

## Paul

I have just seen Paul. He looks ageless, yet he must be over seventy years old. At first I thought I must be mistaken, as it is nearly forty years since I last saw him, but he saw me, and a look of recognition came into his eyes. He smiled the same old smile and waved to me as he tried to weave his way through the crowds of children with sailing boats.

I was sitting on the top of Hampstead Heath by the Whitestone Pond with my two small grandsons, who were sailing their boats in the pond. I had just made up my mind to get ready to go home,

While he was approaching, one of the boys fell into the water. Paul and I reached out together to get him out, and as we did so Paul caught one of my hands in his. I felt a shock go through me at his touch.

"He'll be alright!" said Paul. "He isn't hurt, only wet. Can you manage?"

"Yes, thank you!" I answered, then before he had time to say more, I had gathered up the boats and boys and made for my little car parked by the side of the road.

"Mary! Mary!"

It was Paul calling. He signalled to me to stop, but I bundled the children into the car, started the engine and moved away down the hill before he had time to recover.

When I was alone that night, my mind went back to the first time we had met on this very same Heath. He was taking a walk from Swales Lane in Highgate to Hampstead, and I was walking from Hampstead to Highgate. It had been raining the night before and I was trying to avoid a particularly marshy patch of ground, when I slipped and fell, burying my arms in soft, wet mud. I felt like crying, but then I looked up to see what appeared to be a pair of very blue eyes on very long legs. It was Paul. We both burst out laughing. He helped me to my feet, and after I had wiped most of the mud off, he insisted I took off my wet jersey and put on his dry pullover.

It was the most natural thing in the world that we strolled into the nearest cafe for coffee. Sitting there with him seemed the only thing I ever wanted to do. We met many times after that; so when he asked me to marry him my happiness was complete. He took me to see his house, where we were to live after we were married. He showed me his studio where he did all his work. There were paints and canvases everywhere, piles of books on chairs, and empty wine bottles.

"This is my studio-cum-workshop-cum-hide-away," he told me.

For some reason I did not feel comfortable in that room. It had an atmosphere of dryness and old age, but as it was but three weeks to our wedding day I put it down to pre-wedding nerves, telling myself not to be silly.

I wandered around the room while Paul made coffee thinking how lucky I was to have met this wonderful man. We sat and talked of many things, of hopes and dreams. We talked of many things including mesmerism, body levitation, and hypnotism.

One night as I lay in bed I thought it might be rather fun if I could impress myself on him, so that he thought of me at the same time and we could laugh about it next time we met. I lay in bed and looked around the room. It was just the same as many other rooms except that I did have a photograph to look at of the man I was about to marry. Just one taken when he was dressed in the Edwardian style, and he would not have another one taken. I closed my eyes and relaxed completely. After a while I felt as though I was floating on a warm, fluffy summer cloud. I called his name.

"Paul! Paul!" I seemed to see his face before me so I called again.

"Paul! Paul!"

A slight wave of perspiration broke over me, and I began to be a little nervous.

I found I was almost powerless to move my limbs. My head and feet went up and down in a rocking motion, up and down, up and down. I was now very afraid but could not do anything to help myself. My body rose into the air until it formed an arch with my head and feet resting on the bed. This happened twice. I felt as light as a feather.

My body started the rocking motion again. Then, hovering over the bed for a few moments, I drifted like a cloud through the open window into the night. As I drifted along at rooftop level, I tried to stand upright but the effort of moving made me turn over on to my stomach and in this way I continued to travel. Floating in a rushing wind, feet first with my head downwards was terrifying. I began to gather speed. I passed Whitestone Pond, and went on and on, twisting and turning.

I now heard low murmurings in my ears. I saw shapes floating with me, tattered, black things, dank smelling and horrible. They pulled at me with their crooked fingers and clawed at my clothes. Then they began to drag me down in a sharp descent. Then I knew where I was going. To Paul....

When I came to Paul's house, the Tattered Things screamed, laughed and danced round me. Then, as I descended they pushed me violently through the walls into the studio. There was Paul, looking at me with unseeing eyes. He passed his hand over his face as if he was very weary, then he saw me.

"Oh, Mary, my dear, I thought you would come!." and reaching out his hands he drew me to his side and took me in his arms as he had done so many times before. As he held me I looked into the mirror on the wall.

To my horror I saw that the face of the man in the mirror was that of an old, old man. His neck was brown, skinny and wrinkled in criss-cross folds. The old man looked at me with Paul's eyes and smiled with his dry, old mouth. He was holding me closely and smoothing my hair with claw-like hands. He smelled of age, mildew, and decay....

I broke away from this old man, yet who was the Paul that I loved.

I ran from the house, stumbling as I did so until I reached my own front door where I collapsed on the door step.

When I awoke at last, I was in bed with the sun shining through the window. The dream, or experience of the night before came flooding back to me. I knew I could never marry Paul. I left the country soon after, taking a job as a nanny in Canada, and married Eddie, not seeing Paul again until yesterday on Hampstead Heath. He has not changed at all, nor yet grown older in forty years. I never wish to see him again. He scares, and frightens me. He should grow old with the years.

I never wish to see him again.