

# Lubrietta

By E. G. Swain

For the better understanding of this narrative we shall furnish the reader with a few words of introduction. It amounts to no more than a brief statement of facts which Mr. Batchel obtained from the Lady Principal of the European College in Puna, but the facts nevertheless are important. The narrative itself was obtained from Mr. Batchel with difficulty: he was disposed to regard it as unsuitable for publication because of the delicate nature of the situations with which it deals. When, however, it was made clear to him that it would be recorded in such a manner as would interest only a very select body of readers, his scruples were overcome, and he was induced to communicate the experience now to be related. Those who read it will not fail to see that they are in a manner pledged to deal very discreetly with the knowledge they are privileged to share.

Lubrietta Rodria is described by her Lady Principal as an attractive and high-spirited girl of seventeen, belonging to the Purple of Indian commerce. Her nationality was not precisely known; but drawing near, as she did, to a marriageable age, and being courted by more than one eligible suitor, she was naturally an object of great interest to her schoolfellows, with whom her personal beauty and amiable temper had always made her a favourite. She was not, the Lady Principal thought, a girl who would be regarded in Christian countries as of very high principle; but none the less, she was one whom it was impossible not to like.

Her career at the college had ended sensationally. She had been immoderately anxious about her final examination, and its termination had found her in a state of collapse. They had at once removed her to her father's house in the country, where she received such nursing and assiduous attention as her case required. It was apparently of no avail. For three weeks she lay motionless, deprived of speech, and voluntarily, taking no food. Then for a further period of ten days she lay in a plight still more distressing. She lost all consciousness, and, despite the assurance of the doctors, her parents could hardly be persuaded that she lived.

Her *fiancé* who by this time had been declared, was in despair, not only from natural affection for Lubrietta, but from remorse. It was his intellectual ambition that had incited her to the eagerness in study which was threatening such dire results, and it was well understood that neither of the lovers would survive these anxious days of watching if they were not to be survived by both.

After ten days, however, a change supervened. Lubrietta came back to life amid the frenzied rejoicing of the household and all her circle. She recovered her health and strength with incredible speed, and within three months was married—as the Lady Principal had cause to believe, with the happiest prospects.

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Mr. Batchel had not, whilst residing at Stoneground, lost touch with the University which had given him his degree, and in which he had formerly held one or two minor offices. He had earned no great distinction as a scholar, but had taken a degree in honours, and was possessed of a useful amount of general knowledge, and in this he found not only constant pleasure, but also occasional profit.

The University had made herself, for better or worse, an examiner of a hundred times as many students as she could teach; her system of examinations had extended to the very limits of the British Empire, and her certificates of proficiency were coveted in every quarter of the globe.

In the examination of these students, Mr. Batchel, who had considerable experience in teaching, was annually employed. Papers from all parts of the world were to be found littered about his study, and the examination of these papers called for some weeks of strenuous labour at every year's end. As the weeks passed, he would anxiously watch the growth of a neat stack of papers in the corner of the room, which indicated the number to which marks had been assigned and reported to Cambridge. The day upon which the last of these was laid in its place was a day of satisfaction, second only to that which later on brought him a substantial cheque to remunerate him for his labours.

During this period of special effort, Mr. Batchel's servants had their share of its discomforts. The chairs and tables they wanted to dust and to arrange, were loaded with papers which they were forbidden to touch; and although they were warned against showing visitors into any room where these papers were lying, Mr. Batchel would inconsiderately lay them in every room he had. The privacy of his study, however, where the work was chiefly done, was strictly guarded, and no one was admitted there unless by Mr. Batchel himself.

Imagine his annoyance, therefore, when he returned from an evening engagement at the beginning of the month of January, and found a stranger seated in the study! Yet the annoyance was not long in subsiding. The visitor was a lady, and as she sat by the lamp, a glance was enough to shew that she was young, and very beautiful. The interest which this young lady excited in Mr. Batchel was altogether unusual, as unusual as was the visit of such a person at such a time. His conjecture was that she had called to give him notice of a marriage, but he was really charmed by her presence, and was quite content to find her in no haste to state her errand. The manner, however, of the lady was singular, for neither by word nor movement did she show that she was conscious of Mr. Batchel's entry into the room.

He began at length with his customary formula "What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?" and when, at the sound of his voice, she turned her fine dark eyes upon him, he saw that they were wet with tears.

Mr. Batchel was now really moved. As a tear fell upon the lady's cheek, she raised her hand as if to conceal it—a brilliant sapphire sparkling in the lamp-light as she did so. And then the lady's distress, and the exquisite grace of her presence, altogether overcame him. There stole upon him a strange feeling of tenderness which he supposed to be paternal, but knew nevertheless to be indiscreet. He was a prudent man, with strict notions of propriety, so that, ostensibly with a view to giving the lady a few minutes in which to recover her composure, he quietly left the study and went into another room, to pull himself together.

Mr. Batchel, like most solitary men, had a habit of talking to himself. "It is of no use, R. B.," he said, "to pretend that you have retired on this damsel's account. If you don't take care, you'll make a fool of yourself." He took up from the table a volume of the encyclopedia in which, the day before, he had been looking up Pestalozzi, and turned over the pages in search of something to restore his equanimity. An article on Perspective proved to be the very thing. Wholly unromantic in character, its copious presentment of hard fact relieved his mind, and he was soon threading his way along paths of knowledge to which he was little accustomed. He applied his remedy with such persistence that when four or five minutes had passed, he felt sufficiently composed to return to the study. He framed, as he went, a suitable form of words with which to open the conversation, and took with him his register of Banns of Marriage, of which he thought

he foresaw the need. As he opened the study-door, the book fell from his hands to the ground, so completely was he overcome by surprise, for he found the room empty. The lady had disappeared; her chair stood vacant before him.

Mr. Batchel sat down for a moment, and then rang the bell. It was answered by the boy who always attended upon him.

“When did the lady go?” asked Mr. Batchel.

The boy looked bewildered.

“The lady you showed into the study before I came.”

“Please, sir, I never shown anyone into the study; I never do when you’re out.”

“There was a lady here,” said Mr. Batchel, “when I returned.”

The boy now looked incredulous.

“Did you not let someone out just now?”

“No, sir,” said the boy. “I put the chain on the front door as soon as you came in.”

This was conclusive. The chain upon the hall-door was an ancient and cumbrous thing, and could not be manipulated without considerable effort, and a great deal of noise. Mr. Batchel released the boy, and began to think furiously. He was not, as the reader is well aware, without some experience of the supranormal side of nature, and he knew of course that the visit of this enthralling lady had a purpose. He was beginning to know, however, that it had had an effect. He sat before his fire reproducing her image, and soon gave it up in disgust because his imagination refused to do her justice. He could recover the details of her appearance, but could combine them into nothing that would reproduce the impression she had first made upon him.

He was unable now to concentrate his attention upon the examination papers lying on his table. His mind wandered so often to the other topic that he felt himself to be in danger of marking the answers unfairly. He turned away from his work, therefore, and moved to another chair, where he sat down to read. It was the chair in which she herself had sat, and he made no attempt to pretend that he had chosen it on any other account. He had, in fact, made some discoveries about himself during the last half-hour, and he gave himself another surprise when he came to select his book. In the ordinary course of what he had supposed to be his nature, he would certainly have returned to the article on Perspective; it was lying open in the next room, and he had read no more than a tenth part of it. But instead of that, his thoughts went back to a volume he had but once opened, and that for no more than two minutes. He had received the book, by way of birthday presents early in the preceding year, from a relative who had bestowed either no consideration at all, or else a great deal of cunning, upon its selection. It was a collection of 17th century lyrics, which Mr. Batchel’s single glance had sufficed to condemn. Regarding the one lyric he had read as a sort of literary freak, he had banished the book to one of the spare bedrooms, and had never seen it since. And now, after this long interval, the absurd lines which his eye had but once lighted upon, were recurring to his mind:

“Fair, sweet, and young, receive a prize  
Reserved for your victorious eyes”;

and so far from thinking them absurd, as he now recalled them, he went upstairs to fetch the book, in which he was soon absorbed. The lyrics no longer seemed unreasonable. He felt conscious, as he read one after another, of a side of nature that he had strangely neglected, and was obliged to admit that the men whose feelings were set forth in the various sonnets and poems had a fine gift of expression.

“Thus, whilst I look for her in vain,  
Methinks I am a child again,  
And of my shadow am a-chasing.  
For all her graces are to me  
Like apparitions that I see,  
But never can come near th’ embracing.”

No! these men were not, as he had formerly supposed, writing with air, and he felt ashamed at having used the term “freak” at their expense.

Mr. Batchel read more of the lyrics, some of them twice, and one of them much oftener. That one he began to commit to memory, and since the household had retired to rest, to recite aloud. He had been unaware that literature contained anything so beautiful, and as he looked again at the book to recover an expression his memory had lost, a tear fell upon the page. It was a thing so extraordinary that Mr. Batchel first looked at the ceiling, but when he found that it was indeed a tear from his own eye he was immoderately pleased with himself. Had not she also shed a tear as she sat upon the same chair? The fact seemed to draw them together.

Contemplation of this sort was, however, a luxury to be enjoyed in something like moderation. Mr. Batchel soon laid down his lyric and savagely began to add up columns of marks, by way of discipline; and when he had totalled several pages of these, respect for his normal self had returned with sufficient force to take him off to bed.

The matter of his dreams, or whether he dreamed at all, has not been disclosed. He awoke, at any rate, in a calmer state of mind, and such romantic thoughts as remained were effectually dispelled by the sight of his own countenance when he began to shave. “Fancy you spouting lyrics,” he said, as he dabbed the brush upon his mouth, and by the time he was ready for breakfast he pronounced himself cured.

The prosaic labours awaiting him in the study were soon forced upon his notice, and for once he did not regret it. Amongst the letters lying upon the breakfast table was one from the secretary who controlled the system of examination. The form of the envelope was too familiar to leave him in doubt as to what it contained. It was a letter which, to a careful man like Mr. Batchel, seemed to have the nature of a reproof, inasmuch as it probably asked for information which it had already been his duty to furnish. The contents of the envelope, when he had impatiently torn it open, answered to his expectation— he was formally requested to supply the name and the marks of candidate No. 1004, and he wondered, as he ate his breakfast, how he had omitted to return them. He hunted out the paper of No. 1004 as soon as the meal was over. The candidate proved to be one Lubrietta Rodria, of whom, of course, he had never heard, and her answers had all been marked. He could not understand why they should have been made the subject of enquiry.

He took her papers in his hand, and looked at them again as he stood with his back to the fire, having lit the pipe which invariably followed his breakfast, and then he discovered something much harder to understand. The marks were not his own. In place of the usual sketchy numerals, hardly decipherable to any but himself, he saw figures which were carefully formed; and the marks assigned to the first answer, as he saw it on the uppermost sheet, were higher than the maximum number obtainable for that question.

Mr. Batchel laid down his pipe and seated himself at the table. He was greatly puzzled. As he turned over the sheets of No. 1004 he found all the other questions marked in like manner, and making a total of half as much again as the highest possible number. “Who the dickens,” he said, using a meaningless, but not uncommon expression, “has been playing with this; and how came I

to pass it over?" The need of the moment, however, was to furnish the proper marks to the secretary at Cambridge, and Mr. Batchel proceeded to read No. 1004 right through.

He soon found that he had read it all before, and the matter began to bristle with queries. It proved, in fact, to be a paper over which he had spent some time, and for a singularly interesting reason. He had learned from a friend in the Indian Civil Service that an exaggerated value was often placed by ambitious Indians and Cingalese upon a European education, and that many aspiring young men declined to take a wife who had not passed this very examination. It was to Mr. Batchel a disquieting reflection that his blue pencil was not only marking mistakes, but might at the same time be cancelling matrimonial engagements, and his friend's communication had made him scrupulously careful in examining the work of young ladies in Oriental Schools. The matter had occurred to him at once as he had examined the answers of Lubrietta Rodria. He perfectly remembered the question upon which her success depended. A problem in logic had been answered by a rambling and worthless argument, to which, somehow, the right conclusion was appended: the conclusion might be a happy guess, or it might have been secured by less honest means, but Mr. Batchel, following his usual practice, gave no marks for it. It was not here that he found any cause for hesitation, but when he came to the end of the paper and found that the candidate had only just failed, he had turned back to the critical question, imagined an eligible bachelor awaiting the result of the examination, and then, after a period of vacillation, had hastily put the symbol of failure upon the paper lest he should be tempted to bring his own charity to the rescue of the candidate's logic, and unfairly add the three marks which would suffice to pass her.

As he now read the answer for the second time, the same pitiful thought troubled him, and this time more than before; for over the edge of the paper of No. 1004 there persistently arose the image of the young lady with the sapphire ring. It directed the current of his thoughts. Suppose that Lubrietta Rodria were anything like that! and what if the arguments of No. 1004 were worthless! Young ladies were notoriously weak in argument, and as strong in conclusions! and after all, the conclusion was correct, and ought not a correct conclusion to have its marks? There followed much more to the same purpose, and in the end Mr. Batchel stultified himself by adding the necessary three marks, and passing the candidate.

"This comes precious near to being a job," he remarked, as he entered the marks upon the form and sealed it in the envelope, "but No. 1004 must pass, this time." He enclosed in the envelope a request to know why the marks had been asked for, since they had certainly been returned in their proper place. A brief official reply informed him next day that the marks he had returned exceeded the maximum, and must, therefore, have been wrongly entered.

"This," said Mr. Batchel, "is a curious coincidence."

Curious as it certainly was, it was less curious than what immediately followed. It was Mr. Batchel's practice to avoid any delay in returning these official papers, and he went out, there and then, to post his envelope. The Post Office was no more than a hundred yards from his door, and in three minutes he was in his study again. The first object that met his eye there was a beautiful sapphire ring lying upon the papers of No. 1004, which had remained upon the table.

Mr. Batchel at once recognised the ring. "I knew it was precious near a job," he said, "but I didn't know that it was as near as this."

He took up the ring and examined it. It looked like a ring of great value; the stone was large and brilliant, and the setting was of fine workmanship. "Now what on earth," said Mr. Batchel, "am I to do with this?"

The nearest jeweller to Stoneground was a competent and experienced tradesman of the old school. He was a member of the local Natural History Society, and in that capacity Mr. Batchel had made intimate acquaintance with him. To this jeweller, therefore, he carried the ring, and asked him what he thought of it.

“I’ll give you forty pounds for it,” said the jeweller.

Mr. Batchel replied that the ring was not his. “What about the make of it?” he asked. “Is it English?”

The jeweller replied that it was unmistakably Indian.

“You are sure?” said Mr. Batchel.

“Certain,” said the jeweller. “Major Ackroyd brought home one like it, all but the stone, from Puna; I repaired it for him last year.”

The information was enough, if not more than enough, for Mr. Batchel. He begged a suitable case from his friend the jeweller, and within an hour had posted the ring to Miss Lubrietta Rodria at the European College in Puna. At the same time he wrote to the Principal the letter whose answer is embodied in the preface to this narrative.

Having done this, Mr. Batchel felt more at ease. He had given Lubrietta Rodria what he amiably called the benefit of the doubt, but it should never be said that he had been bribed.

The rest of his papers he marked with fierce justice. A great deal of the work, in his zeal, he did twice over, but his conscience amply requited him for the superfluous labour. The last paper was marked within a day of the allotted time, Mr. Batchel shortly afterwards received his cheque, and was glad to think that the whole matter was at an end.

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That Lubrietta had been absent from India whilst her relatives and attendants were trying to restore her to consciousness, he had good reason to know. His friends, for the most part, took a very narrow view of human nature and its possibilities, so that he kept his experience, for a long time, to himself; there were personal reasons for not discussing the incident. The reader has been already told upon what understanding it is recorded here.

There remains, however, an episode which Mr. Batchel all but managed to suppress. Upon the one occasion when he allowed himself to speak of this matter, he was being pressed for a description of the sapphire ring, and was not very successful in his attempt to describe it. There was no reason, of course, why this should lay his good faith under suspicion. Few of us could pass an examination upon objects with which we are supposed to be familiar, or say which of our tables have three legs, and which four.

One of Mr. Batchel’s auditors, however, took a captious view of the matter, and brusquely remarked, in imitation of a more famous sceptic, “I don’t believe there’s no sich a thing.”

Mr. Batchel, of course, recognised the phrase, and it was his eagerness to establish his credit that committed him at this point to a last disclosure about Lubrietta. He drew a sapphire ring from his pocket, handed it to the incredulous auditor, and addressed him in the manner of Mrs. Gamp.

“What! you bage creetur, have I had this ring three year or more to be told there ain’t no sech a thing. Go along with you.”

“But I thought the ring was sent back,” said more than one.

“How did you come by it?” said all the others.

Mr. Batchel thereupon admitted that he had closed his story prematurely. About six weeks after the return of the ring to Puna he had found it once again upon his table, returned through the post. Enclosed in the package was a note which Mr. Batchel, being now committed to this part of the story, also passed round for inspection. It ran as follows:—

“Accept the ring, dear one, and wear it for my sake. Fail not to think sometimes of her whom you have made happy.— L. R.”

“What on earth am I to do with this?”

Mr. Batchel had asked himself again. And this time he had answered the question, after the briefest possible delay, by slipping the ring upon his fourth finger. The book of Lyrics remained downstairs amongst the books in constant use. Mr. Batchel can repeat at least half of the collection from memory.

He knows well enough that such terms as “dear one” are addressed to bald gentlemen only in a Pickwickian sense, but even with that sense the letter gives him pleasure.

He admits that he thinks very often of “her whom he has made happy,” but that he cannot exclude from his thoughts at these times an ungenerous regret. It is that he has also made happy a nameless Oriental gentleman whom he presumptuously calls “the other fellow.”