

BLACKAURA



John Sladek

winner of first prize in

The Times Detective Story Competition

John Sladek's entry in the 1972 Cape/Times Detective Story Competition won the first prize of £500 plus a contract with Jonathan Cape for a follow-up detective novel. *Black Aura* is the result. Discovered in the competition, Sladek's unusual talents for ingenious plotting, cunning characterization and black wit have reached triumphant consummation in his first full-length classic detective thriller.

Lamenting the passing of the golden age of detection, Sladek's omniscient creation Thackeray Phin, a plus-foured drop-out from an American university, has condescended to investigate the supernatural until something more sinister comes along. 'Drug Victim's Ghost Warns Pop Star at London Commune Seance' — the eerie headline attracts Phin to the headquarters of a spiritualist group and the beginning of his second case.

When Doc Lauderdale, the drug victim's father, mysteriously disappears from behind a locked lavatory door, the rest of the group rejoices at his achievement in 'astral projection'. But the impalement of a pop star on garden railings (a nasty accident after an experiment in levitation), and a further series of ghoulish occurrences, convince the amateur sleuth that he is on the trail of as tangled a web of fraud and duplicity as his hero Holmes ever set out to unravel. With the aid of Becker, the con-man who claims to 'know how it's done', Phin draws up a list of suspects: Viola Webb, the expensive medium who can see the black aura of impending death; Dank, the retired Wing-Commander addicted to bottled spirits; the Reverend Stonehouse, oddly connected with the

continued on back flap

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chapel at the funeral parlour; Professor Hackel the distinguished but doubting psychologist. Is one of them the perpetrator of minor mysteries, or of a master crime?

The curse of an Egyptian amulet, strange doings in a dark seance parlour, lurking death in an orgone box, psychic poison and live burial — John Sladek's taut brain-teaser fairly creeps with fiendish happenings. It is a superb entertainment.

JOHN SLADEK was born in Iowa in 1937. He studied mechanical engineering, and later English Literature, at the University of Minnesota before leaving the United States to travel. After visiting Morocco, he spent some time in Spain and Austria, living in small villages and writing. He has now settled in London, where he has published two science fiction novels.

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Black Aura

THE CASTLE AND THE KEY
THE REVOLUTIONARY SYSTEM
THE MILLER-ROBERTS SYSTEM
THE STEAM-DRIVEN BOY

Black Aura

BY JOHN THOMAS M. D. D.
THE NEW ACADEMY



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY-NINE MARK LANE LONDON

THE NEW ACADEMY

by the same author

THE CASTLE AND THE KEY
THE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM
THE MÜLLER-FOKKER EFFECT
THE STEAM-DRIVEN BOY
THE HOUSE THAT FEAR BUILT
(with Thomas M. Disch)
BLACK ALICE (with Thomas M. Disch)
THE NEW APOCRYPHA

JOHN SLADEK

Black Aura



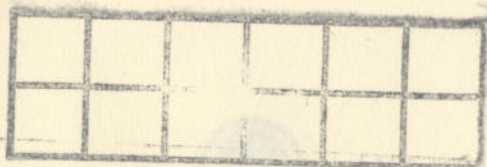
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'In the late evening a few of us – including Peter Underwood, Chairman of the Ghost Club; Colonel Ralph Morris, a retired Indian Army officer; David Cutler, a saw doctor whose hobby is parachute jumping ... entered the haunted room upstairs, closed the door, and sat absolutely silent in a ring. There followed an eerie silence ...'

DENNIS BARDENS

'The climax of the haunting occurred when the head of a woman materialized on the pillow of Jung's bed about sixteen inches from his own. The phantom had one eye open. It stared at the astonished psychoanalyst.'

BRAD STEIGER

'In two words: im-possible.'

SAM GOLDWYN

Chapter One

The Aetheric Mandala Society

From the *Sunday Globe Sketch*:

DRUG VICTIM'S GHOST
WARNS POP STAR
AT LONDON COMMUNE SEANCE
by Ben Budge

'Don't do it, Steve! Don't think you can "experiment" with drugs and not get hooked. I should know from bitter experience.' This was the sound advice a former drug addict gave pop singer Steve Sunday recently. Sound advice, but a bit eerie, too. For the addict, David Lauderdale, had died a year before he gave it!

It all took place at the north Kensington home of Mrs Viola Webb, the celebrated medium. In years past, Mrs Webb's clientele included nobs from all walks of life. Judges, jockeys, football stars and peers held hands in her dark seance parlour, and many went away comforted.

Now Mrs Webb acts as female guru for a spiritualist commune, the Aetheric Mandala Society. Its members, including Steve and his girlfriend, live together, meditate and 'study the Universal Mysteries'. Lauderdale was also a member until his tragic death last March. In an exclusive interview, Steve told me the whole amazing story.

'We all knew Dave was a junky,' he said. 'But when he died of an overdose ...'

By four o'clock, the thin rain was beginning to spoil the market. From the fruit and vegetable stalls, cries of 'Best banana' grew louder with sudden urgency, as the crowds started drifting away to shelter. Further up the street, other stall-holders packed away their dusty paperbacks, freckled mirrors and cracked coronation-mugs.

Most of the local shoppers had gone home already, and now the tourist pack was breaking up. Germans hurried on to the end of the street, determined to see every last bargain and, perhaps, to photograph their wives in front of it. Americans turned back, disgusted, and headed for Wimpy signs. A small group of French youths in G.I. battle dress were shaking the doors of a pub, inexplicably locked.

'Best banana (God damn you)!' 'Six-a-pound tomatoes (Bloody berks)!' An ice-cream van collided with a gypsy fortune-teller's caravan. Someone caught a shop-lifter, and someone else found a Canadian quarter in his change. There were really only two happy men on Portobello Road this miserable Saturday, and one of them was selling umbrellas.

The other, Thackeray Phin, marched steadily up the centre of the road, taking little notice of the market stalls and none of the rain. His own umbrella remained furled, a walking-stick. Its ferrule had pecked up a rotten tomato, but he was no more aware of this than of the car which growled along behind him, sounding its 'musical' horn.

The car was furious. Never before had a blast of 'Colonel Bogey' failed to scatter pedestrians, be they blind, lame or aristocratic. Yet here was a tall and skinny man, ridiculous in plus-fours, who not only wouldn't scurry, but innocently took up the tune and whistled it as he marched. Finally the baffled vehicle could only turn off into a side street, gnashing its gears.

Thackeray Phin was neither eccentric nor unobservant. If his clothes were eccentric, they helped him pass unnoticed in the market crowd, where Belgian Comanches jostled Danish Arabs and Chicago gangsters from Peterborough.

Here, he knew, the costume of an Edwardian golfer was quite strange enough to blend in, yet not so bizarre as to cause envy.

As for observations, he'd already made two important ones: a phrenology model in the window of an antique shop, and a poster advertising the wisdom of an Eastern-thirteen-year-old sage. Now he stopped to examine the window display of a health-food shop.

There were dirty bags of rice, sprays of seaweed, a bowl of brown eggs and a small pile of stunted apples. ALL COMPOST GROWN, a sign explained. He could well believe it; each of the eggs was smeared with evidence.

On the shop door someone had scribbled, very small, *Hitler was a vegetarian*. Phin drew out a large magnifying glass and examined this graffito.

'A first-class discovery,' he murmured.

'Want to score, man?'

A short, grey-haired man stood fidgeting beside him, staring at the window and speaking out of the side of his beard. That beard looked false, and the voice and pudgy features were familiar.

'Want to score?' The man held up a matchbox and rattled it. Then, since Phin seemed still in the dark, he opened the box to show him a square brown pellet. 'Good stuff, man.'

'Beeker, what the hell are you up to? Don't you recognize me?'

Beeker jumped. 'Phin! What are you doing here?'

'You really ought to look your customers in the eye, Beek. I might have been the Home Secretary. Let's see that thing.'

'You look like George Bernard Shaw, without his whiskers.'

'A clean Shavian profile? Thanks.' Phin took the square pellet and magnified it. 'I see by this that you've pawned your fiddle.'

Beeker feigned astonishment. 'How the deuce did you guess that?' Then he examined the pellet. 'Doesn't look like hash, eh?'

'No, it looks exactly like what it is, violin rosin. I know you, Beeker. The stingiest – sorry, thriftiest – con-man in London. Rather than just throw away a bit of rosin, you cut it up and bring it down here to sell to tourists.'

'They like it,' said the older man defensively. 'They'd be fair miserable, spending all day on Portobello Road without meeting a single genuine pusher. Anyway, who are you to talk about tourists, Yank?'

Phin coloured slightly. 'Let's get a cup of tea. I hear that's quite a fashion in London, these days.'

Having been in London two years, Phin was beginning to feel less sensitive about his nationality. At first, he'd stayed clear of all American places like the Tower, the Ambassador Theatre, or Portobello Road, and he'd crossed the street to avoid anyone carrying a Pan Am flight bag. But now it had been months since any florid face beneath a floral hat-band had shouted 'Hey! Are you an American, too?' at him, and Phin could almost admit to himself that he really was.

The two found seats in a nearby café, next to the steamy window. Tea was served.

'Still in greasy old London, then?' asked Beeker, setting down his cup. He wiped his mouth with a paper serviette, and some of the false hair came away in it. 'Still *sleuthing*?'

'Still trying. I haven't had a great many cases, so far. Not many at all. Very few. In fact, one case.'

'The Aaron Wallis murder? I read about it.'

Phin's career as an amateur detective had begun promisingly a few months before, with a locked-room murder. In the hope of other cases, he continued to run his newspaper advertisement:

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER seeks worry. On leave

in London, this drop-out from a think tank, professional logician and amateur sleuth would like a challenge. Anything irrational considered.

The response was ungratifying: One abusive letter accusing him of vivisection. One letter from a man who had proved the existence of God by squaring the circle, and wanted a pen-friend. Phin was having no more luck, it seemed, than 'QUIET GENT, respect,' in the next column, who 'seeks bedsit. Odd drink.' The two ads were a running saga. Would Drop-out ever find his worry? Would Odd Drink get his bedsit?

'I'm still running the ad., but I've got another idea. If I can't solve murders, maybe I can practise on humbler mysteries.'

'Which are?'

'The hermetic and arcane mysteries. Occultism. What secret power did the ancients possess? "Anything irrational", as the ad. says.

'First, I should explain what brought me to Portobello Road this afternoon. Look. See that overpass?' He pointed out through the cloudy window. Hanging almost over the café was a great grey dinosaur's belly. It spanned the road, standing on fat grey dinosaur's legs, otherwise concrete pillars.

'Westway fly-over, you mean? What about it?'

'Chesterton once predicted that men would fight to the death in Notting Hill to stop a thoroughfare like that. The battle of Portobello Road, he said, would be fought around 1994, with halberds, by brave men in silly costumes. They would lose, naturally, but even their defeat would be a kind of victory: spirit against stone.

'Well, here the thing stands, more of a monster than even Chesterton dreamed. Not a halberd raised against it. Not a pike, spetum, partizan, brandestoc or corseque. Not so much as a glaive.'

They were silent for a moment in the room of chattering tourists. Becker removed more of his beard.

'Anyway, I came to look over the battlefield,' Phin went on. 'Chesterton thought the forces of bureaucracy could never really hold out against the forces of imagination. How naive he must have been. Bureaucracy has won. There are no more saints, fanatics, jesters or poets. No more *master-criminals* either.'

'Oh, I don't know ... The great train-robbers?'

'An organized gang. A criminal committee, watching the clock like office workers. As much a machine as the police system that deals with them. They probably counted their loot with adding machines.'

'No, the master-criminal, like any other master-guildsman, is a medieval figure. He works alone, in secret. He may not make headlines, but then he doesn't get caught either. He is - occult.'

Phin cleared his throat, 'I'll probably never meet a master-criminal, so I'll go on being a journeyman detective. But I can learn my trade by practising on a humbler kind of occult mystery. There's plenty of *that* around: Faith-healers, mind-readers, mediums -'

'Now there I can help you.' Becker stopped scratching; his beard in shreds. 'Used to be a stage medium myself. If you want to know the craft, I can fill you in. Who do you want to expose?'

'Not expose, just watch. When were you a medium?'

'Years and years ago. Magic Marvin, the Man with the Hypnotic Hands. I did the floating lady, nice bit of table-lifting ... all stage stuff, you understand. Not as subtle as the parlour stuff. Enjoyed it, too, but it made my face too well-known. Ten years later I was up north doing the tank, when -'

'The tank? What's that?'

'One of my favourites. You drive into a petrol station and let 'em watch you fill up the tank *with water*. Then

you drop in a pill and start the engine. Then you tinker with it until they come over to ask you about it. 'Little invention of mine,' you say, and tell 'em how the big oil companies are trying to buy up the patent. Then -'

'Then you need a small loan to start manufacturing the magic pill.'

'Right. There I was in the middle of my pitch, when this young bloke came up and said, "I know you. You're Magic Marvin. Seen you when I were just seven year old." I was lucky to get out of that village in only two or three pieces.'

Phin ordered more tea. 'I was thinking of joining something called the Aetheric Mandala Society. I believe their house is around here somewhere.'

'That's Vi Webb. She's very good, Phin. I know a few other mediums that would like to know how she does it. But she's expensive.'

The sleuth nodded. 'I read about her group in the paper.'

'Posh clientele she's got. She used to be a stage ghoster, like me. I caught her act once - oh - twenty years ago. Her and her husband. He was a stooge, she did all the work. She was good then, and I hear she's better now. Some of my friends in the trade almost believe she's the goods.'

'What else do you know about her and her society?'

Beeker shrugged. 'Oh, you hear things ... gossip ...' With a sly smile, he added, 'You know what old wives mediums can be. For instance there's a story about an Egyptian curse.'

Phin sat up straight. 'A curse! Tell me more.'

'That young bloke that died - you know, the junky? The story is - and I won't guarantee a word of it - he had this sacred amulet from some Egyptian tomb. Wore it about his neck on a string. Well, there was supposed to be some kind of curse on it, and it was the curse really killed him.'

'Fascinating!'

'And that's not all. Now they say the boy's father has

joined the society. And *he's* wearing the sacred juju. Funny situation, that.'

'Do you think it's a publicity stunt?'

'Could be. I hear the suckers are tearing down the doors to get into Mrs Webb's club. Probably they all want to see if the father snuffs it. Still, she tries to keep an exclusive clientele. You have to be invited to join.'

'Then I think I'll —' Phin began, but Beeker shushed him.

'Don't look now,' he said. 'But one of the very devils we're talking about has just come in. Steve Sunday. Sitting on your right, second table over. With a fat man.'

After a moment, Phin looked over. Steve Sunday was a thin, red-haired man of about twenty-five. His denim clothes were quiet, almost out of place in this crowd whose taste ran to jelabas and leather greatcoats. Likewise his long coppery hair was not draggled in the current fashion, but parted in the middle and cut to a neat and glossy helmet. Sunday had the regular, rather stupidly handsome features of a window mannequin, fixed in a perpetual vacant smile.

Just now he seemed to be telling a joke to his companion. This 'fat man' was thick-set, but by no means fat for a man of his late middle age. But he was jowly, and this, together with the way he laughed, holding his stomach, gave him a jolly Friar Tuck air; he picked up a teacup as though it were a tankard he would clash on the table when, any moment now, he burst into song. Yet, above the jowls, his eyes were bleak and serious, and his stiff grey hair, combed straight back to hang below the collar of his ski-jacket, marked him as a patriarch.

'Now you know what a pop star looks like.'

'He can't be that popular,' said Phin. 'Nobody's looked at him but us.'

'Yes, I think most of his fans are under thirteen. And he's only had one hit with them, I think.'

They finished their tea and stepped outside.

'I always get a funny feeling about coincidences like

that,' Beeker said. 'Talk of someone and they appear. Maybe I'm psychic.'

'But of course, their house is near by. Still, psychic or not, your gossip interests me. This society has all the right ingredients: money, drugs, a curse, strange doings in the dark seance parlour. Even a death. It's certainly worth spending an evening on, if only to see Mrs Webb's tricks.'

'Take you more than one evening to figure them out.' The little con-man grinned. 'Five quid says you can't do it after three seances.'

'Five it is. Where are you these days?'

Beeker handed him a card. 'Give me a ring when you give up.' He drifted away to shake his matchbox at whatever tourists remained in the deserted market.

Phin went back to the health-food shop, to meditate again on *Hitler was a vegetarian*. There it was, the collision of two occult traditions. He could imagine vehement denials by both Nazis and human herbivores. Yet both systems had their roots in nineteenth-century mysticism ...

But then, so did almost every occult system he could think of: phrenology, mesmerism, homeopathy ... and especially the seance. Phin took it all as a joke, but he knew too how the Victorians must have seen it: Humour and horror are never so far apart, and shaking with laughter often looked like shaking with fear.

He looked closer at the graffito, gasped, and then began to shake silently. Someone had crossed out *was* and added *is*.

Chapter Two

Walk into my Parlour

London has many streets like Caversham Gardens, each with a terrace of Victorian town houses facing its mirror image across the way. Town houses, as Phin knew, were built always to a standard height and shape, so that they fitted together on a street like white piano keys on a keyboard.

But here something was wrong. As Phin (standing at middle C) glanced along the row, he saw that the end house had violated the rules: it was a storey taller and proportionately wider than the rest. When he reached it and found it to be his destination, he had to walk around to the side to see more of this curiosity.

Mrs Webb's house was completely Victorian in all other respects. Here were the usual spiked iron fence and dry moat in front, to repel attackers; the usual servants' entrance at the bottom of the moat; the usual front stairs to keep the servants firmly below. At the back of the row of houses was a private square enclosed by another spiked fence. The smaller garden behind each house was doubly defended by spikes and a hedge. A burglar coming in the back way would have to pick two gate locks, one for the square and one for the garden, before he even reached the house.

Phin tried the front way. As he rang the bell, it occurred to him that such houses were made, not just for privacy, but for absolute secrecy. Even the tiny balconies above seemed arranged to screen the windows.

He had phoned to arrange a 'sitting', but a crisp female voice had informed him that nothing was available for several weeks. Meanwhile, would he care to attend one of the society's regular lectures? He would. This Saturday, it

was Reverend Arthur Stonehouse, speaking on 'Harnessing Psychic Forces'. Phin should bring a voluntary contribution of three guineas, and a favourite photograph.

The door was opened by the voice's owner, a plump young woman in a black knitted dress. The black contrasted with her pale, alas, pimpled complexion. She aspired to severe asceticism, Phin judged – no make-up, no jewellery but a wooden brooch in the form of a cross – yes, and her pimples showed signs of recent fingernail torture. She introduced herself as Miss Ernestine Johnson, took his money and offered him the visitors' book. Then she led the way up many stairs to a small lecture hall.

A few dozen people were there ahead of him. Phin found a folding chair at the side, where he could look over the crowd for interesting eccentrics.

In that way, the crowd was disappointing; he might have found them sitting in any prosperous cinema. There were a few young couples wearing the fashionable Bohemian clothes no Bohemian could afford, a dozen tense young men in heavy-rimmed glasses, two sleek businessmen with their hatted wives, and a majority of old people on their own, clutching their photos and looking worried.

'Dear friends,' said the speaker. 'Don't let my dog-collar frighten you away. No sermons, I promise you.' He grinned a horrible grin, and someone tittered.

Reverend Stonehouse was about fifty years old, thin and nearly bald. The clerical collar hung as loose about his neck as if it were a real dog-collar. His plain little face above it was yellowish, and this even beeswax colour extended right back over the top of his head. Three or four strands of black hair were combed across the baldness, making a sketch or diagram: here's where hair would go.

His upper incisors were not only long and crooked, but gapped apart like beaver fangs. They showed over his lower lip at the faintest smile, and, in gleeful moments, made him a comic monster.

'Some of you may be jolly sceptical about psychic forces. "What are they?" you ask. "Who possesses them?" and "Why should I care about them?" "Good for you," say I. A healthy scepticism is always welcome. After all, had not Thomas the Apostle doubted greatly, we could not believe.

'Of course Thomas had an open mind. When the evidence was revealed to him, he accepted it. That, dear friends, is the true and good heart of scepticism. You may say, "Seeing is believing", and I agree with you. But I say, "See, then. And believe!"'

Stonehouse took a practised grip on the lectern. 'Now, what is there to see? Are psychic forces real? Or are we all a gang of deluded cranks and fuddy-duddies, to believe in it?

'Now, a scientist wouldn't ask you to believe in germs without letting you squint down a microscope. So I shan't ask you to believe in psychic forces without a demonstration. In a short while, Mrs Webb will show you *indisputable* proof of the psychic forces *within this room*.

'First, let me tell you a ghost story. About an hundred years ago there lived in India a prominent judge named Sir Edmund Horney. He had an arrangement with a certain newspaper editor, whereby the editor would call at his home of an evening to collect Sir Edmund's judgments for the day, to be published the following morning.'

Phin had heard the story before. The editor shows up one night in Sir Edmund's bedroom. The judge is furious, orders him to leave before he wakes Lady Horney. He gives him the judgments, and the editor leaves, without saying a word. Lady H. wakes, and the judge tells her of the strange visit. They note the time, three o'clock. Next day, the editor is found dead in his office, which he hasn't left all night.

While Stonehouse went through it, the sleuth looked around the room. The walls were painted in two shades of

dead green. The curtains at the window were dusty green velveteen. In the grimy light from naked bulbs he could see nothing that was elegant, or even pleasing.

Looking behind him, he noticed that the room had five sides. For no conceivable reason, one back corner had been cut off by a diagonal partition with a door in it.

‘... died at precisely three o’clock.’

The clergyman paused to let this sink in. ‘Psychical experiences of one sort and another happen to most of us. You may feel that you’ve been in a place before, or that you know what someone’s about to say before he says it. You may think of someone, and next moment he walks through the door.’ Phin thought of Beeker in the café: *Here are the very devils* ... He felt he knew everything Stonehouse was going to say, so he tuned out, letting the psychic vibrations of the lecture wash over him, and waiting for the demonstration.

‘... psychic vibrations ... simply another name for the life principle ... one chap may have what we call a “green thumb” ... science cannot explain ... read the emanations of psychic force from a photograph.

‘And now, the demonstration. Has everyone brought a snap?’

Everyone had. Miss Johnson collected the photos on a tray and took it to the front of the room.

‘Our spiritual leader, Mrs Viola Webb.’

She came from the back of the room, where she’d probably been sitting all along: a masculine, heavy-set woman in her fifties. Her hard stride shook the floor and sent her plain brown gown billowing out behind. It was not until she reached the front that Phin had a chance to study her features. But even as he noted the hard cheekbones, firm chin and deepset eyes, she seemed to be making some slight adjustment in her expression. An line or two softened, she smiled, and the tough businesswoman turned into a sweet, slightly distracted old dear. In this character she began to

flutter her hands and scratch her perm, as if bewildered to find herself before an audience.

But her dark eyes were scanning and judging them.

'Now let me see. I hardly know what I'm supposed to do, I'm all at sixes and sevens. Perhaps Reverend Stonehouse can tell you all about our home study course while I catch my breath.'

The gallant cleric performed his commercial, explaining that, while not everyone could be asked to join the society and live here in person, they could avail themselves of 'spirit associate' memberships, a home study system which ...

At last Mrs Webb was ready. She picked a photo from the tray and studied it. Then, holding it up for all to see, she walked a complete circuit around the audience.

'This is a picture of a baby boy, wearing a light-blue jumper. His - grandfather is here with us - you, sir!' She put her hand on the shoulder of an old man at the end of the second row.

'How in Heaven - ?'

'The boy's name begins with J? James or John. And he's older now, but only a few months - he's several months older - I get the strong vibration of a J - but is it his name? Yours? Yes, your name is James. And he is named after you? Ah, his second name is James. Right?'

'Almost perfect,' said the old man weakly. 'Except for -'

'Can the rest of you hear that? He says that *every detail is perfect!*'

She returned his picture and took another from the tray. By the same technique - smoking out the owner, pounding him soft with rapid guesses, seizing on any reaction and emphasizing her successes - she worked through nearly a dozen pictures. If this was the best she could do, Phin was wasting his time.

'I'm sorry, but my psychic energy is nearly exhausted for this evening. I can only try one more.'

She held up an item that Phin recognized as his own 'favourite', an engraving of William Huskisson.

'Now here's an odd lot. A nineteenth-century gentleman!'

Phin tried to look blandly interested along with the others, but something in his expression caught her eye. She walked up to him at once, and clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder.

'Your engraving, I believe?'

'Yes it is.'

'An ancestor, perhaps? Or just a little joke? Ah, yes. A trick.' Phin's blush admitted it to all.

'Well,' she said, 'I can take a joke as well as anyone. Let me see. You do know the gentleman's name? Yes, it begins with R - perhaps P - no, I see, it's George or William. *William.*'

He nodded, and there was applause. This ended the performance, with everyone loving Mrs Webb and fairly hating trickster Phin. Mrs Webb left, and the rest were ushered out by Reverend Stonehouse.

'Don't feel glum, my boy,' he said, shaking Phin's hand. 'Harmless joke. No offence taken, I'm sure.'

'It wasn't altogether a joke. You see, Mr Huskisson's imagination has been a constant example to me. That, and his tragic death.'

'I say! Who was the chap, anyway?'

'I should have thought he'd be a national hero. After all, he officiated at the opening of the first passenger railway in Britain.' Phin might have added that, on that historic occasion, Huskisson was run down and killed by the first passenger train. But it might have sounded like another joke.

And he couldn't face another Stonehouse grin.

For two days before his seance appointment, Phin immersed himself in occult literature. Phenomena like telepathy, second sight, prophetic dreams, telekinesis, apports, pre-

monitions, ectoplasm; tools like the planchette, pendulum, dowsing-rod and orgone box – with all of these he achieved a nodding, even dozing acquaintance. There were mediums who could fly; mediums who could move objects without touching them; mediums who could leave their physical bodies. There were dozens of mediums who could have warned President Kennedy not to go to Dallas, and scores who could solve any murder by feeling the vibrations at the scene of the crime. Finally there was a medium who had once reduced Cecil B. DeMille to tears, and who now reduced Thackeray Phin to fits of helpless yawning.

‘Money,’ he kept reminding himself. ‘Drugs. Seances. A curse. And a death.’

In his reading, he made one profitable discovery, the secret of Mrs Webb’s photo performances. ‘Sensitives’, he learned, often used the technique in night-club acts. It was really a game of Twenty Questions, the customer providing yes-or-no answers by facial expressions or (hand on shoulder) unconscious movements. It was called ‘muscle-reading’.

On the appointed evening, Miss Johnson met him at the door again. She looked as if she’d been weeping. It was hard to be sure, for there was always a swollen look to her features, especially about the eyes. As always, her face was expressionless.

The fee this time was ten guineas. Miss Johnson led him to a drawing-room on the first floor, where the others were having what she called ‘cocktails’.

The room was large but over-furnished, in the manner of a boarding house parlour. Three large sofas and half-a-dozen deep armchairs were crowded in, with occasional tables and a grand piano. In one corner Phin noticed more boarding-house signs: a heap of magazines, a record-player and several boxes of games. Nothing was missing but the TV set, and nothing added but an Axminster carpet and pale beige silk upholstery. If Mrs Webb had no taste, he

reflected, at least she had more money than the grubby lecture hall indicated.

The first person he recognized was Mrs Webb, her heavy figure in pink silk propped by the fireplace. She was talking to two tiny, white-haired ladies, who nodded together at every other word. By the record-player, a girl in blue was curled up on a sofa, sleeping or meditating. A large man in black, with a rough black beard, sat at the piano. He gazed at the keys as if trying to fathom their use. The bald man talking to him wore a roll-neck sweater, and it was not until he took his elbow off the piano top, turned and came to greet him, that Phin recognized Reverend Stonehouse.

'Mr - ?' The beaver teeth emerged.

'Phin. Thackeray Phin.'

'Do I remember you from somewhere? A lecture, perhaps?'

'Yes, about three weeks ago. Most enlightening, reverend.'

'Please. Everyone around here just calls me Stoney. These seances, as you may have gathered, have some of the informal give-and-take of a family discussion, you see. None of the formality of the lectures.'

They stood there for a moment or two, silent, while 'Stoney's' awkward grin faded, brightened, faded.

'Well, Thackeray. Are you at all interested in telepathy? I've been engaged in some jolly interesting experiments - ah, here's Mrs Webb.'

Her handshake was muscular, and her dark, unblinking eyes stared at him, into him. Phin could not avoid that gaze, as penetrating as the smell of fried hair from her permanent.

'Delighted you could come, Mr Phin. I feel we may have some exceptional manifestations tonight. Now, what will you have to drink? There's carrot juice, celery tonic - just about anything.'

He settled for a vegetable mixture which smelt of soap

and tasted of cabbage. Mrs Webb introduced him to the two old ladies, Miss Ada and Miss Emily Blaise, and swept off to speak to another new arrival. As she moved away, her feet showed beneath the hem of her evening gown. Mrs Webb was wearing old bedroom slippers.

'Let's see,' said Miss Emily. 'Let's see, we've contacted our dear Papa, and our brother Aleister, who just passed over last year, and even poor Bernard Shaw.'

'Our cat,' explained her twin, in a twin voice.

'Amazing! And did he actually speak to you?'

'Oh, yes. Bernard Shaw was a very intelligent cat. Almost human, as we used to say. I always felt he would have liked to talk to us when he was alive. Only his poor pussy body couldn't manage the words. But he understood every word we said.'

'You could see that in his eyes,' said Ada.

'Yes, and I swear he could read the labels on the cat food! He used to growl and purr even before I opened the tin!'

'Almost human,' said Ada.

'Better than some people.'

'Oh, yes, better than lots of people.'

Phin cleared his throat. 'When did he d - pass over?'

'It was just a month to the day before Aleister, wasn't it, Emily?'

'Yes, we talked about it at the time. A month to the day.'

'Such a shock, it was.'

'Such a loss. But of course we haven't really lost him at all. We contacted him on our ouija board at home.'

'And then Mrs Webb got through to him for us.'

'We'd come here oftener, but it's so expensive.'

'Emily!'

'Well it is. Not just the contributions, but the train from Cheltenham. Not that it's not worth it, you understand.'

Phin excused himself and drifted away, looking for a place to put down his glass of cabbage water. Mrs Webb was shaking hands with a young couple in buckskin jackets.

'I'm so glad you could come again,' she told them. 'I feel we may have some exceptional manifestations.'

A man with a hearing-aid stuck out his hand. 'Dank here. Bruce Dank. Wing-commander. Now retired, of course.'

Mr Dank was a cocky little man whose blazer and repulsive tie doubtless advertised some important school. Standing as he did, no taller than Phin's shoulder, he looked a little like a schoolboy now; his dark hair was slicked down flat, and now and then he pulled faces as he talked.

'Yank, are you? Where from?'

'New York. But I've more or less settled permanently in London.'

'Don't blame you. Decent people aren't safe in a place like New York. It's the wogs, you know. Let them in, the moral fibre collapses. Happening here, now. Drugs, sex, permissiveness, abortions, porn, the balance of payments shot to hell... Do you know what Nostradamus said about Britain? I'll tell you, and it'll make your head spin. Just a mo, I'll get another tomato juice and be right back.'

As soon as Dank had glided away, Phin started a conversation with the nearest person to hand, a middle-aged man in a West African shirt of pink and purple – the 'fat man' from the café.

'Lauderdale,' he said. 'Dr Andrew Lauderdale. But call me Doc, will you?'

'Why "Doc"?''

'I was in America a few years ago, and the name got stuck on me. Anyway, it's more appropriate now. Like Dank, I've retired.'

'From medical practice?'

'No, marine biology. After my son's death a year ago, I gave up work and joined the society. I've lived all over the world, but I've never really felt at home until now. This is my home, and these are my family. Even poor Dank.'

Phin found himself staring at the stone ornament Doc

wore on a string around his neck: a scarab. 'I believe I read something about you in the paper not long ago.'

'So you know all about Dave? It's all right, I don't mind talking about it. I feel that Dave is very much alive and with me now.' He grinned. 'But don't let me bore you about that. I see you've just escaped Dank's monologue on the blacks.'

'Is that what it was all about?'

'Yes, Dank's got it all worked out. According to Nostradamus and, for all I know, the Great Pyramid, there's going to be a black uprising - Armageddon, in fact. He believes of course that the forces of white supremacy will finally triumph, and I think he half believes that Bruce Dank will become World Emperor in the New Age.' Lauderdale's laugh was easy, and kind.

'Sounds as though you don't go along with his theory.'

'Who could? Don't get me wrong - I love and respect Dank - as a human being. We all had great hopes for him here. If only he could get some of the poison out of his system, he might almost be a likeable person.'

'I don't mean just the mental poison, either. He's over there now, lacing his tomato juice with something from his pocket-flask. We all tried hard to get him off the gin and on to a regimen of natural, organic foods, but it's hopeless. Meanwhile he's forty-five and looks fifty-five, while I'm the reverse. Or so everyone tells me.'

Doc's short-sleeved shirt showed fairly muscular arms, but otherwise he looked like any other flabby man of his age.

'Amazing!' Phin exclaimed. He was getting tired of using that word tonight. 'You owe it all to health foods?'

'Organic foods. Listen, ten years ago the doctors gave me up for dead. Heart.' He struck his chest, and the scarab jumped on its string. 'I'd had one attack already. They told me to give up smoking and drinking. I went one better, and gave up cholesterol. No more eggs, meat, milk or butter.'

Plenty of whole-grain cereals and fresh fruits and vegetables. So here I am, a walking dead man!' His deep laugh mocked the notion, and made the scarab dance again.

'That's an unusual amulet you're wearing. Obsidian, is it?'

'Yes. An Egyptian scarab. It belonged to Dave.' He held it up to the light and turned it. 'See the back? Those hieroglyphs are supposed to be some sort of curse. Death to the wearer, or something.'

There was an awkward pause, then Doc laughed again. 'You haven't asked the obvious question. Did the curse have anything to do with Dave's death?'

'Did it?'

'It could have. You know, for a while I wore it half hoping it would kill me, too. At least I could see him again. Now - it obviously doesn't work - I just wear it, that's all.'

They were interrupted by the young couple in fringed buckskin, who introduced themselves as Alan and Jane Forster.

'Happy to meet you,' said Jane. 'Now don't tell me your birth sign, Mr Phin. Wait. Don't tell me - you're Libra. You must be.'

'She's never wrong,' Alan said.

'It's Gemini, I'm afraid.' Phin said this apologetically.

'Oh. Well, I knew it was an Air Sign, anyway. Now you, Doc. You must be - Aries!'

'No, Cancer.'

Jane looked at him. 'Are you *sure*?'

'Yes,' he said, laughing. 'But you're close again. Aries and Cancer are both Cardinal Signs.'

'See? She's never wrong,' said Alan, as Jane tugged him away.

'Come on, darling, I want to try that man at the piano.'

'Infallibility,' said Phin, 'isn't everything.'

Doc nodded. 'That's right. I don't care for astrology myself, but then I don't care about science any more,

either. My mind is full, if that doesn't sound too pompous. If Jane is happy guessing sun signs, good for her. It all fits together somehow, this whole business of being human, being happy. And since I've given up science, I no longer worry about *how* it all fits together. Let people believe what makes them happy.'

'And spiritualism makes you happy?'

'I have to believe in it,' said Doc. He looked grave. 'I have to believe in it.'

Mrs Webb announced that the seance would begin in a few minutes.

'I'm afraid I haven't introduced myself to everyone,' Phil said. 'Who's the Mephistopheles at the piano?'

'Professor Merihew Hackel, a psychologist. For all his dark satanic looks, he's not a spiritualist. In fact, he's a complete sceptic. He only joined the society to do research on us.'

'Doesn't Mrs Webb mind having sceptical vibrations all over the seance parlour?'

'Apparently she still has hopes of converting him. I doubt her chances, myself. And I'm bound to admit that he is a disruptive influence around here. For one thing, he and I are barely on speaking terms.'

'Why? If I'm not being too nosy.'

'It's nothing really.' The ex-scientist looked thoughtful. 'He's decided that I'm some sort of Judas to science, that's all.'

'Oh. Who's the girl in the corner?'

'Nancy Michie. Come, I'll introduce you.' He called to her as they approached, but the sleeping girl did not move or open her eyes.

She wasn't beautiful, any more than a pre-Raphaelite woman was ever beautiful, but she gave him the same impression of shadowy beauty: a consumptive with lovely hair. Her face lay half-shaded by the chestnut curled glory, resting a cheek on her hand, which, with her arm, lay along

the graceful curve of the sofa's arm. Her long gown of blue, with faint patches of green diaphanie, flowed along the cushions in pre-Raphaelite lines. Thrust from the flowing folds was one final touch of elegance, her bare, dirty foot, with a ruby ring on one toe.

'Nancy?' Doc touched her shoulder and she rolled forward, face down, 'Nancy!'

Just like the movies, Phin thought, and looked at her back for the hilt of a jewelled stiletto. Then Nancy sighed and made burrowing motions.

'Keeps terrible hours,' Doc explained. 'As you must have noticed from her natural eye-shadow. Nancy, wake up.'

All the same, Phin thought, Doc looks relieved.

Nancy groaned and sat up. She began scratching her knee.

'We're ready to begin,' said Mrs Webb.

Without a word, the girl got up and shuffled towards the door. Led by this sleepwalker, the whole group crossed the hall and entered the seance parlour.

It was a well-preserved, panelled dining room, complete with round dining table and dim chandelier. When the others were seated, Mrs Webb issued instructions.

'We'll all hold hands,' she said. 'That completes a circuit for the aetheric energy to travel amongst us.' She pulled back a heavy brown café curtain to show a small alcove, some four feet directly behind her place at the table. Inside the alcove was a light card table. She picked up the instruments upon it one by one, explaining their use.

'Discarnate persons, those who have passed over into unity with the aetherium, can speak to us in many ways.' The light made deep sockets of her eyes; as she turned to pick up a handbell, the sockets moved across her high cheeks. 'They may at times be almost playful. And playful creatures need toys. Here I have a handbell ... a trumpet made of paper ... a guitar ... and a slate.

'These are really toys to keep them occupied, to keep

them from playing little pranks with *us*. You may know how trying the exuberance of so-called poltergeists can be for the living: they tend to touch, pinch, pull hair and even cause injuries. There is no danger of that tonight, *as long as we keep our circle unbroken*.

'Just so none of you are frightened by "strange" sounds, here's how the bell and guitar sound.' After sounding them, she passed the paper trumpet around for their inspection (Professor Hackel inspected it closely) and showed them the slate. Picking it up by its handle, like a hand-mirror, she turned it over to show two blank sides.

When the instruments were restored to the alcove, she closed the curtain and took her seat.

'I'm going to ask Dr Lauderdale and Professor Hackel to hold my wrists tightly, and to press firmly on my feet with theirs. The aetheric force can be terribly strong at times. In the past, I've wrenched muscles under its power. Ernestine, will you lock the door and put out the lights?'

Phin held the rough hand of Jane Forster, and, when she'd returned to her place, the moist hand of Ernestine Johnson. The dark room began to expand, as if puffed out by the sobbing breath of the medium. There was no other sound.

Mrs Webb groaned, and Phin could hear the silk of her dress thrashing. Suddenly she screamed, a fine contralto sound that made him gasp. Then came minutes of dead silence. Phin's own hands were sweating now, and he felt trapped by the hands gripping them. Could someone be standing right behind him in the dead blackness? Almost touching him? Reaching for his throat ... ?

'Yes?' called Mrs Webb. 'Yes? Yes? Maurice? Maurice?'

'This is Maurice,' she replied, in a lower voice. 'Hello, my dear. I have messages. I have so many messages so many everyone wants to talk hello. *HELLO!*'

More thrashing, and the handbell tinkled in the alcove.

'Is there anyone here named Alan? Alan Forrest?'

Jane's hand convulsed. Her husband spoke in a hoarse whisper:

'I'm Alan Forster.'

Maurice had a message from Alan's mother. 'She says you are to stop eating animal flesh and stop wearing animal skins, Alan. And there's something about a shop.'

Alan explained that he had inherited an antique shop from his mother.

'There's something about Regent Street. Does that make sense?'

'Uh, no.'

'She says Regent Street share. Or chair.'

Jane's hand pounded Phin's knuckles on the table. 'The Regency chair!' she screamed. 'The one in the window!'

'God! That's right! We've a Regency chair in the shop window!' From the sound of him, Alan was jumping up and down in his place. 'What else does she say?'

'Window, window, window. Through a glass darkly.' Maurice seemed to be stalling. 'The windows of Heaven are dark, Alan. Don't sell that chair to a dark man.'

'Hear, hear,' piped Bruce Dank.

'A man with dark hair,' Maurice corrected himself. 'He is a Prince Regent of Darkness. Do you hear?' Guitar strings sounded.

'Yes, mother.' It was hard to tell whether the Forsters were frightened or disappointed.

Maurice went on to fetch messages for Ernestine (from her father), Stoney (from his sister) and Professor Hackel (from Socrates). Dank chatted for a minute with an old R.A.F. mate whose memory was as vague as his vocabulary unmilitary.

Phin was bored. The guitar and bell effects were fascinating (he suspected threads, or a secret panel) but when a spectral Indian chief with the unlikely name of Thunder Head turned up to speak to anyone named Thackeray, he began to wonder what time it was.

'Chief Thunder Head brings greetings, Thackeray, from the Great Spirit.'

'My heart is glad,' said Phin. 'By his name, the chief would seem to be of the Kwakiutl tribe. Am I right?'

'That is correct, Thackeray.'

'Or possibly Utopi,' Phin added. 'Yes, it's definitely an Utopi name.' Having just invented the Utopi, he felt justified in saying anything he liked about their names.

'Er - all tribes are as one in the Happy Hunting Ground.'

'I see. But I doubt if the Kwakiutl have a Happy Hunting Ground. Being, as of course you know, a tribe of fishermen. Still, I suppose they know it under some other name.'

'You speak the truth. All -'

'All names are as one, I imagine. Gosh, this aetheric plane business is really difficult, isn't it? I sometimes wonder that spirits can remember who they really are.'

Thunder Head/Maurice said slowly, 'But I know who you are, Thackeray.'

'Oh?'

'You are a detective. You found the murderer of a man who makes pictures.'

'A painter, yes. Aaron Wallis.' Someone, Phin thought, had been reading the papers.

'Aaron is here. He says to thank you for what you've done. But he also says to warn you that there are some mysteries better left alone. If you go too far, you will be humbled in the Judgment of the Beyond. Is that clear?'

What, he wondered, did the Beyond have to hide? 'Very clear.'

'Aaron hopes you will approach this in the right frame of mind. Of heart. See, believe, understand. You have great psychic powers, though you don't know it. That is how you caught a murderer before, and how you will catch one again.'

Everyone at the table seemed to be holding their breaths.

'Will I? And whose murderer will I catch?'

'Mine,' said the voice. 'I, Maurice Webb, was murdered!'

'I'll be damned!' Doc whispered.

Bruce Dank said, 'Blacks, I'll be bound.'

Phin asked Maurice who had killed him.

'I cannot say. I know, but I cannot say. But it will all be made clear to you in time.'

'How were you killed, then?' Phin asked.

'By means of *psychic poison*. That is why I want you to use your hidden powers to avenge me.'

'How about a hint, anyway?'

There was no answer. Instead, the table in the alcove began rocking and thumping violently. Mrs Webb screamed again, and there was a tremendous crash.

In her natural voice, she said, 'What? What is it? Ernestine, could we have the lights?'

Just before Ernestine released his hand, Phin heard something thump on the table in front of him. When the lights came on, he saw it was the paper trumpet. Mrs Webb, streaming sweat, sat still held fast by her table partners.

Hackel jumped up and pulled back the alcove curtains. The little table lay on its side. He rummaged among the articles on the floor.

'I don't understand this,' he said, holding up the slate. His beard and hair seemed even more ragged than before, and his eyes were wild. 'Who the bloody hell wrote this?'

Written carefully on the slate, in thick white strokes of chalk, was:

P H I N

Chapter Three

Vanishing Trick

Over herbal tea in the drawing-room, they performed a thorough post-mortem.

'Mother spoke of darkness,' said Alan Forster. 'I think she must have meant that dark stain on the Regency chair.'

'Blood!' Jane exclaimed. 'It could be blood! Do you suppose someone was *murdered* in that chair?' Plainly she envied Phin his sudden notoriety.

Dank cleared his throat. 'Speaking of murder, old man, have you really solved one? You must tell me all about it, I'm rather a keen murder buff, when I get the time to read them. In fact, there's not much I'm not interested in. Ever read a good Western? I remember one ...' He rambled on for some minutes, from cowboys to horses, to show-jumping; from show-jumping to political implications of the monarchy; ending, as before, at Nostradamus.

Doc and Ernestine cornered the sleuth next, asking about the murder he'd solved and the one he would solve.

'I like a good mystery,' Doc said. 'I wonder about old Webb, now?'

'You knew him?' Phin asked.

'No, I say "old Webb" because he seems so much a figure of the past. Almost historical.'

'I never knew him either,' said Ernestine. 'I don't think anyone in the society did, except Mrs Webb. Excuse me, I see Steve's come in. I'll have to get another cup for him.'

Doc looked more serious when she'd left. 'I do wonder if there isn't something funny going on around here,' he said.

'So do I,' said Hackel, joining them. 'That slate business, especially. It's really baffling.'

Phin set his untouched tea on the mantelpiece. 'Do you

think so? I think the slate business is about the only thing I do understand.'

'Well don't tell me.' Hackel was irritated. 'I want to figure it out for myself. But it does seem almost -'

'Supernatural?' Doc suggested.

Hackel's manner went from irritation to anger. His heavy brows shot up to ten-minutes-till-two, and he all but snarled.

'The devil! It's nothing but a bloody trick, like all her special effects! And I mean to get to the bottom of this deliberate fraud, if it's the last thing I do!'

His hand trembled, spilling tea into his saucer. 'It's not a secret panel, I've checked before. I had a damned good hold on her right hand and foot. How were you on the other side?'

'I had a good grip,' Doc said. 'Even if I hadn't, I don't see how she could write something in even, smooth letters, in perfect darkness. And what about all the other things? That trumpet floating over and dropping on the table? The bell?'

Hackel glared at him. 'I think we were *hypnotized*. Made to believe things happened when they didn't.'

For some reason, Doc didn't take this with his usual good nature. 'Oh, of course! Blame it all on hypnosis. That's so much more likely than any obvious trick, like someone's leaving the table. It's funny how you always overlook the obvious, isn't it, Professor? Almost as if you wanted to draw attention away from it.'

'What are you getting at, Lauderdale? Out with it!'

'Now, boys.' Stoney came between them. 'We have a visitor, and this won't do at all.' He laid a frail hand on each man's heavy shoulder; it looked as though he were going to ask them to shake hands.

Hackel stalked away and sat down at the piano. After stabbing out a few chords of 'Chopsticks', he began to play, settling into a skilful imitation of Thelonius Monk. Doc walked out of the room.

'I must apologize, Mr Phin,' Stoney said quietly. 'Simply don't know what's got into everyone tonight. Steve's been

quarrelling with Nancy, and now this. I'm afraid all our talk about spiritual harmony must sound rather hollow, eh?'

'Maybe it's hearing that there's a detective in the house. Guilty consciences or something.'

'Do you really think so? Good Heavens!'

'No, I don't. After all, I'm only an amateur. And not here to spy out anyone's secrets. Except a few secrets of the ancients.'

'It's Dr L, really. He gets so edgy whenever Dave fails to show up for a contact, poor man. And then the Professor is obsessed with catching out Mrs Webb in some sort of conjuring trick. But come, I believe Mrs Webb would like a word with you.'

She sat on the sofa in the corner, leaning forward to talk to Nancy and Steve, who were sitting on the floor. Phin heard only her final words:

'... whatever, you've no right to speak to her like *that*. Ah, Mr Phin! Have you met Steve?'

The singer had been frowning, but now he looked up and turned on the vacant smile.

'Mr Phin's a detective,' explained Mrs Webb.

'A private eye!' Steve said. Without apparent irony, he added, 'Outa sight!'

Phin sat on the sofa, and Stoney drew up a chair.

'Mr Phin, I believe you to be a psychic sensitive,' Mrs Webb said. 'You may not know it, but you have great potential. I'd like to ask you - *we'd* like to ask you - to become a full member of the Aetheric Mandala Society.'

So they've not only checked my background, he thought. They've checked my bank balance.

He stalled. 'I - really don't know what to say. I'm not sure I'm - worthy -'

'We're better judges of that than you, you must agree.'

'But you don't really know me.' He looked at the two on the floor. Nancy stared at the carpet pattern, and Steve chewed at his knuckle and stared straight at Nancy. Neither

could be listening. 'I haven't even spoken with some members.'

'We think we know enough. Naturally the offer is provisional. If we don't get along together, that's that. Oh, and don't worry about the expense. Ernestine will go over the finances of the society with you later. Meanwhile, you're under no obligation.'

'I accept, then. With thanks.'

'Wonderful. We can have the initiation right now. Ernestine, will you get Doc down here? We're doing Mr Phin.'

Doing Mr Phin. He had visions of a naked torch-dance, trial by ordeal, the placement of a secret scar ...

The reality was far simpler. Mrs Webb made a short speech outlining the aims of the Aetheric Mandala Society ('Oneness with the One'). Then each of them approached Phin, laid hands on both of his shoulders, and said 'Brother.' It was all over in five minutes, and they were congratulating him. Even Steve managed to stop chewing the back of his hand and offer a handshake to the newest member. It was agreed that Phin would move into the house next day.

Mrs Webb walked down to the front door with him.

'Come to luncheon tomorrow,' she said, 'and bring a few things in a bag. You can move in properly later.' She maintained her 'dotty' persona, chatting about aetheric harmonies, until they reached the door.

There her manner changed abruptly. 'I may as well tell you now, Mr Phin, I know that you're a phoney.'

'Pardon?'

'I know your heart is insincere, and I think the others must guess it, too. I've more or less coerced them into having you with us.'

'But why? Has it anything to do with your husband's death?'

She grimaced. 'I believe Maurice must have been having his little joke with you about that. No, it's far more serious. Someone has been stealing money from the society.'

'Stealing money?'

'Shh, not so loud.' She glanced up the stairs. 'It's been going on for some time. As much as fifty pounds a week.'

'And you want me to investigate. O.K. But surely you know all the members well enough to have some idea who it is?'

'I'm not sure ...'

'You mean, Mrs Webb, that you *are* sure. But you don't like telling a stranger.'

She sighed. 'I wouldn't care to say, not just yet. What I have discovered is that Ernestine's books do not balance. There are entries which seem to be changed.' Her large hand, strong despite its plumpness, gripped his wrist like a handcuff. 'Don't mistake my meaning. It isn't the money. It's the *betrayal*.'

'When did Ernestine start working for you?'

'About eleven years ago. Shortly after Maurice - passed.' Her grip relaxed, and she added, 'It's the betrayal, you understand. The betrayal.'

'Murdered with what? This seems to be a bad line.'

'Psychic poison, Beeker. Psychic poison.'

Now Phin could hear a strange crackling over the phone. He identified it as Beeker's asthmatic laugh.

'What do you want me to do, mate? Look it up under P?'

'What I want you to look up is Maurice Webb's death certificate, to start with.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't have the faintest idea how to find out about such things. Then I want you to pick up all the gossip you can about the Aetheric Mandala Society, especially anything about the finances of its members. I've joined, by the way. I'm moving into the house today.'

'Congratulations. Figured out any seance secrets, yet?'

'Some. I need some practice, and then I'll give you a

demonstration seance. Can you come to dinner on Wednesday?’

‘O.K. Must ring off now. I’ve got to see a few people about diamond rings I’ve lost. See you. Keep, as they say, the faith.’

Ernestine served the lunch in a depressingly hygienic dining-room on the first floor. There were frosted-glass windows, letting in so little sunlight that they ate under fluorescent lights at midday, as in a Woolworth’s cafeteria. Murals of Granny Smith apples added nothing to the atmosphere but reflected green light, caught up and intensified by the long, yellow-green formica table. The colour, Phin kept trying not to remember, of putrefaction. He’d rather have eaten in the warm brown seance room upstairs, but the round dining-table there was evidently reserved for spiritual nourishment.

The food was equally depressing, though not as clean. Following grubby slices of raw carrot, there was lentil porridge and meatless sausages, nearly as nasty as the real. Perhaps to encourage fermentation, the whole was driven home with a ‘syllabub’ of rancid goat’s milk, beaten with raw sugar.

Phin envied Nancy her foresight in fasting today. She was evidently sitting out the meal-time in an orgone box, somewhere in the back garden. He envied the audacity of Bruce Dank, who, after pushing the mess around his plate for a few minutes, sighed with fake repletion and excused himself.

‘Need a walk after a meal like that,’ he said. ‘Burn up the old lipids.’ He looked at his watch on the way out, no doubt checking how much pub time remained.

The sleuth was left with his mess of health, in the company of those who seemed to enjoy their Soyasage and Lenti-Mash mightily. He could only swallow and endure, as he did with the new nickname Ernestine chose for him.

‘I expect you’ll want some coffee,’ she said, ‘*Thack*. We never drink it ourselves, but I know you must be used to it,

being American. So I bought some caffeine-free instant for you this morning.'

'I really don't know what to say,' he murmured, mouth full of curds. She skipped heavily out to put on the kettle.

'Really delicious meal!' Doc called after her. 'I can just *feel* the nutrients.' He patted the paunch under his loose Hawaiian shirt. 'How about you, Thackeray? Wasn't that good?'

'Not half.' Phin silently rejoiced that the English language created so many opportunities for tact. 'Good isn't the word for it.'

A waking sleep descended over them. Stoney was reading a thin book. Hackel, to the disgust of others, was *peeling* an apple. Mrs Webb excused herself and went upstairs to work on her memoirs.

Steve finished eating an apple in the approved way – core, stem and all – and rose to go. Doc rose at the same moment. Like two sleepwalkers, they moved towards the archway that led to the hall, and they all but collided going through it.

'Don't tell me you're going to the loo, too?'

'Oh. Well, after you, Doc.'

'Won't be a minute.'

Doc made a left turn and disappeared down the hall, and Steve waited, lounging in the archway.

Ernestine was just bringing in the 'coffee' when the front doorbell sounded.

'I'll get it,' Stoney sighed. He folded the book over his finger and, holding it between his palms like a breviary, he glided out, turning right.

Ernestine served Phin's brew, with a pitcher of skimmed milk. When she'd cleared a few dishes and returned to the kitchenette, Hackel and Phin were alone in the room.

The psychologist laid down his half-peeled apple and moved to a closer chair.

'Mr Phin.' His voice was low, evidently so that Steve and Ernestine couldn't hear. 'I've been meaning to speak to you

since last night. If you're really a detective, there's real work for you here.'

'What sort of work?'

'All this -' he waved his dessert knife, '- a monstrous fraud. You do understand that, don't you?'

'Do I? Fraud, perhaps, but monstrous? Maybe it's a friendly little fraud, with the best intentions.'

'Take Mrs Webb, for instance. She's up there now, working on her new book, *Splendour in the Dark*. Her *third* book of memoirs. A pack of lies, of course, just like the last two. She's diabolically clever, faking up the evidence afterwards to make herself into a miracle-worker.

'And she even plugs her books during seances. We had one a few weeks ago when Dr Lauderdale was talking to his son. Dave told his father to stop wearing that 'dangerous' scarab, and Dr Lauderdale asked him how he knew it was so dangerous.

'"Where did you get it in the first place?" he asked. "I can't remember," said the so-called ghost. "In this place there is much darkness and confusion. But you can read about it in Mrs Webb's book," or words to that effect. Now I ask you!'

'Have you read the book, then?'

'Oh, yes. Her last one, *And Yet a Voice*. The passage our dubious ghost refers to is simply hearsay, a colourful story about a wandering gipsy - surely a fabrication. I wasn't about when the boy acquired the amulet, but I was present at his death. And there's simply no question of its being caused by supernatural means. None at all. Either he made up the story himself, or the others made it up about him.'

Phin sipped his coffee-metaphor. 'And how do you think he came by the scarab?'

'I don't know. But I know you should expose this Madame Fraud for what she is: a *ghoul*, preying on the grief-stricken. She's really got her hooks into Dr Lauderdale for one. He's no longer interested in science's search for truth. Instead,

he's content to just sit around reading occult nonsense, or just brooding.'

'Brooding? Or meditating? It depends on your point of view, doesn't it? I suppose people might have complained that Gandhi moped too much, or Buddha brooded, but it wouldn't have looked that way to Gandhi or Buddha. Even in the scientific search for truth, it must be necessary to stop work now and then, to just waste a little time.'

Hackel's clenched teeth showed through the beard. 'I see where you stand, all right. If you're going to pick on every little word—'

'I only meant to say that Doc seems anything but moody to me. He's downright cheerful.' Phin smiled. 'Content.'

'There you are. He's *content*. And with this place! As long as he thinks he has a lifeline to what he imagines is the ghost of his son. And he has a passionate hatred of any truth which threatens to cut that lifeline. For instance, I told him what I thought about the "wandering gipsy" story, and the whole curse theory of Dave's death. I said his son died of an overdose of 'H' and we didn't need to drag in curses to explain that.

'Well, he stared at me for a minute as if I were some new specimen of marine fauna. Then he said, "Professor, I'd appreciate it if you kept your fucking mouth shut about my son."

'Ever since, he's been rather avoiding my company, and I can't say I've been seeking his. And when we do converse—well, as you saw last night. I don't know. If spiritualism can have that kind of effect on a decent scientist...'

Hackel went on in this vein for several minutes, accusing Mrs Webb of frauds large and venial. He stopped only when Stoney came into the room.

'Still waiting?' he asked, as he passed Steve in the archway.

'What does it look like? I'm in agony. He's been in there ten bloody minutes.'

'Just had a chin with two of your little admirers at the door. Two little girls, no more than twelve years old. They absolutely insisted I let them in to see you. I did no such thing, needless to say. I say, why don't you use the upstairs loo?'

Steve grimaced, and shook his copper hair. 'Waited too long, now. I can hardly move, let alone climb stairs.'

The clergyman sat down to his syllabub and book again. 'They wanted a lock of your hair, or a shirt button,' he called out. 'Some little souvenir. Extraordinary!'

The singer mumbled something about a golden souvenir, and limped off down the back hall to hammer on a door.

'Doc, for God's sake! Hurry up!'

'What's the book?' Phin asked.

Stoney held it up. 'Adrian Munk's *Dowsing Extraordinary*. Fascinating stuff about this man Prolpe, whose sensitivity to auric vibrations is so great that he can identify the sex of unborn children. He holds the wand over the woman, and it dips once for a boy, twice for a girl.'

'Three times for kittens, I suppose,' Hackel said.

Stoney showed them the book's frontispiece: a grim-faced farmer holding the two branches of a forked stick. In all the dowsing cartoons Phin had seen, the stick always bent towards the ground irresistibly, but in this photo, the stick looked normal enough. The caption read: 'George Prolpe locating an underground river in the Sahara Desert.'

'The Sahara Desert?' asked Phin. 'It looks like Hampstead Heath.'

'Ah, that's just it.' Stoney leafed through the book and read a long passage to them, explaining how Prolpe could locate underground water sources merely by passing his dowsing-rod over a map of any area.

'I've been doing some dowsing research myself,' Stoney confided. 'Nothing this spectacular, but I did dowse Hyde Park, with some interesting results. You know that it used to

be a plague pit? I've been trying to get in contact with the souls of some of the victims of the Great Plague. It doesn't work perfectly yet, but I have had some occasional messages through the wand.'

'How does that work, exactly?' Phin asked. He noticed that Steve was still pounding at the bathroom door.

'Much like table-rapping. I agree with the spirits on a simple code, like one for yes, two for no; but I'm trying to work up to a kind of Morse code, for spelling out messages in full. The wand begins to tingle in my hands, and then -'

'The rubbish pours out,' said Hackel. 'You know very well you're moving the rod yourself. Unconscious movements.'

'That may be, indeed. Yet why can't it be the unconscious part of my brain which acts as a radio receiver for the messages?'

Leaving them to their argument, Phin went to the archway and watched Steve pounding and kicking the bathroom door.

'"Just a minute", he says. It must have been half an hour! Come on, Doc, I know you're in there! And I've got a private eye here who likes to kick down doors!'

Suddenly Steve stopped pounding. His face became serious. 'I just thought. His heart! Do you think -?'

Phin rapped on the door. 'Dr Lauderdale, are you all right?' There was no reply, no sound at all but running water. He rattled the knob and noticed the lock in the centre of it. 'Is there a key to this thing?'

'There might be. I don't know where.'

Hackel, Stoney and Ernestine came out of the dining room.

'It's Doc,' Steve explained, preparing to kick the door. 'I think something's wrong in there. His heart, maybe.'

Three solid kicks with the high heel of his boot scarred the door but had no other effect.

'No need for all that,' said Hackel. 'There's a bunch of keys in the kitchenette, isn't there? Hang on.'

He fetched the keys and started trying them. The fourth

key worked. Phin pushed the door open, expecting to find something heavy blocking it.

One of the sink taps was running. On the glass shelf above it lay the Egyptian scarab.

Otherwise the room was empty.

Chapter Four

Black Aura

'You're sure he came in here?' Phin asked, trying the window. 'And that he didn't leave?'

'What do you mean? I *saw* him come in here, and I never took my eyes off the door for even a second.' The singer picked up the scarab and studied it. 'He never came out at all. Not by the door.'

'Nor the window. It's fastened with a burglar-proof lock.' Phin looked into the bath and lifted the lid of the toilet. 'I suppose if I were a really cautious detective, I'd dust the bowl for fingerprints. Who knitted this cover for the lid?'

'I did,' said Ernestine. 'But what can that possibly have to do - ?'

'Nothing, nothing. Detectives always seize upon some insignificant detail when they're stuck.'

'So you're stuck?' Stoney asked.

'No. What's your theory, Professor?'

The Professor's theory was obvious, as he tugged at the knees of his trousers and knelt to tap the floor. Then he rose and started tapping the tiled wall.

'Secret panel,' he explained. 'Must be here somewhere.'

Steve laughed. Stoney, unwilling to crowd into the tiny room with the others, stood with folded hands in the doorway. Behind him, Phin could see Mrs Webb's slippered feet slowly descending the back stairs.

The clergyman looked agitated. 'Really, Professor. What would a secret panel have been used for? Two of these are outside walls; one adjoins the kitchenette, and one the hall. It's clear to me that what we're dealing with is beyond the physical -'

'A miracle!' Ernestine breathed. 'Astral projection! Doc must have passed his body through the solid wall!'

'Entirely possible,' Stoney said, nodding rapidly. 'As we know, so-called solid matter is mostly empty—'

He was again interrupted, as Mrs Webb shouldered her way through the door. 'What's all this?' she demanded. 'I heard someone pounding loudly enough to bring the house down.'

Ernestine explained. As she listened, the medium's eyes shone.

'I knew it,' she said solemnly. 'I felt *something*. This *presence*. It felt as though a soul had brushed past me at my desk, in its ascent to a higher plane.'

Phin turned around to look at her. 'So you knew something was up, did you?'

'Astral projection!' Ernestine said again, and modified her earlier theory: 'He must have passed his body through the solid ceiling!'

'It certainly looks that way,' Phin said, frowning. 'Unless of course he left by the open door.'

He returned to the dining-room archway where Steve had waited. Looking to the right, one could see straight through to the front door; to the left, straight through to the back. There were four other exits in sight: three doors and the back stairs; the front stairs were just around a corner, out of sight.

'You couldn't have mistaken the door by any chance?' He walked down the hall, yanking open doors. 'Broom closet, main kitchen, recreation room. By the look of the dust in these, nobody's been in them for months.'

'We intended to have spiritualist conventions here,' Mrs Webb explained. 'That's why we kept the large kitchen and the front room for a recreation room, which we could use for a dormitory. I've intended to do something with them, but—my time is short.'

'I see something's been walled up here, by the stairs.'

'Stairs to the basement,' Ernestine said. 'The last owner started converting the house into flats.'

'I see the back door's bolted.'

'We've had to keep it bolted lately.' Stoney came forward and slid back the upper bolts, while Phin did the lower. 'One of Steve's juvenile fans tried to sneak in this way, a few weeks ago. She actually had the lock picked!'

Phin opened the door and came face-to-face with Nancy, reaching for the bell.

'How did you know I was here?' Shouldering her shoulder bag, she entered.

Phin looked past her into the garden. 'I just had this feeling. Did you go out of the house this morning by this door?'

'Sure.' She shrugged off her orange suede coat and held it over her arm. 'Stoney let me out. We keep it bolted all the time, see, because -'

'I just heard. Where is this orgone box of yours?'

'There.' She pointed to a small shed in the corner of the garden. 'I've been recharging my orgones for hours. What's up, anyway? Why are you all standing here in the hall?'

'Doc's disappeared,' Phin said. 'I just wondered if you'd seen him passing out through the rear wall. Let's all go back in the dining-room, shall we?'

When they were seated, he drew out a notebook and sketched a diagram:

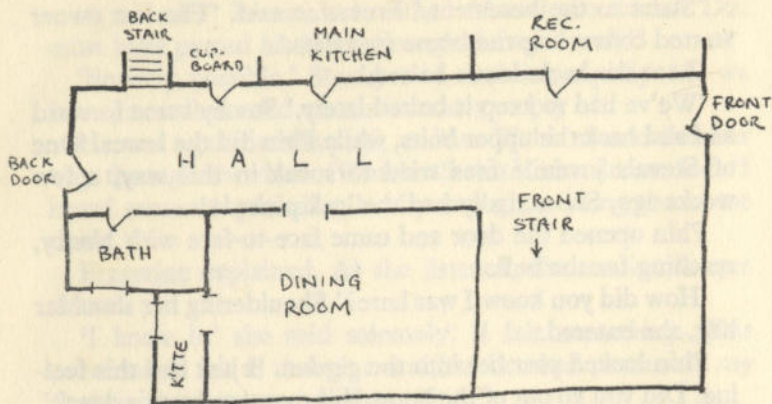
'Now we all saw Doc go towards the bathroom, Steve saw him go into it, and no one saw him come out. If we're agreed on that much, I'd like you all to look at this diagram and think about it. And I'd like your permission to search upstairs.'

'But why?' Ernestine looked astonished.

'Because I want to see whether Doc couldn't have gone up the back stairs, somehow, without Steve's seeing him. Anyway, I haven't seen much of the house, yet.'

'I'll go with you,' Hackel said, jingling the keys. 'Where shall we start?'

'The second floor? I don't expect to find him, you under-



stand. He could easily have sneaked down the front stairs and out the front door by now.'

'Well I'm going back to work,' said Mrs Webb. 'I've more to do than trail around the house on a fool's errand.'

She preceded Phin and Hackel up the stairs, and continued on up another flight.

'I don't understand this at all,' said Hackel. 'There's neither rhyme nor reason to this - this vanishing trick.' He wiped sweat from his forehead. 'It's almost *magic*.'

'The rhyme for that, I believe, is tragic. I think you and I should call the police now, Professor.'

Hackel stroked his beard. 'You really think it's that serious? Maybe we should. But Mrs Webb would be furious, I can tell you.'

'I suppose so. And we really have nothing to tell them, for now.'

After checking the drawing-room, seance room and two hall cupboards, they ascended to the third floor. Here, Hackel explained, there were three bedrooms, the library, and a hall toilet.

The library was large. Phin glanced at a few titles, and walked over to the nearest window. 'It faces the front,' he

said. 'I'm beginning to get an idea of the plan of this house, now. The drawing-room's directly below us, and the lecture hall above. Is there a large room like this on the top floor, as well?'

'Mrs Webb's office. Shall we look at the bedrooms?'

The first was Mrs Webb's: frilly, pink-draped, and far from tidy. Enormous garments and undergarments hung over her dressing-table mirror; the table was crowded with boxes, jars and bottles labelled with rustic names ('Alfalfa Skin Milk', 'Birch Sap Wrinkle Cream'); the wardrobe was crammed with expensive dresses; a fox stole leered from under the bed.

Nancy's walls were black, with large astrological signs painted in fluorescent colours. Her water-filled bed had, if marks on the carpet were any indication, once needed a puncture repair.

Ernestine's room was neat and stark, with a polished floor, unpainted walls, and what seemed to be an army bed. Her dresses looked handmade, and her sweaters were knitted, Phin supposed, from the pattern book on her shelf. The only decoration in the room was a wooden crucifix with a plaster Christos, dripping red paint.

'Catholic? Or just an all-round mystic?' Phin asked.

'She's mystical, all right. Claims to have visions. She and Mrs Webb will be working up visions of Doc before long, I shouldn't wonder.'

Phin knew the fourth-floor lecture hall well enough, but now Hackel showed him through the door in the diagonal partition, into a small triangular room with one window and no furniture.

'For private meditation,' he explained. 'They call it the quiet room.'

Phin opened the french window and went out on the balcony. 'It can't be all that quiet, with the street noise. Though I guess we're high enough here.'

The first bedroom on this floor was Hackel's own undis-

tinctive hotel quarters. The suits in the wardrobe were as sombre as the covers of the thick books on his shelf. The desk held a flat portable typewriter and a flat stack of typed notes headed, 'Mass Hallucinations in a Spirit Cult'.

'I don't care much for the title,' Phin said.

'Oh, I suppose the idea of mass hallucinations upsets you, does it?' Hackel said shortly.

'Oh, no. But 'spirit cult' is a dangerous line to take, Professor.'

'Dangerous! My God, don't you think a belief in ghosts can be dangerous? Need I remind you that believers in the Holy Ghost used to burn people at the stake?'

'The stakes are rather different now. Like so many people, you can't see that harmless cranks really *are* harmless. You want to organize your own Inquisition against them, but you should be ignoring them, not igniting them.'

'I've heard that one before. Let them get on with their spirit worship - '

'But that's the point: spiritualists *don't* give a damn about the spirit. They believe in nothing but the body.'

'The *body*?'

'They worship and love the body so much that they can't let it go at death. They have to keep resurrecting it for one more chat, one more parlour game.'

'Notice the pattern in their nonsense? They replace the physical body by an *astral body*. For food it eats *thought force*, for air it breathes the *aether*. Instead of protoplasm it's made of *ectoplasm*, and so on. It writes on slates, flings objects about, plays music and speaks. In other words, it's an ordinary living body. Can't you see? They simply want to take life with them.'

'A nice debating point. But why is my paper "dangerous"?''

'Because it shows you don't understand them at all. And that means you're in danger of becoming one of them. They see it, even if you don't; that's why they let you hang around

here. Believe me, they'll try every means to convert you. I have a feeling that Doc's little stunt may be part of their plan of attack.'

'I don't follow that at all, Mr Phin.'

'Professor, you put too much faith in your five senses. Anything you can't explain must be a "hallucination". That's your weakness, and I feel sure they – or some of them – know it. You lack the one sense they can't attack. The sixth sense that might save you.'

They opened the door of the next room, which looked unused.

'Sixth sense, indeed!' Hackel muttered. 'What's that, may I ask?'

Phin sighed. 'A sense of humour. Whose room is this?'

'Yours, I believe. Someone should have shown it you before.'

The next room was Dank's. There were horse brasses on the wall and a pile of cheap paperbacks by the bed: several Westerns by someone called Latigo Hand; an exegesis of Nostradamus, and an item called *The Negro Beast*, which bore neither author's name nor publisher's imprint. Under the bed, where Dank might have looked for black assassins, there were empty brandy bottles.

The fifth-floor bedrooms were those of Stoney, Doc and Steve. Stoney's neat cell showed nothing more exciting than a rack of walnut wood, to hold his clerical collars. Doc's held almost no personal belongings other than clothes, a small cache of wheat germ and vitamins, and a framed snapshot of a sullen boy.

'That's Dave. His mother was killed in a plane crash, I understand, and Doc more or less raised him alone.'

'What kind of person was Dave?'

'Secretive, and a bit paranoid. Always creeping about the house, peering at everyone with just about the expression you see here.' Hackel studied the picture. 'No one really liked him much.'

As they passed into the hall again, Phin asked, 'Why did they keep him in the society, I wonder?'

'There was some movement to get rid of him, but it came to nothing, finally. And then he died.'

'I wonder if someone did, after all, get rid of Dave.'

'Out of the question,' Hackel said, but his hand shook as he opened the door to Steve's room.

The air was filled with small motionless aeroplanes. There were models, in primary colours, of at least a dozen types of plane, strung from wall to wall on wires.

Phin ducked his head and moved among them. 'I had an idea Steve was a model-builder.'

Hackel made a face. 'I suppose you've worked up some elaborate Freudian theory about Steve, have you? Locking himself up for hours with these artificial birds -'

'Not quite. I saw him chewing his hands last night. Chewing the knuckles to get the dried cement off. I used to do the same, when I was a kid. But I didn't expect flying models like these. Steve really is old-fashioned, isn't he? And a careful worker.'

He bent over a plan on the work-table, shoving aside heaps of scrap balsa wood and silvery paper to examine it. 'A World War One Fokker triplane: it all comes back to me now. Stringers and formers and dihedral angles and dope -'

His voice trailed off. He looked thoughtful, but not at all nostalgic.

'Lead on, Professor.'

'There's nothing left but Mrs Webb's office, across the hall.'

There were sounds of furious typing from the office, but, when they opened the door, the typist was not in sight.

The office was large and comfortable, with a low divan at one end, comfortable chairs by the fireplace, and three tall french windows. At the far end, there were shelves of occult paraphernalia to the ceiling. Around the middle window, someone had erected a barricade of filing cabinets, topped

with African violets. The sounds of typing came from here, and Phin could make out, through the velvet foliage, Mrs Webb's grey-brown perm.

The two men rounded the barricade and found her working at a large, untidy roll-top desk.

'What is it you wanted, gentlemen? Wait, I have just this paragraph to finish, then I can spare you a few minutes before my nap.'

They waited, while she fired a few more bursts on her machine.

'We haven't found Doc anywhere,' the professor said.

'I'm hardly surprised at that. He is gone,' she said, with a knowing smile. 'Gone, as Elijah is gone. We shan't see him again, unless he elects to descend from the astral plane, and I don't see why he should. I could have told you some months ago that this would happen. I noticed then that the colour emanations -'

'Hang the colour emanations!' Hackel shouted. 'Isn't that typical, saying afterwards that you knew it was going to happen. You've just made all this up, haven't you?'

She maintained the smile. 'No, Professor, I didn't. I have it on the authority of Mrs Besant and others, many others, that the colour and quality of an aura is the surest key to one's personality and future condition. In your present state of anger, for example, your aura will be brightest red, tinged perhaps at the edges with a bit of green envy. Dr Lauderdale's aura, I'm sorry to say, was black. The black aura signifies the total death of the physical body.'

'Oh, I give up!' Hackel slammed the door on his way out.

'Sit down, Mr Phin, I wanted to show you the accounts. Now let me see, where have I put the book this time?'

Where indeed? The desk was a chaos of piled papers and spread-eagled books, mingled with a few pieces of apparatus from the shelves. A crystal ball on a dusty velvet stand held down a heap of dusty typescript, a dowsing-rod served as an unwieldy bookmark, and the telephone rested on a fan of dog-

eared Tarot cards. Mrs Webb dug through the disorder and finally came up with a heavy ledger.

'Here's what I spoke to you about. See these entries?'

Phin looked, and shrugged. 'I'm no accountant, you understand.' He took the book and turned over a few pages. 'I see. Did Ernestine make all the entries?'

'Oh, yes. And she's always been a reasonable book-keeper, until the last time I checked. As you can see, her figures don't add up. And some seem to have been changed. I don't know what to make of it.'

'I see. This balance is out by over a hundred pounds. Still, it seems a stupid way of embezzling. I'm sure if Ernestine were that good at keeping accounts, she could dream up a more sophisticated way of stealing from you.'

He stood up, snapping the book shut. 'If I may, I'd like to take this with me, and go over it more carefully. Just to look for wrong balances. But you really need an audit, by a professional. Checking your receipts and bills. In fact, considering the size of your operation, I'm surprised you don't have all this handled by an accountant.'

She drew her old cardigan off the back of her chair and over her shoulders. 'Really, that's not the point, Mr Phin. Why should I let "professionals" meddle in our affairs? Where's the trust and love in that? We are not that kind of "operation", are we?'

Phin descended to the drawing-room carrying the book in his hand, hoping that someone would notice it, blush, and blurt out the details of their crime. No one gave a glance towards it, or towards Phin.

Nancy sat in a straight-backed chair, allowing Steve to brush her dark curls. Ernestine sat as far from them as possible, and watched them constantly. The others were discussing Doc.

'Take a pew, old man,' said Dank, bright-eyed and boozy. 'They've just been giving me the gen on this disappearance business. Rum, what?'

Steve looked over at him. 'Demon rum, maybe.'

Though he said it softly, the hard-of-hearing little man bristled at once. 'I may take a brandy at lunchtime,' he said. 'But by God, they'll never mistake *me* for a pansy lady's maid.'

'What do they mistake you for, then?' Steve said softly, and went on brushing.

'What? What was that? Kindly repeat that remark, young man, and I'll -'

Ernestine said, 'For shame! The both of you! Here we are, privileged to witness a *miracle*, and all you two can do is *bicker*.'

'There may be more than one miracle today,' said Stoney. 'Steve's planning to give us a little demonstration this evening, aren't you, Steve?'

'What's this?' Hackel sat up straight. 'I haven't been informed of any demonstration.'

'Oh, nothing much really.' Steve looked embarrassed. 'I won't tell you anything about it now, in case it doesn't come off. But I wish Doc could see it.'

Hackel laughed. 'No chance of that. According to the oracle upstairs, Doc won't be back till Judgment Day.'

Just at that moment, the brush must have caught in a bad snarl, for Nancy bared her teeth and groaned.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped
out of the car was a warm, humid breeze.
I had heard that the weather was perfect,
not too hot, not too cold. It was exactly
what I needed. The humidity was just
what I needed. The humidity was just
what I needed.

I had heard that the humidity was perfect,
not too hot, not too cold. It was exactly
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Chapter Five

Scorpio Descending

After dinner, Phin took the ledger to his cold room, flopped it open on his table, and started to meditate. This was no more his idea of sleuthing than dinner had been his idea of eating. Items like '3 pr. curtains, £43.18' and '1 cwt. w.g. rice, £7.95' tend to have, when repeated often enough, the same effect as chanting a *mantra*, or attending to the drone of a hypnotist's voice.

The real Thackeray Phin was of course nowhere near this dreary house, nor even in the twentieth century. He sat by a warm fire in his Baker Street rooms, explaining to a friend his solution to a recent series of baffling murders.

'Consider this man, this "Jack the Ripper",' he said. 'What do we really know about him? The police tell us that he killed six women in the latter months of 1888, the last on November 8th. The brutality of his crimes suggests a deranged mind, while the considerable skill with which he mutilated his victims suggests that he is a surgeon. The police have also established that he lives in London, though not in the East End where his murders occurred.'

'Good Heavens!' expostulated his companion. 'There must be thousands of surgeons in London.'

'That is correct. But we have another clue, in his frequent notes to the newspapers and the police, jeering notes which brag of his crimes. He dares them to bring him to justice.'

'Evidently our Jack is of a literary turn of mind, and enjoys making a mystery of his murderous activities. And while there are thousands of surgeons in London, there

surely cannot be more than a few dozen *literary* surgeons. We have narrowed the field already.'

'Ah, but which of the few dozen could he be?'

The sleuth smiled. 'We have yet another clue: the seventh murder.'

'But there were only six!'

'That is the clue. Why did our Ripper stop? What changed his habit of life in November 1888?'

'Perhaps,' said the friend, 'he died, or removed to a new locality.'

'But, according to the medical register, no surgeon died in that month, no surgeon retired, and no surgeon left his London practice. No, our Ripper has experienced a deeper change than a mere change of address, and that change has reformed him.'

'Do you mean he is now sane?'

'I mean he is now married. It must be clear that his crimes were those of a passionate character. Wedlock has enabled him to check his morbid passions. I took the liberty of checking the registry offices, and found one surgeon who married in November 1888. By no coincidence, he is a literary man, who writes accounts of ingenious murders. In two of these tales, he actually refers to the date of his own marriage. Significant, is it not?'

An inspector of police stepped from behind the arras, his handcuffs at the ready. Phin's companion started up and stood trembling. With a face as pale as foolscap, he asked:

'And this surgeon's name?'

'Surely,' said the sleuth, 'that is elementary, Watson.'

So much for reality. Nowadays, the police did not wait politely behind the arras while the amateur investigator produced his dazzling deductions. They swarmed in, lights flashing and klaxons blaring. As they no doubt saw it, any-

thing a lone amateur could do with meerschaum and meditation, they could do so much better with twenty tiny cars filled with eighty large officers – all talking at once on the radio.

Deduction? They had computers capable of piling up great heaps of punched cards at astonishing speed. Observation? They had Identikits capable of rendering any human face whatever with the realism of a Disney cartoon. The worlds of crime and crime detection alike were infected with business efficiency.

Even a spirit medium needed account books. Back to work, Phin.

He was just beginning to focus on w.g. rice once more, when Bruce Dank put his slick seal's head in the door.

'Steve's about to start, old man. Over in the lecture hall.'

As they crossed the hall, Dank said casually, 'Checking the books, were you? Someone had their hand in the till?'

'Could be,' Phin said. He noticed that the wing-commander had turned his hearing-aid receiver to catch his answer.

The chairs in the lecture hall had been rearranged, turned to face the back of the room and grouped close to the 'quiet room' door. A few strangers were there already, white hair and glasses gleaming in the stale light. Phin took his seat in the front row (reserved for the Aetherian elite), nodded to the Forsters in the second row, and counted the house. One of the elite was missing.

'Where's Nancy?'

'I don't know,' Hackel said. 'She was here a few minutes ago, then she just slipped away.'

Stoney whispered, 'I believe she said she needed air. Imagine she'll be back directly, eh? It would be a shame if she missed it – I get the impression it's something rather special.'

'Quite a crowd. Is it open to the public?'

'An invited audience.' The professor chuckled. 'Potential

suckers, I'd say. The fellow with the squinty eye over there is some sort of reporter.'

Ernestine sat apart from the audience, guarding the hall door. In her new, or newly-made dress, she looked even more dismal and blotchy than ever. Phin wondered what it was that could bring her out of her almost perpetual sulk, aside from contemplating a blood-dripping crucifix. Not money, surely. Secretaries in novels were habitually stealing from, or blackmailing their employers, but this was real life, or very nearly.

A plain girl, drudging for Mrs Webb all these years, and now slaving for the rest of them, without a gleam of colour in her life – why shouldn't she steal?

When he saw the way she stared at Steve, Phin had his answer. She clearly worshipped him, in the same aching and inarticulate way his little girl fans worshipped him. And she would no more dream of telling him than she would of asking Mrs Webb for the money to buy a dress.

Mrs Webb stood up and signalled for their attention. 'It's not ten o'clock yet,' she said. 'But since we're all here, I thought Steve might like to commence.'

'Nancy isn't here,' he said, not looking up. 'I don't want to begin without her.'

Ernestine made a small smack of disapproval and stood up. 'If you'll all excuse me, I think I'll go and meditate.'

'There's a warm fire in the office,' said Mrs Webb.

'Oh, fine. Anything's good enough for me.' Ernestine said this not at all in her usual humble manner, and walked out before her employer could answer.

'What's the matter with *her*?' Steve asked. He'd been sitting with his hands in the pockets of his modish white suit, and with one foot crossed over the other knee, making a careful study of his green suede boot. Now he looked up and around him for the first time, and he looked annoyed.

'We'll all have to be a little more patient with Ernestine,' said Mrs Webb. 'You know, Steve, how she likes to use the

quiet room of an evening. And tonight you've taken it. She naturally feels a bit snappish.'

'I don't see why she has to meditate anywhere, tonight.' He flicked at the white lapels, and at the front of his electric green T-shirt, while Mrs Webb introduced his act.

'Steve is about to show us something of the power of aetheric forces generated during the trance state. I myself do not know exactly what will happen, but he assures me that it invokes the power of Universe Mind over matter. First, he's going into this little room behind me - we call it our quiet room - to meditate and attain a deep trance state in solitude. He's asked me to lock him in, and he'd like all of us to remain as quiet and undistracting as possible.'

Before the act could proceed, Hackel had to satisfy himself that there were no trick devices or hidden accomplices in the odd little triangular room. Then Steve went in, taking a flashlight from his pocket, lay down on the room's carpeted floor, and closed his eyes. Mrs Webb closed and locked the door, and Hackel checked that it really was locked.

'I just don't want any more strange disappearances,' he said. 'You'll notice he was wearing the scarab.'

Phin, craning around, noticed that the reporter was writing this down.

'Reporters!' Stoney whispered, making a face. 'Mrs Webb didn't want anything to do with a reporter. They always muddle things. But Steve insisted. Should've thought -'

Ernestine stood at the hall door and yelled, 'Stoney! Telephone!'

A dozen people shushed her. Stoney tried to wave her away.

'Tell them to ring later,' he stage-whispered.

'It's important,' she said, louder than necessary. 'Miss Emily Blaise. You know, the E.S.P. test.'

'Bah!' He sucked his fangs. 'I'd forgotten. Excuse me.'

When he and Ernestine had left, there was a knock at the quiet room door. Mrs Webb unlocked it.

'I can't get into a trance,' Steve complained. 'What's all the bloody row, anyway?'

'Stoney had a telephone call. Do you want to try again?'

He did. The locking and checking ritual was repeated.

Minutes passed, during which the loudest noise in the room was the scratching of the reporter's pen.

Hackel got up once, tiptoed to the door, removed the key and peered through the keyhole. He returned shaking his head.

'He's turned out the light in there. Can't see a thing.'

'What's supposed to happen?' whispered the reporter. 'Is he going to walk through the wall or anything?'

'Who said anything about walking through walls?' Hackel said this quietly, but it sounded like a shout in the stillness. He received a round of hisses for it.

Another minute passed. Then someone made a noise.

Phin had noticed when he came into the room that the curtains were open, but had immediately forgotten the fact. Now it was brought to mind suddenly, as Alan Forster pointed to the window and said, '*Look!*'

The stampede was on. Phin sat fairly near to the window, so reached it just behind Mrs Webb and Hackel. Within a second, the mob behind was trying to push the three of them through the glass.

There wasn't much light from the room, but enough to see the small balcony with its glossy iron rail. Some ten feet straight out beyond it, standing in mid-air, was Steve. He had illuminated his face with the flashlight; now, having gathered his audience, he grinned and made a stiff mock bow.

'Impossible!' Hackel said, his voice breaking. 'I must see how - ' He fumbled at the window catch, but Mrs Webb seized his hand.

'He's in a trance, you fool! Whatever you do, don't open

that window or make a noise. He must not be awakened too soon.'

The pop singer bobbed gently up and down, as though suspended on a piece of elastic. He shone the torch on his left hand, showing that it held no support – though what support there could be, no one could imagine.

'He's standing on something,' Hackel muttered. 'He's hanging on a rope. He's got on to the balcony somehow.'

These theories were so patently false that Mrs Webb answered them with a sniff.

'I can't stand any more of this!' Hackel lunged suddenly, putting his fist straight through the glass in his effort to get the catch.

Abruptly the light and Steve vanished. Before Hackel got the window open, there came a heavy sound, a dull twang, the sound of a giant's fork being banged down on the giant's table. Then the window was open and they rushed out.

'I think he's fallen,' Hackel called, leaning over the rail.

Phin looked down at something small and white, far below.

'I think he has.' He glanced up to the dimly lit office windows above. 'I'll phone for the ambulance.'

The others were still trying to crowd through the french window on to the tiny balcony. Phin shouldered his way back inside and raced upstairs to the office.

The only light seemed to come from the roaring fire. On the divan, half-hidden in shadow, he could make out Ernestine sitting cross-legged. Stoney's head and the telephone receiver were just visible through the African violets.

'Emergency, Stoney. Dial 999, ambulance, quick. Steve's fallen.'

'Oh no!' Ernestine untangled her thick legs and scrambled for the door.

Stoney looked grim, but calm. 'Ring off, please, Miss

Blaise. Quickly, now. I must call an ambulance.' While dialling, he asked, 'What sort of fall?'

'A bad one. From the fourth-storey level – and it sounds as though he's hit an iron fence below.'

The clergyman repeated all this clearly to the ambulance service. Phin switched on the lights and made a brief inspection of the room, meanwhile. If, as it seemed, Steve had been held up by a rope, Ernestine and Stoney were likely assistants. Each of them was near a window overlooking the accident, if accident it was.

The desk was much as before, but Stoney had added a pack of E.S.P. cards and a printed form on which he'd evidently been scratching notes. Probably Miss Blaise had been relaying her guesses of the cards over the phone, and Stoney writing them down. The rest of the objects on the desk looked much as before, though with the mess, it was hard to be sure.

Knowing it wasn't possible to burn a rope this quickly, he checked the fireplace. There was nothing to be seen in the fire but burning logs. The detective thing to do seemed to be to look under the grate, so he looked. Just under the edge was a scrap of fibre (Aha!) which he put away in his wallet. Further back lay a coin of some kind, but the grate was glowing hot and Stoney had finished phoning.

On the way downstairs, Phin realized how foolish all this was. No one could suspend a man on a rope in such a way as to keep him motionless, over four yards from the house – not without a large crane.

In the street they found a crowd gathering, pressing in close to the figure on the low fence. Sodium light made the white suit amber, and the blotches upon it rusty orange.

Steve hung with his head and arms outside the fence; ornamental spikes had pierced him across the chest. The impact of his body would have been enormous, and several of the iron palings were bent beneath him. His long hair, now more golden than copper, hung halfway down the

fence in a point, like the wet tip of a brush. It *was* wet, Phin saw; drops of pigment rolled down it and dripped to the pavement.

Steve's hand twitched.

'He's alive!' Ernestine screamed. She made a move as if she would throw herself on Steve and drag him from the spikes. 'He's alive he's alive ...' Stoney and Hackel managed to hold her back.

Phin squatted down. Now he could see blood coming from Steve's mouth and nose. Another man approached, and Phin warned, 'Don't try to move him. Let the ambulance men take care of him, they'll be here in a minute.'

'I wouldn't think of it,' said the squinting reporter. He opened his notebook and bent over the figure. 'Steve,' he said softly. 'Can you hear me, Steve?'

Phin was revolted. He was about to order the news-man away, when Steve's lips moved.

'Mother?' he said. '*Mutti?* Hurt ... someone's hurt ...' His voice was weak, and he slurred the half-sentences.

'Did someone murder you, boy?' the reporter asked.

'Murder? Haven't I ...' Steve turned his head slightly to look at the reporter. Making a great effort, he said distinctly, 'I think it needs a fourpenny stamp.'

His head fell back. He said no more until the ambulance men arrived, and then his half audible mutterings made no sense to anyone listening.

The crowd moved back as the ambulance men came through it. Nancy had joined the others. She caught Phin's arm and murmured something. Her face, in the flashes of blue light, showed no emotion.

'What did you say?'

'Who's that on the fence?' she asked.

'I'm afraid it's Steve.'

She turned away, impatient, and asked someone else. From time to time Phin saw her again in the crowd, always asking:

'Who is that on the fence?'

The ambulance men had trouble lifting Steve off the spikes. One of them caught his foot in a piece of string and kicked it away. When Phin saw what it was, he picked it up and put it in his pocket.

All at once, the real hurry was over. The ambulance men laid Steve on a stretcher and fussed over him a moment longer, before they put him away. One man went to turn off the blue flashing light, while the other spoke to a uniformed constable. The ambulance drove away slowly.

'We may as well go inside,' Phin told the others. 'I think the police will want to ask us a few questions.'

Nancy seemed to come out of her daze. 'The fuzz? They're coming inside?'

She ran ahead of them into the house, and up the stairs two at a time. The others filed in slowly, too shocked to say more to one another than 'Terrible. Terrible thing.'

Phin and the reporter brought up the rear.

'You heard his last words, too?' asked the reporter. 'He did say murder, didn't he? *Murder*. Tell me, my friend, where's the phone?'

Chapter Six

Pushed or Flew?

'To outsiders,' Hackel assured his fellow prisoners, 'a police investigation is bound to look somewhat chaotic. The bustle and confusion ...'

They were now being held in the drawing-room. One at a time, they were hustled across the hall to the seance parlour for questioning. The entire house swarmed with policemen: measuring rooms, pounding up and down stairs, colliding in doorways, and often pairing off in corners to whisper over their notebooks. All this had been going on for hours.

'But beneath the chaos,' Hackel went on, 'one can trace the outlines of some master plan. Believe me, the police know exactly what they're doing, and waste no effort in doing it. Here we see the best -'

'I say!' Stoney had been looking out the window. 'Those two detectives down there in the street seem to be having a frightful argument.'

Hackel smiled. 'Dialectics. The logical theory matched against the well-known intuitional "hunch". They cannot be arguing about the *facts*, therefore they are testing their interpretations against one another.'

'Now they seem to be actually fighting.'

The investigation was not, as Hackel thought, grinding on towards some inevitable conclusion. It was standing still and spinning its wheels. Detective Sergeants Thole and Blessing had already had enough of the case, and of each other.

So it was that Chief Inspector Gaylord stepped out of his car to find them rolling in the street, putting over their arguments by brilliant armlocks and intelligent kneeling, not to say clever eye-gouging and throttling of pure genius.

'Oh Christ. Bring me the notebooks of those two men and send them home,' he said quietly, turning his hawk-like profile in another direction. 'What the hell's got into everyone around here? And why, can anyone tell me, is that man measuring a tree?'

He stalked inside and up to the seance parlour. 'Simple homicide investigation. Just because it involves a pop singer and his crank friends, we don't have to ... now where are the statements? Who took the statements? I want them right here on this table, where Gordon left them for me.'

He stepped into the drawing-room to have a look at the witnesses collectively.

'Middle-aged hippies,' he muttered, glaring at Professor Hackel. 'That explains a lot.'

Back in the seance parlour, he read through the confiscated notebooks. D.S. Thole felt that the whole thing was an elaborate trick gone wrong, a trick involving ropes or mirrors. He and others had searched the premises, even the roof, without finding a single mirror that wasn't firmly bolted to furniture or a wall, or so much as a foot of rope. There was a ball of knitting wool in the office, he ended hopefully, and in the basement, bundles of 'literature' tied with twine.

'Note: basement has duplicator and bundles of pamphlets. Would S.B. be interested? Possible Comm. front?' S.B., of course would be the Special Branch. Thole hoped they might seize the basement press, which regularly turned out such revolutionary pamphlets as 'Why Ectoplasm?' and 'The Auric Fire'.

Blessing decided from the start that genuine levitation had taken place. There were, his crabbed Speedwriting asserted, many things not fully explained by ordinary science ...

Next came a pile of statements. Everyone in the lecture hall who could see clearly out of its window had seen the same thing: Steve Sunday, floating in mid-air about ten feet straight out from the balcony, illuminating his face with a

pocket torch. Some had seen a ghostly aura about the pop singer's head and shoulders, one had seen winged creatures with evil faces, and the elderly Mr Krbzski swore to a red magnetic ray, pulling Steve up towards a flying silver disc ...

There were no outside eye-witness accounts. Miss Nancy Michie had gone for a walk after dinner. Miss Ernestine Johnson and Reverend Arthur Stonehouse were upstairs in the office (with, as Thole pointed out, the ball of knitting wool).

The physical evidence showed that Steve Sunday had opened the french windows in the little triangular room, stepped out on the balcony and grasped its rail. Quite possibly he stepped over and stood on the narrow (four-inch) ledge outside the rail.

But then what? Did a mirror arrangement reflect him into the window of the lecture hall? Did he swing out on a rope and stop for two or three minutes at the end of his swing? Did he slide along a wire, or walk a tightrope? Then where was the mirror, rope or wire?

All right, it was a rope, and they burnt it in the office fireplace.

'Get me Miss Ernestine Johnson,' he asked the constable at the door.

As soon as the fat young woman was seated, he said, 'I'd like to get this tidied up quickly, Miss Johnson. You can be of assistance, by simply admitting that this statement of yours is a pack of lies.'

'I - I -'

'Don't. Don't compound them. Just let *me* tell *you* what happened. You planned this little game with Mr Sunday. You lowered a rope from the office window next to you - a window directly above the balcony he was standing on - and he swung on this rope from there to the next balcony. There he stood, just outside the rail, shining a torch on his face. In the uncertain light, it looked as if he were further away, hanging in mid-air.

'When he went to swing back again, something went wrong. Either he lost his grip and fell, or *you let him fall*. Now, save us an hour's work by telling us the whole truth.'

He could see it was wrong, by her manner. Her shyness had vanished while he spoke, and now she looked at him calmly.

'Chief Inspector, I don't know what you're talking about. And that's the whole truth.'

Gaylord had a terrible suspicion that it was.

'All right, then. Let's just say it wasn't you.' He thought for a moment. 'You're a very religious person, aren't you, Miss Johnson? Pious, even?'

'I try to live a worthy life.'

'Let's suppose you saw Reverend Stonehouse doing something wrong. Fraudulent. Lowering a rope out of the window, say, for Sunday to swing on. Would you be able to tell me if you saw that?'

'Yes, of course.'

'But would you be able to admit to yourself that you saw it? The shock of it might be so great that you'd literally refuse to believe your eyes. You were supposed to be meditating, so you told yourself that this was part of your dream, or—'

'My eyes were closed, at least part of the time,' she said. 'I don't suppose I could have seen the Reverend Stonehouse lowering a rope even if he did so. The filing cabinets were in the way. I could hear him talking on the telephone, that's all. I could see his head over Mrs Webb's plants. He had his back to me as he stood at the desk.'

'But you were in a trance? How could you be sure *what* you saw?'

'I know what I know. I did have a rather different variation of my vision, but — you wouldn't be interested in that, I'm sure.'

'Oh, but I *am*. Tell me about this "vision".' He picked up his pen.

'There were flowers bursting up out of the carpet, everywhere. And then this cathedral grew up in front of me out of the flowers. Then -'

He laid down his pen. 'Thank you very much, Miss Johnson. I believe that'll be all for now.'

Stonehouse wore a roll-neck pullover that made him look exactly like a parson in a roll-neck pullover. The prissy gestures and exaggerated accent annoyed Gaylord; he began to wonder whether Stonehouse wasn't a homosexual.

'Let me come straight to the point, reverend. Either you or Miss Johnson lowered a rope to that boy. I realize it must have been just a small prank at the time, only something went wrong. But now that he's dead, it's important to get at the truth.' He held up a page of writing. 'Are you absolutely sure your statement is correct?'

'Absolutely sure? Hmm. Perhaps I'd do well to give it, as they say, a "butcher's" before I answer that. It's entirely possible I've forgotten something in the excitement, you know.'

He took the statement and read it over, flashing his long front teeth from time to time as he mumbled. 'Yes, that seems quite in order.'

'You were talking on the telephone all during the incident?'

'I presume so. I was in fact conducting a rather important experiment in the long-distance transmission of thought. E.S.P. as it's usually called. The lady who telephoned from Cheltenham was endeavouring to receive my thoughts, as I looked at the symbols on a set of special cards. You see -'

'And you had your back to Miss Johnson?'

'Most of the time, yes. I did look round once or twice, to make sure I wasn't disturbing her meditation with my talk.'

'And what was she doing?'

'Sitting in the half-lotus position on the divan. The half-lotus -'

'Her eyes were open or closed?'

'Closed, I think. I could be wrong, though.'

Gaylord glanced over the statement again. 'How much time elapsed from the time you saw her sitting there, and the time you learned about the accident?'

'Perhaps - ten minutes? I really can't be sure.'

'Then she could have been lowering a rope from her window in the meantime?'

Stonehouse seemed to give it some thought. 'In theory, I suppose. But then, in theory, so could I. I may not have been keeping an eye on her, but she almost certainly wasn't watching me.'

'Unless it was a joint operation, eh, reverend?'

The next witness was a tall, slightly anaemic man of about thirty, wearing a salt-and-pepper suit of an oddly old-fashioned cut, and carrying, but not smoking, a meerschaum pipe. When he sat down and laid the pipe on the table, Gaylord saw that it was carved with the head (including a snapbrim hat pulled low over the eyes) of Dick Tracy.

'So, Inspector Gaylord. We meet again.'

'Stop it, Phin. This is serious, not one of your damned charades.'

'Stuck are you? Like some help?'

'Stuff your help. I've already got a decent theory. The deceased was swung on a rope -'

'No. Not a rope. Definitely not a rope.' Phin picked up his pipe and sucked it reflectively. 'For two reasons.'

'Oh, all right! Your Sherlock Holmes deductions have it all laid out for you, do they? Why not let me in on the secret?'

'Deduction had nothing to do with it. First, it can't be a rope if, as they claim, your men have searched the place without finding a rope. Second, I just heard two of your men whispering in a corner: there are no rope marks on Steve's hands, and no indications that a rope was ever tied around his body.'

'All right, the rope is out. Unless -'

Phin nodded. 'Unless it was a special padded rope, and unless they got rid of it. Which reminds me. I found this in the office fireplace.' He produced the short piece of fibre and dropped it on the table. 'Burnt rope, maybe?'

'You should have shown this to us earlier, Phin. Let me get someone in here to look at it.'

'I really forgot about it. I also saw something else in the fireplace, but I couldn't reach it. A coin. Looked like an old penny.'

'Very significant,' said the Chief Inspector. He spoke to the man at the door, who fetched another man with a small suitcase.

'There it is, Evans. Can you identify that?'

The man went to work with a sheet of white paper, tweezers, and a large, self-illuminating magnifying glass on a tripod.

'Knitting wool,' he said, a minute later. 'Charred a bit at one end. A dye analysis could tell you -'

'That's enough, thanks. This came from the office fireplace, so will you keep it with the other stuff from there? Has there been any ash analysis, by the way?'

'Not yet, but you can tell by looking at it, sir. Wood ash. Nothing else interesting, except a few old pennies.' The technician started packing his equipment.

'Wait a minute, Evans. Is there any chance somebody made a rope out of knitting wool, used it to swing a man on, and then burnt it?'

Evans scratched his head. 'You'd never make it strong enough for that. And there'd be a pound or two of burnt wool in the fireplace. There isn't, sir.'

When he'd left, the other two were silent for a moment.

'What about the disappearance of Dr Lauderdale?' Phin asked. 'Don't you think they might be related, these "miracles"?''

'I don't want to hear about Lauderdale. Every one of your

crank friends brought up the subject with Inspector Gordon, and he had to tell them what I'm telling you – it's not a police matter. Still, I'd like to interview him about this. But what connection could there be?

Phin leaned back and looked at the chandelier. 'I don't know. Steve was involved in both incidents.' He added, after a moment's thought, 'You know, this is my opportunity. Here's where I should say something like "Curious about the old pennies in the fireplace", or make an enigmatic reference to Mrs Webb's bedroom slippers. And I can't think of a single brilliant, but confusing, thing to say.' After another silence, he added, 'All the same, it is curious about that Egyptian scarab.'

'Stop!' Gaylord held up his hand, halting the flow of word-traffic. 'I don't want to hear about the scarab. Thanks very much, but it'll only clutter up my thoughts even more. Do me a favour. *You* take care of the scarab side of this, O.K.?'

'And you'll take care of the hard facts? But what are the hard facts?'

'These.' The policeman went through a sheaf of notes and came up with a diagram:

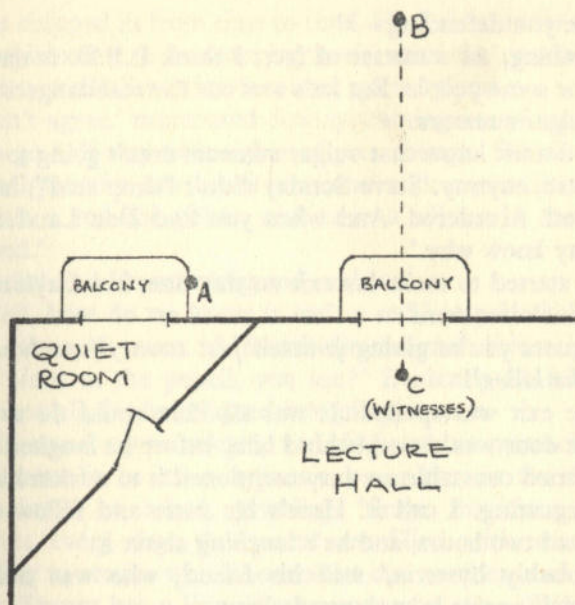
'We know Sunday was in the little room. We know he handled the window catch and the balcony rail at the place marked *A*, and we think he stepped over the rail there. We know that a dozen witnesses saw him at *B*, or thought they did. But we don't know how he got from *A* to *B*.'

He sighed. 'Damn it, Phin, he must have swung on a rope, or used a mirror. The lads are still searching. It scares me to think what we'll have to believe if they don't find anything.'

'I don't think they will,' said Phin.

'But damn it, he didn't just *jump* from one balcony to the next. They're seven feet apart – nobody would take a chance like that.'

'Why do you say "one balcony to the other", Inspector?



We saw him clearly, you know, at point B. That's ten feet or so from the balcony.'

'Hysteria and error. There's no other explanation. You all expected a miracle, so you saw one.'

'Is that your personal opinion?'

'I have no personal opinions, Mr Phin. For all I know, you, and the rest of this nut-cutlet circus, were raving on L.S.D. or something. Sunday, too. This whole case reeks of drugs, to me. I've heard all kinds of stories about youngsters who thought they could fly -'

Phin stood up and jammed the meerschaum in his jacket pocket. 'There isn't a single authenticated case like that,' he said. 'But there are hundreds of silly rumours. They used to say that kids wanted to fly after smoking pot. Before that, they said kids went nuts and tried to fly after reading too many Superman comics.'

'Are you defending - ?'

'Nothing. As a matter of fact, I think L.S.D. is dangerous, for some people. But let's sort out the real dangers from the vulgar rumours.'

'You must know that vulgar rumours aren't going to solve this case, anyway. Steve Sunday didn't "drop acid", he was dropped. Murdered. And when you find Doc Lauderdale, we may know why.'

He started to make his exit on this line, but Gaylord got in a quick last word:

'I guess you're giving yourself *just twenty-four hours to find the killer?*'

The exit was spoiled. It was all Phin could do to wait till the door was closed behind him, before he laughed. The uniformed constable on duty mentioned it to a friend later:

'Disgusting, I call it. Here's his mate and fellow-crank not dead two hours, and he's *laughing* about it.'

'Probably hysteria,' said his friend, who was doing a sandwich course in mob psychology.

The police mob was beginning to thin out. Phin and the other Aetherians still sat in the drawing-room, mainly because no one had bothered to tell them they could go to bed. Other witnesses had gone home, all but the squinting reporter, who dozed in a deep chair, awakening whenever the door opened.

Nancy was asleep. Stoney alternatively conversed with his friends and his God - but prayed in such a position as to keep his sharp chin from falling on his chest. Mrs Webb had her feet up, and Dank recklessly took unconcealed drinks from his pocket flask. Phin could feel his eyes growing gritty from the accumulation of waking hours.

Only Ernestine and the professor became more alert and chatty as the night wore on. Now they were having an animated argument about the Indian Rope Trick, while the

others chipped in from time to time. Hackel naturally found the explanation to be mass hypnosis, with the possible aid of wires, while Ernestine favoured spirit helpers.

'Can't agree,' murmured Stoney, coming out of a prayer. 'I can go half-way with either of you, though. We all know that a hypnotist can touch someone with a pencil, telling him it's a red-hot poker, and raise a blister in the spot touched.'

Hackel and Ernestine agreed, so far.

'Well, how do we know it *isn't* a red-hot poker? In another plane, I mean. A fourth-dimensional object in the same place as the pencil, you see?' Evidently he felt this explained all, for he relapsed into piety at once.

Phin stood up to stretch, and dug out his meerschaum. 'Why must it be mass hypnosis, *or* spirits, *or* the fourth dimension?' he asked, yawning. 'Stage magicians work miracles every day, the courts are filled with witnesses swearing to stories which contradict one another, and every public library has a large department of *fiction*. Why is it that we can't recognize a trick off stage, an honest mistake outside the courtroom, or an uncatalogued lie?'

Mrs Webb spoke sharply. 'I think its immoral, to sit here theorizing and dissecting everything, after what's happened. If we must talk, let's talk about Steve and Dr Lauderdale.'

'You're right, of course.' Phin sat down abruptly. 'Do you see any connection between Doc's disappearance and Steve's d - passing?'

'I most certainly do,' said Ernestine. 'The scarab's curse! It was Steve who had it after Doc vanished. He - was wearing it - then.'

'But where is it now?' asked Mrs Webb.

'Where indeed?' Phin put his hand in his pocket and felt for the scarab. It wasn't there.

'Look!' Ernestine pointed at an object on the floor, just where Phin had been standing. '*The scarab!*'

'How could it have got there?' said Mrs Webb.

Phin was about to explain that he'd been standing just there when he pulled out his pipe, that he'd been carrying the scarab around for hours; he decided instead to let the others explain it their way.

'It's come back to us,' said Stoney.

'Steve must have put it there for us,' Ernestine said breathlessly. 'For one of us.'

All but Hackel convinced themselves that this was psychic evidence of the highest order. Sleepers were awakened and the materialized scarab pointed out to them. Within minutes, it was part of the legend.

'Someone had better pick it up,' said Mrs Webb, finally.

'Guess you're right, old girl.' Dank reached for it, but reluctantly. He was glad to let Stoney beat him to it.

'I'll take charge of this, from now on,' said the clergyman, and put it in his pocket. 'It may have jolly strong powers, but I can call upon a Stronger Power, if you take my meaning.' The teeth twinkled at them.

Relieved by his bravery, the others settled into a discussion of the curse. Phin listened for some minutes, and then he asked a question.

'The one thing I'm not clear about is where did Dave get the scarab in the first place?'

'If you ask me,' Dank said thickly, 'it's an African juju. Fellow who gave it to him had more than a touch of the tarbrush about him. Makes sense, you know. The Egyptians were nothing but a lot of niggers in fancy dress, now, weren't they?'

'I think you'd better have a good sleep,' said Mrs Webb coldly. Turning to Phin, she explained: 'Dave was fond of travelling, you see. Every week or so he was off to Hull or some other distant corner of the country, usually thumbing lifts.'

'As I understand it, he met a gipsy gentleman on one of these long jaunts. The gipsy gave him the scarab - I believe

he tricked Dave into taking it – and then told him about the curse.

‘Dave didn’t believe in the curse himself, not for a moment. If only he had! Now, of course, we know how real, how tragically real it is. Science can say what it likes, but that scarab has caused the deaths of two of our members, and the dematerialization of another. I really wish Reverend Stonehouse hadn’t picked it up. I get such terrible emanations from that – *thing*.’

‘Bosh! Mustn’t bother about me,’ Stoney said, grinning. ‘The Lord has a way of protecting His own, don’t you know?’

The talk drifted on to theological matters. Did God permit evil in the universe, or was He unable to purge it?

There were agitated sounds in the hall. Heavy, no doubt official, feet pounded up and down stairs, a door slammed, more feet pounded, several more doors slammed, and finally a great stampede. As the drawing-room door opened, they could hear a policeman’s voice:

‘–king hell. They couldn’t have looked there right off, could they?’

A uniformed man asked for Phin, conducted him down to the back garden, and turned him over to Chief Inspector Gaylord.

‘One of our brighter lads searching for ropes and mirrors thought of looking in the shed,’ he said. ‘Come have a look.’

They ducked through the low door and found several men with portable lights working around a metal box in the corner. The box stood upright like a small privy, with its metal door open. A square window had been cut into the side. By the lights shining through it, they could see how the box was made, of sandwiched layers of glass fibre and sheet metal.

They could also see the occupant. Doc sagged on the low wooden seat inside. His mouth was open, and his eyes.

‘Dr Andrew Lauderdale?’

'Yes,' said Phin.

'Bloody marvellous. Now we can just tear up our work and start all over again.'

Phin took a closer look at the strangled corpse. 'You've made some progress, after all,' he said. 'At least you've found a piece of rope.'

Chapter Seven

The Professor's Theory

Gaylord and Phin faced each other across the round seance table again.

'I'll begin by asking you to account for your movements between the hours of one and three o'clock this afternoon.'

'And I'll begin by saying that five of us saw Dr Lauderdale alive up to 2.30, possibly later. That should cut the time limit down.' Phin went on to describe the scene as he remembered it, from Doc's departure to the discovery of the empty room. 'That was 3.10, by Hackel's watch.'

'So you, Hackel, Miss Johnson, Stonehouse and Sunday were all accounted for. The others?'

'Mrs Webb went up to her office just a minute before Doc left. Dank went for a walk – to the pub, I imagine – at 2.13 exactly. He looked at his watch as he left, and I automatically checked the time on Hackel's watch.'

The inspector wrote this down. 'Don't you wear a watch?'

'No, I'm training myself to waste time. I find that if I can forget the days, the minutes and hours forget themselves.'

'Ask a stupid question. What was Miss Nancy Michie doing?'

'I'm afraid, Inspector, that she has a poor alibi. You see, she claimed to be sitting in the orgone box at the time. *That* box.'

'I see.' Gaylord made half a page of notes on this. 'She didn't happen to mention seeing a body next to her, did she?'

'No, but then Nancy's inclined to reticence.'

'We'll see about that. Now, who had it in for Lauderdale?'

'Hackel. They "quarrelled in public", you might say. Hackel claims that Doc had a grudge against him, because he, Hackel, hadn't become a convert to spiritualism. I doubt it. And I don't think Hackel seriously disliked Doc, either, no matter how much he raved against him.'

'So you don't think Hackel could have wanted him dead?'

'I wouldn't say that, Inspector. I only said he didn't dislike him.'

'Who gets Doc's money, and how much is there?'

'I've heard there's a lot, inherited from his wife. And I believe it goes to the society treasury – administered by Mrs Webb.'

'Women?'

'Not that I know of.'

Gaylord put down his pen. 'He was a marine biologist, and a good one. After his son's death, he throws all this over, and joins the society. Does that ring true? Do scientists have sudden conversions like that?'

'They do learn the technique of the suspended judgment,' said Phin. 'He didn't strike me as converted. More – wanting to know.'

'All right.' The inspector ticked off a few items in his notes. 'One thing's sure. Lauderdale was murdered within a few feet of that box. Inside the shed, in other words. So our suspects should include anyone who could have been there between 2.30 and 3.00. We can forget for the moment about his mysterious disappearance, and concentrate on the murder.'

'That means it's Nancy Michie, Bruce Dank, Mrs Webb, Steve Sunday.'

'Not Sunday, I think. He was either in sight or earshot the whole time, in the hallway. And if I were you, I'd add two more people.'

'Oh? Who?'

'Stoney went to answer the front door. He was gone for

ten minutes. Plenty of time to get round to the back garden by way of the street.

'Then there's Ernestine. We assume she was in the kitchenette washing dishes.'

'And the only exit's through the dining-room where you were sitting.'

'No, there's the kitchenette window, overlooking the back garden. And Hackel and I had our backs to her the whole time, talking. I really can't swear she was in there.'

Gaylord sat back, tapping his aquiline nose with the pen. 'Wait. I see where this is leading. The kitchenette window is very close to the bathroom window, within reach of it. Are you suggesting that Miss Johnson - ?'

'It's best to keep an open mind, as we spiritualists say. But then, Hackel and I could have conspired together to give each other alibis, couldn't we? Or Steve and Mrs. Webb. Or the disappearance could have been effected by an elaborate arrangement of mirrors. Doc managed to convince Steve he was going into the bathroom, when really he -'

'*Was coming out of it!* By jove, Phin, you're brilliant! Now if you'll kindly use the same device, to make it appear as if you're coming in here for interrogation, I've a hell of a lot of work to get through tonight.'

'Laugh if you will,' said Phin, leaving. 'They laughed at all great ideas and inventions. They laughed at nitrous oxide.'

But as the constable noted, Phin was not laughing when he came out of the seance room. He looked worried.

After their interrogations, the Aetherians were assembled in the drawing-room and harangued by Chief Inspector Gaylord.

'It's three a.m.,' he said. 'You've all had time to think. If you want to add to your statements, now's the time to do so. Some of you've had second thoughts already. Miss

Michie, for example. When we explained to her that she could hardly have been in the orgone box at the time of the murder, without being either an eye-witness or a murderess, she remembered everything far more clearly. Didn't you?'

Nancy remained unmoved, as though used to this kind of bullying.

'She remembered one critical fact: that she *hadn't* gone to recharge her orgones after all. Instead, she "went for a walk, but couldn't say exactly where".'

Gaylord, evidently aware of his role, actually began pacing the carpet pattern before them.

'I wonder if Mr Dank could have caught sight of her. He was going for a walk, too. No, I've forgotten, he changed that. Now he remembers that he went to a pub called the King Charles Head, on Drew Street. Arrived about one p.m., stayed till closing time. Is that right, Mr Dank?'

'Right. Right.' Bruce Dank's face was as shiny as his hair, and his eyes could now stay open only one at a time. 'I admit my disgusting habit. Why not? We all have weaknesses. Me too. I *drink*, and I admit it. I drink a *lot*. Lots. *But* — and here's the important thing. The important thing is, I drink, *but* —'

'I know you've been drinking this evening, Mr Dank. What I want to know is, how you managed to drink in that pub at a time when you were still in this house.'

'No, wait. Wait. Let me finish. Let me finish. I drink, *but* — I admit it.' Having confessed to his own satisfaction, Dank fell asleep.

'Now, Mrs Webb.'

'Inspector, we've already been over my "story", as you choose to call it. I was working upstairs, I heard pounding below, and I came down to investigate. And I can't prove a word of it. All the same, I'm very tired, and I'd like to sleep.'

Gaylord gave up. The dazed Aetherians watched his

men collect their papers and file out, with the squinting reporter after them.

The reporter did not file out of the house, however. After using the phone in the front hall again, he opened the door to let in a few colleagues. Chin in hand, Mrs Webb watched the men in duffle-coats and glasses come bouncing in, as the men in blue lumbered out.

'After the lions, jackals,' she murmured. 'Well, let's get it over with.'

The jackals were quick and thorough.

'The police think Steve's death was an accident. But what do *you* say, Mrs Webb?'

'Which of you is Nancy Mitchie? My paper is prepared to offer you, for an exclusive -'

'Two, were there? Who was the other bloke?'

'You're one of the eye-witnesses? And you say he was *actually flying*?'

'Have you rung up his ghost, yet?'

'Sort of a commune, is it?'

'No offence, Professor, but what are you doing in a bunch of -'

'Is that Aetheric with an A?'

'Renegade scientist, would you say?'

'-call it MY LIFE WITH STEVE, or maybe STEVE'S GIRL: MY TRAGEDY.'

'The hippie scientist and the -'

'How do you mean, "flying"?''

Someone took a picture of Dank sleeping, which would later appear over the caption: 'Drug dream after friend's death?' Someone thought the orgone box might be tied to a feature on Wilhelm Reich. Someone else took down the particulars of Mr Thaddeus Finn, an American school-master. And someone else asked Stoney if he'd describe himself as a 'worker priest'.

'How about the sleeping arrangements here? Any free love going?'

'How about drugs?'

'How about double suicide?'

'How about NANCY: STEVE LIVES!?'

'How about naked rituals?'

'How about five hundred quid? I can ring my editor -'

At last, Mrs Webb made a brief statement. In her belief, a number of things had happened here today which could not be explained by science, and would have to be called 'supernormal'. Tragic deaths may have claimed two of its members, but the Aetheric Mandala Society, with an 'a', would carry on its work. That work was the explanation of the unexplainable, the search for higher guidance, and the voyaging of lonely explorers into what she called 'inner space'. The Aetherians were proud to know the first two martyrs to this great enterprise, and, though saddened by their loss, knew that Steve Sunday and Dr Andrew Lauderdale were not lost forever, only temporarily out of touch.

This said, Mrs Webb went up to bed, leaving the roomful of reporters so quiet that they could hear her bedroom slippers shuffling up the carpeted stairs. Most of the Aetherians followed her example, and most of the journalists left, until the only people left, besides the sleeping drug fiend, were Phin, Hackel and the squinting man.

'It's very simple, really,' Hackel said, perhaps to himself. 'Men can't walk through walls or defy gravity. So there has to be some simple explanation for all of it.' He did not offer to give the explanation.

The reporter asked Phin if he meant to 'crack' this case.

'Don't pretend you're anonymous,' he went on. 'I covered your last murder case. Do you think Lauderdale was killed by Steve? A murder-suicide angle?'

'Why should that be?'

'I've heard that Lauderdale was getting off with Nancy. In fact, I heard they used to meet out there by the orgone box. Or in it.'

Phin looked at him to see if he were fishing. 'Where did you hear all this?'

'Professional rumours. You know. Quite a few of the lads have been up here, at one time or another, doing special features on spiritualism. You get to hear things.'

'So do we all,' Hackel said suddenly. He started to crack his knuckles one by one.

'So do we all hear things. And see things,' he went on. 'Impossible things. Utter rubbish, of course.' He seemed to come out of his daze. 'Utter rubbish! Do you know how they do it? With *fine black wires*. There isn't a single one of Mrs Webb's so-called miracles that can't be explained by fine black wires. That and the willingness of her audience to be led up the garden path. They've all been conditioned, you see. She can tell them anything. She'd like to get me like that, too, her puppet professor, attesting to every ...

'Sorry, I'd better get some sleep. Goodnight, gentlemen.'

But at the door he paused. 'Ironic, isn't it? Her name, I mean.'

'What, Webb?' the reporter asked, when Hackel had gone.

'*Fine black wires*,' Phin explained. 'Poor Hackel!'

'Think he's crazy?'

'He's always been crazy, in the way you mean. I'm just afraid he might be right, this time. My God, what it would do to him, if he found some of those fine black wires! All his worst fears confirmed!'

The reporter stopped writing and scratched something out. 'Let me get this right. He's crazy, but on the right track?'

'"On the right track" or "off the rails", it makes no difference to him. What I mean is, he's a fanatic. I tried to warn him earlier against his own blind fanaticism. I made the mistake of telling him he'd be a fanatical convert to spiritualism. Now he seems to think they have a plot to steal his mind or something.'

'I'd rather ask you about the murder plot.'

'There is none. These murders make no sense at all, as a story. They're dream murders.'

The squint was aimed at him. 'Do you mean they could be the work of a crazy man? Say, a fanatic?'

'You could say that.' The reporter wrote this down, and left before Phin could retract it.

The sleuth didn't mind having lost his audience, for he'd also lost himself – in a theory that began to explain. He addressed his next remarks to the snoring Mr Dank.

'But seriously, folks, these murders aren't just senseless, they're Nonsense, with a capital N. They're like Max Miller's limerick:

There was a young man from Dundee
Who was stung on the neck by a wasp.
When asked "Does it hurt?"
He replied, "Not at all,
He can do it again if he likes."

'That's just it: no rhyme or reason, as Hackel would say. And he's closer to the truth than I thought, with his ridiculous theory, just because it *is* ridiculous. Insane ...

'Yes, you could say these are insane murders ...

'Or is there a practical joker in the house?'

Chapter Eight

Death and Mr Dank

Beeker found it convenient to change his address every month or two. His latest office was located in a redevelopment area in Kilburn, at the top of a crumbling warehouse. On the outside wall, a huge painted sign still advertised Dr Munn's Kidney Salts ('Often imitated, never equalled'). This could be appreciated from a great distance, now that several dozen homes which might have obscured it had been redeveloped to the ground.

The walls of Beeker's office had been painted many times, but not recently. Now the layers had peeled to leave an intricate topography. The little confidence-man seldom looked at his walls. Normally he stared out of his window (just above the apostrophe of Dr Munn's) contemplating new gilt-edged schemes. He was staring out now, while Phin gave his account of the two Aetherian deaths.

'And that's about all, except that this morning the place was besieged by weeping pre-adolescent girls, who should have been weeping over lost dolls or dead tortoises. Then of course the papers have it all wrong, with stories of mass ascensions and ritual murders ...'

'Well!' Beeker turned from the window and started twiddling his new Genghis Khan moustache. 'So you found your "master-criminal" at last. I hope you have sense enough to keep out of his way.'

'I won't start worrying until I come into possession of the accursed scarab,' replied the sleuth. 'By the way, if you keep fooling with that moustache, it'll come off.'

Beeker quickly put both hands behind him. 'Who do you think's behind it all?'

'I have no idea. That's what makes it worth looking into.'

All the way over here on the bus, I tried building theories. It's easier, though, if we simplify the problem: instead of Doc's vanishing from the bathroom to turn up in the orgone box, for example, I make him a solicitor named Blithering, found dead in the library of his country house. It makes the problem more familiar, you see.

'Either someone bashed in poor Blithering's head with a poker, or else he fell and hit his head on the fender (whatever that is). We know that the butler brought him a whisky and soda at 12.20. Then minutes later, Blithering had a mysterious visitor who arrived by the french windows and left a footprint in the dahlia bed. Could the muffled guest have been his secretary, Simpson, known to be in love with Blithering's daughter, but penniless? Or his dissolute son, Harold, recently cut out of the will, and recently sent down from Oxford (by the 12.18 train - train schedules play a big part in this)? Or even Blithering's detested half-brother Mortimer, just returned from Canada (by the 12.21) where he's been living for years under an assumed name? Or - ?'

'Christ! I forgot to tell you!' Beeker's excitement started a fit of hiccups. For several minutes he was obliged to hold his breath while each spasm made his moustache twitch dramatically, and while Phin went on to other theories. In the second version, Lord Surrogate was found murdered on a golf course; in the third, the Hon. Fenton Worth was pushed from the window of a first-class compartment on the 12.18 as it sped through a tunnel ...

'For God's sake, belt up and listen,' Beeker finally gasped. 'I checked on the death certificate for Maurice Webb, like you asked, and I couldn't find one. So I started asking around. The word is, he -'

At this exact moment, no shot rang out, causing him to crumple wordless to the floor, while Phin sprang to the window to see a strange figure in a Burberry hurrying away. Instead, Beeker went on to finish his sentence.

'Say that again?'

'Maurice Webb didn't die at all. He vanished!'

Phin looked disgusted. 'Oh, I guess this is your idea of a joke. Here I am, seriously considering murder theories, and all you can do is drag in a corny old plot device like that.'

'But *I'm* serious. He -'

'No. Not another word. Tell me anything - tell me Maurice Webb was run down by the 12.18 - but don't tell me he's *alive*.'

'But he *did* vanish. Not like Doc Lauderdale, mind. He just stepped out for a packet of cigarettes, about eleven years ago, and never returned.'

'Cigarettes? He stepped out for a *pack of cigarettes*?' Phin lowered his voice to a solemn pitch. 'Then this case is even more serious than I thought. What brand were they?'

'Eh?'

'Not by any chance an Egyptian blend?'

This started Beeker laughing, which in turn started his hiccups again. While awaiting the calm, Phin made a pot of coffee.

'I can hardly believe it,' he said, setting out cups. 'If Webb's alive, this really is a body-in-the-library case. By all fictional precedents, we can expect him to pop up as one of the Aetherians. Returned to blackmail someone, or to avenge some old wrong. No, that really is too much to hope for. But are you absolutely sure he vanished?'

'Of course not. All I know is what I hear, from a couple of old friends in the trade. But it's good gossip, they wouldn't kid me about that. I mean, they might tell me he was snatched off to Hell, or he vanished out of a locked room, or -'

'A locked bathroom. Or he levitated, and fell. But they wouldn't tell you something believable. They wouldn't make up a story about a man deserting his wife. All right, I believe it, then.'

'You think it was desertion, then?'

Phin said, 'Let's abruptly change the subject, before I think too much. How's business?'

Beeker immediately plunged into an elaborate explanation of all the new schemes he hoped to bring forth. One involved borrowing a rare Fenelli violin from some friend, another needed no more than a soup bone and the credentials of a paleontologist, while a third required the services of six Chinese waiters and an angry young woman ...

Phin wasn't really listening. His mind kept turning up images of Maurice Webb: Webb, in a blazer and hearing aid; Webb, in a clerical collar; Webb, in a beard, the pontificating unbeliever; Webb, the wandering gipsy – even Webb, the 'marine biologist', never seen actually practising his profession ...

But why stop there? Say Webb came back with his cigarettes, say Mrs Webb deposited him (with the fresh pack of Players in his pocket) under a fresh patch of concrete in the basement floor ... say that Webb murdered his wife and impersonated her for eleven years ...

'And you, Phin? How are the seances going? Have you cottoned on to all of Mrs Webb's little tricks?'

'I wonder if I have, Beek.'

Ernestine was plainly upset today. Throughout the afternoon and at dinner, she either snapped at anyone who spoke to her, or else refused to answer. A new crop of acne was budding on her forehead, and her usually dull hair looked dead.

Dinner was a disaster even by Aetherian standards: burnt soup, underdone rice and soyaburgers that came to the table cold and gluey. She completed the meal by dropping a serving of fruit salad on the floor and bursting into tears.

'Sit you down, my dear,' said Stoney gently. 'It really isn't fair of us to expect you to do so much, not today. Let me clean this up, while you have a rest.'

Taking his cue, Phin offered to wash the dinner dishes. Ernestine refused, at first in a martyred tone, and then out of genuine embarrassment at being thought 'delicate'. Finally

she agreed to let him wipe the dishes, while she washed.

As he polished a plate, Phin pretended to notice the window over the sink.

'You can see the bathroom window from here in the daytime, can't you?'

'I suppose so.'

'Interesting. I wonder if you noticed anything odd about the scene yesterday lunch-time. Was the bathroom window open, for instance?'

'No. I mean, I didn't notice,' she said, not looking up from her work.

'I imagine you'd have seen anyone climbing in or out of it, right? Because it's so close. In fact, if anyone had been out there, you could have almost reached out and touched them – that is, if this window opens easily. Let's see.' He pushed up the window suddenly and reached out. 'Yes, I can even touch the bathroom window itself. If I had a bit of string arranged beforehand, I could probably open and close the bathroom window from here, with a bit of practice. What I mean is, these burglar-proof locks aren't *absolutely* burglar-proof, especially if the burglar can set things up from the inside. It's easy, really. You put a knitting needle through the loop of the key, and you fix the string – or, say, knitting yarn – so that when you pull, the key turns.'

If he'd expected an immediate reaction, he was disappointed. Ernestine continued to scrub and rinse dishes mechanically, while he closed the window and went back to work. The reaction came some minutes later.

'String,' she said. 'Windows.'

'Pardon?'

'The policeman said something about me lowering a rope from the office window, for Steve to climb on, or something. He thought that I could – and so do you, don't you?' Tears ran down her blunt chin and dripped into the suds. 'With all of you, it's all rope and string and bloody windows!'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, Ernestine,' he lied.

'He – he asked me about my visions, too. They're beautiful, incredibly beautiful. He wanted to know about the vision I had in the office. But then, as soon as I started telling him about it, he lost interest. String and windows, that's his world and yours too. You're all so wrapped up in string –' She laughed, snorting through her tears, and blowing a fine bubble at one nostril. 'You're all so tied up, so strung up to this world, you can't see the real beauty all around you.'

Phin apologized again. 'I really am a novice here,' he said. 'You're quite right about my blindness to the Other Reality. But I'm willing to learn. Why don't you try telling me about your visions? And I'll try to listen and understand.'

'All right.' She thought for a moment. 'I think the first one was when I was nine or ten years old. It was a rainy day, and I was sitting on our window seat with my cat, Lila. Just stroking her and watching the rain.'

'All at once I noticed the way the rain was running down the window. It was making shapes. Patterns. Like the arches in Gothic cathedrals, only weaving and melting together. I'm not explaining it very well.'

'No, it's fascinating. Please go on.'

'Well, then the sun came out, and it shone through the arches and spires, so bright it should have hurt my eyes, but it didn't. I could stare right at it. It was like – a Gothic city of glass and diamond spires. And I could see right through all of it, right to the centre. I could see the blazing soul of the Universe!'

Phin put away the plate he'd been polishing for some minutes, and took up another. 'And you had other visions?'

'Oh yes. After the first few, it was easy. I have them frequently, now. Sometimes I can will them to happen, or else I'll just be knitting or reading, and they'll come over me.'

'And the one in the office last night?'

'I willed that one. I started looking at the carpet. The pattern's very dim in the firelight. I kept concentrating on trying to see *through* it, you understand? Then it started

bursting with flowers. Millions of tiny flowers like bright sparks, exploding into beautiful little blossoms. And I saw my cathedral growing up out of them, an enormous white spire with all the little vines and things all round it, rising out of this sea of flowers. And then – oh, it sounds silly, but I saw a brilliant red flash, and then these two men. I think they might have been discarnates, trying to get through to me.'

'Two men. Did they say anything?'

'Nothing, but – and this is the silly-sounding part – they were dancing a tango together.'

'A tango. I see. What did they look like?'

'They were dark. Dark clothes and hair. They looked like messengers of darkness. You know, I think they came to take Steve away.'

Phin nodded. 'Maybe they did, at that.'

When Phin came out of the dining-room, Stoney was talking on the phone in the front hall. He quickly covered the receiver and asked, 'How is she now, poor thing?'

'Much better. All this seems to have upset her terribly, though.'

Stoney nodded. 'Shouldn't wonder. She was quite mad about Steve, you know.'

'I suspected it. Did he know about it?'

'Now there you have it. Steve simply ignored her. I'm certain she never screwed up the courage to tell him – hello? Yes, operator, I'm holding.'

'Excuse me,' said Phin. 'I'll just go along upstairs, and give you some privacy.'

'Don't worry, I'd like the company. I've been waiting for twenty minutes for this connection. Trying to call Steve's father in Hamburg, don't you see, to make the arrangements.' He sighed, glancing at his watch. 'It's rather urgent, because I took the liberty of making tentative arrangements already, with a local funeral home. If I don't contact him soon, I fear

Herr Sontag may have made quite other arrangements himself.'

'Sontag? Oh, Steve's real name, I see. It's good of you to take the trouble on his behalf.'

'Not at all, it's really my responsibility – Hello? Herr Sontag? This is the Reverend Arthur Stonehouse speaking. Let me first of all extend ...'

Phin slipped away to the drawing-room. Half a dozen strangers had dropped in, not counting the Forsters, the Misses Blaise and the reporter with mis-matched eyes. Phin found a seat in a quiet corner, next to Miss Emily Blaise.

'What shocking news!' she exclaimed at once. 'Ada and I were quite beside ourselves when we saw the morning paper.'

Ada was beside her twin now, and she leaned forward to join the conversation. 'Yes, of course we knew something terrible had happened when Mr Stonehouse had to stop the E.S.P. experiment. And the paper this morning made it all sound so terrible and confusing –'

'So, after we'd finished work today, we took the first train for London,' her sister finished. 'To see if we could be of any use.'

'And of course to satisfy our own curiosity.'

'Ada! What a thing to say!'

'True, though.' Ada sat back again, apparently pleased at having shocked her sister.

'What must you think of us, Mr Phin?'

He pondered the question. 'Well, I'd always supposed you to be retired gentlewomen, but you spoke just now of 'work'. What would that be, if you don't mind my asking?'

'Oh, we don't work for a *living*,' Emily assured him. 'Though I wish in a way we did. Aleister, our dear brother, played very unfair with us in his will. He was always so afraid we'd 'squander' his money on our projects, so he left us only a small annuity each, and the rest of his money in trust.'

'In trust?'

'We can only have some for what he called "special emergencies", such as a larger house, or if either of us decided to marry – as if ladies of our age went about looking for husbands! Otherwise, we can't have a penny till we leave this earth. Isn't that silly, Mr Phin? Oh dear, I've completely wandered off the subject, haven't I? What was I about to say?'

'Your work?' he prompted.

'Ah. We do a great deal of unpaid – but very rewarding – work for the Spelling Reform League.' She spelt the league's name for him: *spelɪŋ ri:fawm li:ɡ*. 'And we're keen anti-vivisectionists, too.'

'You must be very busy, what with all that and the Aetheric Mandala Society. Not to mention your E.S.P. experiments.'

'Oh my, yes. Those are very tiring indeed, but Mr Stonehouse tells me I have great telepathic abilities. We both have, Ada and I. I believe those faculties are usually found in twins, and it's certainly true that Ada and I often know each other's thoughts. I wouldn't use my powers for selfish ends, of course, but I do hope that, through Mr Stonehouse's research, we may help to convince the world that E.S.P. at least exists.'

'How do your experiments work? Are they anything like those of Dr Rhine at Duke University?'

'Yes indeed. We, too, use a special pack of cards, with five symbols: the cross, circle, square, star and waves (wavy lines). At his end of the line, Mr Stonehouse shuffles the pack and goes through it, looking at each card in turn. At my end, in Cheltenham, I try to visualize each symbol as he looks at it. Then I tell him my guess and he writes it down.'

Hackel had moved closer to catch the last part of this conversation. 'Of course,' he explained, 'Stonehouse just tells her what to guess – or writes down what he pleases.'

'He most certainly does not tell me what to guess. He says nothing whatever except 'Yes', when he's heard my guess.'

'Well something's going on,' Hackel retorted. 'Because E.S.P. just does not and cannot exist!'

'How dare you accuse a minister of the gospel of cheating!' Miss Emily's chin trembled, and not with its normal Parkinsonian tremor. 'That man is practically a saint! And right now, he's telephoning Steven's father in Germany, to offer condolences. I don't suppose you'd have thought of doing anything like that, Professor.'

'And he's making funeral arrangements,' Phin added, trying to steer the conversation away from dispute.

'You see?' Emily nodded, and Ada with her. 'A saint!'

Hackel, evidently routed by this sudden canonization of an enemy, got up and walked away. Miss Emily turned a smile of triumph towards Phin.

'Do you know which undertaking establishment will be handling the arrangements, Mr Phin?'

'I haven't heard, no.'

'Oh, I do hope it's the Rosedale Home. They did our dear brother so well, didn't they Ada? So natural.'

'So like him.'

'So natural. His smile, Mr Phin ...'

Later, when the twins had left, Hackel buttonholed the sleuth again.

'See here, Phin, you can't take that E.S.P. rubbish seriously.'

'Not if it is rubbish.'

'I mean, it's just not on, is it? These cranks get up to all sorts of little deceptions. They could have it all prearranged. Or even the way Stoney says "Yes" could be a kind of code.'

Phin smiled. 'I notice you call them cranks even while accusing them of vile deception. I always thought that a crank was by definition a person who deceives himself.'

'Of course, but surely they deceive others, too?'

'Yes, anyone who's found a universal truth doesn't mind promoting it with a particular lie. If he believes there are

spirits everywhere, he sees no harm in faking the appearance of one spirit in one seance room. That's how I think Mrs Webb operates. You can see a great truth shining in her face, even when she's busy working one of her little frauds.'

'That reminds me,' said Hackel. 'We held a small sitting while you were away this afternoon. Nancy, Stoney, myself, Mrs Webb and Ernestine. Ernestine had the most remarkable conversation with 'Maurice'; he practically accused her of a crime.'

'Murder?'

'No, theft, more like. Let's see if I can recall his exact words. Ah, "There is a black aura emanating within these walls. Love and trust have left this house, the light has gone out of it." Then there was something about death lurking in the shadows, and the curse of the ancient ones upon those who steal from the tomb, whatever that might mean. I thought of the scarab at once, but "Maurice" seemed to go on harping on stealing. "The thief steals away not money, but the light," he said, a couple of times. Then he asked Ernestine if she had anything to confess. *That* finished the seance. She jumped up and ran out of the room.'

The sleuth nodded. 'That explains why she's been so edgy this evening, partly.'

'Well, so much for Mrs Webb's universal truth,' said Hackel, showing his teeth. 'I think your theory's wrong: she wouldn't know the truth if it kicked her.'

'You think not?' For reasons he did not explain, this idea made Phin's face contort, as if he struggled to control some large emotion. Before he could speak again, Stoney came from the hall to join them.

'If you're through with the phone,' said the squinting man, and rushed out, leaving the door open.

'That's all settled, then,' said Stoney. 'We'll have Steve's earthly remains taken to a local undertaker's for preparation, and then flown to Germany for burial. Too bad, really. I'm sure Steve would rather have been buried in England, where

he lived most of his life. But of course his father's wishes must be respected.'

'Then Steve's really German by birth and name only,' Phin said. 'And he's even altered his name. Were his parents divorced, then?'

'That's right,' said Hackel. 'Typical child of a broken marriage, rootless, drifting into mysticism ...'

'He did drift into the society,' Stoney admitted. 'He started coming to meetings some two years ago, then more and more seances, and so on, until we invited him to join.'

'Like a moth to a flame.' Hackel turned and walked away.

'I really must apologize for Professor Hackel's abrupt manner, Mr Phin. You know, he really is basically a good man, and I think he could become a great believer, if only he'd let himself believe.'

Phin looked over at the psychologist, now hunched down in a chair in the far corner, cracking his knuckles. 'I think he's a great believer now,' he said. 'He and I were just talking about fanaticism, and I noticed that he's willing to apply the fanatic label to anyone but himself. Yet I've seldom met a man more obsessed than he - than he seems, anyway.'

Stoney chuckled. 'You mean "There is no god but science, and Hackel is his prophet"? That sort of thing?'

'More or less. It's odd, meeting a psychologist who doesn't know his own mind. Hackel keeps calling attention to his delusion by seeing it in others.'

'Calling attention, you say? Hmm. Still, I daresay we all go about making pronouncements about the motes in one another's eyes, eh? Even the disincarnate appear to have their blind spots. Today, Maurice was pontificating rather fulsomely upon the Eighth Commandment, with ne'er a mention of Doc's murder. Finally I asked him if he expected the murderer to be brought to justice soon. He said "the killer hasn't the ghost of a chance". Really quite a wry comment on his own condition, I thought.'

The sleuth grinned. 'Yes, this evening Emily Blaise said

that she and her twin were beside themselves when they heard the news. And I can't help but notice how Bruce Dank keeps ending sentences with "what?" and interrupting speeches with "hear, hear!" I suspect that I do something of the kind myself.'

' "I suspect", ' said Stoney. 'Very good indeed.'

Suddenly everyone's conversation stopped as they heard the doorbell. Then from the hall they heard the reporter saying:

'Good evening, Chief Inspector. Here to make the pinch?'

Gaylord came in a moment after, accompanied by a uniformed policewoman. They walked straight over to Nancy and stopped. The reporter trailed close behind, until Gaylord turned and noticed him.

'This isn't an arrest,' he said. 'So you can buzz off, for a start.' Turning to Nancy, he said, 'We'd like to ask you a few more questions, Miss Michie. May we use the room across the hall again?'

Nancy shivered as the policewoman took her arm.

'She looks ill,' Stoney said quietly.

'Not as ill as she will be,' said the squinting reporter, evidently enjoying the drama. 'She's the only one of you with no alibi - twice.' He winked his skewed eye.

Phin felt like insulting him, but he could think of nothing more immediate than complimenting him on his hideous tie.

'Distinctive tie you've got there. Fawn and turquoise stripes. Is it some famous public school? I only ask because we foreigners are interested in your English public schools.'

'No, as a matter of fact, it's a Muldoon Murder Tie.'

'Pardon?'

'Maybe you've heard of the Muldoon murder? No? Well, Muldoon was a wealthy financier, got his head blown off by a letter bomb. Scotland Yard took weeks to trace it - guess where - back to his own secretary. She was a secret terrorist. That's the story in a nutshell.

'Anyway, all of us who covered the story had to spend

those weeks chasing around together. So, when it was over, we formed a club. The Muldoon Murder Club.'

'Any membership fees?' Phin asked, in his most pragmatic American accents.

'Oh no, nothing like that. Reporters are always broke, anyway, you know.'

The pragmatist feigned surprise. 'Really? Well, I guess at least one of your members must have *two pennies* to rub together.'

The officers brought Nancy back while the reporter was catching on.

'I'd like to speak to Mr Bruce Dank next,' said Gaylord.

That's when they all noticed that Dank was missing.

Chapter Nine

The Secret Passage

Mrs Webb held another seance next afternoon, to contact the disincarnate members. Doc, whose earthly body was now, as he'd wished, introducing medical students to the mysteries of anatomy, declared that he felt fine. He hadn't seen anything of Dave yet, because he (Doc) was still waiting in some kind of dark anteroom to the Other Realm. Steve, whose body was being hurriedly embalmed at the Rosedale Funeral Home (in order to catch an early plane), said that he missed everyone, but that the music over here was very 'hep' and 'cool'.

Nancy almost ruined the atmosphere by giggling. When Maurice stopped relaying Steve's voice, faltered and signed off, she whispered loudly, 'See you later, alligator.'

But later it was Phin she saw, in the drawing-room. Nancy seemed in bright spirits, chattering as if to make up for her days of gloomy silence.

'I guess I'm not what you call tight with this place,' she said. 'Really it was Steve's thing, not mine. I believe in God and immortality and reincarnation and all, but I'm not sure the old - Mrs Webb has my kind of vibes. You know, when we first came here, she used to spy on us. Yeah, really. Kept coming into his room or mine on any old excuse, just to have a look at the beds. We even tried making it on the floor once, to fox her. But Steve's room's right above Brucie Dank's, and poor Brucie came to breakfast talking about poltergeists next day - we both had to leave the room to laugh. Say, where is Brucie, anyway?'

She asked this as if she had really just noticed his absence.

'Still no trace of him,' Phin said. 'The police are still look-

ing. That may also be why they have a constable posted in front of the house. In case he comes home.'

'Is that it? I thought it was just to keep the weenybops from smashing up the house for souvenirs. Poor kids. If only they knew ...'

'Knew what?' Phin tried not to look as if he were hitching his chair closer.

She blushed prettily, then laughed. 'Well, Steve may have come on like a sex maniac with the itch when he got behind a microphone,' she said quietly. 'But not here. Maybe it was the bad vibes or something - Mrs W. and her pet priest - but Steve just started going off me. He got "tired". Well. Doesn't matter now.'

She day-dreamed for a moment, tracing with one bitten fingernail the brocade pattern of her trousers.

'But this is not a happy house,' she said finally. 'Not happy.'

'What do you think's wrong with it?'

'I don't know. Too many old people. They've had their lives once, and now they can't think of anything but having them over again after they snuff it. But I don't want to think about dying, damn it, I'm for living. That's why I like thinking about Steve when he was alive and happy, instead of talking to his *hep-cat* ghost.'

'Claiming he's *real gone*? I can see that.'

Phin was beginning to measure Nancy as a nice girl, neither intellectual nor silly, but not very articulate.

'I understand Steve played a few practical jokes. Maybe he wasn't entirely serious about spirit communication, then,' he suggested.

Her answer surprised him. 'Oh, he was serious, all right. I know he played a joke or two on the Prof, but they were *Zen jokes*. The little slap in the face that wakes you up to reality. He wanted the Prof to stop thinking and start knowing. One of Steve's favourite aphorisms was this: "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." If you dig

that, you know Steve. He was basically very serious. Under the frivolous cuticle.'

Frivolous cuticle? Aphorisms? Either Nancy's vocabulary had suddenly come to light, or she was lifting words from another's. He began to suspect the source when she added: 'Doc explained Zen jokes to me. Like when Marie Antoinette said "Let them eat cake," she might have really meant it, see? Maybe she meant "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom". They wanted to fill their bellies, but she wanted them to taste sweetness in their souls. So she was really a good woman at heart, you see?'

Phin was inclined to think that Nancy had missed the point of Doc's story, and that she probably accepted the literal notion that wrathful tigers were wise.

'What are you two conspiring about?' Mrs Webb plumped herself down in the next chair. 'Whew! I'm knocked out. These days, bringing Maurice to the table takes all my soul energy. But it's worth it, I hope.'

They were saved from agreeing with her by Ernestine's announcement of tea.

That evening it started to rain. Phin roamed the house after dinner, and finally ended up in the library, paging through *Penetralia*, by Andrew Jackson Davis. The Poughkeepsie Seer and founder of table-rapping spiritualism had little to communicate to him tonight, less than the spirit-rapping of the rain at the windows and the silence within.

After an hour, Stoney came in, brushing lint from his clerical suit.

'So here you are. We wondered where you'd got to. Coming with us?'

'Where?'

'We all thought we'd go round and see Steve, you know. Mrs Webb mentioned it earlier, perhaps you didn't hear.'

'I guess not. Yes, I'd like to come, if you'll wait while I change.'

He needn't have rushed, as it turned out, for the others took their time about assembling in the drawing-room. Everyone looked spruce and solemn, and even Nancy had more or less pinned up her hair and put on a dark green trouser-suit. Stoney covered his clerical elegance with a dirty grey raincoat. Hackel and Ernestine came down in their customary solemn black. Mrs Webb appeared at last in a dark suit, veiled hat and leather shoes.

'I want everyone to understand that we aren't precisely in mourning,' she explained. 'We're really getting ourselves up for the undertaker. I don't want him thinking we're a pack of freaks. Naturally this is not a farewell service or anything of that kind, it's a simple demonstration of our love.'

'We'd better hurry,' Stoney said, checking the time. 'It's nearly ten o'clock, and they may be sending him off tonight.'

'So soon?' Mrs Webb asked. 'Didn't they say when he was leaving?'

'Not exactly. You see, they're trying to avoid publicity. When I spoke to the Rosedale people, they said they didn't want a pack of screaming teenagers showing up at the airport.'

'Well, we'd best be off, then.'

The Forsters showed up before the taxis arrived; their yellow sports car followed the two taxis to make a small procession to the Rosedale Funeral Home.

Phin took a jump-seat facing Mrs Webb and Professor Hackel. Their faces were hidden in the brown shadows, but shifting bars of yellow light revealed their hands. Mrs Webb's plump fingers were clasped over her handbag and perfectly relaxed, but the professor was once more cracking his knuckles violently. Hardly a word was exchanged during the drive, except that Mrs Webb leaned forward to look at the meter from time to time, and sat back, sniffing in disapproval.

The procession wound through quiet suburban streets and

drew up before the pillars of a large, mock-Georgian house. Mr Smerth, the undertaker, answered the door. He was a lean, serious-looking man, wearing the centre-parted hair and pince-nez of a past age. When he learned who they were, Mr Smerth seemed agitated to the point of actually wringing his hands.

'Oh dear. Please step in here, won't you? And I'll try to explain.' He ushered them into a quiet, elegant little parlour and wrung his hands some more.

'Oh dear. As a matter of fact,' he said. 'As a matter – I really don't know how to tell you this. In fact, you're too late. I fear the deceased has already left for Heathrow airport. I really am most sorry.'

No one seemed to know what to do next.

'I don't see why we couldn't have been informed,' grumbled Mrs Webb. 'We counted on seeing him one last time.'

The undertaker repeated his apology. 'You see, it was his father's wish to avoid unsuitable publicity – and ours, of course. Had we announced the time of his departure, I feel sure there might have been an unseemly demonstration at the airport.'

'Quite.' Stoney nodded. 'We do understand.'

Mrs Webb gathered her handbag and stood up. 'Well I don't understand. We, at least, should have been told. After all, we're not juvenile fans.'

Hackel, for once, had a soothing idea. 'You forget, we had that reporter hanging about all yesterday. Teenager demonstrations would be right up his street. One uncautious word from any of us ...'

'All right, then.' Mrs Webb sighed. 'We've wasted our time. Let's go home.'

Smerth offered to give them tea before they left, but Mrs Webb moved towards the door as she considered it. In the hall, they passed a door labelled CHAPEL, and Stoney had an idea.

'If you'll all excuse me for a moment, I do believe I'd like to offer a moment of private meditation for Steve's soul, before we leave.'

'Of course,' said Smerth, and showed him into the chapel. 'Meanwhile, I'll telephone for taxis.'

Smerth clearly felt his duty towards the Aetherians had not yet been discharged, for he hovered about them, chatting with them while they waited in the hall. The weather, all agreed, was dreadful. On the other hand, it was pleasant enough for February, was it not? All things said, this had been a mild winter, and Mr Smerth hoped, fervently hoped, that it would continue so. Spiritualism? He'd never been able to make up his mind perfectly on the subject, though he supposed there was something, even a great deal, to be said on all sides.

The chapel door opened, but it wasn't Stoney. A burly assistant whose face was the colour of raw beef came out. He wore a dark, ill-fitting suit, and in one red fist he clutched what at first seemed to be a filthy rag-bundle.

'Scuse me, sir,' he said, shaking the bundle out. 'Someone left this in the chapel.'

It was Stoney's grey raincoat.

'Meadows, I don't quite understand. The reverend gentleman must still be in the chapel - he's only just gone in there.'

'Dunno about that, sir. No one in there now.'

They all followed Smerth into the chapel. The narrow room contained a dozen short pews and a velvet-draped trestle designed to hold a coffin - but no reverend gentleman.

'I don't understand,' said Smerth again. 'Did Reverend Stonehouse leave by the back way?'

'No sir. Couldn't of, sir. Me and Henry's been working out the back. We come in to take the coffin out, and he wasn't here. Then we saw the coat, so I come back to bring it to you, sir.'

'Let me ask my other man about this.' The perspiring undertaker led the way through a curtained doorway, and all followed but Phin. The sleuth first made a quick inspection of the room, checking behind curtains, peering under pews, and even lifting the skirt of the trestle.

'Dust to dust,' he murmured, and followed the others outside.

The chapel's second entrance led to a brightly-lit porch with a glass canopy. The porch ended in a kind of loading-platform, where a small black van was backed up. The left side-door was open, and a second man in establishment mourning sat in the seat sideways, with his feet on the ground. He was swarthy and lean, though not as lean as his employer, but otherwise undistinguished except by a thick shock of dark hair hanging in his eyes. He was smoking, but when he saw Smerth he quickly dropped the cigarette on the asphalt and stepped on it. His white even teeth showed in a grimace when Smerth spoke.

'I saw that. I saw that, Forbes. And you haven't put your cap on. You both have your caps off. How many times do I have to tell you ...' He moved forward to talk to the two assistants privately in the same hysterical tone. Reluctantly, the two fitted on their flat black cloth caps.

The Aetherians hung back near the door, uncertain whether to help in questioning the assistants, or do nothing at all. The undertaker, meanwhile, continued to behave as though the whole problem hinged on cap-wearing.

'One thing is certain,' Hackel said. 'If he went through here, one of those fellows is bound to have seen him. The one called Forbes was sneaking a smoke, so he must have had his eyes riveted on the door, watching out for his boss.'

Phin agreed. 'Still, you never know.' While the two assistants were arguing with their employer, he stepped to the back of the van and opened it. There was nothing inside but a bronze-coloured coffin.

'Here, none of that,' Smerth said, and came to slam the

door. 'I hope you don't suppose the reverend gentleman could be in *there*?'

'I am sorry. But if, as your assistants seem to confirm, Mr Stonehouse hasn't been seen leaving, I thought it might be time to search for him.'

'Here, Bill!' called the man in the van. 'Better get our skates on, if we're to clear Customs by twelve.'

The red-faced man made a gesture of apology to Smerth, climbed in, and the van drove off. The undertaker herded his charges back into the chapel.

'I really don't quite understand,' he said again. 'But I'm sure there must be some quite ordinary explanation.' He stared round at the chapel furnishings, as if expecting Stoney to step from behind a curtain and give the simple explanation. 'Could he have fallen under a pew, or -'

'No chance of that,' Phin said. 'I've checked this room already.' He walked a circuit of the room, showing where he'd looked. 'Under the pews ... behind those hangings ... under this trestle ... and I looked behind the door on our way in. He's not here, and he wasn't here when we entered. Mr Smerth, are there any other exits of any kind? Windows, ventilators, anything?'

The undertaker shook his head. 'The openings for ventilation and heating are no more than four inches square. And we were all watching one door, and my two men the other.'

'They were outside that door all the time?'

'Not actually outside it,' Smerth said nervously.

'Not actually?' Hackel shouted. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

The undertaker blushed. 'They came in to remove a coffin. The one you saw in the van.' He licked his lips. 'Your friend's coffin, I fear.'

Nancy had started to slump down in a pew. Now she sat up. '*What?* That was Steve's coffin? Why didn't you tell us?'

'Well, you see, I thought he had gone earlier, when I met

you at the door. By the time I realized Meadows and Forbes were still here, I knew it could only distress you to learn the truth. There simply wasn't time for you to pay your respects by then, you see. As it is, they'll be late getting the deceased to the airport. I do apol -'

'If you say that once more, I'll scream,' Nancy said quietly. 'The least you could have done would have been to let us see him before he left.'

'There - really wasn't time. The father of the deceased wanted him sent home as quickly as possible. I had no instructions about visitors here, so naturally I didn't arrange to have the coffin opened for viewing.'

'I wonder if it was opened, nevertheless,' said Phin. 'Let's remember that Reverend Stonehouse had a few minutes alone with it, before your men came in to remove it.' He picked up Stoney's raincoat and put it on, jamming his hands in the pockets. 'Could he have climbed into the coffin? Or been forced into it?'

'Really!' Mr Smerth glared at him. 'I don't know where you get such fantastic and disagreeable notions.'

'I'm naming the more *agreeable* possibilities,' Phin explained. 'I can also see the coffin lid raising as he stands next to it ... a hand emerging ... seizing his wrist ...'

Smerth, whose high forehead was glowing cherry-red, could not even say 'Really!' to this suggestion.

'Too much like Poe?' Phin asked. 'Then how about a Sweeney Todd system: Stoney drops through a trap-door to the basement, where, after dismemberment, he can be gradually distributed among other coffins, as among so many meat pies. Sorry if I sound insensitive, but we should consider *all* possibilities. No doubt the professor would like to sound the floor and walls for secret panels. Meanwhile I think we might take up this gentleman's kind offer of tea.'

Hackel did remain behind to examine the floor and walls for cracks or hollow panels. The others, most of them too numb to speak, shuffled off to the elegant parlour, where

Smerth offered them tea and sandwiches, and more apologies.

It was nearly one a.m. when they got home. The constable in his rain cape was still on duty before the door. Nancy wanted to tell him about the disappearance.

'Don't be a fool,' said Mrs Webb. 'Haven't we had enough grief and interference from the police already? Not to mention the newspapers.'

Everyone took sides in the instant dispute but Hackel, who went inside, leaving the rest of them to stand arguing by the kerb. Almost at once he came running out again, surprisingly fast for a heavy man.

'Get an ambulance,' he shouted to the policeman. 'Quickly, man. Use your radio.'

'What is it?' said Mrs Webb, already on the move.

'Stoney. In the hall, unconscious. Almost dead, I think.'

People often behave eccentrically in emergencies, but Phin's behaviour was almost mad. He walked rapidly into the house and right past the unconscious man on the floor, without looking at him.

'Search his pockets,' he called over his shoulder. 'Before the ambulance men get here. See if he has the scarab.'

'All right,' said Hackel. 'Where are you going?'

'To look at the kitchen mop, of course.'

Chapter Ten

Mysteries of the Seance

'Extraordinary!' Stoney spread a tiny triangle of toast with corn-oil margarine. 'I really must write up my experience for the Society for Psychical Research. I'm sure they'd be most interested.' The others kept firing questions at him all through breakfast, and his toast grew cold on his plate.

'One minute I was there in the chapel, and the next, those ambulance chaps were waking me up in the hall here. Remarkable!'

'What happened after they took you to the hospital?' Phin asked.

'Nothing much, really. A doctor looked me over, said I was fine, and they sent me home.' Stoney chuckled. 'Just goes to prove what I said, eh? About a Stronger Power watching over me.'

'What did you feel, at the chapel?' Ernestine asked. 'Did you have any warning?'

'Well, now that you mention it, I did feel peculiar when I walked into the chapel. There was this bronze coffin there, you see. It was sitting up on some sort of stand, but – I almost felt it was *floating in the air*.'

'What?' Hackel banged his fist on the table. 'Are you trying – ?'

'No, no, Professor. I don't say it *did* float, but it gave me a floating impression. Altogether there was something about that room, too. Something strange, and yet familiar. Almost as if I'd walked into it before.

'Well, when I saw the coffin, I thought to myself, "There's been some mistake. Mr Smerth's put me into the wrong room or something." I think I even turned to go, but – something drew me back.'

Phin asked about the scarab.

'I had it with me earlier, I know, when I changed into my suit. I remember putting it in my trousers pocket. I didn't think about it again until I came home from the hospital and undressed for bed. It wasn't there. Of course,' he added, 'that needn't necessarily have been part of the Experience. It could easily have dropped out of my pocket in the ambulance or somewhere.'

'I doubt that,' said Phin. 'Professor Hackel searched your pockets for it, just before the ambulance arrived.'

'And I didn't find it,' Hackel added.

Stoney considered this news carefully. 'In the chapel, possibly?'

'Perhaps its astral body is there,' Phin said, covering a yawn. 'But I didn't notice it.'

'Mysteriuser and mysteriuser!' Stoney finished toying with his toast and dusted his hands. 'Would anyone care for this? I'm afraid my appetite's deserted me this morning. The excitement! Really, I feel almost as though I'd come through some sort of test, or trial by ordeal!'

Hackel dug into his bowl of muesli. 'What I want to know is, how did you come through the back entrance of that chapel last night? Hypnotize those two men?'

'Shame!' said Ernestine and Mrs Webb together.

'Back entrance? I'm afraid I don't really follow.'

Hackel began to expound one of his Svengali theories. Phin pushed away his own untouched bowl of muesli, a peculiar food whose richness gave him heartburn on the best of mornings. This was not a good morning at all, for he'd stayed up late, reading a book called *Errors of Fact and Errors of Perception*. *Errors* had been written by a German philosopher in English, in tortured sentences stabbed through by the asterisks and daggers of footnotes. Phin had managed two hundred pages of it, on nothing better than coffee guaranteed not to keep him awake.

'What did you do in the chapel?' he asked Stoney. 'Did you approach the coffin at all?'

'I - really couldn't say. I looked at it, as I said. It seemed - odd.'

'Could anyone have knocked you on the head?'

'Oh no. The doctor said there wasn't a mark on me. He seemed to think I'd simply swooned away.'

'*Swooned away,*' Hackel said. A drop of milk ran unnoticed down his beard. 'Do you expect us to believe that? Why not just admit you've faked this stunt from beginning to end?'

'Faked it? Why should I?' Stoney chuckled. 'Really, Hackel, you have -'

'Why? *Why?* To cover up murder, that's *why!*'

'Professor,' Mrs Webb warned.

Stoney stopped chuckling, and looked distressed. 'Hackel, I hope you didn't mean that. And I can't for the life of me see how you make out that this is some sort of cover-up. Believe me, I didn't plan what happened last night. I didn't even ask for it to happen. And I have no idea why it did happen.'

Phin had to agree that it would be a foolish act, for a killer to heap suspicion on himself. The very fact that Stoney had lived through his disappearance, while his scarab-predecessors had died, made him look unnecessarily guilty. It was anything but a cover-up. It didn't rule out his guilt, nor did it make the case against anyone else stronger. In short, it was senseless. Or, he reminded himself, a joke.

Stoney went on soothing the psychologist. 'Let's not start accusing one another wildly, shall we? If I can't ask for your respect and love and trust, let me appeal to your scientific spirit. It is the truth we're interested in here, and the truth is not served by bickering among ourselves, but by studying the evidence.'

Ernestine finished her cereal and looked at Phin's bowl. 'You shouldn't waste that, Thack.'

'I know. It could probably feed a family of starving Swiss for a week. Look, why don't you have it?'

'If you're sure ...' she said, digging into it.

'I think,' said Mrs Webb, 'that *evidence* is something for our detective to tell us about. Mr Phin, have you any theories?'

'It's a little early in the morning for theories,' he said. 'Though I'll admit I like a long, cool theory around sundown. But since you ask, I may as well mention Sherlock Holmes's famous formula for mystery-solving. It turns up somewhere in every detective novel written this century, and it goes like this: "Whenever we have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."'

'How very true,' Stoney said.

'True in logic, but not very useful in life. For instance, there are possibly fifty or a hundred explanations for your disappearance from that chapel, none of them strictly impossible. You could have been chloroformed and dumped into the coffin. You could have simply suffered from a sudden attack of amnesia, and walked out the way you went in, while we, also suffering from amnesia, don't recall seeing you leave. You could have been camouflaged as a pew ...'

Hackel looked as though he wanted to mention hypnosis or fine black wires. The sleuth forestalled him.

'No, the Holmes formula doesn't work, except in simple, even trivial cases. I notice, by the way, that Holmes never actually used it himself.'

'What's your formula?' Ernestine asked. She took a triangle of Stoney's toast and began spreading it with a green vegetable salve.

Phin rose to leave. 'I don't have one. I usually just hope the killer blurts out his guilt in front of witnesses.'

From the archway, he added, 'If he doesn't, I just turn over to the last chapter and read the answer. Barring printing errors, it never fails.'

Since today was Wednesday, Phin had business at home, namely, dinner and a seance. The dinner preparations were simple: he laid out the ingredients for beef stroganoff, made a green salad, and mixed a port-wine jelly. Phin liked cooking – when it took three ingredients, fifteen minutes and one pan – or when someone else did it.

Preparations for the seance took more time. He shifted furniture, prepared his props, and practised until he was aching and exhausted. By then it was late afternoon, but there was still time to relax, and read, and enjoy being home.

His flat was large, but inelegant. There were only three pictures on his walls worth looking at; no more than a dozen books unobtainable at any public library in finer editions; a mantelpiece covered with stones of no great value and, to most people, no great beauty.

On the other hand, his flat was not in any way connected with spiritualism or murder. True, Mrs Dawson, the woman who came to clean each day, delighted in the mass poisoning of mice in the kitchen, but all the other murderers around were trapped in his bookcase.

Phin now took down a volume marked *Snakes of Iceland* and leafed through a Father Brown story, checking a few half-remembered details. As in all Father Brown stories, the good ended happily and the bad were hanged. He put the book back next to *Pope Joan* and sat down to do some hard day-dreaming.

Chesterton's Father Brown stories do not appear in any book called *Snakes of Iceland*; the opposite is true. In one of these celebrated mysteries, a false bookcase is revealed by false titles: *Snakes of Iceland* (there are none), *Pope Joan* (there was none) and *The Religion of Frederick the Great* (he had none). Intrigued by the notion, Phin had decided to build his own false bookcase, concealing ...

But when he'd thought it over, there were no finer things to conceal behind false bindings than real books. He had therefore rebound a few of his books, namely those he hated

lending to friends. His treasure was safe behind false and unattractive titles showing a catholic taste in vacua: Biography (*Richard IV*); Travel (*East Riding*); Anthropology (*Homo Dawsonii*, or Piltown Man); Mathematics (*Irrational Integers*); and Sport (*The 1940 Olympic Games*).

In no book, real or unreal, however, could he imagine finding a solution to his present problem: the Mystery of the Vanishing Scarab.

'O.K.,' he said aloud. 'Granted that an object can curse people and make them vanish. How the deuce, how the Sam Hill, and how the bloomin' 'eck *can it curse itself*? This is unprecedented! Even magic has rules, after all. Spells have to be spelled right. No one goes around healing stones and turning the lepers into bread. You don't find pots of rain at the end of the goldbow, or shun the Evil Ear. Even magic has rules ...

'Then where is it? Where's that damned bug?'

The answer was not forthcoming by seven o'clock, when he set the table for three. There was just time to change, into a suit, shirt and tie of more or less satanic black, before Mrs Dawson and Mr Beeker arrived.

Mrs Dawson refused more brandy, explaining that she was a bit Brahms and Liszt already.

'I have to get both of you drunk,' Phin explained. 'For my seance to work.'

Beeker drained his glass. 'Right. We're drunk, then. I say we have a seance.'

Phin cleared the dining table and set a lamp in the middle. Then, with Beeker's help, he shifted the 'cabinet', a large wardrobe with its door removed, out of the corner of the room to a position a few feet behind his own chair and to one side of it. Inside the cabinet was a small round table. He placed his props on it one at a time, showing and naming each:

'This apparent toy ukelele is really a spirit guitar. This seeming box of matches is actually a bell. This is the spirit trumpet, made from the exact same cardboard as that of Mrs Webb and many another famous medium. And this, though it looks exactly like a large, flat lollipop, wrapped in cellophane, is really a spirit slate.' He showed them two sides of it and placed it with the other objects. Then he pinned up a tablecloth over the cabinet opening, and took his place at the table.

'With your co-operation, I'll try to raise not only the apparitions from Mrs Webb's seances, but a few others. I want you, Mrs Dawson, to grasp my right hand firmly and rest your foot on my right foot. Mr Beeker will do the same with my left. As soon as you've switched out the lamp, please hold each other's hand, and remember — *do not break the circle.*'

The medium kept them sitting silent in the dark for a count of 200, before he whispered: 'Is it — *you?*'

More silence, then a hoarse voice spoke with an American accent: '*Is there anyone here named Mrs Dawson?*'

'Yes?'

Phin's limbs jerked as though moved by puppet strings.

'*I am one you have murdered. I seek ... revenge.*'

'I never!'

'*My earthly body lies in the kitchen. You dropped it in the pedal bin ...*'

In the midst of their relieved chuckles, the sitters heard the ukelele strings sound.

'*But I forgive you,*' said the voice. '*And you may call me Mickey.*' Unearthly scrapes and thumps came from the cabinet, and the matchbox rattled. Phin's hands and feet were now in constant convulsive motion, so it became difficult for his companions to keep the circle unbroken.

Mickey was followed by other spirits: a cousin of Julius Caesar, President Millard Fillmore, Theda Bara's understudy, a Red Indian named Doesn't Sleep Too Well, who

claimed to be Sitting Bull's tax lawyer. All spoke in exactly the same hoarse twang (Miss pseudo-Bara explained that this had kept her out of talking pictures).

Towards the end, things got hectic as several spirits seemed to be struggling for control of the seance.

'Is there anyone here named Alfred Lord Tennyson? I have a message from his tailor –

'Get off the air, you. We're trying to conduct a serious seance. This is Winston Churchill speaking.'

'Pay no attention to these interfering spirits, folks. They haven't been raised properly. But seriously, ladies and gentlemen, I went out walking in the cemetery today –

'GET OFF THE AIR, BOTH OF YOU. I'M TAKING CHARGE HERE.'

'You? You couldn't take charge of a ouija board.'

'– and there wasn't a soul about. No, seriously, the funniest thing happened to me on my way here tonight. This down-and-out ghost stopped me as said "Excuse me sir. Could I trouble you for the price of a cup of tea?"

'Get away from the microphone, will you?'

'YOU GET AWAY!' There were terrible thumps from the cabinet.

'All right, maybe I'm not Winston Churchill, but I used to do a pretty good imitation, when I was –

'So I took him in a café –

'ATTENTION! ATTENTION!'

'GIVE ME THAT MICROPHONE BEFORE I RE-INCARNATE YOU.'

'"This is our darkest hour –"

'– and I showed him the menu. Tea, fourpence. No, seriously –

'ATTENTION! I HAVE SEIZED CONTROL OF THIS SEANCE IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF AETHERIA! LONG LIVE THE DEAD!'

The alarming noises from the cabinet built to a crescendo, then ceased. After a short pause, the sitters realized

that, all this time, an elephant had been levitating in the room: now the creature lost his power and crashed to the floor.

Beeker's hand shook as he turned on the light.

'Did I frighten you?' Phin said. 'I'm sorry.'

The wardrobe, which it had taken two men to shift, now lay on its back.

'I'll explain everything in a minute. But right now, I hear spirit-rappings from the neighbours downstairs. I'd better go down and apologize, and maybe sweep up the plaster.'

Mrs Dawson, who had remained perfectly calm while the wardrobe crashed to the floor, now looked alarmed.

'Oh, I hope not,' she said. 'Plastering's very dear. Best tell them I dropped somethink – tell them I dropped a tray.'

While they waited, Beeker rummaged among the contents of the cabinet. The giant lollipop had cracked, but its transparent wrapper was intact. He turned it over. There was a message in ink, written directly on the candy surface:

'YOU OWE ME £5.'

Phin returned, poured more brandy, and sat down to explain.

'The main Webb gimmick is pretty old. Eusapia Palladino used it in Victorian days, and Margery Crandon in the 'twenties.

'Remember the way I kept struggling? Each of you had to control one hand and one foot, and I made that as difficult as I could. But really, all the hand-jerking was to distract you while I – but let me demonstrate.'

He stood the cabinet upright again, and the table inside, and took his place with the others holding him as before. This time they could see the improvised curtain move, as the table inside rattled and thumped. But this time they could also see Phin's foot thrust into the cabinet.

'Loose shoes, you see. Mrs Webb's bedroom slippers are even better for getting out of, undetected. And your holding

my hands, instead of making it more difficult, makes it much easier. I can brace myself for each kick.

'Naturally I'm not as good as Mrs Webb or the great Eusapia. They can kick straight behind them, while I have to cheat a little, by having the cabinet to one side.'

'Is that it, then?' Beeker asked. 'You brushed your foot over the ukelele strings, and pushed the matchbox around with your toes?'

'That's right. I believe Mrs Webb can actually pick up her bell between her toes and ring it, but that takes plenty of practice.'

Mrs Dawson looked puzzled. 'But how did you make the cabinet fall over? You couldn't have kicked it over, and I had hold of your hand.'

'At the time, yes. But earlier, I got my hand away from you, remember? That's Margery Crandon's trick: I freed my hand for a second, shoved the cabinet to tip it back, and jammed my foot under it. Later, when I was ready, I just lifted my foot.'

'But it's so heavy!'

'Yes, but that's the nice feature of wardrobes. Heavy, but tall. As soon as they're tipped up a bit, it's easy to turn them over.'

'How about this?' Beeker asked, holding up the lollipop. 'You aren't going to tell me you unwrapped it and wrote on it, *in the dark, with your toes?*'

'Writing?' said the sleuth. He took the 'spirit slate' and showed them that both sides were blank. 'What writing?' Then he handed it back to Beeker, who of course turned it over to find the writing intact.

The con-man looked to Heaven for forgiveness. 'Argh! I should have guessed - a kid's trick! You held it with the blank side showing, and you turned your hand to show us the other side, you gave the stick a little half-twirl.' He demonstrated that the lollipop now had a message on *both*

sides. 'I used to know that trick when I was ten years old. Well, I guess it's worth a fiver at that.'

He immediately paid up, with an I.O.U.

'I'll put some coffee on,' said Mrs Dawson. Phin was about to protest that she was a guest, but Becker frowned at him.

When she was out of the room, the con-man said, 'I've been asking around about your mates over there. A choice lot.'

'Yes?'

'What's that girl's name? The sexy one?'

'Nancy. She was Steve Sunday's girl.'

'And everybody's, so I hear. You want to watch her. They tell me she was up the spout last year, and nobody knew who the lucky man was.'

'The vicar's another right one, too. They say he goes around rabbiting on about holiness, and acting like he's a bit too good to be Archbishop of Canterbury, and all the while he's poncing off Mrs Webb. I hear he keeps a sharp eye on every penny that comes in. You want to watch him, too.'

'Anybody else I should watch?'

'Yeah, the R.A.F. twit, what's his name? Dank. They say the R.A.F. gave him the old heave-ho in 1956. Or they "allowed him to resign his commission".'

'What for?'

'I don't know. But it was in the Middle East. Like, Egypt. My guess is, it was either interfering with local boys, or else black marketing.'

'Now that *is* interesting,' Phin said. 'Egypt - land of souvenir scarabs. God, I wonder if he "interfered" with Dave Lauderdale?'

It was late when Phin arrived back at the house of the Aetherians, but Mrs Webb was just starting another seance. Evidently business was picking up to the point where she

could hold two sittings in an evening. Phin joined the circle, to watch her showing off, to her newest recruits, her newest acquisition : the soul of Bruce Dank.

The performance was predictable, but Phin took a professional interest in the finer points of her technique. He knew his own show had looked shabby by comparison; brandy had been his demon helper. Now, holding Mrs Webb's hand, he tried to sense her movements through it, as she leaned forward to swoop one leg straight out behind her. He fought the impulse to kick away her empty slipper and spoil things (that was demon brandy talking again), and listened to her 'telling the tale'.

After Steve and Chief Thunder Head, Maurice spoke up to explain that a New Age was coming. The poor would inherit the earth, and certain Eminent Ones would govern us as we ought to be governed. The strange things that had been happening lately, and the tragic deaths of Steve, Doc and Mr Dank, were all part of a Greater Plan shortly to be revealed in this very room.

Finally Bruce Dank came on the line.

'I'm very happy here,' he said. 'Don't worry about me, chums. I'm very, very happy, and I'm with those I love. Of course I miss you all, and it's marvellous talking to you like I am talking to you now, but Over Here there's such peace and beauty, everywhere, all round -'

The doorbell sounded, together with a heavy knock. Ernestine put on the lights and went down to answer, while Mrs Webb, blinking and gasping after her trance, started chatting with the newcomers. Phin left them and went to the top of the stairs to look down.

A policeman was bringing Dank home. Not the dapper Dank of old, but a weeping, mud-smeared, babbling creature, recognizable only by Dank's blazer. Even that was burst at the shoulder.

'Thank you, constable, thank you,' he said. 'Very good of you, I'm sure. Never been so bloody miserable in all ... yes,

thanks, ta. Nice of you to care. As if anybody cared ... I want to thank you ...' And the tears continued, trickling through the dirt and stubble.

'Put him to bed,' said the constable.

'Is he all right?' Ernestine caught Dank as the constable let go of him.

'Yes, we had the police surgeon look him over. Just needs sleep, and I suppose a bath. And do try to keep him off the booze, miss. Next little spree like this, and we'll have to bring him home by way of a magistrate. Good night, miss.'

Phin called the professor, and together they hauled Dank upstairs to bed.

'"I'm very happy here",' Hackel mimicked. 'Looks it, doesn't he? Christ! He's even pawned his deaf-aid.'

Chapter Eleven

Nancy Goes Visiting

By morning, the effects of Dr Jekyll's elixir had worn off, and the restored Mr Dank came bouncing into the drawing-room to make his apologies. Clean-shaven and cheerful, wearing a fresh blazer and his spare hearing-aid, and with his hair once more slicked down flat, this reformed character had gone so far as to wear a buttonhole. The tiny red rose, plucked from the bouquet on the hall table, was hardly wilted at all; it still held nearly as much colour as his eyes.

'So wretchedly sorry about last night, old boy,' he said to Phin. 'Don't know how to say forgive me, if you can, but -'

'It's all right, really.'

'But it isn't, not with me. Don't know what came over me - I suppose morbid fears. I'm no coward about death, mind, but it is a bit shaking to have two of your brother Aetherians go like that, in one day.'

'I understand.'

'Found my stride again now, though. As of today, I'm off the booze for good. I've learned things since I came here - found new strength. The ancients had it right, you know.'

'The ancients?'

'Nostradamus, for instance. And Plato. Now *there* was a thinker! Plato said they had an ideal society on Atlantis. Place for every man, and every man in his place. There's a lot to be said for that nowadays, you know. And the ancients understood that you can't hide from the world in a glass of gin, what?'

Phin nodded. Composing his face in an expression of interest, he prepared for the coming lecture. 'Right you are.'

'They knew, I mean old Plato knew, that all this so-called reality is merely a shadow, old boy. A *shadow* ...'

Some minutes later, the lecture had worked itself around to Dank's life.

'Left the R.A.F.,' he explained. 'Under a cloud.'

Phin's thoughts wandered: he saw clouds and aeroplanes, aeroplanes wandering lonely as clouds, World War One planes hiding in clouds, an entire air force being flown into the bottom of a cloud, parked and left ... He missed Dank's next words.

'... so someone had to carry the can, and I was the youngest man. Bad business. Wish I'd never got mixed up in it. I had no reason to pinch the bloody stores, after all. It wasn't as if I needed the money. Always had a comfortable income. That is, my wife had.

'Found I couldn't get a job anywhere. No qualifications, really. Started drinking rather more than was good for me. Suppose I hated living off Myra's money - not that she wasn't free with it - and gradually I came to hate Myra herself. All the same, old boy, it rather cut me up when she passed over. We'd been living in Devon, you see. All at once I was alone, really alone, for the first time in my life. In a place I loathed. Without a single friend.

'Ahem. Daresay all this sounds like self-pity. After all, Myra left me well-fixed. I inherited everything. Everything, except -' Dank suddenly stopped, looking as though he wanted a glass to hide his face behind.

'Except what?'

'Except her car. She left that to her nephew, simply as a small act of kindness. I gather he'd admired it or something, about the time she was making her will.

'But do you know, I was so gin-crazy, I began brooding about that car, until I convinced myself she'd left it to him to spite me. It was a - an act of betrayal, you see?

'Brought her down to London to have her buried in the family vault, and met the nephew at the funeral. Needn't tell you I was a swine. Made a scandalous scene, turned all the relatives against me. So then, old boy, I really was alone.

Went back to Devon and stayed drunk for a month. Tried suicide once.

'Then, one morning, I cast the bloodshots on a letter from Mrs Webb. Looked all rubbish to me at first, of course. Aetheric Mandala Society, their aims of spiritual regeneration, all that. But it was the last part that really impressed me. Mrs W. said she'd received a message from Myra. It said, "Bruce, it's all right about Rover. I forgive." That's all. Just "Bruce, it's all right about Rover. I forgive." Shook me, I can tell you.'

'But why?' Phin asked. 'Did you have a dog - ?'

'No, no. "Rover" was *her* Rover. Her car! She forgave me for everything, you see? There I was, touching bottom, and here came a message of hope and forgiveness. I decided to sign on forthwith. And I've never looked back.'

Remembering his recent lapse, he added, 'Oh, I may backslide now and again, but now I have a real foundation to my life. Founded on the solid bedrock of eternity, that's Bruce Dank.'

'Unbelievable!' said Phin. 'The message, I mean.'

'True, though. And it's led me here, and I don't regret that, not for a minute. Finally found the time to brush up on philosophy, read all the really great minds: Plato, Nietzsche, Nostradamus and so on. And we have a marvellous library here, what? Have I told you what Nostradamus says about the Common Market?'

'Ah! You just reminded me, there's something in the library I meant to check.' Phin excused himself and actually went to the library, intending to browse until Dank went out for his lunch-time drink.

He found Ernestine, doing callisthenics. She stood with her feet about half a yard apart, hands at her sides, and swayed stiffly from side to side.

'Am I interrupting?'

'Eye exercises,' she explained, not pausing. 'I do them every day, only I've missed a few days, what with - every-

thing. I started these six months ago, and now my eyesight is back to normal, without them. Glasses, that is. There's a book on the table.'

Phin picked up *Better Sight without Glasses* and opened it to a photograph of a girl in 1920's costume, grinning as she performed the same exercise, which was called 'swinging'. Other pictures showed the same flapper rolling her eyes up (towards plucked brows and fair ringlets) or staring with intensity at her own forefinger. This, he thought, probably explains why no one has worn glasses since 1920.

Aloud, he said, 'I see you're busy, so I'll just find a book and tiptoe out.'

'Wait. I want to have a word with you anyway, and so does Mrs Webb. I'll be through in a few minutes.'

Phin sat down and read all about the nature-cure system of eye exercises. As far as he could make out, the book seemed to hold that the main causes of all eye defects are ocular flabbiness, and, for some reason, constipation. Enemas and reading on jerky trains were highly recommended, as possible cures for every eye ailment from eye-strain to cataract.

'There. All finished. Will you come up to the office with me, please?'

They found Mrs Webb reminiscing, elbows on the desk, resting the septum of her nose on her clasped hands. Backlighted by the sun, the frizzy perm became almost an aureole. *Tranquility*, said her pose. *Khepri, the scarab, is in His Heaven* (having just rolled his blazing dung-ball to the 10 a.m. position). *All's right with the world*. All that spoiled the tableau was the sound of a desk drawer slamming as they came in, and the lingering odour of cigarette smoke.

'Sit down, Mr Phin. Today we're offering you the key to eternal peace and happiness.'

'Oh?'

'That key is Loving Trust. I said to you when you joined the society that the invitation to join was provisional. You've

been on probation, in other words. But now the probation period is over. Now we are offering you the opportunity to bind your soul to ours, *for ever*. Tell us, now you've seen our society and lived with us – is this what you wish?’

Pinned in the dark beam of her gaze, Phin hardly knew what to answer. ‘Just what does soul-binding entail?’

She held up a sheet of paper without looking at it. ‘This form is a declaration of loving trust. Love is, after all, nothing but sacrifice. And in the eyes of the earthbound, this declaration may represent some great sacrifice. But we know that in signing it you will be exchanging something of no real value for something of infinite value. You will be giving us a sum of money we need to carry on our predestined work on earth. And you will be gaining full membership in the fraternity of the Higher Universality. Do you understand?’

‘Yes. You mean membership dues. You want me to give –’

‘Give? Did I say give? No, I should have said *lend*. You will be lending us earthly money, yet, in the Higher Universality, you will not even be lending it. For you and I and Ernestine – all of us – own *everything*. We own one another, Mr Phin. The money you give us is not really yours, since you did not come into this world with it. Yet, at the same time, it *is* yours, in the sense that all that is, is your property. Ultimately, we keep nothing, and gain all. We own not even our own souls, which belong to God. Yet, since God is in and of us, all of us, we own the entire visible and invisible universe. Does that make it clearer?’

‘Universally clear,’ he couldn’t help replying. ‘And at the same –’

‘Our souls encompass the All and the Everything,’ Ernestine chimed in. Money is merely the poor earthly symbol of the binding force of aetheric-atomic in-fullness, you see.’ It sounded like a quotation from a book, and, when he thought about it, a quotation from a book written by Mrs Webb.

He took the ‘declaration’ and studied it. Despite its title,

it was merely a semi-legal document, pledging him to pay over half his income for life to the society, and to make a will leaving the entirety of his goods and chattels to the society; said sums to be held in the name of Mrs Viola Webb.

'This doesn't have much point, legally,' he said. 'I could ignore the gift payments entirely, and make a new will revoking all the rest of this, you know.'

'Loving trust,' said Mrs Webb, 'works both ways. You needn't sign this at all. Or you could take it with you, read it over and consider it, and sign it whenever you pleased. If ever. We don't want you to sign until you're sure.'

On the other hand, he thought, this is exactly the kind of quasi-legal document that would stand up in court, should he die without making a will. And most people who die suddenly haven't made wills.

He signed it, and Ernestine witnessed his signature.

Nancy was her usual sullen self at lunch. She redistributed the food on her plate, ignored Stoney's splendid explanation of the cosmic forces in dowsing, and only passed the sea-salt after three requests. Afterwards, when she 'felt like getting some air', Phin decided to follow her.

Shadowing is a game for private eyes, dicks, shamuses or gumshoes. Phin resented having to do it at all, knew that doing it well was out of the question. Being well over six feet tall prevented him from melting into crowds. He owned no snap-brim hat to pull low over his eyes, nor any trench-coat with face-concealing collar.

He disliked standing for hours pretending to read a newspaper, for he either developed leg cramps or else he became engrossed in what he was pretending to read (a dozen suspects could flee while he caught up on the prospective marriage of a soccer star, the knighting of a disc jockey, or the mountain rescue of a brave, snow-bound rat-terrier). He

never found a reflecting shop window situated where it could be of the slightest use. And he could never quite bring himself to say 'follow that cab'.

Today was a day of sacrifices. He raced up to his room and slipped into a prepared disguise: Glen plaid raincoat and matching hat (tucking his hair under it to make it look shorter); empty camera case; and a pair of glasses with heavy dark rims but no lenses. No matter where in London Nancy went, he reasoned, there were bound to be crowds of American tourists.

He raced down and slammed out of the house. Nancy was nowhere in sight.

She can't be far away, he thought. Turned a corner, maybe. He sprinted to the corner and looked both ways down a long street, empty of pedestrians. As he turned back, he saw Nancy just now coming out of the house.

Not a promising beginning. Phin turned away and pretended to be taking pictures of a house across the way. Nancy walked slowly away from him without looking back. The sleuth trailed along, still fiddling with his imaginary camera. At least her coat of bright red-orange suede made her easy enough to spot.

Several turnings later, they came to Ladbroke Grove. Here her pace quickened, and, with Phin still twenty yards behind, she hailed a taxi.

'Here goes,' he muttered, and raced to the corner. As in all the best shamus stories, a second taxi was sitting there, idling its motor.

'Follow that cab,' he ordered, pressing a new £5 note into the driver's hand. 'No, not that one. *That* one, turning the corner.'

'Here for a holiday, sir?' asked the driver, slowly putting the cab in motion.

'Yes, I - yeah, I'm here on vacation.'

'Yank, are you, sir? Or Canadian?' They were following, but Nancy's cab was out of sight around a curve.

'American. Uh, can you try to keep that cab in sight?'

'Anything you say, mac.' The driver, at least, was enjoying himself.

They caught up with Nancy at Notting Hill Gate – where she paid her driver and skipped into the Underground station. Phin was a yard behind her as she raced through the barrier past a smiling ticket inspector.

As soon as she'd passed, the inspector stopped smiling and started clicking his punch.

'Ticket, please!'

It looked hopeless. Phin knew he had no change for the ticket machines, and there were at least ten people queuing at the window. There was only tourism to get him through.

Phin walked up and shoved into the front of the queue. The man behind him gasped, but the tourist ignored everyone.

'Excuse me,' he shouted. 'I want a one-way ticket to *Charring Cross Station*.'

When he had his ticket, it was only fair to give the customer behind him a chance for revenge. Phin asked him the way.

'Charing Cross?' said the delighted man. 'Just take any train that says Ealing Broadway.'

Nancy was still on the platform, waiting for an eastbound Central Line train. The sleuth turned his back and played with the chocolate-machine until their train came.

Somewhere, on the platform or train, Nancy must have spotted him, for now the shadowing became a chase. She got off at Bond Street and boarded a bus. Phin had to chase it to the traffic-lights to get on, and then, just as he reached the top of the stairs, he looked out and saw her running back down the street. She took another bus to Oxford Circus; he followed in a taxi. She went into one entrance of the tube station and came out of another; she removed her coat and carried it with only the blue lining showing; she

visited the Dolphinarium for ten seconds; she pointed out Phin to a policeman.

The tourist stuck close through it all. While keeping an eye on Nancy, he explained to the constable that, Heck, he just wanted to take a picture of a pretty girl, and, Shucks, he didn't mean no harm ...

Nancy pulled her last, and best manœuvre on Southampton Row. As their taxis ticked along in heavy traffic, she ordered her driver to stop, but did not get out. Phin's taxi stopped just behind, parked next to a small pedestrian cross-street. They waited.

'Sorry, I'll have to pull out,' said Phin's driver. 'If I stay here another minute, I'll get pinched.'

Just then Nancy jumped out and ran down the cross-street. Phin ran after her. He didn't see her plan until they reached the end of the street, and then it was too late.

The little pedestrian street cut across two major streets which intersected, forming a triangle. Nancy had arranged with her driver to wait until there was a green light and a clear run to the intersection. Then, while she ran from A to B, the taxi ran around A to C to B, picked her up without stopping, and sped away. By the time Phin got to B, it was out of sight.

For a man who's just spent over eleven pounds to end up standing bewildered in Holborn, in silly clothes, he didn't take it badly.

'At least I know she isn't going for walks,' he said pointlessly, and packed the hat and glasses into his camera case. 'Whatever she's up to, she's discreet. Now what's this?'

They were changing the window display in a bookshop. On the way out were *Cooking Picasso Would Have Liked*, *Sexual Self-Defence* and *The Fuehrer's Dentist*. On the way in was a huge display, dozens of copies of a single book - *And Yet a Voice*, by Viola Webb.

Phin knew there would be a copy in the Aetherian's library, but he went in to buy a copy anyway. He came out

with *And Yet a Voice* and her earlier *Unseen Witnesses*, feeling it hadn't been a completely wasted trip, after all.

He unwrapped them on the bus and glanced at the biography on the back of the earlier book:

'Born in 1919, Mrs Viola Webb ... early tragedy ... miracles attested by prominent film stars ... baffled scientists ...'

Opening to a page at random, he read:

The next phase of my life was characterized by grave doubts as to the meaning and purpose of these presences, which Dr Bogen kept asseverating were auto-induced hallucinations. Not unlike St Joan, I began to dubitate. Were my sensory images merely the productions of my own deep memory layers, excoriated by the all-too-recent discarnation of Maurice, or were they visitations, transmitted to me as to one who attains the supersensitivity necessary to perceive auric disturbances, and originating in the radiant superior strata of the celestial flux? That was the question.

Phin closed the book and meditated on a question or two of his own: where did the scarab come from? Where did it go? Where *could* such an object come from? Egypt. A museum. A private collection. A dealer in Egyptian antiquities.

He got off the bus at the next stop, looked up an address in a phone book, and took a taxi to South Kensington.

'This is Rigg Street, sir. What was the number?'

'I've forgotten. But it's a short street. Just look for an antique shop.' As Phin spoke, he saw the shop. A dilapidated Regency chair in the window, and the ornate letters on the awning (spelling out ANTIQUE HEY!) meant that it could only be the Forsters.

Chapter Twelve

A Midnight Discovery

'Mr Phin! Thackeray! I didn't know you were interested in antiques,' said Alan Forster. 'See anything you like? I mean, have a look around. Take your time.'

Phin's gaze, finding nowhere to alight, travelled from wall to ceiling to shelf to wall, taking its time over the chaos. It looked as though some freak cyclone had sucked up the entire contents of a dozen Victorian attics, discarded everything useful, and deposited all the rest – every embroidery sampler, feather picture, wax flower and cake plate – in this concentrated room. A stuffed eagle was still in flight overhead, among the coach-lamps; a heap of occasional tables had landed in the corner behind a brass-bound butter churn. Elsewhere he spotted apothecary jars, an egg-collection and a magic lantern; no doubt there were hidden drawers full of scrimshaw, antimacassars, button-hooks, views of Brighton Pavilion worked in sea-shells, and everything else devised by the Victorians to while away a half-century of colossal boredom.

'Genuine Victoriana,' Alan added.

'I'm sure of it,' Phin said. 'But, even so, I'm afraid I'm not a genuine customer. Just happened to be in the neighbourhood, and thought I'd drop in. But don't let me take up *your* time. You must be in the middle of refinishing something.'

'How did you – ? Oh, the smell.' The pleasant, ripe-banana smell of shellac was overpowering. 'Come out back, we can talk while I work. Jane? Look who's here.'

'Hello,' she said, not looking up. She sat at a small, unfinished table in the corner, writing calculations. The rest of the little back room was filled with unbeautiful furni-

ture in various stages of restoration and repair. 'You two go ahead and chat. I'm just catching up on this birth chart for a friend of mine.'

There seemed nowhere to sit, so Phin perched on the edge of Jane's work-table. Alan went back to varnishing.

'Mrs Webb says you're a psychic detective,' he said, over his shoulder. 'Is that true?'

'Not as far as I know. I detect, but I don't know if I'm psychic or not.'

Jane looked up. 'Don't you believe in psychic vibrations?' she asked, hostile and ready to meet hostility.

'You can always tell a non-believer, can't you? I may as well admit it: No. I suspect -'

'Us of witchcraft or something?'

'No, I suspect that there are many fewer things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy.'

'That sounds damned arrogant.'

'I suppose it is, but I can't help it.'

Alan waved his paintbrush. 'But you must believe there are some mysteries man will never solve - that can't be understood by the human mind.'

Phin picked up a book from the table, and flipped through pages of ephemeris tables, showing positions of the planet Mars from 1890 to 1990. 'Would you mean the mysteries of astrology, for instance?'

'Yes, exactly.' Jane looked triumphant. 'All your science can't explain planetary influences, and never will!'

'I don't pretend to understand planetary influences, if any. I leave all such mysteries to be solved by the human mind of the astrologer. That is, if there really are mysteries beyond human ken, why try to ken them?'

They smiled at his ignorance. Alan said, 'You probably don't know much about astrology, do you? I'll bet you didn't know we made all our important decisions by the stars, did you?'

The sleuth decided to conciliate. 'Really? Hmm. I under-

stand it's a very old science. Goes back to the Egyptians, at least.'

They seemed to forgive him at once. 'Yes,' Jane said. 'The ancients had many secrets and sciences which we're only now beginning to understand.'

'Right.' Alan put down his brush and wiped his hands. 'They're only just finding out that Stonehenge was a computer, and the Great Pyramid was a kind of time-machine.'

'Yes, and there are ancient airfields in South America.'

Phin nodded. 'Still, it says something for modernity that we've figured all this out. Amazing, all the same. I suppose it couldn't have been much of a trick for the ancient Egyptians to put a curse on that scarab, then.' He watched for reactions - in vain.

'That's exactly what I mean,' said Alan. 'What more proof do we need of their superior science?'

Jane nodded. 'They were in direct contact with the elementals. The basic forces of the universe. The energy that turns the stars, and makes a bunch of dead chemicals into a living, spiritual being.'

A nod and a thoughtful look showed that Phin was taking it all in. 'I don't suppose any Egyptian antiquities ever come your way, do they?'

Alan laughed. 'Even if they did, we'd never be able to afford them, Thackeray. This is more or less a shoestring operation, you see. We're lucky to clear five thousand a year, and the rest of our money is tied up in stock, mostly. Anyway, it takes a real specialist to appraise Egyptian stuff. There are only one or two dealers in the country who handle it regularly. And the British Museum, of course.'

Phin fished for a reaction again. 'That's what bothers me. You see, Dave Lauderdale had to get that scarab from someplace. I doubt if he actually went to Egypt and dug it up, so where was it? And who had it?'

Jane tidied a calculation and chewed her pencil. 'If you want my opinion, it came from the aetherium. From the

void, in other words. And I think that's where it's gone back to.'

'Then it wasn't real, you mean? A ghostly jewel?'

'That's one way of putting it,' said Alan. 'An ectoplastic mock-up of the real scarab, which is probably still buried in Egypt. But we prefer to call such objects "after-images".'

'It looked real enough to me,' Phin said.

'Oh, sure. They look and feel real - there's no way of telling they aren't real. Nevertheless, they're after-images, symbols, placed here to remind us.'

'Warnings,' Jane added. 'Show him the ring, Alan.'

He unlocked a corner cupboard and took a ring from a box. 'This is what I mean.'

Phin examined it. 'An old-fashioned wedding band. Hall-marked, 22-carat gold. Initials R.W.F. Very pretty engraving they used to do.'

'It's an exact copy of my mother's wedding ring,' Alan said. 'Tests as real gold, and everything. But it's not hers, at least, it's physically impossible that it's hers.'

'Not hers?'

'This ring dropped in front of me on the seance table, at the first Aetherian sitting we went to. About two weeks earlier, my mother was buried wearing her own ring!'

Phin handed it back hastily.

'I don't suppose there's any chance of it's being a copy of your mother's ring? An imitation?'

'No, it's exactly like it, even the hall-mark.'

'I was afraid of that,' Phin said. The Forsters beamed.

Phin skipped the seance that evening and went to bed, intending to force his way through a few chapters of *Unseen Witnesses*. After a few minutes, he switched to *And Yet a Voice*, where Mrs Webb had dropped the worst jargon of her earlier work, to tell a straight story.

Dave would go off by himself for days at a time to places like Plymouth or Hull, thumbing rides or tramping through the countryside like a common vagrant. His behaviour at home was equally erratic. More than once we missed small pieces of jewellery or money from our rooms. Though none of us accused him at the time, I feel sure Dave must have been at the bottom of these thefts.

Far from trying to conceal his misdeeds, Dave seemed to enjoy the pain he caused all of us by flaunting them. On one occasion, a neighbour's cat was found brutally beaten to death. Dave more than hinted that he was responsible. This news affected one of our associate members, Miss Emily Blaise, so strongly that she became violently sick. Miss Blaise never spoke to Dave again, neither before nor since his discarnation.

I decided to delay no longer. Dave must be parted from our community at once. Yet, when I told him this, he wept and begged me to allow him to stay, among 'the only family I have'. A few patient questions finally elicited the fact that, at the bottom of all his perverse behaviour, lay the root cause – drug addiction.

I called a general meeting of all full members and many of the associates. After discussing Dave's problem and asking the Infinite All for guidance, we made our decision. Dave would be allowed to remain, on probation, while we tried to cure him of his terrible affliction.

Though Dave made an effort to improve, the drug seemed to have the upper hand. He soon reverted to his old behaviour, and added a new, malicious twist: now that we knew he was an addict, he could torment us with that fact. Time and again, he paraded his needle scars, threatened suicide, and bragged of the depths to which he had sunk. It was then I noticed that Dave

seemed to be radiating a black aura – the well-known indication of imminent death.

Phin skipped a few pages explaining the colours of auras, and rambling accounts of other black auras Mrs Webb had seen.

In January, Dave came home from one of his junkets wearing a peculiar ornament on a string around his neck: an Egyptian scarab carved of stone. He told me how a gipsy wanderer had tricked him into accepting it:

‘He said he had an old pair of shoes he didn’t want, and insisted I take them. I didn’t want them, either, in fact I later threw them away. But just then I didn’t want an argument, so I took them and tried them on. This bug stone was shoved down in the toe of one shoe. When I asked him what it was, he laughed, and said the *scarab* had a curse on it. Anyone who owned it would die a horrible death, unless they could make someone else take the scarab.’

Most of us thought this was nothing more than the over-active imagination of a drug fiend. Since Dave’s horrible death, however, it doesn’t seem so far-fetched. We do know that the word ‘gipsy’ comes from ‘Egyptian’, and some say that the secret language of the gipsies is really the ancient and hermetic tongue of the priests of Ra ...

Looking up, he saw Nancy standing in the open door.

‘How’s sleuthing – sleuthing?’ she stammered.

‘How are you?’ he said. ‘You look pale.’

‘Yeah. A weird thing happened – happened today.’

‘What was that?’

‘What?’ She took a chair, leaned forward and began picking at the varnish on her toe-nail.

'You said a weird thing happened?'

'Oh. Yeah, I was followed. By a sinister man in a *hat*.' Her glance did not imply a shrewd test. In fact, it was empty of meaning.

'Well, you're a pretty girl. I imagine all kinds of men follow you, especially men in hats.'

'I have some information,' she said. 'Sleuthing type.'

After a moment of silence, he asked what the information was.

'I was sleeping with Doc, off and on. And off and on.'

'I heard a rumour about that.'

'Nasty rumours. I thought I'd tell you before you found the nasty rumours. Have you ever noticed how they dig them out of their noses and wipe them all over the bottoms of chairs? Dried rumours on the bottom of every chair.' She went to work on the second toe-nail.

'Did I give you the letter?' she asked suddenly.

'No. What letter's that?'

'Here.' She brought a grimy envelope from the pocket of her smock. 'Doc gave me this and he said not to read it, but if anything happened to give it to somebody. Like the fuzz, but I can't, they bother me. Those empty eyes. Robots. Some of them walk around all wired up for remote control. Anyway, here.'

While he was looking at the address side of the envelope, she drifted out of the room.

'To Whom It May Concern.' He looked at the flap with his magnifier before opening it. The edge of the flap was wrinkled, as though steamed open and resealed. Inside was a handwritten letter of two pages :

'To whom it may concern

By the time you read this, I will be dead. Murdered by Maurice Webb, the same man who murdered my son. Webb is now using another name. I'm not sure

yet what he calls himself, but I know he's a member of the Aetheric Mandala Society.

First, some background on how I got mixed up in this. Dave, my son, was born on August 7th, 1949. I didn't see much of him during his childhood, because my studies of marine fauna took me to distant parts, while my wife preferred to remain with him in Bristol. I was attached to the University of Bristol, and taught there during alternate years. 1960 was one of the 'in-between' years, which I spent in Australia. The reason I mention all this will become clear shortly.

In 1963 my wife was killed in an aeroplane crash. I threw myself into my work more seriously after that, and I'm afraid I saw even less of Dave, who was then at boarding-school.

He finished, started university, and then lost interest. He just drifted. Eventually he became a heroin addict, though I didn't know it at the time. His own efforts to cure himself finally led him to the Aetheric Mandala Society, run by Mrs Viola Webb.

Dave and I seldom corresponded, and I saw him less than once a year. On our last meeting, he confessed his addiction, but said he didn't want my help in curing it.

About a year ago I received a long, confused letter from him, telling me all about the society, and asking (not overtly) for my help. He said:

'It's a funny lot here, some of them crazier than me, which is saying something. It's all very unreal, sometimes I can't tell which of us are alive and which are ghosts. Mrs Webb's got this ghost control she calls Maurice, her dead husband I guess. He yaks on about what all the other ghosts are saying to us. Mother comes through sometimes. She seems real. More real than you or me. She wants me to pack it (H) in, and I really try, but somehow I never get around to it.

Doing anything is so hard, living is so hard, sometimes I'd like to really pack it in, everything I mean. But I never get around to that either. Maybe somebody will do me a favour.

'It isn't like ghosts and people, it's like a family. The others here are creeps and idiots, but old Maurice is O.K. Sometimes I get out of control and just start screaming at them and I can't stop doing things to them. I pinched a few things from their rooms, take stuff they've hidden, and give them a bad time in general. I know I'm really an evil influence here. I even scared Maurice half to death (or life, or something) when I asked him about Salisbury. He really choked and shut up, I always spoil things. If he wanted to get rid of me, I wouldn't blame him.'

A few weeks later I learned of Dave's death. The police and everyone else seemed to think it was just another case of accidental poisoning, but I believe that Dave was murdered.

I started checking Dave's odd reference to Salisbury. It made no sense at first, until I learned that Maurice and Viola Webb had been in Salisbury in August 1960. According to an ad. in the *Salisbury Record*, they were booked in for a week's engagement at a local cinema, from Monday, August 1st.

All at once, I understood. From his seventh birthday on, my wife had made a tradition of taking Dave to some entertainment on his birthday. He was especially fond of 'magic' shows, and I know my wife would have been happy to travel as far as Salisbury to give him this birthday treat. 1960 brought his eleventh birthday. Though I was not there at the time, I am almost sure that Dave saw the Webbs perform in Salisbury.

But how could this damage Mrs Webb's seance? I next learned that Maurice Webb was not dead: no

certificate of his death had ever been issued at Somerset House. These two facts added to one conclusion :

Dave saw and recognized Webb among the present Aetherians. The exposure of Mrs Webb's ghostly 'control' could ruin her; I now knew that the Webbs, one or both, were Dave's murderers.

I then feigned a conversion and joined the society myself, to find Webb. By age, the choice is limited to Prof. Merihew Hackel, Rev. Arthur Stonehouse and Mr Bruce Dank. I have three lines of inquiry :

1. Into the background of each man. Where was each in August 1960? Stonehouse seems to have held a vicarage in Derbyshire (but could he lead a double life?). Hackel's life at that time is a complete mystery. Dank claimed to have been in the R.A.F. at that time, but Mrs Webb let it slip that he was discharged in 1956.

2. Into the puzzling 'curse' scarab. I believe that Dave may have stolen it from the personal belongings of someone in the house, or else Webb gave it to him to set up the 'curse' story, prior to the murder. Hackel, I understand, is interested in primitive religions – could this include the religions of Egypt? Dank was stationed in Egypt. Of course, any of the three could have purchased the scarab in England.

3. Into the details of Dave's death. From all accounts, I've learned one fact: Professor Hackel went into the room where Dave was supposed to be injecting himself. After a minute alone with him, Hackel came out to announce that Dave was dead.

Hackel, then, is my first suspect, though I haven't yet eliminated the other two. One of the three is definitely Webb.

Does it make sense that Webb would kill, just to protect a spiritualist fraud? If not, I have a better theory. It is quite possible that the Webbs are running

a lucrative drug trade. For example, I have reason to -'

The second page ended here, a further page or pages were missing. Phin read it through again, trying to make sense of it. Doc's evidence was mushy, his theory fragmented. It hardly seemed the work of a scientific mind. And if the missing portion had been as badly thought out as this, why had anyone taken it?

'Possible that the Webbs are running a lucrative drug trade.' Phin decided to search Mrs Webb's room, thoroughly and at once. She must be either still raising ghosts downstairs, or up in her office - but even if she were in her room, he could pretend to be looking for the library.

The house was deathly quiet as he made his way downstairs. There was a crack of light under Mrs Webb's door, but that didn't mean she was in. Only today Ernestine had been complaining to the medium about carelessness and the cost of kilowatt-hours.

He opened the door a crack and listened. Silence. He walked in.

My God, he thought. *They always have a scene like this in the stage farce.* First there was Mrs Webb, in bed. Her pink plastic curlers and frilly night-cap were just visible over the top of a woman's magazine. Her plump hand reached out, flicking her cigarette at the ash-tray beside her, missing it.

Then there was Stoney, surprised in the act of smoothing his folded trousers over the back of a chair. One hand flew to his mouth, the other covered the entirely decent crotch of his candy-stripe shorts. The rest of his costume could only have been designed to raise laughs in the back of the theatre: black socks with garters, a black bib depending from his roman collar (the traditional arrangement by which priests save on shirts), baldness, a vest with holes.

'What are you staring at?' asked Mrs Webb of Stoney.

Then she lowered *Woman's Place* to stare at the intruder herself. 'Mr Phin!'

'What's the meaning of this?' said the cleric through his fingers.

'Sorry, wrong door,' Phin said, slammed it quickly and hurried back to his room.

Minutes later, a fully dressed, blushing, and very dignified Reverend Stonehouse came to visit him.

'Let me say first of all that this kind of spying is not tolerated in this house or in this country,' he said.

'I am sorry.'

'Very well, we accept your apology. Now I suppose I'd better explain what you saw down there. May I sit?'

'Yes, of course.'

Stoney sat, paying attention to the creases in his trousers. He sighed. 'I didn't want you to get the wrong impression – that Mrs Webb and I are living in sin. Far from it. It's all quite legal, I assure you. But, for personal reasons, my wife prefers not to make it public just yet.'

'Have you told the police?'

Stoney gulped. 'Good Heavens, no! Ought we have? I say, it can't possibly have any bearing on their investigations, can it?'

'I wouldn't know. But they'll be upset if they think you're keeping secrets from them. They call it withholding information. It might make them think someone tried to blackmail you about this, and you murdered them.' Phin picked up the letter from Doc and folded it as he spoke, watching Stoney's eyes. The clergyman was either innocent of its contents or a formidable poker-player.

'I daresay you're right. I'd better "come clean" with them. It just didn't seem something they had to know.'

Phin returned the letter to its envelope. 'Would you mind telling me why it's a secret?'

'The fact is, Mrs Webb – my wife – thinks it looks a good deal better if we say nothing for the time being. She fears

our marriage might look like a public betrayal of her first husband. After all, she does communicate with him in every seance – how might the other sitters take this? Dash it all, I wanted to make it public from the start. Then we needn't have had a scene like this.'

When the scene was over, Phin tried to get some sleep. What, indeed, was 'the meaning of all this?' Was Stoney really Maurice Webb – and concealing it for the slightest and silliest of reasons? Or was there some simpler reason for the secrecy?

'Now there's a thought,' he said aloud. '*Mrs Webb a bigamist!*'

Chapter Thirteen

Second Sight

'Dave Lauderdale was murdered, all right,' said Chief Inspector Gaylord, when he'd read through Doc's letter. 'But we've never pinned anything on anyone in your little society. The lad injected himself with a mixture of milk-sugar and kitchen cleanser. Common enough way for pushers to get rid of awkward customers.'

'I know that,' Phin said. 'I've read William Burroughs – but then, everyone in the society's probably read him, too. And it isn't as though milk-sugar and kitchen cleanser are hard to get. So why does it have to be a pusher?'

Gaylord smiled. 'I didn't say that. You don't understand, Phin. We don't investigate addict deaths, not like that. We've got – Christ – files full of them. Open verdicts all. Look, this Dave was an unregistered addict; he took his chances. It could have happened anyhow. A dirty needle, an overdose, an air bubble. Could be suicide. Could be the lad pumped that stuff in his vein on purpose, looking for some great new high. So, while you and I may know his pusher murdered him, we can't even begin to prove that it *was* murder.'

Phin was shocked into silence. Finally he managed to say, 'Well, let's talk about the other two deaths. I was right about Steve's not being drugged, wasn't I?'

'You were right. The post-mortem's all in order. It begins to look as though he died by an accidental fall, while "levitating". I still say it was a fall off a balcony, plus a load of gullible witnesses.'

'Including me, perhaps. All right, did you find his fingerprints on the rail of the balcony we were watching?'

'Look, we've been all over this once. I'll read you the

relevant parts of this report.' The policeman bent his aquiline profile towards the open file on his desk. 'Prints, as I told you, in the small triangular room, on the window catch of that room, and on the balcony rail outside it. He probably climbed over it, on the side nearest the other balcony – the one you were watching.'

'Which is seven feet away from it,' said Phin, remembering the diagram.

'Um, yes. That's right. That's all the prints. Oh, except on the torch, a clear set of left-hand fingers and palm.'

Phin sighed. 'But no fingerprints on the balcony we were watching. Which makes me wonder why you keep insisting he was on that balcony. Never mind – what about Doc's death?'

'You already know it all. He was killed very near that orgone box thing, and dragged into it. And we found a strand of the rope that killed him, caught in the rough wood surface of the shed. Not far from a nail. Might indicate the murder was unpremeditated; the killer grabbed a handy piece of rope and garotted him.' Gaylord immediately had second thoughts. 'On the other hand, why would anyone hang up a three-foot length of rope in the shed, except to have it handy for the murder?'

'*Anyone* meaning Nancy or Dank.'

'Nancy's got no alibi,' said Gaylord, a little defensively.

'That either means she's stupid, or she's been reading detective novels where the one person with a perfect alibi did it. The one who was, say, asking a policeman for the right time at the moment of the murder. Do you really think she's trying to call attention to her lack of alibi?'

'I don't know, Phin, honestly. Maybe she's crazy. Or maybe she hopes to keep her mouth shut until it all blows over somehow. That's something that does happen in real life.'

'And Dank?'

The Chief Inspector started doodling squares, cutting

them into triangles. 'Anybody but the girl, eh? I don't blame you, my friend. Nice-looking girl. But she's got form, you know.'

'Form? You mean she's got a police record?'

That seemed to amuse Gaylord, for reasons opaque to the American. 'A track record. Like they say in Brooklyn, she's been around, buddy. Knows the score.'

Phin said coldly, 'I wish Englishmen didn't enjoy imitating American accents so much. They only sound like Dutchmen, bearing down on every *r* like that. The latest word from Brooklyn, by the way, is that it's no longer part of New Amsterdam. What about Dank's alibi?'

'He's got one, all right. You say he left the house at 2.13. We have three witnesses who saw him at the King Charles Head well before 2.30, and he stayed till closing-time. In fact, they had to drag the glass from his hand at 3.15.'

'That's no surprise.' Phin's mood brightened at once. 'A perfect alibi, eh? Broken it yet?'

'I know what you're thinking. Stop thinking it.'

'I'm thinking he bought a drink at 2.30, nipped outside to the Gents and was gone for some undetermined time, came back and made himself conspicuous at closing-time.'

Gaylord blushed. 'He did nip out to the Gents, but only for five or ten minutes, according to his drinking companions.'

'Better and better. How long does it take to walk to the King Charles Head? Five minutes, say? Two, if he had a bicycle. Plenty of time to do it. And then we all know how good drinking companions are at estimating time. No, I wouldn't cross Dank off your list of suspects just yet, Inspector.'

'Oh, ta. Thanks for the tip. As a matter of fact, we haven't crossed anyone off our list, yet, Phin. Not even you.'

'I agree,' said Phin. 'I should be your main suspect. All this stuff started happening directly I joined the group. I

was "mixed up" in a murder before. You think I fancy Nancy – which gives me a motive for two murders. I have an airtight alibi for both of them. And now I'm trying to lead you off on a false trail, with a forged letter.'

'I'm not too worried about the letter,' Gaylord said, glancing over it again. 'I'll have it examined, of course, but I've been reading Lauderdale's journals and stuff. This is almost certainly his writing, and it even sounds like him.'

'I wonder what was on page three?'

'Let's see how much we can guess. This last bit talks about a "lucrative drug trade", and then he says "I have reason to". The next word must be "believe" or "suspect", right?'

'Right, Inspector.'

'How about "I have reason to suspect this", the drug business, "because ..." followed by his evidence. My hunch is, Doc Lauderdale was murdered by Aetherians who are members of a drug-ring. "Pushers and junkies."'

'Your *hunch*.' Phin shook his head. 'Your *hunch* is wrong. Sherlock Holmes would never entertain a hunch like that. It's not even a proper hunch – more of a cringe.'

'Sherlock Holmes, I seem to recall, was a junky himself.'

'Listen –'

'No, you listen, Phin. It has to be drugs. Dave Lauderdale's death points to a drug-ring killing. Steve Sunday experimented with drugs himself, as he admitted. And since junkies are often superstitious, what better excuse to band together than a mystical society? You know as well as I do how these things operate. Look at Timothy Leary's "religion" – used as a cover for drug-taking.'

'May I speak frankly, Chief Inspector? Don't be a dumb cop. You seem to have it all worked out, with seances as an excuse for a dozen junkies to get together in a dark room. But you ignore the difference between Dave's mainlining

heroin and Steve's having smoked a little pot (and that in the past). You say that because some junkies are mystics, these mystics must be junkies – shaky logic, there. Finally, since Dave's death points to a drug-ring, all the more reason for them to have killed him by some other means, if they were a drug-ring. Why make the drug squad suspicious, when they could drown him in his bath?'

'He probably never bathed,' said Gaylord nastily.

'More dumb-cop-ism? All right.' Phin was irritated now, and unable to keep it out of his voice. 'The phrase is a "lucrative drug trade". Does that sound like junkies and pushers? Ever hear of a rich junky or a millionaire street-pedlar? The real money is all at the other end, in smuggling.'

'You may have a point there.'

'Oh sure. I could build up a great case for smuggling. Stoney vanished at the funeral home, where they were sending a coffin abroad. Did he catch someone stuffing it with dope? Or was he stuffing it himself? Another thing, I saw a letter on the hall-table today with a funny foreign stamp. Tropical bird, I believe it was. Could that have been from the Far East?'

'That's *very* interesting. Tell me –'

'It isn't of the slightest interest. No drug-ring destroyed the third page of Doc's letter, unless it was a drug-ring run by dumb cops. Why would they destroy the evidence on page three, and leave the evidence, or the hints of evidence, on page two? Forget about drug-rings, and let's get back to –'

'To square one,' said the policeman, sighing.

'To murder and possible bigamy.'

'Hmm. We'll check for a divorce decree and a marriage to Stonehouse. But this sounds like a story, to me. The good priest was just embarrassed, trying to save his reputation.'

'And how far would he go to save it? I'm wondering

what would have happened if Dave had walked in as I did – and maybe threatened blackmail.'

Gaylord thought about that for half a minute. 'No. Too many ifs. Either it's a legal marriage, or no marriage at all. But even if she were a bigamist, would Mrs Webb kill, to hide the fact? It would only mean a year in prison at most. And the notoriety might do her business good. What's the matter? You look depressed.'

'Hm.' Phin drew a deep sigh, and fired it. He looked around. 'Nasty offices they give you up here. Fluorescent lights, steel desks, hard furniture ... looks like the death cell of a very modern prison. All you need is Muzak.'

'What's bothering you, then?'

'We aren't getting anywhere. Just following theories round and round. It's no good. It never happens in the best detective –'

'Don't you quote bloody Sherlock Holmes at me again.'

'We keep talking motives, when we should be talking *methods*. Here are the questions we have to answer, before we can get off the merry-go-round and start staggering in a more or less straight line.' He ticked them off on his fingers.

'First, how did Dave get that injection of poison? Did Hackel jab him? Or did someone outside the group sell it to him?'

'Second, how did Doc get out of the house? Helped out the window? That points to Nancy or Dank, or someone else outside. Sneaked past Steve? That points to Stoney or Mrs Webb. Then of course, there's Steve himself, who could have just lied. Or Ernestine could have worked strings at the window. O.K., then our suspects are Nancy, Dank, Mrs Webb, Stoney, Steve, Ernestine – or someone outside the group.'

'Third, who could have strangled him? Nancy, Dank or someone outside the group.'

'I can see where this is leading,' Gaylord said. 'And I don't care for it.'

'Right. It's the same for the other questions: who could have held Steve up on some rope arrangement, or whatever? Who could have killed him? Who could have kidnapped Stoney? In every case, *someone from outside.*'

'Marvellous. You've just built a terrific case against X. Now why don't you go and catch X for us?'

'I will!' Phin bounded out of his chair. 'Maurice Webb, or X, or whoever he is, will be brought to justice! You know, this may be my greatest case – so far.'

He made for the door, then went back and sat down again. 'Another thing. I followed Nancy yesterday, but she managed to shake her tail – that is, lose me. I wonder if she could have been meeting X?'

'We'll find out, Phin, and let you know. But I have one small favour to ask, in return.'

'A favour?'

Gaylord turned to gaze out the window, holding his eagle beak at a proud angle. 'Another department is very interested in a certain friend of yours, named Montague or Montgomery Beeker. Many aliases. You'd be doing us a favour, and being a good citizen – well, a good resident – if you'd just let us know about his movements from time to time. We know he's up to something crooked, because we – that is, my colleagues – know Mr Beeker.

'Not as well as you know him, however. That's why we'd like your help. Just tell us what you think he's up to. His latest confidence scheme, all that.'

He turned, then, to see how Phin was taking it.

Phin had vanished.

'Good thing I left the office door open. Fresh air was needed.' Phin was furious with himself as well as Gaylord. Now he sat on the bus, muttering.

'If the police want Beeker, let them find him ... only a petty con-man, after all ... isn't he?'

Or was Beeker X?

'Ridiculous!'

Beeker had introduced him to the Aetheric Mandala Society in the first place, worked up his interest in it. Thereafter the miracles started happening ... as if Phin were hired to be an impeccable witness ...

'There isn't a shred of real evidence.' But then Beeker wouldn't make mistakes. He was a professional. Good at conjuring, and these were certainly conjuring miracles ...

The old lady next to Phin got up and moved to a distant seat. Other passengers were making a point of not looking at him. He blushed, fixed his gaze on the scene outside the window, and tried to forget about Beeker, X and murder.

It was growing dark. The bus was becalmed in rush-hour traffic on a long street of brightly-lit, sterile shops. The main crowds seemed to be office workers hurrying for buses and trains home; the only 'shoppers' he could see were men with discouraged posture, who stood looking at a glittering display of TVs and tape-recorders they could never afford. Why, he wondered, was there an electronics shop in every depressed area like this (usually located between the pornography bookshop with its sun-faded titles and 'Rubber Goods' with its single dusty truss)?

He caught a flash of orange among the hurrying office workers. As the crowd separated, he saw that it was Nancy's coat. She was away ahead now, hiking along on the arm of a short man who could be Beeker. True, the man had dark curly hair, but so might Beeker - for today. In a moment they would be out of sight in the mob.

Just as he left his seat to get off, the bus started with a lurch. Somehow it had passed them by the time he got back to the window. Twenty yards on, it stopped for a traffic-light.

Here they came: the conspirators. Nancy and Beeker.

Beeker and Nancy. Wearing (he saw, as they came closer) the faces of two strangers.

As soon as he dis-recognized them, Phin saw a dozen clues that should have told him he was being a fool. The woman's hair was black, not brown. The man was too tall for Beeker. And so on.

I should try eye exercises, he thought. And with that, Phin finally began to see.

Chapter Fourteen

Second Opinion

'Morning, chaps.' Rubbing his hands, Dank bustled into the drawing-room where Phin and Stoney were playing Ludo. 'What? Intellectual pursuits?'

'Boredom,' said Phin. 'No one seems to be able to settle down to his work these days. Stoney was just telling me he's broken off the dowsing experiments indefinitely, on account of - the trouble.'

'Rather.' Stoney flashed his beaver fangs. Soberly he added, 'Of course my work isn't so important. But Mrs Webb seems off her stride, too, don't you think? I fear this business is affecting her health. She's not strong, you know.'

'Damned shame, all of this. Quicker they clear up this mess, the better, says I. Bad for morale,' Dank said. 'Anyone seen Hackel this morning? Thought we might dust off the old table and get in some table tennis.'

Phin conceded his last Ludo game. 'Poor Hackel seems more upset than anyone. He came down to breakfast, accused us all of being *in cahoots*, and then walked out without eating.'

Stoney arranged the pieces and put the game aside. 'He informed us in so many words that the deaths of Doc and Steve were only part of a plot to make him, Hackel, a laughing-stock!'

'Nut-case,' Dank said, wagging his head. 'Too much of his so-called science, if you ask me. Too much peering and prying into the mysteries of Nature. Man isn't meant to know -'

'My dear Dank, I couldn't disagree more. You will insist that science and mystical understanding are at loggerheads, but it simply isn't so! Take Isaac Newton - one of the

greatest scientists ever to walk this earth, yet he didn't go around scoffing at the alchemists. No indeed, he pitched in and tried his own hand at alchemy! In my view, Hackel's fault is in thinking there is some fundamental division between science and faith. Perhaps you make the same mistake.'

'Never made a mistake in my life,' Dank said cheerfully. 'Anyone for table tennis?' No one was, so he stayed in his chair.

'I still don't understand the professor's outburst this morning,' Phin said. 'Of course, we're all upset.'

'Right-oh.' Dank looked anything but upset. 'No telling which of us may be next, is there? Just because that thingum isn't about doesn't mean we're not still under a curse, what?'

'Oh dear. Do you think so?' When Stoney made a frown, the skin all over his head shifted forward.

'Absolutely, old boy. We might all be murdered before this is over.'

Ernestine swung the door open. 'Come quickly! It's Mrs Webb!'

'Dead?' they all said, more or less together.

'Fainted. But she looks just ghastly. Up in the office. Come.'

They took the stairs two at a time all the way up.

'Damn this big house!' Dank gasped. 'So many ... bloody ... steps!'

They found Mrs Webb fallen face down on her typewriter. When Phin and Stoney tried to lift her, she vomited into it, groaned, and tried to shake them off.

'Poison,' she moaned.

'Viola!' Stoney's face was pale, and his narrow chin trembled. 'My God! I'd better get a doctor.'

'No-no-no,' she said weakly. 'No doctor. I won't -' A cough interrupted. 'I won't have a horrid allopath fussing over me. Just get me to bed.'

They half-carried her down to her room.

'Do let me get a doctor,' Stoney pleaded. 'My dear, he can't harm you by just looking. If you've been poisoned -'

'Psychic poison,' she said, and retched. Ernestine had fetched a basin and held it ready. 'Allopathy's useless against the forces -' She used the basin.

'Don't try to talk,' Phin said. 'Just lie back and take it easy. Here, Ernestine, I'll empty that for you.'

Several minutes later, when he brought back the clean basin, the argument was reaching a compromise. Mrs Webb would not hear of an 'allopath', that is, a conventional doctor, but she would allow someone named Dr Jarvis to examine her. For now, she just wanted to be left alone. All right, Ernestine could stay with her.

'I was afraid of that,' said Stoney, as they came out into the hall. 'This Jarvis is a naturopath. He may be able to give her something to calm her stomach, but that's about all. I have no illusions about nature cures. Frankly, I'd rather she saw a proper doctor. If that were poisoning - Heavens!'

'Chin up.' Dank slapped his thin shoulder. 'Nature's cure is best, you know. Give this Jarvis a tinkle, and let's see what he can do, what?'

'What choice have I?'

Phin had to take a parcel to the post office, to be delivered by postal messenger to Chief Inspector Gaylord. He missed the brief house-call of Dr Jarvis. On his return, he found Stoney and Dank in the drawing-room, and they told him all about it. Stoney was gloomier than ever, and Dank still 'looking on the bright side, old man.'

'Oh, *she's* pleased as punch,' Stoney said. 'But I'd like a second opinion, all the same.'

'What did the - doctor say?' Phin asked.

'He merely suspended a pendulum over her, mumbled something about "sub-luxations of the auric metabolism", and told her to keep taking the kelp. And went away with his ten guineas.'

'See here,' Dank said, frowning. 'I thought you trusted in the auric vibrations of dowsing and pendulums and such. Now you say -'

'I say it's not enough, that's all. It's one thing to conduct dowsing experiments, but quite another to allow one's - dear friend - to place her life at risk and become a guinea pig. Dr Jarvis did exactly the same thing last time, and she's still not well.'

'Last time?' Phin asked. 'How many of these attacks have there been, then?'

'This is the third. That's what worries me. Jarvis may mean well, but he simply hasn't got at the root of it.'

Dank slipped out for his lunch-time walk. Phin had been turning over a plan in his mind, and now he explained it to Stoney.

'Do you really think she's been poisoned?' he asked, first.

'I hardly know what to think. Something's terribly wrong with her, I feel sure. It doesn't matter to me what the cause is, I'm desperate to have it found and put right.'

'I think I know a doctor who can help us. If I can get him to agree, we'll have him pose as a - non-allopath. That way he can at least examine Mrs Webb without arousing her suspicions.'

Stoney was delighted. 'Bless you, my boy. This really is too good of you. Do you think he'll do it?'

'I'd better ask him first. I'll phone from the office, so no one'll overhear. Can you keep everyone away from the hall extension for a few minutes?'

Stoney would be happy to do so. He went down to sit by the phone in the front hall, as though waiting for a call, while the sleuth went up to the office.

Ernestine had covered the typewriter, removed it to a corner of the room, and tidied the desk. A few stacks of typescript had been squared and shifted to one end, while the occult apparatus had been piled at the other end, next to the phone.

Phin spoke to his medical friend, who was unenthusiastic about the deception.

'It's unethical, for starters.'

'I know. But it could save a life. So it's not really in conflict with your Hippocratic oath, is it?'

Short silence. 'I don't know ... what would I have to do? Witch-doctoring really isn't my line, you know. This patient's bound to see through me.'

'I've thought of that. You just go through your normal examination, and say as little as possible. I'll have an assistant for you, who knows all the magic incantations. You won't have to do a thing.'

Short silence, sigh. 'I suppose so. This evening at seven all right?'

'Fine. I think we'll call you "Dr Grave". I'll have your assistant call round for you at 6.30, then, O.K.? His name - his real name - is Beeker.'

He phoned Beeker next, and explained what he wanted him to do. While they were speaking, Phin found the key to the filing cabinet and started looking through the files.

'I'll need a bit of extra equipment,' said Beeker.

'Fine, fine. Get anything you need; I'll pay for it. But be sure you get over to the surgery at 6.30 sharp. The doctor's doing this as a favour, and putting his reputation in jeopardy. I don't want to make this any harder for him than - Holy Khepri!'

'Eh? Think of something else?'

'No, I was just sneaking a look at Mrs W's files. Edifying.'

'Client files? A lot of mediums have those. They jot down notes on what a client says in one seance, and then throw it back at him months later. It can have a big effect.'

'So I see.'

'Then they put down other stuff. One bloke used to bug his waiting room, to hear what the clients said to each other. And he had his assistants going through the pockets of their coats in the cloakroom, during each seance. And

then most client files have stuff from other mediums. It's kind of a grand co-operative investigation effort, like Inter-pol.'

After hanging up, Phin made a closer examination of the files. Each folder was labelled with a thinly-disguised numerical cipher. It took Phin less than a minute to see that '19-13-9-20-8-18-12' was nothing more than 'Smith, R. L.', though he needn't have bothered. Smith's name and a brief life history were plainly typed out on information sheets inside :

Robert Llewelyn Smith, born 18 September 1908.
Wd like to contact wi Mary; bro Jim(Jamesie) + in
childhood drowning, swim accident; mo Cora (Mums;
+ flu 1918). Librarian, retired.

There followed a list of odd details and attributes, some ticked and marked with dates, presumably dates of seances : Smith was a non-smoker, had back trouble, his mother was Canadian, etc.

Phin checked the files for Steve Sunday and Arthur Stonehouse, in the same drawer. They rated five sheets of data apiece, listing scores of seance visits and details of conversations. Evidently Mrs Webb made no attempt to keep a file up to date, once a client was well hooked. He put these files back and tried another drawer.

Bruce Dank's file was empty.

The scratch of a paper-clip indicated that it hadn't always been empty, and common-sense said Mrs Webb would have a large file on Dank. In the same drawer, Phin checked the files of the Blaise sisters and the Forsters. Empty. He opened the folders and held them to the light, looking for paper-clip scratches. In the Forster file there were more interesting marks.

Some object had been fastened into the folder with two crossed strips of tape, now torn out. The object was thick

enough to make radial creases in the cardboard, and small enough to fit between tape marks an inch apart. In other words, it was an object about the size and shape of a wedding ring.

Phin telephoned Gaylord from a public telephone box. Using public phones, he'd already learned, was one of those exercises which kept the British cheerful and patient (the Blitz had been another). It had taken him some time to learn the routine of long queues, crossed lines, wrong numbers, phones that accepted money but refused service, missing directories, directories with torn-out pages, and telephones that came apart in the hand.

Today, the G.P.O. and the weather had conspired to hinder someone else's phone call, however. Phin got through to the right number immediately, after queueing behind only one person, and the rain held off until he was in the box.

The Chief Inspector was interested in his 'poisoning' news. 'You know, we could get a magistrate's order and have her snatched into hospital, if you really think it's poison.'

'There doesn't seem to be an emergency yet, Inspector. Stoney says it's her third attack. So if it is poison, it must be slow. I'm getting a doctor to look at her this evening, but meanwhile, I'd rather not panic anyone, especially the poisoner.' Phin told him about the missing files, and the saga of the wedding ring.

'We've been busy, too,' said Gaylord. 'We followed Nancy Michie today, to the piano department of Harrod's. She met a bloke named Ben Doody.'

'Who?'

'He's a member of a backing group that worked a lot with Steve Sunday.'

'What else do you know about him?'

'Not too much, so far. The group's doing telly commercial sound-tracks, over at the Durham Agency, I gather. Sunday was contracted to sing a few songs with them, about a men's underarm deodorant.'

'I see.' Phin thought this over until the phone started bleeping for more money. Though he fed it another coin, he was cut off.

'Never mind,' he said, hanging up. 'Gaylord would only forbid me to interview Ben Doody anyway.' He took up the A-D directory and looked for the Durham Agency.

Ben Doody turned out to be a tall, swarthy youth with a Groucho Marx moustache, Harpo hair. He came to meet Phin, who stood shaking out his wet umbrella in one corner of the large studio. In the opposite corner, a group of men and women were dancing on and about a parked racing-car, whose driver sat perfectly still and smirked. An upright piano provided dance music.

'We put in the real sounds later,' Doody explained. 'And the voice over.'

'Why the racing car? What's it selling?'

'New men's deodorant, "Pit Stop". Uh, what was it you wanted? I've only got a few minutes. We're recording for another series, today.'

'I won't take much of your time, Mr Doody. You see, I'm doing an article for an American music magazine, *Sounds Swell*. I'm interested in anything you can tell me about Steve Sunday's last days. What he said and did, and so on.'

Doody scratched his ear. 'What can I tell you? Steve worked with us a lot, the last few months. I didn't see much of him outside the studio. We were doing this series for "Pit Stop", only we'll have to finish the last two without him. Just background theme.'

'Did you happen to know any of the other members of this occult society he belonged to?'

The dancers' frenzy came to a stop. They froze while someone adjusted a light. Then a man with a clipboard ordered Phin and Doody to step back while other lights and large reflecting panels were wheeled out to produce some new effect. Phin found his interview's venue shifted to a cramped corner by the door, surrounded by spare equipment.

'I had no idea making a commercial was so complicated. Now, what was I asking you? Oh, did you meet any of the other - ?'

'I met Steve's girl Nancy a few times. I guess she's one.'

'How well did you know her?'

'Just to talk to.'

Just was the give-away, confirming what Phin suspected and Gaylord probably knew about the clandestine meeting.

'I don't know if I should ask you this ...' Phin fidgeted with his umbrella, poking at a coil of power-cable on the floor, aiming it like a rifle at the brilliant overhead lights. He knew very well that he *shouldn't* ask the question, which would amount to a tip-off.

'Ask me what?'

'Ask you,' Phin said, poking with his umbrella at the mirror surface of a nearby panel, testing its resiliency, 'if you knew that Nancy was a junky.'

'What?' The musician was suddenly deafer than Beethoven.

'Never mind. I wouldn't be able to print that anyway, I guess. Forget I mentioned it. Thanks for your help, Mr Doody. I really appreciate it. Oh, one more thing. How much was Steve making from these commercials?'

'Plenty. I don't know, he must have cleared fifty thousand from the series. Maybe more.'

'That much? Then, in spite of his popularity, he must have needed the money.'

Doody appeared to give it thought. 'I guess so, yeah. You

see, he had a lot of problems earlier. Bad contracts, that scene. Then he tried to start his own recording studio, lost a packet on that. I guess this was supposed to get him enough bread so he didn't have to make any more bum contracts.'

'Would you say he died a rich man?'

'I doubt it. Look, I got to go.'

Phin thanked him and started to leave. At the door he looked back.

Doody seemed in no hurry to go, now. He stood chewing a fingernail hungrily, and watching the dancers. The man with the clipboard was beating time to the music and shouting at them.

'Wave the spanner, Jenny! *Wave* the bloody spanner! That's it. Now Peter rolls the tyre ... and kick! And kick! Beautiful!'

Phin answered the door to Beeker and 'Dr Grave'. Under their overcoats they wore white lab gowns with Yin-Yang symbols on the pockets.

'Iron-on patches,' Beeker whispered. 'How do we look?'

'Fine. She's been vomiting again.'

The doctor nodded. 'Where is the patient, Th - Mr Phin?'

He led them up to Mrs Webb's room. She was sitting up in bed, looking pinker and healthier than she'd been all day.

'Dr Grave, eh?' She gave him a suspicious look. 'Just what sort of doctor are you?'

'Madam, I -'

'He's a mesmeric magnetist,' Beeker explained. 'A doctor of mesmeric healing, and a Fellow of the Eastern University of Health.'

This seemed to satisfy her, but she insisted that Phin and Ernestine remain in attendance during the examination.

Grave opened his bag and brought out a number of per-

fectly ordinary diagnostic instruments. To each had been taped a toy magnet. Under the pretext of measuring various 'magnetic vibration rates' and 'auric fluxes', he managed to listen to her heart; take her pulse, temperature and blood pressure; and look down her throat and into her eyes and ears.

'Any pain?' he asked.

'A little soreness in my stomach.'

'Ah!' Beeker nodded. 'That'll be mesmeric poison, won't it, doctor?'

'Perhaps so, yes.'

Mrs Webb's eyes widened. 'My goodness! That's just what I've been trying to tell everybody.'

'Let's see where it hurts,' Grave said.

'Right. Then we can *draw out the poison* with these.'

Beeker held up a pair of toy bar-magnets.

The psuedo-quack pressed his patient's abdomen until he found the tender spot. Then, while his assistant held the magnets poised over it, he turned away and looked at the contents of Mrs Webb's basin.

Phin accompanied the two men to the front door. Dr Grave scratched out a prescription and handed it to him. 'Get her to take these tablets, three a day. Tell her to chew them. Eat nothing until the vomiting stops, and lay off fried foods, spices, spirits, coffee and tea. In fact, it's better if she sticks to bland foods entirely: porridge and milk, that sort of thing.'

'Sounds like an ulcer.'

'I don't know what it is, without proper tests. But I think she has a painful tumour. She really should go into hospital immediately. Even if she seems better for a time, there's bound to be another attack.'

'I'll see what I can do. And thanks.'

He would deliver the doctor's verdict to Stoney, who cowered in the drawing-room, perhaps playing a game of Snakes and Ladders with the professor. But there was

another confrontation to be got through first. He found Nancy in the library, reading a fashion magazine.

'Nancy?'

'Mm?'

'Why did you steam open the letter from Doc? Why did you destroy the last page, or pages?'

'What?'

'I think you heard me. I went through the deafness routine this afternoon, with your Mr Doody. Your connection, I guess I should call him.'

She continued staring hard at the magazine page. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Then I'd better explain. You've caused a lot of trouble for yourself and for everybody else, by not simply telling us you're an addict. I can imagine Doc said as much, or hinted as much, in his letter. That's why you destroyed page three.'

'You seem to have it all worked out,' she said, turning a page, licking her finger, turning another.

'I have, yes. It explains why you have no alibi for two murders. That is, you have an alibi, but you're afraid to tell the police about it. Want to tell me?'

'No.' She turned another page. 'Oh, all right. You seem to know it all anyway. I was making a meet that lunch-time, with the Dude. Ben Doody. He didn't show - half the time he doesn't - so I had to try and catch him again that evening. Not much of an alibi, is it? I mean, the Dude won't swear to it, will he?'

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I think the police will believe you. For one thing, they probably know Doody's pushing already, or they soon will. For another, it doesn't take much thought to see that you're the only one who could have destroyed that third page of Doc's letter. Better for you to tell them everything now, rather than later.'

'I will,' she said. 'What've I got to lose now?'

Phin went to his room, feeling the beginnings of nausea,

the growth in his stomach of a new and nasty theory. The police would question Doody, pressure him, and produce Nancy's alibi. They would stop suspecting her, just when they really ought to start.

Doody and Nancy, a murder team. Intimately connected with all three victims. Doody preparing a poison dose for Dave. Arranging their mutual alibi for two more murders. And the damning, almost clinching evidence: Doody working in *that television studio*. Teamwork ... like a dance team ...

'Two men dancing the tango, indeed!'

Chapter Fifteen

Fourth Dimension

At 2.00 a.m. the sleuth was still not asleep. He decided to turn on the light and try the sedative prose of *And Yet a Voice*. If it didn't put him to sleep, the account of Dave's death might at least give him the basis for Doc's wild theory. He found it near the end of the book.

... to make the auric vision all too tragically true.

On the fateful night, early in February, most of us went out to attend a lecture at the Spirit Phenomena Convention. Dave stayed home with a headache, and Nancy to keep an eye on him.

When we arrived home, Dave and Nancy met us in the front hall. Dave was in a filthy mood, and began at once to attack us as 'pious hypocrites'. The telephone was ringing. I stopped to answer it, while Dave followed the others into the dining-room, still haranguing them.

Emily Blaise was on the line from Cheltenham, calling to say she'd just had the strangest feeling that something was wrong. Even as I spoke with her I could hear Dave screaming at the others. I told her that 'something wrong' was an understatement

'This is the stuff.' Dave kept shouting. 'Take a good look at it! A little sachet of pure death!' There were sounds of a scuffle, and someone crashed to the floor.

I dropped the phone immediately and rushed in. Dave met me in the archway, shoved me aside with a curse, and rushed off to the bathroom. In the dining-room I found a chair turned over, and Reverend Stonehouse lying dazed on the floor. Professor Hackel was bleeding from the nose. Evidently these two kindly

gentlemen had tried to keep Dave from his appointment with the Angel of Death.

To no avail. Later Professor Hackel went into the bathroom and found Dave dead, of an overdose. He'd mercifully died in an instant, having barely had time to open the bathroom window for a last breath of life. The ancient curse had fallen upon him, and I saw in this tragedy what I knew to be true already: the auric vibrations never lie. Never again would I doubt the colour radiance of an aura.

Phin closed the book. Could it be only coincidence that Miss Emily Blaise was on the phone from Cheltenham, whenever murder was being committed in London? Once she provided an alibi, more or less, for Stoney, and once for Mrs Webb.

'And twice for herself,' he added aloud.

There would be no sleep for him until he inspected the dining-room and bathroom downstairs. While he was at it, he might as well raid the icebox.

The dining-room's cadaverous light streamed out through the archway. Phin approached it quietly and looked in. Hackel sat in the glare, his back to the door, hunched up in his brown dressing-gown. He was holding a glass of milk.

'Professor? Having trouble sleeping?' Phin said. 'Oh, I'm sorry - here, let me mop that up.'

When the milk was cleaned up, he apologized again.

'Don't worry, I didn't want it anyway,' Hackel rumbled. 'Goat's milk! But I didn't want to bother putting the kettle on.'

'Leave that to me, professor. I was thinking of a cup of tea or a sandwich or something myself. I can understand your insomnia. This hasn't been easy on any of us, three murders and -'

'Three?'

'I count the death of Dave Lauderdale as a deliberate

poisoning. His father certainly thought so, anyway.' Phin briefly explained the letter, without mentioning Doc's primary suspect. 'Anyway, since Doc's dead, it looks as though he must have been right, doesn't it? Excuse me, I'll put the kettle on.'

He took his time about it, giving Hackel a chance to get his story straight.

'I've just been reading Mrs Webb's account of it, in her last book. Of course she was on the phone, so missed quite a lot. What really happened in here that night – the "scuffle" she mentions?'

Hackel's thick fingers played a game of church-and-steeple on the green formica. 'Hard to remember, really, it was so long ago. Let me see ...

'Young Lauderdale was shouting at us and waving this little sachet of heroin about. Then Stonehouse tried to take it from him. Did take it from him, as a matter of fact.'

'What did he do with it?'

'Do with it? He – he tried to throw it to me. You see, Dave was attacking him.'

Phin decided to lead the witness. 'He didn't put it in his pocket, by any chance?'

Light dawned. 'Yes, now that you mention it, he *did* put it in his pocket. I remember now. We were all wearing our coats, you see, having had no time to take them off. Stonehouse put it in his coat pocket, and then took it out again. Then he dropped it. I picked it up, and David turned his attack on me. And he got it away from me, I'm afraid.'

'Yes, and where was Nancy all this time?'

'She was right here in the room with us. You see –'

'Oops, the kettle. Excuse me again.' Phin made the tea and set out two cups. Thank Ra, he thought, Nancy was in the room. 'Go on, Professor.'

'She was there all the time, with us. She and David were in the front hall when we came in. They seemed to be embracing, but they jumped apart when the door opened.'

'Did Steve see this?'

'I don't know. He didn't register anything if he did.'

'Do you think Dave had come in just ahead of you? Nancy was greeting him?'

Hackel frowned. 'No, that's not right. Because Nancy was wearing a coat and Dave wasn't. I'd say *she* had just arrived.'

'Fascinating. Professor, you've been very helpful. I'm convinced that if I can find out who killed Dave, it'll tell me who killed Doc and Steve. Do you think this tea is strong enough, yet?'

Hackel's trembling paw poured it out.

Next morning Phin interviewed the others. He began by helping Ernestine with the breakfast dishes. All she could remember of the fatal evening was 'a fight, there was a fight. And the little packet fell on the floor.'

Dank, cornered in the library, was equally vague. 'The young thug hit Stoney and Hackel, I remember that,' he said. 'Just about to wade in myself when the lad turned and ran like a cur.' He remembered nothing of the packet's falling on the floor, or any other details.

'Had quite a lot on my mind, though. Myra hadn't been in the ground more than a few months, old boy. Myra's relations still weren't speaking to me. Made such a fool of myself at the funeral, I told you. Do you know, I wanted to arrange to have flowers, fresh flowers put on Myra's grave weekly - but I couldn't bring myself to ring up the funeral home. I was even afraid to face old Smerth -'

'Smerth!'

Phin managed not to break into mad laughter throughout the rest of the conversation. He walked out of the library without actually capering, and, even when he was alone in the hall, he permitted himself no more than a brief grin, a fierce whisper:

'Calloo! Callay!'

A few minutes later, he had inveigled Stoney into a game of darts in the recreation room.

'Yes, I remember a bit of the evening. Though I rather try to forget unpleasantness when I can. I must admit I started it all. Dave was waving his drug in front of my nose, you see, taunting me. It occurred to me to try rescuing him from himself, by force if need be. Then of course I was angry, and that must have had something to do with it. Out of whatever mixed motives, I knocked the packet from his hand. It fell on the floor. Then I tried to push him away from it, and hold him while someone else picked it up. Hackel, it was. I'm greatly afraid the ruse failed, and Dave trounced us both for our pains.'

'Tell me, was Nancy in the room? Or did you notice?'

'I believe so, yes. She was about during the whole disgraceful episode. She and Dave were in the front hall when we arrived. Seemed to have just arrived herself. Or was leaving. Anyway she'd her coat on, don't you know.'

Phin conceded the rest of the darts game and went to find Nancy in the drawing-room, to hear her version of the story.

'Dave and I were in the front hall when they got home,' she said. 'Talking. Then there was a quarrel and a fight. The scag got knocked to the floor once.'

'What did it look like?'

'You've never seen it? This was a little tea-bag, like, but plastic.'

'Can you try to remember every detail of what happened? Who was fighting, and how did it start?'

'Well. Uh, Dave waved it about, and then Stoney knocked it out of his hand. And then he sort of gave him a shove, so he couldn't pick it up again. Stoney shoved Dave, I mean. And then the Prof picked it up and put it in his pocket. Coat pocket. Everybody was wearing coats.'

'You're sure about that? The pocket business?'

'Positive. Because when Dave took it back off him, he just about ripped his coat in two, getting it.'

'I don't suppose Hackel kept the coat?'

'Yeah, I think he had it mended or something.'

'Fine. That's all I wanted to know.' Phin stood up to go.

'What are you going to do next?'

He smiled. 'This afternoon, I'm going to order my coffin.'

'*Your coffin?*'

'Of course. Now that these three murders are solved, I feel I need a long rest. No doubt our murderer agrees.'

'You've solved them?'

'Well, almost. I still don't know who did them, for sure, but that's a trivial matter. One thing still puzzles me, though. What were you and Dave doing that evening in the front hall, when the door opened?'

She jumped now as she had probably jumped then. 'What?'

'Hackel thinks you were "embracing". I think you were giving Dave his dope. You'd just gone out to buy it for him, hadn't you?'

It wasn't really a question, and she didn't really answer.

Mr Smerth wasn't happy about being trapped behind his desk and interrogated again. He kept taking off his pincenez and polishing them hard, to signal his displeasure.

'I've already answered a great many questions for the police,' he said. 'Really, Mr Thin -'

'Phin. My questions aren't altogether about the odd disappearance of Reverend Stonehouse, this time. The first question is, will you sell me a coffin?'

'"Sell you a coffin"? For what purpose?'

'My own purposes. I feel sure you will sell me one, if I say that, first of all, it may help catch a murderer, second, the name of your firm will never be brought into the case,

and third, you can make it a middling-expensive coffin. Are we agreed?’

The gleam in the pince-nez seemed to alter from hostile to avaricious. ‘Perhaps. Your other questions?’

‘Next, I want to know something about a former client.’

‘Out of the question. I *never* discuss clients. And I’m about to have luncheon.’

‘All I really want to check is a name. Have you undertaken anyone named Forster in the past few months? A Mrs R. W. Forster?’

‘Mrs Regina Forster, yes. I remember her well. Any more questions?’

Phin rose. ‘Just one. Could I have a word with the two men who were working here the night Reverend Stonehouse vanished? Bill and Henry, I believe they were called.’

Smerth looked pained. ‘Forbes and Meadows, you mean. Henry Forbes has been ill these past few days. You’ll find William Meadows at his luncheon, in the public house just down the road. The Falsall Arms. Now, about this coffin?’

‘We can work out the details later. All you need to go on with is the length, six foot three. Or, if you’re metricated now, one hundred and ninety centimetres. Goodbye, Mr Smerth. Nice doing business with you.’

In the Falsall Arms, Phin found the red face of Bill Meadows hanging over a pint and a pile of sandwiches. He reintroduced himself and went straight to the point.

‘You and your colleague Henry were the last persons who might have seen Reverend Stonehouse in the chapel that evening. I wonder if you’d mind telling me exactly what you saw and heard?’

‘Nothing. Me and Henry was going in to get the goods, and we find this coat in one of the pews. You know the rest.’

‘Not quite all of it. What happened after you left the funeral home in the van?’

Bill looked at the sleuth over the rim of his tankard. ‘What you getting at? We went to the bleeding airport,

didn't we? Handed the goods in at the customs, with all the papers and that, and then we come straight back. What you on about?'

Phin tried to look confidential and lowered his voice. 'Little matter of missing jewellery,' he said. 'Reverend Stonehouse had with him a kind of stone bug. Well, he turned up all right, but the bug's still missing. I'm trying to trace it.'

'Don't look at me, mate! I don't know -'

'Of course you don't. But there's more to it than that. You see, it was an Egyptian jewel, a scarab. Not really worth much. The thing is, it has a curse on it. Anyone who owns it is in danger. In danger of dying a violent death.'

'Go on!' Bill grinned as he drained his glass. Phin bought him another.

'No, I mean it. I know it sounds crazy, but I've seen the thing work myself. The last three people who had it before Stonehouse are now dead. One of them was Steve Sunday. See what I mean?'

Bill's grin faltered, faded. 'Steve Sunday was the goods we took to the airport,' he said quietly. 'Bleedin' 'eck!'

'You can see it's important to find the man who has it now, can't you? I'm only interested in his welfare. There's no question of charges being pressed, if he gives it back.'

'Look here,' Bill looked serious. 'Henry's got it, and that's the truth. I ain't superstitious, but you never can tell with these things. Henry's the one you want.'

'He found it when he found the coat, see? And he showed it to me in the van, after we drove off.'

'"Nice bit of rock," he says. "Can't be worth much, but I think I'll have it for a souvenir." I told him he was daft, he'd get us both in dead trouble. So he says, "Drop me off at my place, and I'll hide the thing were nobody'll find it."'

'I didn't want to, but I dropped him off. He lives in Harlesden, not much out of the way. He goes inside and I sit

waiting in the van for an easy ten minutes, then I hoot the hooter. We was late already.

'So he sticks his bonce out the window and says, "Bill, you'll have to make it without me. I've come over all funny-like. Me insides are turning over." He's been off work ever since, too. Nothing I could do but take the goods to Heathrow on me own, which is what I did do. I couldn't say nothing to Mr Smerth about it, because he'd have the whole story out of me, he's that quick.'

'I don't like the sound of this,' said Phin. 'Henry's getting sick like that, just after – How much time do you have left of your lunch-hour? Could you direct me to his place?'

'I'll drive you over.' Bill finished his pint, belched, and dusted crumbs off his black suit. Then he blew his nose, adjusted his cloth cap, and jerked his head towards the door. 'Right. Let's go.'

It was a short drive before the car jolted through a winding back street of Harlesden, where half the houses were boarded up.

'They're pulling those down to build council houses,' Bill explained. 'Here we are.' He pulled up before a vacant corner shop and gestured at the upper windows – almost the only windows in sight that had curtains. 'He was dead lucky to get this place. If they pull it down, he'll get a council flat. All right for some.'

They rang the bell and waited, knocked and waited.

'Maybe Henry's out,' said Bill.

Phin took a plastic credit-card from his wallet. 'I wouldn't think of this normally,' he said. 'But this is an emergency, I think.' He slipped it between the door and jamb, springing the lock.

The door opened on a narrow staircase with peeling walls. There were no letters on the floor, but a fair-sized heap of circulars and advertisements for mini-cabs.

'Looks like he hasn't picked up his mail for a couple of days,' Phin said gravely. He led the way upstairs.

As in many such flats, there were three rooms: a large bed-sitting room in front, a smaller kitchen in the back, and a tiny bathroom and toilet off the hall. A smell of death hung over the place; they traced it at once to a pedal-bin in the kitchen, overflowing with rotten food. Except for bacteria here and a spider in the bathroom, there seemed to be no life in the place. Then, just as Phin reached for the handle of the front room's door, a voice within said distinctly:

'I hope you didn't mean that, Doctor.'

The American accent and flattened tone identified it, after a breathless second, as television. They opened the door and went in.

The TV picture had twisted into an abstract design, a row of nested black question marks. The rest of the room provided questions: a half-empty pot of tea, growing mould; an ash-tray with a few cigarette ends and one whole cylinder of tobacco ash; the gas fire turned up to a comfortable temperature; the bed turned down and waiting; undisturbed dust on the wooden arms of a chair; the scarab lying on the coffee table; the splinters of a teacup, and a dried, star-shaped splash of its contents, on the linoleum.

And no Henry Forbes.

'What's happened to him?' Bill whispered.

'This,' said Phin, picking up the scarab by its string. 'The curse seems to have caught up with poor Henry, just when he was sitting down to a nice cup of tea.'

Bill's normally beef-red face went a paler pink. 'I've got to work,' he said suddenly. 'I wasn't here with you, remember. I don't know nothink about it.'

'Don't worry.' Phin held the stone to the light. Its polished surface shone like the hard wings of a real beetle. 'I'll take care of this.' Before he looked around, he heard Bill's car starting, getting into gear, driving away.

The sleuth spent an hour poking through the flat, making occasional use of his magnifier. There were no fingerprints on the scarab or the teapot handle - odd, but not alarming.

There was no suitcase under the bed or on top of the wardrobe – unusual, but not inexplicable. Henry's toothbrush seemed to have vanished with him – very peculiar, but still not ominous.

'After all,' Phin said to the scarab, 'he could have poured tea with gloves on; undertakers' assistants may wear gloves out of habit or something. He may never have had a suitcase, or loaned it to someone. And he may be toothless – no, I remember that white, even grin of his – dentures? What do you think?'

The scarab did not reply. After another glance into the pedal-bin, the sleuth shut Henry's front door and walked off down the street, whistling, looking for a public telephone.

Chapter Sixteen

Finz Speling Reefawm

'Inspector Gaylord?'

'Gaylord here. Hello?'

'Hello,' said a third voice on the line. 'Is this Perkin's Raisins?'

'This is Detective Chief Inspector Gaylord speaking. Go ahead.'

'This is Thackeray Phin, Inspector. 'I -'

'I'm trying to get Perkin's Raisins. Hello?'

On the second try, Phin learned that the telephone number of Scotland Yard was not in service. On the third, however, the miracle of modern telecommunications worked. He was able to speak to Gaylord half-way across London, telling him about the latest disappearance.

'Christ!' said the policeman.

'Well, that's one way of putting it.'

'I'm beginning to believe in that bloody bug myself.'

'Inspector, I can assure you the bloody bug's days are numbered. It will claim no more victims - well, maybe one more - then suddenly lose its powers for ever. By the way, did you get that sample I sent you?'

'I did. The lab's been over it. No metallic poisons, no volatile poisons, no oxalic acid - no nothing, except some blood and breakfast. They say Mrs Webb has either been swallowing razor blades or, more likely, has an ulcer. Or possible cancer.'

'So I heard from secret medical sources. Any more news?'

'Yes. We've checked Nancy Michie's alibis for both murders. They hold good, unless Doody's lying.'

'I thought you'd say that.'

'And we found out that Maurice Webb -'

'Wait. Don't tell me, Inspector, let me see if I can guess. You've found out that Doc's theory about Maurice Webb is all wrong, haven't you?'

Gaylord coughed. 'Well, yes. How did you know?'

'It's all in Doc's letter. His theory all rests on the assumption that Dave saw Webb in Salisbury, on August 7th, 1960, his eleventh birthday. Dave didn't.'

'He didn't? Why?'

'Because of a law, enacted in the 1600s, and not repealed until 1972. A law forbidding theatrical entertainments on Sunday. Dave's eleventh birthday fell on Sunday, so he couldn't have seen the Webbs for his annual treat. It's all in the letter.'

'Maybe. Surely Doc would have thought of that. Dave must have had birthdays on Sundays before.'

'Yes, his sixth was on a Sunday, but Doc says his birthday treats started the following year. Poor Doc! All that work to prove a false theory! Not to mention being strangled.'

Gaylord, after a pause, said, 'Maybe Dave had his treat the day after?'

'The Webbs weren't in Salisbury the day after. They had a week's engagement, from the first of August. Of course he could have had his treat earlier - but that makes the Salisbury story weak and improbable. Certainly not good enough for Doc's elaborate theory. I think Dave Lauderdale never laid eyes on Maurice Webb.'

'I think you're right,' said Gaylord. 'For a better reason. Webb's alive and well, but he's abroad.'

'Abroad? Where?'

Just then the telephone noisily demanded more money, cutting across the policeman's answer.

'Did you hear me? I said -'

'Never mind, Inspector, I can guess. Probably explains the tropical bird stamp on that letter. So long for now. I've got to get back to the house before it's too late.'

'Too late? Too late to prevent another killing?'

'No, too late to *have* another killing. It's absolutely essential to have one more murder. Goodbye, Inspector.' Phin hung up quickly without saying more. After all, sleuths are supposed to leave puzzled policemen holding dead telephones.

Next, he called a man in the British Museum, Department of Egyptian Antiquities, and described the scarab to him.

'Do you think it could be stolen property?'

'Undoubtedly,' said the expert. 'Heart scarabs, of the size and quality you describe, are fairly scarce. There can't be many in circulation.'

'Why "heart scarabs"?''

'They used to place them in mummy shrouds, over the heart. At one time they opened up the heart itself and placed the stone inside. Do you know anything about Egyptian religion?'

'Yes,' said Phin. 'A little. Khepri the dung-beetle was supposed to roll the sun across the sky each day.'

'That's right. They thought of the dung-beetle as a kind of sacred motor, running things in the upper world. And the heart seemed to be a kind of motor, too, you see?'

'And the inscription on the back?'

'I'd have to look at it to be sure. But we have one like it here in the museum, only larger and rather a better specimen, I suspect. Dates from about 1300 B.C. The inscription on the back of ours is demotic, rather than hieroglyphic, and I imagine yours is much the same.'

'Not a curse, by any chance?'

'No, it's a quotation from the Book of the Dead, explaining more or less how the heart will come to life again in the next world. You say your inscription occupies ten lines; so does ours. I'm certain they're the same. You know, despite the popular idea, the Egyptians didn't go around putting curses on things, any more than we do.'

'I know,' Phin said. 'I had to ask, though. Do you think this could have come from a museum?'

'Possibly. Look at the beetle's posterior for a dab of paint with a number on it.'

Phin looked. 'No, but something's been scraped off rather crudely. Oh, do you have stolen property lists? It should have been taken about a year ago, or just over a year.'

'Just a minute.' After several, the Egyptologist said, 'Sounds like the Gillington Museum, in Blingford. Stolen on January 11th, last year. Small museum, probably with no great security precautions. I should imagine someone simply opened a case and shoplifted it.'

'Where's Blingford?'

'Just outside Plymouth, a fairly small village.'

'Plymouth? That's perfect. But how did a small village come to have such a valuable item, Mr Andrews?'

'Oh, they have quite a decent little collection. I've seen it. I daresay that's one of the best heart scarabs in Britain you have there, Mr Phin. *Very* valuable.'

'How valuable?'

'I really couldn't say. It might easily be worth a hundred pounds - even *a hundred and ten!*'

As soon as he got home, Phin went up to see the invalid. Ernestine was reading to her from the wisdom of ancient Madame Blavatsky, but he managed to gain a private audience.

'Have you found out who's been poisoning me? And stealing, and betraying?'

'Not exactly, Mrs Webb. But I have found out one or two things you probably didn't want me to know. About the Rosedale Funeral Home, for instance.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' She looked out of the window.

'They've been supplying you with information for your seances. Shall I elaborate?'

She clenched her powerful jaw and said nothing.

'When Bruce Dank's wife died, he quarrelled with relatives at the funeral – at Rosedale. Your spirits soon knew all about it. When the Blaise twins lost their brother, your spirits soon learned what went on at his funeral – at Rosedale. And when Alan Forster's mother died, the wedding ring from her finger –'

'You know nothing of apports,' she snapped.

'I know they are spirit manifestations of solid objects, capable of being moved by cosmic forces, passed through solid walls and so on. But in this case, the apport made a detour. On its way from a sealed coffin to your seance table, it rested awhile in your filing cabinet upstairs. It seems at least possible that someone working at Rosedale removed the ring just before the coffin was closed.'

'Please. I'm not feeling very well. How can you torture me like this, Mr Phin?'

'I am sorry, believe me. But it's necessary for all our sakes for me to ask these questions. Another thing I've learned is that your former husband, Maurice Webb, is alive. He lives, I believe, in Rhodesia. Salisbury, Rhodesia, I imagine.'

The old woman – certainly looking older than he'd ever seen her – stared at him for half a minute, then turned away and wept. Her sobs convinced him that sleuths really are, as many have said, creeps and bastards. Nevertheless, when her tears had subsided, he went on with it.

'Mrs Webb, would you like to tell me about Maurice?'

'He deserted me, almost a dozen years ago. At first I couldn't believe it, I knew he must have met with some terrible accident. He was ill – in hospital – dead. Rather than become one of those abject creatures, haunting police stations and mortuaries, I decided to contact him by psychic means. Later, when I learned he was alive, I divorced him.'

'But then you'd already established "Maurice", your control, as part of your repertoire.'

'No, it wasn't like that,' she insisted. After blowing her nose, she went on. 'I really was in contact with him, I'll never doubt that. But I believe it must have been his *ka* I materialized. The *ka* is that part of the soul which can leave the body even in life. Nevertheless, it was really Maurice. No, not the creature living in Rhodesia. Not Maurice the betrayer. But a better, ideal Maurice, kind and loving ...

'Oh, I know you think I'm an old fraud, tricking my clients. But you know nothing of the World Beyond. You see, I really do have extra-normal powers. I really do go into trance states and speak with those who have passed over. It's just that, sometimes it can be difficult. The powers are so fragile, so easily blocked by disbelief. Now and again I need a bit of help. Information, if you like. Just to help me overcome the sceptics and confound my enemies, you see. Just to give those who believe a sign of faith.'

'And the informant at Rosedale?'

'I have no informant at Rosedale, Mr Phin. Let me tell you who my sources are. Other mediums have helped me from time to time. People who understand my problem. I have many sources in the World Beyond, who speak to me and guide me when I am alone.'

'And the source of the Rosedale information? The ring?'

'Ah, that is my favourite aetherial being. I have reason to believe he is the departed spirit of an ancient race, perhaps an ancient man of Mars. Oh, you may scoff, but I have talked with him many times, on the telephone. And he sent me the ring.'

'I think I understand,' Phin said gently. 'And I certainly do believe in your Martian.'

At dinner, the unscoffing sleuth seemed in high spirits.

Wearing an open-neck shirt of red silk and gaudy Oxford bags, he kept the conversation off immediate tragedies, and told stories of famous sleuthing errors.

'There's Dr Watson's famous wandering war-wound,' he said. 'I suppose everyone knows that. Then there's the time when Sherlock Holmes examined the tracks of bicycle tyres in mud and rather cleverly deduced which way the bike was travelling. He explained, I think, that *the track of the back tyre always crosses over the front*. I never did figure out just how this told him whether the bike was going East or West. But even the sleuth on whom Holmes is modelled, Poe's brilliant Auguste Dupin, had his problems ...'

After dinner the company withdrew to the drawing-room, where Phin suggested a session with the ouija board.

'I know you'll all enjoy it,' he said, and without waiting for unanimous consent, dashed up to the office to get the board and pointer.

The ouija board lay on a shelf in plain sight. But its pointer, a small, heart-shaped board on wheels, had to be exhumed from the jumble on one end of the desk. A wheel had found its way into the tray of tangled rubber bands, and one heavy strand was now twisted round the axle. While he worked at disentangling it – no easy job, for apparently Mrs Webb had the bored office worker's habit of knotting rubber bands together – he looked over the other apparatus in the pile. On impulse, he picked up the dowsing-rod and brought it along.

'I nearly tripped coming down the stairs with this load,' he said, herding the others into the seance room. 'These bags. I could use them to conceal a pair of sawn-off shot-guns. Still, one has to be out-of-date.'

Nancy nodded. 'They stopped wearing bags a year ago.'

'Really? I thought they stopped forty years ago. How time crawls, when you're having good clean fun. Here we are.' He dumped the apparatus on the seance table. 'I

brought the dowsing-rod because I hoped Stoney would honour us with a little demonstration. I've never actually seen the wand or rod used.'

Stoney demurred, until the others prompted and coaxed.

'I can't use it properly here,' he explained, finally. 'It takes some time to become attuned to the background radiations. But I'll show you how it works, when it does work.' He grasped the two branches of the rod and held it straight out before him. 'You see? One holds the prongs like so, and twists them to maintain tension. Then -'

The dowsing-rod snapped, and Stoney nearly fell over. Phin leaped to rescue him.

'Oops, too much tension. Ah, here's the trouble.' Phin held up the broken branch. 'Someone's been carving notches in it, a notch in each branch. Must have weakened it.'

The clergyman examined it, frowning. 'That's odd. I never noticed those before. Notched for a better grip, I expect, by the previous owner. I only buy wands that have been proved, in successful dowsing, you see. Still, it is odd that it didn't break before.'

'A practical joke?' Phin suggested.

'This is all very entertaining,' said Hackel. 'But if the slapstick comedy act is finished, I'd like to see the next turn.'

'Speaking of turns,' Phin said, 'I'd like to invite all of you to a little demonstration of my own. I don't know the exact date yet, but sometime soon I'll be undertaking a difficult yogic experiment, in Kew Gardens.'

'What sort of "experiment"?' Hackel sounded wary.

'You'll see. You'll all know more when the arrangements are made.' The mysterious announcement over, Phin rubbed his hands. 'Right. Let the cosmic forces of ouija reign. Does anyone want to take down the utterances of the board?'

'I've already brought my shorthand pad,' said Ernestine, holding it up.

'Excellent!'

Hackel looked amused. 'Oh, excellent. By all means, let's get down every syllable of gibberish on paper. You know, of course, the word *ouija* comes from the French *oui* and the German *ja*. I can think of no more fitting name for this little game of garble.'

'I say, that's not quite fair, you know,' said Stoney.

'Not fair,' Dank agreed. 'Last time we had some damned interesting messages. There was that Eskimo chap, Nook-nook, and I don't know who.'

'Listen to me!' Hackel slapped his hand on the table. 'We've had this argument a hundred times. I'm sick and tired of explaining that the movements of the pointer aren't caused by any outside forces. They're caused by our hands – by small unconscious pushes we call ideomotor movements.'

Dank sniggered. 'Don't know a hell of a lot about idiot psychology,' he said. 'But I do know the board works!'

'Precisely,' said Stoney. 'Even granting that the movements are caused by our hands, what guides our hands? You say the unconscious mind. But I say the unconscious mind itself may detect the presence of subtle emanations –'

'I say let's try it out,' Phin said. With a 'Hear, hear' from Dank, they settled down to *ouija*. Ernestine cleared the dowsing-rod pieces away, dropped them on the card table in the alcove, and sat ready for dictation. Even Hackel did not decline to place his paw on the pointer, along with the rest of them.

First came the spirit of the assassin of President Kennedy, who identified himself as a Mr *Jebbl*. Dank asked him where he was born – more than hinting that it was Africa – and Jebbl replied *Ohio*. Lifting his own hand so that it only seemed to touch the pointer, Phin asked Jebbl to name the capital of Ohio.

Crstsr, spelled the pointer, then *Boston*.

As other spirits came to speak their pieces, the sitters grew more confident of receiving messages, and more expert

at deciphering them. They quickly identified, with Dank's help *Norts* as Nostradamus and *Fged* as the Christian name of an abominable snowman. However, neither the Provençal seer nor the yeti seemed to have much to say, except in their native dialects; to Hackel's amusement, they lapsed into unpronounceable words and aimless spirals round the circle of letters.

'I have a feeling that Dave is here,' Phin said. 'Dave, is that you?'

The pointer hesitated, spiralled, paused and then moved to *Yes*.

'Can you talk to us about your death, Dave?'

Yes.

'What do you want to tell us? Was it murder?'

Yes. Yes. Yes. The pointer swung in small arcs, jabbing at the *Yes* sign until another question was asked.

'What do you want to say about your death?'

Slowly, and with many hesitations, the pointer spelled out *Stonhack*.

'What does that mean?'

No answer.

'I think I know,' said Ernestine. 'Do any of you remember when Dave was with us at a seance, and asked Maurice some question about Salisbury? Something strange, like "I'll see you at Salisbury", remember that? Well, we all talked it over afterwards. I remember we decided it had something to do with Salisbury and the sacred site.'

'Stonehenge!' Dank bobbed his head. 'No doubt about it, he was trying to say Stonehenge!'

Nancy pulled up her flowing sleeve, which was trying to creep down and get in the pointer's way. 'What about the "hack" part?' she asked shortly.

'I believe,' said Stoney, 'the hack was an old type of stone-cutting tool. Perhaps the type used at Stonehenge itself.'

'Crap!' said Nancy. 'Dave was trying to tell us the names of his two murderers: Stoney and Hackel!'

Before either astonished man could reply, Phin cut in. 'Why don't we ask Dave what he meant? Dave, were you trying to name your murderer?'

No answer.

'Well, were you talking about Stonehenge?'

Don't be silly. If I wanted to do that, I'd do it. I get tired of the way everybody goes out of his way to find mystical meanings in everything I say. If I'd said Bath, I don't suppose anyone would notice that I died in a bathroom. They'll all be too busy speculating that the city of Bath is very close to the sacred site at Glastonbury. Can't you let a ghost say what he means?

After spelling through this outburst, their arms ached.

'Someone's having a lark,' Stoney suggested.

You would say that.

Phin asked Dave once more to name his murderer, and stop fooling around.

Clues on table.

'Absurd!' Hackel explained. 'There's not a thing on the table but the ouija board and our hands.'

'How about the card table, then?' Phin went to the alcove and fingered the apparatus on the card table. 'Plenty of clues here. Too many, probably.' While his back was turned, he opened the top two buttons of his shirt. 'Or maybe he meant both tables. Let's just pile all this stuff together and see what we make of it.' He brought the 'clues' to the dining table.

'A paper trumpet. A guitar. A bell. A broken dowsing-rod. A blank slate.' He apparently showed both blank sides. 'And a ouija board. Now, in what way do they point to our murderer?'

Ernestine frowned. 'I hope you're not accusing Mrs Webb of anything.'

'That would be a bit too obvious. I'm sure Dave can do better than that. Maybe he wants us to look at these items as symbols.'

'A handbell and a slate suggest the old-fashioned school. The paper cone could be a dunce's cap. A board with the alphabet painted on it has obvious schoolroom uses, as does a stick. Could a *professor* be indicated?'

'Oh, I give up,' Hackel said. 'This really is unadulterated tripe. Do you mean to tell me - ?'

'Nothing at all. I'm only showing what can be done with "clues on the table".'

'Still,' Nancy said, 'there must be something in this idea.'

'There's a lot more in it than that,' Phin said. 'The bell and guitar are musical instruments. Singers used to use megaphones exactly like this paper trumpet, and of course the stick could be a baton. Do the signs point to a 1930s dance band as the murderer? Or, generalizing, to a *musician*?''

'Oh,' said Nancy, very faintly.

Stoney said, 'Really, this is most perplexing. Which is it to be? A professor or a musician?'

'Why either?' Phin held up the two pieces of the dowsing-rod, fitting them together. 'This rod can point in three directions at once, and so can our clues. The guitar is Spanish, and the paper cone resembles the hats worn by Inquisitors. I think the Inquisition cursed witches with a bell, and wrote their sins on a slate, to be displayed at the place where they were burnt.' He pulled the two pieces apart. 'On a pile of sticks like these. Could the killer be a person connected with religion? A *clergyman*? Especially if he's also a *water witch*?''

Ernestine spoke up. 'But it could also mean a heretic. That is, an unbeliever.' She looked at Hackel. 'A professor, who plays the piano.'

'Don't try to pin this on me!' Hackel shouted, leaping up. 'I don't believe in your malarkey, I am a professor, and I do play the piano. So what? I didn't kill David Lauderdale. The man who did kill him is sitting right there - playing the pious parson!'

Stoney's eyebrows and fangs began working, but he was unable to say a word.

'I know exactly how he did it, too!' Hackel shouted. 'He took that packet of dope away from David and put it in his pocket. Then he brought out a duplicate. *A packet of poison!*'

'I - I really don't know what to say,' Stoney gasped. 'But you are mistaken, Professor. You must be mistaken.'

Nancy started to say something but Phin spoke first. 'Aren't all of you making too much of this? I only suggested a few readings of our little collection of clues, and you've all leapt to unwholesome conclusions. You're all wrong, I'm afraid. What would you have concluded if I had worked on the clues like this?'

Seizing Ernestine's pencil and shorthand book, he wrote block letters quickly, underlining some of them:

TRUMPET
GUITAR
DOWSINGROD
HANDBELL
YESYESBOARD
SPIRITSLATE

'Then Ernestine did it?' Nancy said, disbelieving.

'I'm not saying that, either. I had when I started this case what we sleuths call a "suspect list", or in ordinary parlance, a list of suspects. All your names were on it. Now I've crossed them all off. And Mrs Webb, too. And of course myself.'

'Then who the devil done it!' Dank said, smoothing his already polished hair. 'And what the devil's all this tripe about clues on the table, eh?'

'They're not *my* clues,' Phin said. 'Ask Dave.' He shoved the other articles aside and put his hand on the pointer. When everyone had joined in, he asked: 'Dave, we're still lost. What's the clue you wanted to tell us about?'

Shakily, the pointer spelled : *Slate*.

Phin put his hand on the slate. As he leaned over the table, an object on a string swung out of the front of his open shirt and rapped on the table. Later the others would notice he wore the scarab, but just now all attention was on the slate, as he turned it over slowly.

The writing that came into view was in plain block letters. A handwriting expert could no doubt have established that these were not the work of Dave Lauderdale, but of the same hand that printed on Ernestine's notebook. The message read :

HACKEL'S LYING

Chapter Seventeen

Breathless Encounter

There was no sky at all over Kew Gardens this winter morning, no distractions above tree-top level in the way of sun, birds, clouds or colour. There were a few dirty blanks where such details had been rubbed out, but these were almost invisible to the untrained eye. Not that any eye, trained or otherwise, was trained upon the emptiness above; Londoners seldom make the mistake of looking at the weather.

But visitors who ignored the lack of blue above Kew Gardens were quick to notice men in blue at its gates. Those who came to the park (to wrestle with their dogs or lie with their loves or read the Latin tags on the trees) cared very little for skylscapes or Constables, and very much for constables and (possible) prison escapes.

'Must be them bank-robbers has broken out of the Scrubs again,' said someone, and the rumour passed among dog lovers and Latin lovers and among lovers.

Few of them penetrated to the remote corner of the park where the action was to be. The Kew authorities had given in ungracefully to the idea of having a hole dug in their paradise, and a coffin dropped into it, while music played and a crowd sat under a marquee to watch. But they would not let it happen in full view of every visitor, every botanical specimen in the place. Instead, the whole circus was jammed into the weediest corner, screened from view by a line of poplars, and ordered to keep the music down, so as not to attract ice-cream vans.

Under the red-and-white striped marquee there were deck-chairs for the Aetherians, their friends, a few reporters and a few loafers who carried newspapers and wore police

shoes. Just now a radio reporter squatted next to Mrs Webb's chair, holding up a little microphone.

'You can rest assured,' she said, 'that he'll die a horrible death. A yogi needs years and years of training before he even attempts something like this. Amateurs and fools should not toy with aetheric forces of which they know not.'

Ernestine wasn't so sure. 'It would be a good thing for the society if he could manage it,' she said. 'But three days does seem like a long time.'

'Thank you very much, ladies.' The reporter stopped his tape, checked his watch, and walked away quickly towards the gate, thinking already of his next interviews. Before lunch, he could just squeeze in the London-to-Brighton Pram Rally and a man who claimed a pathological hatred of elms. By the time the reporter stumbled over a guy-rope for the small Moroccan tent, he had already forgotten the Aetheric Mandala Society.

The small tent, ten yards from the marquee, protected an open grave and a new coffin of imitation bronze provided by the Rosedale Funeral Home. The coffin had been on display all week at the Aetherians' house – up till last night, when Phin had rushed it off to a welding shop for some last minute alterations. A uniformed constable stood before the raised front flap of the tent, next to a sign: DANGER. LIVE BURIAL.

It was cold. The privileged people under the marquee kept looking at their watches, and enviously at the television film crew, who lay on the grass, wrapped up in twos and threes in fur robes. Phin was late, and the reporter from the Leatherhead *Citizen* began to bet that he wouldn't show up at all. A man from *Psychic Express* thought he'd just take that bet, while the other reporters adjusted their duffle-coat hoods for sleep.

Mrs. Webb adjusted her fur hat and woke from a doze.

'Deck-chairs are about right,' Hackel was saying. 'It's like an Atlantic crossing in mid-January.'

'Just look what the wind's doing,' Nancy replied, meaning, to her hair. 'Where is he, anyway?'

The other Aetherians had all recovered from the novelty of sitting here at the very centre of a mammoth public display: Stoney read, Ernestine exercised her eyes, and the Blaise sisters, having marked their chairs with twin handbags, made the rounds distributing leaflets which condemned animal experiments. Alan and Jane Forster wandered off towards a gate where they thought they'd heard the tinkle of an ice-cream van. Dank interrupted a conversation with the television people on Nostradamus to stare after them.

'Ice-cream! On a day like this!' he said. 'Drop of brandy's more like it, what?'

'I didn't say anything,' said the television man, and stood up to measure once again the distance from his camera to the tent.

The tourists' cameras were meanwhile clicking faster, for some reason. It was all one of the dog-owners could do to keep his pet from chewing spent flash cubes. Two more dogs were warming up to a fight; the balloon salesman drifted away from them. A stream of people were coming from the Tropical Plants House, now, and another from the gate. The surf of human voices was threatening to drown out the martial music from two loudspeakers on the marquee; a white sea of ice-cream wrappers and crumpled anti-vivisection leaflets was spreading over the grass.

Phin arrived. At first he was a black figure with a pumpkin head in the distance. Then, closer, a tall man in a black cape and a very large red head-dress. And finally, when he walked up to the microphone and threw off the cape, he was Thackeray Phin, in full evening dress and a massive red turban with a blue jewel.

'Who's that man with him?' Mrs Webb asked. 'Isn't he

the magnetic healer's assistant? But he didn't have that beard.'

Someone else in the crowd recognized Beeker too, but couldn't put a name to that pudgy face ...

While helpers struck the tent, Phin cut in on the microphone and talked over the Sousa march.

'Ladies and gentlemen! You are privileged to witness a feat of ancient Yoga never performed anywhere in the Western world. *Live Burial!* Under the strictest scientific conditions, I shall enter this coffin you see behind me, have it hermetically sealed from the outside, and be lowered into that grave! I shall be covered with two tons of solid earth! In this sealed coffin, which contains enough air to keep a man alive no more than five hours, I shall remain alive for three entire days!

'And now, Dr Ehrlenmayer, the distinguished consultant, will explain the medical side to this difficult and dangerous experiment.'

Beeker, now wearing his white lab coat, took the microphone.

'The human system normally requires from two to three cubic feet of fresh air per hour. But in the Yogic trance, with respiration and heartbeat brought to a stop ...'

The "medical side" was really a two-minute build-up. Phin meanwhile walked over to have a few final words with his Aetheric brethren. They were to guard his grave the whole time, taking watches of four hours, two persons to a watch.

'Who's on first?' he asked Ernestine.

'Mr Dank and Nancy. Then the professor and me. We're all taking part but Mrs Webb; it's really too cold for her to sit out here.'

'Oh, it's not that,' said the medium, glaring at him. 'I don't mind making sacrifices, even of my health - but not for this sort of *circus*. I hope you realize the damage you're doing our movement, Mr Phin. If you fail, we'll be the

laughing stock of the country, and if you die, we'll be blamed.'

'Ah, but if I succeed?'

'Success is reserved for those with true vision. You are no yogi. You aren't even much of a detective. Imagine, accusing Professor Hackel!'

'I didn't. Dave accused him.'

She looked away. 'Well, you made insinuations against nearly all of us, and that's worse.'

'Did I?' Phin touched the scarab, which hung like a decoration against his starched shirt-front. 'Perhaps I can make up for my insinuations now. Among other things, this psychic demonstration should prove Stoney's innocence.'

'Did I hear my name being taken in vain?' asked the clergyman, craning around to show his fangs.

'I just said this demonstration should prove your innocence. Do you remember what I said about the scarab's curse? It must look embarrassing, the way the scarab's seemingly spared you, while killing its other owners. I intend to show that there is no curse. I'm wearing the scarab during my burial.'

'No curse? I say, how do you account for - ?'

'I haven't much time, but let's trace the scarab's history - what we know of it. Dave had it and died of poison. Doc had it, vanished, and was strangled. Steve had it, levitated, and fell to his death.'

By now the rest of the Aetherians were watching Phin count victims on his white-gloved fingers. 'Stoney had it, vanished, and was found unconscious. The next man who had the scarab has vanished, too. Do you all see what I'm getting at?'

'There really is a curse?' asked Nancy.

'No, there really is *no possible curse*. Because the pattern is wrong. There's an odd man out among the victims.'

'Stonehouse,' said the professor.

'No, Dave. Why didn't the curse kill him by miraculous

means? Why was he alone killed plainly in an unlocked room, with an open window, without passing through walls or levitating or doing anything else miraculous?

'Even curses have rules, after all,' Phin went on. 'If the curse affects everyone else miraculously, why not Dave? Simply because Dave's death was a one-off murder, that's why. X killed him, never intending further murders. It was only when X realized it would be necessary to kill others that the "curse" story became useful, and the miracles were arranged. Doc learned too much about Dave's death, so he had to go. Steve knew too much about Doc's death ... and so on.'

'I don't quite understand,' Stoney said. 'Do you mean that I knew something, and there was an attempt to silence me? Because I can assure you I know nothing - and of course I haven't been silenced.'

'Stoney, you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was absolutely imperative that you be got out of the chapel on that particular night. I can't elaborate on that now, there isn't time. For now, let's just say that X saw his chance, both to complicate the mystery, and to complete the final details - and at the same time, to get you out of the way.'

'But who is X?' said Ernestine.

'Dr Ehrlenmayer' finished speaking, and the recorded brass band crashed into a march called 'Under the Double Eagle'. Phin stepped smartly over to the coffin, waved and smiled, and climbed in.

Becker and other assistants closed the lid and screwed it down, then sealed it with wide tape. It took only a minute to lower the coffin into its deep grave. As the first spadefuls of earth fell, rattling on the lid, the TV film-crew brought this part of their documentary to a close. A young man with a microphone stepped in front of their camera and frowned into it.

'There we have it. Mr Phin is down there, but is he rest-

ing in peace? We won't know for three days, three symbolic days before the resurrection. Other farcical stunts of the Aetheric Mandala Society have ended in tragedy. Will this one be different? Again, only time will tell. But not even time can answer the really big question about these crank friends of ours: what do they want from us – our belief? Or our money?'

The camera stopped, and the crew started packing up.

'I'll be watching for you on the six o'clock news,' Dank called out to them. Members of the crew smiled and nodded, not bothering to explain they weren't newsmen, but making a documentary film called *Crank Holiday*. Tomorrow they were off to France, to help another cult scan the sky for *soucoupes volantes*.

'Under the Double Eagle' ended, and someone started dismantling the public address system. Casual onlookers drifted casually away. Mrs Webb went home, huffing about American publicity-hunters. Stoney had a lunch appointment. The Forsters left, and the Blaise sisters began looking up train timetables. Half an hour after the burial, half the crowd was gone.

Bruce Dank went to lunch and came back warm and chuckling, with a flask lying next to his heart. Nancy lit a lettuce cigarette and leaned back, letting the smoke roll out across the roof of her mouth, and staring at the empty sky.

'You don't have to stay,' she said to Ernestine.

'I know.' She unrolled a piece of knitting and smoothed it over her knee. 'But it's so peaceful here. I'll stay for an hour, anyway.'

'Well I've had enough,' said Hackel, levering himself out of his deck-chair. 'I've serious work to do. I don't know why I even agreed to return at four.'

Beeker settled down in Hackel's vacant chair and opened a book. Now and then he raised his eyes to stare at an undistinguished spot of turf some yards from the grave. Be-

hind him, eyes stared over a newspaper at the back of Beeker's neck. A few pigeons came to be fed, and a few pensioners to feed them. A park attendant with a pointed stick went by, spearing up isolated bits of trash at a distance, and ignoring the sea of litter around the marquee.

By one o'clock Dank was asleep and Nancy yawning as she painted her toenails. The park attendant made several more passes at a distance. A few drops of rain thumped on the canvas. More stragglers straggled away, while the dozen who remained took shelter under the marquee, with the Aetherians, Beeker and the newspaper readers.

All at once Beeker dropped his book and strode quickly towards the spot of ground he'd been watching, where the park attendant had just speared something. A second later, Bill Meadows put down his newspaper and pointed after Beeker.

'That's him, constable! That's Henry!'

The policeman stopped shooing a dog away from the grave mound and looked up. Throwing off his helmet, he lunged after the little man in the white lab coat, shouting at him to stop.

Beeker was half the policeman's size, no more than a dozen running steps away from him, and not running. Nevertheless, the constable took no chances, but brought him down with a flying tackle.

'Stop! You - !'

'Christ!'

Beeker stood up cursing and favouring his twisted knee; the constable lay cursing and holding his injured elbow; two men in the distinctive sporting clothes and tweed hats of detectives rushed forward to grab their man; the frightened dog quickly peed in the empty helmet and slunk away. And it was all for nothing.

Bill tore off his cap and waved it, as though the policemen were all half a mile away. 'Not him! Not him! *Him!*'

All this time the park attendant had been sidling away.

Now he broke into a run. He seemed to be grinning back at them, though more likely his white teeth were clenched in a grimace of panic. Before they could give chase, he must have seen it was hopeless – two detectives, the man in uniform, and Detective Chief Inspector Gaylord (racing paper in hand) were all reluctantly moving in his direction. Henry faltered and stopped.

The two detectives reached him first. By the time Gaylord caught up they were holding the man's arms twisted behind his back. One seemed to be trying to march him off somewhere; the other, to keep him from moving.

'Good work, men.' Gaylord believed in building morale. 'Did he say anything yet?'

'No, sir.'

Henry had lost his cap. He was allowed to free one hand and brush the thick brown hair from his eyes. 'Get stuffed.'

'Bring him back over here, where he dropped his stick.'

They marched the prisoner a few yards, until they stood on the spot of ground Beeker had been watching.

'Oy! You!' said Gaylord. 'Did you put this big lump of dirty putty here?' He skewered the lump with a pencil and lifted it, revealing the end of a plastic drain pipe. 'Do you know what this is?'

'I'm not talking.'

'It's the end of a pipe leading to Mr Phin's grave. His air pipe, in fact. In the grave, it matches up with a hole in the bottom of his coffin. You knew it would be here somewhere, didn't you? So you put on a park man's uniform, poked about with your stick until you found it, and then plugged it. Right?'

Henry didn't answer. They marched him over to the marquee, where, despite his wig and dentures, he was immediately and formally identified as Reverend Arthur Stonehouse.

Chapter Eighteen

The Veil Lifted

Time would turn defeats into victories. Tonight the late evening papers gloated over the 'Seance Murderer', but even this was a kind of publicity triumph. From now on, not a paper in Britain would spell *Aetheric* without the *A*, or *Mandala* with a double *l*. Publicity, good or bad, generates powerful psychic vibrations, and, feeding on these, the society would grow.

As for the growth of Mrs Webb, she would be persuaded by Maurice, in a dream, to submit to the hated allopathic knife. Her operation would forestall for several years the sweetness, as she so often expressed it, of final discarnate union with the Ultimate All.

But just now, morale was low. A few hours had elapsed since Stoney's arrest, and uneasy rumours were circulating. They sat in the grimy light of the lecture hall, waiting, while melancholy evening closed in. Dank had a headache, Nancy had the jitters. Ernestine was frightened and confused, trying to decide whether 'Thack' was a police spy sent to frame Stoney and discredit the spirits, or a psychic detective sent by Higher Powers to snare a venomous monster. Worried and angry, the Blaise sisters had gone back to Cheltenham. Worried and weeping, Mrs Webb had gone to bed.

There were several other people waiting for the lecture: lecture regulars of advanced age, who had stopped in to commiserate with the Aetherians, and stayed to show their united contempt for the speaker. There were no smiles in the audience for this speaker, nothing closer to a smile than Hackel's smirk.

The speaker's appearance ought to have raised a smile,

however. His evening clothes looked as though he'd been lying down in them, which he had, and his great, pumpkin-shaped turban was becoming slightly lopsided. The vulgar glass jewel pinned to it could have been a third eye, an eye that never closed, but never stopped twinkling, either.

'Friends,' he began. That raised a harsh chuckle, that choked off when he added, 'of the truth.'

'I said that my burial would *prove Stoney's innocence*. I'm sorry you all took it to mean *prove that he was innocent*. I meant "prove" literally: to prove is to test. The exception, we always say, proves the rule. It shows it to be a bad rule. My test showed Stoney to be a bad man.

'He began as a fraud, went on to become a ghoul, and ended up a triple murderer. Along the way, he built Mrs Webb's group into a wealthy little empire – worth, I'd guess, over half a million – and having built this empire, he married it.'

Phin had to pause here, to let them digest the shock of it. After a few hostile and meaningless questions from the audience, he went on.

'In his Henry Forbes identity he took a part-time job at the Rosedale Funeral Home. Wealthy persons were buried from this place, and when their mourners got together for wakes or funerals, they talked.

'Henry learned from their conversations, and much of what he learned made its way, no doubt by astral means, to the seance table here. Rich heirs were invited to seances, and their conversations, now mouthed by ghosts, were sold back to them.'

'You're saying Mrs Webb is a cheat!' Ernestine gasped.

'I say nothing at all of Mrs Webb. She was employed as a *medium* in the fullest sense of the word, transferring trivial information from Henry to the seance table, and not at all trivial amounts of money from clients to Henry. Like many spirit media, she may have cheated from time to time, but – also like many – she almost certainly believed in her

powers. But let me speak of Arthur-Henry Forbes-Stonehouse.

'Dave was the first threat to the empire. Not only was he an addict and a sneak thief, he seemed to enjoy making others suffer, perhaps because he suffered so himself. Dave ferreted out secrets as a kind of perverse hobby. He threatened exposure not for blackmail purposes, but just to make people squirm.

'Reading Mrs Webb's mail, he learned that her first husband, the late "Maurice", was alive. Is alive, I should say, and living in Salisbury, Rhodesia. Dave hinted as much in a seance, and I believe that this must have panicked Stoney.

'Not that the secret was damaging in itself. But if Dave could dig up Maurice, what else might he not exhume?

'Dave couldn't be bribed or frightened off; he had enough money for his terrible needs, and what can frighten a man who dies daily? But he could very easily be killed. No one's more vulnerable than a junky. Hundreds may be murdered every week, and no one the wiser. So Stoney killed him, and it was a *perfect crime*.'

'What do you mean?' Hackel spluttered. 'If you've caught him, how can it be perfect?'

The third eye twinkled. 'I haven't caught him. He's got clean away with it. I know Stoney had plenty of reason to kill him. And method. And opportunity. And I know that he killed two others. But - partly thanks to you, Professor - I don't know he killed Dave.'

Phin went over the events leading up to Dave's death.

'It finally comes to this: Dave took a packet of poison into the bathroom with him, prepared it and injected it into his vein. The murderer is therefore one of the persons who touched that packet.

'We can rule out the pusher who sold it to Nancy because, according to her, he didn't know whom it was for. That leaves Nancy herself (who brought it home for him),

Stoney (who admits knocking it out of his hand) and you, Professor (who admit touching it).

'You say that Stoney put the dope in his pocket and took it out again, making a switch. But Nancy says it was you who pocketed the stuff. One of you must be lying.

'Professor, if I give you my word that I believe you are innocent, will you come clean with us now?'

Hackel rubbed his face, as though wiping away cobwebs. 'I was lying,' he said quietly. 'Nancy was right. Stonehouse knocked the packet out of Dave's hand, and it fell to the floor. I picked it up and put it in my pocket, just to keep it away from him. But when the boy started actually striking at me, tearing my coat, I - I let him have it.

'When I saw where your line of questioning was leading, I knew it looked bad for me. Hoping no one would be able to remember the exact details, I lied.'

Phin's pumpkin nodded. 'You gave him the poison, then.'

'No, I -'

'You didn't know it, of course. The switch was made by Stoney, at the moment he "knocked" it out of Dave's hand.'

Phin cleared his throat. 'This sounds like clever prestidigitation, but anyone can do it with no practice at all. Stoney was carrying around a prepared packet of poison, planning to switch it somehow, when Dave gave him the perfect opening.

'Stoney held the poison concealed in his hand, grabbed the packet Dave held, and let the poison drop to the floor. Quite naturally everyone looked down at it, while he pocketed the heroin. And everyone would afterwards swear that he "knocked" the packet out of Dave's hand, hardly touching it himself. Clever, simple and bold. A perfect crime, as I said.

'Professor, when you told me he'd put the packet of heroin in his pocket, I thought for one dizzy moment that Stoney was innocent. No one clever enough to commit the

murders that followed, would have made such an obvious switch. But never mind.

'Next, Doc came looking for a murderer. He started digging, and, like Dave, found out that Maurice Webb was alive. Stoney panicked again, and this time with reason. For Doc was no neurotic child, but a hard-minded, thorough scientist, looking for the truth. He wasn't likely to give up until he found it. This death needed more planning.

'Stoney wanted to obsess us with the scarab, since Dave had worn it and Doc was wearing it. He needed therefore to make the crime look miraculous. But for that, he needed an accomplice.'

Dank belched. 'Sorry. What accomplice?'

'We have only Steve Sunday's word for it that Doc vanished from that bathroom – or that *he even went into it.*'

'Eh? He must have! I mean – Good Lord!'

'Doc did go in, but only to lay the scarab on a shelf and turn on the tap. Then he walked straight out the back door. Steve barred it after him, locked the bathroom – and lied.'

'Impossible!' Hackel exclaimed. 'Why on earth should they do that?'

'First, I ought to explain that Steve was, as you said, Professor, fond of practical jokes. He played a series of pranks on you, tickling your scepticism, trying to bring out what I called your sixth sense. This was to be one of them, and the levitation was another. Stoney made a bargain with him: "You help me vanish Doc, and I'll help you with your defiance of gravity." Steve of course had no idea that either stunt would end in murder.'

'Wait a minute,' said Hackel. 'Wait. How did Stonehouse persuade Dr Lauderdale to take part in this?'

'By telling him it was more than a prank. He must have said something like, "Look here, I've got something frightfully important to tell you (or show you), but we mustn't be seen going out to talk about it (or look at it). It concerns the death of Dave. So, while Steve is playing his little joke

on Hackel, we can use the opportunity to sneak out of the house for few minutes."

'So Doc walked out the back door, went out of the garden and round to the front door and rang the bell. Stoney answered, and they went back to the shed and - and so on. For a man strong enough to carry coffins, it couldn't have taken long.'

'Just a minute.' Hackel's smile was ironical. 'You seem to be taking a lot for granted with this doorbell business. Why couldn't he have had Mrs Webb sneak down the back stairs, go out back and do the strangling?'

'Because he already had a perfect accomplice, and a near-perfect alibi. If Mrs Webb had been helping him, he wouldn't have needed Steve at all.'

Phin picked up a torch. 'Now for the final murder. It seems dark enough outside to show you all. So if you'll watch the window you watched that night, I'll levitate for you. Don't open the window or come out until I beckon.'

He went into the tiny quiet room and locked the door. The stunned audience clustered about the window and waited. A moment later, Phin's illuminated head and shoulders appeared, suspended in the blackness some ten feet straight out from the balcony rail. Hackel mumbled something about wires, and flung the window open.

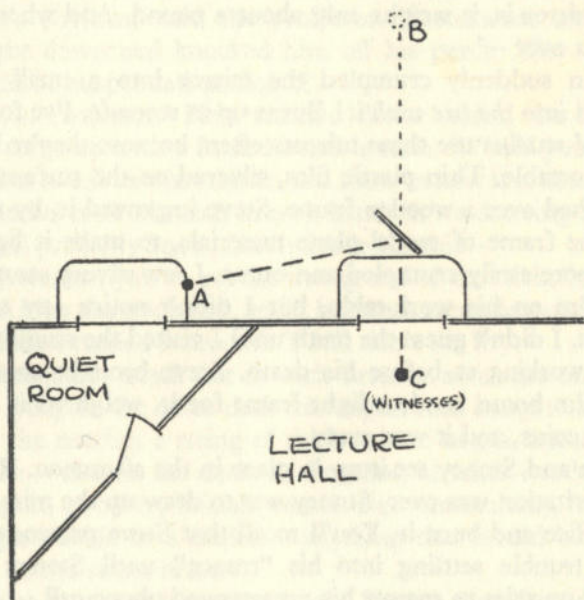
'Don't come out just yet,' Phin said. 'Stay a second. I am sorry to be wobbling like this, but there's a stiff breeze tonight. I suspected this method when I heard from the police that Steve's left-hand prints were on the torch. We all saw him holding it in his right hand. O.K., come out and say hello.'

Those of the audience who could squeeze on to the balcony saw at once that it was a mirror trick. Phin wasn't hanging in space at all. He was standing on the next balcony.

'You see? Steve never left the balcony of the quiet room at all, not until he fell. But he did take more of a chance

than I take, because he wanted to illuminate more of his body. So he couldn't stay behind a rail. But come back inside and I'll show you a diagram.'

Back in the lecture hall a minute later, he held up a large placard:



'Steve stepped over the rail at *A* and stood on the narrow ledge outside it. He held the rail with one hand while he shone the torch with the other. We all saw him at *B*.'

'Where did you find the mirror?' Nancy asked.

'I didn't. I had to make it myself. I'll show you.' He went out to the balcony and fetched it back.

'We all thought of ropes *or* mirrors, but we didn't guess ropes *and* mirrors. It took me a while to make this copy, because I'm not as clever as Steve at model-building. Just look at it: four feet high, three wide, with a bit of weight at

the bottom to keep it upright, and this brace here,' – he indicated a stick jutting out of the mirror frame, – 'to keep it resting against the balcony at the proper angle.'

'Suspended from the office window,' Hackel said excitedly. 'On fine black –'

'Black knitting yarn, I think. You see, professor, big as this mirror is, it weighs only about a pound. And when the show's over –'

Phin suddenly crumpled the mirror into a small ball. '– and *into the fire with it!* Burns up in seconds, I've found.

'TV studios use these mirrors often, because they're light and portable. Thin plastic film, silvered on the surface and stretched over a wooden frame. Steve improved it, by making the frame of model-plane materials, to make it lighter and more easily crumpled and burnt. I saw silvery scraps of the film on his work-table, but I didn't notice any silver planes. I didn't guess the truth until I visited the studio he'd been working at before his death. Steve brought some of this film home, made a light frame for it, weighted it with a few coins, and it was ready.

'He and Stoney set it up in place in the afternoon. When the levitation was over, Stoney was to draw up the mirror to the office and burn it. You'll recall that Steve pretended to have trouble settling into his "trance" until Stoney was called upstairs to answer his prearranged phone call.

'Speaking of trances, it was a bit of bad luck, Ernestine's deciding to meditate in the office just then. Stoney must have been scared, but he depended on eye exercises to "see it through".'

Ernestine sat up at that. 'What do eye exercises have to do with it?'

'Ever since you abandoned your old-fashioned glasses, Ernestine, I'm afraid your eyesight's been less than perfect. You made wrong entries in the account book, because you could hardly make out your own writing. Stoney knew that if he slipped on his "Henry" wig and kept the overhead

light off, you might not know what you were seeing. He was right.

'Why, I wonder, didn't any of us pay more attention to your vision? Two men dancing a tango – what else could it be but *one man carrying a large mirror?*'

'Good show,' said Dank. 'But then how did the lad fall?'

'It's obvious,' said the professor. 'Stonehouse swung a weight down and knocked him off his perch. The weight would be suspended on fine bl –'

'No, Professor.' Phin reached down behind the lectern and came up with a forked hazel branch. 'Would you be so kind as to tell us what this is, and show us how it is used?'

Hackel took a branch in each hand. 'It's a dowsing-rod, as you all probably know. One holds it like this –'

'Professor, you've got the wrong end of the stick, literally. Hold it by the thick end, and it becomes a murder weapon.'

Hackel turned it around. 'I still don't see it.'

'Imagine a notch cut in each branch, as in the one that was lying on the office desk that night. And imagine hooked into the notches a string of thick rubber bands, knotted together – also on the desk. A slingshot, in other words. Or a catapult, in other, British, words. For ammunition, he used a light pebble or a conker – anything that would be easily lost on the street below.'

'Not much of a weapon,' said Hackel, handing it back. 'Neither strong nor accurate.'

'It didn't have to be. The finale of Steve's act was to let go of the rail and show both his hands were free. There he was, balanced on his heels – the high heels of those ridiculous boots of his – on a narrow ledge. A nudge would knock him over.'

'As for accuracy, a brightly-lit target at six yards doesn't require much. Stoney had, I'm sure, plenty of practice in the park.'

'Plenty of practice at murder, too. So when I came snooping, he decided to avoid killing me if possible. Instead, he

would kill 'Henry', severing all possible connections with Rosedale. He destroyed the files containing Rosedale information, and he used the scarab to lay a false trail that I could follow to a false conclusion.

'It was Stoney who set up the visit to Rosedale, at a time when Henry was supposed to go on duty. When he walked into the chapel that night, the Henry disguise was in his pocket; under his clerical collar and bib he wore a plain shirt and tie. Conveniently, a black suit serves well for either a clergyman or an undertaker's assistant.

'Like any quick-change artist, he walked in one door as Reverend Stonehouse, shed his coat and changed his appearance, and walked out the other door as Henry Forbes. He knew I might suspect the two assistants, so he left a "scarab trail" to Henry's house, and ended it there. It's not hard to make a man vanish when he doesn't exist.

'Then, as Stoney again, he went home. The constable on duty complicated things, so he entered through the garden, climbed in the kitchen window and of course mopped up his muddy footprints behind him. Then all he had to do was arrange himself in the front hall and "go unconscious." There must be fifty ways of knocking oneself out, from holding one's breath to self-hypnosis.'

'I'm with you there,' said Hackel. 'But how did you ever see through his double identity in the first place?'

'At first I suspected him of getting out of the chapel in the coffin. But he could hardly allow himself to be flown off to Germany in it, so he'd need to escape from the coffin before it reached the airport. But he could only do that with the collusion of one or both of the assistants - and if they were helping him, there was no need to escape by coffin at all. He could simply walk out.

'Then, when I blundered into Mrs Webb's room and found him, I noticed two things: first, that the collar-bib arrangement was easy to use for some sort of quick-change act. Second, that he put his hand to his mouth. The gesture

of an embarrassed man, surely, but also the gesture of a man not wearing his dentures. I began to wonder whether, without his famous "Stoney" front teeth, I would be able to recognize him. Indeed, when he changed them for a pair of even, white dentures, he became a different man.'

Ernestine, flushed and cross, said, 'There's still one thing you haven't managed to explain away. How did the scarab pass from Steve, when he died, to the drawing-room carpet where we found it? At least you'll have to admit that that was mysterious.'

Phin was about to explain, when he noticed that others in the room were looking flushed and cross, too. He had by now robbed them of a set of favourite miracles. It would be cruel to go on.

'I'm not really sure,' he said. 'Perhaps there are some things we're not meant to understand, not in this world.'

True, true, said nodding heads all over the audience. Grudgingly they spared Phin a few seconds' applause. Then, led by Ernestine, they all trooped off to a meditation lesson in the drawing-room. The sleuth was alone, standing by his crumpled mirror. He began unwinding his turban, and then paused, as though listening to a spirit voice.

At the same moment, in his Scotland Yard office, Gaylord was using a pencil to rewind the ribbon of his typewriter.

'You'd think the Force could manage not to get swindled when it buys an office machine,' he said. 'These -'

He paused, as though listening to a spirit voice.

'Beeker! Damn it, Phin's "doctor" was Beeker! We had him and we let him go. Damn that Phin. I wonder what he's up to now?'

The real Thackeray Phin stood on the deck of a ship, several thousand miles away, looking at a space capsule. The capsule door stood open, and in front of it, on the iron deck,

was the chalk outline of a sprawled figure with a large head.

'It seems impossible,' said the space-agency official. 'He was alone in the capsule. We talked to him all during his orbital flight, and after splashdown. But when we opened the capsule door, he fell out - just here - with a jewelled dagger in his back. Who could possibly have done it?'

Phin reached for his meerschaum. 'Let me explain,' he said. 'We know the victim kept a pet badger. We know that he recently purchased two maps of Cornwall. And, most important of all, we know that he suffered from *an abnormal fear of chocolate cakes.*'

Reaching for his meerschaum was a signal. Obeying it, an inspector of police stepped from behind the spacecraft, handcuffs at the ready.

