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MUSEUM PIECE

Beware the Familiar Spirits

by James Laver

Long hours spent on train journeys led James Laver to read "all the books in the London Library under the rubric 'Occultism'." He finally became so knowledgeable on the subject that he was able to converse with experts on the subject, until he was once rebuked with knowing more than he had a right to without being "one of us."

During my long train journeys up and down the country, I had almost unlimited time for reading, and I decided to read all the books in the London Library under the rubric "Occultism."

I carried them of ten at a time, as the generous laws of the library permitted, and they helped me to forget the discomforts of railway travel in war-time.

I read the works of Eliphas Levi and the *Philosophe Inconnu*. I struggled with the *Clavicula Salamonis* and the *Chinese Book of Changes*. I read all the works on modern extrasensory perception.

Sylvia Muldoon told me how to project the astral body, and John Mulholland warned me to *Beware the Familiar Spirits*.

I think I must always have been interested in the Dark Side of Nature. At all events the very first entry in my diary (in 1917) is concerned with a visit to a Spiritualistic meeting in Liverpool.

Perhaps I had better say at once that I have no sympathy with Spiritualism. I am interested in levitation, not uplift and the arguments for individual survival still leave me unconvinced.

Just before the outbreak of war I decided to write a book on Nostradamus. The name of Nostradamus had cropped up from time to time in my reading yet I could gain no clear picture of this enigmatic figure.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* treated with scorn his claims as a prophet but, rather inconsistently, admitting that he

seemed to know a great deal about the French Revolution. As his book of *Centuries* was published in 1555, this was itself sufficiently remarkable.

Fortunately the London Library had a number of editions of his works and I began to study them.

I read all the commentators I could lay my hands on. Most of these were, of course, French and some were fanatical French Royalists, only too anxious to prove that the return of the Bourbons was inevitable and imminent.

I had never been to a dark séance but, seeing one advertised, I applied for a ticket and, for a modest expenditure of seven shillings and six-pence was admitted to the circle. The medium was tied in a chair against the wall.

We Had to Sing

I noticed that his left hand was very loosely secured.

Within reach of this hand was a table with rattles, squeaky toys and other apparatus. At his feet lay the levitating trumpet, with a splash of luminous paint on it so that its position could be seen in the dark.

The lights were lowered and we were requested to sing. The advertisement had said: "Manifestations guaranteed," and very soon things began to happen.

There were raps and strange noises. The levitating trumpet danced in the air and even seemed to bank against the wall above the medium's head.

Then it became motionless at about the level of his face and a voice came through it:

"Hello! Hello!"

"Is that you, Dad?" cried one of the circle, and the trumpet immediately answered: "Yes, this is Dad."

"God bless you, Dad: have you any message for us to-night?"

And Dad pronounced perhaps the feeblest message that has ever come even from the Beyond: "Go on as you're going on now."

However, the audience at my séance seemed to be completely satisfied: and then came the medium's crowning effort: levitation.

When the lights went up he was found, still tied to his chair, at the other end of the room. It seemed to me quite possible, in spite of the fact that he was tied to the chair, to tilt it forward and move on his toes.

Another thing that interested me was the arc of spittle on the wall behind where his head had been. This, no doubt, had been ejected from the levitating trumpet when it was banged against the wall.

So spirits spit! The whole thing was fraudulent. I thought I could have put up a better show myself.

When my book on Nostradamus was finally published, towards the end of the War, it brought me letters from all over the world; and the writers of some of these letters were more than a little cracked.

The letter which interested me most bore the Hastings postmark. It began:

"Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law . . ." I turned to the end of the letter and read:

"Love is the Law, love under will.

Yours fraternally, Aleister Crowley."

The Essence of Magic

The "yours fraternally" gave me rather a turn. But Crowley said he had read my book on Nostradamus and found it most interesting. He was living in a small hotel near Hastings, and would I care to come and see him?

I went to Hastings (it was towards the end of March, 1947), took a cab about four miles into the country and was set down as a small Regency house, now a private hotel.

Crowley was called and came downstairs to greet me.

We went into a sitting room until lunch was ready and I tried to establish contact. I asked him about the third volume of his Confessions and he told me it was withdrawn on the eve of publication.

Only two or three copies existed; he did not possess one himself and could not tell me where to find one. The fourth and fifth volumes, he said, existed only in manuscript—"deposited with trustworthy friends."

After the meal I went up to Crowley's room, wondering if he had purposely chosen No. 13. I found him sitting on a divan bed with a little table before him.

He asked me about my interest in occultism. I said I thought the essence of Magic was summed up in Blake's phrase: "Push imagination to the point of vision, and the trick is done."

"Ah," he said, "you realise that Magic is something we do to ourselves. It is more convenient to assume the objective existence of an Angel who gives us new knowledge than to allege that our invocation has awakened a supernatural power in ourselves."

I went on to discuss the power of the mind over the body, and remarked that, if we added to the power of suggestion the possibility of telepathic communication, a rational approach to magical phenomena became possible.

I had read enough in occultist literature to be able to talk the language. We spoke of the Body of Light and the methods of its projection, the vibration of God-names, the evocation by deosil circumambulation, the banishing by the same process widdershins, the consecration of the circle.

At last Crowley growled, "It seems to me that you know more than you have any right to know, *without being one of us.*"

Rather foolishly, I asked him if he was acquainted with the Chinese divining rods. He produced a set from a cigar box and spread them out on the bed.

"I must ask you not to touch them. They are full of my emanations. I use them every day."

I did not touch them. He saw me to the door with great courtesy, and I returned to London.

Crowley died shortly after my interview with him and the story was current (I do not vouch for it) that, shortly before his end, his doctor had said to him: "I am going to cut off your heroin."

Crowley replied: "If you do I shall die—and I shall take you with me."

He did die, and the doctor died a fortnight later.

One could not help feeling in dealing with Crowley that there was a real touch of diabolism.