

CHAPTER IV

THE CARFEX HOUSE SEANCES

ONCE Sir Bussy had launched himself and his friends upon these metapsychic experiments he pursued the investigation with his customary intemperance. Carnac Williams was only one of several lines of investigation. It is a commonplace of psychic literature that the more a medium concentrates on the ectoplasm and materializations, the less is he or she capable of clairvoyance and the transmission of spirit messages. Carnac Williams was to develop along the former line. Meanwhile Sir Bussy took competent advice and secured the frequent presence of the more interesting clairvoyants available in London.

Carfex House was spacious, and Sir Bussy had a great supply of secretaries and under butlers. Rooms were told off for the materialization work and others for the reception of messages from the great beyond, and alert and attentive helpers learnt the names and business of the experts and showed them to their proper apartments. The materialization quarters were prepared most elaborately by Sir Titus Knowles. He was resolved to make them absolutely spirit tight; to make any ectoplasm that was exuded in them feel as uncomfortable and unwelcome as ectoplasm could.

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He and Williams carried on an interminable wrangle about hangings, lighting, the legitimate use of flashlight photography, and the like. Sir Titus even stood out, most unreasonably, against a black velvet cabinet and conceded Williams black tights for the sake of decency with an ill grace. "We aren't going to have any women about," said Sir Titus. Williams showed himself amazingly temperamental and Sir Titus was mulishly obstinate; Sir Bussy, Hereward Jackson, and Mr. Parham acted as their final court of appeal and pleased neither party. Hereward Jackson was consistently for Williams.

On the whole Williams got more from them than Sir Titus, chiefly because of Mr. Parham's lack of intellectual sympathy with the latter. Constantly the casting vote fell to Mr. Parham. With secret delight he heard of—and on several occasions he assisted at—an increasing output of ectoplasm that it entirely defeated Sir Titus to explain. He was forbidden, by the rules and hypothesis that it might conceivably cause the death of his adversary, to leap forward and grab the stuff. It bubbled out of the corners of Williams's mouth, a horrid white creeping fluid, it flowed from his chest, it accumulated upon his knees; and it was withdrawn with a sort of sluggish alacrity. On the ninth occasion this hitherto shapeless matter took on the rude suggestions of hands and a human face, and a snapshot was achieved.

The tests and restrictions imposed upon the trances of the clairvoyants were, from the nature

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of the case, less rigorous than those directly controlled by Sir Titus, and their results developed rather in advance of the Williams manifestations.

The communications differed widely in quality. One medium professed a Red Indian control and also transmitted messages from a gentleman who had lived in Susa, "many years ago, long before the time of Abraham." It was very difficult to determine where the Red Indian left off and where the ancient from Susa began. Moreover, "bad spirits" got in on the Susa communications, and departed friends of Hereward Jackson sent messages to say that it was "splendid" where they were, and that they were "so happy," and wished everyone could be told about it, but faded out under further interrogation in the most unsatisfactory fashion. At an early stage Sir Bussy decided that he had "enough of that gammon" and this particular practitioner was paid off and retired. There were several such failures. The details varied, but the common factor was a lack of elementary incredibility. Two women mediums held out downstairs, while upstairs in the special room Williams, week by week, thrust his enlarging and developing ectoplasm into the pale and formidable disbelief of Sir Titus.

Of the two women downstairs one was a middle-aged American with no appeal for Mr. Parham; the other was a much more interesting and attractive type. She was dusky, with a curiously beautiful oval olive-tinted face and she said she was the young widow of an English merchant in

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Mauritius. Her name was Nanette Pinchot. She was better educated than the common run of psychic material and had very high recommendations from some of the greatest investigators in Paris and Berlin. She spoke English with a pleasing staccato. Neither she nor the American lady professed to be controlled by the usual ghost, and this was new to all the Carfax House investigators. The American lady had trances of a fit-like nature that threw her slanting-wise across her chair in inelegant attitudes. Mrs. Pinchot, when entranced, sat like a pensive cat, with her head inclined forward and her hands folded neatly in her lap. Neither lady had heard of the other. The one lodged with cousins in Highbury; the other stayed in a Kensington hotel. But their line of revelation was the same. Each professed to feel a mighty afflatus from an unknown source which had thrust all commonplace controls aside. There were moments when Mr. Parham was reminded of the Hebrew prophets when they said, "the Voice of the Lord came upon me." But this voice was something other than the Voice of the Lord.

Mrs. Pinchot gave the fuller messages. The American lady gave descriptive matter rather than positive statements. She would say, "Where am I? I am afraid. I am in a dark place. An arcade. No, not an arcade, a passage. A great huge passage. Pillars and faces on either side, faces carved on the pillars, terrible faces. Faces of Destiny. It is dark and cold and there is a wind

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blowing. The light is dim. I do not know where the light comes from. It is very dim. The Spirit, which is Will and Power, is coming down the passage like a mighty wind, seeking a way. How great and lonely the passage is! I am so small, so cold, and so afraid. I am smaller. I am driven like a dead leaf before the wind of the great Spirit. Why was I put into this dreadful place? Let me out! *Oh, let me out!*"

Her distress became evident. She writhed and had to be recalled to the things of this world.

By an extraordinary coincidence Mrs. Pinchot also spoke of a great passage down which something was coming. But she did not feel herself actually in the passage, nor was she personally afraid. "There is a corridor," she said. "A breeze of expectation blows down it from some unknown source. And Power is coming. It is as if I hear the tramp of iron footfalls drawing near."

Hereward Jackson did not hear these things said. That made it more remarkable that he should bring back a report from Portsmouth. "There is a new Spirit coming into the world," he said. "A man in Portsea has been saying that. He is a medium, and suddenly he has given up saying anything else and taken to warning us of a new time close at hand. It is not the spirit of any departed person. It is a Spirit from Outside seeking to enter the world."

Mr. Parham found something rather impres-

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sive in these convergent intimations. From the first he had observed Mrs. Pinchot closely, and he found it difficult to believe her capable of any kind of fraud, collusion, or mystification. The friendly candour of her normal bearing passed over without a change into her trance condition. He had some opportunities of studying her when she was not under séance conditions; he twice took her out to tea at Rumpelmayer's and afterwards persuaded Sir Bussy to have her down at the Hangar for a week-end. So he was able to hear her talking naturally and easily about art, foreign travel, ideas in general, and even public affairs. She was really cultivated. She had a fine, inquiring, discriminating mind. She had great breadth of view. She evidently found an intelligent pleasure in his conversation. He talked to her as he rarely talked to women, for commonly his attitude to the opposite sex was light and playful or indulgent and protective. But he found she could even understand his anxieties for the world's affairs, his sense of a threatening anarchism and dissolution in the texture of society, and his feeling for the need of a stronger and clearer guidance in our periodic literature. Sometimes she would even anticipate things he was going to say. But when he asked her about the Spirit that was coming into the world she knew nothing of it. Her séance life was quite detached from her daily life. He gave her his books on Richelieu with a friendly inscription and copies of some of his graver articles and addresses. She said they were no ordinary articles.

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From the outset she had made it plain that she realized that this new circle she had entered was very different in quality from the usual gathering of the credulous and curious with which a medium has to deal. "People talk of the stupidity of spirit communications," she said at the first meeting. "But does anyone ever consider the vulgar quality of the people to whom these communications have to be made?"

This time, she felt, the grouping was of a different order. She said she liked to have Sir Titus there particularly, for his hard, clear doubt was like walking on a level firm floor. Sir Titus bowed his forehead with an acknowledgment that was not as purely ironical as it might have been. To great men like Sir Bussy, to sympathetic minds like Hereward Jackson, to learning and mental power, spirits and powers might be attracted who would disdain the vague inquiries of the suburban curious.

"And you really believe," said Mr. Parham, "these messages that come through you come from the dead?"

"Not a bit of it," said Mrs. Pinchot in that sharp definitive way of hers; "I've never believed anything so nonsensical. The dead can do nothing. If these influences are from people who have passed over, they come because these people still live on. But what the living power may be that moves me to speech I do not know. I don't find any proof that all the intimations, or even most of the intimations we receive, come from ghosts

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—if one may use that old word for once. Even if some certainly do.”

“Not disembodied spirits?” said Hereward Jackson.

“Sometimes I think it must be something more, something different and something much more general. Even when the names of departed friends are used. How am I to know? I am the only person in your circle who has never heard my own messages. It may be all delusion. It's quite possibly all delusion. We people with psychic gifts are a queer race. We transmit. What we transmit we do not know. But it's you stabler people who have to explain the things that come through us. We are limited by what people expect. When they expect nothing but vulgar ghosts and silly private messages, what else can we transmit? How can we pass on things they could not begin to understand?”

“True,” said Mr. Parham, “true.”

“When you get greater minds as receivers you will get greater messages.”

That too was reasonable.

“But there's something in it very wonderful, something that science knows nothing about.”

“Ah! there I agree,” said Mr. Parham.

In the earlier séances with her there was a sort of “control” in evidence. “I am the messenger of the Advent,” he declared.

“A departed spirit?” asked Jackson.

“How can I be departed when I am here?”

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"Are there such things as angels, then?" asked Mr. Parham.

("Gaw!")

"Messengers. 'Angel' means 'messenger.' Yes, I am a messenger."

"Of someone—or of something—some power which comes?" asked Mr. Parham with a new helpfulness in his voice.

"Of someone who seeks a hold upon life, of someone with great power of mastery latent, who seeks to grapple with the world."

"He'd better try upstairs," injected Sir Titus.

"Here, where there are already will and understanding, he finds his helpers."

"But who is this Being who comes? Has he been on earth before?"

"A conquering spirit which watches still over the world it has done so much to mould."

"Who is he?"

"Who *was* he?"

"The corridor is long, and he is far away. I am tired. The medium is tired. The effort to speak to you is great because of the Strong Doubter who sits among you. But it is worth while. It is only the beginning. Keep on. I can stay but a little while longer now, but I will return to you."

"But what is he coming for? What does he want to do?"

There was no answer. The medium remained for some time in a state of insensibility before she came to. Even then she felt faint and begged to

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be allowed to lie down for a time before she left Carfax House.

So it was that Mr. Parham remembered the answers obtained in the first of the séances with Mrs. Pinchot that really took a strong hold of his imagination. The actual sequence of the transmission was perhaps more confused, but this was what stood out in his memory.

It would indeed be a mighty miracle if some new Power did come into human affairs. How much there was to change! A miracle altogether desirable. He was still sceptical of the idea of an actual spirit coming to earth, but it was very pleasant to toy with the idea that something, some actual anticipation of coming things, was being symbolized in these riddles.

The detailed records of all séances, even the most successful ones, are apt to make copious and tedious reading for those who are not engaged in their special study, and it would serve no useful purpose to relate them here. Mr. Parham's predilection for Mrs. Pinchot helped greatly in the development of that "something-in-it" attitude, which he had first assumed at the Williams séance in Buggins Street. Released from any insistence upon the ghostly element and the survival of the pettier aspects of personalities, the phenomena of the trance state seemed to him to become much more rational and credible. There was something that stirred him profoundly in this suggestion of hovering powers outside our world seeking for some means, a congenial temperament, an under-

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standing mentality, by which they could operate and intervene in its affairs. He imagined entities like the great spirit forms evoked and pictured by Blake and G. F. Watts; he dreamt at last of mighty shapes.

Who was this great being who loomed up over his receptive imagination in these Carfex House seances? He asked if it was Napoleon the First, and the answer was, "Yes and no"; not Napoleon and more than Napoleon. Hereward Jackson asked if it was Alexander the Great and got exactly the same answer. Mr. Parham in the night, or while walking along the street, would find himself talking in imagination to this mysterious and mighty impending spirit. It would seem to stand over him and think with him as in his morning or evening paper he read fresh evidences of the nerveless conduct of the world's affairs and the steady moral deterioration of our people.

His preoccupation with these two clairvoyants led to a certain neglect on his part of the researches of Sir Titus upon Carnac Williams. More and more was he coming to detest the hard and limited materialism of the scientific intelligence. He wanted to think and know as little of these operations as possible. The irritation produced by the normal comments of Sir Titus upon the clairvoyant mediums, and particularly upon Mrs. Pinchot and the American lady, was extreme. Sir Titus was no gentleman; at times his phrases were almost intolerably gross, and on several occasions Mr. Parham was within an ace of fierce reprisals. He

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almost said things that would have had the force of blows. The proceedings at these materialization séances were unbearably tedious. It took hours that seemed like æons to get a few ectoplasmic gutterings. The pleasure of seeing how much they baffled Sir Titus waned. On at least three occasions, Mr. Parham passed beyond the limits of boredom and fell asleep in his chair, and after that he stayed away for a time.

His interest in Carnac Williams was reawakened after that ninth séance in which a face and hands became discernible. He was at Oxford at the time but he returned to London to hear a very striking account of the tenth apparition from Hereward Jackson. "When at first it became plain," said Hereward Jackson, "it might have been a crumpled diminutive of yourself. Then, as it grew larger, it became more and more like Napoleon."

Instantly Mr. Parham connected this with his conception of the great Spirit that Mrs. Pinchot had presented as looming over the Carfax House inquiries. And the early resemblance to himself was also oddly exciting. "I must see that," he said. "Certainly I must come and see this materialization stuff again. It isn't fair to Sir Titus for me to keep so much away."

He talked it over with Mrs. Pinchot. She showed she was entirely ignorant of what was going on in the room upstairs, and she found the triple coincidence of the Napoleonic allusion very remarkable. For the American lady had also spoken of Buonaparte and Sargon and Genghis Khan in a

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rambling but disturbing message.

It was like a sound of trumpets from the Unknown, first on this side and then on that.

Once more Mr. Parham faced the long silences and boredoms of the tense and noiseless grapple of Sir Titus and Williams. It was after dinner, and he knew that for a couple of hours at least nothing could possibly occur. Hereward Jackson seemed in a happier mood, quietly expectant. Sir Bussy, with a certain impatience that had been increasing at every recent séance, tried to abbreviate or at least accelerate the customary strippings, searchings, markings, and sealings. But his efforts were unavailing.

"Now you have drawn me into it," said Sir Titus in that strident voice of his, "I will not relax one jot or one tittle in these precautions until I have demonstrated forever the farcical fraudulence of all this solemn spooking. I shan't grudge any price I pay for a full and complete exposure. If anyone wants to go, let him go. So long as some witness remains. But I'd rather die than scamp the job at this stage."

"Oh, Gaw!" said Sir Bussy, and Mr. Parham felt that at any time now these researches might come to a violent end.

The little man settled into his armchair, pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip for a time and then lapsed, it seemed, into profound meditation.

At last the fussing was over and the vigil began. Silence fell and continued and expanded and wrapped about Mr. Parham closer and closer. Very

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dimly one saw the face of Williams, against the velvet blackness of the recess. He would lie for a long time with his mouth open, and then groan weakly and snore and stir and adopt a new attitude. Each time Mr. Parham heard the sharp rustle of Sir Titus Knowles's alertness.

After a time Mr. Parham found himself closing his eyes. It was curious. He still saw the pallid brow and cheekbone of Williams when his eyes were closed.