

Séance

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While the Medium Mocks Death's Dignity, His Wife's Bad Conscience Conjures Up Strange Phantoms!

THE medium arranged the room for the séance while his wife looked on with contempt.

"Bells and trumpets," she said. "You mock the dignity of death. It's simply detestable."

Her husband was unruffled.

"Funny, your conscience didn't wake up till your old man left you some money. You were glad enough to help when it meant you could eat."

She leaned inside the doorway looking white and unhappy.

"I didn't know you were a fake till after I'd married you. I hated it. But people will do anything when they're desperate."

"Or believe anything," he retorted. "They want bread for their souls like you want bread for your body."

"Bread for their souls! You're blasphemous. You talking about souls. Well, you won't do it after tonight. I'm going to expose you. I'm not going to let you ruin another heartbroken gullible little widow."

He left the phonograph he was preparing and came to her, exasperated hatred on his cruel clever face. He caught her by her frail birdlike wrists and held her against the wall.

"Don't be a fool, Lallie. Your dough won't last. What'll we do for dough if you spoil the racket? What would you do if I kicked you out? Work? I should say not. You haven't the strength of a sparrow."

She hadn't. She tried to release her hands but her fingers fluttered ineffectually.

"Let me go," she said. "You make me ill. Let me go."

He held on, staring with disgust into her paper-white face. "So you think you're good? You've got a conscience? You learn all my tricks so you can live off me, and when you don't have to, you go pious on me. You want to leave me, don't you? But first you'll kick me in the gutter. So that's a conscience!"

SHE stared back at him, eyes brave and steady. "All I ask is this—stop doing it! Let's move to another town. Do some decent work that doesn't destroy people."



The apparition spoke to his wife

"Destroy people! Now look here woman, I know plenty things like psychology. They get more'n their money's worth. I give them nerve when they lose it, and cheer 'em up when their folks die. I'm a benefactor!"

“You’re a lying fraud, doing serious damage. Mrs. Hay took her life when you’d got all her savings, and you’re all set to do the same with Mrs. Palmer’s legacy.”

A clock chimed nine. The medium gave his wife a rough shake and pushed her up the stairs.

“Come on, you hysterical fool. Get out of the way before they start coming.”

She stumbled upwards in front of him. It was useless to offer resistance. She lay down gladly when he pushed her on the bed. He looked at the old door lock but the key was missing. He looked back at her and saw mutinous obstinacy in her watchful gaze. He took a sheet from the bed and tore it into broad strips with his thin steel-strong hands. She lay without protest while he bound her and tied a gag over her mouth.

“Sorry,” he said, “but you asked for it.” Bitter contempt narrowed the lids of her steady eyes. He lifted his clenched fist in a murderous gesture. “You wait till it’s over!”

Downstairs a bell rang. In a moment he was the grave clairvoyant, relaxed, suave, his face ready for his gentle smile. His wife began to work to free herself as soon as she heard him running down the stairs.

Mrs. Palmer, the plumpish widow, was the first arrival. She had come early on purpose hoping to get a word alone with him. He took her into the little parlor where his clients gathered prior to the séance. He did not believe in allowing them time and a good light in which to look about them.

The crepe-clad old lady calmed his unease. She looked so much better, it was a miracle. And he had worked it! She was smiling cheerfully as she pushed a fat little wallet in his hand.

“You’ve helped me so much,” she explained. “I want to help your great work. This is to give sittings to people too poor to pay for them.”

The medium accepted her offering with dignity.

“That is most generous, Mrs. Palmer. I have a special fund for that very purpose. See, here it is.”

He pushed up the cover of an old roll-top desk and pointed out the drawer marked “Special Fund.”

The widow watched him put her money away with tears in her eyes, but the smile lingered on her face. A thought eddied through her mind like the first November wind—what shall I do when my money is all gone? She had a feeling of guilt as he closed the desk, but she was wax in the hands of this good, this wonderful man. He transmitted his

own altruistic emotions.

The front doorbell rang again, and presently the gathering of three men and five women was complete. The medium led them into the séance room dimly lit with a red light. Indicated their places and started the phonograph. The amplifier was muffled and emitted a soft dreamy music.

Now the medium, nerves tense and ears straining caught the faint sounds of struggle overhead. Sweat beaded his forehead and a cold dew sprang into his palms. Should he go and see if she were really secure? But of course she was. He forced himself to concentrate on the task before him as the music came to an end.

Now he put out the red light and went through his routine efficiently. Bells tinkled. A phosphorescent trumpet rose, floated about and blew a faint note in the air. He became aware that the two strangers who had been skeptical at first were becoming impressed. Funny, how he felt waves of feeling coming out of people.

Maybe he did cheat. He had to. But he had strange feelings at times of being on the verge of *something*. Whatever Lallie thought of him, there was *something* there. He shivered. He’d rather there wasn’t. If he ever did get in touch, he would die of fright.

He pulled in his wandering thoughts. It needed histrionic skill to put over those hoarse faltering speeches of Mr. Palmer, and the widow would be expecting special service tonight.

“I saw what you did, Minnie,” he croaked thickly, “and I’m very pleased with you—”

It was then that he felt a rush of cold air and realized that the secret door in the wall had been opened behind him in the dark. It took all his willpower not to move and betray the fact that he was not in a mediumistic trance. He pressed his right foot on a lump under the carpet and a bell jangled in a far corner.

“You tell them or I’ll tell them,” his wife whispered softly in his ear.

“Let me alone this once and I’ll do anything you like,” he whispered back.

“You do it or I’ll do it,” she said, implacably. “I mean it.”

SHE had him in a tight spot, but he had nothing to lose by being resourceful. He made sounds indicating he was coming out of his trance.

“Friends,” he said weakly, “something is wrong

tonight. My wife is ill. She needs me. Her necessity is calling me back.”

Chairs scraped and a murmur of sympathy came from the invisible company. But the bluff failed. Lallie moved adroitly out of his reach before anyone could get up and reach the light. Her voice came out of the dark, low and unhurried, but unmercifully distinct.

“He’s a liar. Go away all of you. Get your money back. I’m his wife. I tell you he’s a fraud.”

People collided with each other as everybody moved at once. Mrs. Palmer’s voice was shrill with wrath and excitement.

“You mean I never really got through to my husband?”

“You did not Mrs. Palmer. My husband cannot assist you or anyone else to communicate with the dead.”

Someone found the light switch and the medium saw that the secret door was closed and his wife gone. He wanted to run after her and catch her before she escaped from the house, but his clients would not let him go. They demanded their money back, threatened him with prosecution. He gave Mrs. Palmer back her wallet, distributed the rest of the money, at the same time begging them to believe that he was a true medium and an honest man.

“You have witnessed my secret grief,” he explained, “delusions on the part of my wife.”

One of the two strangers, more judicious than the rest, told him not to worry. He would assist him to vindicate himself. He could arrange an expert investigation.

They went one by one and the medium sighed with relief when he shut the door on the last of them. He stood there in the silence with murder boiling in his heart. He wouldn’t dare touch her now with all these witnesses of her provocation, but one of these days he’d have his own back. She’d run off and left him anyhow. He could feel with that strange sixth sense of his that she was no longer in the house.

He needed action to calm him down. He dismantled the things in the séance room and packed them ready for a quick exodus to another city. Then he sorted and burned most of the contents of his desk. Hatred ran through him like a poison as he did so. I’ll get her yet, his thoughts drummed, I’ll get her yet.

He went upstairs in the small hours. He saw her when he opened the bedroom door, her body half on and half off the bed, but still imprisoned by his stoutly tied bonds. His hair crept on his skull. He didn’t want to be a real medium, but he knew what he would find before he touched her. She was dead.