

# STRANGER THAN FICTION.

By

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*Illustrated by Thomas Somerfield.*



THE STATUE OF DANTE IN THE PINCIO AT ROME, REFERRED TO IN THIS *Photo.* ARTICLE. [L. Felici.]



WHEN one casts one's thoughts back upon one's own life in search of things which seem particularly strange, it is not in the material events that one most clearly perceives them. I have had the good fortune to have had a fairly adventurous life and to have visited strange parts of the world under interesting conditions. I have seen something of two wars. I have practised the most dramatic profession in the world. I have travelled from North Greenland and Spitzbergen to West Africa, and my thoughts can conjure up many a recollection of storm and danger, of whales and bears and sharks and snakes, and all that used to interest me as a schoolboy. And yet whatever I could say upon such subjects someone else has said already with more authority and experience. It is rather when you look closely into the intimate workings of your own mind and spirit, the queer intuitions, the strange happenings, the inexplicable things which come suddenly to the surface and are glimpsed rather than seen, the incredible coincidences, the stories which should end one way but either end the other or else have no definite finish at all, tailing off into oblivion with ragged fringes of mystery behind them instead of the neat little knot of the tidy-minded romancer—it is these, I say, which seem to be really stranger than any fiction.

The most remarkable experiences in a man's life are those in which he feels most, and they are precisely those of which he is least disposed to talk. All the really very serious

things in my life, the things which have been stamped deep into me and left their impress for ever, are things of which I could never bring myself to speak. And yet it is within the compass of just these intimate and vital things that one perceives strange forces to be moving and is conscious of vague and wonderful compulsions and directions which are, I think, the innermost facts of life. Personally, I am always conscious of the latent powers of the human spirit, and of the direct intervention into human life of outside forces which mould and modify our actions. They are usually too subtle for direct definition, but occasionally they become so crude that one cannot overlook them.

I will take a very obvious example, which I have quoted before, but which may bear re-telling, as it shows the thing in its most undeniable form. In the year 1892 I was travelling in Switzerland and had occasion to cross the Gemmi Pass. On the top of it was a lonely inn which looks down upon a populous valley on either side, but is itself entirely isolated during the winter. I supposed that it was deserted at that time, but I was told upon inquiry that this was not so. The family laid in a supply of food and remained there for some months utterly cut off from the people below them. The singularity of such a position arrested my attention, and a story began at once to form itself within my brain, in which I conceived the desperate position of a group of characters strongly antagonistic and reacting upon each other, who had no refuge from each other's company and were irresistibly impelled towards black tragedy while



"ON THE TOP WAS A LONELY INN WHICH LOOKS DOWN UPON A POPULOUS VALLEY ON EITHER SIDE."

the golden lights of happy human life twinkled in the valleys beneath them. These ideas were still weaving themselves in my brain and building themselves up into symmetrical form in the strange semi-conscious impersonal way that such things grow, when I bought a book of Maupassant's to while away my return journey through France. It was certainly a book which I had never read before. The first story in it was called "l'Auberge"—"The Inn"—and there was the whole of my conception already finished by a master hand! It was the same inn, the Gemmi Pass, the winter, the group of characters, all complete. There was a great dog that I had not yet come upon. The rest was what I had schemed and what I would assuredly have published as my own but for this happy chance that saved me. But was it a chance? Could it have been a chance? That Maupassant had passed that way and that his quick brain had seen the possibilities of the lonely inn—that is likely enough. But that in the few days between thinking the story and writing it I should buy the one and only book in the world which would prevent me from making a fool of myself—could that be a coincidence, or was a kindly outside influence at work to save me from such an error?

Whether coincidence or guidance, it was one of those things that are stranger than fiction.

And yet I am willing to admit that without any external action at all, unless it be the malign one of some mischievous Puck, the most extraordinary coincidences do occur in life which one would certainly never dare to invent. Here is a case in point.

Since I have at various times written certain detective stories, some simple souls have been willing to identify me with my hero and to call me in to their aid when they were in distress. I have even been offered a blank cheque to take up a case. Possibly so long as it remained blank it would about represent the value which I could give in exchange. Still, I may claim with some complacency that out of half-a-dozen cases which pity or curiosity has induced me to investigate I have always reached a solution. In one notorious case I was, however, the victim of the extraordinary coincidence to which I allude. In connection with the crime I had suspicions of a certain family which I will call Wilder—not necessarily as being the direct criminals, but as knowing a good deal about the matter. One member of this family had, to my knowledge, gone to California some years before. His name was John and he was an architect by profession. Presently, from a small town in California which I will call St. Anne, I began to receive papers alluding to my investigation and scribbled all round the margins with ribald blasphemy. On one of these communications was the address from which it came. I at once wrote to the Chief of the Police of that town, giving the address and asking if he could tell me whether a John Wilder, architect, late of England, was living there. He answered me that it was so. Now, surely you would think that this was final. I had actually been able to give the name and trade of a man living six thousand miles away with nothing to direct me but a line of deduction. I was convinced that the line was correct, and I notified the British police of the result. Can it be believed that the answer I received from them some weeks later was that they had investigated the matter, that it was a coincidence, and that the John Wilder in question was a different man from him whom I sought?

The insane papers sent to me were from a well-known religious maniac who lived in the same boarding-house. This man was an American and had certainly nothing to do with the crime, but I am unable to understand even now how he came to take any interest

in the matter, if there were not some Englishman near him to coach him in the details. However, I can, of course, only accept the police report, as correct and claim to have been the victim of a coincidence which certainly could not be used in fiction.

It is in the twilight-land, where spirit and matter meet, that the strangest happenings occur. Sometimes they are very slight and objectless, and yet point to vast issues behind them. I remember that in Rome my wife and I were walking on the Pincio. She had never been there before nor read anything about it, for it was the first day of our visit. She suddenly said, in an abstracted voice, "There is a statue of Dante there." A few moments later we came upon the statue, which had been concealed by bushes. I said, "How could you possibly know that?" She answered, "I have no idea. I simply *knew* it." What a trivial, inconclusive episode, and yet can all science give a name or an explanation for such an incident?

I have studied the occult for thirty years, and it seems strange to me to listen to the confident opinions, generally negative ones, which are expressed upon the subject by people who have not given it really serious thought for as many minutes. This is not the time or place for me to give my views, which are still those of a student rather than of a dogmatist. But I have had one or two experiences which are a little outside the usual range of *séances* or manifestations, and also outside the range of what one could render credible in fiction. In one of these affairs I seemed to brush very close to something really remarkable, unless deception on one side and coincidence upon the other have established a strange working partnership.

I was living in the country at the time, and formed an acquaintance with a small doctor—small physically and also in professional practice—who lived hard by. He was a student of the occult, and my curiosity was aroused by learning that he had one room in his house which no one entered except himself, as it was reserved for mystic and philosophic purposes. Finding that I was interested in such subjects, Dr. Brown, as I will call him, suggested one day that I should join a secret society of esoteric students. The invitation had been led up to by a good deal of preparatory inquiry. The dialogue between us ran somewhat thus:—

"What shall I get from it?"

"In time, you will get powers."

"What sort of powers?"

"They are powers which people would

call supernatural. They are perfectly natural, but they are got by knowledge of deeper forces of Nature."

"If they are good, why should not everyone know them?"

"They would be capable of great abuse in the wrong hands."

"How can you prevent their getting into wrong hands?"

"By carefully examining our initiates."

"Should I be examined?"

"Certainly."

"By whom?"

"The people would be in London."

"Should I have to present myself?"

"No, no; they would do it without your knowledge."

"And after that?"

"You would then have to study."

"Study what?"

"You would have to learn by heart a considerable mass of material. That would be the first thing."

"If this material is in print, why does it not become public property?"

"It is not in print. It is in manuscript. Each manuscript is carefully numbered and trusted to the honour of a passed initiate. We have never had a case of one going wrong."

"Well," said I, "it is very interesting, and you can go ahead with the next step, whatever it may be."

Some little time later—it may have been a week—I woke in the very early morning with a most extraordinary sensation. It was not a nightmare or any prank of a dream. It was quite different to that, for it persisted after I was wide awake. I can only describe it by saying that I was tingling all over. It was not painful, but it was queer and disagreeable, as a mild electric shock would be. I thought at once of the little doctor.

In a few days I had a visit from him. "You have been examined and you have passed," said he, with a smile. "Now you must say definitely whether you will go on with it. You can't take it up and drop it. It is serious, and you must leave it alone or go forward with a whole heart."

It began to dawn upon me that it really was serious, so serious that there seemed no possible space for it in my very crowded and preoccupied life. I said as much, and he took it in very good part. "Very well," said he, "we won't talk of it any more unless you change your mind."

There was a sequel to the story. A month or two later, on a pouring wet day, the little doctor called, bringing with him another

medical man whose name was familiar to me in connection with exploration and tropical service. They sat together beside my study fire and talked. One could not but observe that the famous and much-travelled man was very deferential to the little country surgeon, who was the younger of the two.

"He is one of my initiates," said the latter to me. "You know," he continued, turning to his companion, "Doyle nearly joined us once." The other looked at me with great interest, and then at once plunged into a conversation with his mentor as to the wonders he had seen and, as I understood, actually done. I listened amazed. It sounded like the talk of two lunatics. One phrase stuck in my memory.

"When first you took me up with you," said he, "and we were hovering over the town I used to live in in Central Africa, I was able for the first time to see the islands out in the lake. I always knew they were there, but they were too far off to be seen from the shore. Was it not extraordinary that I should first see them when I was living in England?"

There were other remarks as wonderful. "A conspiracy to impress a simpleton," says the sceptic. Well, we will leave it at that, if the sceptic so wills, but I am under the impression that I have brushed against something strange. This is one of the stories with an untidy, ragged ending such as the editor abhors.

One more queer experience which will bear telling. I volunteered once to sleep in a haunted house in Dorsetshire. Two other investigators went with me. We were a deputation from the Psychological Society—of which, by the way, I am almost an original member. It took us the whole railway journey from town to read up the evidence as to the senseless noises which had made life unendurable for the occupants, who were tied by a lease and could not get away. We sat up there two nights. On the first nothing occurred. On the second, one of our party left us and I sat up with the late Mr. Podmore, a well-known student of these things. We had, of course, taken every precaution to checkmate fraud, putting worsted threads across the stairs, and so on.

In the middle of the night a fearsome uproar broke out. It was like someone belabouring a resounding table with a heavy cudgel. It was not an accidental creaking of wood or anything of that sort, but a deafening row. We had all doors open, so we rushed at once into the kitchen, from which the sound had surely come. There was nothing

there—doors were all locked, windows barred, and threads unbroken. Podmore took away the light and pretended that we had both returned to our sitting-room, while I waited in

The suggestion was that the child had been done to death there, and that the subsequent phenomena, of which we had one small sample, were in some way a sequence to this tragedy.



"WE RUSHED AT ONCE INTO THE KITCHEN, FROM WHICH THE SOUND HAD SURELY COME."

the dark in the hope of a return of the disturbance. None came—or ever did come. What occasioned it we never knew. It was of the same character as all the other disturbances we had read about, but shorter in time. Here there was a sequel to the story. Some years later the house was burned down, which may or may not have had a bearing upon the sprite which seemed to haunt it, but a more suggestive thing is that the skeleton of a child about ten years old was dug up in the garden. This I give on the authority of a relation of the family who were so plagued.

There is a theory that a young life cut short in sudden and unnatural fashion may leave, as it were, a store of unused vitality which may be put to strange uses. But here again we are drifting into regions which are stranger than fiction. The unknown and the marvellous press upon us from all sides. They loom above us and around us in undefined and fluctuating shapes, some dark, some shimmering, but all warning us of the limitations of what we call matter, and of the need for spirituality if we are to keep in touch with the true inner facts of life.