

George MacDonald (1824-1905)

4 *The Homeless Ghost*

Through still, bare streets, and cold moonshine  
    His homeward way he bent;  
The clocks gave out the midnight sign  
    As lost in thought he went  
Along the rampart's ocean-line, 5  
Where, high above the tossing brine,  
    Seaward his lattice leant.

He knew not why he left the throng,  
    Why there he could not rest,  
What something pained him in the song 10  
    And mocked him in the jest,  
Or why, the flitting crowd among,  
A moveless moonbeam lay so long  
    Athwart one lady's breast!

He watched, but saw her speak to none, 15  
    Saw no one speak to her;  
Like one decried, she stood alone,  
    From the window did not stir;  
Her hair by a haunting gust was blown,  
Her eyes in the shadow strangely shown, 20  
    She looked a wanderer.

He reached his room, he sought a book  
    His brooding to beguile;  
But ever he saw her pallid look,  
    Her face too still to smile. 25  
An hour he sat in his fireside nook,  
The time flowed past like a silent brook,  
    Not a word he read the while.

Vague thoughts absorbed his passive brain  
    Of love that bleeding lies, 30  
Of hoping ever and hoping in vain,

Of a sorrow that never dies —  
When a sudden spatter of angry rain  
Smote against every window-pane,  
And he heard far sea-birds' cries. 35

He looked from the lattice: the misty moon  
Hardly a glimmer gave;  
The wind was like one that hums a tune,  
The first low gathering stave;  
The ocean lay in a sullen swoon, 40  
With a moveless, monotonous, murmured croon  
Like the moaning of a slave.

Sudden, with masterful, angry blare  
It howled from the watery west:  
The storm was up, he had left his lair! 45  
The night would be no jest!  
He turned: a lady sat in his chair!  
Through her loose dim robe her arm came bare,  
And it lay across her breast.

She sat a white queen on a ruined throne, 50  
A lily bowed with blight;  
In her eyes the darkness about was blown  
By flashes of liquid light;  
Her skin with very whiteness shone;  
Back from her forehead loosely thrown 55  
Her hair was dusk as night.

Wet, wet it hung, and wept like weeds  
Down her pearly shoulders bare;  
The pale drops glistened like diamond beads  
Caught in a silken snare; 60  
As the silver-filmy husk to its seeds  
Her dank robe clings, and but half recedes  
Her form so shadowy fair.

Doubting she gazed in his wondering face,  
Wonder his utterance ties; 65  
She searches, like one in forgetful case,  
For something within his eyes,

For something that love holds ever in chase,  
For something that is, and has no place,  
    But away in the thinking lies. 70

Speechless he ran, brought a wrap of wool,  
    And a fur that with down might vie;  
Listless, into the gathering pool  
    She dropped them, and let them lie.  
He piled the hearth with fagots so full 75  
That the flames, as if from the log of Yule,  
    Up the chimney went roaring high.

Then she spoke, and lovely to heart and ear  
    Was her voice, though broke by pain;  
Afar it sounded, though sweet and clear, 80  
    As if from out of the rain;  
As if from out of the night-wind drear  
It came like the voice of one in fear  
    Lest she should no welcome gain.

“I am too far off to feel the cold, 85  
    Too cold to feel the fire;  
It cannot get through the heap of mould  
    That soaks in the drip from the spire:  
Cerement of wax ’neath cloth of gold,  
’Neath fur and wool in fold on fold, 90  
    Freezes in frost so dire.”

Her voice and her eyes and her cheek so white  
    Thrilled him through heart and brain;  
Wonder and pity and love unite  
    In a passion of bodiless pain; 95  
Her beauty possessed him with strange delight:  
He was out with her in the live wan night,  
    With her in the blowing rain!

Sudden she rose, she kneeled, she flung  
    Her loveliness at his feet: 100  
“I am tired of being blown and swung  
    In the rain and the snow and the sleet!  
But better no rest than stillness among

Things whose names would defile my tongue!  
How I hate the mouldy sheet! 105

“Ah, though a ghost, I’m a lady still!”  
The youth recoiled aghast.  
Her eyes grew wide and pale and chill  
With a terror that surpassed.  
He caught her hand: a freezing thrill 110  
Stung to his wrist, but with steadfast will  
He held it warm and fast.

“What can I do to save thee, dear?”  
At the word she sprang upright;  
On tiptoe she stood, he bent his ear, 115  
She whispered, whispered light.  
She withdrew; she gazed with an asking fear:  
Like one that looks on his lady’s bier  
He stood, with a face ghost-white.

“Six times — in vain, oh hapless maid! — 120  
I have humbled myself to sue!  
This is the last: as the sunset decayed,  
Out with the twilight I grew,  
And about the city flitted and strayed,  
A wandering, lonely, forsaken shade: 125  
No one saw me but you.”

He shivered, he shook, he had turned to clay,  
Vile fear had gone into his blood;  
His face was a dismal ashy gray,  
Through his heart crept slime and mud; 130  
The lady stood in a still dismay,  
She drooped, she shrank, she withered away  
Like a half-blown frozen bud.

“Speak once more. Am I frightful then?  
I live, though they call it death; 135  
I am only cold! Say *dear* again.”  
But scarce could he heave a breath;  
Over a dank and steaming fen  
He floated astray from the world of men,

A lost, half-conscious wraith. 140

“Ah, ’tis the last time! Save me!” Her cry  
 Entered his heart, and lay.  
 But he loved the sunshine, the golden sky,  
 And the ghosts’ moonlight is gray! —  
 As feverous visions flit and fly 145  
 And without a motion elude the eye,  
 She stood three steps away.

But oh, her eyes! — refusal base  
 Those live-soul-stars had slain!  
 Frozen eyes in an icy face 150  
 They had grown. Like a ghost of the brain,  
 Beside the lattice, thought-moved in space,  
 She stood with a doleful despairing grace:  
 The fire burned! clanged the rain!

Faded or fled, she had vanished quite! 155  
 The loud wind sank to a sigh;  
 Pale faces without paled the face of night,  
 Sweeping the window by;  
 Some to the glass pressed a cheek of fright,  
 Some shot a gleam of decaying light 160  
 From a flickering, uncertain eye.

Whence did it come, from the sky or the deep,  
 That faint, long-cadenced wail?  
 From the closing door of the down-way steep,  
 His own bosom, or out of the gale? 165  
 From the land where dead dreams, or dead maidens sleep?  
 Out of every night to come will creep  
 That cry his heart to quail!

The clouds had broken, the wind was at rest,  
 The sea would be still ere morn, 170  
 The moon had gone down behind its breast  
 Save the tip of one blunt horn:  
 Was that the ghost-angel without a nest —  
 Across the moonset far in the west  
 That thin white vapour borne? 175

He turned from the lattice: the fire-lit room  
    With its ghost-forsaken chair  
Was cold and drear as a rifled tomb,  
    Shameful and dreamless and bare!  
Filled it was with his own soul's gloom,                     180  
With the sense of a traitor's merited doom,  
    With a lovely ghost's despair!

He had driven a lady, and lightly clad,  
    Out in the stormy cold!  
Was she a ghost? — Divinely sad                     185  
    Are the people of Hades old!  
A wandering ghost? Oh, self-care bad,  
Caitiff and craven and cowering, which had  
    Refused her an earthly fold!

Ill had she fared, his lovely guest! —                     190  
    A passion of wild self-blame  
Tore the heart that failed in the test  
    With a thousand hooks of shame,  
Bent his proud head on his heaving breast,  
Shore the plume from his ancient crest,                     195  
    Puffed at his ancient name.

He sickened with scorn of a fallen will,  
    With love and remorse he wept;  
He sank and kissed her footprints chill  
    And the track by her garment swept;                     200  
He kneeled by her chair, all ice-cold still,  
Dropped his head in it, moaned until  
    For weariness he slept.

He slept until the flaming sun  
    Laughed at the by-gone dark:                     205  
"A frightful dream! — but the night is done,"  
    He said, "and I hear the lark!"  
All day he held out; with the evening gun  
A booming terror his brain did stun,  
    And Doubt, the jackal, gan bark.                     210

Followed the lion, Conviction, fast,  
And the truth no dream he knew!  
Night after night raved the conscience-blast,  
But stilled as the morning grew.  
When seven slow moons had come and passed 215  
His self-reproach aside he cast,  
And the truth appeared untrue.

A lady fair — old story vile! —  
Would make his heart her boast:  
In the growing glamour of her smile 220  
He forgot the lovely ghost;  
Forgot her for bitterness wrapt in wile,  
For the lady was false as a crocodile,  
And her heart was a cave of frost.

Then the cold white face, with its woe divine, 225  
Came back in the hour of sighs:  
Not always with comfort to those that pine  
The dear true faces arise!  
He yearned for her, dreamed of her, prayed for a sign;  
He wept for her pleading voice, and the shine 230  
Of her solitary eyes.

“With thy face so still, which I made so sad —  
Ah me! which I might have wooed —  
Thou holdest my heart in a love not glad,  
Sorrowful, shame-subdued! 235  
Come to me, lady, in pardon clad;  
Come to my dreams, white Aidead,  
For on thee all day I brood!”

She came not. He sought her in churchyards old,  
In churchyards by the sea; 240  
And in many a church, when the midnight tolled  
And the moon shone eerily,  
Down to the crypt he crept, grown bold,  
Sat all night in the dead men’s cold,  
And called to her: never came she. 245

Praying forgiveness more and more,

And her love at any cost,  
Pining and sighing and longing sore  
    He grew like a creature lost;  
Thin and spectral his body wore,                         250  
He faded out at the ghostly door,  
    And was himself a ghost.

But if he found the lady then,  
    So sorrowfully lost  
For lack of the love 'mong earthly men                         255  
    That was ready to brave love's cost,  
I know not till I drop my pen,  
Wander away from earthly ken,  
    And am myself a ghost.

*1893*

(From *The Poetical Works of George MacDonald*. Vol. 2.  
London: Chatto & Windus, 1893)