



**STRANGE TALES**

by

**EDDA WESTBURY**

## Synopsis

*Strange Tales* offers a unique blend of science fiction and fantasy in this wonderful collection of short stories. Absorbing tales of mystery, the unreal and pure fantasy will have you turning the pages in this exciting book by promising new author – Edda Westbury.

From the charms of ‘**The Believer**’, a story about a mild mannered 74 year old, who has for most of his life, lived along side ghosts, playing by their rules and being all the better for it, to ‘**The Traveller**’, a delightful story of discovery and adventures through time.

Totally absorbing, this imaginative collection is a must for any science fiction/fantasy reader.

## Chapter One

### The Gift

In a quiet side street, in a district of Liverpool which would now come under the heading of inner city, the delicate lace curtains, discreetly covering the lower front bay window of a large terraced house, twitched aside almost imperceptibly as a gleaming Rolls Royce pulled up gently outside.

Hidden unobtrusively, behind the curtain, Miles Gordonson, self proclaimed head of the Everton Spiritualist Association, of which he was the sole member, allowed himself an indulgent smile of satisfaction, while he watched his next victim, a grey haired, expensively but understatedly dressed, middle aged woman being helped to alight from the car by her chauffeur.

Mrs Sedgewick glanced nervously about the silent, narrow street before walking, uncertainly, towards the front door of number 11 and reaching to press the bell. After counting to ten, Miles answered the door wearing a reassuring mask of welcome and

ushered the, still pretty woman, along the brightly lit lobby and into a comfortable living room, which exuded an air of normality.

“Please allow me to take your outdoor things to the front parlour Mrs Sedgewick. Do be seated and make yourself at home. I’ll make us both a nice cup of tea. One sugar or two?”

Looking visibly more relaxed, Mrs Sedgewick declined the offer of sugar, knowing that it was still rationed, but gratefully accepted the invitation to take tea. She seated herself in an armchair by the fireside after handing her expensive, tailored overcoat to Miles, who was soon busy in the kitchen making tea and placing black market chocolate biscuits onto a fine porcelain platter. He was quite willing to swear that his favourite aunt had made them for him if the need arose.

Mrs Sedgewick had been referred to him by another of his Clients. Her son had been declared missing in action and presumed dead several months before the end of the war. That had been three years ago and Mrs Sedgewick had finally come to accept that her only child was indeed no longer amongst the living. It was her hope, however, that she would be able to make contact with him ‘on the other side’ through the mediumship of Miles Gordonson.

Miles insisted that his clients give him almost no information whatsoever about themselves or the person with whom they wanted to make contact. He operated his services through a mixture of psychology, kidology and detective work. For instance, Mrs Sedgewick came from a very old, distinguished Liverpool family and following several days of research at Liverpool’s central library, Miles knew possibly more about the Sedgewick family and the Milton family, from which Mrs Sedgewick originated, than most members of those families did.

He had learnt her son’s name, age, qualifications and military history. Old newspaper columns had given him a superficial knowledge of where, how and when he had gone missing; the client who had referred Mrs. Sedgewick to him had inadvertently supplied details of the young man’s personality and the mother and son relationship. It seemed also that he had been very close to his father. The grieving mother would, he knew, unwittingly provide him with further details. All that would then be required of him would be to give his client some authentic sounding messages of reassurance from the dearly departed and keep his fingers crossed that she would be pleased enough to make his efforts worth while. Miles never asked for a fee. His services, he was at pains to assure, were absolutely free, but if his client wished to give a donation towards the upkeep of his association he would gladly receive it.

By no means a particularly wicked man, Mr Gordonson would have made an excellent psychologist and, by today’s standards, an even better social worker had he had a formal education. As it was, he saw himself as a good Samaritan rather than a confidence trickster and had no trouble sleeping at nights.

“Forgive my manners Mrs Sedgewick. Would you prefer a small sherry instead of tea?”

“Tea will be fine thank you Mr. Gordonson.”

“Please call me Miles. I do so dislike formality on these occasions.”

“Thank you. You must call me Martha.”

“So kind. Charming name.”

“I must say, this is not at all what I expected.”

“Dear me Martha. I hope you weren’t expecting dimmed lights, a ouija board and a coven of thirteen. I’m afraid I do not go in for parlour tricks and ventriloquist acts. Nor do I go in to deep trances or use an imaginary American Indian guide with some ludicrous name like Big Chief Running Nose,” smiled Miles, oozing enough charm to make Martha Sedgewick giggle girlishly. “No, no, leave all that nonsense to the charlatans of this world is what I say. I simply meditate quietly and let the loved one impart his or her thoughts to me,

which I then pass on. It doesn't always work though. I must warn you not to get your hopes up just yet. Remember, this will be a new experience for your son. He may have difficulty getting through. You too must do your bit Martha and concentrate on the matter in hand."

Miles always liked to tell his clients to be prepared for disappointment. It made them so much more grateful when he got through first time. He would amaze Martha Sedgewick first by mentioning her son's name and military rank. She would know that she had not revealed either.

During the tea drinking ritual, Miles made polite and interesting conversation about his life's work and about how, from his childhood onwards, he had been 'in tune' with the Spirit world. He had read much on the subject and Mrs Sedgewick was duly impressed. She was an easy and willing victim but of course Miles did not think of her as such.

After clearing away the tea cups the spiritualist sat down opposite Martha and told her to concentrate her thoughts on her beloved son while he himself began to meditate in the hope that the young man....

"Wait ..... wait ..... your son ..... is his name Jonathan?"

"Yes, Yes. Please help me Miles. Please go on."

"I do begin to think that we will be successful, but remember Martha, you must concentrate."

"Yes," she whispered, watching Miles carefully and forgetting all about concentration.

Suddenly Miles slumped back in his chair. His eyes rolled up until only the whites were showing and his breathing became deep and noisy. Martha recoiled as a feeling of nausea swept over her. Miles had said that there would be no parlour tricks; no trances. What then was this? She had no time to speculate further.

A rasping voice said, "Matty, Matty is that really you?"

Only two people in the world had ever had the cheek or the permission to call Martha Sedgewick nee Milton, Matty. One was her husband who was alive and well, without the disconcerting knowledge that his wife was consulting a medium, and the other was her elder brother who had lost his life in the service of his country at Dunkirk. A shocked Martha realised that the voice was becoming clearer; there was no doubt in her mind now that it was that of her brother.

"Yes Bertie it's me, Martha. I feel very confused, is this really happening?"

"It certainly is old thing, but I have precious little time so please pay attention to what I have to tell you. Jonathan is not dead. Repeat, Jonathan is not dead. Now, now, for pity sake don't faint on me Matty. Jonathan needs help. At the moment he thinks that his name is Jules La Vere. Following a skirmish he was left badly wounded and suffering from amnesia. A mix up in ID papers gave him a new name and a new country of birth. The only living relative he has in this new life of his is a sister who refuses to believe that Jonathan is anyone other than her beloved brother, Jules.

"The resemblance is astonishing and Jonathan speaks French like a native which makes him appear authentic even to himself. The villagers hadn't seen the boy, Jules, since he was seventeen and managed to get over here to join the British Army so they accepted him without question. They feel very proud of him plus he's quite a hero with his wounded leg.

"You must go to him my dear. He is living on a small farm in Brittany. Write down this address. Now I must go Matty. God bless you until we meet again. Good luck finding Jonathan."

Moments later, Miles came out of his trance suffering from a blinding headache. For a few seconds he wondered where he was and even who he was. His puzzlement did not abate when Martha Sedgewick planted a large, wet, resounding kiss on his cheek and called him a wonderful, wonderful man.

“You truly have the gift,” she said. “Judith Collins was quite right about you. Says you have never failed her.”

“What happened?” Miles pleaded weakly.

“Oh, more than I ever dreamt possible. How can I ever thank you?”

Mrs Sedgewick took out her cheque book and began to write in it. She then extracted the cheque, folded it and handed it gratefully to the spiritualist. She had to press it into his palm, and close his fingers around it, as he still seemed to be rather bemused.

“Where is that sherry Miles? You look rather pale. It must take a lot out of you. Perhaps a large one will do the trick.”

A nonplussed Miles Gordonson gulped down his sherry, still wondering what exactly had happened, but thought better of asking his client again. Surely he was supposed to know. Martha was so excited that she practically ran out of the house calling over her shoulder that she would keep him informed of her progress. Her chauffeur called a minute later to collect her forgotten outdoor clothes; he gave Miles a very odd look then left.

Miles looked at the cheque, which was still clutched tightly in his hand, unfolded it quickly and gasped in disbelief. The sum of £500 blazed out at him. £10 would have been welcome and £15 downright generous but £500 was so far beyond his expectations that it called for another large sherry. What the hell had happened? What had he said or done to deserve such a generous amount? He couldn't remember a damned thing from when he'd sat back to allegedly meditate to Martha making a great fuss of him. It didn't make sense but whatever he had done it must have been satisfactory as far as his client was concerned. He examined the cheque again carefully just to make sure it was genuine. Everything seemed to be in order.

Still dazed, Miles made a note in his diary to see his doctor at an early opportunity. Blackouts and thumping great headaches were not things he was prone to. He sincerely hoped that he had conducted himself with decorum throughout his dealings with Mrs Sedgewick.

The head of the spiritualist association locked up the house and strolled around to where his smart, new, black standard car was parked covertly. He then drove to his comfortable home in Garston. It wouldn't do to allow his clients to know that he was anything other than a man of exceedingly modest means.

The throbbing pain above his eyes was making it difficult for Miles to concentrate on his driving. His head actually felt sore to the touch. Suddenly the awful thought that Martha Sedgewick was completely mad entered his brain. If she had whacked him over the head with something it would account for the blackout and the terrible pain he felt. Worse still was that her husband, once he found out about his crazy wife's visit to a medium, would try to cancel the cheque. First thing in the morning, Miles vowed, he would pay it into the bank and hope that the money would find its way into his account before Mr Sedgewick could block it. Just let him try to retrieve it then.

The would be medium felt more comfortable with the reasoning that his client was insane than he did with the thought that it might be himself who was going mad. He would pay a call on his doctor just to be on the safe side, but that he had been dealt a quick blow to the skull was beginning to seem very plausible. He decided to take at least a week off, as his next client, Judith Collins was not due for a consultation until the following Friday.

As Miles was making his preparations on the Friday, secure and happy in the knowledge that the £500 cheque had been paid into his account without a hitch, the telephone rang. He recognised the voice of Martha Sedgewick with trepidation.

“We found him,” she gushed. “His father and I cannot thank you enough.”

Surprised, Miles was about to ask, 'Found who?' when he remembered the dead son. "Oh, Quite," he replied, not knowing what else he could say. The woman was obviously three sheets to the wind and he wished she would put down the phone.

"My husband will pay you a visit shortly," she continued. "He wishes to thank you personally. He says that £500 is not enough for what you have given us. Well, good-bye for now, I will be in touch soon. I would dearly love to speak to my brother again."

Bewildered, Miles replaced the receiver. There was no doubt about it, Martha Sedgewick was clearly out of her tree but not so her husband. Whatever he had told his dotty wife Miles knew that he wanted his money back. Well let him try and get it. Let him try.

When the doorbell rang, Miles slipped into the front room to check, via the curtains, that it was his client and not Sedgewick calling. Relieved, he opened the door to Judith. Her problem was a new one to Miles. She had lost a valuable and valued diamond necklace and wanted the spirits to help her to recover it. Miles was almost sure that he knew where it was.

The leading light of The Everton Spiritualist Association had made it his business to become acquainted with Mrs Collins' maid. She was a pleasant, if plain, young woman from whom Miles learnt much about Judith, her home and her financial circumstances.

Marie, the maid, had more than hinted that Mrs Collins thought she was in some way connected with the necklace's disappearance. Miles was sure that the friendly girl was entirely innocent. Judith had apparently last sighted the necklace on her dressing table from where it seemed to have vanished. Marie had gone to great lengths to explain to Miles about the hours of work she put into polishing the ancient, uneven floorboards in her Mistress's bedroom. Judith refused to have them covered over with linoleum and carpeting. "I'd swear it's just to give me extra work," Marie complained. "It's not like she can't afford it. I wouldn't care if they were nice and smooth and even. A nuisance is what they are."

The necklace was most probably languishing in a crevice in the floorboards, having slid off the dressing table, Miles was certain. Marie more than likely gave less attention to polishing the offending floorboards than she claimed; otherwise she would have found the missing diamonds. He would, of course be vague with his answers as it was possible that he could be wrong about the lost item's location. He'd say that the spirits seemed to be indicating that the necklace was nestling in a space between the floorboards in Judith's bedroom. Did she have an uncovered wooden floor he would ask innocently?

It had been Miles' intention to draw the session out for as long as possible, in an attempt to make Judith feel that he was working so very hard on her behalf that she ought to cough up more than the usual £10. Now he would have to say that reception with the spirit world was poor, in order to get rid of her as quickly as possible in case Sedgewick should call sooner than expected looking for his money back. He would also have liked to ask Judith a few questions concerning her deranged friend Mrs Sedgewick, but they would have to be shelved for the moment.

"Judith, my dear, so lovely to see you. Come in, come in. Sit down and relax. Would you like some tea or maybe something a little stronger?"

"Nothing for me, thank you Miles. I want to find out about my necklace. I do so hope you can help me. It's worth an absolute fortune. It's my most valuable possession. I cannot believe that Roger was so careless as not to have it insured. The police just keep asking me a lot of silly questions. It has been stolen and I think I know who the culprit is but the police will not back me up. It must be my maid, but if I dismiss her I may never see my necklace again.

"Let us not be too hasty to judge others, Judith. Let us turn to the spirits for help."

Miles sat opposite to Judith as he asked her to concentrate on the necklace and the last time she had seen it. Judith stared in surprise as Miles stumped in his chair. His head

jerked back and his eyes rolled upwards but remained open. 'Dear God,' she thought. 'The man is having a fit and I don't know what to do. How inconsiderate'.

"Dear old Judy, lost your necklace have you? You always were irresponsible and stupid. Can't think what I ever saw in you. It wasn't as though you were ever anything to look at. Your bombastic and overbearing personality scared me so much that I was afraid to refuse to marry you. Then I let you ruin the rest of my life. Death came as a pleasant shock to me."

Judith instantly recognised the voice of her deceased husband, Roger, and Miles' face had curiously taken on his resemblance.

"How dare you speak to me like this? How dare you?"

Roger treated his former wife to an outburst of loud and raucous laughter. "Easily you old trout. What do you think you can do about it? You, who are idiotic enough to think that your maid has purloined your necklace. My necklace actually. It was paid for with my hard earned money. What use do you think it would be to her? She couldn't wear it and who would she sell it to? You are a fool and a nasty one at that. The elusive necklace is stuck down a crack in the floorboards, owing to your carelessness, where it fell when it slipped off your dressing table."

Nobody had ever spoken to Judith in such a manner before. She was far too outraged to feel any fear and nor did she feel obliged to thank Roger for solving the mystery of the missing necklace.

"What do I think I can do about your speaking to me like this? What do I think I can do about it?" she screeched. "This is what I can do about it."

Raising her heavy handbag she wiped the smile off Roger's face with it and watched with satisfaction as blood began to course down his nose.

"Never felt a thing you old harridan," he chuckled.

Miles' features returned to normal. Judith became aware that it was his nose and his lips, which were cut, and bleeding. She noticed also that there was a swelling starting to form beneath his left eye. Maybe she had hit him more than once. Although she was disturbed, it took nothing away from the feeling of elation she was experiencing. It seemed as if years of frustration had fallen from her through the one and only act of physical violence she had ever indulged in. She suspected that later her husband's words might trouble her, but for now she would savour the moment.

Roger had been no saint. He had caused her much suffering over the years. Delving into her handbag, she noticed the gaily wrapped package lying the bottom. It was the rather charming glass paperweight she had bought that morning and forgotten about. No wonder Miles looked so ghastly. She removed it from her bag, wrote out a cheque for £50 and placed the still wrapped parcel on top of it, together with a thank you note to Miles who was beginning to come round. Not wanting to answer the awkward questions Miles was bound to ask, Judith left hurriedly.

Later as Miles lowered his blood stained shirt into a bowl of cold water he thought, angrily, that there was a conspiracy against him. If he had been uncertain as to whether or not Martha Sedgewick had thumped him there was no doubt in his mind that Judith Collins had. It was merely the £50 cheque and the strange note she had left him that prevented him from going to the police. Well, that and the fact that the police may have questioned his rather dubious livelihood.

Miles Grdonson felt afraid. Judith's note thanked him for telling her where to find her necklace and 'for everything else dear'. She, like Martha, also mentioned his 'wonderful gift', yet he remembered nothing and the dreadful headache was back. Marie had phoned him an hour after he had regained consciousness to thank him for getting her out of trouble

and clearing her name. He took the opportunity to arrange to meet her later that evening to ferret out what further information he could from her. It was when he was about to pop out for The Liverpool Echo that Miles bumped into John Sedgewick on the door step.

"Damn and blast it. What now?" Miles thought. Sedgewick greeted him like a long lost friend, which did not make Miles feel any less suspicious. He was forced to remove his hand from Sedgewick's grasp.

"May I come in for a moment?"

"As you can see, I'm just leaving. An urgent appointment, you understand," lied Miles.

"I won't keep you then, except to thank you once more and give you this cheque, although money can hardly repay you for the return of our son. I will always be in your debt Mr. Gordonson."

The hair on the back of Miles' neck began to bristle. He was at a loss for words but took the cheque anyway.

"Perhaps we can arrange to meet at a time convenient to us both, to enable me to lay some proposals before you. I have always thought that this spiritualist business was a lot of mumbo jumbo, aimed at gullible idiots, but it seems that I was wrong. Some of you people really do have a gift. When shall we meet?"

Miles, deciding that he had better get to the bottom of whatever was going on, arranged a meeting with Sedgewick and finally got rid of the man after more enthusiastic handshaking. He changed his mind about going out and returned indoors.

The cheque was in a sealed envelope, which he opened hastily. It was for another £500. At this rate, in an age when the average man could count himself lucky to take home £4 or £5 a week, Miles would be able to retire soon, but none of it made any sense to him.

Even though the spiritualist kept a supply of tinned food and other non-perishables at the rented house in Lorraine Street, he did not bother to concoct himself a meal. Instead he poured himself a drink. Later, thankful that he kept a change of clothes at the ready he washed, dressed, did what he could with his battered face and set out to meet Marie. He would have to tell her that he had slipped and hit himself on a cupboard door.

He met her on the corner of the street, outside a sweet shop, as she did not think it seemly to be seen meeting a gentleman either inside or outside a public house. He was sure to be a few minutes early, in case she got there first and people thought she had been stood up. Miles was pleasantly surprised to note that the maid looked very presentable in a smart grey fitted costume. Her figure was good and without the harsh, scraped back hairstyle he had last seen her sporting, she looked very attractive. Miles felt quite proud to be her escort.

The girl was comfortable to be with. She chatted easily and openly and laughed at all his jokes. She seemed to be flattered by his attention listening with interest to his conversation. They went to a nearby pub where Miles, in an effort to clarify matters in his mind, took Marie partially into his confidence. He explained that the spirits appeared to be playing tricks on him. They were sending him into a trance from which he emerged without any recollection of what had taken place. Normally he remained conscious throughout, but this was no longer the case.

"And so you see I remember absolutely nothing about what happened while I was with Judith Collins and will be eternally grateful for any information you can give me on the subject. The whole thing is very embarrassing."

Marie sympathised and gave him an account of what her mistress had told her."

This, although it included the information that her dead husband had spoken through Miles, bore no mention that Judith had attacked the medium. Judith had revealed to Marie that her late husband, Roger, had told her that she would find that her diamonds had fallen

through a crack in the floor boards and had gone on to say how much he still loved and missed her.

"I see," said Miles, who did not see at all. The spirits had never seen fit to speak through him before and he was pretty certain that no medium had ever received a good hiding from a spirit who was just using that person as a mouthpiece. In fact Miles did not believe in spirits other than those, which came out of a bottle, and with this in mind he went over to the bar.

When he returned with fresh drinks, a small group of people came in and sat at the table next to theirs. Amongst them was a tall, sad-looking middle aged lady, dressed all in black. As snatches of their conversation drifted towards him it became evident that the woman in black had buried her husband a few days earlier. The last thing he remembered was smiling at Marie and then he was waking up with the increasingly familiar headache. Marie was rubbing warmth into his hands and the black clad woman was leaning over him thanking him profusely.

"Where am I? What happened?" he asked tentatively.

Marie told him to rest. She would explain in a moment. Miles noticed that everyone in the room was staring at him and recollected where he was before closing his eyes again. When he reopened them the bereaved woman and her companions had gone.

Regarding him with something like awe, Marie recounted what had happened. It seemed that he had gone into a trance during which his voice and countenance had altered. His words had been directed at the woman in black; they constituted a message of love and comfort from her deceased husband. The woman had recognised her husband's voice and verified that the message could have come only from him. She had been deeply moved and wanted to contact him again through Miles. She would, she had informed Marie, be willing to pay any fee that might be required of her.

"But of course I just gave her your phone number and explained that your services were free. That's right isn't it?"

"Oh, yes quite. Thank you so very much," replied Miles, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"Her name was Joan Carey by the way. Would you like to leave now? You look a bit done in and no wonder."

"No, I think we'll have another drink first and then I'll see you home. I don't know about you Marie, but I could do with a strong one."

"Well it isn't every day something as exciting as this happens to me. I'll have whatever you're having. Go on surprise me."

Miles decided to spend the night at the house in Lorraine Street. So many thoughts were eddying around in his head he didn't trust himself to drive home. After consuming several more drinks, which fogged his brain even more, he took himself upstairs to try and get some rest in the uncomfortable makeshift bed that he used very rarely.

The following morning Miles considered taking the pledge. It was not until he finished his third cup of tea that he began to feel remotely human again. He sat putting together all the facts that he had gleaned so far, only to find that he still knew very little about what was happening to him. After all he had been out for the count each time he had supposedly been in communion with the spirit world. This was true even of last night. He had only Marie's word for what had apparently taken place. Could he trust her? She did work for Judith Collins when all was said and done.

He had not needed a spirit to tell him where Judith's necklace was and where had those cuts and bruises on his face come from if not from Judith? On the other hand he'd had no idea that the Sedgewick boy was still alive never mind where he was to be found, and why would several strangers go to the length of staging last night's little performance? It had to have been genuine. That however, was in itself worrying. He did not fancy going into spontaneous trances every time he got close to the recently bereaved. There was also the matter of the money he had received from both Sedgewick and Judith.

