

The Ghost of Lord Clarenceux

ARNOLD BENNETT

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IN the chair which stood before the writing-table in the middle of the room sat the figure of Lord Clarenceux. The figure did not move as I went in; its back was towards me. At the other end of the room was the doorway, which led to the small bedroom, little more than an alcove, and the gaze of the apparition was fixed on this doorway. I closed the door behind me and locked it, and then stood still. In the looking-glass over the mantelpiece I saw a drawn, pale, agitated face, in which all the trouble in the world seemed to reside; it was my own face. I was alone in the room with the ghost the ghost which, jealous of my love for the woman it had loved, meant to revenge itself by my death. The ghost, did I say? I looked at it; no one would have taken it for an apparition. Small wonder that till the previous evening I had never suspected it to be other than a man. It was dressed in black; it had the very aspect of life. I could follow the creases in the black coat, the direction of the nap of the silk hat. How well by this I knew the faultless black coat and that impeccable hat! Yet it seemed that I could not examine them too closely. I pierced them with the intensity of my fascinated glance. Yes, I pierced them, for, showing faintly through the coat, I could discern the outline of the table which should have been hidden by the man's figure, and through the hat I could see the handle of the French window.

As I stood motionless there, solitary in the glow of the electric light with this fearful visitor, I began to wish that it would move. I wanted to face it to meet its gaze with my gaze, eye to eye, and will against will. The battle between us must start at once, I thought, if I was to have any chance of victory, for, moment by moment, I felt my resolution, my manliness, my mere physical courage slipping away.

But the apparition did not stir. Impassive, remorseless, sinister, it was content to wait, well aware that all suspense was in its favour. Then I said to myself that I would cross the room and so attain my object. I made a step and drew back, frightened by the quite sound of a creaking board. Absurd! but it was quite a minute before I dared to move another step. I had meant to walk straight across to the other door, passing in my course close by the occupied chair. I did do not so; I kept round by the wall, creeping on tiptoe, and my eye never leaving the figure in the chair. I did this in spite of myself, and the manner of my action was the first hint of my ultimate defeat.

At length I stood in the doorway leading to the bedroom. I could feel the perspiration on my forehead and at the back of my neck. I fronted the inscrutable white face of Lord Clarenceux, the lover of Rosetta Rosa; I met its awful eyes: dark, invidious, fateful. Ah, those eyes! Even in my terror I could read in them all the history and the characteristics of Lord Clarenceux. They were the eyes of one who could be of the highest and the lowest. Mingled in their hardness was a melting softness, with their cruelty a large benevolence, with their hate a pitying tenderness, with their spirituality a hellish turpitude. They were the eyes of two opposite men, and as I gazed into them they reconciled for me the conflicting accounts of Lord Clarenceux which I had heard from different people.

But, as far as I was concerned, that night the eyes held nothing but cruelty and disaster; though I could detect in them the other qualities, these qualities were not for me. We faced each other, the apparition and I, and the struggle, silent and bitter as the grave, began. Neither of us moved. My arms were folded easily, but my nails pressed into the palms of my clenched hands. My teeth were set, my lips tight together, my glance unswerving. By sheer strength of endeavour I cast aside my fear of defeat, and in my heart I said with the profoundest conviction that I would love Rosa though the seven seas and all the continents give up their dead to frighten me.

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So we remained, for how long I do not know. It may have been only minutes I cannot tell. Then gradually there came over me a feeling that the ghost in the chair was growing larger. The ghastly inhuman sneer on his thin widening lips assaulted me like a giant's malediction, and the light in the room seemed to become more brilliant till it was almost blinding. This went on for a time, and once more I pulled myself together, collected my scattering senses, and seized again the courage of determination which had nearly slipped from me; but I knew that I must get away, out of sight of this moveless and diabolic figure, which did not speak, but which made known its commands by means of its eyes. "Resign her," the eyes said. "Tear your love for her out of your heart! Swear that you will never see her again or I will ruin you utterly, not now only but for evermore."

I think I trembled; my eyes answered "No." For some reason which I cannot at all explain, I suddenly took off my overcoat, and, drawing aside the screen which ran across the corner of the room at my right hand, forming a primitive sort of wardrobe, I hung it on one of the hooks. I had to feel with my fingers for the hook, because I kept my gaze on the figure. "I will go into the bedroom," I said; and I turned to pass through the doorway. Then I stopped. If I did so, the eyes of the ghost would be upon my back, and I felt that I could only withstand that glance by meeting it. To have it on my back.É Doubtless I was going mad. However, I went backwards to the doorway, and then rapidly stepped out of sight of the apparition and sat down upon the bed. Useless! I must return. The mere idea of the empty sitting-room empty with the ghost in it filled me with a new and considerable fear. Horrible happenings might occur in that room, and I must be there to see them! Moreover, the ghost's gaze must now fall on nothing; that would be too appalling (without doubt I was mad). Its gaze must meet something, otherwise it would travel out into space further and further till it had left all the stars and waggled aimless in the ether. The notion of such a calamity was unbearable. Besides, I was hungry for that gaze. My eyes desired those eyes: if that glance did not press against them, they would burst from my head and roll on the floor, and I should be compelled to go down on my hands and knees and grope in search for them. No, no. I must return to the sitting-room. And I returned. The gaze met mine in the doorway, and now there was something novel in it an added terror, a more intolerable menace, the silent imprecation so frightful that no human being could suffer it. I sank to the ground, and as I did so I shrieked; but it was a weird shriek, sounding only within the brain, and in reply to that unheard shriek I heard an unheard voice of the ghost crying, "Yield!"

I would not yield. Crushed, maddened, tortured, I would not yield. I wanted to die. I felt that death would be sweet and truly desirable. And, so thinking, I faded into a kind of coma, or rather a state which was just short of coma. I had not lost consciousness, but I was conscious of nothing but the gaze. "Good-bye, Rosa," I whispered; "I am beaten, but my love has not been conquered." The next thing I remember was the paleness of the dawn at the window. The apparition had vanished for the night, and I was alive. But I knew that I had touched the skirts of death. I knew that after such another night I should die.