

A Voyage to Arcturus

by David Lindsay

CONTENT

- 1 The Seance
- 2 In the Street
- 3 Starkness
- 4 The Voice
- 5 The Night of Departure
- 6 Joiwind
- 7 Panawe
- 8 The Lusion Plain
- 9 Oceaxe
- 10 Tydomin
- 11 On Disscourn
- 12 Spadevil
- 13 The Wombflash Forest
- 14 Polecrab
- 15 Swaylone's Island
- 16 Leehallfae
- 17 Corpang
- 18 Haute

- 19 Sullenbode
- 20 Barey
- 21 Muspel

Chapter 1 THE SEANCE

On a march evening, at eight o'clock, Backhouse, the medium - a fast - rising star in the psychic world - was ushered into the study at Prolands, the Hampstead residence of Montague Faull. The room was illuminated only by the light of a blazing fire. The host, eyeing him with indolent curiosity, got up, and the usual conventional greetings were exchanged. Having indicated an easy chair before the fire to his guest, the South American merchant sank back again into his own. The electric light was switched on. Faull's prominent, clear - cut features, metallic - looking skin, and general air of bored impassiveness, did not seem greatly to impress the medium, who was accustomed to regard men from a special angle. Backhouse, on the contrary, was a novelty to the merchant. As he tranquilly studied him through half closed lids and the smoke of a cigar, he wondered how this little, thickset person with the pointed beard

contrived to remain so fresh and sane in appearance, in view of the morbid nature of his occupation.

"Do you smoke?" drawled Faull, by way of starting the Conversation. "No? Then will you take a drink?"

"Not at present, I thank you."

A pause.

"Everything is satisfactory? The materialisation will take place?"

"I see no reason to doubt it."

"That's good, for I would not like my guests to be disappointed. I have your check written out in my pocket."

"Afterward will do quite well."

"Nine o'clock was the time specified, I believe?"

"I fancy so."

The conversation continued to flag. Faull sprawled in his chair, and remained apathetic.

"Would you care to hear what arrangements I have made?"

"I am unaware that any are necessary, beyond chairs for your guests."

"I mean the decoration of the seance room, the music, and so forth."

Backhouse stared at his host. "But this is not a theatrical performance."

"That's correct. Perhaps I ought to explain.. .. There will be ladies present, and ladies, you know, are aesthetically inclined."

"In that case I have no objection. I only hope they will enjoy the performance to the end."

He spoke rather dryly.

"Well, that's all right, then," said Faull. Flicking his cigar into the fire, he got up and helped himself to whisky.

"Will you come and see the room?"

"Thank you, no. I prefer to have nothing to do with it till the time arrives."

"Then let's go to see my sister, Mrs. Jameson, who is in the drawing room. She sometimes does me the kindness to act as my hostess, as I am unmarried."

"I will be delighted," said Backhouse coldly.

They found the lady alone, sitting by the open pianoforte in a pensive attitude. She had been playing Scriabin and was overcome. The medium took in her small, tight, patrician features and porcelain-like hands, and wondered how Faull came by such a sister. She received him bravely, with just a shade of quiet emotion. He was used to such receptions at the hands of the sex, and knew well how to respond to them.

"What amazes me," she half whispered, after ten minutes of graceful, hollow conversation, "is, if you must know it, not so much the manifestation itself - though that will surely be wonderful - as your assurance that it will take place. Tell me the grounds of your confidence."

"I dream with open eyes," he answered, looking around at the door, "and others see my dreams. That is all."

"But that's beautiful," responded Mrs. Jameson. She smiled rather absently, for the first guest had just entered.

It was Kent - Smith, the ex - magistrate, celebrated for his shrewd judicial humour, which, however, he had the good sense not to attempt to carry into private life. Although well on the wrong side of seventy, his eyes were still disconcertingly bright. With the selective skill of an old man, he immediately settled himself in the most comfortable of many comfortable chairs.

"So we are to see wonders tonight?"

"Fresh material for your autobiography," remarked Faull.

"Ah, you should not have mentioned my unfortunate book. An old public servant is merely amusing himself in his retirement, Mr.Backhouse. You have no cause for alarm - I have studied in the school of discretion."

"I am not alarmed. There can be no possible objection to your publishing whatever you please."

"You are most kind," said the old man, with a cunning smile.

"Trent is not coming tonight," remarked Mrs. Jameson, throwing a curious little glance at her brother.

"I never thought he would. It's not in his line."

"Mrs. Trent, you must understand," she went on, addressing the exmagistrate, "has placed us all under a debt of gratitude. She has decorated the old lounge hall upstairs most beautifully, and has secured the services of the sweetest little orchestra."

"But this is Roman magnificence."

"Backhouse thinks the spirits should be treated with more deference," laughed Faull.

"Surely, Mr. Backhouse - a poetic environment ..

"Pardon me. I am a simple man, and always prefer to reduce things to elemental simplicity. I raise no opposition, but I express my opinion. Nature is one thing, and art is another."

"And I am not sure that I don't agree with you," said the exmagistrate. "An occasion like this ought to be simple, to guard against the possibility of deception - if you will forgive my bluntness, Mr. Backhouse."

"We shall sit in full light," replied Backhouse, "and every opportunity will be given to all to inspect the room. I shall also ask you to submit me to a personal examination."

A rather embarrassed silence followed. It was broken by the arrival of two more guests, who entered together. These were Prior, the prosperous City coffee importer, and Lang, the stockjobber, well known in his own circle as an amateur prestidigitator. Backhouse was slightly acquainted with the latter. Prior, perfuming the room with the faint odour of wine and tobacco smoke, tried to introduce an atmosphere of joviality into the proceedings. Finding that no one seconded his efforts, however, he shortly subsided and fell to examining the water colours on the walls. Lang, tall, thin, and growing bald, said little, but stared at Backhouse a good deal.

Coffee, liqueurs, and cigarettes were now brought in. Everyone partook, except Lang and the medium. At the same moment, Professor Halbert was announced. He was the eminent psychologist, the author and lecturer on crime, insanity, genius, and so forth, considered in their mental aspects. His presence at such a gathering somewhat mystified the other guests, but all felt as if the

object of their meeting had immediately acquired additional solemnity. He was small, meagre-looking, and mild in manner, but was probably the most stubborn-brained of all that mixed company. Completely ignoring the medium, he at once sat down beside Kent-Smith, with whom he began to exchange remarks.

At a few minutes past the appointed hour Mrs. Trent entered, unannounced. She was a woman of about twenty-eight. She had a white, demure, saintlike face, smooth black hair, and lips so crimson and full that they seemed to be bursting with blood. Her tall, graceful body was most expensively attired. Kisses were exchanged between her and Mrs. Jameson. She bowed to the rest of the assembly, and stole a half glance and a smile at Faull. The latter gave her a queer look, and Backhouse, who lost nothing, saw the concealed barbarian in the complacent gleam of his eye. She refused the refreshment that was offered her, and Faull proposed that, as everyone had now arrived, they should adjourn to the lounge hall.

Mrs. Trent held up a slender palm. "Did you, or did you not, give me carte blanche, Montague?"

"Of course I did," said Faull, laughing. "But what's the matter?"

"Perhaps I have been rather presumptuous. I don't know. I have invited a couple of friends to join us. No, no one knows them.. ..The two most extraordinary individuals you ever saw. And mediums, I am sure."

"It sounds very mysterious. Who are these conspirators?"

"At least tell us their names, you provoking girl," put in Mrs. Jameson.

"One rejoices in the name of Maskull, and the other in that of Nightspore. That's nearly all that I know about them, so don't overwhelm me with, any more questions."

"But where did you pick them up? You must have picked them up somewhere."

"But this is a cross - examination. Have I sinned again convention?I swear I will tell you not another word about them. They will be here directly, and then I will deliver them to your tender mercy."

"I don't know them," said Faull, "and nobody else seems to, but, of course, we will all be very pleased to have them.... Shall we wait,or what?"

"I said nine, and it's past that now. It's quite possible they may not turn up after all.... Anyway, don't wait."

"I would prefer to start at once," said Backhouse.

The lounge, a lofty room, forty feet long by twenty wide, had been divided for the occasion into two equal parts by a heavy brocade curtain drawn across the middle. The far end was thus concealed. The nearer half had been converted into an auditorium by a crescent of armchairs. There was no other furniture. A large fire was burning halfway along the wall, between the chairbacks and the door. The room was brilliantly lighted by electric bracket lamps. A sumptuous carpet covered the floor.

Having settled his guests in their seats, Faull stepped up to the curtain and flung it aside. A replica, or nearly so, of the Drury Lane presentation of the temple scene in *The Magic Flute* was then exposed to view: the gloomy, massive architecture of the interior, the glowing sky above it in the background, and, silhouetted against the latter, the gigantic seated statue of the Pharaoh. A fantastically carved wooden couch lay before the pedestal of the statue.

Near the curtain, obliquely placed to the auditorium, was a plain oak armchair, for the use of the medium.

Many of those present felt privately that the setting was quite inappropriate to the occasion and savoured rather unpleasantly of ostentation. Backhouse in particular seemed put out. The usual compliments, however, were showered on Mrs. Trent as the deviser of so remarkable a theatre. Faull invited his friends to step forward and examine the apartment as minutely as they might desire. Prior and Lang were the only ones to accept. The former wandered about among the pasteboard scenery, whistling to himself and occasionally tapping a part of it with his knuckles. Lang, who was in his element, ignored the rest of his party and commenced a patient, systematic search, on his own account, for secret apparatus. Faull and Mrs. Trent stood in a corner of the temple, talking together in low tones; while Mrs. Jameson, pretending to hold Backhouse in conversation, watched them as only a deeply interested woman knows how to watch.