Edward Frederic Benson

The Confession of Charles Linkworth

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Lesen Kopfkino Spaß
Lesen Kopfkino Spaß, Hans-Jürgen-Str. 7, 47051 Duisburg
Telefon: 0203 / 9 29 29 29, Fax: 0203 / 9 29 29 30
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Edward Frederic Benson (1867–1940)

DR. TEMPLE'S FIRST DISCOVERY. He arrived three days before the Christmas Eve on which his vacation, and that of his clerk, was to fall due, when his last hope of his free vacation, apart from the Christmas Day and Boxing Day, was at a brisk forward and very promising stage. The week that great friends meant and meant, was the week in which he was to be free from work, and it was about with these very thoughts that he had set out, refreshed, for these three which hope was not realized, and he was sitting in his office on the morning of Monday, the 23 of December, when the doctor arrived, not to exercise his skill and professional knowledge, but to tell him that he was ill himself, and that he could by the sheer natural force of living. Then the news that hope could no longer be entertained was left with him

telephone is, just for an hour to give it plenty of time between half-past nine and half-past ten. I will be ready for it at the other end. Supposing I am ruga up, I will, when it has finished, ring two up to make sure that I was not being called in—in the usual way. »

« And there is nothing to be afraid of, sir! » asked the man.

Dr. Teesdale remembered his own moment of terror this morning, but he spoke quite sincerely.

« I am sure there is nothing to be afraid of, » he said, reassuringly.

Dr. Teesdale had a dinner engagement that night, which he broke, and was sitting alone in his study by half past-nine. In the present state of human ignorance as to the law which governs the movements of spirits severed from the body, he could not tell the warder why it was that their visits are so often periodic, timed to punctuality according to our scheme of hours, but in scores of tabulated instances of the appearance of revenants, especially if the soul was in sore need of help, so might be the case here, he found that they came at the same hour of day or night. As a rule, too, their power of making themselves seen or heard or felt grew greater for some little while after death, subsequently growing weaker as they became less earth-bound, or often after that ceasing altogether, and he was prepared to sight for a less indistinct impression. The spirit apparently for the sake of economy of its disembodiment is weak, like a moth newly broken out from its chrysalis—and then suddenly the telephone bell rang, not so faintly as the night before, but still not with its ordinary imperative tone.

Dr. Teesdale instantly got up and put the receiver to his ear. And what he heard was heartbroken sobbing, strong spasms that seemed to tear the weeper.

He waited for a little before speaking, himself cold with some nameless fear, and yet profoundly moved to help, if he was able.

« Yes, yes, » he said at length, hearing his own voice tremble. « I am Dr. Teesdale. What can I do for you? And who are you? » he added, though he felt that it was a needless question.

Slowly the sobbing died down, the whispers took its place, still broken by crying.

« I want to tell, sir—I want to tell—I must tell, »

« Yes, tell me, what is it? » said the doctor.

« No, not you—another gentleman, who used to come to see me. Will you speak to him what I say to you? —I can't make him hear me or see me. »

« Who are you? » asked Dr. Teesdale suddenly.

« Charles Linkworth. I thought you knew. I am very miserable. I can't leave the prison—and it is cold. Will you send for the other gentleman? »

« Do you mean the chaplain? » asked Dr. Teesdale.

« Yes, the chaplain. He read the service when I went across the yard yesterday. I shan't be so miserable when I have told. »

The doctor hesitated a moment. This was a strange story that he would have to tell Mr. Dawkins, the prison chaplain, that at the other end of the telephone was the spirit of the man executed yesterday. And yet he utterly believed that it was so, that this unhappy spirit was in misery and wanted to tell. « There was no need to ask what he wanted to tell.

« Yes, I will ask him to come here, » he said at length.

« Thank you, sir, a thousand times. You will make him come, won't you? »

The voice was growing fainter.

« It must be to-morrow night, » it said. « I can't speak longer now. I have to go to see—oh, my God, » The sobs broke out afresh, sounding fainter and fainter. But it was in a frenzy of terrified interest that Dr. Teesdale spoke.

« Tie see what! » he cried. « Tell me what you are doing, what is happening to you? »

« I can't tell you. I may tn't tell you, » said the voice very faint. « That is part—» and it died away altogether.

Dr. Teesdale waited a little, but there was no further sound of any kind, except the chuckling and croaking of the instrument. He put the receiver on to its hook again, and then became aware for the first time that his forehead was streaming with some cold dew of horror. His ears sang; his heart beat very quick and faint, and he sat down to recover himself. Once or twice he asked himself if it was possible that some terrible jest was being played on him, but he knew that could not be so; he felt perfectly sure that he had been speaking with a soul in torment in contrition for the terrible and irremediable act it had committed. It was no delusion of his senses, either; here in this comfortable room of his in Bedford Square, with London cheerfully roaring round him, he had spoken with the spirit of Charles Linkworth.

But he had no time (nor indeed inclination, for somehow his soul sat shuddering within him) to indulge in meditation. First of all he rang up the prison.

« Warder Dyycott? » he asked.

There was a perceptible tremor in the man's voice as he answered.

« Yes, sir. Is it Dr. Teesdale? »

« Yes. Has anything happened here with you? »

Twice it seemed that the man tried to speak and could not. At the third attempt the words came « Yes, sir. He has been here. I saw him go into the room where the telephone is. »

« Ah! Did you speak to him? »

« No, sir ; I sweated and prayed. And there's half a dozen men as have been screaming in their sleep last night. But it's quiet again now. I think he has gone into the execution shed. »

« Yes, Well, I think there will be no more disturbance now. By the way, please give me Mr. Dawkins's home address. »

This was given him, and Dr. Teesdale proceeded to write to the chaplain, asking him to dine with him on the following night. But suddenly he found that he could not write at his accustomed desk, with the telephone standing close to him, and he went upstairs to the drawing-room which he seldom used, except when he entertained his friends. There he recaptured the serenity of his nerves, and could control his hand. The note completed Mr. Dawkins to dine with him next night, and he was left to fill him a very strange history and ask his help. « Even if you have any other engagement, » he concluded, « I seriously request you to give it up. To-night, I did the same.

« I should bitterly have regretted it if I had not. »

Next night accordingly, the two sat at their dinner in the doctor's dining-room, and when they were left to their cigarettes and coffee the doctor spoke.

« You must not think me mad, sir, » said Dawkins, « he said, « when you hear what I have got to tell you. »

Mr. Dawkins laughed.

« I will certainly promise not to do that, » he said.

« Good. Last night and the night before, a little later in the evening than this, I spoke through the telephone with the spirit of the man we saw executed two days ago, Charles Linkworth. »

The chaplain did not laugh. He pushed back his chair, looking annoyed.

« Teesdale, » he said, « is it to tell me this—I don't want to be rude—but this hoax tale that you have brought me here this evening? »

« Yes. You have not heard half of it. He asked me last night to get hold of one. He wants to tell you something. We can guess, I think, what it is. »

Dawkins got up.

« Please let me bear no more of it, » he said. « The dead do not return. In what state or under what condition they exist has never been revealed to us. But they have done with all material things. »

« But I must tell you more, » said the doctor. « Two nights ago I was rang up, but very faintly, and could only hear whispers. I instantly inquired where the call came from and was told it came from the prison. I rang up the prison, and Warder Dyycott told me that nobody had rang me up. He, too, was conscious of a presence. »

« I think that man drinks, » said Dawkins, sharply.

The doctor passed a moment.

« My dear fellow, you should know that we sort of thing, » he said. « He is one of the steadiest men we have got. And if he drinks, why not I also? »

The chaplain sat down again.

« You must forgive me, » he said, « but I can't go into this. These are dangerous matters to meddle with. Besides, how do you know it is not a hoax? »

« Played by whom? » asked the doctor. « Hark! »

The telephone bell suddenly rang. It was clearly audible to the doctor.

« Don't you hear it? » he said.

« Hear what? »

« The telephone bell ringing. »

« I hear no bell, » said the chaplain, rather angrily. « There is no bell ringing. »

The doctor did not answer, but went through into his study, and turned on the lights. Then he took the receiver and mouthpiece off its hook.

« Yes? » he said, in a voice that trembled. « Who is it? Yes! Mr. Dawkins is here. I will try and get him to speak to you. » He went back into the other room.

« Dawkins, » he said, « there is a soul in agony. I pray you to listen. For God's sake come and listen. »

The chaplain hesitated a moment.

« As you will, » he said.

He took up the receiver and put it to his ear.

« I am Mr. Dawkins, » he said.

He waited.

« I can hear nothing whatever, » he said at length. « Ah, there was something there. The faintest whisper. »

« Ah, try to hear, try to hear! » said the doctor.

Again the chaplain listened. Suddenly he laid the instrument down, frowning.

« Something—somebody said, « I killed her, I confess it. I want to be forgiven. » It's a hoax, my dear Teesdale. Somebody knowing your sympathetic leanings is playing a very grim joke on you. I can't believe it. »

Dr. Teesdale took up the receiver.

« I am Dr. Teesdale, » he said. « Can you give Mr. Dawkins some sign that it is you? »

Then he laid it down again.

« He says he thinks he can, » he said. « We must wait. »

The evening was again very warm, and the window into the paved yard at the back of the house was open. For five minutes or so the two men stood in silence, waiting, and nothing happened. Then the chaplain spoke.

« I think that is sufficiently conclusive, » he said.

Even as he spoke a very cold draught of air suddenly blew into the room, making the papers on the desk rustle. Dr. Teesdale went to the window and closed it.

« Did you feel that? » he asked.

« Yes, a breath of air. Chilly. »

Once again in the closed room it stirred again.

« And did you feel that? » asked the doctor.

The chaplain nodded. He felt his heart hammering in his throat suddenly.

« Defend us from all peril and danger of this coming night, » he exclaimed.

« Something is coming! » said the doctor.

As he spoke it came. In the centre of the room not three yards away from them stood the figure of a man with his head bent over on to his shoulder, so that the face was not visible. Then he took his head in both his hands and raised it like a weight, and looked them in the face. The eyes and tongue protruded, a livid mark was round the neck. Then there came a sharp rattle on the boards of the floor, and the figure was no longer there. But on the floor there lay a new rope.

For a long while neither spoke. The sweat poured off the doctor's face, and the chaplain's white lips whispered prayers. Then he in a huge effort the doctor pulled himself together. He pointed at the rope.

« It has been missing since the execution, » he said.

Then again the telephone bell rang. This time the chaplain needed no prompting. He went to it at once and the ringing ceased. For a while he listened in silence.

« Charles Linkworth, » he said at length, « in the sight of God, in whose presence you stand, are you truly sorry for your sin? »

Some answer inaudible to the doctor came, and the chaplain closed his eyes. And Dr. Teesdale knelt as he heard the words of the Absolution.

At the close there was silence again.

« I can hear nothing more, » said the chaplain, replacing the receiver.

Presently the doctor's man-servant came in with the tray of spirits and syphon. Dr. Teesdale pointed without looking to where the apparition had been.

« Take the rope that is there and burn it, Parker, » he said.

There was a moment's silence.

« There is no rope, sir, » said Parker.

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