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The Ghost A Modern Fantasy

Arnold Bennett

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THE GHOST

A Modern Fantasy

BY

ARNOLD BENNETT



CONTENTS

CHAPTER

- I. My Splendid Cousin
- II. At The Opera
- III. The Cry of Alresca
- IV. Rosa's Summons
- V. The Dagger and the Man
- VI. Alresca's Fate
- VII. The Vigil by the Bier
- VIII. The Message
- IX. The Train
- X. The Steamer
- XI. A Chat with Rosa
- XII. Egg-and-milk
- XIII. The Portrait
- XIV. The Villa
- XV. The Sheath of the Dagger
- XVI. The Thing in the Chair
- XVII. The Menace
- XVIII. The Struggle
- XIX. The Intercession

THE GHOST

CHAPTER I

MY SPLENDID COUSIN

I am eight years older now. It had never occurred to me that I am advancing in life and experience until, in setting myself to recall the various details of the affair, I suddenly remembered my timid confusion before the haughty mien of the clerk at Keith Prowse's.

I had asked him:

"Have you any amphitheatre seats for the Opera to-night?"

He did not reply. He merely put his lips together and waved his hand slowly from side to side.

Not perceiving, in my simplicity, that he was thus expressing a sublime pity for the ignorance which my demand implied, I innocently proceeded:

"Nor balcony?"

[2]

This time he condescended to speak.

"Noth—ing, sir."

Then I understood that what he meant was: "Poor fool! why don't you ask for the moon?"

I blushed. Yes, I blushed before the clerk at Keith Prowse's, and turned to leave the shop. I suppose he thought that as a Christian it was his duty to enlighten my pitiable darkness.

"It's the first Rosa night to-night," he said with august affability. "I had a couple of stalls this morning, but I've just sold them over the telephone for six pound ten."

He smiled. His smile crushed me. I know better now. I know that clerks in box-offices, with their correct neckties and their air of con-

tinually doing wonders over the telephone, are not, after all, the grand masters of the operatic world. I know that that manner of theirs is merely a part of their attire, like their cravats; that they are not really responsible for the popularity of great sopranos; and that they probably go home at nights to Fulham by the white omnibus, or to Hammersmith by the red one – and not in broughams.

"I see," I observed, carrying my crushed remains out into the street. Impossible to [3] conceal the fact that I had recently arrived from Edinburgh as raw as a ploughboy!

If you had seen me standing irresolute on the pavement, tapping my stick of Irish bog-oak idly against the curbstone, you would have seen a slim youth, rather nattily dressed (I think), with a shadow of brown on his upper lip, and a curl escaping from under his hat, and the hat just a little towards the back of his head, and a pretty good chin, and the pride of life in his ingenuous eye. Quite unaware that he was immature! Quite unaware that the supple curves of his limbs had an almost feminine grace that made older fellows feel paternal! Quite unaware that he had everything to learn, and that all his troubles lay before him! Actually fancying himself a man because he had just taken his medical degree....

The June sun shone gently radiant in a blue sky, and above the roofs milky-bosomed clouds were floating in a light wind. The town was bright, fresh, alert, as London can be during the season, and the joyousness of the busy streets echoed the joyousness of my heart (for I had already, with the elasticity of my years, recovered from the reverse inflicted on me by Keith Prowse's clerk). On the opposite side [4] of the street were the rich premises of a well-known theatrical club, whose weekly entertainments had recently acquired fame. I was, I recollect, proud of knowing the identity of the building – it was one of the few things I did know in London – and I was observing with interest the wondrous livery of the two menials motionless behind the glass of its portals, when a tandem equipage drew up in front of the pile, and the menials darted out, in their white gloves, to prove that they were alive and to justify their existence.

It was an amazingly complete turnout, and it well deserved all the attention it attracted, which was considerable. The horses were capricious, highly polished grays, perhaps a trifle undersized, but

with such an action as is not to be bought for less than twenty-five guineas a hoof; the harness was silver-mounted; the dog-cart itself a creation of beauty and nice poise; the groom a pink and priceless perfection. But the crown and summit of the work was the driver—a youngish gentleman who, from the gloss of his peculiarly shaped collar to the buttons of his diminutive boots, exuded an atmosphere of expense. His gloves, his scarf-pin, his watch-chain, his mustache, his [5] eye-glass, the crease in his nether garments, the cut of his coat-tails, the curves of his hat—all uttered with one accord the final word of fashion, left nothing else to be said. The correctness of Keith Prowse's clerk was as naught to his correctness. He looked as if he had emerged immaculate from the outfitter's boudoir, an achievement the pride of Bond Street.

As this marvellous creature stood up and prepared to alight from the vehicle, he chanced to turn his eye-glass in my direction. He scanned me carelessly, glanced away, and scanned me again with a less detached stare. And I, on my part, felt the awakening of a memory.

"That's my cousin Sullivan," I said to myself. "I wonder if he wants to be friends."

Our eyes coquetted. I put one foot into the roadway, withdrew it, restored it to the roadway, and then crossed the street.

It was indeed the celebrated Sullivan Smith, composer of those so successful musical comedies, "The Japanese Cat," "The Arabian Girl," and "My Queen." And he condescended to recognize me! His gestures indicated, in fact, a warm desire to be cousinly. I reached him. The moment was historic. While the [6] groom held the wheeler's head, and the twin menials assisted with dignified inactivity, we shook hands.

"How long is it?" he said.

"Fifteen years—about," I answered, feeling deliciously old.

"Remember I punched your head?"

"Rather!" (Somehow I was proud that he had punched my head.)

"No credit to me," he added magnanimously, "seeing I was years older than you and a foot or so taller. By the way, Carl, how old did you say you were?"

He regarded me as a sixth-form boy might regard a fourth-form boy.

"I didn't say I was any age," I replied. "But I'm twenty-three."

"Well, then, you're quite old enough to have a drink. Come into the club and partake of a gin-and-angostura, old man. I'll clear all this away."

He pointed to the equipage, the horses, and the groom, and with an apparently magic word whispered into the groom's ear he did in fact clear them away. They rattled and jingled off in the direction of Leicester Square, while [7] Sullivan muttered observations on the groom's driving.

"Don't imagine I make a practice of tooling tandems down to my club," said Sullivan. "I don't. I brought the thing along to-day because I've sold it complete to Lottie Cass. You know her, of course?"

"I don't."

"Well, anyhow," he went on after this check, "I've sold her the entire bag of tricks. What do you think I'm going to buy?"

"What?"

"A motor-car, old man!"

In those days the person who bought a motor-car was deemed a fearless adventurer of romantic tendencies. And Sullivan so deemed himself. The very word "motor-car" then had a strange and thrilling romantic sound with it.

"The deuce you are!" I exclaimed.

"I am," said he, happy in having impressed me. He took my arm as though we had been intimate for a thousand years, and led me fearlessly past the swelling menials within the gate to the club smoking-room, and put me into a grandfather's chair of pale heliotrope plush in front of an onyx table, and put himself into [8] another grandfather's chair of heliotrope plush. And in the cushioned quietude of the smoking-room, where light-shod acolytes served

gin-and-angostura as if serving gin-and-angostura had been a religious rite, Sullivan went through an extraordinary process of unchaining himself. His form seemed to be crossed and re-crossed with chains—gold chains. At the end of one gold chain was a gold cigarette-case, from which he produced gold-tipped cigarettes. At the end of another was a gold matchbox. At the end of another, which he may or may not have drawn out by mistake, were all sorts of things—knives, keys, mirrors, and pencils. A singular ceremony! But I was now in the world of gold.

And then smoke ascended from the gold-tipped cigarettes as incense from censers, and Sullivan lifted his tinted glass of gin-and-angostura, and I, perceiving that such actions were expected of one in a theatrical club, responsively lifted mine, and the glasses collided, and Sullivan said:

"Here's to the end of the great family quarrel."

"I'm with you," said I.

And we sipped.

[9]

My father had quarrelled with his mother in an epoch when even musical comedies were unknown, and the quarrel had spread, as family quarrels do, like a fire or the measles. The punching of my head by Sullivan in the extinct past had been one of its earliest consequences.

"May the earth lie lightly on them!" said Sullivan.

He was referring to the originators of the altercation. The tone in which he uttered this wish pleased me—it was so gentle. It hinted that there was more in Sullivan than met the eye, though a great deal met the eye. I liked him. He awed me, and he also seemed to me somewhat ridiculous in his excessive pomp. But I liked him.

The next instant we were talking about Sullivan Smith. How he contrived to switch the conversation suddenly into that channel I cannot imagine. Some people have a gift of conjuring with conversations. They are almost always frankly and openly interested in themselves, as Sullivan was interested in himself. You may seek to foil them; you may even violently wrench the conversation into

other directions. But every effort will be useless. They will beat you. You had much better lean [10] back in your chair and enjoy their legerdemain.

In about two minutes Sullivan was in the very midst of his career.

"I never went in for high art, you know. All rot! I found I could write melodies that people liked and remembered." (He was so used to reading interviews with himself in popular weeklies that he had caught the formalistic phraseology, and he was ready apparently to mistake even his cousin for an interviewer. But I liked him.) "And I could get rather classy effects out of an orchestra. And so I kept on. I didn't try to be Wagner. I just stuck to Sullivan Smith. And, my boy, let me tell you it's only five years since 'The Japanese Cat' was produced, and I'm only twenty-seven, my boy! And now, who is there that doesn't know me?" He put his elbows on the onyx. "Privately, between cousins, you know, I made seven thousand quid last year, and spent half that. I live on half my income; always have done; always shall. Good principle! I'm a man of business, I am, Carl Foster. Give the public what they want, and save half your income—that's the ticket. Look at me. I've got to act the duke; it pays, [11] so I do it. I am a duke. I get twopence apiece royalty on my photographs. That's what you'll never reach up to, not if you're the biggest doctor in the world." He laughed. "By the way, how's Jem getting along? Still practising at Totnes?"

"Yes," I said.

"Doing well?"

"Oh! So—so! You see, we haven't got seven thousand a year, but we've got five hundred each, and Jem's more interested in hunting than in doctoring. He wants me to go into partnership with him. But I don't see myself."

"Ambitious, eh, like I was? Got your degree in Edinburgh?"

I nodded, but modestly disclaimed being ambitious like he was.

"And your sister Lilian?"

"She's keeping house for Jem."

"Pretty girl, isn't she?"

"Yes," I said doubtfully. "Sings well, too."

"So you cultivate music down there?"

"Rather!" I said. "That is, Lilian does, and I do when I'm with her. We're pretty mad on it. I was dead set on hearing Rosetta Rosa in 'Lohengrin' to-night, but there isn't [12] a seat to be had. I suppose I shall push myself into the gallery."

"No, you won't," Sullivan put in sharply. "I've got a box. There'll be a chair for you. You'll see my wife. I should never have dreamt of going. Wagner bores me, though I must say I've got a few tips from him. But when we heard what a rush there was for seats Emmeline thought we ought to go, and I never cross her if I can help it. I made Smart give us a box."

"I shall be delighted to come," I said. "There's only one Smart, I suppose? You mean Sir Cyril?"

"The same, my boy. Lessee of the Opera, lessee of the Diana, lessee of the Folly, lessee of the Ottoman. If any one knows the color of his cheques I reckon it's me. He made me—that I will say; but I made him, too. Queer fellow! Awfully cute of him to get elected to the County Council. It was through him I met my wife. Did you ever see Emmeline when she was Sissie Vox?"

"I'm afraid I didn't."

"You missed a treat, old man. There was no one to touch her in boys' parts in burlesque. A dashed fine woman she is—though [13] I say it, dashed fine!" He seemed to reflect a moment. "She's a spiritualist. I wish she wasn't. Spiritualism gets on her nerves. I've no use for it myself, but it's her life. It gives her fancies. She got some sort of a silly notion—don't tell her I said this, Carlie—about Rosetta Rosa. Says she's unlucky—Rosa, I mean. Wanted me to warn Smart against engaging her. Me! Imagine it! Why, Rosa will be the making of this opera season! She's getting a terrific salary, Smart told me."

"It's awfully decent of you to offer me a seat," I began to thank him.

"Stuff!" he said. "Cost me nothing." A clock struck softly. "Christopher! it's half-past twelve, and I'm due at the Diana at twelve. We're rehearsing, you know."

We went out of the club arm in arm, Sullivan toying with his eyeglass.

"Well, you'll toddle round to-night, eh? Just ask for my box. You'll find they'll look after you. So long!"

He walked off.

"I say," he cried, returning hastily on his steps, and lowering his voice, "when you meet my wife, don't say anything about her theatrical career. She don't like it. She's a great lady now. See?"

"Why, of course!" I agreed.

He slapped me on the back and departed.

It is easy to laugh at Sullivan. I could see that even then—perhaps more clearly than now. But I insist that he was lovable. He had little directly to do with my immense adventure, but without him it could not have happened. And so I place him in the forefront of the narrative.

[15]

CHAPTER II

AT THE OPERA

It was with a certain nervousness that I mentioned Sullivan's name to the gentleman at the receipt of tickets—a sort of transcendantly fine version of Keith Prowse's clerk—but Sullivan had not exaggerated his own importance. They did look after me. They looked after me with such respectful diligence that I might have been excused for supposing that they had mistaken me for the Shah of Persia in disguise. I was introduced into Sullivan's box with every circumstance of pomp. The box was empty. Naturally I had arrived there first. I sat down, and watched the enormous house fill, but not until I had glanced into the mirror that hung on the crimson partition of the box to make sure that my appearance did no discredit to Sullivan and the great lady, his wife.

At eight o'clock, when the conductor appeared at his desk to an accompaniment of applauding taps from the musicians, the house was nearly full. The four tiers sent forth a sparkle of dia-

monds, of silk, and of white arms and shoulders which rivalled the glitter of the vast crystal chandelier. The wide floor of serried stalls (those stalls of which one pair at least had gone for six pound ten) added their more sombre brilliance to the show, while far above, stretching away indefinitely to the very furthest roof, was the gallery (where but for Sullivan I should have been), a mass of black spotted with white faces.

Excitement was in the air: the expectation of seeing once again Rosetta Rosa, the girl with the golden throat, the mere girl who, two years ago, had in one brief month captured London, and who now, after a period of petulance, had decided to recapture London. On ordinary nights, for the inhabitants of boxes, the Opera is a social observance, an exhibition of jewels, something between an F.O. reception and a *conversazione* with music in the distance. But tonight the habitués confessed a genuine interest in the stage itself, abandoning their rôle of players. Dozens of times since then have I been to the Opera, and never have [17] I witnessed the candid enthusiasm of that night. If London can be naïve, it was naïve then.

The conductor raised his baton. The orchestra ceased its tuning. The lights were lowered. Silence and stillness enwrapped the auditorium. And the quivering violins sighed out the first chords of the "Lohengrin" overture. For me, then, there existed nothing save the voluptuous music, to which I abandoned myself as to the fascination of a dream. But not for long. Just as the curtain rose, the door behind me gave a click, and Sullivan entered in all his magnificence. I jumped up. On his arm in the semi-darkness I discerned a tall, olive-pale woman, with large handsome features of Jewish cast, and large, liquid black eyes. She wore a dead-white gown, and over this a gorgeous cloak of purple and mauve.

"Emmeline, this is Carl," Sullivan whispered.

She smiled faintly, giving me her finger-tips, and then she suddenly took a step forward as if the better to examine my face. Her strange eyes met mine. She gave a little indefinable unnecessary "Ah!" and sank down into a chair, loosing my hand swiftly. I was going [18] to say that she loosed my hand as if it had been the tail of a snake that she had picked up in mistake for something else. But that would leave the impression that her gesture was melodramatic,

which it was not. Only there was in her demeanor a touch of the bizarre, ever so slight; yes, so slight that I could not be sure that I had not imagined it.

"The wife's a bit overwrought," Sullivan murmured in my ear. "Nerves, you know. Women are like that. Wait till you're married. Take no notice. She'll be all right soon."

I nodded and sat down. In a moment the music had resumed its sway over me.

I shall never forget my first sight of Rosetta Rosa as, robed with the modesty which the character of Elsa demands, she appeared on the stage to answer the accusation of Ortrud. For some moments she hesitated in the background, and then timidly, yet with what grandeur of mien, advanced towards the king. I knew then, as I know now, that hers was a loveliness of that imperious, absolute, dazzling kind which banishes from the hearts of men all moral conceptions, all considerations of right and wrong, and leaves therein nothing but worship and desire. Her acting, as she [19] replied by gesture to the question of the king, was perfect in its realization of the simplicity of Elsa. Nevertheless I, at any rate, as I searched her features through the lorgnon that Mrs. Sullivan had silently handed to me, could descry beneath the actress the girl—the spoilt and splendid child of Good Fortune, who in the very spring of youth had tasted the joy of sovereign power, that unique and terrible dominion over mankind which belongs to beauty alone.

Such a face as hers once seen is engraved eternally on the memory of its generation. And yet when, in a mood of lyrical and rapt ecstasy, she began her opening song, "In Lichter Waffen Scheine," her face was upon the instant forgotten. She became a Voice—pure, miraculous, all-compelling; and the listeners seemed to hold breath while the matchless melody wove round them its persuasive spell.

The first act was over, and Rosetta Rosa stood at the footlights bowing before the rolling and thunderous storms of applause, her hand in the hand of Alresca, the Lohengrin. That I have not till this moment mentioned [20] Alresca, and that I mention him now merely as the man who happened to hold Rosa's hand, shows with what absolute sovereignty Rosa had dominated the scene. For as Rosa

was among sopranos, so was Alresca among tenors—the undisputed star. Without other aid Alresca could fill the opera-house; did he not receive two hundred and fifty pounds a night? To put him in the same cast as Rosa was one of Cyril Smart's lavish freaks of expense.

As these two stood together Rosetta Rosa smiled at him; he gave her a timid glance and looked away.

When the clapping had ceased and the curtain hid the passions of the stage, I turned with a sigh of exhaustion and of pleasure to my hostess, and I was rather surprised to find that she showed not a trace of the nervous excitement which had marked her entrance into the box. She sat there, an excellent imitation of a woman of fashion, languid, unmoved, apparently a little bored, but finely conscious of doing the right thing.

"It's a treat to see any one enjoy anything as you enjoy this music," she said to me. She spoke well, perhaps rather too carefully, and with a hint of the cockney accent.

[21]

"It runs in the family, you know, Mrs. Smith," I replied, blushing for the ingenuousness which had pleased her.

"Don't call me Mrs. Smith; call me Emmeline, as we are cousins. I shouldn't at all like it if I mightn't call you Carl. Carl is such a handsome name, and it suits you. Now, doesn't it, Sully?"

"Yes, darling," Sullivan answered nonchalantly. He was at the back of the box, and clearly it was his benevolent desire to give me fair opportunity of a tête-à-tête with his dark and languorous lady. Unfortunately, I was quite unpractised in the art of maintaining a tête-à-tête with dark and languorous ladies. Presently he rose.

"I must look up Smart," he said, and left us.

"Sullivan has been telling me about you. What a strange meeting! And so you are a doctor! You don't know how young you look. Why, I am old enough to be your mother!"

"Oh, no, you aren't," I said. At any rate, I knew enough to say that.

And she smiled.

"Personally," she went on, "I hate music—loathe it. But it's Sullivan's trade, and, of course, one must come here."

[22]

She waved a jewelled arm towards the splendid animation of the auditorium.

"But surely, Emmeline," I cried protestingly, "you didn't 'loathe' that first act. I never heard anything like it. Rosa was simply—well, I can't describe it."

She gazed at me, and a cloud of melancholy seemed to come into her eyes. And after a pause she said, in the strangest tone, very quietly:

"You're in love with her already."

And her eyes continued to hold mine.

"Who could help it?" I laughed.

She leaned towards me, and her left hand hung over the edge of the box.

"Women like Rosetta Rosa ought to be killed!" she said, with astonishing ferocity. Her rich, heavy contralto vibrated through me. She was excited again, that was evident. The nervous mood had overtaken her. The long pendent lobes of her ears crimsoned, and her opulent bosom heaved. I was startled. I was rather more than startled—I was frightened. I said to myself, "What a peculiar creature!"

"Why?" I questioned faintly.

"Because they are too young, too lovely, too dangerous," she responded with fierce emphasis. "And as for Rosa in particular—as for Rosa in particular—if you knew what I knew, what I've seen—"

"What have you seen?" I was bewildered. I began to wish that Sullivan had not abandoned me to her.

"Perhaps I'm wrong," she laughed.