

The Blind Owl
and Other Stories

Sadeq Hedayat

Translated by D.P. Costello
and Deborah Miller Mostaghel



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Contents

<i>Sadeq Hedayat: His Life and Works</i>	v
<i>Bibliography</i>	xiii
The Blind Owl	1
Hajji Morad	107
Three Drops of Blood	117
The Legalizer	131
Whirlpool	145
Fire-Worshipper	163
Abji Khanom	169
The Stray Dog	181
The Broken Mirror	195
Davoud the Hunchback	203
Madeleine	211
Dash Akol	217
The Man Who Killed his Passions	233
Buried Alive	253
<i>Notes</i>	279

The Blind Owl

(translated by D.P. Costello)

1

THERE ARE SORES which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker.

It is impossible to convey a just idea of the agony which this disease can inflict. In general, people are apt to relegate such inconceivable sufferings to the category of the incredible. Any mention of them in conversation or in writing is considered in the light of current beliefs, the individual's personal beliefs in particular, and tends to provoke a smile of incredulity and derision. The reason for this incomprehension is that mankind has not yet discovered a cure for this disease. Relief from it is to be found only in the oblivion brought about by wine and in the artificial sleep induced by opium and similar narcotics. Alas, the effects of such medicines are only temporary. After a certain point, instead of alleviating the pain, they only intensify it.

Will anyone ever penetrate the secret of this disease which transcends ordinary experience, this reverberation of the shadow of the mind, which manifests itself in a state of coma like that between death and resurrection, when one is neither asleep nor awake?

I propose to deal with only one case of this disease. It concerned me personally and it so shattered my entire being that I shall never be able to drive the thought of it out of my mind. The evil impression which it left has, to a degree that surpasses human understanding, poisoned my life for all time to come.

I said “poisoned”: I should have said that I have ever since borne, and will bear for ever, the brand mark of that cautery.

I shall try to set down what I can remember, what has remained in my mind of the sequence of events. I may perhaps be able to draw a general conclusion from it all – but no, that is too much to expect. I may hope to be believed by others or at least to convince myself; for, after all, it does not matter to me whether others believe me or not. My one fear is that tomorrow I may die without having come to know myself. In the course of my life I have discovered that a fearful abyss lies between me and other people and have realized that my best course is to remain silent and keep my thoughts to myself for as long as I can. If I have now made up my mind to write it is only in order to reveal myself to my shadow, that shadow which at this moment is stretched across the wall in the attitude of one devouring with insatiable appetite each word I write. It is for his sake that I wish to make the attempt. Who knows? We may perhaps come to know each other better. Ever since I broke the last ties which held me to the rest of mankind, my one desire has been to attain a better knowledge of myself.

Idle thoughts! Perhaps. Yet they torment me more savagely than any reality could do. Do not the rest of mankind who look like me, who appear to have the same needs and the same passion as I, exist only in order to cheat me? Are they not a mere handful of shadows which have come into existence only that they may mock and cheat me? Is not everything that I feel, see and think something entirely imaginary, something utterly different from reality?

I am writing only for my shadow, which is now stretched across the wall in the light of the lamp. I must make myself known to him.

2

IN THIS MEAN WORLD of wretchedness and misery I thought that for once a ray of sunlight had broken upon my life. Alas, it was not sunlight but a passing gleam, a falling star, which flashed upon me, in the form of a woman – or of an angel. In its light, in the course of a second, of a single moment, I beheld all the wretchedness of my existence and apprehended the glory and splendour of the star. After, that brightness disappeared again in the whirlpool of darkness in which it was bound inevitably to disappear. I was unable to retain that passing gleam.

It is three months – no, it is two months and four days – since I lost her from sight but the memory of those magic eyes, of the fatal radiance of those eyes, has remained with me at all times. How can I forget her, who is so intimately bound up with my own existence?

No, I shall never utter her name. For now, with her slender, ethereal, misty form, her great, shining, wondering eyes, in the depths of which my life has slowly and painfully burned and melted away, she no longer belongs to this mean, cruel world. No, I must not defile her name by contact with earthly things.

After she had gone I withdrew from the company of man, from the company of the stupid and the successful and, in order to forget, took refuge in wine and opium. My life passed, and still passes, within the four walls of my room. All my life has passed within four walls.

I used to work through the day, decorating the covers of pen cases. Or, rather, I spent on my trade of pen-case decorator the time that I did not devote to wine and opium. I had chosen this ludicrous trade of pen-case decorator only in order to stupefy myself, in order somehow or other to kill time.

I am fortunate in that the house where I live is situated beyond the edge of the city in a quiet district far from the noise and bustle of life. It is completely isolated and around it lie ruins. Only on the far side of the gully one can see a number of squat mud-brick houses which mark the extreme limit of the city. They must have been built by some fool or madman heaven knows how long ago. When I shut my eyes not only can I see every detail of their structure but I seem to feel the weight of them pressing on my shoulders. They are the sort of houses which one finds depicted only on the covers of ancient pen cases.

I am obliged to set all this down on paper in order to disentangle the various threads of my story. I am obliged to explain it all for the benefit of my shadow on the wall.

Yes, in the past only one consolation, and that a poor one, remained to me. Within the four walls of my room I painted my pictures on the pen cases and thereby, thanks to this ludicrous occupation of mine, managed to get through the day. But when once I had seen those two eyes, once I had seen her, activity of any sort lost all meaning, all content, all value for me.

I would mention a strange, an incredible thing. For some reason unknown to me the subject of all my painting was from the very beginning one and the same. It consisted always of a cypress tree at the foot of which was squatting a bent old man like an Indian fakir. He had a long cloak wrapped about him and wore a turban on his head. The index finger of his left hand

was pressed to his lips in a gesture of surprise. Before him stood a girl in a long black dress, leaning towards him and offering him a flower of morning glory. Between them ran a little stream. Had I seen the subject of this picture at some time in the past or had it been revealed to me in a dream? I do not know. What I do know is that whenever I sat down to paint I reproduced the same design, the same subject. My hand independently of my will always depicted the same scene. Strangest of all, I found customers for these paintings of mine. I even dispatched some of my pen-case covers to India through the intermediary of my paternal uncle, who used to sell them and remit the money to me.

Somehow I always felt this subject to be remote and, at the same time, curiously familiar to me. I don't remember very well... It occurs to me that I once said to myself that I must write down what I remember of all this – but that happened much later and has nothing to do with the subject of my painting. Moreover, one consequence of this experience was that I gave up painting altogether. That was two months, or, rather exactly, two months and four days ago.

It was the thirteenth day of Nouruz.* Everyone had gone out to the country. I had shut the window of my room in order to be able to concentrate on my painting. It was not long before sunset and I was working away when suddenly the door opened and my uncle came into the room. That is, he said he was my uncle. I had never seen my uncle in my life, for he had been abroad ever since his early youth. I seem to remember that he was a sea captain. I imagined he might have some business matter to discuss with me, since I understood that he was interested in commerce as well. At all events my uncle was a

bent old man with an Indian turban on his head and a ragged yellow cloak on his back; his face was partly concealed by a scarf wrapped around his neck; his shirt was open and revealed a hairy chest. It would have been possible to count the hairs of the sparse beard protruding from under the scarf which muffled his neck. His eyelids were red and sore and he had a harelip. He resembled me in a remote, comical way like a reflection in a distorting mirror. I had always pictured my father something like this. On entering the room he walked straight across to the opposite wall and squatted on the floor. It occurred to me that I ought to offer him some refreshment in honour of his arrival. I lit the lamp and went into the little dark closet which opens off my room. I searched every corner in the hope of finding something suitable to offer him, although I knew there was nothing of the sort in the house – I had no opium or drink left. Suddenly my eye lighted on the topmost of the shelves on the wall. It was as though I had had a flash of inspiration. On the shelf stood a bottle of old wine which had been left me by my parents. I seem to remember hearing that it had been laid down on the occasion of my birth. There it was on the top shelf. I had never so much as given it a thought and had quite forgotten there was such a thing in the house. To reach the shelf I got up onto a stool which happened to be there. As I reached towards the bottle, I chanced to look out through the ventilation hole above the shelf. On the open ground outside my room I saw a bent old man sitting at the foot of a cypress tree with a young girl – no, an angel from heaven – standing before him. She was leaning forwards and with her right hand was offering him a blue flower of morning glory. The old man was biting the nail of the index finger on his left hand.

The girl was directly opposite me but she appeared to be quite unaware of her surroundings. She was gazing straight ahead without looking at anything in particular. She wore on her lips a vague, involuntary smile as though she was thinking of someone who was absent. It was then that I first beheld those frightening, magic eyes, those eyes which seemed to express a bitter reproach to mankind, with their look of anxiety and wonder, of menace and promise – and the current of my existence was drawn towards those shining eyes charged with manifold significance and sank into their depths. That magnetic mirror drew my entire being towards it with inconceivable force. They were slanting, Turkoman eyes of supernatural, intoxicating radiance which at once frightened and attracted, as though they had looked upon terrible, transcendental things which it was given to no one but her to see. Her cheekbones were prominent and her forehead high. Her eyebrows were slender and met in the middle. Her lips were full and half-open as though they had broken away only a moment before from a long, passionate kiss and were not yet sated. Her face, pale as the moon, was framed in the mass of her black, dishevelled hair and one strand clung to her temple. The fineness of her limbs and the ethereal unconstraint of her movements marked her as one who was not fated to live long in this world. No one but a Hindu temple dancer could have possessed her harmonious grace of movement.

Her air of mingled gaiety and sadness set her apart from ordinary mankind. Her beauty was extraordinary. She reminded me of a vision seen in an opium sleep. She aroused in me a heat of passion like that which is kindled by the mandrake root. It seemed to me that as I gazed at her long slender form, with its harmonious lines of shoulder, arm, breasts, waist, buttocks and

legs, that she had been torn from her husband's embrace, that she was like the female mandrake which has been plucked from the arms of its mate.

She was wearing a black pleated dress which clung tightly to her body. Gazing at her, I was certain that she wished to leap across the stream which separated her from the old man but that she was unable to do so. All at once the old man burst into laughter. It was a hollow, grating laugh, of a quality to make the hairs of one's body stand on end; a harsh, sinister, mocking laugh. And yet the expression of his face did not change. It was as though the laughter was echoing from somewhere deep within his body.

In terror I sprang down from the stool with the bottle in my hand. I was trembling, in a state of mingled horror and delight such as might have been produced by some delicious, fearful dream. I set the bottle of wine down on the floor and held my head in my hands. How many minutes, how many hours I remained thus, I do not know. When I came to myself I picked up the bottle and went back into my room. My uncle had gone and had left the room door agape like the mouth of a dead man. The sound of the old man's hollow laughter was still echoing in my ears.

It was growing dark. The lamp was burning smokily. I could still feel the aftermath of the delicious, horrible fit of trembling which I had experienced. From that moment the course of my life had changed. With one glance, that angel of heaven, that ethereal girl, had left on me the imprint of her being, more deeply marked than the mind of man can conceive.

At that moment I was in a state of trance. It seemed to me that I had long known her name. The radiance of her eyes, her

complexion, her perfume, her movements, all appeared familiar to me, as though, in some previous existence in a world of dreams, my soul had lived side by side with hers, had sprung from the same root and the same stock and it was inevitable that we should be brought together again. It was inevitable that I should be close to her in this life. At no time did I desire to touch her. The invisible rays which emanated from our bodies and mingled together were sufficient contact. As for the strange fact that she appeared familiar to me from the first glance, do not lovers always experience the feeling that they have seen each other before and that a mysterious bond has long existed between them? The only thing in this mean world which I desired was her love; if that were denied me I wanted the love of nobody. Was it possible that anyone other than she should make any impression upon my heart? But the hollow grating laughter, the sinister laughter of the old man had broken the bond which united us.

All that night I thought about these things. Again and again I was on the point of going to look through the aperture in the wall, but fear of the old man's laughter held me back. The next day also I could think of nothing else. Would I be able to refrain altogether from going to look at her? Finally, on the third day I decided, despite the dread which possessed me, to put the bottle of wine back in its place. But when I drew the curtain aside and looked into the closet I saw in front of me a wall as blank and dark as the darkness which has enshrouded my life. There was no trace of aperture or window. The rectangular opening had been filled in, had merged with the wall, as though it had never existed. I stood upon the stool but, although I hammered on the wall with my fists, listening intently, although I held the lamp to it and examined it with care, there was not the slightest trace of any

aperture. My blows had no more effect upon the solid, massive fabric of the wall than if it had been a single slab of lead.

Could I abandon the hope of ever seeing her again? It was not within my power to do so. Henceforth I lived like a soul in torment. All my waiting, watching and seeking were in vain. I trod every hand's-breadth of ground in the neighbourhood of my house. I was like the murderer who returns to the scene of his crime. Not one day, not two days, but every day for two months and four days I circled around our house in the late afternoon like a decapitated fowl. I came to know every stone and every pebble in the neighbourhood but I found no trace of the cypress tree, of the little stream or of the two people whom I had seen there. The same number of nights I knelt upon the ground in the moonlight, I begged and entreated the trees, the stones and the moon – for she might have been gazing at that moment at the moon – I sought aid from every created thing, but I found no trace of her. In the end I understood that all my efforts were useless, because it was not possible that she should be connected in any way with the things of this world: the water with which she washed her hair came from some unique, unknown spring; her dress was not woven of ordinary stuff and had not been fashioned by material, human hands. She was a creature apart. I realized that those flowers of morning glory were no ordinary flowers. I was certain that if her face were to come into contact with ordinary water it would fade; and that if she were to pluck an ordinary flower of morning glory with her long fine fingers they would wither like the petals of a flower.

I understood all this. This girl, this angel, was for me a source of wonder and ineffable revelation. Her being was subtle and intangible. She aroused in me a feeling of adoration. I felt sure

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