

Young Strickland's Career

By J. D. Beresford

No doubt the story of the future is written, so far as the future is an expression of present potentialities. We boast our foreknowledge of planetary history, and can prophesy with fine accuracy the occurrence of every major and minor eclipse or occultation in the solar system. But in the most precise science there remains always at least one element that is undefinable and unknowable. The regular traffic of planets about the sun might one day be upset by the coming of an unknown visitor from the deeps of space. The materials of our knowledge are so limited. And in human affairs we know so little of the materials. Nevertheless, it may be that to the universal consciousness the future is a foretellable expression of our present potentialities.

I remember how my friend Strickland used to harp on that theme eighteen years ago. I was incredulous; a stickler for freewill. I could not bear the thought of anything like a cut-and-dried programme of human development. But my one really convincing retort to all his arguments was to reply, "Oh; on broad lines, perhaps. On the very broadest lines."

Strickland's attitude just then was so obviously influenced by his desires. He had married at forty, had one child, a boy, and was oppressed by the fear that he would not live to see his son's future. Strickland was obsessed with that idea for a time. He even went so far as to consult mediums. And a man of forty-five who will consult professional mediums about the future cannot be quite sane.

His sole excuse for that lapse was the plea that astrology had failed him. He had had two very expensive horoscopes cast, and they had been most grievously at fault concerning the first three years of little Strickland's life. Both forecasts had been gloomy with regard to those early years, prophesying a delicate constitution, unusual trouble with infantile complaints. And one horoscope shrugged its inspired shoulders at the critical period of teething, and continued with a kind of cynical despair, as if the astrologer were a little ashamed of the way he was earning his ten guineas: "Should he, however, survive. . . ." And the truth was that little Strickland was quite a fatiguingly healthy child. His appetite and his craving for exercise, even at the age of eight weeks, were, admittedly, almost abnormal.

So Strickland lost faith in the pattern of the stars, and tried mediums, who were not so nervous of the magistrates in those days. If he had stuck to one clairvoyante he might have laid his restless enquiry, but, unhappily, the first lady he visited misread her client's hopes, and mapped out a successful business career for his little son; and Strickland, who had already fulfilled that destiny in his own life, and had ambitions to see his son leading a "really sensible Government," took another opinion. The second prophetess, pathetically anxious to please, no doubt, saw young Strickland as a Bishop; the third was a shade nearer to the mark with an Admiral; but the fourth—a charming young woman, recently engaged to be married, collecting a trousseau by her last professional efforts—made the boy a Poet.

After that Strickland bought a crystal, and tried to see the future for himself.

I laughed at him then, of course; and even now I feel inclined to laugh at those first foolish enquiries of his. But his very earnestness should have saved Strickland from anything like ridicule; and I am glad to remember that I did not laugh when he told me of the one and only vision that came to him rough the crystal—it was, by the way, an unusually fine specimen, as big as an orange. He picked it up second-hand, somewhere in Soho.

As I see it, one of the most intriguing features of Strickland's experience is the fact that he had ceased to probe his son's future when the vision came. The boy was seven years old then, and had a little sister of two and a half who had partly diverted her father's attention. And Strickland had probably outgrown the fear of his own premature death; though it may be that his passionate longing for assurance as to the glory of his boy's career had not so much spent itself as been thrust back into his sub-consciousness. Superficially the difference in him was quite obvious. The change of his tone, for example, when he spoke of his son. Even the manner of reference. The tender enunciation of "My little boy" had altered to "That young rascal of mine," just the proudly modest description of the ordinary father.

And when the vision came, neither he nor I related it in any way to his ancient search.

He came to my rooms one evening after dinner, produced the crystal from his pocket, and tossed it over to me.

"A present for a sceptic," he said. "I've finished with it."

I might have thought that he was clearing up the lumber of his old fancies if it had not been for his manner; but the garment of his initiation still clung to him and affected me with the strangeness of its mystery.

I shuddered.

"What did you see?" I asked.

"Oh! don't say you believe in it," he said; "after all your jeers at me."

"Did you see anything?" I insisted, nursing the crystal in the cave of my two hands. I stared into it and saw the faint pink of my magnified palm. No vision came to me; yet I was aware of some potency in the thing.

"Perhaps some reflection, some translation of one's subconsciousness. . . ." I ventured.

Strickland sneered. "By God, I hope not," he said.

"What were you—looking for?" I asked.

"For nothing. I wasn't looking for anything," he said. "I picked the thing up by the merest accident. I was going to give it to the little girl—as a plaything."

"And then. . . ." I prompted him.

"I saw a picture in it. It snatched my attention. I wasn't thinking. . . ."

"And the picture?"

"Hell. Just hell. The real thing; none of your picturesque flames and torture. It came out at me, as it were, and it was—well, the abomination of desolation, nothing more nor less that."

"But. . . ." I began.

He interrupted me. His eyes were fixed on the vision of a future that had become a fragment of his past. "A waste," he in a low, thoughtful voice. "A dead, horrible waste . . . all black and pitted and furrowed. . . it looked as if there had been some awful, blasting eruption. . . or as if the whole earth had been scorched and blighted by some unimaginably vast fire. But, oh! the terrible gauntness and death of it all."

He paused and threw his head back with a queer laugh before he continued in a new tone, "It was just a silly nightmare, that's all. And it had its inevitable element of the grotesque. In the middle of that waste there was a scarecrow, a live scarecrow—digging. Digging turnips, if you please. Oh! It was bosh, of course, absolute bosh. I shall have forgotten all about it next week. But I couldn't give the crystal to the little girl after that. You can keep it. Tell me if you get anything . . ."

So I kept the crystal, and sometimes stared into it. But no came to me.

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It was in the late autumn of 1919 that Strickland got permission to go out to France. The war had made an old man of him, although he was little over sixty; and he begged me to go with him. "I should like you to help me," he said. "I have a feeling that we might, perhaps, hear something about that young rascal of mine. 'Wounded and missing,' you know, always leaves one with just a hope."

The first beautiful release of peace was passing then into that restless craving for immense action which affected us all so strongly at that time; and the feeling was aggravated in my case by the realisation of impotence. I was too old to help.

I accepted Strickland's offer, eagerly. . .

I do not believe that he remembered his vision when, after a week's fruitless enquiry, we came one afternoon to the historic desert that had once been beautiful France. Certainly, he made no reference to his old experience; but he was almost senile. I noticed a difference in him, even in that one week.

But *I* remembered; and I had a fit of cold shivering that I could not control when we came out on to the awful plain that they now call The Plain of the Dead, and saw the figure of that one demented peasant, dressed in the grotesque relics of two nations' uniforms.

He was digging feverishly with his pointed spade, and I heard the ring of it as it struck.

It was not a turnip that he wrenched up.

The thing rolled towards us. . .

Young Strickland's head had always been a queer shape.