

On Finding A Loved One

By Julian Scutts

Between this World and That to Come

MYSTERIOUS WAYS

Or the Night Something Happened in Chipping Bumpstead

Chipping Bumpstead is a small and rather insignificant market town somewhere in the West of England. It is the sort of place that might get a brief mention in a motorist's guide: "Tucked away in a pleasant rural area, this unassuming little place seems to capture the soul of Merry Old England."

For centuries nothing ever happened there - nothing, that is, apart from what always happens everywhere with people being born, people growing up, people marrying and having families, people eating and drinking, people dying, people being people.

Nothing ever happened there until one winter's day in 1967. A notice found nailed on the Social Activities board near the main entrance to the Town Hall aroused immediate interest among all sections of the town community, especially the old folk. As a matter of fact, the younger folk usually left Chipping Bumpstead for Bristol, Birmingham or London as soon as at all possible.

The notice read:

"Is death the end?

Come to the Town Community Centre at 8 p.m. on Wednesday , and find out."

Next day a further notice was attached to the first, and this read:

"If you wish to communicate with a loved one, a close relative or dear friend, who has passed away leaving this world of tears and toll, then bring something of great sentimental value to that person with you, anything from an old photograph to a diamond ring."

Some people, naturally enough, raised their eyebrows at all this, while others treated the whole thing as a joke, hardly a joke in very good taste either.

On Wednesday night the hall was packed. As the church clock struck eight, a middle-aged lady dressed in black entered and made for a large chair placed prominently at the front of the hall. Before sitting down she addressed her audience of several hundred with the following words (as translated from the French by an interpreter who stood at her side).

"May I introduce myself. My name is Madame Clarence. I am an ordinary person like everyone else here, but I may differ from you in one particular respect. You see, I was born with a special gift. Of course, God has given each of us a particular gift, whether it be the gift of a beautiful voice to sing with or clever hands to make things with. Mine happens to be the gift of 'clairvoyance'. Through people like me - we are known as mediums - the dead can communicate with the living and vice versa. No, death is not the end! How could it be! Have we been placed on this earth for a few brief years simply to die and become nothing? Did the Maker of the universe give us our faculties, our talents and our ability to love simply that these should finally be discarded like so much rubbish? No, deep in your hearts, you know, as I know, that this life is the beginning, not the end."

Already the mood had changed. Those giggling girls in the back row had ceased to giggle, those careless youths, who were also at the back of the hall, had become quiet and thoughtful. After explaining the general principles of spiritualism, Madame Clarence requested and received a number of articles of the kind specified on the notice.

Soon the séance began in earnest. Electricity gave place to the flicker of candlelight. Haunting music emanated from a hidden source. From what he said on a later occasion, it would appear that Sam Pringle, the local radio and television dealer, was still in sufficient command of his critical faculties to note that the lower octaves of the celestial music were subject to much the same 'crackle and buzz' that one hears when playing back an overused tape. The music eventually died away and total silence ensued, but this silence did not remain unbroken for long.

"Berty, Berty! I am calling you!"

After five shattering seconds, a feeble voice from somewhere in the middle rows responded:

"Y-Yes, Aunt M-able?"

The voice, recognisably that of an elderly lady despite its unearthly and eerie quality, continued:

"Yes, Berty, I've been keeping an eye on you!"

"On me!?", the feeble voice rasped.

"Yes, Berty, on you! I'll get straight to the point. Is it a sin to borrow money and never repay it? Is it wrong to borrow anything, even an old book or a cupful of sugar and never return what is borrowed?"

"It most certainly is, Auntie. Y-You mean the three pounds I was going to pay back ..."

"That and all the other times, Berty. Repay all your debts to those who are still alive, but to those who are not, there must still be recompense - either in the present life or in that which is to come."

"Auntie, believe me, I tried to send you back the five pounds I owed you, but your illness was so sudden and short. In any case, I didn't think money mattered very much in the next world."

"You didn't think money mattered very much in the next world! Do you want to wake up in the next life only to be confronted by a queue of ghostly creditors? Everything in the earthly realm has its equivalent in the spiritual, money included!"

"Oh, Auntie, if I ever had a chance of repaying the ten pounds... "

"You have that chance, " Auntie Mable boomed, "For Madame Clarence not only has the power of transforming sounds and messages between your world and mine. She can also transfer earthly money into an otherworldly bank account."

"You mean, all I need do is hand the money to Madame Clarence and she'll see to the rest?"

"Yes, my child, that is precisely what I mean, and you can also repay your debts to anyone else over here while you're about it."

"G-Good, " stammered Berty, "W-will a ch-cheque do?"

At this point Aunt Mable's voice, which had hitherto maintained a composed and serene unearthly quality, turned strangely human, almost savage:

"Where I come from the terms are strictly cash!"

Berty staggered towards Madame Clarence, his progress painfully slow, hindered as it was by the convulsions of a man in the grips of mortal fear. Madame Clarence's facial expression, like that of a Grecian statue, was timeless and serene. Her right arm was outstretched and her index finger pointed fixedly at a large black bag of silk that lay on the table in front of her. Scarcely had he paid his debt than a most remarkable occurrence took place

A young man, his wan face replete with a bushy upturned moustache, stood up in the third row from the front. His shaking hand betrayed a fear that only great courage could have mastered. His eyes burned with moral indignation, his whole stance was accusatory:

"Can't you see? She's tricking you, she's after your money, she's exploiting your personal sorrows, your fears, just to get your money. She's nothing but a"

The sound that followed defies description. To refer to it as a scream, shriek or gurgle would be to do that sound or noise a great injustice. If ever pharynx may convey to mortal ears reverberations from the pit which is bottomless, if ever uvula trilled to render the human mind, though it were only for a moment, the anguish of Dives, then it was that 'noise' on that night in Chipping Bumpstead. As though the coils of a constricting serpent had been about his throat, the young man staggered towards the exit, uttering as he did so a word that some present on that occasion took to be 'mercy.' Once outside the door, the young man gave one final yell of pain of deep remorse, perhaps. He then seemed to dissolve into the outer darkness.

From her expression it seemed that Madame Clarence shared in the consternation of her audience, an audience petrified, as silent as the grave. Her eyes were moist and ruddy, like the eyes of a mother made disconsolate by the forward ways of a lost son. The black lace about her face vibrated as she once more became the centre of everybody's attention.

"Fooleesh boy, poor boy! 'E should not 'ave dane zat." As emotion had loosened her tentative grip on the English language, she used the good offices of her interpreter to say:

"It is a dangerous and most fearful thing to trifle with the powers beyond, as the fate of the young stranger should have revealed even to the most hardened scoffer.

"Now that your heart strings are vibrant with awe and compassion, repay your debts to those who have passed on, nay, give in generous abundance more than the law demands, give in such measure that departed friends and relatives should enjoy independence and comfort, a few luxuries perhaps. Mere solvency is not enough."

Stewards passed round collection bags, and even in that poorly hall, many a multicoloured glitter bore witness to the fact that this mysterious transaction between the earthly and the spiritual realms involved more than items of cheap junk, an impression later corroborated by the findings of a questionnaire circulated by the CID. This revealed that a conservatively estimated sum of fifty thousand pounds, jewellery being assessed on its resale value must have been collected. The stewards ceremoniously brought the bags to the front of the hall and deposited them on the table where Madame Clarence was sitting.

"I can assure you all that your repayments and gifts will be greatly appreciated. You yourselves shall not go unrewarded, if you believe my words. In a moment complete darkness shall supervene. Do not fear, but heed my words. Wait, and consolation shall be yours."

Sure enough, the hall was plunged into darkness and for the next fifteen minutes no one ventured to say or do anything. At last somebody said:

"It's a con! Get the police."

Within five minutes the hall was empty. No one switched the lights and one can only speculate as to the reason. Shame at being thought a fool? Did I say empty? Almost empty?

One person remained, Mrs. Margery Chapman. She believed deep in her heart that she had to wait. Perhaps it was the word 'consolation' that had appealed so deeply to her innermost feelings. She waited half an hour, an hour, two hours, three hours. Was she immune from the gnawing doubt that she was the most inveterate dupe in a community of dupes? If she entertained such a thought, she most certainly succeeded in suppressing it, and would doubtless have sat there until daybreak - to the detriment of her none too perfect health, if deliverance had not come. All of a sudden she sensed that a door had been opened, that a loved one was in her presence, that heaven had not been deaf to the plea of her heart.

"Cecil, Cecil! Is it you?"

"Cecil?" came an answer out of the darkness, "Not blimmin' likely. This is Fred Jackson come to lock up. 'Ere, ain't that spooky lark over yit?!"

Yes, it was indeed none other than Frederick Jackson, a retired London publican whose part-time job it now was to lock up the Community Hall after hours.

Time passed. Madame Clarence was apprehended on a charge of acquiring money and jewellery by false pretences. Her defence was hard put to make out a defence. The Crown had its problems too, as only a minute proportion of the missing money and jewellery was recovered. Madame Clarence's explanation was simple. How could anyone expect to find what had been 'transspiritualized' into the realm beyond? The Defence Counsel argued, possibly with tongue in cheek, that if nothing else Madame Clarence's alibi had the merit of being 'consistent within a certain frame of reference.' Furthermore:

"Madame Clarence's assertion does not allow itself to be circumscribed by the limits of normal rationality." As Defence Counsel also pointed out, no one in the audience had been forced to give anything. It could not be proved that Madame Clarence intended to deceive her listeners, only that she enjoined them to make a somewhat surprising leap of faith, to act in accordance with "a very bold metaphysical assertion".

All this promised to mark a notch in legal history, but for a very sad and unexpected event, Madame Clarence's sudden death.

On the very day of her funeral, wedding bells were ringing from the steeple of Chipping Bumpstead Parish Church.

"Another slice of wedding cake, Freddie darling?" asked the bride, from that day Mrs. Margery Jackson (née Higgins, Mrs. Chapman by her first marriage).

"Don't mind if I do" said Freddie.

Despite all the small talk, Mrs. Jackson could hear some of the guests in the background talking about Madame Clarence, such snatches as:

"If you were so convinced that she was a con-woman, why didn't you do something to stop her before it was too late?"

"I supposed I was hypnotised somehow, like everybody else."

And from another quarter: "What surprises me is that so many of my parishioners went along to that thing. They must have heard me preach on the witch of Endor on some occasion or other."

"Anyway, she got her comeuppance in the end."

"You're right there, poor woman."

"I say, if you've been taken in, you've none to blame but yourself, is what I always say."

But now all that Mrs. Jackson could hear was an undifferentiated buzz. Having surrendered to a sudden impulse, she clasped her bridegroom by the hand and was looking into his eyes with a serene and yet intense smile. She remembered what Madame Clarence had said: -

"Wait and consolation shall be yours."

Those were her words, and she knew those words were true.