

A Triple Warning

By C. W. Leadbeater

It was at the dinner table of one of the highest dignitaries of the Church—a man whose name, were I at liberty to mention it, would command recognition and respect wherever the English language is spoken—that I heard the two stories which I shall next relate. I am aware that to give the name of the narrator would add greatly to the value of the account with many minds, and indeed, I have no reason to suppose that there would be any objection to my mentioning it; but I did not ask permission to do so (having at the time not the slightest idea of ever publishing the tales) and therefore I refrain.

Whether the stories have been given to the public before by any other writer, and if so where and in what form, I cannot say; the distinguished narrator was of opinion that they had become the theme of common talk, and seemed much surprised that no one present had heard them; but since they were entirely new to the forty or fifty persons gathered round that table, and since I myself have never seen them in print, though I have read most of the extant collections of such stories, I run the risk of repeating what may, perhaps, be to some people an oft-told tale. For the sake of clearness I shall in each case call the chief actor in the story ‘the bishop,’ though, of course, in the first of the cases related, his episcopal honours were far in the future.

The first of his ghostly experiences occurred while ‘the bishop’ was still at college. It seems that one night he had retired to bed somewhat earlier than usual, having locked the outer door of his sitting-room, but leaving that between the latter apartment and his bed-room standing open. In the sitting-room a large fire was blazing brightly, flooding the place with its cheerful light, and rendering every object almost as distinctly visible as at noon-day. It was half-past ten, and the bishop had just laid himself down in blissful expectation of long and uninterrupted sleep, when he saw the figure of his father standing in the doorway between the two rooms, in the full glare of the light. Surprise held him motionless for a few seconds; he even thinks that he must have watched the play of the firelight upon the sad, earnest face for a whole minute, before the figure raised its hand and beckoned him to come. This dissolved the spell which seemed to hold him in its grasp, and he sprang from the bed and rushed towards the door, but before he could reach it the figure had vanished!

Startled beyond expression, he searched both sitting-room and bed-room thoroughly, and easily convinced himself that he was entirely alone; there was nowhere for an intruder to hide, and the outer door was securely locked, as he had left it. Besides, the figure had been distinctly and unmistakably that of his father, looking—except for the intense yearning expressed in his face—exactly as when he had last seen him only a few weeks before; and he was quite convinced that no college joker could have deceived him on this point. He was at last forced to conclude that he must have been the victim of an illusion, hard though it was to bring himself to such an opinion when he recollected the natural appearance of the figure and the play of the firelight on its face; so he once again composed himself to rest.

The shock, however, had banished sleep for the time, and he lay watching the flickering shadows on the wall for more than an hour before he felt himself sinking again into unconsciousness. Whether he had actually fallen into a doze, or was only on the point of doing so, he was unable to say; but he was suddenly startled into complete wakefulness by the

reappearance of the figure in the doorway, with the same intense expression on its face, and beckoning to him, if possible, even more earnestly than before. Determined that this time, at least, it should not elude him, he sprang with one bound from his bed to the door, and clutched violently at the apparition; but he was again doomed to disappointment; the appearance seemed exactly the same even when he was within a yard of it, yet his outstretched hands grasped only the empty air, and once more the strictest search only confirmed what was already certain—that it was utterly impossible for any bodily presence to have either escaped from the rooms or concealed itself in them.

Like most young men, he had been more or less sceptical upon the subject of apparitions, and, though seriously startled by what he had seen, he endeavoured to reason himself into the belief that it was due to a mere trick of the imagination, arising perhaps from some unsuspected bodily ailment. After bathing his forehead with cold water, he therefore retired to rest once more, firmly resolved not to allow his mind to dwell upon what he considered the dream of a distempered brain. As he lay down the various college clocks chimed midnight, and, with visions of early chapel in his mind, he made the most strenuous efforts to obtain the sleep of which he felt so much need.

At last he was successful, but it seemed to him that he could have been but a few moments unconscious when he awoke with a start, with that feeling of causeless terror at his heart which so often overcomes persons of highly nervous organisation when suddenly roused from deep slumber. The fire in the sitting-room had burnt low, and instead of the cheerful dancing light he had seen as he fell asleep, there was now only a dull red glow upon wall and ceiling; but there in the doorway, clearly defined in the midst of that glow, stood his father's figure once more! This time, however, there was a distinct difference in both its expression and its action; instead of the intense yearning which had been so clearly visible before, there was a look of deep though resigned regret, and the raised hand no longer eagerly beckoned him to approach, but slowly and sorrowfully waved him back as he fixed his horror-stricken gaze upon the vision. Instead, too, of vanishing instantly, as before, its outlines became indistinct and it seemed to fade gradually away into the dull red glow upon the wall.

Only upon its disappearance did our young friend recover the power of motion, and his first act was to draw forth his watch and look at the time. It was ten minutes to two—far too early either to arouse any one else or to obtain any sort of conveyance for his homeward journey—for home he at once resolved to go. His father, the rector of a distant country parish, had been perfectly well when he left him a few weeks before, nor had he since heard anything to alarm him in any way; but, profoundly impressed as he was by the recurrence of the vision, and convinced at last that there was in the matter something of what is usually called the supernatural, he felt that it would be impossible for him to rest until he had satisfied himself by ocular demonstration that his father was alive and well. He made no further attempt to sleep, and at the very earliest moment when he thought such an application possible, he sought an interview with the head of his college, explained his fears to him, and set out for home without delay.

The day of rapid travel somewhat weakened the impression that the events of the night had produced upon him, and when, as the shades of evening were beginning to fall, he drove up the well-known lane leading to the rectory, it was scarcely more than a latent uneasiness which clouded his pleasant anticipations of the astonished greeting of the home circle. It gave him a sudden shock, on coming within sight of the house, to see that all the blinds were drawn closely down; true, it was already going dusk, but he knew that his father loved the twilight hour, and would never admit candles until they were absolutely necessary; and a nervous apprehension of

he hardly knew what, overpowered him so completely that for some moments he was unable to knock at the door. When at last he summoned courage to do so it was opened by the butler—one who had served in the family for many years—whom he had known since childhood; but the first glimpse of this old retainer's face revived in a moment all his worst apprehensions.

“Ah! sir,” said the man, “you are too late! If you could only have come last night! Yes,” (in answer to his horrified enquiries), “yes, the master is gone; and almost the only words he spoke after he was taken ill were to say how he longed to see you. It was ten o'clock last night when the fit took him, and half an hour afterwards, as soon as he was able to speak, the first thing he said was:

“ ‘Send for my son; I must see my son once more.’

“We told him that a messenger should be sent with the first dawn of day, but he scarcely seemed to hear us, for he had fallen back into a kind of trance, like. Then at a quarter to twelve he roused up for a few moments, but all he said was:

“ ‘How I wish my son were here!’

“And again just the moment before he died—ten minutes to two it was—he opened his eyes and seemed to know us all, though he was too weak to say much; but he just whispered:

“ ‘I am going; I should like to have spoken to my dear son once more, but I shall not live to see him now.’

“And then he passed away so peacefully, it seemed as though he had but fallen asleep.”

Such was the bishop's first experience of life on the super-physical plane—one of a class by no means uncommon, though perhaps an unusually perfect and striking example of its kind. At any rate it is not difficult to believe the remark of the narrator, that it produced on him an impression which time was powerless to obliterate—an impression which coloured his whole after-life.

How many there are among us who have been profoundly affected—whose entire characters even have been changed—by one short glimpse of that world which is ever close around us, though commonly veiled from our eyes! Few people care to speak of such things in this blind and sceptical age, but anyone who takes the trouble to make quiet and earnest enquiries among his friends will be surprised to discover how much more common than he supposed such experiences are.