

A GHOST STORY

Lafcadio Hearn

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There are certain beliefs as old as the world, that have encountered more or less scepticism in all ages, and nevertheless endure to-day, beliefs based upon observations so excellently authenticated, and so strongly interresembling, whether made before Christ or in the present age of rail-roads and electricity, that the admission of their testimony in the great trial which metaphysical theories are undergoing in the court of Common Sense, cannot be refused. We refer especially to the belief in warnings, premonitions of death, wraiths, doubles, all those singular superstitions connected with sudden decease, all those apparitions of inexplicable voices by which people at vast distances from home are weirdly informed of the loss of friends, or relatives, to whom they are particularly attached. An immense number of extraordinary books have been written upon this subject; and an enormous bulk of modern testimony collected in regard to it, so much, indeed, that people have long since become more or less weary of the theme, the more so because every new statement obtained bears a tiresome resemblance to others familiar from childhood. Nevertheless, while we have all read about such things, very few of us believe in them; and although there are probably few adult readers of this paper who have not occasionally met with some one claiming to have had ghostly experience, there are also few who are willing to place credence in such assertions.

Nor does it matter much how generally trustworthy in other respects the person who makes the statement may be; in this particular matter either his veracity is apt to be doubted, or the soundness of his mental condition called into question. Finally, the numerous scientific explanations of mental and sensory delusions have been received with zeal by the public at large, who find in them a ready apology for summary condemnation of all weird experiences as totally unworthy of serious attention. It is possible, folks are apt to say, it is quite possible such things have appeared to certain persons, but only as musical or visual spectra the results of diseased conditions of the nervous system.

But it would seem, from the tenor of a curious recent article in the London Daily Telegram, that certain forms of hallucination not only demand, but are actually receiving, a thorough and totally novel scientific investigation. The investigators, indeed, are men who do not believe in ghosts; but they are also men unwilling to accept the cut-and-dried explanation of all visual or auditory hallucinations by nervous disorder. They do not seem to think, for example, that an unhealthy condition of mind could alone account for the following story related by Lieut. Col. Jones of Her Majesty's Service, which is but one of a thousand equally well-authenticated narratives:

"In 1845 I was stationed with my regiment at Moulmein, in Burmah. In those days there was no direct mail, and we were dependent upon the arrival of sailing vessels for our letters, which sometimes arrived in batches, and occasionally we were months without any news from home. On the evening of the 24th of March, 1845, I was, with others, dining at a friend's house, and when sitting in the veranda after dinner, with the other guests, in the middle of a conversation on some local affairs, I all at once distinctly saw before me the form of an open coffin with a favorite sister of mine, then at home, lying in it apparently dead. I naturally ceased talking, and every one looked at me with astonishment, and asked what was the matter. I mentioned, in a laughing manner, what I had seen, and it was looked upon as a joke. I walked home later with an officer very much my senior the late Major Gen. Geo. Briggs, retired, Madras Artillery, then Capt. Briggs who renewed the subject, and asked whether I had received any news as to my sister's illness. I said no, and that my last letters from home were dated some three months prior. He asked me to make a note of the circumstance, as he had before heard of such occurrences. I did

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so, and showed him the entry I made opposite the day of the month in an almanac. On the 17th of May following I received a letter from home announcing my sister's death as having taken place on that very day viz.: the 24th of March, 1845."

Our readers are doubtless familiar with numberless stories of a similar character; and probably most persons who do not believe such things could occur except by fortuitous coincidences, doubt because they have not seen. Now the scientific and impartial writer of the article in the English journal before us, well remarks that although millions die and "make no sign," although such experiences must be comparatively rare, we must also remember that other mental powers, of whose existence there can be no doubt whatever, are equally rare. For instance there are persons capable of powerfully impressing or influencing other persons without touching or speaking to them; and there are persons peculiarly sensitive to the unexpressed will of strong minds. Both powers are uncommon that of conveying impression or of receiving it; and (leaving all theories of mesmerism out of the question) there must even in such cases be a bond of affection or sympathy, "a moral relationship" as the editor calls it, between the two. Under such circumstances it is not impossible that mind should affect mind to an extraordinary degree; and perhaps the narrative of the English officer might be accepted on the theory that his dying sister thought of her absent brother so intently as to form that image in his mind which he saw. How far the influence of mind may thus reach is certainly still unknown; science is obliged to confess its inability to tell us precisely what mind is. The other day, in discussing the subject of electrical phenomena in human beings, we stated on tolerably good authority, that only two or three cases of such electrical prodigies are recorded by physiologists.

That they have been seen and studied is beyond dispute; and while we grant the existence of mysterious powers of one sort on such rare testimony, we cannot reasonably reject the existence of other powers still more incomprehensible, but equally well authenticated.

It is easy enough to recognize the power of mind upon mind, when the recipient and the deliverer of the impression are in each other's presence; but it is difficult to comprehend the extension of such influence half-way round the world, unless we force ourselves to accept a theory like that old Greek story about threads of invisible gold spun by the Fates, which bind lives to lives without ever snapping, till the scissors of death cuts them. Yet again we must believe in other things quite as hard to understand! Who can comprehend the specialized sense by which a hound follows a zig-zag trail for miles through woods, fields, prairies, or even through the crowded streets of a great city, where the trail is crossed by others innumerable and equally fresh or fresher?

If the faculty of conveying or receiving such singular impressions as those related in Lieut.-Col. Jones' narrative, is only an example of some specialized sense, we might suppose that in the course of time such powers would become more generally developed in mankind; and the evolutionary theory again presents us with startling possibilities, the realization of old mythological fancies, the reading of secret thought, the silent exchange of sympathy across the face of the world, and even the final annihilation of deception by the absolute impossibility of veiling a purpose or of concealing a hate.