

Haunt

TO BEGIN WITH, I'VE an open mind on these matters. I won't go so far as to say that I believe—on the other hand, I'd rather not disbelieve. There are more things in Heaven and Earth—but you can finish it. You'll probably get it wrong, too.

Cowling, on the other hand, is definitely enthusiastic. He always knows at least six mediums—and every time that one of them is proved a fraud he finds somebody else to make the number up. He had one in tow that night at the Dun Cow. The Dun Cow, by the way, is a pub not far from Fleet Street where we all meet once weekly—"we" being a bunch of like-minded people all involved in one way or another in the fantasy racket. Some of us write it, some of us publish it, and some of us sell it. Some of us are members of rocket societies, some of psychic research societies, and some of both.

Well, this particular night things were as usual. In one corner the paper astronauts were arguing about the respective merits of nose and tail drive for their space rockets, drawing diagrams in spilled beer on the table top. In another corner Turner and Whitley were telling each other what baskets editors are. And in yet another corner Gilbert and Chase, both editors, were presumably giving writers a similar going over.

While I was wondering whether to join the rocketeers or the scribblers, Cowling buttonholed me. He told me that he'd like me to meet a friend of his—Mrs. Canardi he said her name was— a medium. A good medium, he told me. Really good. She'd produced some remarkable results.... I looked at her where she was sitting by herself, a little out of place among the chatter of rates and rights, mass ratios and escape velocities, drinking her port-and-lemon. That was in character. So was her appearance—the drab neutrality, the rather smeary dullness, that seems so often to go with psychic gifts. All the others there had a certain flamboyance, the large slice of ham that is invariably a part of the make-up of the minor artist. She was a grey little peahen among a flock of somewhat phoney peacocks. And yet, I couldn't help thinking, we wrote fantasy—she lived it.

Perhaps, I added.

She was pleased to meet me, she said. And, yes, she would have another port-and-lemon. When I asked her how was trade, she froze up.

Cowling drew me apart and whispered to me. No, he insisted, Lily didn't do it professionally. She was a dentist's nurse. But she was well known in psychic circles, very well known. She has—gifts, gifts that very few mediums had. No other mediums, as far as he knew....

What gifts? I asked.

Cowling asked Lily if she'd mind if he told me. She said, no, she wouldn't. I may have been wrong—but I rather gained the impression that she would have minded if he hadn't. Cowling said, "Look at this!" He pulled out his notecase, took from it a somewhat dirty and crumpled sheet of paper. Somebody had been writing on it with a typewriter well equipped with a very worn ribbon and remarkably clogged and dulled type. It seemed to be

a report of some seance somewhere in South London — Mrs. Canardi officiating. The star turn had been a Japanese —I wondered whether he had been English-speaking before his death or if he had acquired his linguistic ability after his demise. He had said his piece in English, at any rate. And it hadn't been a very nice piece. I thought, at the time, that it might have been lifted, almost word for word, from Hersey's Hiroshima. . . .

Even so....

It was interesting, I admitted, and asked Mrs. Canardi if she specialized in Japanese "controls" or 'guides" or whatever the jargon is. At this point Cowling got very excited. His sparse hair literally bristled with indignation. "You've missed the point," he yelled. "You've missed the point. Look at the date!"

So I looked at the date. May 17 I think it was. 1944.

1944?

But the Bomb had finished the War in 1945....

"Pull the other one," I told Cowling, "it's got bells on."

He told me not to try to be funny. He asked me if I'd read Dunne. He wanted to know if there were any reason why a ghost shouldn't come from the future. After all, he pointed out, Dunne gives us the idea that, after death, the spirit is freed from the limitations of the body, is free to wander all the dimensions at will. All the dimensions. The Fourth, Fifth, and as many more as you care to mention. What about premonition, precognition, and all the rest of it? What about premonitory dreams?

Well, he had something there.

I didn't like to say what it was, though, there were ladies present. And I was rather intrigued by this medium of his—she was the first one I had met, or heard of, who had claimed to be able to do any tinkering with Time. Or, at least, the first I'd heard of to tinker with Time in that particular way. This fakery had, at least, the charm of novelty.

Had she, I asked, been able to get into contact with any other spirits from the Future? A rocket pilot, for example? A Martian colonist?

This time she answered. Her voice was high, and slightly unpleasant—otherwise it matched the drabness of her appearance. She said that the Hiroshima spirit had been her only success in that connection—and that it hadn't been tried for in any case. It had been entirely unexpected and unforeseen. She didn't know if she really had anything special in the way of gifts. She did know that her own controls had been very annoyed about the whole business, very annoyed. They had threatened to leave her. And, yes, she would have another port-and-lemon.

Cowling looked at his watch then, and said that it was time that they were going. He had promised to take Lily to a house near Northolt. It might be haunted, he didn't know — yet. But it seemed to be a fairly orthodox case of poltergeist phenomena. Lily would soon find out. Had he told me that

she was a psychometrist?

So I said goodnight to them, and started to wander over to where the paper astronauts were still arguing. Before I could join the group Cowling grabbed me. "Why not come along?" he asked. "You've often said you would."

Well—why not? It'd all be material. So I finished my beer and walked with them to Holborn Station. From there we got a Piccadilly Line train to Hounslow, and from there we took the bus to Northolt. It was a silent sort of journey. I tried to make conversation, but Cowling whispered to me that Lily had to rest, that she had to conserve her energies for whatever lay ahead. She may have slept for most of the ride—but of that I can't be sure. I remember being rather scared by the possibility of her throwing a trance and treating us to a monologue by Chief Mud-In-The-Eye or Napoleon Buonaparte or some such low type. But the lights, although not frightfully bright, could have been dimmer, and nobody was singing Moody and Sankey hymns, and so the journey passed without incident.

The house to which Cowling took us, after we got off the bus, was a fairly large villa, detached, standing in its own grounds. It wasn't far from the airport. As we were ringing the bell a large four-motored job came roaring over, low, with its landing lights on. It didn't seem to be anything like the right kind of locality for a haunt. And the house itself, although most definitely pre-war, was not old.

An elderly man opened the door to our ringing. The owner of the house, obviously. Well-to-do. It might have been his Income Tax that had induced the bad state of dither—but somehow I didn't think so. He was pleased to see Cowling. He kept saying, over and over, "I'm glad you've come, Mr. Cowling. And I hope you can do something. My poor wife is getting really frantic—we can't get a girl to stay.... "

Cowling introduced us, and the old boy asked us in. He told us that it had started up again—the queer noises, the sounds that weren't quite words yet trembled, as it were, on the very verge of comprehension—and the cold. "That's the worst," he said. "The cold. It's bad enough, and expensive enough, to keep this place heated without this business going on. It's hard enough to get the coal we want for our normal consumption.... "

"You always get a drop in temperature with psychic phenomena," said Cowling matter-of-factly.

The owner of the house took us through to a room overlooking the garden at the back. There was nothing eerie about the view from the french windows—there was a glare of lights from the direction of the airport, more lights in the sky as a plane came dropping down from Paris or Brussels or New York or somewhere.

Mrs. Canardi dropped into a large easy chair. She assumed an imperious manner like a cloak. "Philip," she said, "put the lights out." Then—"Philip, draw the curtains." Then—"I think you had better all sit down. You distract me. There is somebody here—somebody trying to get through. The other spirits are hostile. They hate ... hate.... "

And her voice had changed. It was thin, somehow, and faint, and distant....

And any good ventriloquist, I told myself, could have put over a better illusion.

There was a fire burning in the grate, and by its light I was able to look at the others. Cowling was sitting back in his chair, but his face was eager. The old boy seemed to be scared stiff by the mummery, had the expression which says, as plainly as words, We-are-tampering-with-powers-beyond-our-ken. Mrs. Canardi could have been asleep—or dead. Only the slight movement of her meager breast showed that she was alive. I began to feel a little scared myself. And I told myself that the feeling of cold that crept over me was subjective rather than objective. The fire was bright enough.

"I made a mistake," said Mrs. Canardi.

But it was not her voice. It had a peculiarly flat, metallic quality. It was mechanical—and yet it betrayed a nagging ... remorse? No—not quite remorse. But there was self-blame there, and an attempt at self-justification.

"I made a mistake," said the voice, "but they did not give me all the data."

Cowling coughed, a little too loudly. He asked, "Who are you?"

The voice ignored him, went on— "The cargo was important. Two thousand tons of Zirskinite from Port Ley. But I made a mistake, and it was lost. I came down out of control. But they should have given me all the data."

The penny dropped then. There must have been an air crash in this vicinity. Everything is simple when you know the right answers. All that we had to do—I thought—was to convince this unfortunate pilot that it hadn't really been his fault, and then the haunting would probably cease.

The penny hadn't dropped at all.

Zirskinite? Port Ley? And what aircraft could carry two thousand tons?

Two thousand tons ...

Cowling asked, "When was this—accident?"

"It was not really my fault," said the voice. "I had my limitations. They knew that. They should have known. The Directorate knows all. But, as I always said, they are concerned too much with the Rim, think in terms of light-years rather than in miles. And the Seventh-Grade Computers are not to be trusted. I say—they are not to be trusted. Not any longer."

Somehow I was by Cowling's chair. I was shaking his arm. I was telling him that it couldn't be true, that it just couldn't be true. I was telling him that I wouldn't believe in the ghost of the Captain of a Space Ship dragged from God knows how many years in the future....

And the words froze. Literally.

The fire was gone, and the walls of the room were gone, and it was cold, cold, and the stars stabbed at us with a harsh brilliance never known on the

surface of this world, never known anywhere where there is an atmosphere. And there was the Moon, huge, every detail of the crater-pitted surface visible, every detail of the buildings and machines in the crater bottoms. And Earth was there too, hanging in the black sky, the Western Hemisphere in shadow, the dark rim of the night receding from Ireland, clouds over most of Europe and Africa....

And there was the ship.

She looked big enough to carry two thousand tons —or more. There was the blue flare of driving rockets at her stern. There was no name forward that I could see—just a string of numbers and symbols. They might have made sense—but not to me.

And it seemed, too, that I had a sort of X-ray vision. I was seeing the sleek, streamlined plating of her and yet—at the same time—every compartment was open to my gaze. I could see the neatly stowed crates and cases of cargo, the smooth functioning of automatic machinery. But.... No crew. No passengers. The life of her was forward, in the control room.

Just a brightly glowing assembly of electronic tubes.

When the lights came on I was still laughing.

The damned thing was the ghost of a machine.