

Visions of the Dead in Sleep

By Lacy Collison-Morley

In most of the Greek and Roman stories that survive, the wraiths of the dead are represented as revisiting their friends on earth in sleep. These instances I have not, as a rule, troubled to collect, for they cannot strictly be classed as ghost stories; but since the influence of the dead was generally considered to be exercised in this way, I shall give a few stories which seem particularly striking. That it was widely believed that the dead could return at night to those whom they loved is proved by the touching inscription in which a wife begs that her husband may sometimes be allowed to revisit her in sleep, and that she may soon join him.

The most interesting passage that has come down to us, dealing with the whole question of the power of the dead to appear to those whom they love in dreams, is undoubtedly Quintilian's Tenth Declamation. The fact that the greatest teacher of rhetoric of his day actually chose it as a subject for one of his model speeches shows how important a part it must have played in the feelings of educated Romans of the time. The story is as follows.

A mother was plunged in grief at the loss of her favourite son, when, on the night of the funeral, which had been long delayed at her earnest request, the boy appeared to her in a vision, and remained with her all night, kissing her and fondling her as if he were alive. He did not leave her till daybreak. "All that survives of a son," says Quintilian, "will remain in close communion with his mother when he dies." In her unselfishness, she begs her son not to withhold the comfort which he has brought to her from his father. But the father, when he hears the story, does not at all relish the idea of a visit from his son's ghost, and is, in fact, terrified at the prospect. He says nothing to the mother, who had moved the gods of the world above no less than those of the world below by the violence of her grief and the importunity of her prayers, but at once sends for a sorcerer. As soon as he arrives, the sorcerer is taken to the family tomb, which has its place in the city of the dead that stretches along the highway from the town gate. The magic spell is wound about the grave, and the urn is finally sealed with the dread words, until at last the hapless boy has become, in very truth, a lifeless shade. Finally, we are told, the sorcerer threw himself upon the urn itself and breathed his spells into the very bones and ashes. This at least he admitted, as he looked up:

"The spirit resists. Spells are not enough. We must close the grave completely and bind the stones together with iron." His suggestions are carried out, and at last he declares that all has been accomplished successfully. "Now he is really dead. He cannot appear or come out. This night will prove the truth of my words." The boy never afterwards appeared, either to his mother or to anyone else.

The mother is beside herself with grief. Her son's spirit, which had successfully baffled the gods of the lower world in its desire to visit her, is now, thanks to these foreign spells, dashing itself against the top of the grave, unable to understand the weight that has been placed upon it to keep it from escaping. Not only do the spells shut the boy in—he might possibly have broken through these—but the iron bands and solid fastenings have once again brought him face to face with death. This very realistic, if rather material, picture of

a human soul mewed up for ever in the grave gives us a clear idea of the popular belief in Rome about the future life, and enables us to realize the full meaning of the inscription, "Sit tibi terra levis " (May the earth press lightly upon thee), which is so common upon Roman tombs as often to be abbreviated to "S.T.T.L."

The speech is supposed to be delivered in an action for cruelty brought by the wife against her husband, and in the course of it the father is spoken of as a parricide for what he has done. He defends himself by saying that he took the steps which are the cause of the action for his wife's peace of mind. To this plea it is answered that the ghost of a son could never frighten a mother, though other spirits, if unknown to her, might conceivably do so.

In the course of the speech we are told that the spirit, when freed from the body, bathes itself in fire and makes for its home among the stars, where other fates await it. Then it remembers the body in which it once dwelt. Hence the dead return to visit those who once were dear to them on earth, and become oracles, and give us timely warnings, and are conscious of the victims we offer them, and welcome the honours paid them at their tombs.

The Declamation ends, like most Roman speeches, with an appeal: in this case to the sorcerer and the husband to remove the spells; especially to the sorcerer, who has power to torture the gods above and the spirits of the dead; who, by the terror of his midnight cries, can move the deepest caves, can shake the very foundations of the earth. "You are able both to call up the spirits that serve you and to act as their cruel and ruthless gaoler. Listen for once to a mother's prayers, and let them soften your heart."

Then we have the story of Thrasyllus, as told by Apuleius, which is thoroughly modern in its romantic tone. He was in love with the wife of his friend, Tlepolemus, whom he treacherously murdered while out hunting. His crime is not discovered, and he begins to press his suit for her hand to her parents almost immediately. The widow's grief is heart-rending. She refuses food and altogether neglects herself, hoping that the gods will hear her prayer and allow her to rejoin her husband. At last, however, she is persuaded by her parents, at Thrasyllus's instance, to give ordinary care to her own health. But she passes her days before the likeness of the deceased, which she has had made in the image of that of the god Liber, paying it divine honours and finding her one comfort in thus fomenting her own sufferings.

When she hears of Thrasyllus's suit, she rejects it with scorn and horror; and then at night her dead husband appears to her and describes exactly what happened, and begs her to avenge him. She requires no urging, and almost immediately decides on the course that her vengeance shall take. She has Thrasyllus informed that she cannot come to any definite decision till her year of mourning is over. Meanwhile, however, she consents to receive his visits at night, and promises to arrange for her old nurse to let him in. Overjoyed at his success, Thrasyllus comes at the hour appointed, and is duly admitted by the old nurse. The house is in complete darkness, but he is given a cup of wine and left to himself. The wine has been drugged, however, and he sinks into a deep slumber. Then Tlepolemus's widow comes and triumphs over her enemy, who has fallen so easily into her hands. She will not kill him as he killed her husband. "Neither the peace of death nor the joy of life shall be yours," she exclaims. "You shall wander like a restless shade between Orcus and the light of day. . . . The blood of your eyes I shall offer up at the tomb of my beloved Tlepolemus, and with them I shall propitiate his blessed spirit." At

these words she takes a pin from her hair and blinds him. Then she rushes through the streets, with a sword in her hand to frighten anyone who might try to stop her, to her husband's tomb, where, after telling all her story, she slays herself.

Thither Thrasylus followed her, declaring that he dedicated himself to the Manes of his own free-will. He carefully shut the tomb upon himself, and starved himself to death.

This is by far the best of the stories in which we find a vision of the dead in sleep playing an important part; but there is also the well-known tale of the Byzantine maiden Cleonice. She was of high birth, but had the misfortune to attract the attention of the Spartan Pausanias, who was in command of the united Greek fleet at the Hellespont after the battle of Platrea. Like many Spartans, when first brought into contact with real luxury after his frugal upbringing at home, he completely lost his mental balance, and grew intoxicated with the splendour of his position, endeavouring to imitate the Persians in their manners, and even aspiring, it is said, to become tyrant of the whole of Greece. Cleonice was brutally torn from her parents and brought to his room at night. He was asleep at the time, and being awakened by the noise, he imagined that someone had broken into his room with the object of murdering him, and snatched up a sword and killed her. After this her ghost appeared to him every night, bidding him "go to the fate which pride and lust prepare." He is said to have visited a temple at Heraclea, where he had her spirit called up and implored her pardon. She duly appeared, and told him that "he would soon be delivered from all his troubles after his return to Sparta"—an ambiguous way of prophesying his death, which occurred soon afterwards. She was certainly avenged in the manner of it.

Before leaving these stories of visions of the dead, we must not omit to mention that charming poem of Virgil's younger days, the *Culex* (The Gnat). Just as the first sketch of Macaulay's famous character of William III. is said to be contained in a Cambridge prize essay on the subject, so the *Culex* contains the first draft of some of the greatest passages in Virgil's later works—the beautiful description of the charms of country life in the *Georgics*, for instance, and the account of Tartarus in the sixth book of the *Æneid*. The story is slight, as was usually the case in these little epics, where the purple patches are more important than the plot. A shepherd falls asleep in the shade by a cool fountain, just as he would do in Southern Italy to-day, for his rest after the midday meal. Suddenly a snake, the horrors of which are described with a vividness that is truly Virgilian, appears upon the scene and prepares to strike the shepherd. A passing gnat, the hero of the poem, sees the danger, and wakes the shepherd by stinging him in the eye. He springs up angrily, brushes it off with his hand, and dashes it lifeless to the ground. Then, to his horror, he sees the snake, and promptly kills it with the branch of a tree.

While he lies asleep that night, the ghost of the gnat appears to him in a dream, and bitterly reproaches him for the cruel death with which it has been rewarded for its heroic services. Charon has now claimed it for his own. It goes on to give a lurid description of the horrors of Tartarus, and contrasts its hard lot with that of the shepherd. When he wakes, the shepherd is filled with remorse for his conduct and is also, perhaps, afraid of being continually haunted by the ghost of his tiny benefactor. He therefore sets to work to raise a mound in honour of the gnat, facing it with marble. Round it he plants all kinds of flowers, especially violets and roses, the flowers usually offered to the dead, and cuts on a marble slab the following inscription:

“Little gnat, the shepherd dedicates to thee thy meed of a tomb in return for the life thou gayest him.”

There is also an interesting story of Pindar, told by Pausanias. In his old age the great poet dreamt that Persephone appeared to him and told him that she alone of all the goddesses had not been celebrated in song by him, but that he should pay the debt when he came to her. Shortly after this he died. There was, however, a relation of his, a woman then far advanced in years, who had practised the singing of most of his hymns. To her Pindar appeared in a dream and sang the hymn to Proserpine, which she wrote down from memory when she awoke.

I have included one or two stories of apparitions in dreams among those in the next section, as they seemed to be more in place there.