated Ajax. Homer, however, did not satisfy this boy, and as a parting shaft he declared that the statue in Ilium did not really represent Hector, but Achilles. Nothing happened immediately, but not long afterwards, while the boy was driving a team of ponies, Hector appeared in the form of a warrior in a brook which was, as a rule, so small as not even to have a name. He was heard shouting in a foreign tongue as he pursued the boy in the stream, finally overtaking and drowning him with his ponies. The bodies were never afterwards recovered.

Philostratus gives us a quantity of details about the Homeric heroes, which the vine-dresser has picked up in his talks with Protesilaus. Most of the heroes can be easily recognized. Achilles, for instance, enters into conversation with various people, and goes out hunting. He can be recognized by his height and his beauty and his bright armour; and as he rushes past he is usually accompanied by a whirlwind—*δῖα ὤνεχόν, ἄειδόν*, even after death.

Then we hear the story of the White Isle. Helen and Achilles fell in love with one another, though they had never met—the one hidden in Egypt, the other fighting before Troy. There was no place near Troy suited for their eternal life together, so Thetis appealed to Poseidon to give them an island home of their own. Poseidon consented, and the White Isle rose up in the Black Sea, near the mouth of the Danube. There Achilles and Helen, the manliest of men and the most feminine of women, first met and first embraced; and Poseidon himself, and Amphitrite, and all the Nereids, and as many river gods and spirits as dwell near the Euxine and Mæotis, came to the wedding. The island is thickly covered with white trees and with elms, which grow in regular order round the shrine; and on it there dwell certain white birds, fragrant of the salt sea, which Achilles is said to have tamed to his will, so that they keep the glades cool, fanning them with their wings and scattering spray as they fly along the ground, scarce rising above it. To men sailing over the broad bosom of the sea the island is holy when they disembark, for it lies like a hospitable home to their ships. But neither those who sail thither, nor the Greeks and barbarians living round the Black Sea, may build a house upon it; and all who anchor and sacrifice there must go on board at sunset. No man may pass the night upon the isle, and no woman may even land there. If the wind is favourable, ships must sail away; if not, they must put out and anchor in the bay and sleep on board. For at night men say that Achilles and Helen drink together, and sing of each other's love, and of the war, and of Homer. Now that his battles are over, Achilles cultivates the gift of song he had received from Calliope. Their voices ring out clear and godlike over the water, and the sailors sit trembling with emotion as they listen. Those who had anchored there declared that they had heard the neighing of horses, and the clash of arms, and shouts such as are raised in battle.

Maximus of Tyre also describes the island, and tells how sailors have often seen a fair-haired youth dancing a war-dance in golden armour upon it; and how once, when one of them unwittingly slept there, Achilles woke him, and took him to his tent and entertained him. Patroclus poured the wine and Achilles played the lyre, while Thetis herself is said to have been present with a choir of other deities.

If they anchor to the north or the south of the island, and a breeze springs up that makes the harbours dangerous, Achilles warns them, and bids them change their anchorage and avoid the wind. Sailors relate how, “when they first behold the island, they embrace each other and burst into tears of joy. Then they put in and kiss the land, and go to the temple to pray and to sacrifice to Achilles.” Victims stand ready of their own accord at the altar, according to the size of the ship and the number of those on board.

Pausanias also mentions the White Isle. On one occasion, Leonymus, while leading the people of Croton against the Italian Locrians, attacked the spot where he was informed that Ajax Oileus, on whom the people of Locris had called for help, was posted in the van. According to Conon, who, by the way, calls the hero Autoleon, when the people of Croton went to war, they also left a vacant space for Ajax in the forefront of their line. However this may be, Leonymus was wounded in the breast, and as the wound refused to heal and weakened him considerably, he applied to Delphi for advice. The god told him to sail to the White Isle, where Ajax would heal him of his wound. Thither, therefore, he went, and was duly healed. On his return he described what he had seen—how that Achilles was now married to Helen; and it was Leonymus who told Stesichorus that his blindness was due to Helen’s wrath, and thus induced him to write the *Palinode*.

Achilles himself is once said to have appeared to a trader who frequently visited the island. They talked of Troy, and then the hero gave him wine, and bade him sail away and fetch him a certain Trojan maiden who was the slave of a citizen of Ilium. The trader was surprised at the request, and ventured to ask why he wanted a Trojan slave. Achilles replied that it was because she was of the same race as Hector and his ancestors, and of the blood of the sons of Priam and Dardanus. The trader thought that Achilles was in love with the girl, whom he duly brought with him on his next visit to the island. Achilles thanked him, and bade him keep her on board the ship, doubtless because women were not allowed to land. In the evening he was entertained by Achilles and Helen, and his host gave him a large sum of money, promising to make him his guest-friend and to bring luck to his ship and his business. At daybreak Achilles dismissed him, telling him to leave the girl on the shore. When they had gone about a furlong from the island, a horrible cry from the maiden reached their ears, and they saw Achilles tearing her to pieces, rending her limb from limb.

In this brutal savage it is impossible to recognize Homer’s chivalrous hero, who sacrificed the success of a ten years’ war, fought originally for the recovery of one woman, to his grief at the loss of another, and has thus made it possible to describe the *Iliad* as the greatest love-poem ever written. One cannot help feeling that Pindar’s Isle of the Blest, whither he was brought by Thetis, whose mother’s prayer had moved the heart of Zeus, to dwell with Cadmus and Peleus, is Achilles’ true home; or the isle of the heroes of all time, described by Carducci, where King Lear sits telling Œdipus of his sufferings, and Cordelia calls to Antigone, “Come, my Greek sister! We will sing of peace to our fathers.” Helen and Iseult, silent and thoughtful, roam under the shade of the myrtles, while the setting sun kisses their golden hair with its reddening rays. Helen gazes

across the sea, but King Mark opens his arms to Iseult, and the fair head sinks on the mighty beard. Clytemnestra stands by the shore with the Queen of Scots. They bathe their white arms in the waves, but the waves recoil swollen with red blood, while the wailing of the hapless women echoes along the rocky strand. Among these heroic souls Shelley alone of modern poets—that Titan spirit in a maiden’s form—may find a place, according to Carducci, caught up by Sophocles from the living embrace of Thetis.