

Strange Meeting

A short story by Mike Roden

It was unnaturally quiet in Battersea Park. The usual grumbling roar of traffic on the Embankment was missing, no planes droned overhead and the parakeets were unusually silent. Perhaps the world was relaxing into this glorious early summer day. I was not relaxing, however: I was late. I was due at the park cafe by midday to join my wife and a couple of friends, and now I had to hurry.

As I started past the lake, my mobile phone rang. It was a new phone, and one of the reasons that I was late was that I had been playing around with different **ring tones and I'd ended up with a full blooded orchestral version of the Ride of the Valkyries, set ear splittingly loud.** It took me a little while to find the phone. Seeing the number I resigned myself to a long conversation.

"Hello there." I sat down on a bench facing the lake. For several minutes I had a wide-ranging, occasionally heated discussion about the vagaries of the health service, local political issues and the iniquities of the world in general.

As the conversation continued, I became aware that I was being watched. The woman was standing very still, a few yards to my left in the dapple of shade and light under the canopy of leaves: a tall, slim silhouette in a dark dress sweeping the

ground. Her wide-brimmed hat cast a shadow over her face.

"Are you there?" said the voice at the other end.

"Yes, I'm here," I said, suddenly not entirely sure where I was.

I had seen an old postcard recently, a moment frozen in time – a woman in a long dark dress, with a wide brimmed hat, turned slightly away from the camera staring out across the park lake. The legend on the bottom of the picture said *Battersea Park, 1908.*

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The woman moved slightly, and for a moment I thought she was going to come over and speak to me. But she started to turn away.

My caller distracted me. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I said testily, and then I blinked. The woman was no longer there. The path was quite empty in both directions.

I suddenly recalled the famous story about two women visiting the Palace of Versailles, and finding themselves briefly back in the time of Marie Antoinette.

Most people didn't believe them, and I knew what I'd just seen, but I wasn't sure I believed it myself.

"Sorry, have to go," I said, and as if a spell had been broken, there was noise around me again, aircraft overhead, a helicopter in the distance, the sound of children in the playground, the clamour of a pair of parakeets squabbling.

And round the next corner came two figures, a gentleman resplendent in top hat and tails, and a lady in a glamorous outfit of green silk, the skirt grazing the top of her polished boots.

Suddenly I felt very stupid. The others would be only too delighted to poke fun at me for forgetting that today there was a celebration of 150 years of Battersea Park. The place was filled with people in Victorian and Edwardian dress, and there were even cyclists riding ancient machines and clad in character. My wife was suitably amused by **my 'supernatural' experience.**

Our friends arrived as I was having a well earned beer and enjoying the smell of burgers **cooking over at the cafe's** barbecue. Harriet glanced at a couple of the Edwardian impersonators going past. **"Oh that reminds me,"** she said, **"We were doing some clearing out, the other day and I found this."** She handed me a small leather bound volume.

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"I thought you might be able to sell it on eBay."

"Recollections of a Battersea Lady?" I said. There was no date, or any author's name. "Probably privately printed – pre-first world war."

My wife took it off me. "No pictures," she said, flicking it through it, and then - "I don't believe it..." She thrust the open book towards me. "Look at that!"

This is what that anonymous Edwardian lady, circa 1908, had

written:

"I was taking my usual morning stroll in the Park, walking by the lake, before luncheon, when I had the strangest encounter.

The peace of the day was suddenly shattered by what sounded like a discordant musical box playing what I took to be a short extract from one of Herr Wagner's operas. I then observed a grey haired hatless gentleman of middle years take a seat on one of the benches. His left hand was pressed to his cheek and I thought he might be unwell. However, he then proceeded to conduct a spirited

conversation with himself, occasionally jabbing the air to emphasise some point or other. I was amused rather than alarmed, but felt I should take myself safely away from him, as he appeared to be watching me with some interest, while continuing his conversation. I smiled politely, and began to turn away, when suddenly he was no longer there. He had quite vanished. I can only suppose he must have been a ghost."

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