

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

(Continued from Last Week)

a few moments. Meanwhile I am going to try a little experiment of my own."

He paused, then continued: "You know it is believed by thousands that messages from the spirit world are written on slates by unseen hands. The test of the genuineness of such messages is the absence of an opportunity for fraud on the part of the medium, and the fact that it is in the handwriting of the person who is believed to be sending them. If these tests are met, we can then assume that the message was not the work of the medium, but comes from outside sources. I have a number of slates here, and am going to try to secure a message on them. I am not sure if I can do it, however."

Currie interrupted to say, "But, John, if the lights are turned out, how are we to know that you did not write those messages yourself?"

Without a smile on his face Bartley replied: "I did not intend to turn out the light. I am going to do what few mediums ever attempt to do: that is, to see if we can secure a message on these slates in full light. There have been so many frauds in slate-writing agencies that a test made in the dark has no value."

As he spoke he tore the wrapping from the package and disclosed a number of ordinary school slates tied together with a string. When he had cut the string and placed the slates on the table before him, he added: "You might claim that these slates already have a message written on them, so I will wash the surface of each with water. If there was any writing on them, it will be wiped out."

With our eyes following every movement, he took a piece of cloth, dipped into the glass of water, and carefully washed one side of a slate. As he was beginning to wash the other side, he paused and said to Currie, "You may think I have not washed the slate thoroughly enough; suppose, Currie, you take it and wash the other side yourself. Make a good job of it."

Currie's earnestness was almost comical as he took the slate and washed it over and over, examining the surfaces. When he had finished he whispered to me, "There was not a word written on that slate."

The same method was employed on the other slates. First, Bartley would wash one side, then would call one of us to examine the slate and wash off the other side. I was until the last, and I examined the slate very carefully before I washed it with the cloth. On the side which Bartley had washed little drops of water still clung. The unwashed side was dirty but showed no traces of having been written on.

When I had finished my task, Bartley took one of the slates and said: "I have seen there was no writing on any kind on these slates. I am going to give one to each of you. Miss Currie should place hers under her name. Currie might sit on his; the rest of you can place them under your own names."

He gave us each a slate, and we placed it as he suggested. I wondered, as I placed mine under my coat, just what Bartley expected to discover.

Now the whole thing seemed so simple. He was so serious about it, that I began to believe that I must expect to receive a message of some sort. We sat silent and expectant, I, for one, feeling a little nervous.

Currie, who had glanced at his slate several times, waited for five minutes to pass before he said, "Suppose, Currie, you look at your slate."

Currie grinned, as if to say he could not do it all foolishness, but did as he was asked. As he glanced at his slate, a smile left his face, his jaw dropped, and his eyes grew big with wonder. He looked at it several seconds as if he could not believe his eyes, then slowly passed it to me. I looked eagerly, glanced at it, and in a moment was startled. There, howling in a sprawling hand, running across the slate that had been blank moments before, was written, in ink, people who steal whisky out of a vault at midnight will come to you."

I was most unable to credit my eyes, and looked at the slate. Both sides had been so thoroughly washed that when I had taken it they were still blank. How the writing had gotten on the slate, I could not imagine.

Currie gave a sudden cry. She turned to her feet with shining eyes. Holding her slate in one trembling hand, she tried to speak, failed, and cried triumphantly: "It's a message from Mr. Slyke! I know it would come," and sank back into her chair, adding, as if unable to believe the evidence of her own eyes, "It's in his own handwriting, and very own, and he tells me what he will do."

Currie took the slate from her trembling fingers, a curious expression on his face. He placed it on the table, and we crowded round to examine it. This time the entire surface of the slate was covered with writing, in the same sprawling hand that had been on Currie's and mine. The letters were large and looked as if they had been written by a person who had written the message had been very weak. Too astonished to speak, we bent and read:

"All will be well with me if you aid those who are trying to discover who injured me. For my peace, do this: listen to the medium—" and the message trailed off in a large S.

"It's Mr. Slyke's writing," Miss Potter cried excitedly. "I recognize it. There was nothing on the slate when I placed my feet on it."

Bartley faced her gravely, with something in his manner that gave me the impression that he was not at all surprised at what was happening. "Then you are absolutely sure it is in his writing?" he asked.

Not trusting herself to speak, she simply nodded.

At that moment the bell rang, and the butler passed through the room on his way to the door. In the second before his return, I saw Doctor King steal a look at his slate, and, from the startled look on his face, I knew that he, too, had received a message. Meeting my eyes, he gave me a faint, wondering smile and shook his head doubtfully.

The man whom the butler ushered in was the medium that Bartley had secured in New York. He was very tall and thin, dressed in black, with white, unhealthy face, shifty eyes, and hair a bit too long.

After he had been introduced, Bartley told us that we were to begin the seance at once. The first thing to be done was to place the medium in a chair in the corner and tie his hands and feet firmly. Roche was selected to draw the rope through the rungs of the chair, tie his hands behind his back, and place a gag in his mouth so that he could not speak. He performed his task with the thoroughness of a police officer trained in the work; and when he informed us that the medium could neither move nor speak, I believed him.

At Bartley's suggestion we seated ourselves around the table. It was a small one, not very heavy in construction. We placed our hands on its surface as directed, and linked them together by hooking the thumb and little finger of each hand around the finger of the hand next to it. We were told that under no circumstance were we to break this circle.

Bartley spent some time in making sure that we were arranged in the proper manner. I was seated with Currie on my left, my little finger clasped around his thumb, and Bartley himself on my right. He rose and turned off the lights, then groped his way back to my side, and a second later his finger closed around mine.

I confess that I felt a bit like a fool as I waited there in the pitch darkness. What we were doing seemed childish; yet back of it all there was such a general air of expectancy that I was tense with excitement. The great draperies had been drawn over the windows, and not even a ray of light penetrated the room. Just what it was that we were waiting for I did not know. Something might or might not take place, the medium had said. We sat in silence for a number of minutes, minutes that dragged endlessly. I must confess that to me they were not the most pleasant I had ever spent.

Someone drew a deep breath, and I thought the table had started to move. Then a silence followed, so deep that I could not hear even my neighbor breathing. I felt as if I were all alone in the darkness. Only the reassuring touch of the fingers on each side of me drew me back to sanity.

Suddenly, when I was least expecting it, I felt the table under my fingers sway back and forth for a second, then fall back upon the floor with a little bang. Currie breathed hard, as if afraid; and his grasp on my fingers tightened. Then without warning came a series of ten knocks, faintly, as if someone were knocking at a distant door. I could not tell where they came from. They seemed to be in the air, on the floor, everywhere but on the table. One thing was sure: they did not come from the direction in which the medium sat. Besides, he had been tied too tightly in his chair to have been able to make them.

Silence again, then more raps, quick little running raps, never very loud, that would start and stop a second, then trip away like little feet running to and fro.

"Are you there?" Bartley's voice asked, hesitatingly.

Almost before his words had died away, there came a series of loud raps, almost falling over each other.

Then Bartley's voice again, cool but low, "Can you communicate with us?"

I had expected that the raps would reply at once, but instead there was a long silence. Several times Bartley repeated the question, and still no answer.

At length he asked, "Shall we try some other method?"

Raps answered, tumbling over each other in their eagerness, and the table tipped so violently that I expected it would fall over. It returned to an upright position with a bang, then silence again. A deep moan from the direction of the medium startled me, then more moans interspersed with sighs.

A shrill, thin voice, ghostly and far away, said brokenly, "Oh—oh—I—feel you; I know—you are—there—there—"

A silence, in which I hardly dared to breathe. The table tipped a second time and a deep voice which seemed familiar, though I could not place it, said, "I am here—here, though you do—not see—me. I was murdered by—"

What it might have added we never knew. Miss Potter suddenly cried out, not in fear but in joy, "It's Mr. Slyke—his voice—"

Bartley, afraid that she might rise in her excitement and break the circle, whispered to her, and she settled back.

I now recognized the voice as that of Slyke, a little changed, it is true, but enough like it to be easily identified. I was too dazed to think: the raps, the darkness, the voice, and the fear that was creeping into my heart, were almost more than I could bear.

Silence again, broken only by the uneasy moans of the medium. Then, without warning, someone cried in terror, "Look! The stairs, the stairs!"

Almost in front of us was the stairway leading to the lower room. There upon the top step, was a tiny light, unlike any light that I had ever seen. It was hardly larger than a silver dollar, of an unearthly whiteness; then it began to grow larger and larger, until it changed into a luminous arm floating in the air. I heard someone gasp in fear, then all was silence again. The light continued to change. Now there were two arms, then the trunk of a body, and then, out of nothing, an entire human figure appeared, glowing with a soft, pale light in the darkness. A misty figure with ghostly, shining feet and hands, but no head! It began to float down the stairs, a step at a time, seemingly upon the air.

Currie's hand trembled under mine; and I controlled my own fear with an effort, as I pressed it reassuringly.

Half way down the stairs a head appeared above the body. One moment there was nothing there; the next, a face with burning eyes and tangled hair. I knew instinctively whose it was. It belonged to Slyke, the murdered man. A voice that seemed to come from the mouth said, "I have come back to place my hand on the person that killed me."

The figure took a step toward us, the table before us fell over on the floor with a crash, and a voice almost

at my elbow cried in terror, "For God's sake, turn on that light. Don't let that d—d thing touch me."

As suddenly as it had appeared, the figure vanished, and we were left in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIV
The Murderer Speaks.

Who turned on the lights I do not know. As soon as they flashed on, we looked at each other inquiringly, our eyes filled with fear. Who had cried out in terror and broken the circle?

Bartley motioned to us to sit down again, and took his stand back of the table. He seemed to me to be very weary, and his eyes rested on us sadly, as if he were reluctant to proceed further. It was not until we moved restlessly under his intent gaze that he said, "I am not going to make any comment on what we have just seen." He paused for a second, then added impressively, "But I think I ought to tell you that I know who killed both Slyke and Briffeur."

There was a murmur of astonishment. Currie looked at me appealingly, but I knew no more than he. Roche whispered to Black, and they exchanged looks of bewilderment.

Bartley still hesitated, as if he were very reluctant to continue.

"I know that some of you doubt if we can prove that Mr. Slyke was murdered. You say there are no clues, and I admit that I have never seen a case in which there were so few. There is no doubt, however, that he was murdered, though it is difficult to say what the motive was. In the case of Briffeur, it was very simple."

"Simple?" Roche gasped.

"Yes, simple. There was but one reason and one way, and even one person that could have killed him."

This statement was too much for Roche; he shook his head in disbelief.

(To be continued)

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