

## **The Meeker Ritual**

*By Joseph Hergesheimer*

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### I. THE ROCK OF AGES

The entire pretension is so ridiculous that it is difficult to credit the extent of its acceptance. I don't mean McGeorge's story, but the whole sweep of spiritism. It ought to be unnecessary to point out the puerility of the evidence--the absurd babble advanced as the speech of wise men submerged in the silent consummation of death, the penny tricks with bells and banjos, the circus-like tables and anthropomorphic Edens. Yet, so far as the phrase goes, there is something in it; but whatever that is, lies in demonstrable science, the investigations of the subconscious by Freud and Jung.

McGeorge himself, a reporter with a sufficient education in the actual, tried to repeat impartially, with the vain illusion of an open mind, what he had been told; but it was clear that his power of reasoning had been disarranged. We were sitting in the Italian restaurant near his paper to which he had conducted me, and he was inordinately troubled by flies. A small, dark man, he was never without a cigarette; he had always been nervous, but I had no memory of such uneasiness as he now exhibited.

"It's rather dreadful," he said, gazing at me for an instant, and then shifting his glance about the white plaster walls and small flock of tables, deserted at that hour. "I mean this thing of not really dying--hanging about in the wind, in space. I used to have a natural dread of death; but now I'm afraid of--of keeping on. When you think of it, a grave's quite a pleasant place. It's restful. This other--" He broke off, but not to eat.

"My editor," he began anew, apparently at a tangent, "wouldn't consider it. I was glad. I'd like to forget it, go back. There might be a story for you."

Whatever he had heard in connection with the Meeker circle, I assured him, would offer me nothing; I didn't write that sort of thing.

"You'd appreciate Lizzie Tuoeu," he asserted.

McGeorge had been sent to the Meeker house to unearth what he could about the death of Mrs. Kraemer. He described vividly the location, which provided the sole interest to an end admitted normal in its main features. It was, he said, one of those vitrified wildernesses of brick that have given the city the name of a place of homes; dreadful. Amazing in extent, it was without a single feature to vary the monotony of two-storied dwellings cut into exact parallelograms by paved streets; there was a perspective of continuous façades and unbroken tin roofs in every direction, with a grocery or drug-store and an occasional saloon at the corners, and beyond the sullen red steeple of a church.

Dusk was gathering when McGeorge reached the Meekers. It was August, and the sun had blazed throughout the day, with the parching heat; the smell of brick dust and scorched tin was hideous. His word. There was, too, a faint metallic clangor in the air. He knew that it came from the surface-cars, yet he could not rid himself of the thought of iron furnace-doors.

He had, of course, heard of the Meekers before. So had I, for that matter. A crack-brained professor had written a laborious, fantastic book about their mediumship and power of communication with the other world. They sat together as a family: the elder Meekers; the wife's sister; a boy, Albert, of fourteen; Ena, close to twenty; and Jannie, a girl seventeen years old and the medium proper. Jannie's familiar spirit was called Stepan. He had, it seemed, lived and died in

the reign of Peter the Great; yet he was still actual, but unmaterialized, and extremely anxious to reassure every one through Jannie of the supernal happiness of the beyond. What messages I read, glancing over hysterical pages, gave me singularly little comfort, with the possible exception of the statement that there were cigars; good cigars Stepan, or Jannie, explained, such as on earth cost three for a quarter.

However, most of what McGeorge told me directly concerned Lizzie Tuoe. The Meekers he couldn't see at all. They remained in an undiscovered part of the house--there was a strong reek of frying onions from the kitchen--and delegated the servant as their link with the curious or respectful or impertinent world.

Lizzie admitted him to the parlor, where, she informed him, the sittings took place. There wasn't much furniture beyond a plain, heavy table, an array of stiff chairs thrust back against the walls, and on a mantel a highly painted miniature Rock of Ages, with a white-clad figure clinging to it, washed with a poisonous green wave, all inclosed in a glass bell. At the rear was a heavy curtain that, he found, covered the entrance to a smaller room.

Lizzie was a stout, cheerful person, with the ready sympathies and superstitions of the primitive mind of the south of Ireland. She was in a maze of excitement, and his difficulty was not to get her to talk, but to arrest her incoherent flood of invocations, saints' names, and credulity.

Her duties at the Meekers had been various; one of them was the playing of mechanical music in the back room at certain opportune moments. She said that Stepan particularly requested it; the low strains made it easier for him to speak to the dear folks on this side. It couldn't compare, though, Stepan had added, with the music beyond; and why should it, Lizzie had commented, and all the blessed saints bursting their throats with tunes! She swore, however, that she had

had no part in the ringing of the bells or the knocks and jumps the table took.

She had no explanation for the latter other than the conviction that the dear God had little, if any, part in it. Rather her choice of an agent inclined to the devil. Things happened, she affirmed, that tightened her head like a kettle. The cries and groaning from the parlor during a sitting would blast the soul of you. It was nothing at all for a stranger to faint away cold. The light would then be turned up, and water dashed on the unconscious face.

She insisted, McGeorge particularized, that the Meekers took no money for their sittings. At times some grateful person would press a sum on them; a woman had given two hundred and seventy dollars after a conversation with her nephew, dead, as the world called it, twelve years. All the Meekers worked but Jannie; she was spared every annoyance possible, and lay in bed till noon. At the suggestion of Stepan, she made the most unexpected demands. Stepan liked pink silk stockings. He begged her to eat a candy called Turkish paste. He recommended a "teeny" glass of Benedictine, a bottle of which was kept ready. He told her to pinch her flesh black to show--Lizzie Tuoeys forgot what.

Jannie was always dragged out with a face the color of wet laundry soap. She had crying fits; at times her voice would change, and she'd speak a gibberish that Mr. Meeker declared was Russian; and after a trance she would eat for six. There was nothing about the senior Meeker Lizzie could describe, but she disliked Mrs. Meeker intensely. She made the preposterous statement that the woman could see through the blank walls of the house. Ena was pale, but pretty, despite dark smudges under her eyes; she sat up very late with boys or else sulked by herself. Albert had a big grinning head on him, and ate flies. Lizzie had often seen him at it. He spent hours against the panes of glass and outside the kitchen door.

It wasn't what you could name gay at the Meekers, and, indeed, it hadn't been necessary for the priest to insist on the girl finding another place; she had decided that independently after she had been there less than a month. Then Mrs. Kraemer had died during a sitting. She would be off, she told McGeorge, the first of the week.

The latter, whose interest at the beginning had been commendably penetrating, asked about Mrs. Meeker's sister; but he discovered nothing more than that--Lizzie Tuoey allowed for a heretic--she was religious. They were all serious about the spiritism, and believed absolutely in Jannie and Stepan, in the messages, the voices and shades that they evoked.

However, questioned directly about Mrs. Kraemer's presence at a sitting, the servant's ready flow of comment and explanation abruptly dwindled to the meager invocation of holy names. It was evidently a business with which she wanted little dealing, even with Mrs. Kraemer safely absent, and with no suspicion of criminal irregularity.

The reporting of that occurrence gave a sufficiently clear impression of the dead woman. She was the relict of August, a naturalized American citizen born in Salzburg, and whose estate, a comfortable aggregate of more than two millions, came partly from hop-fields in his native locality. There was one child, a son past twenty, not the usual inept offspring of late-acquired wealth, but a vigorously administrative youth who spent half the year in charge of the family investment in Germany. At the beginning of the Great War the inevitable overtook the Salzburg industry; its financial resources were acquired by the Imperial Government, and young Kraemer, then abroad, was urged into the German Army.

McGeorge, with a great deal of trouble, extracted some additional angles of insight on Mrs. Kraemer from the reluctant Lizzie.

She was an impressive figure of a lady in fine lavender muslin ruffles, a small hat, blazing diamonds, and a hook in her nose, but Roman and not Jew. A bullying voice and a respectful chauffeur in a glittering car completed the picture. She had nothing favorable to say for the location of the Meeker house; indeed, she complained pretty generally, in her loud, assertive tones, about the inefficiency of city administration in America, but she held out hopes of improvement in the near future. She grew impatiently mysterious--hints were not her habit--in regard to the good shortly to enfold the entire earth. Lizzie gathered somehow that this was bound up with her son, now an officer in a smart Uhlan regiment.

A man of Mrs. Kraemer's type, and the analogy is far closer than common, would never have come to the Meekers for a message from a son warring in the north of France. It is by such lapses that women with the greatest show of logic prove the persistent domination of the earliest emotional instincts. After all, Lizzie Tuoey and Mrs. Kraemer were far more alike than any two such apparently dissimilar men.

At this point McGeorge was lost in the irrelevancy of Lizzie's mind. She made a random statement about Mrs. Meeker's sister and a neighbor, and returned to the uncertain quality of Jannie's temper and the limitations of a medium. It seemed that Jannie was unable to direct successful sittings without a day between for the recuperation of her power. It used her up something fierce. Stepan as well, too often recalled from the joys of the beyond, the cigars of the aroma of three for a quarter, grew fretful; either he refused to answer or played tricks, such as an unexpected sharp thrust in Albert's ribs, or a knocked message of satirical import, "My! wouldn't you just like to know!"

McGeorge had given up the effort to direct the conversation; rather than go away with virtually nothing gained, he decided to let the remarks take what way they would. In this he was wise, for the girl's sense of importance, her normal pressing necessity for speech, gradually submerged her fearful determination to avoid any contact

with an affair so plainly smelling of brimstone. She returned to Miss Brasher, the sister, and her neighbor.

The latter was Mrs. Doothnack, and, like Mrs. Kraemer, she had a son fighting in the north of France. There, however, the obvious similitude ended; Edwin Doothnack served a machine-gun of the American Expeditionary Forces, while his mother was as poor and retiring as the other woman was dogmatic and rich. Miss Brasher brought her early in the evening to the Meekers, a little person with the blurred eyes of recent heavy crying, excessively polite to Lizzie Tuoey. Naturally, this did nothing to increase the servant's good opinion of her.

The sister soon explained the purpose of their visit: Edwin, whose regiment had occupied a sacrifice position, was missing. There his mother timidly took up the recital. The Meekers were at supper, and Lizzie, in and out of the kitchen, heard most of the developments. When the report about Edwin had arrived, Mrs. Doothnack's friends were reassuring; he would turn up again at his regiment, or else he had been taken prisoner; in which case German camps, although admittedly bad, were as safe as the trenches. She had been intensely grateful for their good will, and obediently set herself to the acceptance of their optimism, when--it was eleven nights now to the day--she had been suddenly wakened by Edwin's voice.

"O God!" Edwin had cried, thin, but distinct, in a tone of exhausted suffering--"O God!" and "Mummer!" his special term for Mrs. Doothnack. At that, she declared, with straining hands, she knew that Edwin was dead.

Miss Brasher then begged darling Jannie to summon Stepan and discover the truth at the back of Mrs. Doothnack's "message" and conviction. If, indeed, Edwin had passed over, it was their Christian duty to reassure his mother about his present happiness, and the endless future together that awaited all loved and loving ones. Jannie said positively that she wouldn't consider it. A sitting had been

arranged for Mrs. Kraemer to-morrow, so that she, without other means, might get some tidings of the younger August.

Mrs. Doothnack rose at once with a murmured apology for disturbing them, but Miss Brasher was more persistent. She had the determination of her virginal fanaticism, and of course she was better acquainted with Jannie. Lizzie wasn't certain, but she thought that Miss Brasher had money, though nothing approaching Mrs. Kraemer; probably a small, safe income.

Anyhow, Jannie got into a temper, and said that they all had no love for her, nobody cared what happened so long as they had their precious messages. Stepan would be cross, too. At this Albert hastily declared that he would be out that evening; he had been promised moving-pictures. That old Stepan would be sure to bust his bones in. Jannie then dissolved into tears, and cried that they were insulting her dear Stepan, who lived in heaven. Albert added his wails to the commotion, Mrs. Doothnack sobbed from pure nervousness and embarrassment, and only Miss Brasher remained unmoved and insistent.

The result of this disturbance was that they agreed to try a tentative sitting. Stepping out into the kitchen, Mrs. Meeker told Lizzie that she needn't bother to play the music that evening.

Here the latter, with a sudden confidence in McGeorge's charitable knowledge of life, admitted that Jannie's bottle of Benedictine was kept in a closet in the room behind the one where the sittings were held. The Meekers had disposed themselves about the table, the circle locked by their hands placed on adjoining knees, with Jannie at the head and Mrs. Doothnack beyond. The servant, in the inner room for a purpose which she had made crystal clear, could just distinguish them in a dim, red-shaded light through the opening of the curtain.



By this time familiarity with the proceeding had bred its indifference, and Lizzie lingered at the closet. The knocks that announced Stepan's presence were a long time in coming; then there came an angry banging and a choked cry from Albert. The table plainly rocked and rose from the floor, and Jannie asked in the flat voice of the tranced:

"Is Edwin there? Here's his mother wanting to speak to him."

The reply, knocked out apparently on the wood mantel, and repeated for the benefit of the visitor, said that those who had won to the higher life couldn't be treated as a mere telephone exchange. Besides which, a party was then in progress, and Stepan was keeping waiting Isabella, consort of King Ferdinand, a lady who would not be put off. This business about Edwin must keep. Miss Brasher said in a firm voice:

"His mother is much distressed and prays for him to speak."

The answer rattled off was not interpreted, but Lizzie gathered that it was extremely personal and addressed to Miss Brasher. There was a silence after that, and then the table rose to a perceptible height and crashed back to the floor. In the startling pause which followed a voice, entirely different from any that had spoken, cried clear and low:

"O God!"

This frightened Lizzie to such an extent that she fled to the familiar propriety of the kitchen; but before she was out of hearing, Mrs. Doothnack screamed, "Edwin!"

Nothing else happened. The firm Miss Brasher and her neighbor departed immediately. Jannie, however looked a wreck, and cold towels and Benedictine were liberally applied. She sobbed hysterically, and wished that she were just a plain girl without a call. Further, she declared that nothing could induce her to proceed with the sitting for Mrs. Kraemer to-morrow. Stepan, before returning to

Isabella of Castile, had advised her against it. With such droves of soldiers coming over, it was more and more difficult to control individual spirits. Things in the beyond were in a frightful mess. They might see something that would scare them out of their wits.

Mrs. Meeker, with a share of her sister's aplomb, said that she guessed they could put up with a little scaring in the interest of Mrs. August Kraemer. She was sick of doing favors for people like Agnes's friend, and made it clear that she desired genteel associates both in the here and the hereafter. Jannie's face began to twitch in a manner common to it, and her eyes grew glassy. At times, Lizzie explained, she would fall right down as stiff as a board, and they would have to put her on the lounge till she recovered. Her sentimental reading of Jannie's present seizure was that she was jealous of Ferdinand's wife.

Not yet, even, McGeorge confessed, did he see any connection between the humble little Mrs. Doothnack and Mrs. Kraemer, in her fine lavender and diamonds. He continued putting the queries almost at random to Lizzie Tuoey, noting carelessly, as if they held nothing of the body of his business, her replies. While the amazing fact was that, quite aside from his subsequent credulity or any reasonable skepticism, the two presented the most complete possible unity of causation and climax. As a story, beyond which I have no interest, together they are admirable. They were enveloped, too, in the consistency of mood loosely called atmosphere; that is, all the details of their surrounding combined to color the attentive mind with morbid shadows.

It was purely on Lizzie Tuoey's evidence that McGeorge's conversion to such ridiculous claims rested. She was not capable of invention, he pointed out, and continued that no one could make up details such as that, finally, of the Rock of Ages. The irony was too biting and inevitable. Her manner alone put what she related beyond dispute.

On the contrary, I insisted, it was just such minds as Lizzie's that could credit in a flash of light--probably a calcium flare--unnatural soldiers, spooks of any kind. Her simple pictorial belief readily accepted the entire possibility of visions and wonders.

I could agree or not, he proceeded wearily; it was of small moment. The fate waited for all men. "The fate of living," he declared, "the curse of eternity. You can't stop. Eternity," he repeated, with an uncontrollable shiver.

"Stepan seemed to find compensations," I reminded him.

"If you are so damned certain about the Tuoeuy woman," he cried, "what have you got to say about Mrs. Kraemer's death? You can't dismiss her as a hysterical idiot. People like her don't just die."

"A blood clot." His febrile excitement had grown into anger, and I suppressed further doubts.

He lighted a cigarette. The preparations for Mrs. Kraemer's reception and the sitting, he resumed, were elaborate. Mr. Meeker lubricated the talking-machine till its disk turned without a trace of the mechanism. A new record--it had cost a dollar and a half and was by a celebrated violinist--was fixed, and a halftone semi-permanent needle selected. Lizzie was to start this after the first storm of knocking, or any preliminary jocularly of Stepan's, had subsided.

Jannie had on new pink silk stockings and white kid slippers. Her head had been marcelled special, and she was so nervous that she tore three hair-nets. At this she wept, and stamped her foot, breaking a bottle of expensive scent.

When Mrs. Kraemer's motor stopped at the door, Lizzie went forward, and Mrs. Meeker floated down the stairs.

Stopping him sharply, I demanded a repetition of the latter phrase. It was Lizzie's. McGeorge, too, had expressed surprise, and the girl repeated it. Mrs. Meeker, she declared, often "floated." One evening she had seen Mrs. Meeker leave the top story by a window and stay suspended over the bricks twenty feet below.

Mrs. Kraemer entered the small hall like a keen rush of wind; her manner was determined, an impatience half checked by interest in what might follow. She listened with a short nod to Mr. Meeker's dissertation on the necessity of concord in all the assembled wills. The spirit world must be approached reverently, with trust and thankfulness for whatever might be vouchsafed.

The light in the front room, a single gas-burner, was lowered, and covered by the inevitable red-paper hood, and the circle formed. Lizzie was washing dishes, but the kitchen door was open, so that she could hear the knocks that were the signal for the music. They were even longer coming than on the night before, and she made up her mind that Stepan had declared a holiday from the responsibilities of a control. At last there was a faint vibration, and she went cautiously into the dark space behind the circle. The curtains had always hung improperly, and she could see a dim red streak of light.

The knocks at best were not loud; several times when she was about to start the record they began again inconclusively. Stepan finally communicated that he was exhausted. Some one was being cruel to him. Could it be Jannie? There was a sobbing gasp from the latter. Mrs. Kraemer's voice was like ice-water; she wanted some word from August, her son. She followed the name with the designation of his rank and regiment. And proud of it, too, Lizzie added; you might have taken from her manner that she was one of us. Her version of Mrs. Kraemer's description sounded as though August were an ewe-lamb. McGeorge, besotted in superstition, missed this.

Independently determining that the moment for music had come, Lizzie pressed forward the lever and carefully lowered the lid. The soft strains of the violin, heard through the drawn curtains, must have sounded illusively soothing and impressive.

"Stepan," Jannie implored, "tell August's mamma about him, so far away amid shot and shell."

"Who is my mother?" Stepan replied, with a mystical and borrowed magnificence.

"August, are you there?" Mrs. Kraemer demanded. "Can you hear me? Are you well?"

"I'm deaf from the uproar," Stepan said faintly. "Men in a green gas. He is trying to reach me; something is keeping him back."

"August's alive!" Mrs. Kraemer's exclamation was in German, but Lizzie understood that she was thanking God.

"Hundreds are passing over," Stepan continued. "I can't hear his voice, but there are medals. He's gone again in smoke. The other----" The communication halted abruptly, and in the silence which followed Lizzie stopped the talking-machine, the record at an end.

It was then that the blaze of light occurred which made her think the paper shade had caught fire and that the house would burn down. She dragged back the curtain.

McGeorge refused to meet my interrogation, but sat with his gaze fastened on his plate of unconsumed gray macaroni. After a little I asked impatiently what the girl thought she had seen.

After an inattentive silence McGeorge asked me, idiotically I thought, if I had ever noticed the game, the hares and drawn fish, sometimes

frozen into a clear block of ice and used as an attraction by provision stores. I had, I admitted, although I could see no connection between that and the present inquiry.

It was, however, his description of the column of light Lizzie Tuoeu saw over against the mantel, a shining white shroud through which the crudely painted Rock of Ages was visible, insulated in the glass bell. Oh, yes, there was a soldier, but in the uniform that might be seen passing the Meekers any hour of the day, and unnaturally hanging in a traditional and very highly sanctified manner. The room was filled with a coldness that made Lizzie's flesh crawl. It was as bright as noon; the circle about the table was rigid, as if it had been frozen into immobility, while Jannie's breathing was audible and hoarse.

Mrs. Kraemer stood wrung with horror, a shaking hand sparkling with diamonds raised to her face. It was a lie, she cried in shrill, penetrating tones. August couldn't do such a thing. Kill him quickly!

The other voice was faint, McGeorge said, hardly more than a sigh; but Lizzie Tuoeu had heard it before. She asserted that there was no chance for a mistake.

"O God!" it breathed. "Mummer!"

This much is indisputable, that Mrs. Kraemer died convulsively in the Meeker hall. Beyond that I am congenitally incapable of belief. I asked McGeorge directly if it was his contention that, through Stepan's blunder, the unfortunate imperialistic lady, favored with a vignette of modern organized barbarity, had seen Mrs. Doothnack's son in place of her own.

He didn't, evidently, think this worth a reply. McGeorge was again lost in his consuming dread of perpetual being.

## II. THE GREEN EMOTION

Virtually buried in a raft of ethical tracts of the Middle Kingdom, all more or less repetitions of Lao-tsze's insistence on heaven's quiet way, I ignored the sounding of the telephone; but its continuous bur--I had had the bell removed--triumphed over my absorption, and I answered curtly. It was McGeorge. His name, in addition to the fact that it constituted an annoying interruption, recalled principally that, caught in the stagnant marsh of spiritism, he had related an absurd fabrication in connection with the Meeker circle and the death of Mrs. August Kraemer.

Our acquaintance had been long, but slight. He had never attempted to see me at my rooms, and for this reason only--that his unusual visit might have a corresponding pressing cause--I directed Miss Maynall, at the telephone exchange, to send him up. Five minutes later, however, I regretted that I had not instinctively refused to see him. It was then evident that there was no special reason for his call. It was inconceivable that any one with the least knowledge of my prejudices and opinions would attempt to be merely social, and McGeorge was not without both the rudiments of breeding and good sense.

At least such had been my impression of him in the past, before he had come in contact with the Meekers. Gazing at him, I saw that a different McGeorge was evident, different even from when I had seen him at the Italian restaurant where he had been so oppressed by the fear not of death, but of life. In the first place, he was fatter and less nervous, he was wearing one of those unforgivable soft black ties with flowing ends, and he had changed from Virginia cigarettes to Turkish.

A silence had lengthened into embarrassment, in which I was combating a native irritability with the placid philosophical acceptance of the unstirred Tao, when he asked suddenly:

"Did you know I was married?" I admitted that this information had eluded me, when he added in the fatuous manner of such victims of a purely automatic process, "To Miss Ena Meeker that was."

I asked if he had joined the family circle in the special sense, but he said not yet; he wasn't worthy. Then I realized that there was a valid reason for his presence, but, unfortunately, it operated slowly with him; he had to have a satisfactory audience for the astounding good fortune he had managed. He wanted to talk, and McGeorge, I recalled, had been a man without intimates or family in the city. Almost uncannily, as if in answer to my thought, he proceeded:

"I'm here because you have a considerable brain and, to a certain extent, a courageous attitude. You are all that and yet you won't recognize the truth about the beyond, the precious world of spirits."

"Material."

However, I indicated in another sense that I wasn't material for any propaganda of hysterical and subnormal seances. His being grew inflated with the condescending pity of dogmatic superstition for logic.

"Many professors and men of science are with us, and I am anxious, in your own interest, for you to see the light. I've already admitted that you would be valuable. You can't accuse me of being mercenary." I couldn't. "I must tell you," he actually cried out, in sudden surrender to the tyrannical necessity of self-revelation. "My marriage to Ena was marvelous, marvelous, a true wedding of souls. Mr. Meeker," he added in a different, explanatory manner, "like all careful fathers, is not unconscious of the need, here on earth, of a portion of worldly goods. For a while, and quite naturally, he was opposed to our union."

"There was a Wallace Esselmann." A perceptible caution overtook him, but which, with a gesture, he evidently discarded. "But I ought to



explain how I met the Meekers. I called." I expressed a surprise, which he solemnly misread. "It became necessary for me to tell them of my admiration and belief," he proceeded.

"I saw Mrs. Meeker and Ena in the front room where the sittings are held. Mrs. Meeker sat straight up, with her hands folded; but Ena was enchanting." He paused, lost in the visualization of the enchantment. "All sweet curves and round ankles and little feet." Then he unexpectedly made a very profound remark: "I think pale girls are more disturbing than red cheeks. They've always been for me, anyway. Ena was the most disturbing thing in the world."

Here, where I might have been expected to lose my patience disastrously, a flicker of interest appeared in McGeorge and his connection with the Meekers. A normal, sentimental recital would, of course, be insupportable; but McGeorge, I realized, lacked the coördination of instincts and faculties which constitutes the healthy state he had called, by implication, stupid. The abnormal often permits extraordinary glimpses of the human machine, ordinarily a sealed and impenetrable mystery. Hysteria has illuminated many of the deep emotions and incentives, and McGeorge, sitting lost in a quivering inner delight, had the significant symptoms of that disturbance.

He may, I thought, exhibit some of the primitive "complex sensitiveness" of old taboos, and furnish an illustration, for a commentary on the sacred Kings, of the physical base of religious fervor.

"An ordinary prospective mother-in-law," said McGeorge, "is hard enough, but Mrs. Meeker----" He made a motion descriptive of his state of mind in the Decker parlor. "Eyes like ice," he continued; "and I could see that I hadn't knocked her over with admiration. Ena got mad soon, and made faces at her mother when she wasn't looking, just as if she were a common girl. It touched me tremendously. Then--I had looked down at the carpet for a moment--Mrs. Meeker had gone,

without a sound, in a flash. It was a good eight feet to the door and around a table. Space and time are nothing to her."

Silence again enveloped him; he might have been thinking of the spiritistic triumphs of Mrs. Meeker or of Ena with her sweet curves. Whatever might be said of the latter, it was clear that she was no prude. McGeorge drew a deep breath; it was the only expression of his immediate preoccupation.

"It was quite a strain," he admitted presently. "I called as often as possible and a little oftener. The reception, except for dear Ena, was not prodigal. Once they were having a sitting, and I went back to the kitchen. Of course Lizzie Tuoey, their former servant, was no more, and they had an ashy-black African woman. Some one was sobbing in the front room--the terrible sobs of a suffocating grief. There was a voice, too, a man's, but muffled, so that I couldn't make out any words. That died away, and the thin, bright tones of a child followed; then a storm of knocking, and blowing on a tin trumpet.

"A very successful sitting. I saw Jannie directly afterward, and the heroic young medium was positively livid from exhaustion. She had a shot of Benedictine and then another, and Mr. Meeker half carried her up to bed. I stayed in the kitchen till the confusion was over, and Albert came out and was pointedly rude. If you want to know what's thought of you in a house, watch the young.

"Ena was flighty, too; it irritated her to have me close by--highly strung. She cried for no reason at all and bit her finger-nails to shreds. There was a fine platinum chain about her neck, with a diamond pendant, I had never seen before, and for a long while she wouldn't tell me where it had come from. The name, Wallace Esselmann, finally emerged from her hints and evasions. He was young and rich, he had a waxed mustache, and the favor of the Meekers generally.

"Have you ever been jealous?" McGeorge asked abruptly. Not in the degree he indicated, I replied; however, I comprehended something of its possibilities of tyrannical obsession. "It was like a shovelful of burning coals inside me," he asserted. "I was ready to kill this Esselmann or Ena and then myself. I raved like a maniac; but it evidently delighted her, for she took off the chain and relented.

"At first," McGeorge said, "if you remember, I was terrified at the thought of living forever; but I had got used to that truth, and the blessings of spiritualism dawned upon me. No one could ever separate Ena and me. The oldest India religions support that----"

"With the exception," I was obliged to put in, "that all progression is toward nothingness, suspension, endless calm."

"We have improved on that," he replied. "The joys that await us are genuine twenty-two carat--the eternal companionship of loving ones, soft music, summer----"

"Indestructible lips under a perpetual moon."

He solemnly raised a hand.

"They are all about you," he said; "they hear you; take care. What happened to me will be a warning."

"Materialize the faintest spirit," I told him, "produce the lightest knock on that Fyfe table, and I'll give you a thousand dollars for the cause." He expressed a contemptuous superiority to such bribery. "By your own account," I reminded him, "the Meekers gave this Esselmann every advantage. Why?"

McGeorge's face grew somber.

"I saw him the next time I called, a fat boy with his spiked mustache on glazed cheeks, and a pocketful of rattling gold junk, a racing car on the curb. He had had Ena out for a little spin, and they were discussing how fast they had gone. Not better than sixty-eight, he protested modestly.

"Albert hung on his every word; he was as servile to Esselmann as he was arrogant to me. He said things I had either to overlook completely or else slay him for. I tried to get his liking." McGeorge confessed to me that, remembering what the Meekers' old servant had told him about Albert's peculiar habit, he had even thought of making him a present of a box of flies, precisely in the manner you would bring candy for a pretty girl.

"It began to look hopeless," he confessed of his passion. "Ena admitted that she liked me better than Wallace, but the family wouldn't hear of it. Once, when Mr. Meeker came to the door, he shut it in my face. The sittings kept going right along, and the manifestations were wonderful; the connection between Jannie and Stepan, her spirit control, grew closer and closer. There was a scientific investigation--some professors put Jannie on a weighing-machine during a séance and found that, in a levitation, she had an increase in weight virtually equal to the lifted table. They got phonograph records of the rapping----"

"Did you hear them?" I interrupted.

"They are still in the laboratory," he asserted defiantly, "But I have a photograph that was taken of an apparition." He fumbled in an inner pocket and produced the latter. The print was dark and obscured, but among the shadows a lighter shape was traceable: it might have been a woman in loose, white drapery, a curtain, light-struck; anything, in fact. I returned it to him impatiently.

"That," he informed me, "was a Christian martyr of ancient times."

"Burned to a cinder," I asked, "or dismembered by lions?"

"Can't you even for a minute throw off the illusion of the flesh?"

"Can you?"

He half rose in a flare of anger; for my question, in view of his admissions, had been sharply pressed.

"All love is a sanctification," McGeorge said, recovering his temper admirably. "The union of my beloved wife and me is a holy pact of spirits, transcending corruption."

"You married her against considerable opposition," I reminded him.

"I had the hell of a time," he said in the healthy manner of the former McGeorge. "Everything imaginable was done to finish me; the powers of earth and of the spirit world were set against me. For a while my human frame wasn't worth a lead nickel."

"The beyond, then, isn't entirely the abode of righteousness?"

"There are spirits of hell as well as of heaven."

"The Chinese," I told him, "call them Yin and Yang, spirits of dark and light. Will you explain--it may be useful, if things are as you say--how you fought the powers from beyond?"

"Do you remember what Lizzie Tuoey thought about Jannie and Stepan?" he asked, apparently irrelevantly. "That time Stepan had an engagement with Isabella of Spain." I didn't. "Well, she said that Jannie was jealous of the queen."

McGeorge had, by his own account, really a dreadful time with what was no better than common or, rather, uncommon murder. Two things were evident on the plane of my own recognition--that he had succeeded in holding the illusive affections of Ena, no small accomplishment in view of her neurotic emotional instability, and that the elder Meekers had an interest in the most worldly of all commodities, not exceeded by their devotion to the immaculate dream of love beyond death.

The girl met McGeorge outside the house; he called defiantly in the face of an unrelenting, outspoken opposition. It was in the Meeker front room that he first realized his mundane existence was in danger. He could give no description of what happened beyond the fact that suddenly he was bathed in a cold, revolting air. It hung about him with the undefinable feel and smell of death. A rotten air, he described it, and could think of nothing better; remaining, he thought, for half a minute, filling him with instinctive abject terror, and then lifting.

Ena, too, was affected; she was as rigid as if she were taking part in a séance; and when she recovered, she hurried from the room. Immediately after McGeorge heard her above quarrelling with Jannie. She returned in tears, and said that they would have to give each other up. Here McGeorge damned the worlds seen and unseen, and declared that he'd never leave her. This, with his complete credulity, approached a notable courage or frenzy of desire. He had no doubt but they would kill him. Their facilities, you see, were unsurpassed.

Worse followed almost immediately. The next morning, to be accurate, McGeorge was putting an edge on his razor--he had never given up the old type--when an extraordinary seizure overtook him; the hand that held the blade stopped being a part of him. It moved entirely outside his will; indeed, when certain possibilities came into his shocked mind, it moved in opposition to his most desperate determination.

A struggle began between McGeorge in a sweating effort to open his fingers and drop the razor to the floor, and the will imposing a deep, hard gesture across his throat. He was twisted, he said, into the most grotesque positions; the hand would move up, and he would force it back perhaps an inch at a time. During this the familiar, mucid feel closed about him.

I asked how the force was applied to his arm, but he admitted that his fright was so intense that he had no clear impression of the details. McGeorge, however, did try to convince me that his wrist was darkly bruised afterward. He was, he was certain, lost, his resistance virtually at an end when, as if from a great distance, he heard the faint ring of the steel on the bath-room linoleum.

That, he told himself, had cured him; the Meekers, and Ena in particular, could have their precious Wallace Esselmann. This happened on Friday, and Sunday evening he was back at the Meeker door. The frenzy of desire! Love is the usual, more exalted term. Perhaps. It depends on the point of view, the position adopted in the attack on the dark enigma of existence. Mine is unpretentious.

They were obviously surprised to see him,--or, rather, all were but Ena,--and his reception was less crabbed than usual. McGeorge, with what almost approached a flash of humor, said that it was evident they had expected him to come from the realm of spirits. In view of their professed belief in the endless time for junketing at their command, they clung with amazing energy to the importance of the present faulty scheme.

Ena was wonderfully tender, and promised to marry him whenever he had a corner ready for her. McGeorge, a reporter, lived with the utmost informality with regard to hours and rooms. He stayed that night almost as long as he wished, planning, at intervals, the future. Sometime during the evening it developed that Jannie was in disfavor;

the sittings had suddenly become unsatisfactory. One the night before had been specially disastrous.

Stepan, in place of satisfying the very private curiosity of a well-known and munificent politician, had described another party that had made a wide ripple of comment and envious criticism among the shades. It had been planned by a swell of old Rome, faithful in every detail to the best traditions of orgies; and Stepan's companion, a French girl of the Maison Dorée, had opened the eyes of the historic fancy to the latent possibilities of the dance.

Jannie, at this, had spoiled everything, but mostly the temper of the munificent politician, by a piercing scream. She had gone on, Ena admitted, something terrible. When Mr. Meeker had tried to bundle her to bed, she had kicked and scratched like never before. And since then she declared that she'd never make another effort to materialize shameless spirits.

Argument, even the temporary absence of Benedictine, had been unavailing. Very well, Mrs. Meeker had told her grimly, she would have to go back to cotton stockings; and no more grilled sweetbreads for supper, either; she'd be lucky if she got scrapple. She didn't care; everything was black for her. Black it must have been, I pointed out to McGeorge; it was bad enough with worry limited to the span of one existence, but to look forward to a perpetuity of misery--

McGeorge returned the latter part of the week with the plans for their marriage, an elopement, considerably advanced; but only Jannie was at home. She saw him listlessly in the usual formal room, where--he almost never encountered her--he sat in a slight perplexity. Jannie might be thought prettier than Ena, he acknowledged, or at least in the face. She had quantities of bright brown hair, which she affected to wear, in the manner of much younger girls, confined, with a ribbon, and flowing down her back. Her eyes, too, were brown and



remarkable in that the entire iris was exposed. Her full under lip was vividly rouged, while her chin was unobtrusive.

That evening she was dressed very elaborately. The pink silk stockings and preposterous kid slippers were in evidence; her dress was black velvet, short, and cut like a sheath; and there was a profusion of lacy ruffles and bangles at her wrists. To save his soul, McGeorge couldn't think of anything appropriate to talk about. Jannie was a being apart, a precious object of special reverence. This, together with her very human pettishness, complicated the social problem. He wanted excessively to leave,--there was no chance of seeing Ena,--but neither could he think of any satisfactory avenue of immediate escape.

Jannie's hands, he noticed, were never still; her fingers were always plaiting the velvet on her knees. She would sigh gustily, bite her lips, and accomplish what in an ordinary person would be a snuffle. Then suddenly she drew nearer to McGeorge and talked in a torrent about true love. She doubted if it existed anywhere. Spirits were no more faithful than humans.

This, for McGeorge, was more difficult than the silence; all the while, he told me, his thoughts were going back to the scene in the bathroom. He had no security that it wouldn't be repeated and with a far different conclusion. He had a passing impulse to ask Jannie to call off her subliminal thugs; the phrasing is my own. There was no doubt in his disordered mind that it was she who, at the instigation of the elder Meekers, was trying to remove him in the effort to secure Wallace Esselmann.

She dissolved presently into tears, and cried that she was the most miserable girl in existence. She dropped an absurd confection of a handkerchief on the floor, and he leaned over, returning it to her. Jannie's head drooped against his shoulder, and, to keep her from sliding to the floor, he was obliged to sit beside her and support her

with an arm. It had been a temporary measure, but Jannie showed no signs of shifting her weight; and, from wishing every moment for Ena's appearance, he now prayed desperately for her to stay away.

McGeorge said that he heard the girl murmur something that sounded like, "Why shouldn't I?" Her face was turned up to him in a way that had but one significance for maiden or medium. She was, he reminded me, Ena's sister, about to become his own; there was a clinging, seductive scent about her, too, and a subtle aroma of Benedictine; and, well, he did what was expected.

However, no sooner had he kissed her than her manner grew inexplicable. She freed herself from him, and sat upright in an expectant, listening attitude. Her manner was so convincing that he straightened up and gazed about the parlor. There was absolutely no unusual sight or sound; the plain, heavy table in the center of the room was resting as solidly as if it had never playfully cavorted at the will of the spirits, the chairs were back against the walls, the miniature Rock of Ages, on the mantel, offered its testimony to faith.

One insignificant detail struck his eye--a weighty cane of Mr. Meeker's stood in an angle of the half-opened door to the hall, across the floor from where Jannie and he were sitting.

### III

After a little, with nothing apparently following, the girl's expectancy faded; her expression grew petulant once more, and she drew sharply away from McGeorge, exactly as if he had forced a kiss on her and she was insulted by the indignity. Lord! he thought, with an inward sinking, what she'll do to me now will be enough!

He rose uneasily and walked to the mantel, where he stood with his back to Jannie, looking down absently at the fringed gray asbestos of a gas hearth. An overwhelming oppression crept over him when there

was a sudden cold sensation at the base of his neck, and a terrific blow fell across his shoulders.

McGeorge wheeled instinctively, with an arm up, when he was smothered in a rain of stinging, vindictive battering. The blows came from all about him, a furious attack against which he was powerless to do anything but endeavor to protect his head. No visible person, he said solemnly, was near him. Jannie was at the other side of the room.

"Did you see her clearly while this was going on?" I asked.

Oh, yes, he assured me sarcastically; he had as well glanced at his diary to make sure of the date. He then had the effrontery to inform me that he had been beaten by Mr. Meeker's cane without human agency. He had seen it whirling about him in the air. McGeorge made up his mind that the hour of his death had arrived. A fog of pain settled on him, and he gave up all effort of resistance, sinking to his knees, aware of the salt taste of blood. But just at the edge of unconsciousness the assault stopped.

After a few moments he rose giddily, with his ears humming and his ribs a solid ache. The cane lay in the middle of the room, and Jannie stood, still across the parlor, with her hands pressed to scarlet cheeks, her eyes shining, and her breast heaving in gasps.

"Why not after such a violent exercise?"

McGeorge ignored my practical comment.

"She was delighted," he said; "she ran over to me and, throwing her arms about my neck, kissed me hard. She exclaimed that I had helped Jannie when everything else had failed, and she wouldn't forget it. Then she rushed away, and I heard her falling up-stairs in her high-heeled slippers."

Naturally he had half collapsed into a chair, and fought to supply his laboring lungs with enough oxygen. It's an unpleasant experience to be thoroughly beaten with a heavy cane under any condition, and this, he was convinced, was special.

I asked if he was familiar with Havelock Ellis on hysterical impulses, and he replied impatiently that he wasn't.

"There are two explanations," I admitted impartially, "although we each think there is but one. I will agree that yours is more entertaining. Jannie was jealous again. The Roman orgies, the young person from the grands boulevards, were more than she could accept; and she tried, in the vocabulary lately so prevalent, a reprisal. But I must acknowledge that I am surprised at the persistent masculine flexibility of Stepan."

"It was at the next sitting," McGeorge concluded, "that Stepan announced the wedding of Ena and me. The spirits awaited it. There was a row in the Meeker circle; but he dissolved, and refused to materialize in any form until it was accomplished."

"To the music of the spheres," I added, with some attempt at ordinary decency.