

THE GHOST

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The man was almost invisible against the backdrop of the dark velvet curtain. His tall figure was clothed completely in black and his hair and skin were black as well. He raised a large and corded hand, one capable of great strength, to touch the silver-gray body of the mare beside him. His hand was so light upon her that he might have been touching a ghost.

She responded to his touch by a slight fluttering of her ears. It was enough for him to know that she was expectant and ready to enter the ring. He parted the stage curtain a bit in order to see the spacious hall and audience on the other side.

It was his first visit to Stockholm, Sweden, and he was impressed. The hall was more like a theater than quarters for a circus. Festively illuminated, it was a pleasing sight on that bitter-cold winter night. Red plush seats in ringside boxes and rear and side balconies rose to what seemed an incredible height. Every place was taken and all eyes were on the single ring where Davisio Castini and his bareback riding troupe were bringing their act to its finale.

The orchestra played a stirring march while the heavy horses thumped about the ring. The type did not appeal to him but he knew they had a place in the circus. He cared less for the feathered head plumes and jewel-studded breast collars they wore.

He touched his mare again and her ears pricked forward, awaiting his spoken command. There never would be any glittering ornaments on her, he promised himself. No plumes. No jewel-studded bridles. No colorful ribbons woven into her mane or tail. Nothing, not even a halter. By her movements alone she would overwhelm the audience.

He pressed closer against the curtain to avoid being seen. No emotion showed on his face; never had he allowed it to betray his feelings, in or out of the ring. Cold and masklike, and with deep-set unblinking black eyes, it resembled a piece of classic sculpture. Always he had sensed people's fear of him and, while he found it amusing, never attempted to change it.

The bareback act came to an end and there was a fanfare of drums from the orchestra, followed by a polite wave of applause from the large crowd. He listened and decided that, despite the air of festivity, the audience was as cold as the night outside.

Nervously, now that it was almost time for his mare to enter the ring, he removed a small gold figurine from his pocket and rubbed it gently. The growing warmth of the statuette in his large black hands gave him courage and confidence. He believed

strongly in the powers of the small figurine, for his Haitian blood and heritage had made him more superstitious than most men.

The ringmaster, wearing frock coat and top hat, signaled him to be ready. “*Bientôt, ma chérie,*” he said quietly to his mare.

The fanfare of the trumpets cut the air once more. Then the shrill notes ended and the voice of the ringmaster rang through the spacious hall, as clear and commanding as the silver trumpets had been.

“*Ladies and gentlemen and children,*” the ringmaster announced in Swedish, “*the Circus Heyer takes great pleasure in presenting The Ghost...*”

As the horseman listened to the introduction, he thought of the great number of languages in which he had heard it given. For more than ten years he had traveled with different circuses throughout Europe, as far east as Siberia as well as to all the British Isles.

He knew little Swedish, but it made no difference, since the introduction was always the same. Like the music which would follow, he had composed it himself, so he and his mare always felt at home in whatever country they played.

There was a long pause as the lights in the great hall dimmed until the audience sat in almost complete darkness. This, too, he insisted upon wherever he played—ten seconds, at the very minimum, to silence the spectators and prepare them for the ethereal beauty of what was to come.

He slipped the thin leather halter off the mare’s head, acutely aware of her readiness to obey every cue. He had no doubt that she looked forward to the gala stage on the other side of the curtain and the elegant audience that would be watching her.

The ringmaster had moved to the orchestra pit, leaving the ring in total darkness. “*The Ghost,*” his introduction continued, “*a god-horse, one no longer earthbound but of dancing fire, a winged Pegasus ...*”

The man holding the mare would have preferred it if the introduction had ended there. He wanted nothing more except complete silence and the darkness, followed by the first haunting notes of the music. However, the owner of the Circus Heyer, like most of the others he had worked for, insisted that his name be mentioned, since it was familiar to circus audiences throughout the world. He had given up arguing that it was only the mare’s performance that mattered.

“*... A supreme exhibition of horse training directed by the world’s first horseman in the art of dressage and haute école, Captain Philippe de Pluminel, formerly with the Cadre Noir of the French Cavalry School!*”

“*Entrez,*” the captain whispered softly to the mare. She went forward while he remained behind the curtain, his face showing no trace of nervousness or even excitement. He was a man in full command of himself and the horse in the ring.

Into the complete darkness and the silence came the first sounds of the music. It was faint, almost impossible to hear, and then it swelled, flowing throughout the hall. The

captain could sense the rise in tension as the people waited for something to happen. They were under the spell of darkness and expectation.

He knew that few among them realized that his music had been composed to create just that feeling—that *anything* might happen. It faded away again to the faintest of sounds and, finally, stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

The captain smiled in the darkness. The audience was still silent, but he knew that they were growing apprehensive. They must be straining their eyes and ears for the faintest sound or movement from the ring.

Once again the music came, this time with a dreamlike slowness, as if carried on a summer wind, and barely audible. It echoed through the hall, percussive but muted with a thin, haunting piping sound. Then the rhythm became brisk, followed by a long flute passage, a new movement, as gentle as rain, the soft sounds stealing through the hall, mysterious, remote and ever-haunting.

Suddenly the spotlight came on to bathe the mare standing quietly, peacefully, in the center of the ring. Her head was lowered, as if she were grazing in pasture rather than standing in the tanbark of a circus ring. She would remain that way until her next musical cue—a shrill piping note, constantly repeated.

The captain's eyes never left her silver-gray body. A moment went by while the mare remained ghostly still, as if under the deep spell of the music. The sounds carried far, the notes seeming to stretch out infinitely. It was weird, uncanny music, to him who had created it as well as to the audience. He listened to the receding echoes and could almost hear the cries of distant birds. It was ominous music and yet with it came a sort of joy, an excitement, an intoxicating sense of danger.

He heard the first of the piping notes faintly in the background. It was the signal for his mare to begin. He watched her lift her small head and gaze into the darkness outside the ring. She seemed startled. Her tension mounted as the notes were repeated and became louder.

She turned her head as if she didn't know where the sounds were coming from, or why. She began trotting around the ring, slowly at first, but as the notes quickened so did her flying feet. The notes became a horrible whistling. She slowed abruptly, as if realizing there was no running away from the crackling noise. The notes became slow with her strides, even sly, with long pauses in between.

She continued trotting around the ring but now her strides kept time with the notes. She paused with each syncopated step, dancing as she moved in measured, cadenced strides, the embodiment of supreme grace and beauty.

The captain missed nothing as he watched her floating about the ring with no movement of ears or nostrils. *Like a ghost*, he thought, *her namesake—but a ghost only in her lightness of foot*. She was very much alive, his mare. Everything in her was attuned to the music. She raised her legs high in time to the rhythm.

The pauses between the shrill notes became longer. Obediently, she slowed her strides without lessening their lofty height, giving the impression of barely touching the ground as she moved forward.

He watched her perform the *passage*, and wondered how anyone in the audience could not be captivated by her dancing fire, even if ignorant of the noble art of dressage in its highest form. There was no evidence of her great strength being tried in the disciplined, controlled trot. Instead, it was as if she performed that slow, measured pace for her own delight.

Did the Swedes appreciate what she was doing riderless? he wondered. *Without benefit of physical commands of hands and legs to prompt and guide her into the movements of haute école?* Almost every circus could boast of having a horse and rider skilled in dressage. But no horse, so far as he knew, could give such an exhibition alone! It had taken years of hard work to achieve this perfection!

The music grew louder, flowing around him and into the hall. The piping notes in the background were barely audible but he heard them, as she did. They became more distinct, more commanding, and her movements changed quickly.

She slowed her forward movement still more without the slightest change in gait or lofty carriage. Suddenly she was trotting in place, her hoofs faultless in their timing, and dancing like the “god-horse” the ringmaster had announced. Truly, she did not look earthbound!

The captain watched her perform the *piaffe* with critical eyes, and saw no mistakes. In all the years they had worked together, she had never been as faultless as now.

Finally the music stopped and she was released from the *piaffe*. She made a slow circuit of the ring, then stopped to stand magnificently in the spotlight as if awaiting the acclaim she knew she deserved.

With great effort, the captain controlled his anger at the crowd’s polite but restrained applause. In every other country they had played she had received a tumultuous ovation at this moment. His disappointment was not for himself but for her. He knew she missed the cheering. Always, she reacted to a stirring wave of applause by working better.

As if in a great cathedral, the crowd waited without word or sound for the mare to go into her next display. The captain resented the coldness of the elegantly dressed audience. Were the Swedes unimaginative as well as dull and unappreciative? Were their reactions based on what they knew was expected of them as a nation of reserved and practical people?

He was angry inside and he sought to quell the mounting hot temperament of his own blood. Yet a freezing coldness was there, too, controlled but with an ever-creeping deadliness. He concealed it well. Nothing showed in his face. He looked calm and dispassionate, his eyes a steady, black stare.

He watched his mare as she quickly responded to the clash of cymbals by breaking into a canter. The cadence of her hoofs picked up as if she had been eagerly awaiting

the change of pace. And yet her quickening strides were more floating than driving, so she appeared no more earthbound than she had at a trot.

Faster and faster she circled the ring until she was in a gallop. Suddenly she spun on her hind legs, pirouetting in place and spinning in a small circle as if she sought to drive a hole into the tanbark with her hoofs.

The music rose in a great crescendo and a moment later she lifted her forelegs in the air at an acute angle while balancing herself on her hind legs. She held this pose for several seconds before coming down.

The captain waited for the crowd to applaud her *levade*, and when the rippling of applause finally came, he smiled. She was reaching them and she had much more to give.

To the roll of the drums, she rose again in the *levade* and finished with four jumps on her hind legs that carried her across the ring in the *courbette*. Only then did she bring down her forelegs and trot slowly around the ring, still swaying to the music, forever dancing.

His heart went out to her, for he knew how much she enjoyed her dancing. It was the woman in her, he thought. No stallion, no gelding he had ever trained could equal her lightness of foot, her natural rhythm.

He no longer cared if the crowd applauded or not. It made little difference now. He was celebrating with her these difficult movements brought to perfection by their many years of work together. Her own will had merged with his. She was indeed one with him in all respects.

Now, nearing the end of her performance, she was in the center of the ring. The music faded and only the shrill notes of the flute were heard. They became louder, as they had been at the beginning, and she responded quickly to these signals. Everything in her was alerted. It was evident in the movement of her muscles beneath the spotlight, in the quivering of her nostrils and the ceaseless twitching of her ears.

Once more the notes were so constant that they became a horrible whistle. As they approached their highest pitch, it appeared that she could no longer tolerate them and sought escape. She sprang into the air with her forelegs stretched out while drawing her hind legs beneath her in the difficult *ballotade*.

The captain was unmindful of the applause. He heard only the horrible whistling notes and his eyes were only for the mare. Again she rose from the ground. This time in midair she kicked out her hind legs savagely in unison with her forelegs as if to ward off a pursuer. Truly, she appeared to be a winged horse, a Pegasus, soaring through the air, her head raised high and her mane and tail flying!

The breathtaking *capriole* was the climax of her performance, and when she had finished the lights in the great hall went on, growing in brightness and brilliance. The mare stood still in the center of the ring, her ears alert, her nostrils flaring.

The ringmaster motioned the captain forward and he joined his mare reluctantly, standing beside her in his dark evening clothes.

He raised his hand to acknowledge the ever-mounting applause of the crowd when they saw him. Like her, his movements were proud, cool and controlled. It was not as he wanted it. They applauded now because he stood with her beneath glaring lights and they were able to see and judge the act for what it had been—a serious exhibition of horse training.

Few Swedes cared about imagination of any sort, he decided. They wanted their Art to be obedient and useful, nothing that might ever excel and surpass life itself. They had seen no ghost-horse, no winged Pegasus—only a well-trained animal. They would not waste their time pursuing idle fantasies. They had no part in his own imaginative world.

He had little use for such practical people, and he did not want to be influenced or changed by them and others of their kind. He ceased listening to the applause and concentrated only on his mare and his own thoughts. He stroked her neck beneath the gray mane.

This was to be his last circus performance in Europe, for he had agreed to a contract with Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey in the United States. It meant a well-deserved vacation for him and his mare; they would not have to work again until he joined the Ringling Circus at its training quarters in Florida.