

In families natural defects may be remedied by readjusting heads and bodies not originally proportioned for each other, and human beings dissatisfied with their sex may, under the benevolent system of Dr. Lorenzo y Carmo repair the error of their origin. It will be a question for lawyers to determine to what nationality these future beings are to belong if head and body have previously owed a separate allegiance. But if the system holds good in violent deaths, surely it may be applied to deaths ensuing, as the coroners' juries have it, from natural causes. In this case we might preserve our statesmen and celebrities for ever. Opponents of the system would, however, be found in heirs-apparent. ("A Very Strange Story" 1869)

22. THE GHOST IN SEARCH OF HELP

Summary: A messenger brings someone to a dying person's bed; the messenger, it transpires, is a ghost. Earliest Attestation: 1890. Motif: N/A. Secondary Literature: Edgerton 1968; Brunvand 2012, I, 264–65; I have taken the name "The Ghost in Search of Help" from there.

Ghost lore was an important part of Victorian supernatural culture (Davies 2007; Finucane 1996, 172–216) and survived into the nineteenth and, indeed, the twentieth century more convincingly than fairy lore and witch lore. The following ghost story did the round of the British press in early 1891.

The lower classes at St. Petersburg are greatly excited about an alleged miraculous occurrence which is said to have taken place a few days ago. A priest went with the Holy Sacrament to a young officer, saying that he had been asked to do so by an elderly lady who had called at his house. The officer said that it was nobody that had been sent by him. "Besides," he added smiling, "I am in the enjoyment of the best of health, and by no means preparing for death." The priest looking round the room, perceived the portrait of a lady on the wall, and said it was she who had called and ordered the sacrament. "But that is the portrait of my mother, who has been dead for some time," exclaimed the officer. The priest said it was an

exact likeness of the lady who had called upon him. The officer was so impressed with the incident that he partook of the Sacrament. He died the same evening. ("A St. Petersburg Ghost Story" 1891)

In several variants of the St. Petersburg story—recorded in Russian newspapers in December 1890—the mother travels with the priest in a cab to her son's door (Edgerton 1968, 32–38, collected and translated different versions from contemporary St. Petersburg newspapers). Other versions of "The Ghost in Search of Help" appeared in the same decade. In 1890 the story was set in London in *Blackwood's Magazine*: a ghostly mother walks a priest to her son's house (Garth July 1890; our earliest account and not known to Edgerton 1968). One frustrated spiritualist reader suggests that the story was known even then: "I cannot fix time and place, but, if I have not seen it in print, I must have dreamt it. Every detail is familiar to me; but I am vexed that I cannot remember where I read it" (M. A. Oxon 1890). In 1892 there is a young girl who brings a doctor (rather than a priest) to her sick mother: the girl is, of course, a ghost (Mitchell 1892, 208; for the complicated background to this story, see Nickell 2012; on our very limited evidence doctors seem to be a later development in "The Ghost in Search of Help"). In 1894, a Father Walters is summoned by two children to their father's deathbed in Washington (DC?). The children do not come up the stairs with the priest to their father's room, and it is only when he describes the children to the father, who is indeed dying, that the mystery is resolved: "They were my children . . . My poor dead children" ("Summoned by Ghosts" 1894).

American folklorist William Edgerton reports a London version recorded in the United States in 1942 (1968, 40: "In a recent letter Professor Wax told me that she heard this version in early 1942 from an unidentified graduate student at the University of California in Berkeley who had apparently heard it only a few years before in England."). He may be referring to this story, which appeared in the press in 1939.

Another part of London has its own legend of a phantom taxi-cab. The story goes that a South Kensington vicar was called upon by a lady in a great state of agitation, who wished him to get into the taxi which she had at the door, and go with her to see a man who was dying. Deeming it no more than his duty to answer such an appeal, the cleric went off with the lady in the taxi. He alighted when they had arrived at the house indicated, and, turning round to speak to the lady, found to his amazement that both she and the cab had vanished. The taxi does not come into the story any more, the end being the death of the man the clergyman was called to see, and the startling discovery that the lady who had brought the summons was his wife, who had been dead for 15 years. ("Ghosts on Wheels" 1937)