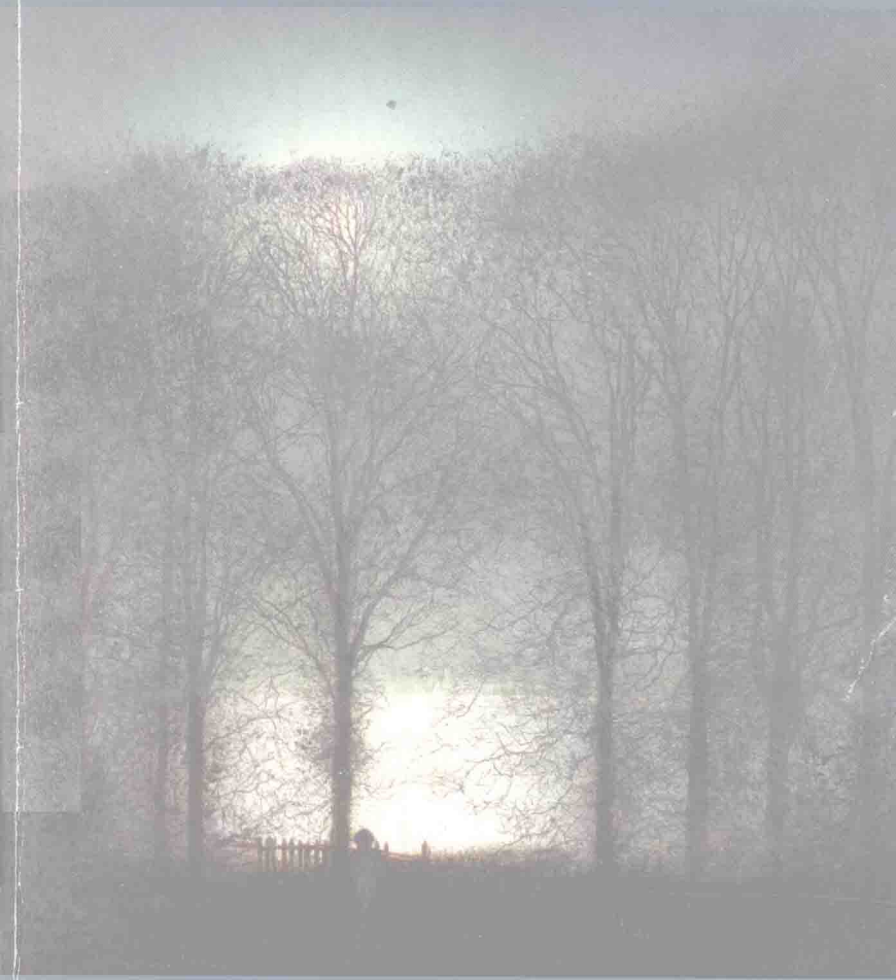
WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

In a Glass Darkly

SHERIDAN Le FANU



SELECTED STORIES

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J. Sheridan Le Fanu

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INTRODUCTION

SHERIDAN LE FANU 'stands absolutely in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories', wrote M. R. James, Le Fanu's great admirer and fellow author. A classic of occult literature, the remarkable collection of stories entitled *In a Glass Darkly* was first published in 1872 and was received with great acclaim. Le Fanu was a bestselling author in his day, and this topical allusion in a story by Henry James published in 1888 attests to Le Fanu's popularity: 'There was the customary novel of Mr Le Fanu's by the bedside; the ideal of reading in a country house after midnight.' Interest in Le Fanu's work resurged with the publication of *Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery* in 1923, and today he is celebrated as a unique master in the realms of the uncanny and the supernatural.

In a Glass Darkly is a collection of five stories which are presented as case histories from the papers of a Dr Martin Hesselius, a scientific doctor who investigates psychic phenomena in terms of mental illness. The title of the collection is taken from St Paul (1 Corinthians 13:12), and Le Fanu's slight alteration of the words (St Paul actually says, 'For now we see through a glass darkly') seems to suggest not only our cloudy and imperfect understanding of the supernatural but that the 'glass' is both a fragile barrier and a mirror which reflects the darker side of human nature. Each story begins with an explanation of the particular aspects of Hesselius's study that the case illustrates. This mode of narration gives credence to the tales themselves, but Le Fanu is generally ambivalent about the doctor's final elucidation of supernatural events, so that disturbing questions invariably remain.

The first two stories deal with cases where the barrier between the natural and supernatural in the minds of the patients has been breached. Both men are haunted to distraction by inexplicable apparitions. In the story called 'Green Tea', the clergyman Jennings consults Hesselius voluntarily, implying that his visions are the product of illness. Hesselius is convinced that Jennings' ultimate

suicide is not connected with his paranormal experience, but with an inherited suicidal mania. His explanation for Jennings' visions is straightforward: the clergyman had over-indulged in green tea, a substance which works on the brain, leaving abusers 'unduly exposed' and prey to 'intrusion of the spirit world'. Hesselius cites alcohol as another dangerous substance when he talks of 'the same senses opened in delirium tremens'.

Like Jennings, Captain Barton of the second tale, which is called 'The Familiar', suffers terrifying hallucinations or visions, and falls into a similar state of nervous decline. Hesselius begins to treat him but fails to prevent his death. This time it seems that guilt is the factor that has caused 'an opening of the interior sense'. The third story, 'Mr Justice Harbottle', is related to the other two in that guilt (and possibly excessive debauchery too) is again associated with supernatural occurrence, but this case is more complex and particularly dramatic. Not only are several members of the judge's household affected by his experience so that they too see ghosts, but the judge has an ominous prophetic dream, which is related with terrifying conviction by Le Fanu. Ambiguous to the very end, a sense of justice being done pervades this story, underlining the powerful capacity for vengeance that spirits have in a manner that is spine-chilling. Doubt is cast on the implicit suggestion that ghosts appear to the sick, and even on Hesselius's theory of the workings of guilt. Harbottle feels fear, but no guilt.

'Le Dragon Volant' is not a ghost story as such, and like Harbottle, its hero was never a patient of Dr Hesselius, but Beckett's tale relates to the doctor's research into the use of drugs which induce a catatonic trance akin to a 'spirit' condition or 'living death'. It is suggested that Beckett was peculiarly susceptible to such drugs and especially open to deception. Though there is no direct explanation as to why this should be, the inference is that youth and his own personality leave him unprotected. Youth again, but particularly loneliness, makes Laura vulnerable in 'Carmilla', Le Fanu's eerie tale of vampirism, which was used as a model for 'Dracula' by his fellow Irishman, Bram Stoker. This story is a curious mixture of traditional vampire-lore and Irish folklore. The beautiful vampire Carmilla has much in common with traditional Irish female spirits, who were often attached to a particular family, though her strong sexuality is a characteristic vampire attribute. Le Fanu overtly uses lesbianism, which was not only a taboo subject at the time but which had all sorts of evil connotations, to heighten tension and to symbolise abnormality.

Le Fanu's ingeniously plotted and brilliantly told stories find strange parallels in his own life. As a young journalist he was passionately concerned with Irish politics, but became disenchanted and despairing, states which seem to be shared by the characters in many of his stories. In 1844 he had married Susan Bennett, but she developed a neurotic morbid obsession and became profoundly depressed, like Hesselius's haunted patients. After her untimely death, Le Fanu became something of a recluse, withdrawing from society and devoting much time to studying the writings of Swedenborg. Swedenborg shares the comforting Christian view that death is not an end, but a release of the spirit into another world. The philosophy is skilfully blended with Irish lore and informs all Le Fanu's writing.

Le Fanu's mode of narration is ideally suited to his subject. A disinterested narrator who had been secretary to Dr Hesselius tells each story as he edits the late doctor's work. His style is compelling. Each individual tale has the gripping appeal of a thoroughly good yarn, but as a collection, the book raises sinister questions and carries the menacing implication that almost anyone is open to supernatural experience.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was born in Dublin in 1814 into a well-educated Irish family of Huguenot origin, connected by marriage to that of Richard Brinsley Sheridan the dramatist. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and called to the bar in 1839, but he never practised and soon abandoned law for journalism. He contributed ballads, stories and verse to the *Dublin University Magazine* and in 1869 became its editor and proprietor; he also became owner or part-owner of a number of newspapers. He had begun writing ghost stories anonymously with 'A Strange Event in the Life of Schalken the Painter' (1839), a subtle and chilling tale in a genre which was as yet in its infancy, but it was after the death of his wife in 1858 that he became something of a recluse and devoted himself to his writing. Notable among the works which sprang from his preoccupation with the supernatural were his novels *The House by the Churchyard* (1863) and *Uncle Silas* (1864), and this collection of short stories, *In a Glass Darkly* (1872). Although a bestselling author for more than twenty years, Le Fanu later became very much neglected and it was not until 1923 with the publication of this collection, edited and introduced by M. R. James, that his achievement was universally recognised. He

was a contemporary of Edgar Allen Poe but their styles are very different as Le Fanu incorporates in his ingenious and skilfully constructed tales of mystery and terror an element of black humour more characteristic of modern writers in the genre. He died on 7 February 1873.

FURTHER READING

Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery, J. S. Le Fanu, edited by M. R. James, 1923

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CARMILLA

IN A GLASS DARKLY

GREEN TEA

PROLOGUE

Martin Hesselius, the German Physician

THOUGH CAREFULLY educated in medicine and surgery, I have never practised either. The study of each continues, nevertheless, to interest me profoundly. Neither idleness nor caprice caused my secession from the honourable calling which I had just entered. The cause was a very trifling scratch inflicted by a dissecting knife. This trifle cost me the loss of two fingers, amputated promptly, and the more painful loss of my health, for I have never been quite well since, and have seldom been twelve months together in the same place.

In my wanderings I became acquainted with Dr Martin Hesselius, a wanderer like myself, like me a physician, and like me an enthusiast in his profession. Unlike me in this, that his wanderings were voluntary, and he a man, if not of fortune, as we estimate fortune in England, at least in what our forefathers used to term 'easy circumstances'. He was an old man when I first saw him; nearly five-and-thirty years my senior.

In Dr Martin Hesselius, I found my master. His knowledge was immense, his grasp of a case was an intuition. He was the very man to inspire a young enthusiast like me with awe and delight. My admiration has stood the test of time and survived the separation of death. I am sure it was well founded.

For nearly twenty years I acted as his medical secretary. His immense collection of papers he has left in my care, to be arranged, indexed and bound. His treatment of some of these cases is curious. He writes in two distinct characters. He describes what he saw and heard as an intelligent layman might, and when, in this style of narrative, he had seen the patient either through his own hall-door to the light of day or through the gates of darkness to the caverns of the dead, he returns upon the narrative, and in the terms of his art, and

with all the force and originality of genius, proceeds to the work of analysis, diagnosis and illustration.

Here and there a case strikes me as of a kind to amuse or horrify a lay reader with an interest quite different from the peculiar one which it may possess for an expert. With slight modifications, chiefly of language, and of course a change of names, I copy the following. The narrator is Dr Martin Hesselius. I find it among the voluminous notes of cases which he made during a tour in England about sixty-four years ago.

It is related in a series of letters to his friend Professor Van Loo of Leyden. The professor was not a physician, but a chemist, and a man who read history and metaphysics and medicine, and had, in his day, written a play.

The narrative is therefore, if somewhat less valuable as a medical record, necessarily written in a manner more likely to interest an unlearned reader.

These letters, from a memorandum attached, appear to have been returned on the death of the professor, in 1819, to Dr Hesselius. They are written, some in English, some in French, but the greater part in German. I am a faithful though, I am conscious, by no means a graceful translator, and although here and there I omit some passages, and shorten others, and disguise names, I have interpolated nothing.

I

Dr Hesselius Relates How He Met the Reverend Mr Jennings

THE REVEREND MR JENNINGS is tall and thin. He is middle-aged, and dresses with a natty, old-fashioned, high-church precision. He is naturally a little stately, but not at all stiff. His features, without being handsome, are well formed, and their expression extremely kind, but also shy.

I met him one evening at Lady Mary Heyduke's. The modesty and benevolence of his countenance are extremely prepossessing.

We were but a small party, and he joined agreeably enough in the conversation. He seems to enjoy listening very much more than

contributing to the talk; but what he says is always to the purpose and well said. He is a great favourite of Lady Mary's, who, it seems, consults him upon many things, and thinks him the most happy and blessed person on earth. Little knows she about him.

The Reverend Mr Jennings is a bachelor, and has, they say, sixty thousand pounds in the funds. He is a charitable man. He is most anxious to be actively employed in his sacred profession, and yet, though always tolerably well elsewhere, when he goes down to his vicarage in Warwickshire, to engage in the actual duties of his sacred calling, his health soon fails him, and in a very strange way. So says Lady Mary.

There is no doubt that Mr Jennings' health does break down in generally a sudden and mysterious way, sometimes in the very act of officiating in his old and pretty church at Kenlis. It may be his heart, it may be his brain. But it has happened three or four times, or oftener, that after proceeding a certain way in the service, he has on a sudden stopped short, and after a silence, apparently quite unable to resume, he has fallen into solitary, inaudible prayer, his hands and his eyes uplifted, and then pale as death, and in the agitation of a strange shame and horror, descended trembling, and got into the vestry-room, leaving his congregation, without explanation, to themselves. This occurred when his curate was absent. When he goes down to Kenlis now, he always takes care to provide a clergyman to share his duty, and to supply his place on the instant should he become thus suddenly incapacitated.

When Mr Jennings breaks down quite, and beats a retreat from the vicarage, and returns to London, where, in a dark street off Piccadilly, he inhabits a very narrow house, Lady Mary says that he is always perfectly well. I have my own opinion about that. There are degrees of course. We shall see.

Mr Jennings is a perfectly gentlemanlike man. People, however, remark something odd. There is an impression a little ambiguous. One thing which certainly contributes to it people, I think, don't remember; or, perhaps, distinctly remark. But I did, almost immediately. Mr Jennings has a way of looking sidelong upon the carpet, as if his eye followed the movements of something there. This, of course, is not always. It occurs only now and then. But often enough to give a certain oddity, as I have said, to his manner, and in this glance travelling along the floor there is something both shy and anxious.

A medical philosopher, as you are good enough to call me, elaborating theories by the aid of cases sought out by himself, and

by him watched and scrutinised with more time at command, and consequently infinitely more minuteness than the ordinary practitioner can afford, falls insensibly into habits of observation which accompany him everywhere, and are exercised, as some people would say, impertinently, upon every subject that presents itself with the least likelihood of rewarding enquiry.

There was a promise of this kind in the slight, timid, kindly, but reserved gentleman, whom I met for the first time at this agreeable little evening gathering. I observed, of course, more than I here set down; but I reserve all that borders on the technical for a strictly scientific paper.

I may remark that when I here speak of medical science, I do so, as I hope someday to see it more generally understood, in a much more comprehensive sense than its generally material treatment would warrant. I believe the entire natural world is but the ultimate expression of that spiritual world from which, and in which alone, it has its life. I believe that the essential man is a spirit, that the spirit is an organised substance, but as different in point of material from what we ordinarily understand by matter as light or electricity is; that the material body is, in the most literal sense, a vesture, and death consequently no interruption of the living man's existence, but simply his extrication from the natural body – a process which commences at the moment of what we term death, and the completion of which, at furthest a few days later, is the resurrection 'in power'.

The person who weighs the consequences of these positions will probably see their practical bearing upon medical science. This is, however, by no means the proper place for displaying the proofs and discussing the consequences of this too generally unrecognised state of facts.

In pursuance of my habit, I was covertly observing Mr Jennings – with all my caution, I think he perceived it – and I saw plainly that he was as cautiously observing me. Lady Mary happening to address me by my name, as Dr Hesselius, I saw that he glanced at me more sharply, and then became thoughtful for a few minutes.

After this, as I conversed with a gentleman at the other end of the room, I saw him look at me more steadily, and with an interest which I thought I understood. I then saw him take an opportunity of chatting with Lady Mary, and was, as one always is, perfectly aware of being the subject of a distant enquiry and answer.

This tall clergyman approached me by and by; and in a little time we had got into conversation. When two people who like reading and know books and places, having travelled, wish to discourse, it is very