



The Spiritualist

A free short story from Michael Lauck for his fans
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"I am not sure exactly how to proceed, ma'am," I lied, "as I have never attended a seance."

"I shall guide you through world of spirits to seek the answers to your queries. There is nossing to fear, " the woman calling herself Princess Sapphira said in her rather strange accent as she extended her hand. I removed my hat and placed it in my crippled left hand, then took her hand in mine, bowed with formality and kissed the perfumed hand lightly. I took care not to stab myself in the eye with her very large ring. I was already quite certain that her accent was false but the gems in the ring appeared to be real enough. "Not that a man such as yourself would given in to fear. If you vill indulge me, sir, vere you hurt in the war?"

I paused for a moment, pondering why she said "war" instead of "var" if her accent was genuine. then I replied slowly "Oh, yes, ma'am." That was the genuine truth. "I am desperate to contact the man who heroically threw himself between a terrible artillery barrage and myself. I may have lost my arm, but he lost his... He saved my life." This story was true, as well as the emotion that creeped into my voice as I spoke, although I had no expectation that the Princess would put me in contact with my savior.

"I vill do all in my powers, as the spirits allow, to establish communication," the Princess said coolly but not coldly. "How may I address you, sir?"

"Oh, I must apologize for my frightful manners. It is not only my first seance, but I have to admit that I have never been in the presence of royalty," I said continuing the lies. Indian chieftans are royalty, are they not? "Especially royalty as enchanting as

yourself.” That part was a little more truthful. Princess Sapphira, as she styled herself, was perhaps a bit of a faded flower but she still had more than her fair share of charms. Returning to the deception I added “I am Mr. Farnsworth Shuttleton, at your service my dearest princess.”

“Please, sir, you may simply address as Madame Sapphira. I left my title in Soronia when I journeyed to your wonderful New World.”

“Whatever would make you do such a thing, good madame?” I asked, not believing for even a moment there was a Soronia although I would not wager on the matter if pressed. The study of geography was always a struggle in my younger days.

“The spirits instructed me to journey to your Republic before your terrible war, when I was still but a girl,” she said wistfully, as if she truly did pine for the fields of Soronia. Or the mountains. Not even being certain if Soronia was fictitious I could hardly be expected to be familiar with its storied features. “They vispered to me that my gifts would be needed here in your people’s time of great need.”

“Sadly, my dear princess, they are desperately needed in our fair land,” I admitted. Truth was that the War of the Rebellion had left countless grieving widows, distraught parents and lonely children on both the North and South. My father had passed shortly before the War, which was difficult enough for my own sweet mother. When I returned from battle crippled and my only brother did not return at all, she was most terribly affected. The light has been missing from her eyes for years now and yet I must admit that she is in a much better humor than many. I fear little can be done to console these poor people. Still, as long as I can stand I shall do whatever is in my power to keep them from falling victim to charlatans and hucksters that claim to speak to their departed loved ones... for a healthy compensation, of course. I would never suggest that it is impossible to pierce the veil and speak to shades of souls lost from this world however such an ability must be truly rare. I would like to think that anyone that the Good Lord has blessed in such a way would not use it solely for their personal gains.

“Yes, Mr. Shuttleton, and I gladly relinquished my titles and wealth to travel here to assist as many families as I possibly am able,” Madame Sapphira said with apparent sincerity. “Now, good sir, if you would please set yourself I believe the other guests have arrived. I shall be in shortly, after I prepare myself.”

I still had her rather dainty hand in my own, so I bowed and kissed it once again. “Until then, my dear princess,” I said and turned to enter the section of the hotel being used as seance chambers. I paused and turned, adding “Please call me Farnsworth.”

As I mentioned earlier, I told a bit of a fib when I claimed this was my first seance. Truth be told, William and I have been to dozens. When I entered the rather large room, William was the only familiar aspect of the arrangement. He was standing in the corner of the room, cautiously observing every detail with his practiced eye. To my surprise the

room was quite large; it was obviously normally used as a ballroom. There was a very large table in the center of the room and that was quite unexpected. Usually a small circular table is employed by the fraudulent spiritualists so that all of their guests could join hands. This is either to concentrate a sacred shape of vital living energies or to keep them from reaching out and grabbing at the black-garbed hands making some instrument or device move through the darkness. This table was much too large for the assembled guests to be seated and join hands in a ring. It was a long rectangle with over two dozen seats.

Besides William, who stood more or less unnoticed in the corner, I spied an elderly couple sitting quietly together at the table. A rather sharp featured man in a fine suit of clothing paced to and fro, checking the time often on his heavy gold watch. He scarcely closed the case before opening it again to observe the time. The thing never got near his pocket! Two women stood and spoke quietly to one another. They may have been grieving widows, they may have been mourning mothers; it was hard to determine as they were the age to be either. Sadly, they may actually be both. Finally there were three women I assumed to all be widows as they were all relatively young. Two were also relatively attractive. In all honesty, arguably the prettiest of the three was known to me. Abigail Johnson had commissioned William and I to attend on her behalf.

William and I are uniquely qualified to examine the workings of these alleged spiritualists. When I was very young, my brother and I were sent from the city to summer at my uncle's farm upstate. It was thought that spending time out of the urban environment and at my father's brother's farm would be good for our development. When we got to be just a bit older, though, I pleaded with parents to allow me to instead spend my summers traveling with my mother's brother, known to people far and wide as Professor Pernius Parlance. He toured the country offering amusements in the forms of monologues from Shakespeare, both tragic and comedic, and acts of legerdemain and prestidigitation. Of course, his main income came from selling his own patented health tonic to his audiences. My uncle, always a champion of the truth, offered health tonic made simply of flavored spirits, like every other peddler of such things, but he did not make extraordinary claims. He preached that happiness was the true key to robust health and firmly believed that a bottle of strong liquor was the true key to happiness!

How could any boy resist such an adventure? When my parents finally relented and allowed me to join the Professor, or Uncle Charles as I knew him, I of course plead William's case as well. What would be the fun of such an adventure without my dearest friend and lifelong companion? So William and I would set out together each summer just as we eventually set out together to war. Under Uncle Charles' tutelage we learned the finer points of his trade. Each summer we learned not only the tricks and skills of the conjuror but also the fine words of the wise old bard William Shakespeare as well. My headmaster was always pleased each fall to find that I returned to school even more well read than when I left the previous spring! I never mentioned exactly how I became familiar with Titus Andronicus or Romeo and Juliet, or that I had gained knowledge of how to maintain an engine for distilling clear liquor.

My experiences in the war, and afterwards, made me find nothing but contempt for those that exploited the grief and anguish of those missing fallen soldiers. My time with my uncle gave me the skills I needed to expose their deceptions, with William's invaluable partnership, of course. I do not consider this pursuit my main vocation. In fact, even though we hire ourselves out in a fashion like the famous Pinkerton's, often William and I refuse any promised fees and expenses at the end of our investigations of mediums and seers. We made our living by building specialized devices for conjurers, something that interests us greatly. If my arm was not so horribly afflicted I would probably be on the stage as an actor or entertaining as a sorcerer. This trade allows me to stay close to the pursuits that I adore so. I also receive a small stipend from my late father's business interests, although most of those dividends keep my dear mother comfortable.

As I sized up the other guests and pondered the idea that one or more may be secret confidants of Madame Sapphira, just as William was my secret ally, an awkward young man entered the room. I recognized him to be a bellboy of the establishment as opposed to a member of Sapphira's company. "The Princess, um, requests that you find seating yourselves. She will, uh," he seemed to be repeating his words to himself in an attempt to remember the rest of his message, "attend presently." With that he scurried out.

I gallantly attended to the seating of the two mothers (who may be older widows), even though I would have much rather held the chair of one of the pretty young widows. Instead the finely dressed man found himself carrying out that duty. A heavy gold watch and the attentions of the prettiest ladies in the room? This world is a terribly unjust realm! William noted my private anguish and snickered to himself. The harsh look I gave him only fired his amusement. The table, as I previously noted, was titanic in proportions and could have easily seated a group several times larger than our own. I made certain to sit with several empty chairs on either side, just in case the Princess desired that we link hands. I honestly hoped that she would not request it. My left hand is weak, but basically undamaged. It is my arm that is almost useless at both the shoulder and elbow. Still, I realize touching my crippled appendage makes many uncomfortable. As we were seated the gas lamps of the room's chandelier were extinguished, leaving the table illuminated by a few kerosene lanterns.

"Good evenings, my dearest people," the Princess purred as she entered the room. She had changed her gown since greeting the attendees in the outer foyer. She was now wearing a rather somber colored gown with a delicately constructed black lace shawl. More lace dressed her hair, as did a fine diadem that appeared to be a gold recreation of thin vines and leaves. The men, myself included, all stood as the lady entered the room. She seemed to float as she moved to her own chair at the head of the table. She arranged her skirts as she sat herself with the assistance of the gold watch owner. He certainly did get around, that one.

We all took our seats again. Sapphira certainly had a presence about her. Her chair, being at the head of the long rectangular tables, had arms but was otherwise no

different than our own. Still, she seemed very much to be royalty on a throne. She slowly surveyed the room, taking a long moment to pause her stern but somehow benevolent gaze upon each of the attendees. As I believe I mentioned earlier, the woman was striking. She was not young but she knew how to present herself in the best of ways and I am certain she still receives a goodly amount of attention from men, even when not maintaining she is a princess. Although already seated regally, she took a moment to straighten herself before beginning to speak. "Some of you, my dears, may have participated in a similar ritual in the past. You may have been asked to grasp the hands of your fellow seekers." Some the the attendees murmured in agreement; I held my tongue. "I will not ask this of you. I will simply request that you place your hands on the table before you thusly," she laid her hands palm down before her. "Of course, Mr. Shuttleton, my dear Farnsworth, if you are unable..."

"No, ma'am, I should be able to manage." I used my right hand to loose my left from the sling I frequently used to keep my left hand elevated and somewhat useful. I flexed my left fingers as I arranged my arm. After my left hand was in position I placed my right hand on the table as well. William shook his head slightly at my delay, but the rest of the room was patient enough. I did not dare look at him for fear of what he might say.

Since we were children William and I have devised ways to communicate when we were supposed to be quiet, asleep, at study or even in prayer. This continued during our time in the war so that we had ways to communicate, even converse, in silence and even in the dark. This was, of course, of tremendous value to us when we were soldiers and continues to be invaluable in our current endeavors. There was an almost unnatural ability to communicate between he and I.

The rest of the attendees placed their hands on the table. The princess smiled at the group in approval and then called out, "Oh, boy." The awkward hotel employee sheepishly entered the room. "Please extinguish the lamps for us but stay near! Ve shall need them relit soon." He quickly rolled the wick down on each of the four lamps making the already dark room much darker. He then left the room and closed the door behind him, closing out the remaining light as well. The room was now as dark as a cave. William silently teased that this was the first time in recent memory I was in the dark with a woman. Had I been able to, I would have gladly silently answered him with a kick to his shin.

"If you wish, dear seekers, you may close your eyes in supplication or allow them to remain open. I do, however, request that you remain as silent as possible. Before I am able to contact your specific loved and lost I must attune myself to the energies and harmonies of this world and the next. I am unsure what this may bring upon us so those of you with more gently persuasions may vant to avert your eyes until I ask the lamps be relit.

"Even though vhat you see may be disturbing, I shall extend my circle of protection around each of you so there is little to fear. Vhatever you do, however, you

must not leave your seat. If you stray from the table you will also stray from my protection!”

This was the point in the evening’s ritual that William and I expected to see the first of the magicians’ deceptions. Princess Sapphira did not disappoint us. First there were some rattlings and scrapings, undoubtedly from chains, first on one side of the room and then from another. There were more than a few gasps and amazed mumblings, but William and I knew this was merely the first of several seemingly amazing displays. Sapphira’s assistants gave the attendees a short bit of time to collect their wits and then the first of the “phantasms” appeared, floating in the room and glowing with a ghostly light.

“Ectoplasms! A substance created when our existence touches another,” the Princess announced over alarmed exclamations from my fellow participants. They would undoubtedly be a great deal less impressed if they knew these are merely scraps of silk and muslin treated with natural phosphorus to give them an unearthly (but I assure you, quite natural) glow. Almost anything can be painted with this substance and I have seen all manner of things treated with phosphorus paint. Trumpets, drums and all manner of items that I would in no way associate with the spirit world have floated before my eyes in the dark. Silks and such are an extremely effective use of the technique, though, because they seem to float as if they are errant spirits when waved about by black clad assistants.

I have to admit that this Sapphira had created a superior performance. As I have mentioned, in the past I have seen the strangest and most inexplicable of items used in this type of display. Sapphira, however, used a particularly effective group of items. First were the silks waved around our table. Then were more silks, wrapped around small stones or some such items that allowed the ghastly scraps of fabric to be tossed high over our heads. Even knowing exactly what was being done, I was impressed by the visual effect created. Then came a number of small items, first on the other side of the table and too small for me to easily identify. As they circled the table I could see that they were military buttons, buckles and bullets of various type and caliber, some Union, some from rebel usage and some I could not identify. These brought forth sobs and other low sounds of mourning from the other guests. I imagine they assumed these were the foul instruments that brought about the destruction of their loved ones... however, I have seen ordinance retrieved from a wounded man and recognized all of these glowing pieces as being unshot from any weapon. Still, I would be a liar if I did not admit these props did not go by without bringing up a pang of sadness in my own breast so I can only imagine how they stabbed at the hearts of the others.

There was a long pause. Sapphira called for the hotel boy to return and the light from the open door blinded us all, except I imagine the good princess whose back was to the door. “Please to light two of the lanterns and then leave us,” she directed. By the time this task was accomplished and the door again closed out the brighter lights of the hotel, our eyes were acclimated to the dim lights of the lanterns. Tracks of tears shone

brightly on several faces. Yes, this Sapphira was quite the showman or, I suppose more correctly, showwoman.

I quickly glanced to William. His raised eyebrow told me that he, too, was impressed by this woman's choice of mystical relics. Phineas and Felix, he indicated, twins aged nine, but small for their age and both easily hidden under the skirts of side tables near the massive fireplace at the far end of the room. Besides being my oldest and dearest companion, William is an invaluable asset in our work! I have no knowledge of how he could have divined the names, but I knew that his information would be completely accurate. Probably he followed them to their hidden refuges while the room was still dark. Since we were children William has had an almost supernatural ability to move silently and through the darkness as well. It made him a formidable hunter when we were traveling with my uncle and an invaluable scout during the war.

"The veils of eternity have been pierced," Princess Sapphira announced quietly, pulling me from my recollections of William during the war. "Shortly I will begin to call forth your loved ones, or at least make the attempt. You must understand that these things may not be guaranteed, despite the generous offerings you have made." Some of those attending nodded in affirmation. "First, however, I shall provide introductions for there is great power to be found in names. By naming each of you I shall be empowered further!"

This was all, of course, pure poppycock but it was damnably effective poppycock. One of the many things I learned while traveling with my Uncle Charles was that there can be an amazing power found in words. Witness to this is, of course, that fine old bard Shakespeare whose words are still revered two and a half centuries after his passing and that, I can only surmise, will be revered for at least two and a half more centuries. I have been told by learned men, in fact, that you can even find his words translated into French and Spanish and the tongues of far off kingdoms in the Orient! Words become even more powerful when spoken correctly. This is what brings fame to great actors and orators around the world. I have spoken with men present at the second inauguration of the late Abraham Lincoln who recalled with tear filled eyes his powerful message. "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan," that great man wrote and spoke those powerful words which drive William and I in our mission.

Sapphira was a fiercely intelligent creature and she fully understood the importance of presentation for the theater she was creating for her special, and no doubt moneyed, guests. Although our investigations indicated she was Boston born Annie Maloney and not Princess of Soronia, she spoke and moved with a royal air. She appeared more the queen of these nether-realms and strange doings than any actress I have seen on stage portraying royalty. For a brief moment I allowed myself compassion for this lady and pondered why she would choose to live by cheating poor, sad souls instead of finding some honest vocation such as the theater. It is a vibrant new era and

it is perfectly acceptable, at least in my opinion, to see the fairer sex emoting on stage. What trauma had so hardened her heart? My moment of introspection was interrupted as the introductions began.

“I have already mentioned the gallant Mr. Shuttleton, here to seek he who saved his life.” I nodded to the assembly. “To my right are Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Tierney and Mrs. Hopkins, widows hoping to speak with their beloved husbands. At the end of the table Mr. and Mrs. Cyrus Robinson who lost three sons in the troubles.” She then turned her gaze to the wielder of the gold watch, “Josiah Fairborne, a widower, seeks his wife and his son cut down in battle.” Finally she turned to the two ladies. “Mrs. Hammerstag who also lost a son and finally Ms. Winifred Freer wishes to speak with her dearest brother, her twin.” A brother? Well, one cannot foresee every possibility. Well, perhaps William could have divined this information but I will admit that I had not even thought of a brother being the source of this good woman’s grief.

“Now, my good friends, we will begin to communicate with the spirit realm. The bond of love is our greatest link, so I ask you each to think of the love you shared with your departed husbands, brothers, sons and wife. Please, attempt not to think directly of them or of treasured remembrances, simply think of the love you shared. I shall shortly fall into my sleeping trance. It shall appear as though I have fainted, and although I will swoon I will be under no threat of harm. Simply think of the love and listen, listen to hear vispers. The spirits will introduce themselves as they are not known to most of the assembled. Listen and pray try to pluck a name from the ether. You may be the voice to name another’s loved one!” The princess once again straightened herself, breathing deeply, and with great effect, until she found the pose she desired. She looked across the table at the Robinsons. “Remember the love,” she said. Her gaze turned to the spinster Ms. Winifred and repeated, in a quieter, sing song voice, “Remember the love.” Finally she turned to Mrs. Johnson and barely spoke “Remember the love!” She drug out these syllables as her eyelids fluttered and she slumped backwards, Her head, seemingly limp as a ragdoll, fell back as though she was studying the season.

William could hardly contain himself and, unnoticed by the others, mimicked her dramatic eye fluttering in an unattractive fashion. Knowing what I knew, of course, he found her last plea the very height of irony. Mrs. Abigail Johnson had shared no love with her husband. His untimely death left her a fair fortune, but in life the man had been beastly to her. The whole marriage, cruelly enough, had been arranged by their families to cement a business deal. Poor Abigail had been so traumatized by the mistreatment she was dealt at the hands of her late husband that she had severed all ties with his family for spawning such a cruel man and also refused contact with her own as they had given her hand to the monster.

I had met her when she was studying a bill advertising Princess Sapphira’s public lecture on spiritualism. I suggested she not attend such hogwash and she, laughing at my low language, agreed but explained that she must attend. Her two dear friends, also widows but of happy unions, were attending in hopes of speaking with their departed husbands. They planned to “donate” enough to warrant seats to a private seance, the

very ritual we were now attending. Abigail's plan was to attend in hopes that the "appearance" of a loving version of her husband's spirit would show the grieving widows that the entire event was a ruse of the lowest order. As we talked and she learned of my expertise, she commissioned William and myself to expose the fraudulent princess. We were moved by her interest in her friends and, frankly, because she was an enchanting young woman. I believe we were sufficiently swayed by her charms to have agreed to a commission to build a dung heap wall with a bare hands!

"Names," the princess murmured loudly as she stirred as if she were struggling. "Names..." William glanced back at the tables, each covered with a fine silk cloth to make the perfect place from which to project ghostly and spectral voices. The princess let out a low moan. "Do you hear the names?"

The gold watch man, Mr. Fairborne, stared at the other guests, studying each intently. The elderly couple each looked as if they were about to burst into tears, as did Mrs. Hammerstag. The widows and Ms. Freer glanced about in wide-eyed anticipation. Even Mrs. Johnson appeared to be affected.

"Do you hear the names? Come to us spirits! You will be safe here," the princess called. As she did, I heard something... not a name, mind you, but a type of quiet grunt or moan, probably distorted through the use of a horn of some type. It made several of the guests jump, others glance around. "The names?" the princess gasped, and some guests began to slowly nod as a second noise made vaguely syllabic sounds such as "sssuuh," "ahhh" and "innn."

William caught my eye and gave me two names: Phineas and Felix. He nodded to the covered tables with a slight smile. "I believe I hear a name," Mrs. Hammerstag said with hesitation. "I am not sure what it is..." she trailed off.

"Nathaniel?" one of the widows ventured. It was Mrs. Tierney. "Did I hear them say Nathaniel?"

"Or Cyrus?" Mr. Fairborne asked. I could not get a measure of his voice; I could not determine if it contained hope. Either way, this was my cue.

"Phineas!" I exclaimed. "I distinctly heard Phineas! Or was it... Felix! Yes, Felix!" I exclaimed excitedly. The princess did not react but several of the guests brightened. "No! It is both! I distinctly hear both Phineas and Felix! Did you hear that, too!" One of the widows nodded excitedly with wide eyes.

"SOLOMON!" the princess said forcefully. I did not think she would let me steal her attention for long, especially if William was correct and I was revealing the names of her accomplices. "Solomon is here!" Before I could wonder whose loved one Solomon was the Robinsons burst into tears.

William caught my eye again. He started to feed me things to say out loud to the assembly. "Solomon," I said as if grasping for something. I pointed to an empty wall with my good hand. "I see him! Do you see him?" Everyone turned to the wall, except for the princess who remained slumped in her "trance." William indicated a few details for me to reveal. "The big oak tree," I gasped. "The big oak tree near the back field. Buried all his pay there... Use the money to buy the seed for next season!" I felt a pang of guilt as Mrs. Robinson swooned and slumped into a faint against her husband. He clutched at her, tears streaming down his face.

The princess spasmed violently, but did not open her eyes. "Thomas is here!" she exclaimed, but I already had new details from William.

"Susanna,' he says, 'Susanna it is proper for you to remarry. Do not be ashamed, my dearest.' He is standing over you, Mrs. Hopkins. He will always love you but you must continue to live your life," I offered.

"Mr. Shuttleton," the princess hissed, apparently she was now out of her trance. "Mr. Shuttleton—"

"Annie Mahoney," I interrupted. "I am told that you are Annie Mahoney. I hear another voice," courtesy, of course, of William's intelligence efforts. "It is Matthias." Mr. Fairborne snapped his stare at me. "He wants you to know that he is not angry, Mr. Fairborne. All is forgiven and forgotten. How can a son be angry at his father?" The man sunk into his seat as if exhausted. I believe that William and I had lifted a great burden from the man.

"However," I continued. "However parents can sometimes be disappointed by the choices their children make. They still love their Annie, but Zachariah and Beulah wonder what their Annie is doing. Why does she have her little nephews under tables? Phineas, Felix, come on out now boys!" I called. "Now boys!" I added a little more firmly and two small twin brothers scrambled out. Several guest made startled exclamations. I turned to the so-called princess. She had started to rise, probably to make her escape. "Your parents are concerned," I said. "They want you to repent, return to the Good Lord's righteous path and stop leading these people astray. They want you to raise your nephews to be better than this... But they love you. Your mother," I started, but waited for William to fill in the rest. "Your mother wants you to know that you can still change, be good." I added softly "Be her Little Dancing Annie again."

The use of her mother's pet name for the medium was simply too much for her to bear. She leapt from her chair. "HOW? How can you know that?"

"Beulah told me," I said quietly. This is when these fraudulent mediums get terribly unpredictable, so my good hand had slipped from the table to my vest pocket lest I need to retrieve my double shot derringer. It was not my desire to shoot anyone, much less a woman, but I had looked down the barrel of more than one false prophet's

weapon in the past and I had much less desire to be shot by anyone, much less this woman.

“How! How do you know this?” she demanded. “HOW? You must have The Gift. You really have The Gift! Show me! Show me!”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Go, take your nephews and go.”

“She is a thief!” Mr. Fairborne declared. “I demand—“

“You got your answer, sir,” I said, with equal shares of warning and menace in my voice.

“Do not presume to tell me what to do, sir! You may be a cripple but I will give you a thrashing!” he shouted as he sprung from his seat. “I shall—“ his words were cut off by the realization that my little pistol was aimed squarely at his forehead.

“You got your answer, sir,” I said quietly but forcefully. “Mr. Robinson,” I continued without diverting my eyes from Fairborne. “I do hope you look by the oak tree. Mrs. Hopkins, I hope your second marriage is as happy as your first. I am sorry that I do not have messages for the rest of you. Ms. Mahoney, take the children and leave.” I believe she started to say something so I added “NOW.”

Fairborne’s eyes followed her as she motioned to the boys and fled the room. If Fairborne was going to make a move, it would be when she opened the door and the exterior light flooded into the room. To my great surprise, the man remained in place. With the additional light, I could see that tears were silently rolling down his face. “Did you really speak with my son?”

I sighed and lowered my weapon, although I did not return it to my pocket. “I truly was given that message for you.” The man fell back into his chair, sobbing. The other guests began to whisper among themselves. I wondered to myself if Ms. Mahoney and her young nephews had made their escape yet. I slipped the little gun back into my vest.

It was perhaps an hour before the crowd had dispersed. I had explained that this was not the first of these fraudulent seances that I had disrupted. I lead several of the attendees over to examine the horns and phosphorous treated silks that the boys had left in their hiding places under the tables. We spoke about the experience and one by one they wandered back to their homes, or at least out of the room. The awkward bellboy had entered, perhaps drawn in by the excitement, and arranged a fire. I sat next to it alone with William. We were actually lodging in the hotel during our stay in the city, so we were in no rush to leave. “Quite a night,” William said.

“Yes,” I almost yawned. “I can only hope the rest of our business goes as well.” Before my chance meeting with Mrs. Johnson the exclusive reason for our visit to the

city was to scout suitable locations for a theatrical tour one of our conjuror clients was about to undertake. While he was to the north performing in the provinces of Canada we gathered the information he need to plan his upcoming American route.

“I believe we did good thing here on this night,” William declared. “You have a visitor,” he said, leaving his seat and moving away from the fireplace and into a corner. I glance behind me, towards the door, and spied Mrs. Johnson.

I rose from my seat and turned to her, “Ma’am, may I be a further assistance?”

She approached and I noticed she seemed to fumble with her pocketbook. She was a lovely woman, barely more than a girl, really, as she was full of youth.

“Would you care to sit,” I asked, motioning to the chair William had vacated.

“Please,” she said taking the seat and arranging her skirts. “I came to speak about the matter of payment,” she said. I noted she seemed nervous. Behind her, William made a face and shook his head, indicating that we should once again waive any fee.

“Ma’am, I am in your fair city on other business. I am glad to have provided the service, but no payment is required.”

“Oh, but I simply must! Please,” she began to open her bag and search inside. “It is only fair to—“

“No, ma’am,” I interrupted with a laugh. “It is only right to assist a lady and it is a particular pleasure to assist such a lovely one as yourself.”

“But—“ I shook my head, which stopped her words there. “Then may I ask a question?”

“Of course,” I said, taking my own seat again.

“How did you divine the messages you relayed? My dear friend Susanna, Susanna Hopkins, she did indeed come hoping to gain permission from her deceased husband to remarry. Yet, I never told you that was her purpose. And that Mr. Fairborne and—“

I laughed again. “As a student of stage conjuring, I have seen many of these, well,” I searched for words as I studied her pretty face. She had very blue eyes that were focused on me with intense curiosity. “Stunts, for lack of a better word. I have seen these types of stunts before so—“

“But that does not explain how you knew the answers to their questions! Tell me!” she pleaded, and she did remind me of a child begging for some sweet treat as she did.

Mrs. Abigail Johnson was, to borrow one of Uncle Charles' phrases, "a very fetching lass."

"Oh, my dear lady, a conjuror does not reveal their methods!"

She sat back and pouted in the most delightful way, but only for a moment. "Will you please accept some payment?"

"Payment is not necessary," I repeated, trying to ignore the adolescent mimes being performed by William behind this beautiful lady.

"Why do you do this, then?"

I looked away from her wide, questioning eyes for a moment and sighed. "My mother, my dear sweet mother, was destroyed by the war. She had two sons set off to preserve the Union. I returned, but my older brother did not." I fear I choked a bit as I spoke.

"I am sure he was quite the hero," Mrs. Johnson offered, with real sincerity in her voice.

I smiled a weak smile at her. She really was fetching and I found myself more than willing to speak to her (for the second time in a day) about something I hate to recall. "I do not know how he realized the deadly barrage was going to hit so close to me, but as rebel artillery exploded he threw himself between the savage explosion and..." I smiled an even weaker smile as the words would not come forth. "Pieces of the shell tore into my arm, but they savaged my brother. He did not survive long enough to know that he had, in fact, saved my life. So, yes, my dear lady, I consider him quite the hero."

Mrs. Johnson dabbed at her eye with a lacy kerchief. "I am so terribly sorry."

We sat in silence, merely enjoying the warmth of the fire, for some time. William even gave up on silently mocking me. Finally, Mrs. Johnson broke the silence. "You helped my dear friend this evening, kept her from becoming a victim of a charlatan. You gave solace, however you found your information, to strangers who desperately needed it. You, good sir, deserve some reward." I started to protest and she silenced me with a look. "If you will not accept money then I must insist that you allow me to prepare you a meal. You are traveling so surely you are missing home cooking! Not to brag, but I am told I am a fine cook. So I insist that you at least allow me to make you a fine supper and a pie tomorrow!"

I had been quite prepared to turn down any amount of money, no matter how much genuine gratitude was attached. This, however, was much more tempting. Abigail Johnson leaned in closer to me and said firmly, "Apple pie."

“I honestly do not require any reward,” I started and William made a face as if I had just introduced a goat in a dress as my Cousin Nell. “However, I feel that if I turned down this offer I would regret it for quite some time.”

“Good!” she said with a bright smile.

“Provided,” I said, “you allow me to escort you home this evening. It is well after dark.” William’s look now let me know he approved of this and he faded back into the corner. I would see him again later.

“That would be most appreciated,” she said, rising and offering her arm. I gladly accepted it and we moved towards the door. “We can make arrangements for tomorrow’s supper as we walk. But first, I would very much like to hear more about your brother, if you are willing to speak of him.”

“I think he would insist I regale you with stories of him,” I laughed. “He was quite a character.”

“What was his name?” she asked as me as we moved through the lobby of the hotel and towards the street.

“William. Even today I still feel as though he is near constant companion.”

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