

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**A STRANGE STORY —
VOLUME 06**

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A Strange Story — Volume 06

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

A Strange Story — Volume 06

CHAPTER LIII

There is an instance of the absorbing tyranny of every-day life which must have struck all such of my readers as have ever experienced one of those portents which are so at variance with every-day life, that the ordinary epithet bestowed on them is "supernatural."

And be my readers few or many, there will be no small proportion of them to whom once, at least, in the course of their existence, a something strange and eerie has occurred,—a something which perplexed and baffled rational conjecture, and struck on those chords which vibrate to superstition. It may have been only a dream unaccountably verified,—an undefinable presentiment or forewarning; but up from such slighter and vaguer tokens of the realm of marvel, up to the portents of ghostly apparitions or haunted chambers, I believe that the greater number of persons arrived at middle age, however instructed the class, however civilized the land, however sceptical the period, to which they belong, have either in themselves experienced, or heard recorded by intimate associates whose veracity they accept as indisputable in all ordinary transactions of life, phenomena which are not to be solved by the wit that mocks them, nor, perhaps, always and entirely, to the contentment of the reason or the philosophy that explains them away. Such phenomena, I say, are infinitely more numerous than would appear from the instances currently quoted and dismissed with a jest; for few of those who have witnessed them are disposed to own it, and they who only hear of them through others, however trustworthy, would not impugn their character for common-sense by professing a belief to which common-sense is a merciless persecutor. But he who reads my assertion in the quiet of his own room, will perhaps pause, ransack his memory, and find there, in some dark corner which he excludes from "the babbling and remorseless day," a pale recollection that proves the assertion not untrue.

And it is, I say, an instance of the absorbing tyranny of everyday life, that whenever some such startling incident disturbs its regular tenor of thought and occupation, that same every-day life hastens to bury in its sands the object which has troubled its surface; the more unaccountable, the more prodigious, has been the phenomenon which has scared and astounded us, the more, with involuntary effort, the mind seeks to rid itself of an enigma which might disease the reason that tries to solve it. We go about our mundane business with renewed avidity; we feel the necessity of proving to ourselves that we are still sober, practical men, and refuse to be unfitted for the world which we know, by unsolicited visitations from worlds into which every glimpse is soon lost amid shadows. And it amazes us to think how soon such incidents, though not actually forgotten, though they can be recalled—and recalled too vividly for health—at our will, are nevertheless thrust, as it were, out of the mind's sight as we cast into lumber-rooms the crutches and splints that remind us of a broken limb which has recovered its strength and tone. It is a felicitous peculiarity in our organization, which all members of my profession will have noticed, how soon, when a bodily pain is once passed, it becomes erased from the recollection,—how soon and how invariably the mind refuses to linger over and recall it. No man freed an hour before from a raging toothache, the rack of a neuralgia, seats himself in his armchair to recollect and ponder upon the anguish he has undergone. It is the same with certain afflictions of the mind,—not with those that strike on our affections, or blast our fortunes, overshadowing our whole future with a sense of loss; but where a trouble or calamity has been an accident, an episode in our wonted life, where it affects ourselves alone, where it is attended with a sense of shame and humiliation, where the pain of recalling it seems idle, and if indulged would almost madden us,—agonies of that kind we do not brood over as we do over the death or falsehood of beloved friends,

or the train of events by which we are reduced from wealth to penury. No one, for instance, who has escaped from a shipwreck, from the brink of a precipice, from the jaws of a tiger, spends his days and nights in reviving his terrors past, re-imagining dangers not to occur again, or, if they do occur, from which the experience undergone can suggest no additional safeguards. The current of our life, indeed, like that of the rivers, is most rapid in the midmost channel, where all streams are alike comparatively slow in the depth and along the shores in which each life, as each river, has a character peculiar to itself. And hence, those who would sail with the tide of the world, as those who sail with the tide of a river, hasten to take the middle of the stream, as those who sail against the tide are found clinging to the shore. I returned to my habitual duties and avocations with renewed energy; I did not suffer my thoughts to dwell on the dreary wonders that had haunted me, from the evening I first met Sir Philip Derval to the morning on which I had quitted the house of his heir; whether realities or hallucinations, no guess of mine could unravel such marvels, and no prudence of mine guard me against their repetition. But I had no fear that they would be repeated, any more than the man who had gone through shipwreck, or the hairbreadth escape from a fall down a glacier, fears again to be found in a similar peril. Margrave had departed, whither I knew not, and, with his departure, ceased all sense of his influence. A certain calm within me, a tranquillizing feeling of relief, seemed to me like a pledge of permanent delivery.

But that which did accompany and haunt me, through all my occupations and pursuits, was the melancholy remembrance of the love I had lost in Lilian. I heard from Mrs. Ashleigh, who still frequently visited me, that her daughter seemed much in the same quiet state of mind,—perfectly reconciled to our separation, seldom mentioning my name, if mentioning it, with indifference; the only thing remarkable in her state was her aversion to all society, and a kind of lethargy that would come over her, often in the daytime. She would suddenly fall into sleep and so remain for hours, but a sleep that seemed very serene and tranquil, and from which she woke of herself. She kept much within her own room, and always retired to it when visitors were announced.

Mrs. Ashleigh began reluctantly to relinquish the persuasion she had so long and so obstinately maintained, that this state of feeling towards myself—and, indeed, this general change in Lilian—was but temporary and abnormal; she began to allow that it was best to drop all thoughts of a renewed engagement,—a future union. I proposed to see Lilian in her presence and in my professional capacity; perhaps some physical cause, especially for this lethargy, might be detected and removed. Mrs. Ashleigh owned to me that the idea had occurred to herself: she had sounded Lilian upon it: but her daughter had so resolutely opposed it,—had said with so quiet a firmness "that all being over between us, a visit from me would be unwelcome and painful,"—that Mrs. Ashleigh felt that an interview thus deprecated would only confirm estrangement. One day, in calling, she asked my advice whether it would not be better to try the effect of change of air and scene, and, in some other place, some other medical opinion might be taken? I approved of this suggestion with unspeakable sadness.

"And," said Mrs. Ashleigh, shedding tears, "if that experiment prove unsuccessful, I will write and let you know; and we must then consider what to say to the world as a reason why the marriage is broken off. I can render this more easy by staying away. I will not return to L—— till the matter has ceased to be the topic of talk, and at a distance any excuse will be less questioned and seem more natural. But still—still—let us hope still."

"Have you one ground for hope?"

"Perhaps so; but you will think it very frail and fallacious."

"Name it, and let me judge."

"One night—in which you were on a visit to Derval Court—"

"Ay, that night."

"Lilian woke me by a loud cry (she sleeps in the next room to me, and the door was left open); I hastened to her bedside in alarm; she was asleep, but appeared extremely agitated and convulsed. She kept calling on your name in a tone of passionate fondness, but as if in great terror. She cried,

'Do not go, Allen—do not go—you know not what you brave!—what you do!' Then she rose in her bed, clasping her hands. Her face was set and rigid; I tried to awake her, but could not. After a little time, she breathed a deep sigh, and murmured, 'Allen, Allen! dear love! did you not hear, did you not see me? What could thus baffle matter and traverse space but love and soul? Can you still doubt me, Allen?—doubt that I love you now, shall love you evermore?—yonder, yonder, as here below?' She then sank back on her pillow, weeping, and then I woke her."

"And what did she say on waking?"

"She did not remember what she had dreamed, except that she had passed through some great terror; but added, with a vague smile, 'It is over, and I feel happy now.' Then she turned round and fell asleep again, but quietly as a child, the tears dried, the smile resting."

"Go, my dear friend, go; take Lilian away from this place as soon as you can; divert her mind with fresh scenes. I hope!—I do hope! Let me know where you fix yourself. I will seize a holiday, —I need one; I will arrange as to my patients; I will come to the same place; she need not know of it, but I must be by to watch, to hear your news of her. Heaven bless you for what you have said! I hope!—I do hope!"

CHAPTER LIV

Some days after, I received a few lines from Mrs. Ashleigh. Her arrangements for departure were made. They were to start the next morning. She had fixed on going into the north of Devonshire, and staying some weeks either at Ilfracombe or Lynton, whichever place Lilian preferred. She would write as soon as they were settled.

I was up at my usual early hour the next morning. I resolved to go out towards Mrs. Ashleigh's house, and watch, unnoticed, where I might, perhaps, catch a glimpse of Lilian as the carriage that would convey her to the railway passed my hiding-place.

I was looking impatiently at the clock; it was yet two hours before the train by which Mrs. Ashleigh proposed to leave. A loud ring at my bell! I opened the door. Mrs. Ashleigh rushed in, falling on my breast.

"Lilian! Lilian!"

"Heavens! What has happened?"

"She has left! she is gone,—gone away! Oh, Allen, how?—whither?"

Advise me. What is to be done?"

"Come in—compose yourself—tell me all,—clearly, quickly. Lilian gone,—gone away? Impossible! She must be hid somewhere in the house,—the garden; she, perhaps, did not like the journey. She may have crept away to some young friend's house. But I talk when you should talk: tell me all."

Little enough to tell! Lilian had seemed unusually cheerful the night before, and pleased at the thought of the excursion. Mother and daughter retired to rest early: Mrs. Ashleigh saw Lilian sleeping quietly before she herself went to bed. She woke betimes in the morning, dressed herself, went into the next room to call Lilian—Lilian was not there. No suspicion of flight occurred to her. Perhaps her daughter might be up already, and gone downstairs, remembering something she might wish to pack and take with her on the journey. Mrs. Ashleigh was confirmed in this idea when she noticed that her own room door was left open. She went downstairs, met a maidservant in the hall, who told her, with alarm and surprise, that both the street and garden doors were found unclosed. No one had seen Lilian. Mrs. Ashleigh now became seriously uneasy. On remounting to her daughter's room, she missed Lilian's bonnet and mantle. The house and garden were both searched in vain. There could be no doubt that Lilian had gone,—must have stolen noiselessly at night through her mother's room, and let herself out of the house and through the garden.

"Do you think she could have received any letter, any message, any visitor unknown to you?"

"I cannot think it. Why do you ask? Oh, Allen, you do not believe there is any accomplice in this disappearance! No, you do not believe it. But my child's honour! What will the world think?"

Not for the world cared I at that moment. I could think only of Lilian, and without one suspicion that imputed blame to her.

"Be quiet, be silent; perhaps she has gone on some visit and will return.

Meanwhile, leave inquiry to me."

CHAPTER LV

It seemed incredible that Lilian could wander far without being observed. I soon ascertained that she had not gone away by the railway—by any public conveyance—had hired no carriage; she must therefore be still in the town, or have left it on foot. The greater part of the day was consumed in unsuccessful inquiries, and faint hopes that she would return; meanwhile the news of her disappearance had spread: how could such news fail to do so?

An acquaintance of mine met me under the archway of Monks' Gate. He wrung my hand and looked at me with great compassion.

"I fear," said he, "that we were all deceived in that young Margrave. He seemed so well conducted, in spite of his lively manners. But—"

"But what?"

"Mrs. Ashleigh was, perhaps, imprudent to admit him into her house so familiarly. He was certainly very handsome. Young ladies will be romantic."

"How dare you, sir!" I cried, choked with rage. "And without any colouring to so calumnious a suggestion! Margrave has not been in the town for many days. No one knows even where he is."

"Oh, yes, it is known where he is. He wrote to order the effects which he had left here to be sent to Penrith."

"When?"

"The letter arrived the day before yesterday. I happened to be calling at the house where he last lodged, when at L——, the house opposite Mrs. Ashleigh's garden. No doubt the servants in both houses gossip with each other. Miss Ashleigh could scarcely fail to hear of Mr. Margrave's address from her maid; and since servants will exchange gossip, they may also convey letters. Pardon me, you know I am your friend."

"Not from the moment you breathe a word against my betrothed wife," said I, fiercely.

I wrenched myself from the clasp of the man's hand, but his words still rang in my ears. I mounted my horse; I rode into the adjoining suburbs, the neighbouring villages; there, however, I learned nothing, till, just at nightfall, in a hamlet about ten miles from L——, a labourer declared he had seen a young lady dressed as I described, who passed by him in a path through the fields a little before noon; that he was surprised to see one so young, so well dressed, and a stranger to the neighbourhood (for he knew by sight the ladies of the few families scattered around) walking alone; that as he stepped out of the path to make way for her, he looked hard into her face, and she did not heed him,—seemed to gaze right before her, into space. If her expression had been less quiet and gentle, he should have thought, he could scarcely say why, that she was not quite right in her mind; there was a strange unconscious stare in her eyes, as if she were walking in her sleep. Her pace was very steady,—neither quick nor slow. He had watched her till she passed out of sight, amidst a wood through which the path wound its way to a village at some distance.

I followed up this clew. I arrived at the village to which my informant directed me, but night had set in. Most of the houses were closed, so I could glean no further information from the cottages or at the inn. But the police superintendent of the district lived in the village, and to him I gave instructions which I had not given, and, indeed, would have been disinclined to give, to the police at L——. He was intelligent and kindly; he promised to communicate at once with the different police-stations for miles round, and with all delicacy and privacy. It was not probable that Lilian could have wandered in one day much farther than the place at which I then was; it was scarcely to be conceived that she could baffle my pursuit and the practised skill of the police. I rested but a few hours, at a small public-house, and was on horseback again at dawn. A little after sunrise I again heard of the wanderer. At a lonely cottage, by a brick-kiln, in the midst of a wide common, she had stopped the previous evening, and asked for a draught of milk. The woman who gave it to her inquired if she

had lost her way. She said "No;" and, only tarrying a few minutes, had gone across the common; and the woman supposed she was a visitor at a gentleman's house which was at the farther end of the waste, for the path she took led to no town, no village. It occurred to me then that Lilian avoided all high-roads, all places, even the humblest, where men congregated together. But where could she have passed the night? Not to fatigue the reader with the fruitless result of frequent inquiries, I will but say that at the end of the second day I had succeeded in ascertaining that I was still on her track; and though I had ridden to and fro nearly double the distance—coming back again to places I had left behind—it was at the distance of forty miles from L—— that I last heard of her that second day. She had been sitting alone by a little brook only an hour before. I was led to the very spot by a woodman—it was at the hour of twilight when he beheld her; she was leaning her face on her hand, and seemed weary. He spoke to her; she did not answer, but rose and resumed her way along the banks of the streamlet. That night I put up at no inn; I followed the course of the brook for miles, then struck into every path that I could conceive her to have taken,—in vain. Thus I consumed the night on foot, tying my horse to a tree, for he was tired out, and returning to him at sunrise. At noon, the third day, I again heard of her, and in a remote, savage part of the country. The features of the landscape were changed; there was little foliage and little culture, but the ground was broken into moulds and hollows, and covered with patches of heath and stunted brushwood. She had been seen by a shepherd, and he made the same observation as the first who had guided me on her track,—she looked to him "like some one walking in her sleep." An hour or two later, in a dell, amongst the furze-bushes, I chanced on a knot of ribbon. I recognized the colour Lilian habitually wore; I felt certain that the ribbon was hers. Calculating the utmost speed I could ascribe to her, she could not be far off, yet still I failed to discover her. The scene now was as solitary as a desert. I met no one on my way. At length, a little after sunset, I found myself in view of the sea. A small town nestled below the cliffs, on which I was guiding my weary horse. I entered the town, and while my horse was baiting went in search of the resident policeman. The information I had directed to be sent round the country had reached him; he had acted on it, but without result. I was surprised to hear him address me by name, and looking at him more narrowly, I recognized him for the policeman Waby. This young man had always expressed so grateful a sense of my attendance on his sister, and had, indeed, so notably evinced his gratitude in prosecuting with Margrave the inquiries which terminated in the discovery of Sir Philip Derval's murderer, that I confided to him the name of the wanderer, of which he had not been previously informed; but which it would be, indeed, impossible to conceal from him should the search in which his aid was asked prove successful,—as he knew Miss Ashleigh by sight. His face immediately became thoughtful. He paused a minute or two, and then said,—

"I think I have it, but I do not like to say; I may pain you, sir."

"Not by confidence; you pain me by concealment."

The man hesitated still: I encouraged him, and then he spoke out frankly.

"Sir, did you never think it strange that Mr. Margrave should move from his handsome rooms in the hotel to a somewhat uncomfortable lodging, from the window of which he could look down on Mrs. Ashleigh's garden? I have seen him at night in the balcony of that window, and when I noticed him going so frequently into Mrs. Ashleigh's house during your unjust detention, I own, sir, I felt for you—"

"Nonsense! Mr. Margrave went to Mrs. Ashleigh's house as my friend. He has left L—— weeks ago. What has all this to do with—"

"Patience, sir; hear me out. I was sent from L—— to this station (on promotion, sir) a fortnight since last Friday, for there has been a good deal of crime hereabouts; it is a bad neighbourhood, and full of smugglers. Some days ago, in watching quietly near a lonely house, of which the owner is a suspicious character down in my books, I saw, to my amazement, Mr. Margrave come out of that house,—come out of a private door in it, which belongs to a part of the building not inhabited by the owner, but which used formerly, when the house was a sort of inn, to be let to night lodgers of

the humblest description. I followed him; he went down to the seashore, walked about, singing to himself; then returned to the house, and re-entered by the same door. I soon learned that he lodged in the house,—had lodged there for several days. The next morning, a fine yacht arrived at a tolerably convenient creek about a mile from the house, and there anchored. Sailors came ashore, rambling down to this town. The yacht belonged to Mr. Margrave; he had purchased it by commission in London. It is stored for a long voyage. He had directed it to come to him in this out-of-the-way place, where no gentleman's yacht ever put in before, though the creek or bay is handy enough for such craft. Well, sir, is it not strange that a rich young gentleman should come to this unfrequented seashore, put up with accommodation that must be of the rudest kind, in the house of a man known as a desperate smuggler, suspected to be worse; order a yacht to meet him here; is not all this strange? But would it be strange if he were waiting for a young lady? And if a young lady has fled at night from her home, and has come secretly along bypaths, which must have been very fully explained to her beforehand, and is now near that young gentleman's lodging, if not actually in it—if this be so, why, the affair is not so very strange after all. And now do you forgive me, sir?"

"Where is this house? Lead me to it."

"You can hardly get to it except on foot; rough walking, sir, and about seven miles off by the shortest cut."

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