

## **THE GHOST GIRL**

by  
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The mists thickened out beyond the breakers, drifting together out of all the heavy, still fog that lay over the little bay. Then, slowly, they began to churn, and a ship drifted out of their thickening. It was a pale, web-formed ship, like a great, ghastly sea-bird, moving steadily and softly against the tide of the gray, early morning, scarcely seeming to touch the waters that cradled it.

On the beach, by the mouth of the river, stood a youth, wearing the black clothing of the villagers. The skin was stretched tightly over the bones of his face, and his eyes glowed, staring from the dark caves of their sockets.

The ship drifted into the river mouth. The boy turned, watching it, held to it like a needle to a lodestone. A host of white, mist-formed shapes stood on the decks; and one of them leaned over the rail towards the youth. It was a girl, clothed in an antique dress, wraith and rain and spray, like the boat itself.

The ship moved in silent state up along the river, with all its sails set and full, though not a breath of wind stirred the thick fog. The youth followed it, walking; then he stumbled and began to run. His hat blew off and his cape fell open, billowing behind him. The mist soaked his hair and clothes.

He ran until he came up to the ship, where it had stopped and anchored. He waited, shivering, on the shore as a boat floated from the ship's side. The ghostly oars made no sound, nor did the skiff as it drifted up on the beach. The girl came into the youth's arms, and their mouths closed, choking and wild on one another, and she moaned softly as his hand found her

breast.

High on the sea-cliff above them stood a lean, bare-headed figure, watching them. The man was dressed in the clothes of the townspeople, and his hair was slubbed at the back of his neck in the village style. But it was hair that should have been braided, for the man has been born Iroquois, and had been raised in the house of the most powerful shaman of the coast.

The man stood watching the two below him, and his face was wooden and his eyes were stone. But he bowed his head as he watched, and then turned quietly away into the fog, and the mists swirled where he had been.

\* \* \*

The streets of the settlers' town were thick with mud after the long rain. The mist clung to the trees and houses, filled the streets, and hung lifeless over the rooftops, its silvery grayness giving the town a look of morning in a time long grown old. But it was in truth nearly noon, and the time was very young. For all this happened while the land was in the infancy, among a people who were too old to wonder and too young to be sure.

The town was built in the style of the far-off land from which the settlers had come, but built harshly and severely, for this young land was hard, and its soil was bitter. At the town's rim stood the forest, and in its heart stood the pillory.

The pillory stood atop a small scaffold in the village square, black and glistening in the mist. The openings in it had been hardened and polished by the sweat and chaffing of many wrists and necks, for the pillory was never empty long.

There was no one in it now, though, due to the long, harsh rain. It stood, gaunt and bleak, in the early, shadowless light of the gray midday. And not too far from it, at the mouth of one of the streets, stood a cloaked man in the dress of the townsfolk.

But his hair and eyes were jet black, and his skin was copper.

As he stood watching the square, he saw the youth whom he had watched from the sea-cliff cross the square and enter one of the houses. An older man with a face like flint stood just within the doorway.

*Where have you been, Jacob?*

*I've told you often enough before, Father.*

*I asked you a question, Jacob. Give me the answer.*

*The same place as last time, Father.*

*Where was that, Jacob?*

*You know, Father. There's no need to say it again.*

*Jacob.*

*By the sea, Father. Watching the waves break on the beach.*

*All night?*

*Yes.*

*You know you have broken the law.*

*I know.*

In a little while the door of the house opened again, and the youth came out, followed by the older man. They crossed the square and knocked on the door of another house, almost identical to the one from which they had come. A short, stout man came to the door, exchanged a few words with the older of the two visitors, and went back inside the house. A few moments later he returned in cloak and hat, a heavy iron chain looped about his neck. He took the youth by the arm and brought him to the scaffold. He opened the pillory, and the youth bowed his head into the central opening, his wrists to either side. The official closed the pillory, locked it, and

returned to his house. The father stood watching the youth for a little while longer, then turned away and went home,

The Indian still stood watching at the edge of the square. He bowed his head as the door shut behind the father, and then looked up at the youth. The youth stared back at him for a few minutes, then closed his eyes and let his head hang against the wood. The Indian watched him a few moments longer, and then he too turned and left the square.

\* \* \*

In the wilderness, just outside the village, there stood a small house, very ordinary, except that it was built not of stone but of logs—logs with the bark left on, stood on end, so that the whole house seemed to grow out of the ground. It stood within a grove of young trees, and its roof was thatched with pine boughs, so that a traveler coming along the woodland path, scarce a hundred feet away, did not see a cottage at all, just a thicket of pine. It was only in the evenings, when the lamplight shone out of large window—for the shutters of that house were seldom closed, not even during a storm—that the passerby could tell there was a human shelter nearby.

It was to this house that the Indian now came. He took a heavy, richly-wrought copper key from his pocket, fitted it into a slot in one of the logs, turned it, and a door opened in the log wall. The shaman went in, taking off his hat and cloak, and closed the door behind him.

In a few minutes smoke began to curl from the clay chimney, and in a little while came too the scent of johnnycake.

The smoke floated out of the chimney to join with the gray mist and float with it in heavy swirls away into the forest, where it settled among the pine boughs and ash leaves, and faded.

After a while the mist warmed in its color, and then slowly grew red-orange and then

golden, and then the light of the sun drifted through the spruce needles and nestled into the pine-covered roof of the cabin.

Gradually the day warmed and the mist lightened, and a salt breeze came in from the sea and swept away the tatters of the mist. A cicada shrilled in a tree, but then all was quiet.

But soon the sea-breeze brought the sound of men's voices, talking in low, stern tones, and the afternoon sun sent their shadows ahead of them around the turn in the path. But as the men themselves came round the turn, they fell silent. Solemn they were, and hatted and cloaked even in the sun.

They left the path and walked through the meadow to the cabin. They knocked on the log wall. The door opened, and the Indian stood at the threshold, watching them. After a few moments he stepped back, holding the door open. The three men entered and did not remove their hats or cloaks. The door closed behind them, leaving only the log wall and the window.

*May I take your cloaks, gentlemen?*

*No, thank you. We won't be long.*

*Will you have some tea?*

*Again, thank you, but we must decline. We come on urgent business.*

*Ah, then.*

*Did you follow the boy?*

*I did.*

*And?*

*There was nothing to see.*

*Nothing? But you must be mistaken.*

*Gentlemen, my eyes are not yet failing. There was nothing there.*

*Then what was he doing?*

*Standing on the shore, staring out at the sea.*

*Impossible! He must have some purpose there.*

*But you have yourselves said many times that he is purposeless.*

*Aye, so he is, and useless therefore. But to stand all a stormy night by the sea for no purpose is madness!*

*Is it?*

*Of course! Why should a man stare all night at a stormy sea?*

*Perhaps because it is like his heart.*

*Would that it were so! But all that is within his heart is pale blood.*

*No, I think not.*

*Would you, then, know him better than we? We, who have raised him and taught him?*

*There was no answer to this question.*

*Come now, the truth.*

*There was nothing there. Follow him yourselves if you wish. I promise you, you will see nothing.*

*If that is so, why does he leave the shelter of the town to walk in the storm?*

*Perhaps because there is no place for him in the town.*

*There are many places for him, if he would work.*

*If he could work.*

*He has no sickness. He can work. But he will not do what we tell him.*

*He cannot do what you tell him.*

*He will not! He is willful, cowardly, and slothful.*

*He is driven, desperate, and chained.*

*Would you know him better than I, his father? I who begat him and reared him? Yet even I must condemn him for useless!*

*Is it his fault that he is so?*

*Is it mine? I begat him and reared him sternly, in the fear of the Lord! I have done my duty, sir!*

*Yes, you have done your duty.*

*You will cure him.*

*What?*

*You will cure him.*

*Ah. I am to help you. So many years you have condemned my art, and now I am to help you.*

*You are.*

*Will not your God damn you for taking a gift of the Devil?*

*We force the Devil to do God's work, sir!*

*Ah then, I see.*

*You will cure him.*

*Here is my magic, gentlemen. Here, in these bottles of powders and waters. Look carefully among them, gentlemen. Do you see any toads or cats or ravens? Is your Devil in any of these bottles? Is there anything here you do not see about you in the woods or the meadows, or even in your own houses? This is all my art, Gentlemen. There is nothing more than this. No, you have let your Devil into the lad yourselves, and I cannot exorcise him for you.*

\* \* \*

There was another storm within the week. It began at dusk and lasted the night and the day. The shaman sat by his fire listening to it, smoking his clay pipe and every now and then drinking a cup of the strong black tea that brewed in a copper kettle next to the grate.

The storm began to lighten during the afternoon and finished as the dusk settled. The shaman, seeing that the clouds had wrung themselves dry, came out into the early evening to listen to the wind. He heard it whispering in the pines and hearkened to it awhile. Then he went back into the cabin and sat by the hearth, gazing into the fire while the wind blew over the chimney-top, muttering the tales that are only for a shaman's ears.

The clouds raced across the sky, showing now and then a vivid patch of star-pierced jet. The patches became streaks and the clouds tore apart. Slowly the evening blew away, and the night was left.

The shaman knocked the ashes from his pipe into a gourd that sat by the hearth. Then he rose and went to the door, and stepped out into the night.

The pines loomed up black and thick against the star-filled sky. Here and there the skeleton of a dead tree strained up out of the dark mass of evergreen. All was silent except the mourning wind and, far off, the murmuring of the sea.

But then, light and windblown, came a halting, measured sound. The shaman listened, hearing the faint pulsing as it came closer. He took his cloak and closed the door. Wrapping the cloak about him, he went quietly through the clearing to the path. There he stood, listening and waiting for the footsteps.

\* \* \*

"Jacob!"

The boy froze staring in the path. The shaman stepped up and looked at him quietly. The youth recognized him and began to breathe again, and his limbs slowly came back from stone.

The shaman held him a while longer, and then turned back to the cabin. He went a little way through the tall grass and then turned to look back at the boy, who had not moved. The shaman motioned toward the cabin with his head and turned and walked on. The boy watched him a little longer, and then followed.

They entered the house. The shaman hung up his cloak and, sitting in his chair by the hearth, began filling his pipe. He looked up at the youth, who stood, looking about, just inside the door. The shaman gestured towards a chair that stood by the other side of the hearth. The youth came over to it but, instead of sitting, untied his cloak. He stood, holding the rain-soaked garment, looking about the room. The shaman smiled, rose, and hung the cloak by the fire. The boy sat, hesitantly, testing the chair before trusting his full weight to it.

The shaman knelt and took a burning twig from the fire to light his pipe. Then he brought two mugs from the shelves on the wall and filled them from the clay pot. He held one mug out to the youth, who took it warily, his eyes never leaving the shaman's face. He sipped the tea, watching the shaman who sat in his chair, his mug on his knee and his pipe at his lips, staring into the fire.

Thus they sat for quite a while, and little by little the youth began to watch the fire instead of the shaman. When the mug was empty the shaman gave the youth one of the long, red pipes, and the boy drew at it slowly, coughing quite a bit at first but quickly acquiring the taste.

Hours ticked by on the rough oaken clock on the mantle, and the youth's head fell against the leather back of the chair. The shaman smiled and fetched a bearskin, which he draped gently

over the sleeping boy.

After a while the fire died down, and the coals warmed the cabin all night long.

\* \* \*

Every day after that the youth spent with the shaman, tramping through the fields and the woods, naming the shrubs and grasses and trees. Within a week the gossips in the village had forgotten the midnight walks along the sea-beach and had begun muttering that the youth was learning the Black Art. Small wonder, they said, for he had, like as not, already made a pact with Lucifer during one of his walk amidst the lightnings!

So a few sun-filled weeks passed in peace, and the drawn skin of the youth's face began to tan.

But then, one day, as they walked through the meadows carrying the gleanings of their morning's rambling and talking in low tones, a shadow fell across them. The youth looked up, and saw a cloud floating across the sky, hiding the sun. Far away, towards the horizon, lay a bank of heavy, blue-black clouds. The shaman saw a fire kindle in the youth's eyes, and knew that a stronger spell than his still held the boy.

The clouds kept gathering all that day. The sun was hidden, and the gray sky held sway. About midafternoon, the shaman took a bottle of powders, wrapped his cloak about him, and left the cabin.

\* \* \*

High on the sea-cliff, the mists had gathered together, thick and wet over the barren rocks. The shaman sat in their midst, scattering the powder into a hissing and struggling fire.

His lips moved steadily, muttering a low cadence, as the smoke of the fire rose, thick and choking, into the mists. The wind began to well in the pines.

By sunset the sky was clear, and the mists were gone.

\* \* \*

It is enough to say that the sky stayed cloudless for somewhat more than a month, and that every morning the youth would come to the shaman's cottage and walk through the forests and meadows and along the seashore with him, listening to the steady, quiet voice talking of plants and earths.

So the long, sun-filled days passed quietly, and the youth began to put on solid weight. His skin tanned, and he began to smile.

But the gossips talked, and the village fathers heard them. So the black-clothed men, wearing wool even in the heat of midsummer, came again to the shaman's cabin, sometime between sunset and moonrise.

*Will you come in?*

*No, we will not. You must cease to teach him.*

*Cease to teach him? Why?*

*We will not have him learning your Black Art.*

*My art is not black.*

*Your art is the art of Satan. His soul must not be taken to the Devil.*

*The Devil despaired of my soul long ago.*

*He has seeped into your soul until you can no longer see him. You have become the Devil incarnate. We will not let you take the boy.*

*Not long ago you told me to save him. I have done that. But now you would have me let him go to his damnation.*

*He will no longer come to you. Let him go or we will hold him by force.*

*Out. Out of my sight. One way or another, you will have the boy damned. Leave me, demons.*

\* \* \*

The next day the boy did not come. The shaman waited until midday, then went out to the village.

He found the boy in the pillory.

The shaman went back to his cabin and took another flask of powders. He locked the door and went out to the sea-cliff.

\* \* \*

When the dusk had gathered, the shaman came back to the village. He broke the lock of the pillory and took the youth back to the cabin.

\* \* \*

The mists rested heavily over the sea-cliffs, stagnant and opaque in the bleak gray light, waiting for the sunrise. The shaman stood on the edge of the cliff, listening to the waves crash against the rock wall far below him.

*Let him go. O dweller among the mists, let him go. Leave him to the living. Let him go.*

He stood, listening again to the moan of the waves and the whispering of the wind in the

pine boughs, and watching the dew-laden mists about him.

*Your life is done. Leave him his. What good is he to you?*

*Is it love when you must look upon him, wasted so, and know it is your doing? Is it love to drain his blood and tear away his flesh and leave him a death's head? Is it love to make him curse his mother for a traitor and his father for a werewolf?*

*Yes, you want him, to feed upon him! To tear his heart to feed the fire that wastes you.*

*No, it is not happiness and it is not even comfort. It is only a whirlwind that fills you now.*

*Then it is the life that you love, and not him. But life is done for you. Why do you cling to it, poor ghost, when it will only rend you?*

*But when you have drained him and destroyed him, what then? What use will he be to you when you have stolen his life?*

*Leave him. Please, leave him. I, a shaman, beg you! Let him go!*

Then the shaman turned and went back to his cabin with the laughter of the wind and the mocking of the waves beating in his ears.

\* \* \*

By evening the sky was filled with thunderclouds. The boy was sitting by the hearth, smoking, and listening to the wind in the chimney.

Then he stiffened and stared into the fire. The shaman, looking up, saw the flames fill his glistening eyes.

The boy rose and went to the door. He stepped out to listen to a singing in the wind. Then, trembling, he caught up his cloak and went bareheaded into the dark.

The shaman sat, smoking, by the hearth, his face wooden and his eyes hooded. The wind began to howl in the chimney.

The air grew thick outside the cabin, singing with unborn fire. Then the first drops fell, and the closeness of the air lightened a little.

Soon the rain was falling evenly on the long meadow grass. Far away, the thunder rumbled. Then it sounded again, louder.

The rain fell faster and thicker, and the growl of the thunder grew. The meadow steamed, giving up the heat of its sun-filled earth.

Soon the rain was blowing across the clearing in billows, and the thunder rocked the earth with its roaring. The pine trees swayed and lashed in the unbound wind.

Then, with a crash of splitting rock, the lightening tore the sky and the meadow, and the thunder rolled and shouted in its wake.

\* \* \*

When the sky lightened, filled with the dawn, the rain was still falling, quiet and steady. When the sun rose behind the iron-colored clouds, the rain was done, and the treetops swayed as the wind swore softly through them

By midmorning the clouds were thinner. The shaman took his cloak and stepped out into the steaming meadow.

The wind was quiet as the shaman went, swiftly and quietly, to the sea-cliff.

\* \* \*

The ghost-ship was moving already out of the river-mouth, all its sails spread wide in the

windless morning. The youth stood at the railing with his arm about the girl's waist, staring at the cliff.

The shaman watched the boat drift away until the mists enfolded it. He waited on the cliff, watching until the mist had thinned in the noonday sun and blown away.

Only then did he look down at the lifeless body at his feet.

**THE END**