

The Spectre Hand

Anonymous

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Do the dead ever revisit this earth?

On this subject even the ponderous and unsentimental Dr. Johnson was of opinion that to maintain they did not, was to oppose the concurrent and unvarying testimony of all ages and nations, as there was no people so barbarous, and none so civilized, but among whom apparitions of the dead were related and believed in. "That which is doubted by single cavillers," he adds, "can very little weaken the general evidence, and some who deny it with their tongues confess it by their fears."

In the August of last year I found myself with three friends, when on a northern tour, at the Hotel de Scandinavie, in the long and handsome Carl Johan Gade of Christiana. A single day, or little more, had sufficed us to "do" all the lions of the little Norwegian capital—the royal palace, a stately white building, guarded by slouching Norskis riflemen in long coats, with wide-awakes and green plumes; the great brick edifice wherein the Storthing is held, and where the red lion appears on everything, from the king's throne to the hall-porter's coal-scuttle; the castle of Aggerhuis and its petty armoury, with a single suit of mail, and the long muskets of the Scots who fell at Rhomsdhal; after which there is nothing more to be seen; and when the little Tivoli gardens close at ten, all Christiana goes to sleep till dawn next morning.

English carriages being perfectly useless in Norway, we had ordered four of the native carriages for our departure, as we were resolved to start for the wild mountainous district named the Dovrefeld, when a delay in the arrival of certain letters compelled me to remain two days behind my companions, who promised to await me at Rodnaes, near the head of the magnificent Rans-fiord; and this partial separation, with the subsequent circumstance of having to travel alone through districts that were totally strange to me, with but a slight knowledge of the language, were the means of bringing to my knowledge the story I am about to relate.

The table d'hôte is over by two o'clock in the fashionable hotels of Christiana, so about four in the afternoon I quitted the city, the streets and architecture of which resemble portions of Tottenham Court Road, with stray bits of old Chester. In my carriage, a comfortable kind of gig, were my portmanteau and gun-case; these, with my whole person, and indeed the body of the vehicle itself, being covered by one of those huge tarpaulin cloaks furnished by the carriage company in the Store Standgade.

Though the rain was beginning to fall with a force and density peculiarly Norse when I left behind me the red-tiled city with all its green coppered spires, I could not but be struck by the bold beauty of the scenery, as the strong little horse at a rasping pace tore the light carriage along the rough mountain road, which was bordered by natural forests of dark and solemn-looking pines, interspersed with graceful silver birches, the greenness of the foliage contrasting powerfully with the blue of the narrow fiords that opened on every hand, and with the colours in which the toy-like country houses were painted, their timber walls being always snowy white, and their shingle roofs a flaming red. Even some of the village spires wore the same sanguinary hue, presenting thus a singular feature in the landscape.

The rain increased to an unpleasant degree; the afternoon seemed to darken into evening, and the evening into night sooner than usual, while dense masses of vapour came rolling down the steep sides of the wooded hills, over which the sombre firs spread everywhere and up every vista. That opened, like a sea of cones; and as the houses became fewer and further apart, and not a single wanderer was abroad, and I had but the pocket-map of my "John Murray" to guide me, I soon became convinced that instead of pursuing the route to Rodnaes I was somewhere on the banks of the Tyri-fiord, at least three Norwegian miles (i.e. twenty-one English) in the opposite direction, my little horse worn out, the rain still falling in a continual torrent, night already at hand, and mountain scenery of the most tremendous character everywhere around me. I was in an almost circular valley (encompassed by a chain of

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hills), which opened before me, after leaving a deep chasm that the road enters, near a place which I afterwards learned bears the name of Krogkleven.

Owing to the steepness of the road, and some decay in the harness of my hired carriage, the traces parted, and then I found myself, with the now useless horse and vehicle, far from any house, homestead, or village where I could have the damage repaired or procure shelter, the rain still pouring like a sheet of water, the thick, shaggy, and impenetrable woods of Norwegian pine towering all about me, their shadows rendered all the darker by the unusual gloom of the night.

To remain quietly in the carriage was unsuitable to a temperament so impatient as mine; I drew it aside from the road, spread the tarpaulin over my small stock of baggage and the gun-case, halted the pony to it, and set forth on foot, stiff, sore, and weary, in search of succour; and, though armed only with a Norwegian tolknife, having no fear of thieves or of molestation.

Following the road on foot in the face of the blinding rain, a Scotch plaid and oilskin my sole protection now, I perceived ere long a side-gate and little avenue, which indicated my vicinity to some place of abode. After proceeding about three hundred yards or so, the wood became more open, a light appeared before me, and I found it to proceed from a window on the ground floor of a little two-storeyed mansion, built entirely of wood. The sash, which was divided in the middle, was unbolted, and stood partially and most invitingly open; and knowing how hospitable the Norwegians are, without troubling myself to look for the entrance-door, I stepped over the low sill into the room (which was tenantless) and looked about for a bell-pull, forgetting that in that country, where there are no mantelpieces, it is generally to be found behind the door.

The floor was, of course, bare, and painted brown; a high German stove, like a black iron pillar, stood in one corner on a stone block; the door, which evidently communicated with some other apartment, was constructed to open in the middle, with one of the quaint lever handles peculiar to the country. The furniture was all of plain Norwegian pine, highly varnished; a reindeer-skin spread on the floor, and another over an easy chair, were the only luxuries; and on the table lay the "Illustret Tidende," the "Aftenblad," and other papers of that morning, with a meerschaum and pouch of tobacco, all serving to show that some one had recently quitted the room.

I had just taken in all these details by a glance, when there entered a tall thin man of gentlemanly appearance, clad in a rough tweed suit, with a scarlet shirt, open at the throat, a simple but degagé style of costume, which he seemed to wear with a natural grace, for it is not every man who can dress thus and still retain an air of distinction. Pausing, he looked at me with some surprise and inquiringly, as I began my apologies and explanation in German.

"Taler de Dansk-Norsk," said he, curtly.

"I cannot speak either with fluency, but—"

"You are welcome, however, and I shall assist you in the prosecution of your journey.

Meantime, here is cognac. I am an old soldier, and know the comforts of a full canteen, and of the Indian weed, too, in a wet bivouac. There is a pipe at your service." I thanked him, and (while he gave directions to his servants to go after the carriage and horse)

proceeded to observe him more closely, for something in his voice and eye interested me deeply.

There was much of broken-hearted melancholy—something that indicated a hidden sorrow—in his features, which were handsome, and very slightly aquiline. His face was pale and careworn; his hair and moustache, though plentiful, were perfectly white-blached, yet he did not seem over forty years of age. His eyes were blue, but without softness, being strangely keen and sad in expression, and times there were when a startled look, that savoured of fright, or pain, or insanity, or of all mingled, came suddenly into them. This unpleasant expression tended greatly to neutralize the symmetry of a face that otherwise was evidently a fine one. Suddenly a light seemed to spread over it, as I threw off some of my sodden mufflings, and he exclaimed— "You speak Danskija, and English too, I know! Have you quite forgotten me, Herr Kaptain?"

he added, grasping my hand with kindly energy. "Don't you remember Carl Holberg of the Danish Guards?"

The voice was the same as that of the once happy, lively, and jolly young, Danish officer, whose gaiety of temper and exuberance of spirit made him seem a species of madcap, who was wont to give champagne suppers at the Klampenborg Gardens to great ladies of the court and to ballet-girls of the Hof Theatre with equal liberality; to whom many a fair Danish girl had lost her heart, and who, it was said, had once the effrontery to commence a flirtation with one of the royal princesses when he was on guard at the Amalienborg Palace. But how

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was I to reconcile this change, the appearance of many years of premature age, that had come upon him?

"I remember you perfectly, Carl," said I, while we shook hands; "yet it is so long since we met; moreover—excuse me—but I knew not whether you were in the land of the living."

The strange expression, which I cannot define, came over his face as he said, with a low, sad tone— "Times there are when I know not whether I am of the living or the dead. It is twenty years since our happy days—twenty years since I was wounded at the Battle of Idstedt—and it seems as if 'twere twenty ages."

"Old friend, I am indeed glad to meet you again."

"Yes, old you may call me with truth," said he, with a sad, weary smile, as he passed his hand tremulously over his whitened locks, which I could remember being a rich auburn.

All reserve was at an end now, and we speedily recalled a score and more of past scenes of merriment and pleasure, enjoyed together—prior to the campaign of Holstein—in Copenhagen, that most delightful and gay of all the northern cities; and, under the influence of memory, his now withered face seemed to brighten, and some of its former expression stole back again.

"Is this your fishing or shooting quarters, Carl?" I asked.

"Neither. It is my permanent abode."

"In this place, so rural—so solitary? Ah! you have become a Benedick—taken to love in a cottage, and so forth—yet I don't see any signs of—"

"Hush! for godsake! You know not who hears us," he exclaimed, as terror came over his face; and he withdrew his hand from the table on which it was resting, with a nervous suddenness of action that was unaccountable, or as if hot iron had touched it.

"Why?—Can we not talk of such things?" asked I.

"Scarcely here—or anywhere to me," he said, incoherently. Then, fortifying himself with a stiff glass of cognac and foaming seltzer, he added: "You know that my engagement with my cousin Marie Louise Viborg was broken off—beautiful though she was, perhaps is still, for even twenty years could not destroy her loveliness of feature and brilliance of expression—but you never knew why?"

"I thought you behaved ill to her—were mad, in fact."

A spasm came over his face. Again he twitched his hand away as if a wasp had stung, or something unseen had touched it, as he said— "She was very proud, imperious and jealous."

"She resented, of course, your openly wearing the opal ring which was thrown to you from the palace window by the princess—"

"The ring—the ring! Oh, do not speak of that!" said he, in a hollow tone. "Mad?—yes, I was mad— and yet I am not, though I have undergone, and even now am undergoing, that which would break the heart of a Holger Danske! But you shall hear, if I can tell it with coherence and without interruption, the reason why I fled from society, and the world—and for all these twenty miserable years have buried myself in this mountain solitude, where the forest overhangs the fiord, and where no woman's face shall ever smile on mine! In short, after some reflection and many involuntary sighs—and being urged, when the determination to un-bosom himself wavered—Carl Holberg related to me a little narrative so singular and wild, that but for the sad gravity—or intense solemnity of his manner—and the air of perfect conviction that his manner bore with it, I should have deemed him utterly—mad!

"Marie Louise and I were to be married, as you remember, to cure me of all my frolics and expensive habits—the very day was fixed; you were to be the groomsman, and had selected a suite of jewels for the bride in the Kongens Nytorre; but the war that broke out in Schleswig–Holstein drew my battalion of the guards to the field, whither I went without much regret so far as my fiancée was concerned; for, sooth to say, both of us were somewhat weary of our engagement, and were unsuited to each other: so we had not been without piques, coldnesses, and even quarrels, till keeping up appearances partook of boredom.

"I was with General Krogh when that decisive battle was fought at Idstedt between our troops and the Germanising Holsteiners under General Willisen. My battalion of the guards was detached from the right wing with orders to advance from Salbro on the Holstein rear, while the centre was to be attacked, pierced, and the batteries beyond it carried at the point of the bayonet, all of which was brilliantly done. But prior to that I was sent, with directions to extend my company in skirmishing order, among thickets that covered a knoll which is crowned by a ruined edifice, part of an old monastery with a secluded burial-ground.

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"Just prior to our opening fire the funeral of a lady of rank, apparently, passed us, and I drew my men aside to make way for the open catafalque, on which lay the coffin covered with white flowers and silver coronets, while behind it were her female attendants, clad in black cloaks in the usual fashion, and carrying wreaths of white flowers and immortelles to lay upon the grave.

Desiring these mourners to make all speed lest they might find themselves under a fire of cannon and musketry, my company opened, at six hundred yards, on the Holsteiners, who were coming on with great spirit. We skirmished with them for more than an hour, in the long clear twilight of the July evening, and gradually, but with considerable loss, were driving them through the thicket and over the knoll on which the ruins stand, when a half-spent bullet whistled through an opening in the mouldering wall and struck me on the back part of the head, just below my bearskin cap. A thousand stars seem to flash around me, then darkness succeeded. I staggered and fell, believing myself mortally wounded; a pious invocation trembled on my lips, the roar of the red and distant battle passed away, and I became completely insensible.

"How long I lay thus I know not, but when I imagined myself coming back to life and to the world I was in a handsome, but rather old-fashioned apartment, hung, one portion of it with tapestry and the other with rich drapery. A subdued light that came, I could not discover from where, filled it. On a buffet lay my sword and my brown bearskin cap of the Danish Guards. I had been borne from the field evidently, but when and to where? I was extended on a soft fauteuil or couch, and my uniform coat was open. Some one was kindly supporting my head—a woman dressed in white, like a bride; young and so lovely, that to attempt any description of her seems futile!

"She was like the fancy portraits one occasionally sees of beautiful girls, for she was divine, perfectly so, as some enthusiast's dream, or painter's happiest conception. A long respiration, induced by admiration, delight, and the pain of my wound escaped me. She was so exquisitely fair, delicate and pale, middle-sized and slight, yet charmingly round, with hands that were perfect, and marvellous golden hair that curled in rippling masses about her forehead and shoulders, and from amid which her piquante little face peeped forth as from a silken nest. Never have I forgotten that face, nor shall I be permitted, to do so, while life lasts at least," he added, with a strange contortion of feature, expressive of terror rather than ardour; "it is ever before my eyes, sleeping or waking, photographed in my heart and on my brain! I strove to rise, but she stilled, or staved me, by a caressing gesture, as a mother would her child, while softly her bright beaming eyes smiled into mine, with more of tenderness, perhaps, than love; while in her whole air there was much of dignity and self reliance.

" 'Where am I?' was my first question.

" 'With me,' she answered naïvely; 'is it not enough?'

"I kissed her hand, and said— " 'The bullet, I remember, struck me down in a place of burial on the Salbro Road—strange!'

" 'Why strange?'

" 'As I am fond of rambling among graves when in my thoughtful moods.'

" 'Among graves—why?' she asked.

" 'They look so peaceful and quiet.'

"Was she laughing at my unwonted gravity, that so strange a light seemed to glitter in her eyes, on her teeth, and over all her lovely face? I kissed her hands again, and she left them in mine.

Adoration began to fill my heart and eyes, and he faintly murmured on my lips; for the great beauty of the girl bewildered and intoxicated me; and, perhaps, I was emboldened by past success in more than one love affair. She sought to withdraw her hand, saying.

" 'Look not thus; I know how lightly you hold the love of one elsewhere.'

" 'Of my cousin Marie Louise? Oh! what of that! I never, never loved till now!' and, drawing a ring from her finger, I slipped my beautiful opal in its place.

" 'And you love me?' she whispered.

" 'Yes; a thousand times, yes!'

" 'But you are a soldier—wounded, too. Ah! if you should die before we meet again!'

" 'Or, if you should die ere then?' said I, laughingly.

" 'Die—I am already dead to the world—in loving you; but, living or dead, our souls are as one, and—'

" 'Neither heaven nor the powers beneath shall separate us now!' I exclaimed, as something of melodrama began

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to mingle with the genuineness of the sudden passion with which she had inspired me. She was so impulsive, so full of brightness and ardour, as compared to the cold, proud, and calm Marie Louise. I boldly encircled her with my arms; then her glorious eyes seemed to fill with the subtle light of love, while there was a strange magnetic thrill in her touch, and, more than all, in her kiss.

" ' Carl, Carl!' she sighed.

" 'What! You know my name?—And yours?'

" 'Thyra. But ask no more.'

"There are but three words to express the emotion that possessed me—bewilderment, intoxication, madness. I showered kisses on her beautiful eyes, on her soft tresses, on her lips that met mine half way; but this excess of joy, together with the pain of my wound, began to overpower me; a sleep, a growing and drowsy torpor, against which I struggled in vain, stole over me. I remember clasping her firm little hand in mine, as if to save myself from sinking into oblivion, and then—no more—no more!

"On again coming back to consciousness, I was alone. The sun was rising, but had not yet risen. The scenery the thickets through which we had skirmished, rose dark as the deepest indigo against the amber-tinted eastern sky; and the last light of the waning moon yet silvered the pools and marshes around the borders of the Langsö Lake, where now eight thousand men, the slain of yesterday's battle, were lying stark and stiff. Moist with dew and blood, I propped myself on one elbow and looked around me, with such wonder that a sickness came over my heart. I was again in the cemetery where the bullet had struck me down; a little grey owl was whooping and blinking in a recess of the crumbling wall. Was the drapery of the chamber but the ivy that rustled thereon?—for where the buffet stood there was an old square tomb, whereon lay my sword and bearskin cap!

"The last rays of the waning moonlight stole through the ruins on a new-made grave—the fancied fauteuil on which I lay—strewn with the flowers of yesterday, and at its head stood a temporary cross, hung with white garlands and wreaths of immortelles. Another ring was on my finger now; but where was she, the donor? Oh, what opium-dream, or what insanity was this?

"For a time I remained utterly bewildered by the vividness of my recent dream, for such I believed it to be. But if a dream, how came this strange ring, with a square emerald stone, upon my finger? And where was mine? Perplexed by these thoughts, and filled with wonder and regret that the beauty I had seen had no reality, I picked my way over the ghostly débris of the battlefield, faint, feverish, and thirsty, till at the end of a long avenue of lindens I found shelter in a stately brick mansion, which I learned belonged to the Count of Idstert, a noble, on whose hospitality—as he favoured the Holsteiners—I meant to intrude as little as possible.

"He received me, however, courteously and kindly. I found him in deep mourning: and on discovering, by chance, that I was the officer who had halted the line of skirmishers when the funeral cortège passed on the previous day, he thanked me with earnestness, adding, with a deep; sigh, that it was the burial of his only daughter.

" 'Half my life seems to have gone with her—my lost darling! She was so sweet, Herr Kaptain—so gentle, and so surpassingly beautiful—my poor Thyra!'

" 'Who did you say?' I exclaimed, in a voice that sounded strange and unnatural, while half-starting from the sofa on which I had cast myself, sick at heart and faint from loss of blood.

" 'Thyra, my daughter, Herr Kaptain,' replied the Count, too full of sorrow to remark my excitement, for this had been the quaint old Danish name uttered in my dream. 'See, what a child I have lost!' he added, as he drew back a curtain which covered a full-length portrait, and, to my growing horror and astonishment, I beheld, arrayed in white even as I had seen her in my vision, the fair girl with the masses of golden hair, the beautiful eyes, and the piquante smile lighting up her features even on the canvas, and I was rooted to the spot.

" 'This ring, Herr Count?' I gasped. He let the curtain fall from his hand, and now a terrible emotion seized him, as he almost tore the jewel from my finger.

" 'My daughter's ring!' he exclaimed. 'It was buried with her yesterday—her grave has been violated—violated by your infamous troops.'

As he spoke, a mist seemed to come over my sight; a giddiness made my senses reel, then a hand—the soft little hand of last night, with my opal ring on its third finger—came stealing into mine, unseen! More than that, a kiss from tremulous lips I could not see, was pressed on mine, as I sank backward and fainted! The remainder of my story must be briefly told.

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"My soldiering was over; my nervous system was too much shattered for further military service. On my homeward way to join and be wedded to Marie Louise—a union with whom was intensely repugnant to me now—I pondered deeply over the strange subversion of the laws of nature presented by my adventure; or the madness, it might be, that had come upon me.

On the day I presented myself to my intended bride and approached to salute her, I felt a hand—the same hand—laid softly on mine. Starting, and trembling, I looked around me; but saw nothing. The grasp was firm. I passed my other hand over it, and felt the slender fingers and the shapely wrist; yet still I saw nothing, and Marie Louise gazed at my motions, my pallor, doubt and terror, with calm, but cool indignation.

"I was about to speak—to explain—to say I know not what, when a kiss from lips I could not see sealed mine, and with a cry like a scream I broke away from my friends and fled.

"All deemed me mad, and spoke with commiseration of my wounded head; and when I went abroad in the streets men eyed me with curiosity, as one over whom some evil destiny hung—as one to whom something terrible had happened, and gloomy thoughts were wasting me to a shadow. My narrative may seem incredible; but this attendant, unseen yet palpable, is ever by my side, and if under any impulse, such even as sudden pleasure in meeting you, I for a moment forget it, the soft and gentle touch of a female hand reminds me of the past, and haunts me, for a guardian demon—if I may use such a term—rules my destiny: one lovely, perhaps, as an angel.

"Life has no pleasures, but only terrors for me now. Sorrow, doubt, horror and perpetual dread, have sapped the roots of existence; for a wild and clamorous fear of what the next moment may bring forth is ever in my heart, and when the touch comes my soul seems to die within me.

"You know what haunts me now—God help me! God help me! You do not understand all this, you would say. Still less do I but in all the idle or extravagant stories I have read of ghosts—stories once my sport and ridicule, as the result of vulgar superstition or ignorance—the so-called supernatural visitor was visible to the eye, or heard by the ear; but the ghost, the fiend, the invisible Thing that is ever by the side of Carl Holberg, is only sensible to the touch—it is the unseen but tangible substance of an apparition!

He had got thus far when he gasped, grew livid, and, passing his right hand over the left, about an inch above it, with trembling fingers, he said—"It is here—here now—even with you present, I feel her hand on mine; the clasp is tight and tender, and she will never leave me, but with life!

And then this once gay, strong, and gallant fellow, now the wreck of himself in body and in spirit, sank forward with his head between his knees, sobbing and faint.

Four months afterwards, when with my friends, I was shooting bears at Hammerfest, I read in the Norwegian "Aftenposten," that Carl Holberg had shot himself in bed, on Christmas Eve.