

SHADOW BEFORE

"Yes, that's the Bishop," said the Second Mate impatiently. Half consciously he counted the seconds between flashes, satisfied himself that they tallied with the period given in the Light List. "We're up to the Scillies on time. All going well; weather permitting, we should be fast alongside in Glasgow tomorrow night."

"What do you mean?" asked Canning. "Weather permitting? Surely it will stay fine."

The attitude of earnest enquirer sat well upon both him and his wife, as it so often does upon dowdy, middle aged couples. All the way from Sydney they had shown an intense interest in maritime affairs, an avid curiosity that soon caused most of the ship's officers to avoid them. It was the Second Mate who had discovered their Achilles' Heel, the weak joint in their armour. They were spiritualists. Mrs Canning was a medium of some repute. And they lent a receptive ear to all the stories that he had to tell them. Tall tales all, retailed at third or fourth hand, losing nothing in the retelling.

"Fog," explained Weldon briefly. "The glass is too high, and there's no wind. Even with radar you don't want to go charging up the Irish Sea and seeing nothing. If there were no traffic it'd be different ... But this house in Dublin, now ...

"They were very grateful for the lift, these two girls, and they asked him for a drink. But he was late already, and knew that his wife would be worrying. But they had their way, and he got out of the car and went in with them. The house was nicely furnished and well kept, and in a small sitting room the three of them sat down and dipped their beaks into a glass of port — or sherry, I forget which. And they had one cigarette each, which he supplied from his case . . ."

The Fifth Officer, enjoying his evening constitutional and after dinner cigarette with his current girl friend, passed, muttered audibly: "It all ghost to showWeldon shot him a dirty look and continued.

"Just one cigarette, and one glass of wine. And then he said that he really must go, and so he said goodnight, and let himself out, got in his car and drove home. Next morning, dressing, he missed his case. He was somewhat miffed about it, as it was a present from his wife. He thought back, remembered where he had left it. The house wasn't in a part of Dublin where any of his own patients lived, but he thought that he could find it.

"He did find it. It was deserted — shutters up, garden a mess of weeds. Nevertheless, he was determined to get his case back, and hammered on the door. Nobody answered, of course, but eventually the woman next door — the place was semi-detached — poked her head over the fence and said that there wasn't anyone in, that there hadn't been anyone in for three years, and that the two ladies who did live there had up and vanished ...

"But he was quite convinced that it was the right house, and at last forced an entry through the kitchen window. The inside was as bad a mess as the outside — dust everywhere. He found the little room where they had had

their wine. He found the table with the decanter and the three empty glasses — all with a good half inch of dust on 'em. And he found his fag case.

"I don't think it was ghosts. It was, it must have been, some kind of Kink in Time ... That would account for the two women waiting at the bus stop at an hour when all buses had long ceased running."

"You materialists," replied Mrs. Canning in a pitying voice. "You won't face up to the facts about the Other World. You invent marvellous explanations that are far more fantastic than anything that we say or claim. It was apparitions of the dead he saw ..."

"Maybe so. But what about the house? Everything in order and well kept ..."

"In a case like that, Mr. Weldon, he would see the house through the eyes of the apparitions. They wanted him to find something there ..."

"He found his case."

"... something that would throw light upon their mysterious disappearance. Ah, if only I had something, anything, from that room!"

"Psychometry, Flora?" asked Canning. Then, to Weldon, "She says she isn't very good at it, but I've seen some amazing results ..."

"Really, George," protested Mrs. Canning insincerely, "I'm not very good."

"Psychometry?" asked Weldon. "Is that what they call spirit writing?"

"No — although Flora is very good at that too. Psychometry is done with objects, or letters, or photographs. She takes them in her hand, tells me about them and their ... associations."

"But this spirit writing ... Do you think that you could do some here?"

"Surely this ship isn't haunted, Mr. Weldon?"

The Second Officer did not smile — one knowing him would have said that he looked more than a little serious. He hesitated before making his reply. Then—

"I don't know. I wish I did know. There's been something funny about her this trip. Just little things — but too many of 'em. As though somebody with unlimited ingenuity, but very little strength, was trying to throw our time table out of gear. It has been like a ship I was in during the war — she was determined not to catch a certain westbound convoy from Milford Haven. Everything went wrong — but they delayed the sailing of the convoy so we could make it. Then we developed boiler trouble and had to put into Liverpool. The convoy we finally caught enjoyed a quiet crossing to the States. And so did the one we should have caught — but with our original schedule unchanged we might well have been somewhere in time to catch some real trouble ..."

"Well, this trip in this ship, the steering gear went haywire — and they

don't know to this day just how or why it did — just as we were passing under Sydney Bridge. But the pilot used our twin screws intelligently and we didn't hit anything. Then there was a fire started in Number 2 — but it was discovered before it got going properly. There has been an epidemic of small things — Liverpool Man goings on. You don't know that phrase, do you? If you come up to the chartroom and find that somebody has spilled the ink over the chart, and nobody will own up to it — that's the Liverpool Man's doing . . ."

"Perhaps I've been more than usually sensitive this trip. We have a child coming, our first, and with luck I should be home just in time to welcome him into this little world. But all the luck seems to be the wrong kind ..."

Canning was unimpressed. Weldon's story was so tame, so unspectacular, compared with the tall tales he had been telling them. But Mrs. Canning was eager. Her almost colourless eyes shone behind the spectacles, the plain, dull face had taken an unwonted vivacity. She put out her right arm, flexed her fingers.

"I can feel . . ." she declared. "Mr. Weldon can come along to our cabin, George."

"Fraid I can't," replied the Second. "Company's Rules and all that. But we're allowed to entertain passengers in our accommodation — provided that everything is strictly decorous. Will you come up? We can have a drink to lay the dust of dinner."

The Cannings accepted. They followed the officer up the ladder, along the boat deck to the officers' flat under the bridge. They seated themselves on Weldon's settee while he investigated the contents of the locker under his desk.

"There's some brandy here," he told them, "not too bad. And there's some barely drinkable port ..."

"Could I have a port and lemon?" asked the medium.

"Sorry, haven't any lemonade in stock. Would orange cordial and a splash of soda do?"

"It would be lovely."

Weldon mixed the drink, wondered how anybody could take such a revolting mixture, poured a brandy each for himself and Canning. Flora Canning delicately sipped her sickly concoction and then, suddenly stiffened.

"There's a man here," she said. "Standing by the door. I think he's something to do with wireless. I get an impression of valves and wires and ... things. He's very unhappy. He seems to belong to this room — or to somebody in it. Did you have a friend, a wireless operator, who was killed in the war?"

Weldon politely wrinkled his brow, succeeded only in corrugating his expression of impolite incredulity.

"No," he said shortly.

"I can see that you don't believe, Mr. Weldon. But it's a relation of yours, I'm sure. There's such a strong resemblance."

Then she gave a little scream as a deep, mournful bellow shook the room. Canning dropped his glass. Even the officer, who had been half expecting it, started. He got to his feet, looked through the port. "Fog," he said. "Thick as pea soup. Thank God for radar!"

"He's gone," lamented the medium. "It must have been that awful whistle. I don't think that I can do anything now."

"Try," begged her husband.

"Try, Flora. After all, this may be the last night of the voyage. And who knows what we may find out!"

Weldon asked, "What do you need?"

"A writing pad — a large one if you have it. A pencil — soft."

"Can do. Here — you'd better sit at my desk, Mrs. Canning. I'll sit on the settee with Mr. Canning."

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes?" called Weldon.

It was the stand-by quarter-master.

"Can you come up to the bridge, sir?" he asked. "The echo sounder is not working."

"Somebody's been tinkering with it. Oh, well — make yourselves at home. I shan't be long. There's fags in the box and another drink or two in the bottles ..."

When he had gone Mrs. Canning said, "Perhaps it will be better now. He doesn't believe. His vibrations are all wrong. But there's something here — and I mean to find out who or what it is."

"What do you think, Flora?"

"That's what we have to find out, dear. Pour me another drink, will you? And is this his pad? It's too small."

"Try this."

This was a cargo plan in Weldon's desk. Canning took it, turned it over so that the plain side was presented as a writing surface. His wife sat in Weldon's chair, held the pencil loosely in her right hand. Her eyes closed. Then—

Hard . . . she wrote. Hard. Struggle all time to get through. Adverse forces. Inertia. Give lever big enough and 1 move Earth — but only little levers and time short . . .

"Who are you?" asked Canning. "What do you want?" But the scribbling

pencil ignored his questions.

Must stop it now before too late. My father killed this ship, collision in fog. Little damage, only one dead — my father. Went inspect place where hit, slipped wet planking, drowned. Tell him careful, careful. Make him believe.

"What . . .?" began Canning. Then — "When? When did all this happen? What can we do about it now?"

The whistle sounded again, the prolonged blast making the very air of the room quiver. Mrs. Canning shivered, her jerkily scribbling hand slowed to a stop. Her eyelids flickered. She stirred uneasily in her chair, made a sound that was half sigh, half moan.

Then she slumped. The pencil moved uncertainly, doodled. Canning, peering over his wife's shoulder, tried hard to read some significance into the formless scrawls. Then the pencil was off again in a barely legible race against time.

Father dead, mother married again. Unhappy home. Turned out wrong. Bad. caused suffering, misery. And, at end, I was murderer. Perhaps this Hell, Purgatory. Don't know. But must try change course of events. Hard, too hard. Too much inertia. Strong forces fighting all time. Tell him — and the pronoun was heavily underscored — careful. Send someone else ...

"Who?" demanded Canning. "Who has to be careful?"

My father . . .

"But he's dead. You said so."

Not yet. When die Time all mixed up. Direction, not duration. Will be dead — but not yet. Must try save. Must . . .

And again the whistle bellowed. And again the medium stirred and shifted while the writing hand hesitated, slowed — stopped. And this time she did awake. It was a sharp, staccato sound that did it — the quarter-master rapping on the door.

"Mr. Weldon's compliments, sir, but he won't be down for a while. He's helping the Chief Radio Officer fix the radar . . ."

"It's gone!" cried the medium. "The power is gone!"

"No, ma'am. I don't think it's that. I heard 'em say it was a valve burned out."

"I didn't . . ." began Mrs. Canning. Her husband laid a quieting hand on her shoulder, squeezed hard.

"Thank you, my man," he said stuffily.

The quartermaster looked curiously at the odd couple in the Second Officer's room. He said nothing more — just raised his eyebrows and turned to go. As soon as he was out of sight Canning said, "Now, read it. What do you make of it, Flora?"

"Give me time."

The woman picked up the reversed cargo plan, puckered her brows over what was scrawled on the paper. She demanded angrily, "What is this? George, did you . . .?"

"Of course not, darling. How could I?"

"But this is utterly absurd. It must be somebody's idea of a joke — somebody who overheard Mr Weldon's silly theories about Kinks in Time. Kinks in Time, indeed! A departed spirit comes from the past."

"Of course, dear," put in the husband timidly, "there's Dunne. I know you never would read his 'Experiment With Time,' but . . ."

"What sensible person would? Surely we can have clairvoyance and prophecy without dragging in all this rubbish about Fourth Dimensions! But I think I know ... You remember that guide I had a year or so ago — the one who said that he was an ancient Egyptian, the one I had to get rid of. Ancient Egyptian! He was such a liar he might have been anything! This is the kind of thing that he'd do. It must be spite."

She took the paper in her hand, made as if to screw it up.

"Don't!" said Canning sharply.

"And why not? Oh, there's all this stuff on the back of it. Though Mr Weldon doesn't deserve to have it back — I hold him partly responsible for this exhibition of childish humour. There!" She ripped the plan viciously across. "And there! Kinks in Time, indeed!"

The wastepaper basket received the dubious evidence of temporal twists and tangles.

Canning looked worried. He picked up the brandy bottle, refilled his glass. He took its contents neat.

"All the same," he said slowly, "I think we should warn the Captain. According to this there's going to be a collision — and that's a serious matter even if nobody's killed . . ."

"Collision — fiddlesticks! Besides . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished but her husband was sufficiently telepathic to get her meaning. A worried shipmaster, on the bridge of his ship in dense fog, would not welcome the sudden incursion of two spiritualists bearing warnings of imminent disaster. This was rendered even more certain by the fact that the Captain and the Cannings were not on speaking terms, had not been since the day that they, in all innocence, had asked if they could hold a spiritualist service each Sunday.

Canning had his faith — but he was not yet prepared to become a martyr to it.

"Then let us go, my dear," he suggested. "We will see Mr Weldon in the morning."

Not far from the Second Officer's cabin was a room of which only he possessed the key. From it came the low, steady music of electric motors, a continuous, quietly regular clicking. It was the Master Compass Room. In the middle of the deck stood the binnacle, and this, too, was always kept locked. Inside the binnacle was the heavy gyroscope, suspended in the midst of the intricacies — vertical ring, phantom ring, mercury ballistic, azimuth motor, follow up system — that made it a compass. The clicking noise came from the trolleys running back and forth over their contractor blocks as the compass "hunted."

But a compass, however efficient, is not much good if it is not placed where the helmsman can steer by it. So, in addition to the Master, there are Repeaters — these being sited as and where required.

To transmit the motions of the Master, relative to the ship, to the Repeaters there is the transmitter. This is the little carriage, with a roller brush at the end of each of its arms, rotating inside a ring whose inner periphery is made up of copper segments — the contacts. As the roller brushes pass over these contacts so the repeaters click over — one third of a degree for each segment.

In the bottom of the binnacle were two pieces of paper. These were there for a purpose. They were what Weldon used daily to clean his trolleys and contactors — not to be confused with the transmitter carriage and contacts — by sliding the thin material between polished wheel and polished surface.

The light was out in the Master Compass Room — but, in any case, there was nobody, nobody corporeal, to see the two scraps of paper float and flutter up from the bottom of the binnacle, from tinder the gyroscope casing and drift unsteadily to the transmitter. There was nobody to see them sliding slowly, hesitantly — between the carbon roller brushes and the copper contacts.

The ship, not steering too well, yawed; her head fell off from 000 to 004. The carriage of the transmitter turned on its axis, following the relative movements of the master compass. But the repeaters on the bridge did not follow — paper can be a good insulator. And paper is light — very little energy is required to lift two pieces — each, say, two inches square. Less energy than is required to pull down a heavy switch — especially when that switch has to be pulled against all the inertia of the past.

Then the make-shift insulators, their work done, fell from their insecure position between brushes and contacts. There was no one to see them fall. Save for the pseudolife of the machines the Master Compass Room was empty.

"That will do the whistle," said the Captain thankfully. Then — "Full Ahead both. Full Away!"

In the radar shack, Weldon, still helping the Chief Radio Officer heard the welcome noise of the telegraphs, the double ring signifying that Stand By was ended. He opened the door and looked outside. "It's lifted, Paddy," he said. "It's a beautiful night ..." His eye was caught and held by a bright, but

fast diminishing stern light abaft the beam. "Hell! She, whoever she was, didn't miss us by much!"

"A miss is as good as a mile," replied Paddy philosophically. "Full speed again? Looks as though you might make it after all."

"Hope so. Rather think I shall now. Somehow, I'm sure that I shall. You know — I've been quite worried about it this trip — the first one and all that. And I've been wanting rather badly to be on hand to welcome young Michael into this vale of tears, to say nothing of being able to lend moral support to Jane. And I had an absurd sort of — what was it we used to call it during the war? — premonition of impending doom. But it's gone now. It's like . . . like some sort of shadow that's lifted with the fog.

"Oh, well — you can manage without me now. Doesn't look as though we'll be needing the magic eye again. I'll tell the Third to get an azimuth to make sure that the gyro isn't playing silly buggers — then I'll turf those weird Cannings out of my room and get some sleep before midnight ..."

Fading fast astern the event, past in Space and Time, never now to come, no longer cast its shadow before.