

The Phantom of the Lake

By Edmund Mitchell

My profession is that of a barrister; but a comfortable private income and devoted love for the seclusion of my library have conduced to keep me out of the madding strife of the law courts.

My residence is in London; and when I am not in chambers, I am to be found almost certainly at Eastwood Hall, a dear old house lying in a beautifully wooded park within a few hours' journey from the Metropolis.

Eastwood was the home of my boyhood. Mrs Armitage, who was then its mistress, was my aunt, but throughout my orphaned youth she was to me as a mother. Her two sons, though some ten years younger than myself; I always looked upon as my younger brothers, and as such loved them in my own quiet way. Their father, Colonel Armitage, after a long illness contracted during foreign service, had died when Charles was about three years old, and Norman was beginning to think about cutting his first tooth.

When the great sorrow of her husband's death fell upon Mrs Armitage, I was only a boy myself. Unlike her own sons, however, I was old enough to realize what death meant; and the grief-stricken widow, her young married life blighted almost at its outset, turned to me for such sympathy and consolation as a boy can give. From that hour when the long expected end had come and she flung her arms around my neck, sobbing as if her heart would break, a new bond of affection seemed to unite us. I have always thought that in the years that followed, something of her chastened sorrow passed into my life making me thoughtful beyond my age. Be that as it may, as I grew towards manhood I came to be my aunt's adviser and counsellor in all matters relating to the boys and the property.

The years rolled by, the lads grew to man's estate, and Eastwood ceased to be my home. But my rooms were always kept ready for me at the Hall; and whenever I chose to make my appearance, there was awaiting me a warm welcome from my cousins and their mother.

Nor did I ever lose the position of family adviser. No step of any consequence was taken without my being consulted. Many a trivial little matter for discussion was made the excuse for a pressing invitation to run down to Eastwood, and was accepted by my conscience as a sufficient justification for breaking for a spell from my studies and literary work. I was unfettered by the trammels of wedlock; and was free at any moment to go whither my soul listed.

My mind often travels back to one special occasion on which I was bidden to Eastwood. My visit this time was for a good and sufficient reason. Charles's regiment was ordered rather unexpectedly to India, and he had leave of a few brief days at home before sailing. Of course I had to be at once telegraphed for, as there were a hundred and one things to discuss and arrange.

My poor aunt was in great distress at the prospect of a long parting from her son. Charles himself was in high spirits. A soldier by birth and disposition, he longed for change and adventure. After three or four busy days, the hour of parting came, and on Charles's part no less than his mother's the farewell was a sad and affecting one.

Norman and I accompanied him to Portsmouth, and saw the *Malabar* sail. The two brothers were deeply attached, and poor Norman seemed afraid to open his lips, lest he should betray tears in his voice. There were love and gratitude in Charles's grasp as he wrung my hand for the last time. We watched the vessel steam away, the young soldier standing on the deck with his

comrades, his hand again and again waving an adieu. Then we turned sadly away, our faces set homeward.

I accompanied Norman back to Eastwood, and remained there a few days, comforting the mother's anxious heart as best I could. At the end of a fortnight, when I went up to London, Mrs Armitage had begun to speak cheerfully and hopefully of her absent boy.

Six months passed by, and Norman too had gone from the home nest, having entered the Diplomatic Service and become attached to a foreign Embassy. We heard regularly from Charles in India; he wrote long letters to his mother, and these, by previous arrangement, were sent by her to Norman and by Norman to me. Thus we all had the full benefit of his news and in return hardly a mail passed without each of us giving him a letter.

It was now midsummer—Charles had sailed early in the year. I had not been out of London for more than a month, and the weather was oppressively hot and sultry. For some days I had felt overcome with ennui, and disinclined for work of any kind.

At last, one morning when I looked forth, and saw that we were in for another baking day, I gave in; escaped from the hot streets and glaring pavements, and found myself speeding through green fields and oven bubbling brooks towards Eastwood.

The warmest of welcomes awaited me. Now that both her sons were away, Mrs Anmitage felt her life dull and cheerless, and she was grateful when I announced my intention of staying with her for at least two or three weeks. Our tête-a-tête dinner that evening was a pleasant one: our conversation all in regard to the absent ones and their letters. An Indian mail was almost due, and the news it would bring was eagerly canvassed.

Shortly after ten o'clock we retired to rest. My rooms, on the ground floor in one of the wings, had french windows opening on to the lawn. On reaching them, I flung the windows wide; and lighting a shaded lamp, set myself to read, with the cool night air caressing my forehead.

But somehow that night I could not fix my thoughts on my book. At last after one or two vain efforts, I rose, lit a cigar, turned down the lamp, and drawing the windows softly behind me, sauntered forth into the park.

One of the great attractions of Eastwood is the lake; in breadth it at no point exceeds a stone's throw, but, as it winds about, its length extends beyond a mile.

From earliest boyhood the lake had been replete with memories of boating, fishing, swimming and skating. Thither that night I bent my footsteps, sauntering slowly along. A quarter of an hour sufficed to bring me to the wooded path that followed the windings of the water. At last I came to the boat-house, in front of which the lake was at its broadest. I seated myself on a bench; and having finished my cigar, gave myself up to the luxury of meditation.

The moonlight streamed upon the water, the surface where its silvery sheen fell in bright contrast to the dark shadows thrown by the trees and by the scattered shrub-clad islets. A balmy zephyr blew down the valley, faintly rustling the leaves and rippling the water at my feet.

Seated there, I felt like one of the Lotophagi of old, filled with perfect bliss, forgetful of time past and unmindful of time to come. I heard the ripple of the water and the rustle of the leaves. I had the faint consciousness of the distant chiming of the clock in the village church tower. Ever and anon, also, the splash of a trout rising to a moth broke upon my ear; otherwise, not a sound invaded the perfect stillness of the night.

A full hour may have passed thus, when I was roused in a second from this stage of half-dreaming trance. I leaned forward, eagerly listening.

It was a strange sound to hear on a midsummer night, yet my practised ear could liken it to nothing but the rhythmical ring of a skater sweeping in long curves over an ice-bound sheet of water.

The sound for a brief space faded without dying away. I had heard the same effect a hundred times before, when on winter nights I had outstripped Charles or Norman, and had waited for them at the boathouse until they rounded the bend some hundred yards farther up. As this thought flashed through my mind, the sound again gradually grew in my ear, and now I could distinguish the sharp clang of the steel as it met the surface of the ice and the dull swish of the succeeding stroke.

Almost involuntarily I strained my eyes towards the bend, which was oven-shadowed by lofty trees and bathed in inky blackness. My trained ear followed and interpreted every modulation of the sound, and my heart murmured, 'Now, he is round.'

At the same instant there shot out from the dark shadow onto the silvery surface of the moonlit water what in all truth seemed to be the form of a skater advancing with rapid, bold sweeps. Fascinated and for the moment dead to other thoughts, I watched every graceful movement. In a brief second the figure was almost abreast of the boat-house. There was a shadowy indistinctness about it, but it seemed that of a young man of noble bearing, wearing a broad-brimmed hat, a dark cloak closely muffled around him.

Soon the skater had shot up almost opposite to where I stood. Then, without warning, the arms were flung forward, there was a faint cry of alarm, and the figure seemed to sink into the water.

At that moment the boughs of the trees around me bent as if before the wind, and a wintry blast swept past me, whirling it almost seemed snowflakes in my face, and chilling me to the bone. I was conscious of a succession of wavelets leaping up and dashing against the sides of the boat-house. Then all was still; and when I shook from me the feeling of horror that froze my very heart's blood, the soft balmy midsummer night breeze was playing upon my cheek, and the waters of the lake were rippling peacefully and almost imperceptibly at my feet.

So realistic had been the vision I had seen and the sounds I had heard, that my first impulse was to take a boat, and push out to where the figure disappeared. I rushed to the boat-house door, forgetting in my eagerness that it was always locked except when someone was rowing on the lake. When I realized that I could not get at the boats, I paused to reflect.

While my mind had never given the subject anything but casual and momentary attention, I had always refused belief in the so-called supernatural. I came now to realize, however, that this night I had seen something undreamed of before in my philosophy.

As I turned from the boat-house, and made my way homeward along the tree-lined path, I felt my blood still chilled with fear. I had always considered myself a fairly strong-minded man, and incapable of conjuring up imaginary alarms, but more than once I started at my own shadow, and it was with a feeling of relief that I regained my room.

My sleep that night was fitful and broken, and by seven o'clock I had risen worn out and unrefreshed. Breakfast at the Hall was at nine o'clock. About eight I strolled forth, to see if an hour's walk would restore my spirits.

For a moment I hesitated between the path by the lake and the avenue. I chose the latter.

I had reached the main gates, and was standing looking along the high-road, uncertain whether to retrace my footsteps on prolong my walk, when a gig drove up rapidly from the direction of the village. It soon reached the spot where I stood, and the man who was driving dropped the reins and jumped to the ground. I at once recognized the village postmaster. I saw that his face was pale, and then I caught a glimpse of an ominous yellow envelope in his hand.

‘What is wrong, Mr Scott?’ I almost gasped.

‘Thank heaven I’ve met you, Mr Hawthorne. I took the message myself off the wire the moment I opened the office, and came straight here.’

‘What is it?’

And I took the envelope from his hand and tore it open.

The message was from Calcutta, and was very brief. It was addressed to Mrs Armitage by one of Charles’s brother-officers, and told her that her son had died from fever after a six hours’ illness.

That was all. ‘Details by mail,’ were the closing words.

My heart sank within me. For one minute everything seemed to whirl round about me. Then I realized the terrible task that lay before me. In a few seconds I had made up my mind. I jumped into the gig beside Mr Scott and he drove me rapidly into the village. I at once despatched this message to Norman in Paris: ‘Come home at once; let nothing delay you.’

Then I got Scott to drive me back to the park gates. My last words to him were: ‘Remember, not a whisper of this must reach Mrs Armitage till Mr Norman’s return. The secret meanwhile lies with you and me.’

I was a little late for breakfast. Heaven knows how I got through the meal. I excused my absence of mind and my inability to converse on the plea of a sick headache. After rising from the table, I withdrew to my room, and eagerly consulted Bradshaw. I found that Norman could be here at six-thirty the next morning.

The day passed like a restless dream; I moved about and spoke mechanically. I was afraid to shut myself up in my room, for I wanted to be near my aunt in order that I might guard against the bare possibility of the terrible news breaking on her unexpectedly.

I was thankful when night came, and she retired to nest. As for myself; the succeeding hours were spent in sleeplessly walking to and fro. How the night dragged its slow length along!

At last daylight broke. By five o’clock I was at the little roadside station. An hour later the kind-hearted postmaster joined me. He offered to apologize for coming, but—‘You see, sir, I couldn’t help it.’ His voice spoke his sympathy, and without one friend to consult I was grateful for his company.

The train arrived to the minute, and Norman sprang on to the platform. His face was pale and anxious.

‘What is wrong, Harry?’ he asked eagerly. ‘Is it my mother?’

‘No,’ I faltered.

‘Charley then?’

In another moment he knew all.

We started for the Hall, Mr Scott undertaking to look after the luggage. I took him to my own rooms, gaining admittance by the french windows, and no one in the house knew that Norman had come home.

By eight o’clock he had recovered from his first shock of grief and was able to discuss with me the dreaded duty that awaited us, of breaking the news to his mother.

I will not attempt to describe the scene that followed. When Mrs Armitage entered the breakfast parlour, my face must have told her that some terrible trouble had fallen amongst us. I faltered out Charles’s name. Thank God I had Norman at hand for her to fold to her heart. With him left, she had still someone to live for.

It was several months ere I ventured to speak to my aunt in regard to the vision I had seen on the lake the night before receiving the terrible news that Charles was dead. From the first the two

events became associated in my mind, but I feared to mention the subject. But the day came when we could converse calmly and resignedly about him that was gone.

Then I learned for the first time the story of the Phantom of the Lake. It was based on a family legend that several generations back the youthful owner of Eastwood Hall had gone out to skate the very night before his marriage. It had been a severe winter, and the ice was perfectly safe, so that his friends did not seek to prevent his going, though no one felt inclined to accompany him. But on the lake that afternoon a portion of the ice had been broken to allow swimming room for the swans. No eye saw the accident; no one was at hand to render help. But next morning the body was found and the young maiden who that day should have become a bride, lost her reason when she beheld her lover's lifeless form.

Hence grew the legend that never an Armitage dies a sudden or violent death but some member of the family sees the phantom skater on the ice, and hears his last bubbling cry across the waters.

Colonel Armitage had imparted the family story to his wife, and both agreed that it would be better to let the weird legend fade into oblivion. He himself had passed away after a long and lingering illness, and there was no report of any supernatural manifestation to mark the event. So the strange story had died out, carefully concealed by the one or two who knew it, and not until now had it reached my ears.

Well, time advanced with inaudible and noiseless step, and another five or six years rolled over our heads. Norman was rising in the Diplomatic Service, and bid fair to be a future statesman. Mrs Armitage was still with us, and reigned as mistress of the Hall. I spent many months of each year with her.

Once again I was bidden to Eastwood in regard to a family matter of importance. Norman was coming home from Berlin to get married. He would start for England in about a fortnight's time.

The news was not unexpected, but it created quite a stir in the household. The next two weeks were spent in busy preparations for Norman's welcome home, and also for the event that was to follow when he would bring a bride to the old Hall.

Every arrangement had been made, and we were now expecting his arrival almost hour by hour. His last letter had stated that he would leave at the earliest possible moment, but he could not say definitely to a day when he would be released from his post.

It was early autumn, and the weather was close and sultry. The cool of the evening was the most enjoyable part of the day, and I loved to spend it on the lake, where there was nearly always a gentle breeze blowing down the valley. Not that the place was without saddest memories. I never found myself on the water but I thought of the fate of Charles. Many a time since then in the falling shades of night had I stooped and listened for the ring of the phantom skater speeding along the ice. I had never heard it again.

We had been all day on the tiptoe of expectancy, but the last train from London had arrived without bringing Norman. Having a number of important letters to write, soon after dinner I bade my aunt goodnight, and withdrew to my rooms. It was ten o'clock before I had completed my work. Rather late for a row on the lake, I thought, but I felt fagged with the heat of the day and tired with writing. So I got the key of the boat-house and started for the water-side.

Among the boats was a pretty racing gig, some twenty feet long. I got her out, and started for a good pull. Bending to my oars, I made the little craft fly through the water, leaving behind a long white track that sparkled in the bright gleam of the harvest moon.

I soon reached the head of the lake, and started on the home journey at a more leisurely stroke. When I had accomplished the distance, and just as I approached the boat-house I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes past eleven.

I was in the act of raising one oar to turn the gig round at right angles to the bank, so as to shoot her into the boat-house, when every muscle of my body seemed to become rigid.

There, away in the distance, borne faintly on the breeze, came the rhythmical ring of skates speeding over the ice!

I listened, frozen with horror. At times the sound died away, then rose again, and I seemed with my mind to follow the phantom skater as he rounded each bend or passed each clump of trees.

Now, however, the ring of the skates was sharp and clear, and on it came, nearer and nearer, mercilessly approaching.

At last the figure I had seen years before shot round the bend, and glided towards me along the glittering surface of the water.

For a moment I was paralysed. But, at last, mind and muscle acted together, and with one sweep of my still uplifted oar I turned the boat broadside to the lake, right in the way of the advancing figure.

I moved my lips, but for a time they refused to utter a sound. At last, with a supreme effort, I managed to shout out, 'Holloa! holloa!'

I heard my voice echoing down the valley, and I hardly recognized its terror-stricken tones.

At the sound the speed with which the advancing figure advanced seemed to slacken, and I could hear the grinding sound that is caused by a skater endeavouring to stop when in full career.

Twenty yards from the boat the figure came to a standstill. 'Holloa! holloa!' I again cried out, incapable of uttering any other sound.

For a moment the phantom gazed at me, my long boat barring his path; then he turned slowly round, and skated away in the direction whence he came. He disappeared round the bend, and the ring of the skates died away in the distance.

I cannot tell how I managed to get ashore. I knew where brandy was kept in the boat-house, but my trembling hand could hardly raise the glass to my lips. It was not for myself I feared. I thought of Norman.

Till break of day I watched in the boat-house, and listened with straining ear; but not again did the dreaded ring of the iron skates break upon the silence of the night. In the grey of the morning I slipped back to the Hall.

I changed my clothes, and endeavoured to calm myself. By six o'clock I was in the little village post office, having roused Mr Scott fully two hours before his time.

I telegraphed to Berlin, to Norman's address, to ascertain whether he had yet started for England, and sat down in a state of sickening agony and suspense, determined to await the reply.

Some fifteen minutes afterwards the clicking of the instrument showed that a message was on the wire. I started to my feet, never thinking that it was impossible for an answer from Berlin to have reached me yet.

'It won't be for you, sir,' said Mr Scott, advancing to the instrument. I pressed close behind him.

'Yes, it is, though,' he cried, eagerly; then, after a moment, he added:

'And it is from Mr Norman.'

The clicking of the instrument pierced my brain as the postmaster spelt out the message word by word. It was dated from Dover, and the hour of despatch was one a.m. It ran as follows: 'Accident in the Channel. Don't be alarmed. Safe, and starting for home.'

The message had lain in the London General Post Office till the office at Eastwood had opened.

I seized my hat and rushed to the station. Norman might arrive by the morning train. Such indeed was the case. How fervently I thanked God in my heart when I saw him standing before me alive and well.

I soon got from him the outline of his story. He had reached Calais just a few minutes after the English packet had left. A tug-boat that had towed in a disabled vessel was, however, on the point of starting for Dover. He had at once accepted the offer of a passage, hoping that, after all, he might catch the mail train at Dover. When the boat had almost reached its destination, a fog came on, and soon after they were run down by the very passenger steamer that Norman had missed. The smaller vessel foundered almost instantaneously and, with the exception of Norman, all on board perished.

But the most remarkable part of his story was to come. He had not felt sleepy, and had remained on deck during the whole passage. He happened to look at his watch a few minutes before the accident happened. It was a quarter to eleven o'clock. A few minutes later he found himself struggling in the water for dear life. He saw the vessel that had run them down, her way hardly checked by the collision, fade into the misty darkness.

He thinks he was in the water quite half an hour. Hope had left him, he was numbed and almost senseless, when there reached his ear, borne through the billows of fog, a faint 'Holloa! holloa!'

But, strangest of all, he thought that he recognized my voice—that it was I who was calling to him across the waters.

Nerved to make one more effort for life he struck out in the direction whence the cry came, and tried to articulate my name. But his numbed lips refused to speak.

Then again he heard my voice shouting 'Holloa! holloa!' In vain he tried to answer.

He remembered nothing more till he found himself on board the mail packet, with someone by his side moistening his lips with brandy.

A boat had been launched from the steamer without a minute's delay after the accident, and it had come back through the fog to endeavour to rescue the ill-fated vessel's crew. No one, however, was seen but Norman, and, indeed, when he was saved the rescuing party had almost given up hope. They heard him splashing in the water, and reached him not a moment too soon. He was insensible when they got him on board. He was soon brought round, and was able to proceed at once to London.

My story was told to Norman and his mother, and to this day both of them hold that to me he owes his life.

Years have rolled by, and when I visit Eastwood little forms climb my knees, and childish voices bestow upon me the loving name 'Uncle Harry'. Mrs Armitage, now descending into the vale of years—I myself have entered on the downward slope—always greets me with her blessing. Norman and his wife—the story has been told to her—are to me as brother and sister.

An artificially constructed island now marks the spot where in a bygone generation the young owner of Eastwood Hall came to his untimely end. But none of us even refer to the legend of the Phantom of the Lake, and we endeavour, as far as possible, to forget its existence.