

The Forsaken Temple

By C. W. Leadbeater

Many years ago I was living in a little village seven or eight miles from London—a, quiet, straggling, old-fashioned place that might from its appearance have been a hundred miles at least from any of the busy centres of commerce. *Now* it is a village no longer, for the giant city, in its steady, resistless expansion, has absorbed it into itself; the old coach-road, once an avenue of great elm-trees as fine as any in the kingdom, is now flanked by trim suburban villas; a new railway station has been opened, and cheap workmen's tickets are issued; and the dear old picturesque, draughty, wooden cottages have been pulled down to make way for model artisans' dwellings. Well, I suppose it is the march of improvement—the advance of civilisation; and yet, perhaps, an old inhabitant may be excused for doubting whether the people were not healthier and happier in the quiet village days.

I had not been long in the place before I made the acquaintance of the clergyman of the district, and offered him such assistance as lay in my power in his parish work. This he was kind enough to accept, and finding that I was fond of children, appointed me a teacher in, and eventually superintendent of, his Sunday schools. This of course brought me into very close relations with the youth of the village, and especially with those who had been selected as choristers for the church. Among these latter I found two brothers, Lionel and Edgar St. Aubyn, who so evidently showed signs of a special musical talent that I offered to give them occasional instruction at my house to encourage them to develop it. Needless to say, they eagerly accepted the offer, and thus in time quite an attachment sprang up between us.

At this period I was much interested in the study of spiritualistic phenomena; and as I accidentally discovered that these two boys were good physical mediums, I had occasional quiet seances at my own house after the music lesson was over. Very curious some of our experiences were, but it is not of those I wish to speak now. I should mention that after these evening sittings it was my custom to walk home with my two choristers, who lived perhaps a mile and a half from my house.

Once, after such an evening, I had occasion to sit up writing until a late hour in the library where the sitting had taken place. I always observed that after a séance the furniture had an unpleasant way of creaking (sometimes even moving slightly at intervals) for some hours; and on this particular night this was specially noticeable. However, I wrote away, little heeding it, until about two o'clock, when suddenly, with out being conscious of the slightest reason for doing so, I felt an uncontrollable impulse to go to my bedroom, which was close by. Wondering what this might mean, I laid down my pen, opened the door, and stepped out into the passage.

What was my surprise to see the door of my bedroom ajar, and a light shining from it, where I knew that no light ought to be! I promptly went to the door, and without pushing it further open, looked cautiously round it. What I saw so far astonished me as to keep me in that position for some little time, staring helplessly. Although there was no apparent source of light—nothing like a lamp or a candle—the room was full of a soft silvery radiance that made every object clearly visible. Nothing unfamiliar met my hasty glance around the room until it fell upon the bed; but there—and as I write I can feel again the sudden chill which crept down my back at the sight—there lay the form of Lionel St. Aubyn, whom I had seen safely enter his mother's house five hours before!

I am bound to admit that my first impulse was a most unheroic one—to slam the door and rush back headlong into my cosy library; however, I resisted it, mustered up my courage, pushed open the door a little further, and walked slowly to the foot of the bed. Yes, there he lay; unmistakably Lionel, and yet not looking in the least as I had ever seen him look before. His hands were crossed upon his breast, and his wide-open eyes looked full into mine, but with no ordinary expression; and though I had not till then seen it, I felt at once instinctively that their bright fixed gaze was that of supreme clairvoyant vision, and that the boy ‘was in that highest state of ecstatic trance, which even great mesmerists can but rarely superinduce in their best subjects.

I thought I saw recognition come into his eyes, but there was not the slightest movement of face or limb; the spell seemed far too deep for that. He was dressed in a long white robe not unlike the ecclesiastical alb, and across his breast there was a broad crimson sash, edged and heavily embroidered with gold. The feelings with which I regarded this extraordinary apparition are more easily imagined than described; so prominent among them, I know, was the thought that surely I must be asleep, and dreaming all this, that I distinctly remember pinching my left arm, as men do in novels, to find out whether I was really awake. The result seemed to prove that I was, so I leaned my folded arms on the foot of the bedstead for a moment, trying to muster up courage to step forward and *touch* my unexpected guest.

But as I paused, a change seemed to take place in my surroundings; the walls of my room appeared somehow to expand, and suddenly—though still leaning on the foot of the bed, and still closely watching its mysterious occupant—I found that we were in the centre of some vast, gloomy temple, such as those of ancient Egypt, whose massive pillars stretched away on all sides, while its roof was so lofty as to be scarcely discernible in the dim religious light. As I looked round in astonishment I could just distinguish that the walls were covered with huge paintings (some at least of the figures being considerably above life-size) though the light was not strong enough to show them clearly. We were quite alone, and my wandering glance soon fixed itself again on the incredible presence of my entranced companion.

Now came an experience which I am aware it is difficult, if not impossible, for me to explain adequately. I can only say that I seemed to myself for the time being to have solved the problem of maintaining a conscious existence in two places at once; for while still gazing fixedly at Lionel inside the temple, I knew that I was also standing outside the same temple, in front of the grand entrance. A magnificent façade it was, apparently facing the west; for a great flight of broad black marble steps (fifty of them at least) which, extending the whole width of the building, led up to it from the plain, gleamed blood-red under the horizontal rays of the setting sun. I turned, and looked for surrounding habitations, but nothing was visible in any direction but one level unbroken desert of sand, save only three tall palm-trees in the distance on my right hand. Never till my dying day can I forget that weird, desolate picture—that limitless yellow desert, the solitary clump of palm-trees, and that huge forsaken temple bathed in blood-red light.

Quickly this scene faded away, and I was inside again, though still preserving that strange double consciousness; for while one part of me still remained in its original posture, the other saw the wonderful paintings on the walls pass before it like the dissolving views of a magic lantern. Unfortunately I have never been able to recall clearly the subject of those pictures, but I know that they were of a most exciting nature, and that the figures were remarkably spirited and life-like. This exhibition seemed to last for some time; and then, quite suddenly, my consciousness was no longer divided, but once more concentrated itself where the visible body had been all the time—leaning with my folded arms on the foot of the bedstead gazing fixedly on the face of the boy.

As I stood there, bewildered, awe-stricken, a voice fell upon my ear with startling suddenness—quite a natural, ordinary voice, though it spoke clearly and emphatically.

“Lionel must not be mesmerised,” it said; “it would kill him.”

I looked round hastily, but no one was visible, and no further remark was made. Once again I pinched my arm, hoping to find myself dreaming; but no—the result was the same as ever, and I felt that the awe which was upon me would develop into ignoble fear unless I did something to break the spell; so with an effort I pulled myself together, and moved slowly along the side of the bed.

I stood directly over Lionel—I bent my head down till I was looking close into his face; but not a muscle moved, not a shadow of change came into the expression of those wonderful luminous eyes, and for some moments I remained spell-bound, breathless, my face within a few inches of his. Then by a mighty effort I shook off the controlling influence and grasped wildly at the figure before me. In a moment the light vanished, and I found myself in total darkness kneeling beside my own bed, and tightly grasping the counterpane with both hands!

I rose, gathered my scattered wits, and tried to persuade myself that I must have fallen asleep in my chair, dreamed an extraordinarily vivid dream, and in the course of it walked into my bedroom. I cannot say that even then I felt at all satisfied with this explanation, because my common-sense assured me that it was all wrong; but at any rate I decided that I could do no more work that night, so I locked my desk, bathed my head with cold water, and went to bed.

Though I rose late the next morning, I still felt extremely weak and fatigued, which I attributed to the influence of my dream; however, I decided to say nothing about it, lest it should alarm my mother. I remember looking curiously in the broad daylight at the black marks made on my left arm by the pinches I had given myself in my dream.

That evening it chanced that Lionel St. Aubyn had to call at my house again—I forget now for what purpose; but I remember very distinctly that in course of conversation he suddenly said:

“O, sir, I had *such* a curious dream last night!”

A sort of electric shock ran through me at the words, but I retained sufficient presence of mind to say:

“Had you? Well, I am just coming out, so you can tell me about it as we walk along.”

Even then I had some uneasy prevision of what was coming—enough at least to make me wish to get him out of earshot from my mother before he said any more. As soon as we were outside, I asked for particulars, and the cold thrill of last night ran down my spine when he began by saying:

“I dreamt, sir, that I was lying on a bed—not asleep, somehow, though I couldn’t move hand or foot; but I could see quite well, and I had a strange feeling that I have never had before. I felt *so* wise, as though I could have answered any question in the world, if only some one had asked me.”

“How did you lie, Lionel?” I asked him; and I could feel my hair rise gently as he answered:

“I lay on my back, with my hands crossed in front of me.”

“I suppose you were dressed just as you are now?”

“O no, sir! I was dressed in a sort of long white gown, such as the priest wears under his chasuble; and across my breast and over one shoulder I had a broad band of red and gold; it looked *so* pretty, you can’t think.”

I knew only too well how it had looked, but I kept my thoughts to myself. Of course I saw by this time that my last night’s expedition was more than an ordinary dream, and I felt that his experiences would prove to be the same as mine; but I had a wild feeling of struggling against

fate which prompted me to make every effort to find some difference, some flaw which would give me a loophole of escape from that conclusion; so I went on:

“You were in your own bedroom, of course?”

But he replied:

“No, sir; at first I was in a room that I thought I knew, and then suddenly it seemed to grow larger, and it was not a room at all, but a great strange temple, like the pictures I have seen in books, with great heavy pillars, and beautiful pictures painted on its walls.”

“This was a very interesting dream, Lionel; tell me in what sort of city this temple stood.”

It was quite useless; I could not mislead him. The inevitable answer came, as I knew it would:

“Not in a city at all, sir; it was in the middle of a great plain of sand, like the Sahara desert in our geography books; and I could see nothing but sand all round, except far away on the right three nice tall trees with no branches, such as we see in the pictures of Palestine.”

“And what was your temple built of?”

“Of shining black stone, sir; but the great flight of steps in front looked all red, like fire, because of the sun shining it.”

But how could you see all this when you were inside, boy?”

“Well, sir, I don’t know; it was odd, but I seemed somehow to be outside and inside too; and though I could not move all the time, yet I seemed to go and look at all the beautiful pictures on the walls, but I could not understand how it was.”

And now at last I asked the question that had been in my mind from the first—which I longed, yet dreaded, to put:

“Did you see any men in this strange dream, Lionel?”

“Yes, sir” (looking up brightly) “I saw *you*; only you, no other men.”

I tried to laugh, though I am conscious it must have been but a feeble attempt, and asked what I had appeared to be doing.

“You came in sir, when I was in the room, you put your head round the door first and when you saw me you looked surprised, and stared at me ever so long; and then you came in, and walked slowly up to the foot of my bed. You took hold of your left arm with your right hand, and seemed to be pulling and pinching at it. Then you leaned your arms on the bedstead, and stood like that all the while we were in that strange temple, and while I saw the pictures. When they were gone you took hold of your arm again, and then you came slowly along the side of the bed towards me. You looked so wild and strange that I was quite frightened.” (‘I have no doubt I did,’ thought I, ‘I certainly felt so’). “Then you came and stooped down till your face nearly touched mine, and still I could not move. Then suddenly you seemed to give a spring, and catch at me with your hands; and that woke me, and I found I was lying safe in my own bed at home.”

As may readily be imagined, this exact confirmation of my own experience, and the strange way in which the boy had evidently seen me doing, even in the merest details, just what I seemed to myself to do, had a very eerie effect on my mind as it was poured out to me in innocent childish frankness, while we passed through the weird moonlight and the deep shadows of the great trees on that lonely road; but I endeavoured to confine myself to ordinary expressions of astonishment and interest, and to this day Lionel St. Aubyn has no idea how remarkable an experience his ‘curious dream’ really was.

I have stated these facts with scrupulous exactness just as they occurred. How are they to be explained? Two possibilities occur to me, but there are difficulties about both of them. The experience may be an instance of the phenomenon called double dreaming, wherein two persons have simultaneously exactly the same dream. It is probable that when that happens, only one of

the persons really actively dreams, and the pictures which he sees or evokes are somehow reflected into the brain of the other, or even hypnotically impressed thereupon. In such cases the two partners in the experience usually see and do exactly the same things; but this time, though both saw the same objects and both had the singular experience of double consciousness, our actions were quite different, and each saw the other as that other imagined himself to be.

The other hypothesis is that Lionel was really in my room in his astral body, and that either he was materialised, or my sight was somehow temporarily opened so that I could see him; that we did actually somehow journey together in astral bodies through space to that forsaken temple in the far-off desert, and there go through together a very strange experience. This theory also presents difficulties, and to those who have never studied these matters it will appear far more improbable than the other; yet I myself believe it to be at least partially true. I believe that Lionel *was* brought astrally into my room, and that I really saw him there; though it is possible that the vision of the forsaken temple may then have been impressed upon us both by some will stronger than our own.

I have always had a suspicion that a third will *was* concerned in the affair, and that the words spoken by the mysterious voice were the *raison d'être* of the whole. For an adult member of the choir, who had heard of our successful séances, was keenly anxious to try his alleged mesmeric powers upon Lionel, asserting that so good a medium would probably be clairvoyant in trance. My instinct was strongly against this, though I had no reason to give for it, I should probably have yielded to persuasion; but after this curious occurrence I refused quite definitely to sanction any experiment of that kind, holding that after such a warning it would be the height of folly. Now, the giving of that warning *may* have been the object of the vision, and all the rest of the display may have been simply intended to impress the order strongly on our minds—as it certainly did.