

A Vampire

By Luigi Capuana

“It is *no* laughing matter!” said Lelio Giorgi.

“Why shouldn’t I laugh?” replied Mongeri. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Neither did I, once . . . and I’d still rather not,” went on Giorgi. “That’s why I’ve come to see you. You might be able to explain whatever it is that’s making my life a misery and wrecking my marriage.”

“*Whatever it is?* You mean whatever you *imagine* it is. You’re not well. It’s true that a hallucination is itself a fact, but what it represents has no reality outside yourself. Or, to put it better, it’s the externalization of a sensation, a sort of projection of yourself, so that the eye sees what it in fact does not see, and the ear hears sounds that were never made. Previous impressions, often stored up unconsciously, project themselves rather like events in dreams. We still don’t know how or why. We dream, and that’s the right word, with our eyes wide open. But one has to distinguish between split-second hallucinations which don’t necessarily indicate any organic or psychic disturbance, and those of a more persistent nature . . . But of course that’s not the case with you.”

“But it *is*, with me *and* my wife.”

“You don’t understand. What we scientists call persistent hallucinations are those experienced by the insane. I don’t have to give you an example. . . . The fact that you both suffer the same hallucinations is just a case of simple induction. You probably must have influenced your wife’s nervous system.”

“No. She was the first.”

“Then you mean that your nervous system, having a greater receptivity, was the one to be influenced. And don’t turn up your poetical nose at what you please to call my scientific jargon. It has its uses.”

“If you would just let me get a word in edgeways. . . .”

“Some things are best let well alone. Do you want a scientific explanation? Well, the answer is that for the moment you wouldn’t get anything of the sort. We are in the realm of hypotheses. One today, a different one tomorrow, and a different one the day after. You are a curious lot, you artists! When you feel like it you make fun of Science, you undervalue the whole business of experiment, research and hypothesis that makes it progress; then when a case comes long that interests you personally you want a clear, precise and categorical answer. And there are scientists who play the game, out of conviction or vanity. But I’m not one of them. You want the plain truth? Science is the greatest proof of our own ignorance. To calm you down I can talk of hallucinations, of induction, receptivity. Words! Words! the more I study the more I despair of ever knowing anything for certain. It seems to happen on purpose, no sooner do scientists get a kick out of some new law they’ve discovered than along comes some new fact, some discovery, that upsets the lot. You need to take it easy, just let life flow by; what’s happened to you and your wife has happened to so many others. It will pass. Why must you try and find out how and why it happened? Are you scared of dreams?”

“If you’d just let me tell you. . . .”

“Go on then, tell me, if you want to get it off your chest. But I warn you, it can only make matters worse. The only way to get over it, is to busy yourself with other things, get away from it. Find a new devil to drive out the old—it’s a good saying.”

“We did all that. It wasn’t any good. The first signs . . . the first manifestations, happened in the country, in our villa at Foscolara. We ran away from it, but the very night that we came back to town . . .”

“It’s natural. What distraction could you find in your own house? You ought to travel, stay in hotels, one day here, another day there; spend the whole day sightseeing, looking at churches, museums, go to the theatre, come back late at night, tired out . . .”

“We did all that too, but . . .”

“Just the two of you, on your own. You should have been with a friend, a party. . .”

“But we were, it wasn’t any good.”

“It all depends on the party!”

“But they were a lively crowd. . .”

“Selfish, you mean, and there you were, isolated, I know. . .”

“But we were lively too, when we were with them. But you can hardly expect them to have come and slept with us. . .”

“Then you *were* asleep? Really I don’t know what you mean any more, dreams or hallucinations . . .”

“To hell with your dreams and hallucinations. We were wide awake and completely sound in mind and body, just as I am now, if you would only let me get a word in edgeways. . .”

“As you wish.”

“Well, you could at least let me give you the facts.”

“I know. I can imagine it all. The books are full of them. There could be small differences in detail . . . but they don’t count. The essentials are the same.”

“Can’t I even have the satisfaction of . . .”

“You can. Hundreds of them. You are one of those who seem to want to lay up troubles for themselves, even make them worse. . . I’m sorry, that’s stupid! But if it would please you. . .”

“Quite frankly, you seem to me to be scared.”

“Scared of what? A nice idea!”

“Scared of having to change your mind. You’ve just said, “I do not believe in ghosts.” And what if I force you to believe in them?”

“All right then. It would be a blow. What do you expect? We scientists are like that, we’re men after all. When our way of seeing things, of judging them, takes a knock, the intellect refuses to follow the senses. Even intelligence is a matter of habit. But now you have me with my back to the wall. All right then. Let’s hear your precious facts.”

“Well,” said Lelio Giorgi with a sigh, “you know already the unhappy background to my years in America. Luisa’s parents were against our marrying—and they may well have been right, they were thinking above all of the economic situation of their future son-in-law—they had no faith in my abilities, and were doubtful about my future as a poet. That slim volume of early verse was my worst enemy. I haven’t even written, let alone published, any more from that day to this, yet even now you called me “poetical.” The label stuck. Oh well.”

“Just like you writers to go right back to the remote beginning.”

“Don’t get impatient. Listen. I had no news of Luisa for the three years I was in Buenos Aires. Then came that rich uncle’s will, after he had nothing to do with me while he was alive. I came back to Europe, hurried to London, and flew here with L200,000 in my pocket, only to find that

Luisa had been married for six months! And I was as much in love with her as ever. The poor girl must have given in to family pressure. At that time I might have done anything . . . All these details are important . . . I was stupid enough, however, to write her a letter full of violent reproaches. I never thought that it could have fallen into the hands of her husband. The next day he turned up at my house, having realized the folly of my behaviour, and determined to persuade me to calm down. He was calm himself.

‘ “I have come to give you your letter back,” he said. “I opened it by mistake, not out of inquisitiveness; and it’s just as well I did. I am assured that you are a gentleman. I have every respect for your distress, but I do trust you have no intention of needlessly disturbing the peace of a family. If you can bring yourself to think things over you will realize that nobody wished to harm you intentionally. It was pure misfortune. You must see now where your duty lies, and I can tell you quite plainly that I am determined to defend my domestic happiness at all costs.”

“He was pale as he spoke, and his voice trembled.

‘ “I must apologize for my indiscretion,” I replied, “and to reassure you I can add that tomorrow I shall be leaving for Paris.” I must have been even paler than him, the words would hardly come. I held out my hand, he shook it. And I kept my word. Six months later I received a telegram from Luisa: “I am a widow. I still love you. And you?” Her husband had been dead for two months.”

“Such is life, it’s an ill wind. . . .”

“And that’s what I somewhat selfishly thought; but it isn’t always true. I had never been so happy in my life as I was on my wedding night and during the following months. We both of us avoided any mention of *him*. Luisa had destroyed every trace. Not out of ingratitude, for he had done everything to make her happy, but because she was afraid that even the slightest memory would have upset me. And she was right. Sometimes the thought that someone else, however legitimately, had once possessed her, made me tremble from head to foot. I could scarcely hide it from her. Often she must have sensed this, and her lovely eyes were clouded with tears. But how radiant she looked on the day she felt sure enough to tell me of the expected arrival of a child. I remember it clearly, we were drinking coffee, I was standing and she was sitting down, with a look of touching weariness. And that was the first time she had ever made any reference to the past: “How glad I am that this didn’t happen *then!*” she exclaimed.

“A loud crash was heard at the door, as if someone had struck it a blow with their fist. We leapt up. I rushed out to see what had happened, imagining it was one of the servants, but the adjoining room was empty.”

“It could have been one of the beams in the house shrinking in the heat.”

“That was how I explained it to Luisa, seeing how upset she was, but I was not convinced myself. I felt somehow disturbed. We waited some minutes, nothing happened. But from then onwards I noticed that Luisa avoided being left on her own; she was still upset, though she would not admit it and I dared not question her.”

“And now I see how you were both influencing each other, without realizing it.”

“Not at all. A few days later I was laughing at the whole episode, and thought that Luisa’s agitated state of mind was due to her condition. Then even she seemed to calm down. Eventually the child was born. After a few months, however, I noticed that the old feeling of fear and terror had returned. At night, all of a sudden, she would cling to me, cold and trembling. “What is it? Are you ill?” I would ask anxiously. “I’m frightened, didn’t you hear?” “No.” “Don’t you hear?” she insisted the following night. “No.” Though this time I had heard the sound of footsteps in the room, pacing up and down, by the bed: I said “no” so as not to frighten her any more. I raised my

head and looked around, "It must be a mouse in the room . . ." "I'm afraid! . . . I'm afraid! . . ." And for several nights, at the same time, the same shuffling, the same uncanny coming and going, up and down, by the bed. We lay and waited for it."

"And your jangling nerves did the rest."

"You know me, I'm not the sort to get worked up easily. I put up a brave show, because of Luisa; I tried to explain things: echoes of distant sounds, accidental resonances in the structure of the villa . . . We went back to town. But that very night the phenomena turned up again worse than before. Twice the bedstead was shaken violently. I peered out. "It's he! It's he!" stammered Luisa, huddled under the bedclothes."

"If you don't mind my saying so," interrupted Mongeri, "I wouldn't marry a widow for all the gold in the world! Something of the dead husband always remains with her, in spite of everything. Your wife wasn't seeing his ghost. "It's *he*" is the "he" of the sensations he left behind him, purely physiological . . ."

"Well, maybe so," replied Lelio Giorgi. "But in that case where do *I* come in?"

"Suggestion. Now it seems perfectly plain."

"Suggestion only at specified times in the middle of the night?"

"Just waiting for it to happen would be enough."

"Well then, how can the phenomena vary every time when my imagination isn't working at all?"

"That's what you think; the Unconscious at work."

"Do let me go on. Keep your explanations until I've finished. Just note that the following morning we were able to discuss the matter with relative calm. Luisa described her impressions and I told her of mine, in such a way that I was convinced that it could not have been an unpleasant trick played on us by our over-excited imaginations; the same blow on the bedstead, the same tugging at the sheets in the same circumstances, when I was trying to comfort her with a kiss and prevent her from crying, as if this itself had provoked the malice of the invisible person. Then one night Luisa flung her arms round my neck and whispered in my ear in a voice that made me shudder: "He spoke!" "What did he say?" "I couldn't hear. Now! He said: You're mine!" And as I held her closer I felt her being dragged violently away from me by two powerful hands, and I had to give way in spite of her resistance."

"What resistance could she offer to what must have been her own behaviour?"

"All right . . . But I felt it too, a something trying to stop her coming into contact with me . . . I saw her flung back with a jolt . . . then she tried to get to her feet, to go to the child, who was sleeping in the cot at the foot of the bed. Then we heard the cot wheels squeaking and saw it tossed across the room, blankets flying in all directions; that wasn't a hallucination. We picked things up, made up the cot, and soon they were flying through the air again and the child was whimpering with fear. Three nights later it was even worse. Luisa seemed drawn completely under *his* evil spell. She seemed unaware of me when I spoke to her, as if I were no longer there. She seemed to be talking to *him* and I could tell from her replies what he was saying to her. "But can it be his fault that you are dead?" "No, no, no, how could you think so? *I* poison you? That's monstrous!" "And what can the child have done to harm you?" "But why are you unhappy? I have prayed for you . . ." "Why don't you want my prayers? You want *me*, but how can you, you're dead!" I tried without success to shake her from the trance. Then she came to. "Did you hear that?" she said. "He says I poisoned him. *You* wouldn't believe that of me. . . . O God! What about the child? He'll kill him. Did you hear?" I heard nothing, but I was well aware that Luisa was not raving. She wept, clutching the child to her. "What shall we do? What shall we do?"

“But the child was all right. That must have reassured her.”

“What can you expect? This sort of thing would upset even the most strong-minded. I myself am not superstitious, but I’m not a free-thinker either. I just don’t have much time for religion. But in a case like this, and with my wife saying “I’ll pray for you,” I naturally thought of calling in a priest.”

“You had him exorcize it?”

“No, but I had a blessing said in the house, with a fine sprinkling of holy water . . . as much to influence poor Luisa, if it really were a case of nerves, as anything. Luisa is a religious person. You can laugh, I’d like to have seen what you would have done in my place.”

“What about the holy water?”

“Useless. No effect at all.”

“Not a bad idea though. Some nervous diseases can be cured that way. We had a case of a man who thought his nose was being stretched. The doctor went through all the motions of an operation, without actually doing anything, and the man was cured.”

“But the holy water in fact made things worse. The next night . . . My God! I can’t bear to think of it. This time *he* seemed to be taking everything out on the child . . . it was awful. When Luisa saw . . .”

“Or thought she saw . . .”

“Saw, man, saw . . . And *I* saw too, almost. She couldn’t get near the cot, something was holding her back. There she was, stretching out her hands to the child, while that *thing*—she described it to me—bent over the baby and did something horrible, its lips pressed to his mouth, sucking his blood . . . For three nights this ghastly process has been repeated, and the poor little thing . . . you wouldn’t recognize him . . . He used to be so plump and rosy, and now . . . in only three nights . . . he’s wasted away. This can’t be imagination. Come and see for yourself.”

“So it could really be? . . .”

Mongeri thought for a few minutes, frowning. The sarcastic and somewhat pitying smile with which he had listened to Lelio Giorgi had vanished all of a sudden. Then he looked up and said:

“So it could really be? . . . Listen. I can’t explain anything because I’m convinced there *is* no explanation. One can’t be more skeptical than that. But I could give you some advice, which might make you laugh, coming from me . . . Anyway, that’s up to you.”

“I’ll do as you suggest, at once.”

“You would need several days for what you have to do. I’ll help you to cut it as short as possible. I don’t doubt the facts you’ve put before me. And I ought to add that since Science has come to examine this kind of problem, it, too, has been less skeptical. It has now become a question of trying to see this sort of thing as a natural phenomena; but a physical problem, not a spiritual one. That’s not our province, we leave that to priests or spiritualists. We are concerned with the flesh, blood and bone that go to make an individual and disintegrate into their original elements when he dies. But then the question arises, does this disintegration, this cessation of organic function, end instantaneously with death, annulling all individuality, or does this persist, in some cases, for any amount of time after death? One is beginning to suspect that this could be the case. And Science is on the verge of coming round to popular beliefs. I have been studying for three years now the empirical remedies of “old wives” and witches and I am coming to the conclusion that they are in fact the remnants of the ancient secret sciences and also, even more likely, of the instincts we can still observe in animals. When man was closer to animals he knew instinctively the medicinal value of certain herbs, but as he evolved away from them he lost this primitive use of certain faculties, and the tradition died out. Only the honest peasant women, in

whom it was more deeply-rooted, preserved some of these natural medicines; and I think that Science should study them, for every superstition contains something more than mere popular error. I'm sorry about this digression . . . What scientists now admit, that the existence of an individual does not cease at death, but only when actual decomposition of the body has taken place, popular superstition has already acknowledged through the belief in vampires, and has even offered a remedy. Vampires are individuals, rare but not unheard of, who persist after death. You may look surprised, but this is a case, and not the only one, where science and popular superstition, or rather, primitive intuition, find themselves at one. And what is the only defense against this evil thing, this disembodied individual sucking the blood and life-force from healthy individuals? The complete destruction of its former body. Where vampires have been known to occur the victims have run to the grave, dug up the body and burned it; then the vampire really does die, and the visitations cease. Now you were saying that your child . . ."

"Come and see him, you wouldn't recognize him. Luisa is going crazy. And I'm not far off myself. I keep saying to myself that it can't be true, it couldn't possibly happen; I even think: "Well, if she did poison him, it was for my sake, it shows how much she loves me . . ." But it won't work, the thought repels me, *she* repels me even . . . all *his* doing! And the reproaches go on, I can tell by her replies, "What? Poison you? . . . How can you believe such a thing?" Life has become impossible, for months now we have gone on like this. You are the first person I have dared to confide in. I'm desperate, I need help . . . And we would have put up with everything if it weren't for the child."

"As a friend and as a scientist, I give you this advice: Have the body cremated. Your wife will easily get permission, and I will help you to speed up the formalities. And Science herself would not be ashamed to have recourse to somewhat empirical methods, trying out a remedy which might well be a superstition in appearance only, seeking out the truth by unconventional methods. Cremate the body. Seriously," he added, seeing from the look in his friend's eye that he feared he was being treated like one of the ignorant populace.

"But what about the child?" cried Lelio Giorgi, wringing his hands.

"One night I lost my temper and threw myself at him yelling "Get out! For God's sake get out!" But I was stopped dead in my tracks, unable to move, mumbling, with the words drying up in my throat. You can't imagine . . ."

"Would you allow me to accompany you tonight?"

"I hardly dared to ask you such a favour. . . But perhaps it would upset him even more, would you leave it until tomorrow?"

But the next day he returned in such shattered state that Mongeri really wondered if he had gone out of his mind.

"He knows!" stammered Lelio Giorgi. "God, what a night! He swore he would do the most terrible things if we dared to . . ."

"All the more reason for daring," replied Mongeri.

"If you had seen the cot tossed about! I don't know how the poor child survived! Luisa had to get down on her knees to him, weeping. "I *will* be yours, all yours, only please don't hurt the child!" And I felt at that moment that every link with her was broken, that she belonged to *him* again and not to me."

"Calm down! We shall get rid of him. Let me come round tonight."

Mongeri went, thinking, convinced that his presence would keep the vampire away. "It's always the case, a neutral, indifferent force will counteract the unknown thing. We don't yet know how or why, but continued observation and study will show."

And in the early hours of the night this seemed to be the case. Luisa looked anxiously around but nothing happened. The child slept untroubled in his cot, pale and wan. Lelio Giorgi did his best to conceal his worry, but kept glancing fearfully from his wife to the complacent Mongeri.

They kept up a conversation on various topics. Mongeri was describing some highly amusing incident on one of his holidays; he was a good talker, without any of his professional pomposity, and he hoped to distract the attention of both of them, so that if the phenomenon did occur he could observe it uninterrupted, when suddenly, as he glanced at the cot, he noticed a slight movement, which could not have been caused by either of the parents, since they were sitting at the other side of the room. He stopped, and they leapt to their feet. By the time they had followed his gaze to the cot it was rocking with some violence. Luisa cried "O heavens, my poor child!" and rushed towards the cot, but was stopped short and sank back on to the couch. Pale as death, she rolled her eyes in terror and muttered something unintelligible, on the point of suffocating.

"It's nothing!" said Mongeri, rising himself, and grasping the hand of Lelio who was shaken with terror. Then Luisa, with a violent shudder, returned to her normal self though with her attention fixed on some invisible person, listening to words they could not hear but at which they could guess from the sense of her replies.

"Why do you say that I keep on wanting to hurt you? . . . But I've prayed for you . . . No, I can't do anything about it, you're dead . . . But how can you say I've poisoned you if you are not dead? . . . That I was plotting it with him? . . . That he sent me the poison? . . . But how can you? I kept my promise! I did! It's absurd! . . . All right, I won't say you are dead any more . . . no, no more . . ."

"This is a case of spontaneous trance!" said Mongeri. "Leave it to me."

He took Luisa by the wrists and said in a loud voice: "Come now!" At the sound of the robust, angry and masculine voice with which she replied Mongeri was taken aback. She had drawn herself up with such a hard, truculent expression that she seemed another person. Her gentle, timid beauty had completely vanished.

"What do you want? Why must you interfere?"

Mongeri pulled himself together. The habitual reserve of the scientist might have made him fear that he too had come under the influence of an overheated imagination, but for the sight of the cot rocking to and fro and this sudden uncanny phenomenon of the personification of the fantasma. He drew himself up, angry for having been startled by the harsh masculine voice, and said sharply: "Stop that! Stop it at once!"

There was such a note of command in his voice, enough to dominate, as he thought, the young woman's mind, that he was surprised at the sardonic laugh with which she replied.

"Stop that! At once!" he replied in stronger tones.

"Aha! Another poisoner! You were in on this too?"

"That's a damned lie!"

Mongeri could not prevent himself from replying as if to a living person. His mind, already troubled, in spite of his efforts to remain calm and impartial, received another shock when he felt himself struck twice on the shoulder by an invisible fist, and turning towards the lamp, saw silhouetted against the light a greyish, wasted hand that seemed almost like smoke from the candle.

"You see? You see?" cried Giorgi with a sob in his voice.

Suddenly everything stopped. Luisa came out of her trance and looked around her as if waking from a natural sleep, questioning her husband and Mongeri with a pathetic movement of the head. They too were amazed and gazed around, speechless, overcome by the sense of peace and

serenity. No one dared to break the silence. Only a slight sound of moaning from the cot made them turn in that direction. The baby whimpered and struggled under the pressure that was forcing something against his mouth . . . Then without warning that, too, stopped, and nothing more happened.

The next morning, on his way home, Mongeri was thinking not only about the folly of scientists who fail to examine cases which coincide with popular superstition, but also of what he had said to his friend two days previously: *I wouldn't marry a widow for all the gold in the world.*

As a scientist he had acquitted himself well, carrying out the experiment to its logical conclusion, without considering the humiliating consequences of failure if the experiment (the cremation of the body of Luisa's first husband) had failed. But notwithstanding the fact that the experiment had confirmed a popular superstition, and that from the day of the cremation the visitations had stopped completely, to the great relief of the good Lelio Giorgi and his Luisa, in his report, not yet published, he did not write with complete sincerity. He could not say, The facts are such, and such is the result of the remedy: popular superstition has triumphed over the narrow-mindedness of science; the vampire died as soon as the body was cremated. No, he restricted his narrative with so many "ifs" and "but's" and confused it with so many "hallucinations," "suggestions" and "inductions," simply to confirm what he had already admitted: that even intelligence is a matter of habit, and that having to change his mind had shaken him.

And what is even more curious, his own life became somewhat incoherent, for he who had once sworn that he would not marry a widow for all the in the world, married one for far less, a pension gold of a mere L 7,000! And when his friend Lelio Giorgi ingenuously remarked "What? You!" he replied, "But her husband has been dead for the past seven years, not a scrap of him remains," without realizing that in so saying, he was contradicting that author of the learned paper: *A case of alleged vampirism*, namely, himself.