

FANTASY COMMENTATOR

...covering the field of imaginative literature...

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## Forgotten Creators of Ghosts

by  
A. Langley Searles

II.-- Ralph Adams Cram

While Ralph Adams Cram is today remembered as an architect of no small eminence, he may be recalled by a few as an author--and by an even smaller group as having written supernatural fiction. His output in the latter field is small: six stories, these having been collected under the title Black Spirits and White: a Book of Ghost Stories (1895). This slim volume contains also a post-script by the author, which, being brief, quoted here in its entirety:

There seem to be certain well-defined roots existing in all countries, from which spring the current legends of the supernatural; and therefore for the germs of the stories in this book the Author claims no originality. These legends differ from one another only in local color and in individual treatment. If the Author has succeeded in clothing one or two of these norms in some slightly new vesture, he is more than content.

However much Cram may be indebted to his Gothic predecessors for the plots of his tales, no one could ever accuse him of emulating their style. Careful and unhurried though it is, his writing is forceful and realistic; and although his treatment may be sympathetic, it is never unnecessarily sentimental. Cram's stories are far more reminiscent of those in the next century than those of the author's own. Like most Americans in his time he looked forward, and the style of the fiction he wrote shows this both by its verisimilitude and its abundant use of forthright materialistic detail.

Best known of the tales in Black Spirits and White is "The Dead Valley," one of the two stories of the book to appear in later anthologies of supernatural fiction. It tells of the adventures of two Swedish boys on a cross-country walking-trip. The youths encounter on the homeward lap of their journey a strange valley, utterly silent and devoid of life, its very air stagnant with death. It is dusk as they are about to cross it, and with the disappearance of the sun an ashy-white, faintly phosphorescent sea of velvet fog fills the hollow like motionless water, so thickly that it seems almost capable of sustaining weight. And as the darkness walls them in they hear from the depths of the silence

"...a cry, beginning as a low, sorrowful moan, rising to a tremulous shriek, culminating in a yell that seemed to tear the night in sunder and rend the world as by a cataclysm."

They are all but petrified with fear; yet to escape the place the two---the narrator and Nils, his companion---must pass through the dread ocean of milky whiteness just below...

"I put one foot into the ghostly fog. A chill as of death struck through me, stopping my heart, and I threw myself backward on the slope. At that instant came again the shriek, close, close, right in our ears, in ourselves, and far out across that damnable sea I saw the cold fog lift like a water-spout and toss itself high in writhing convulsions towards the sky. The stars began to grow dim as thick vapor swept across them, and in the growing dark I saw a

great, watery moon lift itself slowly above the palpitating sea, vast and vague in the gathering mist."

The two flee in desperate fear, keeping as far from the rising whiteness as possible, and at length gain the brink of the surrounding foothills, and hence the outward path leading to safety. The effect of the strange phosphorescent mist is to inflict both youths with a severe brain-fever, from which Nils recovers with a memory completely blank as far as his part in the strange experience is concerned. Because of this the narrator himself is beset with doubts as to the authenticity of the supposed adventure. Was it indeed a dream, some vivid nightmare born of the delirium of illness? Determined to answer the question, he decides to revisit the fateful valley.

This he sets out to do in the late summer some weeks later. After wandering along the familiar paths of the countryside he at length comes upon the place in the late afternoon. It lies before him, a smooth oval depression, the grass on the surrounding hillsides fading from green to brown and then to ashy white as the ground dips downward. The valley itself is utterly barren---a vast stretch of dead earth, glistening here and there with pale alkali-crystals. In its very center rises the gaunt skeleton of a great dead tree; and driven by an overwhelming curiosity he trudges toward it, noticing that as he walks over the hard earth the woodland noises of birds and insects die away completely, leaving an all-pervading ominous silence reminiscent of the horror of the night he shared in the valley with Nils...

"As I drew near the skeleton tree, I noticed the glint of sunlight on a kind of white mound around the roots, and I wondered curiously. It was not until I came close that I saw its nature.

"All around the roots and barkless trunk was heaped a wilderness of little bones. Tiny skulls of rodents and of birds, thousands of them, rising about the dead tree and streaming off for several yards in all directions, until the dreadful pile ended in isolated skulls and scattered skeletons. Here and there a larger bone appeared,---the thigh of a sheep; the hoofs of a horse, and to one side, grinning slowly, a human skull."

Horror overwhelms him, and a strange numbness; and then, seeing that the sun is sinking redly behind the near-by hill-tops, he quickly sets off for the distant valley-wall whence he came.

"...my feet seemed clogged as in a nightmare. I could hardly drag them over the barren earth. And then I felt the slow chill creeping through me. I looked down. Out of the earth a thin mist was rising, collecting little pools that grew ever larger until they joined here and there, their currents swirling slowly like thin blue smoke. ...The silence pursued me like dumb ghosts, the still air held my breath, the hellish fog caught at my feet like cold hands."

And not a moment too soon, he crawls up the desolate slope on hands and knees, the fog undulating pallidly just behind; and in the growing twilight he hears, as before, the same ghastly cry, unmistakable in its horrible intensity. But by now the brow of the friendly hills is at hand, and he leaps down the far slope just as total darkness shuts down on the lifeless gray silence of the Dead Valley.

This story is considered by many to be Cram's outstanding contribution to supernatural fiction, and was indeed noted by Lovecraft as achieving "a memorably potent degree of vague regional horror through subtleties of atmosphere and description." The aura of desolation that pervades it makes "The Dead Valley" a tale that is not easy to forget.

Less artistic and slightly tinged with sentiment is "Notre Dame des Eaux," which describes the return of the spirit of a mad artist to the church of his native French village, and of how it threatens the life of a girl who has befriended the man during his lifetime. Some of the description is beautifully executed; especially memorable is the delicate word-painting of the tiny church itself which the reader encounters early in the story, this being no small contribution to the general atmosphere of the tale.

"In Kropfsberg Keep" tells of the fate that befell two young men, who, in defiance of local superstition, spend the night in the keep of a ruined and haunted castle. Forty years before their coming Count Albert, master of Kropfsberg, gathered together a score of his reckless and wicked friends for a riotous debauch; and at the height of celebration, when all were dancing in the great ballroom, he barred the doors and set the castle afire, then sat in its donjon, listening to the revellers' cries of fear and terror, and watching the red sheets of fire sweep above the battlements. And finally he committed suicide, hanging himself in the ruins of the once-mighty structure. Those who have been luckless or foolhardy enough to brave the night within the crumbling walls of its ruins since that time have always met with death.

But Rupert and Otto---the two youthful travellers---deride such superstitious beliefs. The two sit up before an open fire in the keep, whiling away the night hours at chess until well past midnight. Nothing unusual having occurred, they decide to retire. Otto falls asleep immediately; Rupert sits drowsily smoking, eying the iron hook on the overhead beam from which the wicked count reputedly hanged himself. A melancholy toll from the village clock, Suddenly faint music, as of a near-by dance, fills the air; the opposite ends in a jagged line of fire and he sees Count Albert, mailed, standing before him. The count beckons, and Rupert, pistol in hand, follows the mailed figure to the olden ballroom where a concourse of skeletal horrors---the dead of forty years before---dance once more in a dismal light to strains of music that seem to come from nowhere. The count bids him join the charnel throng; and Rupert, in fright, fires his pistol at the spectre, who leers at him with eyeless skull through the armor-visor... Outside, the clock tolls three; and he finds himself in the keep once more. Has he but dreamed? Not so; for searchers the next morning discover him kneeling beside his companion: Otto lies quite still, a bullet through his throat...

The second story in Black Spirits and White to be anthologized is "Sister Maddelena," which appeared in J. L. French's Ghost Stories (1922). This tells of the wandering spirit of a murdered nun which haunts the corridors of an ancient Sicilian convent until it leads a chance visitor there to the site of her unmarked grave. Cram's descriptions are deftly executed, and the opening of Sister Maddelena's walled-up tomb is a powerfully portrayed scene in the tale.

"The White Villa," also in this volume, is an excellent description of a ghastly murder's spectral reenactment. Though its peak falls somewhat short of those in other tales in this collection, it is yet a memorable example of the supernatural, and reaches a potent emotional level in the depiction of the crime itself.

Although as a whole it is not as artistic as "The Dead Valley," and while it has an admittedly slow beginning, nevertheless "No. 252 Rue M. le Prince" rises to Lovecraftian heights near its ending, and must therefore be rated as equal to the former story. The narrator---for like much of Cram's work this is told in the first person---is visiting a Parisian friend who has but recently

inherited a house that is reputedly haunted. His aunt, the former owner, is said to have practised black magic; and neighbors say that strange sounds are still to be heard there, even though it is now empty.

D'Ardeche, the owner, is persuaded by the narrator and two friends to spend a night in the place, that all may verify for themselves the truth of the neighborhood rumours. D'Ardeche agrees, and after a brief exploration of the place, the party splits up, each man going to one of a group of rooms opening on a common corridor. They shout back and forth to one another from time to time as the evening wears on, finally desisting, since the sound echoes unpleasantly in the rooms. As the hours pass the group becomes silent. The narrator becomes ever more drowsy and numb, as though with cold. Suddenly he discovers that he has lost nearly all the power to move---or, even, to cry out. Then gradually, little by little, the flame in his lantern grows dimmer...dimmer...and is extinguished...

Then the end began. In the velvet blackness came two white eyes, milky, opalescent, small, far away,---awful eyes, like a dead dream. ...I could not have moved my eyes had I possessed the power: they devoured the fearful, beautiful things that grew slowly, slowly larger, fixed on me, advancing, growing more beautiful with white flakes of light sweeping more swiftly into the blazing vortices, the awful fascination deepening in its insane intensity as the white, vibrating eyes grew nearer, larger.

Like a hideous and implacable engine of death the eyes of the Unknown Horror swelled and expanded until they were close before me, enormous, terrible, and I felt a slow, cold, wet breath propelled with mechanical regularity against my face, enveloping me in its fetid mist, its charnel-house deadliness.

Immovable, the luckless man strains every physical and mental fiber in a vain effort to cry aloud, to be freed of this utter terror of the mind...

Suddenly a wet, icy mouth, like that of a dead cuttle-fish, shapeless, jelly-like, fell over mine. The horror began slowly to draw my life from me...as enormous and shuddering folds of palpitating jolly swept sinuously around me...the wet sucking mass closed over my face...

The man awakens in a hospital bed. His friends, whom he did not answer their repeated calls, went to his room---and discovered the door shut and bolted from within. Battering it open,

...they leaped into the room and fell over my body in the middle of the floor. They lighted one of the lanterns, and saw...that the floor and walls to the height of about six feet were running with something that seemed like stagnant water, thick, glutinous, sickening. As for me, I was drenched in the same cursed liquid.

Yet the cause of this horrible happening is destined to remain a mystery forever, as the house in Rue M. le Prince is that very night gutted by fire, and the chamber where doom so nearly overtook the narrator is destroyed with it...

This tale seems a trifle less artistic than "The Dead Valley," yet it is more powerful, and represents the high-water mark of Ralph Adams Cram in the realm of supernatural fiction as a forgotten creator of ghosts.