



A NOVEL IN A NUTSHELL

PSYCHICAL RESEARCH.

By ARTHUR ECKERSLEY.

MR. BELINGHAM himself was emphatic in his repudiation of the entire subject. "Impudent humbug," was the exact phrase he used; adding, a little indefinitely, "Pack of unscrupulous knaves and hysterical women!"

His eyes, rather small and close-set, glared almost fiercely out of his flushed face. He was, perhaps, a trifle more positive in his denunciation since it became evident that Mrs. Belingham was prepared to regard the matter with some credulity; that, indeed, was the obvious point of his reference to hysteria. He clearly expected it to silence his wife and to put an end to the whole thing as a topic of dinner-table conversation; which, for the time at least, it did.

Mrs. Belingham sat facing her husband across the table, whence the cloth, as the picturesque custom of the house was, had already been removed, so that the silver and glass were mirrored in its polished surface.

A tall, thin woman she was, with fair hair and a face pretty, but usually somewhat expressionless. One found, perhaps, the reason for this in her husband: Mr. Belingham discouraged individuality in those with whom he came in contact; and he had been married to his wife for nearly fifteen years.

The only other member of the party, the guest, took no part in the discussion. He sat back, toying gently with his cigarette, and glancing from one to the other of his entertainers in a manner of half-humorous attention, which might possibly have been assumed.

The curtains were drawn, though it was summer; and the room—a very pretty and expensive one—was a shadowy background to the circle of light cast by the candles upon the table.

For a time no one spoke. The host lifted his glass and drank, not ill-pleased at the constrained silence, which was the effect, by no means unusual, of his words. Presently, however, he himself returned to the subject, bantering. "These fortune-tellers," he said, "spiritualists, or table-turners, or whatever they call 'em—the whole crew should be clapped into gaol if I had my way. Set of damned rogues, eh, Hartland?"

He looked over at his guest, in triumph; not so closely, though, as not to see the tremble of the hand opposite, or to mark how furtively it was withdrawn from the table. Louise was used by now to taking these corrective snubbings before strangers; but it still always affected her like that.

He felt, too, instinctively, that Hartland had seen it also. Well, let him! A conceited, sneering puppy! The amiability of Mr. Belingham's mood can be judged. It was all really about nothing. Simply that his wife, greatly daring, had confessed to the gratification of a guinea's-worth of curiosity at the establishment of a Bond Street seer. Captain Hartland, it appeared, had run against her, only that afternoon, as she emerged, still dazed, perhaps, from the Mysteries. This it was, indeed, that started the conversation which had so gravely irritated the lord of the feast.

The scene, as I have said, was one merely typical of the relations between Stanley Belingham and his wife. But to-night there was strangely present an element that puzzled even Belingham himself. In the midst of his own anger he noticed it, and wondered.

Natural enough that Louise should behave like a fool, and that this sneering Hartland should look contemptuous of him for telling her so. There was nothing unexpected in all that; nothing, at least, to explain the fierceness of the resentment that he felt surging within him. He was tired too, deadly tired; seemed suddenly to have grown much more so since this interminable meal began. He wondered for a frightened instant if he were going to be ill. But the fear passed (there had been no sign of it on his large, bullying face), and he drank more wine thirstily, to prevent its return.

So long a time seemed to have elapsed since he spoke that he was startled to hear Hartland replying to him in that unconcerned voice, as though there had been no perceptible, crowded silence between question and answer.

"It seems to me," the other was saying, "a matter in which it is almost impossible to set a definite limit to belief. Charlatany there is, of course, to a certain extent, but beyond that—one feels lost."

He turned, with his faint smile, towards the hostess.

"I am certainly thus far a disciple, Mrs. Belingham," he added, "as to feel tolerably sure that you yourself would be—what do they call it?—a medium of unusual power."

"Why, that—she said so, the woman, only to-day!" Mrs. Belingham had broken out with the words in what was almost a cry of surprised interest. Her whole face was lit up with sudden vivacity. "How curious you should think the same!" she exclaimed.

This was rebellion, though it seemed unconscious. Not for many years, in that well-ordered household, had the master's implied prohibition been so disregarded. Mr. Belingham noted it, and his dull resentment grew; but he said nothing. He saw, too, the change that had come suddenly into his wife's aspect. All at once, she looked the beautiful woman that he had married fifteen years before. He wondered, with a kind of anger, at this also; but decided to wait before crushing her again. He was very tired.

But Hartland and Mrs. Belingham seemed no longer to observe his mood: they were already talking together, eagerly—on the woman's part, excitedly. Their manner had fallen all at once into one of intimacy and confidence. Belingham never remembered to have seen his wife so carried out of herself: her eyes were shining.

The big man at the head of the table watched it all sullenly from beneath his lowered brows. Sometimes he could hardly catch what they were saying to each other, so completely by now had they shut him out of their conversation. Perhaps, too, he was growing a little deaf. No matter; he could still watch—without seeming to do so—

And slowly, as he sat there in silence, the meaning of what he was watching grew, and took possession of his mind. Of course! What kind of a fool had he been not to realise the truth before? That was the real significance of it all, of that quickened look in her eyes, of the hostility that he always remembered to have felt against that puppy Hartland—of everything! And they thought to fool him—him!—with this story of a chance meeting and a common interest in the humbug of the spiritualists. Well, thank God he had found out in time! He could watch now—and plan.

He had forgotten his fatigue in the excitement of such a thought. The creeping heaviness that had held his body but a few moments before seemed to have left him. His pulse was beating fierce and steady, he could hear the sound of it in his ears—wine and rage ran in his blood like flame. Twenty times, in his imagination, he rose up with a sudden oath, and dashed the life out of the guilty pair that smiled and whispered together across the table. He knew their quick terror, the crash of the blows, and himself victorious—the avenger whom they had hoped to mock. But to all outward seeming he still lounged motionless in his chair, a coarse, lethargic figure, brooding heavily.

After what might have been a long or quite a short time—the watcher had lost count of this—Mrs. Belingham seemed suddenly to become conscious of her own conduct. She stopped talking, and glanced at her husband with a look of almost terrified apology. He met it smiling.

"No matter!"—he was at pains to keep the knowledge out of his voice; it sounded harsh, as usual, but the words were unexpectedly mild, "you and Hartland must accept me for a heretic in these matters. I've given my opinion. Don't mind me!"

Louise had risen; Hartland leapt up to open the door for her, but the host did not move. He was no longer tired, but a queer feeling was upon him, as though it would have required an impossible effort to stir his limbs; so he sat where he was, watching and smiling.

[Continued overleaf.]

His wife seemed, however, to notice something unusual besides the suavity of his speech; for she still hesitated, glancing towards him uncertainly for a moment. Some trick of the candle-light it was, perhaps, that, playing upon his face, had startled her. "But 'Go along!'" he commanded, almost pleasantly for him. "We shall not be long. Or, rather—suppose you take Harland with you. What'd you say Harland? Will you keep Mrs. Belingham company with your cigarette in the drawing-room? You don't mind? I've rather an important little matter to settle before I join you—you'll excuse a business man, I know."

The guest murmured something polite; smiling, however, a more intimate answer to the look of inquiry that Mrs. Belingham had flashed upon him. Her husband saw the look. "You might do a little ghost-raising," he called after them jocosely, as they left the room together. His chuckle of laughter followed them through the closing door.

Left alone, he sat for a great while absolutely motionless. He was trying to think to form in his mind some plan by which he might make effective use of this secret power that he held. It was difficult, though; the weariness seemed to be creeping back again, and to be invading his brain, so that it was becoming more and more impossible to concentrate his attention. He had, too, a confused and worrying impression that time had suddenly grown very important; as though something—what?—were waiting to leap out at him before he should be able to accomplish his revenge.

Gradually, however, the scheme of this came to him, plain and unmistakable. After a little time—a little cunning time of waiting to make certain of his victims—he would enter quietly into the drawing-room and surprise them together. He would not go by the ordinary way across the hall, as they would be expecting. No, no. There was a better plan than that: out by the French window beside him, and so along the verandah, till he reached those other windows, which would, he knew, be open, with the curtains drawn.

Behind them, he could listen, and even watch all that went on within, himself unobserved.

It was a grand scheme, that, grand—if only he were strong enough to be quite sure of carrying it out successfully, and not failing by the way. He moved his hand towards the wine again at this thought, but forgot the idea before he reached it, and relapsed into silliness.

A servant, entering with coffee and seeing the motionless figure, chin on breast, thought that he was asleep; and, having placed the tray at his elbow, went out again quietly. He had found his master like this once or twice lately, and cherished a terrified memory of the effect of rousing him. But Mr. Belingham was not asleep, though the mistake was excusable.

The room grew very quiet, so quiet that the muffled beat of the great clock in the hall outside was the only audible sound. The soft pulse of it was like a heavy heart beating quietly into the heard it vaguely, through the dulled confusion of his senses; it mingled itself with that other noise within his own ears, marking out the minutes that were left to him before—Again the Fear ran through him; surely that must be what was happening: he was ill. Perhaps, after all, Louise (the fool!) had been right, when she had told him so often during the last few weeks that he was overworking, and ought to take a rest.

Suppose, even, he were in danger of dying—not just yet, of course, but soon. That was a queer thought; if it were true, the obvious thing to do was to get up and ring the bell; then people would come, and doctors who would prevent it happening—yet he sat there without moving; almost without fear, after the first moment; only vaguely uneasy. And tired. Most of all he wondered, with idle curiosity, what Louise would say afterwards.

Oddly—but then all the swaying to and fro of his mind was odd to-night—these thoughts had already driven out the anger that he had just now been nourishing against his wife for her supposed encouragement of Harland. Perhaps the process had measured out a full hour since he was left alone; half of another had gone by before the lethargy into which he had sunk began to be penetrated by a new feeling of anger than any yet.

It was as though all sensation were very gradually slipping away from Mr. Belingham, little by little: leaving at last the final consciousness of himself, the actual, unbody self, alone and utterly unsupported, in a kind of anticipatory pause; a moment in which all his existence had been narrowed into one thin point of expectation. He was still considering this curiously, when all at once he became aware that the rhythmic beating no longer sounded in his ears.

"The clock must have stopped," he thought, quite clearly. At the same instant he heard his own name called.

The sound of it, tenuous and remote, yet with a strange quality of ip-sistence, seemed at first to rise from nowhere in particular. He considered, listening intently; and, after a moment or two, it came again. This time Mr. Belingham had no longer any doubt: it was his wife's voice that was calling to him. But the tone of it was strange, urgent, a blend of gentle command and entreaty such as he had never known Louise to use before. Mr. Belingham did not stay that he must reach her, no matter how, at once.

He had forgotten everything; suspicion and anger had fallen away from him like dreams—it was his wife whom he loved who

called. The strangest change of all was in his own thought about her.

Perhaps, even so, some memory of the plans he had lately been forming unconsciously influenced him; but, full of his over-mastering need that was upon him to obey the call, he had not been aware of it.

So it was with a faint bewilderment that he found himself already standing just outside the open window of the room in which his wife was, separated from her only by the heavy curtains that were drawn across it. He had no memory of the way by which he had come; and now that he was there, some impotence, inexplicable, held him for a moment hesitating, unable to go forward.

It was as though the actual command, felt rather than heard, had drawn him towards Louise, as (he had this momentary idea, and smiled even then at the incongruity of it) something infinitely light might be drawn upon a breath of air and fall powerless until it is renewed.

Then, clearer than before, but with now a tremble in it like fear, the call came a third time. The sound of it flooded Mr. Belingham with a new strength, impelling him forward irresistibly. He parted the curtains and entered.

After this, everything that happened seemed to pass in one swift instant. To his surprise, the room was almost in darkness, but by a faint radiance that came, he could not mark whence, he saw before him the figures of his wife and Harland. They were seated together at a small table, their hands just meeting upon the surface; the faces of both seemed to bear a strained, expectant look though mingled in Harland's with his usual air of slightly unreal amusement.

So much he had already noticed, when something caused Louise to glance towards the window; and their eyes met. In that instant he saw them change and darken. She bent forward staring, with parted lips, her face a white mask of terror.

Then "Haude, Claude!"—she was screaming the words—had shrunk towards Harland, and caught his arm convulsively in both of her hands, still keeping those agonised eyes on the face of Mr. Belingham. He himself thought that he knew quite well the reason of her fear. An hour ago, the cry, and her involuntary appeal to the other for protection, would have confirmed his own worst imaginings, and have lashed him to God knows what fury of rage. Now he wanted to show her that all this was changed. There was no feeling left in his heart but love, and a great, all-comprehending pity. He understood everything, at last, and knew how little it all mattered—save this. He longed to touch her, and reassure . . . he made a slight movement forward . . .

But now Harland had seen too, and leapt up, white-faced and staring like the woman.

"My God!"—Belingham heard his cry, hoarse with alarm and astonishment. Louise—do you see it?

The two fell crashing over on the side, and Harland and Mr. Belingham faced each other, Louise cowering between them. Even to the man, the husband knew then that he could feel no anger. Things seemed to have gone altogether beyond that—if only he could make them understand too. He tried to speak, but could not. The world seemed to be slipping away from him; the hysterical sobbing of the woman went through him with a sensation like physical pain, rending his whole being. . . .

Harland was still staring at him; anger seemed to be getting the better of his fear; his eyes blazed so that Mr. Belingham could not meet them.

"I'm not afraid of you," he said, his voice strained and quick, "whatever you are man or ghost. When you're really alive you bullied her, drove her to me. It would be like you to come now, if that's what it means."

There was silence; a great fear was breaking upon Mr. Belingham. The room faded, grew misty.

"See!" cried Harland suddenly. He bent towards the woman, taking both her hands in his. "Louise," he said, speaking not to her but over her shoulder, to the other. "Look up and listen. I love you! I should never have told you, but for this. I say it now, so that That, whatever it is yonder, may hear. You're mine, now and always, in spite of him. Do you understand?" His voice grew steadier, more commanding. "We have done no sin for which it can harm us—we have no reason to be afraid. There is nothing there, if we will it so; or, at most, a Shadow, no more, that our own folly has called up. We brought it here, unwittingly, playing with things that we both only half believed. Well now . . . we can dismiss it. . . . Louise!"

She heard, and sobbing, clung to him more closely. He stooped then, lower still, and very deliberately kissed her on the lips. "That is the first time," he said, looking beyond her towards the Shadow.

A moment yet he could see it, watching, knowing (but this he could not see) the truth, and the full bitterness of his own punishment. There—there was nothing there. Understanding had come at last for Mr. Belingham, too late. Darkness was all about him now, enveloping him, bearing him away, out into the night, to nothingness. It was the end.

And still, in one room of the house he left, two figures crouched together, the woman sobbing ever more slowly, the man staring with resolute eyes towards the parted curtains.

In the empty dining-room, that which had once been Mr. Belingham sat at the table, dead.