

THE VOICE OF EUPHEMIA

A Strange Tale of the Spirit World

By EUDORA RAMSAY RICHARDSON

"AND you really believe," I asked, "that you can transmit your thoughts to a girl six hundred miles away?"

"I have always communicated with Euphemia when we were separated," Percy Lagare replied earnestly. "Through all my childhood she was my only friend. Euphemia and I have shared everything—even our thoughts."

"Give me some proof," I suggested. "What is Euphemia doing now?"

Percy made no immediate answer. In his eyes there came that faraway look that set him apart from the other boys in our university. The incident occurred, as I now vividly recall, in the twilight of a late October evening. We were sitting on a balcony that overlooked the back campus. It was not a cheerful scene that lay before us, the trees bare-limbed and gaunt above a carpet of seared leaves, the sky losing its last glow of daylight. Suddenly Lagare's rapt expression gave place to one of extreme terror. Clutching my hand and seeming not to see me, he cried out sharply. Then, for the space of five minutes, the longest I have ever endured, he was silent. And then:

"She is safe now, but she has been in great danger, calling upon me for help. I can never see her. I can only hear the messages she sends," he said.

That evening Lagare seemed shaken, though not in fear for Euphemia's safety. I was entirely unconvinced, however, until he brought me, two days later, a letter from Euphemia telling of a narrow escape from drowning. The experience, I remember, rendered me decidedly uncomfortable. A practical boy of nineteen, I was little interested in psychic phenomena. I was interested, however, in Percy Lagare. He was my David and I his Jonathan—the only close friend Lagare had on the campus.

In appearance, in taste, in fineness of sensibility, Lagare was different from the other boys. There was about him a classical beauty reminiscent of Greek art. Tall and slightly built he was, with an abundance of fair hair that swept back from a forehead high and broad. He was at college only one year, and during

that time was as completely untouched by the life about him as were the chaste marble statues in the foyer. I thought him very lonely until he told me of Euphemia.

Euphemia was the woman he loved, the woman who loved him, and who knew scarcely another man. For generations Lagare's family and Euphemia's had lived on island plantations off the coast of South Carolina, isolated from the mainland, but accessible by row boat to each other. They made few trips to the mainland, but the little boats, for two hundred years, had, with unbroken frequency, crossed the narrow channel that separated the two islands.

Sons and daughters had been tutored at home, and then sent abroad to complete their education. Though the Hegers and Lagares were not prolific people, there had always been a son of each who had carried on the name. Now Percy represented the last of the Lagares and Euphemia the last of the Hegers.

When my friend first mentioned Euphemia to me, he said that he had always loved her. Having no other playmates, like Ferdinand and Miranda, they had, through each other, discovered the existence of love. Their mothers, the closest friends, had, before their births, Lagare told me, spent hours together anticipating the arrival of their children. Percy and Euphemia were born during one of the frightful equinoctial storms so prevalent off the southern coast.

"Old Jeremiah, our household servant," Lagare told me one day, when he had lapsed into a story-telling mood, "loves to talk of that night.

"'Yo' sho' is meant fo' sumpin' turrible, Marse Pu'sy,' he said. 'When I heard yo' liftin' up yo' voice 'gainst de elements o' de Lawd, I says to yo' pa dat he best consecrate dat young un, dat de debbil done sont his spell on him. But, praise Gawd, effen yo' ain't broke up de tempest and save us, Marse Pu'sy.'"

Stranger to me, however, than Jeremiah's interpretations of the night was the psychic communication that passed between Percy's mother and Euphemia's.

"My mother," Lagare continued, "felt that her spirit went out to meet her friend's, and she knew that Euphemia was born. When she described her experiences to Mrs. Huger, she found that Euphemia's mother, too, had been conscious of the same merging of spirit."

As far as Lagare knew, this was the only psychic experience of which the two women had been conscious. The fact, however, that his mother, in perfect health, had died at precisely the time that Mrs. Huger, a consumptive, had died, led him to believe that there was much that had not been told him.

Those portions of the sciences that border on the abstruse interested Lagare. Wireless telegraphy and telephony he regarded as the means by which physical barriers were to be erased.

LAGARE did not re-enter the university the following fall. It seemed to me altogether right that he should return to his plantation, his books, and to Euphemia, whom he soon married. As for me, I anticipated with eagerness the time when I might visit them in their island home. Winters, however, were filled with college activities, and during the sultry sea island summers the Lagares roamed, Nomad fashion, in Alaska and the Canadian Rockies.

Then came the war and for me American cantonments and France. Percy Lagare volunteered, but, on account of underweight and a certain fragility of appearance, he was rejected.

It was, therefore, not until the fall of 1918 that I visited the plantation. Lagare, accompanied by the faithful Jeremiah, met me on the mainland and carried me across in his motor-boat. In the late afternoon we tied to the pier and walked together through the sandy paths arched by great pines from which hung the tropical gray moss. Stretching as far as the eye could see, lay fields still white with unpicked cotton, dotted here and there by the bright bandannas and gay shirts of the negroes who were filling their crocus bags. The house was large and impressive, after the manner of pioneer colonial architecture, with pillars and a piazza as a happy after-thought.

It was flanked on both sides by rows of white-washed cabins. Restrained elegance and prosperity characterized the picture.

Euphemia greeted us, descending the wide front steps and holding out her hands. If I were an artist of the impressionistic school, I should paint Euphemia as I saw her that day, all eyes and hair—eyes dark and burning, in a setting of light and shadow, hair blacker than the raven's wing and far more lustrous, coiled on a neck milk white and bare throated.

The room to which Percy and Euphemia led me was in keeping with the rest of the house. Here, as elsewhere, antique mahogany bespoke an inheritance of culture and affluence.

"This room was my mother's," Percy explained, "and that is her picture above the mirror. I leave it here because it seems to make the room still hers."

The face of Laetitia Lagare was beautiful, with a beauty that challenged one to define its source. I felt strangely possessed with a sense of kinship to the dead woman.

"How lovely your mother is," I said, "and how like you!"

"There never was between two people more nearly perfect understanding," he said, "than between my mother and me—except between Euphemia and me."

"I loved her, and she loved me," Euphemia said gently, and then added with a smile, "but she grew a bit jealous of me, didn't she, Percy?"

"Perhaps," Lagare said, "but mothers are human, and only divine love knows no jealousy."

As the weeks passed, I spent an absurd amount of time before the portrait of Percy's mother, and I began to understand how it is that men have gone mad because of the pictured face of a woman. Never had I felt myself so in the grip of another's personality. I was to find later that this obsession remained with me long after my departure from the island.

I had been only a short time with the Lagares when I realized that Euphemia was ill, and that the bright spots that glowed upon her cheeks evidenced the ravages of the disease to which her mother had been a victim. One evening, when the three of us were sitting before a fire of fragrant dried pine, Euphemia began to talk earnestly of death. There was in her voice a never-to-be-forgotten quality that lent dignity even to the most casual things she said—a deep-toned resonance soft as the southern air she breathed.

"I used to dread the coming of death," she said, "because I thought it meant separation from Percy. Now I know that a union like ours can know no end."

Lagare's hand closed over his wife's. I saw, as I searched his face, that he knew how inevitable was the end, and I guessed the reason for those long visits to other altitudes.

"You mean," I asked, "that you have faith in communication after death?"

"Yes," Euphemia replied. "Just how I should find a way to reach Percy I do not know. Perhaps in our experiments with wireless telephony we are nearing the solution of the problem."

It occurred to me then that Percy's consuming interest in the progress of radio, an interest that had resulted in his becoming one of the best operators in the country, had had its beginning in his dread of separation from Euphemia.

At the end of my visit, when Euphemia waved her farewell to me, I felt that I should not see her again. In the months that followed, however, my mind turned more frequently to the portrait of Percy's mother than to the other friends I had left on the island, and the sense of nearness to the dead woman deepened with time.

Soon Lagare wrote that he was taking his wife to the far west in the hope of defeating her malady. Then followed the losing fight. Letters came from both of them, brave, gay, sad letters that tore at my heart strings. Then this telegram:

"Euphemia is dead. God give me courage. Percy Lagare."

My first thought was for the reason of the man left so utterly desolate. It was not possible for me to join Lagare upon his arrival at the plantation. Six weeks later, however, my affairs made ready for a long absence, I started South. It had now been more than three years since I had seen my friend, and I feared the changes I might find.

Again Lagare met me, accompanied by Jeremiah. Except for a clearer pallor and deeper shadows beneath his eyes, Percy seemed very much the same, but Jeremiah was different. While his master busied himself with the motor of the boat, the old negro beckoned me aside.

"Fo' Gawd, Marse Rogers," he said, "dey's sperrits on tap dat island. Dem niggahs is all flew. Effen I hadn't prommus Marse Pussy's pa to brung him up, I'd a bin gone too."

"Have you and Mr. Lagare been on the plantation alone?" I asked.

"Yassa, Marse Pussy he done discharge de oberseah day 'fo' yastiddy—say dey ain't no use o' him 'dout no hands to wuk. Me an' him an' de sperrits—dat's all on de island, an' dis niggah is gone now. I'se tellin' yo', Marse Rogers."

Percy untied the boat and called to us that he was ready.

"Aren't you coming, Jeremiah?" he asked.

The old darkey shook his head, and the tears streamed down the furrows of his face.

"It's de debbil's wuk, Marse Pussy. I done tole yo' de debbil brung yo' dat night yo' wuz bawnd. Fo' Gawd, Marse Pussy, leab dat ha'nted island."

Lagare smiled sadly as he started the engine.

"All right. Take care of yourself, Jeremiah. We'll look you up when we come ashore," he said.

We chugged away, and far out we could still hear the lamentations of Jeremiah.

Reaching the island, I was amazed by its utter desolation, unprepared as I was for the rapidity with which vegetation grows under the semi-tropical sun and for the completeness with which the humid heat destroys all evidence of paint upon the buildings. Stubby underbrush clogged the paths. Dried cotton stalks, from which the yellowing bolls had not been picked, attempted to rise among the weeds that enveloped them. The house, after its years of disrepair and unattended summers in the blistering southern sun, was devoid of paint and care. The rains of several seasons had washed from the cabins all the whiteness that on my former visit had given them an appearance of sanitary well being.

It was twilight when we picked our way through the path and entered the house. Lagare explained that the electric lighting system was out of order; and, in the absence of lamps, he lighted the tall candles provided for the ancestral candelabra. The high-ceilinged rooms, their heavy mahogany furniture and shadowy corners, assumed an aspect of weirdness that made me quite realize why, following a death, the superstitious blacks had embarked for more cheerful quarters. There descended upon me an unreasoning foreboding of evil. As darkness deepened, I was conscious of fear, and of a desire to leave the plantation and mingle with the throngs under the glare of city lights.

"It was the radio," Lagare explained to me as we sat before the great log fire that night, "that frightened the negroes

away. Before we went West the instrument, as you know, had not reached so high a state of perfection. I have been working with the machine all these years, and upon my return began at once to modernize my equipment. One night I had just tuned in on a concert when Jeremiah entered. There had already been in the cabins strange reports of happenings here. So when Jeremiah carried back the news of the voices I was listening to, there was an exodus which I could not stay."

"You are in a far better frame of mind," I said, "than I expected to find you."

"Yes," Lagare answered, "I am not unhappy, and, despite being here alone, not lonely. You see I have Euphemia with me always."

"You mean," I asked, "that you have established communication with the spirit world?"

"Yes, a mental communication that brings peace to me—nothing more. I do feel sometimes that I must hear her voice, see her face, but the madness that this longing brings does not last. I know that some day in some way she will speak to me."

Then Lagare fell silent, and the rest of the evening we sat, talking now and then, but for the most part watching the smouldering and spitting of the great logs.

At midnight by the light of one of the candles, Lagare led me to the room I had formerly occupied. The immense four poster, with its draperies and side curtains, the gigantic highboy and massive bureau that caught and held the shadows would, I think, have been terrifying to a more hardy occupant than I. From out the portrait above the mirror the eyes of Laetitia Lagare found and followed me. In the dimly-lighted room the white draperies seemed to flutter with the candle's flickerings, giving to me an uncanny sense of the nearness of Laetitia Lagare. Oddly enough, I welcomed the portrait as the one bit of reality in this mansion of past greatness. As soon as possible I burrowed beneath the coverings of the bed. Outside, the wind from the sea screamed as it cut its way through the pines; every shutter clattered on rusty hinges; loosely fitting windows rattled, and warped old boards creaked their gloomy accompaniment.

Then, just at what hour I do not know, a flutter that might have been made by the wings of a fairy passed my door. Then there was the sound of Lagare's door being gently opened and of something entering. I raised myself upon my elbow and listened. At first I

heard only the howling of the wind and the shaking of the old house. At length, from Lagare's room someone seemed to be tiptoeing down stairs. I was certain that I heard the click of the radio in the room below, and then for hours there was no sound save the eerie noises of the night. At last I slept the sleep of exhaustion.

TWICE the next day I was about to tell Lagare of the happenings of the night before, but the gaunt, drawn look on his face, and the starry light in his eyes, deterred me. Surely I had come to comfort my friend, not to harass him. I did, however, that day begin urging Percy to leave the island and come home with me.

"Later," he replied earnestly, "later, but not now."

I said no more that day, but I found myself continually dreading the approach of darkness. Undoubtedly, in a house so old, so large, one's overwrought nerves could give various interpretations to the noises of the night. Hence I determined to investigate anything that was not self-explanatory. Entering the room just before midnight, I sought the eyes of Laetitia Lagare, and from their steady gaze there seemed to flow into me a courage for whatever undertaking might seem necessary. On the table by my bed I placed a lighted candle and waited.

It was just at midnight that again I heard a flutter past my room and the sound of Lagare's door being gently opened, and later someone creeping down the stairs. I rose and prepared to follow the sounds. The candle I carried was insufficient to pierce the blackness, which, as I entered the hall, seemed to close in upon me with strangling intensity. The weak, old balustrade trembled as I grasped it for support. Sickly lines of pale light outlined the living-room door, but from within came no sound to relieve the ghastly stillness.

In the hall I paused, trying to still the wild pumping of my heart. Then, noiselessly, I opened the door and peered into the room. In the far corner a candle cast its wan light, and there before the radio knelt Percy Lagare, an agony of earnestness on his face. So the footsteps of the stair were explained, but not the sounds that preceded Percy's descent.

From the vantage ground of the darkened hall, I watched for a moment, unnoticed. Lagare was listening, it appeared, for a voice that did not come, hoping against hope, fighting despair

and hopelessness. Looking up, he saw me.

"Oh, I am sorry," he said, with the quick thought for others that marked his every act. "I am sorry to have disturbed you, Henry."

"Why do you do this every night," I asked, "wearing yourself out to no avail?"

"It will not always be to no avail," he answered, pathetic eagerness in his voice. "Some day I shall hear, and then there will be rest. Until then I must listen."

"You believe she will reach you over the radio?"

"She believed that she could. Now I have the strongest amplifier that has been made, and I have experimented with many wave lengths. Sometimes I am sure that the first syllable of my name is being pronounced, and then there comes insistent interference as though the voice were being intercepted. Sometimes I feel that the interference must be in the spirit world."

"I must hear her, I must," he added in a fervor of earnestness. "If you love me, Henry, leave me alone."

I obeyed and returned to my room.

AS time passed, other changes in Lagare were evident. He ate little, and, instead of taking the walks that were his custom, sat idly on the piazza or before the fire. It was, moreover, the glow in his eyes that alarmed me most. They were not the eyes of a normal human being, nor yet the eyes of a madman; they were the eyes of one seeing into a world beyond and jealously striving to see further. Each night there came the soft flutter past my door, the sound of someone entering Lagare's room and then the almost noiseless descending of the stairs and the *click* of the wireless instrument.

I had become sufficiently accustomed to the routine to return to my regular habits of sleep, when one night I was awakened by the opening of my door. I felt certain that someone entered and hovered over my bed. I lay quiet in the utter stillness of the room.

Soon afterward there came the flutter in the hall and the creaking of the steps. The noises emitted by the radio I would swear were different from those I had heard on other nights. Numb and awed, I lay awake until I heard the returning footsteps on the stairs.

All the following day Lagare seemed more than ever abstracted, and the food he prepared for me he scarcely touched.

It was quite evident now that neither Lagare nor I could much longer stand the strain of nights on the desolate island; hence I argued valiantly in behalf of immediate departure.

"Percy," I said, as we sat before the fire at twilight, "this is the last night I am going to remain in this place, and you are coming away with me tomorrow."

Lagare's head rested wearily against the carved back of the fine old Chippendale chair, and bluish gray lids closed over his eyes.

"After tonight I will do as you say. Surely after tonight it will be possible for me to leave. Oh, I am tired, so tired! After tonight you may take me away, but tonight I must be here."

I retired early, hoping that before midnight I might get some of the rest I needed. Lagare's last words, running over and over in my mind, gripped by a sickening fear, I lay staring into the darkness about me. Shutters clattered. A dead branch fell to the ground. Waves beat against the sands of the beach. A flash of lightning intensified the shadows of the room. Then rain added its din to the noises of the southern midwinter storm.

To still the beating of my heart I repeated senseless jingles dormant in mem-

ory since childhood. On and on I went in a futile effort to drown fear. Then I seemed to know that the door had been opened and to feel someone hovering over my bed. Minutes like hours went by, while the presence lingered. There was the nightly fluttering past my door—and still the presence lingered.

I remember making one last effort to bring reason to my rescue. Was it a spirit that held me powerless to resist? If so, was there another passing my door and entering Lagare's room? Then my mind went blank, and, acting no longer, merely registered impressions. I could hear Lagare running down the stairs.

The radio whirred, crashed, hissed. Then I felt myself taken gently by the shoulders and propelled toward the steps and down.

Down, down I was going, powerless to resist, down through the blackness, perhaps to some doom awaiting me, past fear, past hope, dominated by the unknown, possessed by another. The grip relaxed as we reached the room in which the instrument had been placed. By the light of a single candle I saw Lagare kneeling before the radio, straining every nerve to catch the slightest sound. Cold and numb, still in the grip of the force that had brought me down, I watched my friend as he listened.

Then through the amplifier there came the never-to-be-forgotten voice of Euphemia Lagare, summing up in its soul-hunger all the love the woman heart has felt for its mate and left unexpressed.

"Percy! Percy!" came the voice.

Lightning sent its jagged forks through the sky. Thunder crashed. The radio whirred in angry accompaniment. From out the stillness that followed, another voice, that seemed to be linked with all my dreams and all my yearnings, came clear and sweet—the voice of motherhood, the same yesterday, today and forever, the voice of all mothers of all ages:

"Henry Rogers, Henry Rogers," were the words it said. "I am Percy's mother. Save my boy."

There followed crashes of the elements, stranger sounds from the instrument, noises that could be likened only to immortal souls in mortal conflict. At length, commanding and triumphant, came the voice of Euphemia Lagare:

"Percy, Percy, I want you. Come to me."

With the cry of "Euphemia! Beloved!" Percy Lagare fell at my feet, on his face the peace of one who has come to the end of his journey and found rest.

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