

A Voyage to Arcturus

by

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Chapter 1. The Séance

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, eying 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 ex- magistrate, "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 ex- magistrate. "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.

Lang, to his own disgust, having failed to find anything of a suspicious nature, the medium now requested that his own clothing should be searched.

"All these precautions are quite needless and beside the matter in hand, as you will immediately see for yourselves. My reputation demands, however, that other people who are not present would not be able to say afterward that trickery has been resorted to."

To Lang again fell the ungrateful task of investigating pockets and sleeves. Within a few minutes he expressed himself satisfied that nothing mechanical was in Backhouse's possession. The guests reseated themselves. Faull ordered two more chairs to be brought for Mrs. Trent's friends, who, however, had not yet arrived. He then pressed an electric bell, and took his own seat.

The signal was for the hidden orchestra to begin playing. A murmur of surprise passed through the audience as, without previous warning, the beautiful and solemn strains of Mozart's "temple" music pulsated through the air. The expectation of everyone was raised, while, beneath her pallor and composure, it could be seen that Mrs. Trent was deeply moved. It was evident that aesthetically she was by far the most important person present. Faull watched her, with his face sunk on his chest, sprawling as usual.

Backhouse stood up, with one hand on the back of his chair, and began speaking. The music instantly sank to pianissimo, and remained so for as long as he was on his legs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness a materialisation. That means you will see something appear in space that was not previously there. At first it will appear as a vaporous form, but finally it will be a solid body, which anyone present may feel and handle - and, for example, shake hands with. For this body will be in the human shape. It will be a real man or woman - which, I can't say - but a man or woman without known antecedents. If, however, you demand from me an explanation of the origin of this materialised form - where it comes from, whence the atoms and molecules composing its tissues are derived - I am unable to satisfy you. I am about to produce the phenomenon; if anyone can explain it to me afterward, I shall be very grateful.... That is all I have to say."

He resumed his seat, half turning his back on the assembly, and paused for a moment before beginning his task.

It was precisely at this minute that the manservant opened the door and announced in a subdued but distinct voice: "Mr. Maskull, Mr. Nightspore."

Everyone turned round. Faull rose to welcome the late arrivals. Backhouse also stood up, and stared hard at them.

The two strangers remained standing by the door, which was closed quietly behind them. They seemed to be waiting for the mild sensation caused by their appearance to subside before advancing into the room. Maskull was a kind of giant, but of broader and more robust physique than most giants. He wore a full beard. His features were thick and heavy, coarsely modelled, like those of a wooden carving; but his eyes, small and black, sparkled with the fires of intelligence and audacity. His hair was short, black, and bristling. Nightspore was of middle height, but so tough - looking that he appeared to be trained out of all human frailties and susceptibilities. His hairless face seemed consumed by an intense spiritual hunger, and his eyes were wild and distant. Both men were dressed in tweeds.

Before any words were spoken, a loud and terrible crash of falling masonry caused the assembled party to start up from their chairs in consternation. It sounded as if the entire upper part of the building had collapsed. Faull sprang to the door, and called to the servant to say what was happening. The man had to be questioned twice before he gathered what was required of him. He said he had heard nothing. In obedience to his master's order, he went upstairs. Nothing, however, was amiss there, neither had the maids heard anything.

In the meantime Backhouse, who almost alone of those assembled had preserved his sangfroid, went straight up to Nightspore, who stood gnawing his nails.

"Perhaps you can explain it, sir?"

"It was supernatural," said Nightspore, in a harsh, muffled voice, turning away from his questioner.

"I guessed so. It is a familiar phenomenon, but I have never heard it so loud."

He then went among the guests, reassuring them. By degrees they settled down, but it was observable that their former easy and good - humoured interest in the proceedings was now changed to strained watchfulness. Maskull and Nightspore took the places allotted to them. Mrs. Trent kept stealing uneasy glances at them. Throughout the entire incident, Mozart's hymn continued to be played. The orchestra also had heard nothing.

Backhouse now entered on his task. It was one that began to be familiar to him, and he had no anxiety about the result. It was not possible to effect the materialisation by mere concentration of will, or the exercise of any faculty; otherwise many people could have done what he had engaged himself to do. His nature was phenomenal - the dividing wall between himself and the spiritual world was broken in many places. Through the gaps in his mind the inhabitants of the invisible, when he summoned them, passed for a moment timidly and awfully into the solid, coloured universe.... He could not say how it was brought about.... The experience was a rough one for the body, and many such struggles would lead to insanity and early death. That is why Backhouse was stern and abrupt in his manner. The coarse, clumsy suspicion of some of the witnesses, the frivolous aestheticism of others, were equally obnoxious to his grim, bursting heart; but he was obliged to live, and, to pay his way, must put up with these impertinences.

He sat down facing the wooden couch. His eyes remained open but seemed to look inward. His cheeks paled, and he became noticeably thinner. The spectators almost forgot to breathe. The more sensitive among them began to feel, or imagine, strange presences all around them. Maskull's eyes glittered with anticipation, and his brows went up and down, but Nightspore appeared bored.

After a long ten minutes the pedestal of the statue was seen to become slightly blurred, as though an intervening mist were rising from the ground. This slowly developed into a visible cloud, coiling hither and thither, and constantly changing shape. The professor half rose, and held his glasses with one hand further forward on the bridge of his nose.

By slow stages the cloud acquired the dimensions and approximate outline of an adult human body, although all was still vague and blurred. It hovered lightly in the air, a foot or so above the couch. Backhouse looked haggard and ghastly. Mrs Jameson quietly fainted in her chair, but she was unnoticed, and presently revived. The apparition now settled down upon the couch, and at the moment of doing so seemed suddenly to grow dark. solid, and manlike. Many of the guests were as pale as the medium himself, but Faull preserved his stoical apathy, and glanced once or twice at Mrs. Trent. She was staring straight at the couch, and was twisting a little lace handkerchief through the different fingers of her hand. The music went on playing.

The figure was by this time unmistakably that of a man lying down. The face focused itself into distinctness. The body was draped in a sort of shroud, but the features were those of a young man. One smooth hand fell over, nearly touching the floor, white and motionless. The weaker spirits of the company stared at the vision in sick horror; the rest were grave and perplexed. The seeming man was dead, but somehow it did not appear like a death succeeding life, but like a death preliminary to life. All felt that he might sit up at any minute.

"Stop that music!" muttered Backhouse, tottering from his chair and facing the party. Faull touched the bell. A few more bars sounded, and then total silence ensued.

"Anyone who wants to may approach the couch," said Backhouse with difficulty.

Lang at once advanced, and stared awestruck at the supernatural youth.

"You are at liberty to touch," said the medium.

But Lang did not venture to, nor did any of the others, who one by one stole up to the couch - until it came to Faull's turn. He looked straight at Mrs. Trent, who seemed frightened and disgusted at the spectacle before her, and then not only touched the apparition but suddenly grasped the drooping hand in his own and gave it a powerful squeeze. Mrs. Trent gave a low scream. The ghostly visitor opened his eyes, looked at Faull strangely, and sat up on the couch. A cryptic smile started playing over his mouth. Faull looked at his hand; a feeling of intense pleasure passed through his body.

Maskull caught Mrs. Jameson in his arms; she was attacked by another spell of faintness. Mrs. Trent ran forward, and led her out of the room. Neither of them returned.

The phantom body now stood upright, looking about him, still with his peculiar smile. Prior suddenly felt sick, and went out. The other men more or less hung together, for the sake of human society, but Nightspore paced up and down, like a man weary and impatient, while Maskull attempted to interrogate the youth. The apparition watched him with a baffling expression, but did not answer. Backhouse was sitting apart, his face buried in his hands.

It was at this moment that the door was burst open violently, and a stranger, unannounced, half leaped, half strode a few yards into the room, and then stopped. None of Faull's friends had ever seen him before. He was a thick, shortish man, with surprising muscular development and a head far too large in proportion to his body. His beardless yellow face indicated, as a first impression, a mixture of sagacity, brutality, and humour.

"Aha-i, gentlemen!" he called out loudly. His voice was piercing, and oddly disagreeable to the ear. "So we have a little visitor here."

Nightspore turned his back, but everyone else stared at the intruder in astonishment. He took another few steps forward, which brought him to the edge of the theatre.

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