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ARLO BATES

A MEETING OF THE PSYCHICAL CLUB

I

The meeting of the Psychical Club had been rather dull, and it was just as the members were languidly expecting an adjournment that the only interesting moment of the evening came. The papers had been more than usually vapid, and, as one man whispered to another, not even a ghost could be convicted upon evidence so slight as that brought forward to prove the existence of disembodied visitants to certain forsaken and rat-haunted houses. At the last moment, however, the President, Dr. Taunton, made an announcement which did arouse some attention.

“Before we go,” he said, smiling with the air of one who desires it to be understood that in what he says he distinctly disclaims all personal responsibility, “it is my duty to submit to the Club a singular proposition which has been made to me. A gentleman whom I am not at liberty to name, but who is personally known to many—perhaps to most—of you, offers to give to the Club an exhibition of occult phenomena.”

The members roused somewhat, but too many propositions of a nature not dissimilar had ended in entire failure and flatness for any immediate enthusiasm.

“What are his qualifications?” a member asked.

“I did not dream that he possessed any,” Dr. Taunton responded, smiling more broadly. “Indeed, to me that is the interesting thing. I had never suspected that he had even the slightest knowledge or curiosity in such matters, and still less that he made any pretensions to occult powers. The fact that he is a man of a position so good and of brains so well proved as to make it unlikely that he would gratuitously make a fool of himself is the only ground on which his proposition seems to me worth attention.”

“What does he propose to do?”

“He does not say.”

“He must have given some sort of idea.”

“He said only that he was able to perform some tricks—experiments, I think, was his word; or no—he said demonstrations. He thought they would interest the members.”

“Did he say why he offered to do them?”

“No further than to observe not over politely that he was weary of some of the nonsense the Club circulated, and that he would therefore take the trouble to teach them better.”

The members smiled, but some colored a little as if the touch had reached a spot somewhat sensitive.

“It is exceedingly kind of him,” one elderly gentleman remarked stiffly.

“He is explicit in his conditions,” the President added.

The members were beginning to seem really awake, and Judge Hobart asked with some quickness what the conditions were.

“First,” the President answered, “that his identity shall not be revealed. I am not to tell his name, and he trusts to the honor of any member who may recognize him. A meeting is to be appointed when and where we please. He is to know nothing more than the time. I am to send a carriage for him, to provide certain things of which he has given me a list, to arrange a room according to his directions, and to give him my word that no record of the meeting shall appear in the newspapers.”

“Are the things he wishes difficult to procure?”

“This is the list,” said Dr. Taunton, taking a paper from his pocket. “You will see that they are all sufficiently simple.

“‘Two rings of iron, four or five inches in diameter, interlocked and welded firmly.

“‘A ten-inch cube of hard wood.

“‘A six-inch cube of iron.

“‘A sealed letter, written by some member.

“‘A carpenter’s saw.

“‘A gold-fish globe ten inches or so across.

“‘Three smaller globes, one filled with red, one with blue, and one with a colorless liquid.

“‘A scale on which a man may be weighed.

“‘A stick of sealing-wax.

“‘A flower-pot filled with earth.

“‘An orange seed.’”

“The articles are simple enough,” Judge Hobart commented. “Are the arrangements required difficult?”

“No. He asks for a committee to examine him in the dressing-room; a platform insulated with glass and some substance he will furnish, and a little matter of the arrangement of lights that is easy enough.”

The members of the Club meditated in silence for a moment, and then Professor Gray spoke.

“It must depend, it seems to me,” he said, “on the sort of a man your mysterious magician is. If he is a person to be trusted, I should say go ahead.”

“He is a gentleman,” the President answered; “a man of social standing, money, education, and with a reputation in his special branch of knowledge both here and in Europe. If I named him, you would, I feel sure, give him a hearing without question.”

“What is his specialty?” one member inquired.

“I hardly think it would be fair for me to tell. It would possibly be too good a clue to his identity.”

“Is it fair to ask if it is connected with any psychical branch?”

“Not in the least. I think I said at the start that I never suspected him of any interest in such subjects. He was asked to join this Club, and declined.”

“Did he give any particular reason?”

The President smiled satirically.

“He said it would never accomplish anything.”

“Perhaps that shows his common sense,” Judge Hobart observed dryly. “I am bound to say that it has not accomplished much thus far. What I do not understand is why at this late day he takes an interest in our work.”

“He did n’t go into that. He did not seem especially anxious. He merely told me that he

was willing to show the Club certain things, and named his conditions. That is about the whole of it."

"Well," observed Judge Hobart, with his air of burly frankness, "I vote we have him. The only reason for shying off is that so many fellows, otherwise sensible, lose their heads the moment they try to investigate anything psychical."

"Is that a reflection on our Club?" Professor Gray asked good-naturedly.

In the end the decision was that the President should be instructed to make arrangements with the unknown, and an evening was chosen for the meeting. The place was left to the President, to be imparted to the members confidentially on the day appointed. Then the gentlemen went their several ways, each, except the President who knew, speculating upon the possible identity of the mysterious wonder-worker.

II

When the clock struck eight on the evening appointed, the members of the Club were all present. The room to which they had been summoned by Dr. Taunton was simply furnished with a table, before which the seats were arranged in a semicircle, and behind which was a small platform on which stood a single chair. This platform was raised on blocks of glass, above which were thin slabs of a substance which to the eye seemed like a sort of brown resin, in which were to be discerned sparkles of yellow, as of minute crystals. The chair was in turn insulated in the same manner, while before it for the feet of the performer was placed a slab of glass covered with the same resinous substance. On the chair lay a thick robe of knitted silk. Beneath the table was a trunk containing the articles of which the President had read a list at the previous meeting.

The members examined everything and handled everything except the platform and the chair upon it. These they were especially requested not to touch. At five minutes past eight a carriage was heard to stop outside, and almost immediately the President came in.

"The gentleman is in the dressing-room," he said, "and is ready for the examining committee. If the members will be seated, we shall be prepared to receive him."

The members took their seats, and there was a brief interval of silence. Then Judge Hobart and Professor Gray, who had gone to the dressing-room, reëntered. Between them was a tall man, well formed, rather slender, but showing in his figure some signs of approaching middle age. He wore simply a single garment of knit silk. It was laced in the back, and fitted him so tightly that the play of his muscles was as evident as it would have been in a nude figure. His face was covered down to the lips by a black mask of silk.

The unknown stepped out of the loose slippers he wore, mounted the platform, put on the silk robe, and sat down in the chair. Judge Hobart made a formal statement that the perfor— that their guest had neither properties nor apparatus concealed about his person. Then he sat down, and silence filled the room.

“We are ready,” President Taunton said.

The stranger smoothed from his lips the smile which had curled them when Judge Hobart so nearly spoke of him as the “performer.” He rose, and stood on the slab before his chair.

“I must say a word or two by way of preface,” he began, in a voice cultivated and pleasant. “In the first place, I have no concealed motive in coming here to-night. I am not even—as I shall convince you before we are done—gratifying my vanity by advertising my powers. It has seemed to me that the Club is not on the right track, and although in one sense it is none of my business, I am interested in the subject which it is, as I understand, the object of this body to investigate. The paper by Judge Hobart in a recent number of the ‘Agassiz Quarterly’ decided me to show to him that certain forces which he conclusively proves to be non-existent do, nevertheless, exist. As I am personally known to perhaps half the gentlemen in the room, and am likely to meet some of them not infrequently, I take the liberty of asking that if any one shall chance to recognize me, he will remember that I come on the condition that my identity remain concealed. The President,” he continued, “will bear me out when I say that I have not seen the things provided for use this evening, and that I had no knowledge of the place appointed for the meeting. The dressing-gown I sent him because the scantiness of my dress makes it rather a necessity. I presume that he has examined it carefully enough to be sure that it is innocent of witchery and of trickery.”

He paused for a moment, and then in a tone somewhat more determined went on.

“One thing I must add. I decline to answer any questions whatever in regard to the means which produce the effects to which I shall call your attention. Those from whom I have learned would be sufficiently unwilling that I exhibit my power at all, and were there no other reason, their wishes would be sufficient to prevent me from offering information or explanation. I may not succeed in doing all that I shall attempt. I have laid out a pretty serious evening’s work, especially for one who lives as I do amid unfavorable conditions; and of course I can receive no assistance from my audience.”

He took off the dressing-gown and dropped it into the chair. Then he removed from his finger a large seal ring, and laid it between his feet on the resinous slab.

“I wish to show you first,” the stranger said, “that if I chose, I could manage to deceive you into thinking that I accomplished much that I did not really do. For instance, I

perhaps at this moment look to you like an elephant."

The members of the Psychical Club gasped in astonishment. Surely upon the platform stood a large white elephant, twisting his pink trunk.

"Or a palm tree," they heard the voice of the stranger say.

No; not an elephant stood on the platform, but a tall and graceful date-palm, crowned with a splendid cluster of spreading fronds.

"Or Dr. Taunton."

The members looked in amazement from the figure of the President sitting in his chair, twirling his gold eye-glasses with his familiar gesture, and his double on the platform, as faithful as a reflection in a mirror, doing the same thing.

"But all this is mere illusion," the voice went on; "I am none of these things."

Once more they saw only the silken-clad figure, tall and supple, smiling under the black mask.

"What I profess to do," the speaker continued, "I shall really do, and not depend upon cheating your senses. I shall hope to leave you proofs and evidences to establish this completely. The difficulty of the different expositions of force is not to be judged by appearances. First, for instance, I shall show you an exceedingly simple and easy thing. It has come to be customary, for some foolish reason, to speak of these phenomena as illustrations of the 'fourth dimension.' The term, I suppose, is as good as another, since it certainly conveys no definite idea whatever to people in general. I will ask a couple of gentlemen to take a pair of interlocked iron rings that I suppose are among the articles prepared, and to bring them to me. I do not wish to leave my insulation, as in later trials I shall need all my force."

The rings were taken from the trunk and brought forward. They were of iron as thick as a man's thumb, were linked together, and firmly welded. To pull them apart would have been impossible for teams of strong horses. By the direction of the stranger they were held before him by the two gentlemen.

"I have asked Dr. Taunton," he said, "to have the rings privately marked, so as to insure against any possible suspicion of substitution. I have never seen them."

He leaned forward, and laid his hand lightly on the junction of the rings. They fell apart instantly. Both were unbroken; and neither gave the slightest appearance of strain or rupture. A murmur of surprise circled the room, and then the members of the Club broke into hearty applause.

The stranger laughed frankly.

“I thank you, gentlemen,” he said good-humoredly; “but I am not a juggler.”

He asked next for the cube of wood and for the sealed letter.

“I have never seen either of these,” he said, the phrase being repeated almost with a mechanical indifference. “I suppose that the President or the person who wrote the letter can identify the note wherever he finds it.”

At his direction President Taunton held up before him the cube with the letter lying upon it. The stranger laid his hand over the letter, and then showed an empty palm toward the audience.

“You see I have not taken the letter,” he said. “If the saw is there, please cut the block in two in the middle. Cut it across the grain.”

While the sawing was going on, the magician put on his wrap and sat down. He resumed his signet ring, and sat with his head bowed in his hands. When the block had been divided, the ends of the letter, cut in halves, appeared in the midst of the wood.

“I think,” the stranger said, “that the two halves of the note will slip out of the envelope without difficulty, and Dr. Taunton will then be able to say whether it is the original letter or not.”

The president with a little trouble pulled out the pieces of paper and fitted them together. He examined them critically, even using a pocket-glass.

“If I had not been deceived earlier in the evening, and if I did not know that it is wildly impossible,” he said, “I should say that this is my letter.”

“‘I believe because it is impossible,’” quoted the stranger. “You may keep the pieces and decide at your leisure.”

He rose as he spoke, and once more threw off his robe. The Club waited breathless. He again placed the ring between his feet.

“I wish now,” he said, “the three globes filled with colored fluid.”

These were brought to him on a tray, and at his bidding placed close together in a triangle.

“This is only another of the innumerable possible variations upon the penetrability of

matter, and would come under the head in common nomenclature of that stupidly used term ‘fourth dimension.’ I said that I am not a juggler, but of course I chose some of the tests because they are picturesque, and so might amuse an audience. See.”

He laid his hand upon the top of the three globes. Instantly they became one by intersection, the three bases being moved nearer together. Each globe preserved perfectly its shape, and in the divisions now made by the coalescing of the section of one sphere with that of another the liquid was of the hue resulting from a mingling of the colors of the differently tinted fluids.

A murmur went around. Several of the members rose to examine the globes.

“Put them on the table,” the wonder-worker said, “and then everybody may see.”

“We are not to ask questions of methods,” Judge Hobart observed. “Is it proper to inquire whether the experiment involves a contradiction of the old law that two bodies cannot occupy the same space?”

“Not at all,” was the answer. “Modern science has shown clearly enough that to seem to occupy space is only to fill it as the stars fill the sky. I have only taken advantage of that fact to crowd more matter into a defined area.”

The members were asked to seat themselves, and when this had been done, the stranger said: “Any number of examples of this power could be given, but these should be enough, unless some one would prefer to improvise a test on the spot.”

“I am glad that you say this,” Professor Gray remarked. “I am subject to the prejudice, foolish enough but common, of being more impressed by experiments of my own contriving. Do you mind, sir, if Dr. Taunton and I loop handkerchiefs together, and let you separate them while we hold the ends?”

“Certainly not,” was the reply.

The experiment was instantly successful, and was repeated for double assurance.

“If we had nothing else to do,” the stranger observed, “we might go on in this line indefinitely; but this is enough of the ‘fourth dimension,’ so called. Now we will try development.”

III

The flower-pot filled with earth was placed upon the slab at the feet of the magician. The orange seed was laid upon the earth.

“So ingenious an explanation has recently been given—or, more exactly, recently revived—of the development of a plant from a seed, that you may suppose me to have all the different pieces of an orange grove concealed about me, despite the fact that my dress is not adapted to the concealment of a needle. However, you may judge for yourselves.”

He leaned forward, and with the point of his finger pushed the seed into the earth.

“Will some one cover the pot with a handkerchief?” he said. “Please be careful not to touch me or it. Hold the handkerchief out, and drop it.”

One of the members followed the directions, and for a moment the stranger sat quiet, his eyes fixed on the covered flower-pot. The centre of the handkerchief was seen gradually to rise, and when the cloth was lifted, the astonished eyes of the Club beheld a glossy shoot, three or four inches in height. Without again covering it, the magician continued to gaze fixedly upon the plant. Before the eyes of the spectators the shoot became a shrub, the shrub a tree; the fragrance of orange blossoms filled the air, and among the shining leaves began to swell the golden fruit. The time had been numbered only in minutes, yet there stood a tree higher than a man’s head, and laden with golden globes.

“Take it away,” the wonder-worker said, “and let me rest a little before I try anything more. You will find the tree to-morrow, and I think you will concede that it is too bulky to have been concealed under these fleshings. If you think it only an optical delusion or the result of hypnotism, try to-morrow by the senses of persons who do not know how it was produced.”

He sat for some moments with his head bowed in his hands. Then at his direction a globe about a foot in diameter was filled with clear water and placed on the table. The lights were then turned down so as to leave all the room in shadow except the platform.

“I must ask you to be as quiet as possible,” the magician requested. “The experiment is a difficult one, and from living in the atmosphere which surrounds my daily life I am out of the proper condition.”

Putting his hands behind him, he sank downward on the slab to his knees, and so reached forward as to press his thumbs upon his great toes. The position was a singular one, and earlier in the evening might have raised a smile. Now all was breathless silence for a couple of moments. Then the stranger sprang suddenly to his full height, and directed his forefinger with a violent movement toward the globe. A spark of violet light not unlike that from an electric battery flashed from the outstretched finger to the globe, and was seen to remain like a star in the midst of the water.

From this violet centre, with slow, sinuous movement, numerous filaments of light grew out in the liquid, until the globe was filled with tangled and intertwined threads like the roots of a hyacinth in its glass. Slowly, slowly, the nucleus rose to the surface, dragging the threads behind it. Then above the water began to form a faint haze. With gradual motion it mounted, absorbing by degrees the fire from the phosphorescent fibres which served for its roots, until a faintly luminous pillar of dully glowing mist four or five feet high showed above the mouth of the globe.

The magician made strange gestures, and a slow rotary motion was discerned in the cloud. Without abrupt or definitely marked alteration the pillar was modified in shape until more and more plainly was evident a resemblance to the human form. He rose to his full height, and extended both his hands toward the figure. Slowly it detached itself from the water and from the globe, and floated in the air, the perfect shape of a woman, transparent, faintly luminous, but with a lustre less cold than at first. One of the men drew in his breath with a deep and audible inspiration. The shape wavered, and another spectator impulsively cried “Hush!” The word seemed to break the spell. The wonderful visionary form trembled, shivered, and its exquisite beauty melted in the air.

The magician resumed his seat with visible disappointment.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I am already tired, and you distracted my attention. The experiment has failed. May the lights be turned up, please.”

A murmur of disappointment ran around the room.

“I am sorry,” he repeated. “I should have impressed on you more strongly the need of absolute quiet. I am not quite up to beginning this over again. Let me show you the opposite—disintegration. It is easier to tear down than to build up.”

The block of iron he had asked for was by his direction laid on the floor in front of the platform. The magician sat for a moment with closed eyes, his hands laid palm to palm upon his knees. Then with an abrupt movement he pointed his two forefingers, pressed together, toward the cube. A report like that of a pistol startled the members, and the solid iron shivered into almost impalpable dust. The members of the Club crowded together to the spot.

“Please do not touch my platform,” he requested, as he had earlier in the evening. “I must still show you something more.”

IV

“Levitation is a phenomenon which is common enough,” he said by way of preface,

“but our examination would by no means be complete without it. Of course I am only touching upon a few of the less subtle principles that underlie what is commonly misnamed occultism; but this is one of the obvious ones. Please let some heavy man step upon the scales.”

Judge Hobart was with some laughter persuaded to take his place upon the platform of the scales, and the indicator marked a weight of two hundred and six pounds.

“Will you look again?” the stranger asked of the gentleman who had read the number.

“Why, he weighs nothing!” the weigher exclaimed, in astonishment.

“His weight has broken the scales,” another member declared.

“You may think,” the magician went on, “that I have bewitched the spring. Will somebody lift the Judge?”

Professor Gray, who happened to stand nearest, put out one hand and picked the venerable Judge up as easily as he would have lifted a pocket-handkerchief. As he took his victim by the collar, the effect did not tend toward solemnity.

“What do you mean, sir?” demanded the Judge. “Put me down, sir, at once.”

The stranger made a little sign with his hand. The Professor saw and understood, so instead of putting Judge Hobart down, he lightly tossed the rotund figure upward. The Judge, probably more to his amazement than to his satisfaction, found himself floating in the air with his head against the ceiling, and with his legs paddling hopelessly as if he were learning to swim. The other members shouted with laughter.

“That will do,” the magician said. “I did not mean to turn things into a farce.”

The ponderous form of Judge Hobart floated softly to the floor; his face showed a wonderful mixture of bewilderment, wounded vanity, and relief.

“It’s very warm at the top of the room,” he said, wiping his red forehead; “very warm. Heat rises so.”

“Other things rise also at times,” somebody said.

Everybody laughed, and then the members settled into quiet again, and listened to the magician.

“Examples of this sort are infinite in number, but one is as good as many. The principle is everywhere the same. Levitation is really too simple a matter to occupy more of our

time. The transporting of matter through space and through other matter is more interesting and more important. It is also more difficult, and consequently less common. Some time ago it was proposed in London, as a test of the reality of occultism, that a copy of an Indian paper of any given date be produced in London on the day of its publication in Calcutta. The test was shirked by those who are advertising themselves by pretending to powers which they did not have, and those who were able to do the feat had no interest in helping to bolster up a sham. That the thing was easily possible is the last fact with which I shall trouble you to-night. Allow me to offer you a copy of the 'London Times' of this morning."

As he spoke, a newspaper fluttered from the air above, and fell upon the table. The stranger checked a movement which Judge Hobart made to examine it.

"Let me seal it first," he said. "It will make future identification surer. Please lay it with that stick of sealing-wax on the platform."

When this had been done, he took the wax and held it above the paper. The wax melted without visible cause, and dropped on the margin of the journal. Leaning forward, the magician pressed his seal into the red mass, and then flung the paper again on the table.

"It will be easy," he remarked, "to compare this with a copy received through the ordinary channels. You do not need to be instructed in the means proper for securing and identifying this. The experiment may seem to you a simple one, but I assure you that it is so difficult that you cannot hope to repeat it without preparation you would find pretty severe."

He rose as he spoke, and drew his robe about him.

"I have to thank you," he continued, "for your patience and attention. As I meet so many of you not infrequently, it is better to trust to your courtesy not to name me than to your ignorance."

He pulled off, as he spoke, the black mask, and with cries of surprise more than half the members of the Club called out the name of one of the best-known club men of the town, a man who had traveled extensively in the East, a man who had proved his powers by distinguished services in literature, a man of wealth and of leisure, and one of dominating character. Smiling calmly, he replaced the mask, and stood a moment in silence.

"That is all," he said.

Then, with a peculiar gesture he waved his arms over the company, and repeated a few words in some unknown tongue. He stepped down from the platform and walked

quietly from the room. But by that gesture or spell he had strangely wrought upon their minds; from that moment no man of them all, not even the President, has ever been able to remember who was their acquaintance who that evening did such wonders in the sight of the astonished Psychical Club.