

A TRUE STORY

Benjamin Disraeli

Table of Contents

<u>A TRUE STORY</u>	1
<u>Benjamin Disraeli</u>	2

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SIR, — When I was a young boy, I had delicate health, and was somewhat of a pensive and contemplative turn of mind; it was my delight in the long summer evenings to slip away from my noisy and more robust companions, that I might walk in the shade of a venerable wood, my favourite haunt, and listen to the cawing of the old rooks, who seemed as fond of this retreat as I was.

One evening I sat later than usual, though the distant sound of the cathedral clock had more than once warned me to my home. There was a stillness in all nature that I was unwilling to disturb by the least motion. From this reverie I was suddenly startled by the sight of a tall, slender female who was standing by me, looking sorrowfully and steadily in my face. She was dressed in white, from head to foot, in a fashion I had never seen before; her garments were unusually long and flowing, and resulted as she glided through the low shrubs near me as if they were made of the richest silk. My heart beat as if I were dying, and I knew not that I could have stirred from the spot; but she seemed so very mild and beautiful, I did not attempt it. Her pale brown hair was braided round her head, but there were some locks that strayed upon her neck; and altogether she looked like a lovely picture, but not like a living woman. I closed my eyes forcibly with my hands, and when I looked again she had vanished.

I cannot exactly say why I did not on my return speak of this beautiful appearance, nor why, with a strange mixture of hope and fear, I went again and again to the same spot that I might see her. She always came, and often in the storm and plashing rain, that never seemed to touch or to annoy her, and looked sweetly at me, and silently passed on; and though she was so near to me, that once the wind lifted these light straying locks, and I felt them against my cheek, yet I never could move or speak to her. I fell ill, and when I recovered, my mother closely questioned me of the tall lady, of whom, in the height of my fever, I had so often spoken.

I cannot tell you what a weight was taken from my boyish spirits when I learned that this was no apparition, but a most lovely woman; not young, though she had kept her young looks, for the grief which had broken her heart seemed to have spared her beauty.

When the rebel troops were retreating after their total defeat, in that very wood I was so fond of, a young officer, unable any longer to endure the anguish of his wounds, sunk from his horse, and laid himself down to die. he was found there by the daughter of Sir Henry R——, and conveyed by a trusty domestic to her father's mansion. Sir Henry was a loyalist; but the officer's desperate condition excited his compassion, and his many wounds spoke a language a brave man could not misunderstand. Sir Henry's daughter, with many tears, pleaded for him and pronounced that he should be carefully and secretly attended. And well she kept that promise, for she waited upon him (her mother being long dead) for many weeks, and anxiously watched for the first opening of eyes, that, languid as he was, looked brightly and gratefully upon his nurse.

You may fancy better than I can tell you, as he slowly recovered, all the moments that were spent in reading, and low-voiced singing, and gentle playing on the lute, and how many fresh flowers were brought to one whose wounded limbs would not bear him to gather them for himself, and how calmly the days glided on in blessedness of returning health, and in that sweet silence so carefully enjoined him. I will pass by this to speak of one day, which brighter and pleasanter than others, did not seem more bright or more lovely than the looks of the young maiden, as she gaily spoke of "a little festival which (though it must bear an unworthier name) she meant really to give in honour of her guest's recovery." "And it is time, lady," said he, "for that guest so tended and honoured, to tell you his whole story, and speak to you of one who will help him to thank you; may I ask you, fair lady, to write a little billet for me, which even in these times of danger I may find some means to forward?" To his mother, no doubt, she thought, as with light steps and a lighter heart she seated herself by his couch, and smilingly bade him dictate; but when he said "My dear wife," and lifted up his eyes to be asked for more, he saw before him a pale statue, that gave him one look of utter despair, and fell — for he had no power to help her — heavily at his feet. Those eyes never truly reflected the pure soul again, or answered by answering looks the found enquiries of

A TRUE STORY

her poor old father. She lived to be as I saw her, — sweet and gentle, and delicate always; but reason returned no more. She visited till the day of her death the spot where she first saw that young soldier, and dressed herself in the very clothes that he said so well became her.

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