

Chapter I

The Séance

On a March evening, at eight o'clock, Backhouse, the medium – a fast-rising star in the psychic world – was ushered into the study at 'Prolands', the Hampstead residence of Montague Faull. The room was illuminated only by the light of a blazing fire. The host, eyeing him with indolent curiosity, got up, and the usual conventional greetings were exchanged. Having indicated an easy chair before the fire to his guest, the South-American merchant sank back again into his own. The electric light was switched on. Faull's prominent, clear-cut features, metallic-looking skin, and general air of bored impassiveness, did not seem greatly to impress the medium, who was accustomed to regard men from a special angle. Backhouse, on the contrary, was a novelty to the merchant. As he tranquilly studied him through half-closed lids and the smoke of a cigar, he wondered how this little, thick-set person with the pointed beard contrived to remain so fresh and sane in appearance, in view of the morbid nature of his occupation.

'Do you smoke?' drawled Faull, by way of starting the conversation. 'No? Then will you take a drink?'

'Not at present, I thank you.'

A pause.

‘Everything is satisfactory? The materialization will take place?’

‘I see no reason to doubt it.’

‘That’s good, for I should not like my guests to be disappointed. I have your cheque written out in my pocket.’

‘Afterwards will do quite well.’

‘Nine o’clock was the time specified, I believe?’

‘I fancy so.’

The conversation continued to flag. Faull sprawled in his chair, and remained apathetic.

‘Would you care to hear what arrangements I have made?’

‘I am unaware that any are necessary, beyond chairs for your guests.’

‘I mean the decoration of the séance-room, the music, and so forth.’

Backhouse stared at his host. ‘But this is not a theatrical performance.’

‘That’s correct. Perhaps I ought to explain . . . There will be ladies present, and ladies, you know, are æsthetically inclined.’

‘In that case I have no objection. I only hope they will enjoy the performance to the end.’

He spoke rather dryly.

‘Well, that’s all right, then,’ said Faull. Flicking his cigar into the fire, he got up and helped himself to whisky.

‘Will you come and see the room?’

‘Thank you, no. I prefer to have nothing to do with it till the time arrives.’

‘Then let’s go and see my sister, Mrs Jameson, who is

in the drawing-room. She sometimes does me the kindness to act as my hostess, as I am unmarried.'

'I shall be delighted,' said Backhouse coldly.

They found the lady alone, sitting by the open pianoforte, in a pensive attitude. She had been playing Scriabine, and was overcome. The medium took in her small, tight, patrician features and porcelain-like hands, and wondered how Faull came by such a sister. She received him gravely, with just a shade of quiet emotion. He was used to such receptions at the hands of the sex, and knew well how to respond to them.

'What amazes me,' she half whispered, after ten minutes of graceful, hollow conversation, 'is, if you must know it, not so much the manifestation itself – though that will surely be wonderful – as your assurance that it will take place. Tell me the grounds of your confidence.'

'I dream with open eyes,' he answered, looking round at the door, 'and others see my dreams. That is all.'

'But that's beautiful,' responded Mrs Jameson. She smiled rather absently, for the first guest had just entered.

It was Kent-Smith, the ex-magistrate, celebrated for his shrewd judicial humour, which, however, he had the good sense not to attempt to carry into private life. Although well on the wrong side of seventy, his eyes were still disconcertingly bright. With the selective skill of an old man, he immediately settled himself in the most comfortable of many comfortable chairs.

'So we are to see wonders tonight?'

'Fresh material for your Autobiography,' remarked Faull.

'Ah, you should not have mentioned my unfortunate

book. An old public servant is merely amusing himself in his retirement, Mr Backhouse. You have no cause for alarm – I have studied in the school of discretion.’

‘I am not alarmed. There can be no possible objection to your publishing whatever you please.’

‘You are most kind,’ said the old man, with a cunning smile.

‘Trent is not coming tonight,’ remarked Mrs Jameson, throwing a curious little glance at her brother.

‘I never thought he would. It’s not in his line.’

‘Mrs Trent, you must understand,’ she went on, addressing the ex-magistrate, ‘has placed us all under a debt of gratitude. She has decorated the old lounge-hall upstairs most beautifully, and has secured the services of the sweetest little orchestra.’

‘But this is Roman magnificence.’

‘Backhouse thinks the spirits should be treated with more deference,’ laughed Faull.

‘Surely, Mr Backhouse . . . a poetic environment . . .’

‘Pardon me. I am a simple man, and always prefer to reduce things to elemental simplicity. I raise no opposition, but I express my opinion. Nature is one thing, and Art is another.’

‘And I am not sure that I don’t agree with you,’ said the ex-magistrate. ‘An occasion like this ought to be simple, to guard against the possibility of deception – if you will forgive my bluntness, Mr Backhouse.’

‘We shall sit in full light,’ replied Backhouse, ‘and every opportunity will be given to all to inspect the room. I shall also ask you to submit me to a personal examination.’

A rather embarrassed silence followed. It was broken by the arrival of two more guests, who entered together. These were Prior, the prosperous City coffee-importer, and Lang, the stock-jobber, well known in his own circle as an amateur prestidigitator. Backhouse was slightly acquainted with the latter. Prior, perfuming the room with the faint odour of wine and tobacco smoke, tried to introduce an atmosphere of joviality into the proceedings. Finding that no one seconded his efforts, however, he shortly subsided and fell to examining the water-colours on the walls. Lang, tall, thin, and growing bald, said little, but stared a good deal at Backhouse.

Coffee, liqueurs, and cigarettes were now brought in. Everyone partook, except Lang and the medium. At the same moment, Professor Halbart was announced. He was the eminent psychologist, the author and lecturer on crime, insanity, genius, etc., considered in their mental aspects. His presence at such a gathering somewhat mystified the other guests, but all felt as if the object of their meeting had immediately acquired additional solemnity. He was small, meagre-looking, and mild in manner, but was probably the most stubborn brained of all that mixed company. Completely ignoring the medium, he at once sat down beside Kent-Smith, with whom he began to exchange remarks.

At a few minutes past the appointed hour Mrs Trent entered, unannounced. She was a woman of about eight-and-twenty. She had a white, demure, saint-like face, smooth black hair, and lips so crimson and full that they seemed as if bursting with blood. Her tall, graceful body was most expensively attired. Kisses were exchanged

between her and Mrs Jameson. She bowed to the rest of the assembly, and stole a half-glance and a smile at Faull. The latter gave her a queer look, and Backhouse, who lost nothing, saw the concealed barbarian in the complacent gleam of his eye. She refused the refreshment that was offered her, and Faull proposed that, as everyone had now arrived, they should adjourn to the lounge-hall.

Mrs Trent held up a slender palm.

‘Did you, or did you not, give me *carte blanche*, Montague?’

‘Of course I did,’ said Faull, laughing. ‘But what’s the matter?’

‘Perhaps I have been rather presumptuous. I don’t know. I have invited a couple of friends to join us. No, no one knows them . . . The two most extraordinary individuals you ever saw. And mediums, I am sure.’

‘It sounds very mysterious. Who are these conspirators?’

‘At least tell us their names, you provoking girl,’ put in Mrs Jameson.

‘One rejoices in the name of Maskull, and the other in that of Nightspore. That’s nearly all that I know about them, so don’t overwhelm me with any more questions.’

‘But where did you pick them up? You must have picked them up somewhere.’

‘But this is a cross-examination. Have I sinned against convention? I swear I will tell you not another word about them. They will be here directly, and then I will deliver them to your tender mercy.’

‘I don’t know them,’ said Faull, ‘and nobody else

seems to, but, of course, we shall all be very pleased to have them . . . Shall we wait, or what?’

‘I said nine, and it’s past that now. It’s quite possible they may not turn up after all . . . Anyway, don’t wait.’

‘I would prefer to start at once,’ said Backhouse.

The lounge, a lofty apartment, forty feet long by twenty broad, had been divided for the occasion into two equal parts by a heavy brocade curtain drawn across the middle. The far end was thus concealed. The nearer half had been converted into an auditorium by a crescent of arm-chairs. There was no other furniture. A large fire was burning half-way along the wall, between the chair-backs and the door. The room was brilliantly lighted by electric bracket-lamps. A sumptuous carpet covered the floor.

Having settled his guests in their seats, Faull stepped up to the curtain and flung it aside. A replica, or nearly so, of the Drury Lane presentation of the temple scene in the ‘*Magic Flute*’ was then exposed to view. The gloomy, massive architecture of the interior, the glowing sky above it in the background and, silhouetted against the latter, the gigantic seated statue of the Pharaoh. A fantastically-carved wooden couch lay before the pedestal of the statue. Near the curtain, obliquely placed to the auditorium, was a plain oaken arm-chair, for the use of the medium.

Many of those present privately felt that the setting was quite inappropriate to the occasion and savoured rather unpleasantly of ostentation. Backhouse in particular seemed put out. The usual compliments, however, were showered on Mrs Trent, as the deviser of so remarkable a theatre. Faull invited his friends to step

forward and examine the apartment as minutely as they might desire. Prior and Lang were the only ones to accept. The former wandered about among the pasteboard scenery, whistling to himself and occasionally tapping a part of it with his knuckles. Lang, who was in his element, ignored the rest of his party and commenced a patient, systematic search, on his own account, for secret apparatus. Faull and Mrs Trent stood in a corner of the temple, talking together in low tones; while Mrs Jameson, pretending to hold Backhouse in conversation, watched them, as only a deeply-interested woman knows how to watch.

Lang, to his own disgust, having failed to find anything of a suspicious nature, the medium now requested that his own clothing should be searched.

‘All these precautions are quite needless and beside the matter in hand, as you will immediately see for yourselves. My reputation demands, however, that other people who are not present should not be able afterwards to say that trickery has been resorted to.’

To Lang again fell the ungrateful task of investigating pockets and sleeves. Within a few minutes he expressed himself satisfied that nothing mechanical was in Backhouse’s possession. The guests reseated themselves. Faull ordered two more chairs to be brought for Mrs Trent’s friends, who, however, had not yet arrived. He then pressed an electric bell, and took his own seat.

The signal was for the hidden orchestra to begin playing. A murmur of surprise passed through the audience as, without previous warning, the beautiful and solemn strains of Mozart’s ‘Temple’ music pulsed through the

air. The expectation of everyone was raised, while, beneath her pallor and composure, it could be seen that Mrs Trent was deeply moved. It was evident that æthetically she was by far the most important person present. Faull watched her, with his face sunk on his chest, sprawling as usual.

Backhouse stood up, with one hand on the back of his chair, and began speaking. The music instantly sank to *pianissimo*, and remained so for as long as he was on his legs.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness a materialization. That means, you will see something appear in space which was not previously there. At first it will appear as a vaporous form, but finally it will be a solid body, which anyone present may feel and handle . . . and, for example, shake hands with. For this body will be in the human shape. It will be a real man or woman – which, I can’t say – but a man or woman without known antecedents. If, however, you demand from me an explanation of the origin of this materialized form – where it comes from, whence the atoms and molecules composing its tissues are derived – I am unable to satisfy you. I am about to produce the phenomenon; if anyone can explain it to me afterwards, I shall be very grateful . . . That is all I have to say.’

He resumed his seat, half turning his back on the assembly, and paused for a moment before beginning his task.

It was precisely at this minute that the man-servant opened the door, and announced in a subdued but distinct voice – ‘Mr Maskull, Mr Nightspore.’

Everyone turned round. Faull rose to welcome the late arrivals. Backhouse also stood up, and stared hard at them.

The two strangers remained standing by the door, which was closed quietly behind them. They seemed to be waiting for the mild sensation caused by their appearance to subside, before advancing into the room. Maskull was a kind of giant, but of broader and robuster physique than most giants. He wore a full beard. His features were thick and heavy, coarsely modelled, like those of a wooden carving; but his eyes, small and black, sparkled with the fires of intelligence and audacity. His hair was short, black, and bristling. Nightspore was of middle height, but so tough-looking that he appeared as if trained out of all human frailties and susceptibilities. His hairless face seemed consumed by an intense spiritual hunger, and his eyes were wild and distant. Both men were dressed in tweeds.

Before any words were spoken, a loud and terrible crash of falling masonry caused the assembled party to start up from their chairs in consternation. It sounded as if the entire upper part of the building had collapsed. Faull sprang to the door, and called to the servant to say what was happening. The man had to be questioned twice before he gathered what was required of him. He said he had heard nothing. In obedience to his master's order, he went upstairs. Nothing, however, was amiss there, neither had the maids heard anything.

In the meantime Backhouse, who almost alone of those assembled had preserved his sang-froid, went straight up to Nightspore, who stood gnawing his nails.

‘Perhaps you can explain it, sir?’

‘It was supernatural,’ said Nightspore, in a harsh, muffled voice, turning away from his questioner.

‘I guessed so. It is a familiar phenomenon, but I have never heard it so loud.’

He then went among the guests, reassuring them. By degrees they settled down, but it was observable that their former easy and good-humoured interest in the proceedings was now changed to strained watchfulness. Maskull and Nightspore took the places allotted to them. Mrs Trent kept stealing uneasy glances at them. Throughout the entire incident, Mozart’s Hymn continued to be played. The orchestra also had heard nothing.

Backhouse now entered on his task. It was one that began to be familiar to him, and he had no anxiety about the result. It was not possible to effect the materialization by mere concentration of will, or the exercise of any faculty; otherwise many people could have done what he had engaged himself to do. His nature was phenomenal – the dividing-wall between himself and the spiritual world was broken in many places. Through the gaps in his mind the inhabitants of the invisible, when he summoned them, passed for a moment timidly and awfully into the solid, coloured universe . . . He could not say how it was brought about . . . The experience was a rough one for the body, and many such struggles would lead to insanity and early death. That is why Backhouse was stern and abrupt in his manner. The coarse, clumsy suspicion of some of the witnesses, the frivolous æstheticism of others, were equally obnoxious to his grim,

bursting heart; but he was obliged to live and, to pay his way, must put up with these impertinences.

He sat down, facing the wooden couch. His eyes remained open, but seemed to look inwards. His cheeks paled, and he became noticeably thinner. The spectators almost forgot to breathe. The more sensitive among them began to feel, or imagine, strange presences all around them. Maskull's eyes glittered with anticipation, and his brows went up and down, but Nightspore appeared bored.

After a long ten minutes the pedestal of the statue was seen to become slightly blurred, as though an intervening mist were rising from the ground. This slowly developed into a visible cloud, coiling hither and thither, and constantly changing shape. The professor half-rose, and held his glasses with one hand further forward on the bridge of his nose.

By slow stages the cloud acquired the dimensions and approximate outline of an adult human body, although all was still vague and blurred. It hovered lightly in the air, a foot or so above the couch. Backhouse looked haggard and ghastly. Mrs Jameson quietly fainted in her chair, but she was unnoticed, and presently revived. The apparition now settled down upon the couch, and at the moment of doing so seemed suddenly to grow dark, solid, and manlike. Many of the guests were as pale as the medium himself, but Faull preserved his stoical apathy, and glanced once or twice at Mrs Trent. She was staring straight at the couch, and was twisting a little lace handkerchief through the different fingers of her hand. The music went on playing.

The figure was by this time unmistakably that of a man lying down. The face focussed itself into distinctness. The body was draped in a sort of shroud, but the features were those of a young man. One smooth hand fell over, nearly touching the floor, white and motionless. The weaker spirits of the company stared at the vision in sick horror, the rest were grave and perplexed. The seeming man was *dead*, but somehow it did not appear like a death succeeding life, but like a death preliminary to life. All felt that he might sit up at any minute.

‘Stop that music!’ muttered Backhouse, tottering from his chair and facing the party. Faull touched the bell. A few more bars sounded, and then total silence ensued.

‘Anyone who wants to may approach the couch,’ said Backhouse, with difficulty.

Lang at once advanced, and stared awestruck at the supernatural youth.

‘You are at liberty to touch,’ said the medium.

But Lang did not venture, nor did any of the others, who one by one stole up to the couch; until it came to Faull’s turn. He looked straight at Mrs Trent, who seemed frightened and disgusted at the spectacle before her, and then not only touched the apparition, but suddenly grasped the drooping hand in his own and gave it a powerful squeeze. Mrs Trent gave a low scream. The ghostly visitor opened his eyes, looked at Faull strangely, and sat up on the couch. A cryptic smile started playing over his mouth. Faull looked at his hand; a feeling of intense pleasure passed through his body.

Maskull caught Mrs Jameson in his arms; she was

attacked by another spell of faintness. Mrs Trent ran forward, and led her out of the room. Neither of them returned.

The phantom body now stood upright, looking about him, still with his peculiar smile. Prior suddenly felt sick, and went out. The other men more or less hung together, for the sake of human society, but Nightspore paced up and down, like a man weary and impatient, while Maskull attempted to interrogate the youth. The apparition watched him with a baffling expression, but did not answer. Backhouse was sitting apart, his face buried in his hands.

It was at this moment that the door was burst violently open, and a stranger, unannounced, half leapt, half strode a few yards into the room, and then stopped. None of Faull's friends had ever seen him before. He was a thick, shortish man, with surprising muscular development and a head far too large in proportion to his body. His beardless, yellow face indicated, as a first impression, a mixture of sagacity, brutality, and humour.

'Aha-i, gentlemen!' he called out loudly. His voice was piercing, and oddly disagreeable to the ear. 'So we have a little visitor here.'

Nightspore turned his back, but everyone else stared at the intruder in astonishment. He took another few paces forward, which brought him to the edge of the theatre.

'May I ask, sir, how I come to have the honour of being your host?' asked Faull sullenly. He thought that the evening was not proceeding as smoothly as he had anticipated.

The newcomer looked at him for a second, and then broke into a great, roaring guffaw. He thumped Faull on the back playfully – but the play was rather rough, for the victim was sent staggering against the wall before he could recover his balance.

‘Good evening, my host!’

‘And good evening to you too, my lad!’ he went on, addressing the supernatural youth, who was now beginning to wander about the room, in apparent unconsciousness of his surroundings. ‘I have seen someone very like you before, I think.’

There was no response.

The intruder thrust his head almost up to the phantom’s face. ‘You have no right here, as you know.’

The shape looked back at him, with a smile full of significance, which, however, no one could understand.

‘Be careful what you are doing,’ said Backhouse quickly.

‘What’s the matter, spirit-usher?’

‘I don’t know who you are, but if you use physical violence towards *that*, as you seem inclined to do, the consequences may prove very unpleasant.’

‘And without pleasure our evening would be spoilt, wouldn’t it, my little mercenary friend?’

Humour vanished from his face, like sunlight from a landscape, leaving it hard and rocky. Before anyone realized what he was doing, he encircled the soft, white neck of the materialized shape with his hairy hands and, with a double-turn, twisted it completely round. A faint, unearthly shriek sounded, and the body fell in a heap to the floor. Its face was uppermost. The guests were

unutterably shocked to observe that its expression had changed from the mysterious but fascinating smile to a vulgar, sordid, bestial grin, which cast a cold shadow of moral nastiness into every heart. The transformation was accompanied by a sickening stench of the graveyard.

The features faded rapidly away, the body lost its consistence, passing from the solid to the shadowy condition, and before two minutes had elapsed the spirit-form had entirely disappeared.

The short stranger turned and confronted the party, with a long, loud laugh, like nothing in nature.

The professor talked excitedly to Kent-Smith, in low tones. Faull beckoned Backhouse behind a wing of scenery, and handed him his cheque without a word. The medium put it in his pocket, buttoned his coat, and walked out of the room. Lang followed him, in order to get a drink.

The stranger poked his face up into Maskull's.

'Well, giant, what do you think of it all? Shouldn't you like to see the land where this sort of fruit grows wild?'

'What sort of fruit?'

'That specimen goblin.'

Maskull put him away with his huge hand.

'Who are you, and how did you come here?'

'Call your friend up. Perhaps he may recognize me.'

Nightspore had moved a chair to the fire, and was watching the embers with a set, fanatical expression.

'Let Krag come to me, if he wants me,' he said, in his strange voice.

'You see, he does know me,' uttered Krag, with a

humorous look. Walking over to Nightspore, he put a hand on the back of his chair.

‘Still the same old gnawing hunger?’

‘What is doing in these days?’ demanded Nightspore disdainfully, without altering his attitude.

‘Surtur has gone, and we are to follow him.’

‘How do you two come to know each other, and of whom are you speaking?’ asked Maskull, looking from one to the other in perplexity.

‘Krag has something for us. Let us get outside,’ replied Nightspore. He got up, and glanced over his shoulder. Maskull, following the direction of his eye, observed that the few remaining men were watching their little group attentively.

Chapter II

In the Street

The three men gathered in the road outside the house. The night was slightly frosty, but particularly clear, with an east wind blowing. The multitude of blazing stars caused the sky to appear like a vast scroll of hieroglyphic symbols. Maskull felt oddly excited; he had a sense that something extraordinary was about to happen.

‘What brought you to this house tonight, Krag, and what made you do what you did? . . . How are we to understand that apparition?’

‘That must have been Crystalman’s expression on its face,’ muttered Nightspore.

‘We have discussed that, haven’t we, Maskull? Maskull is anxious to behold that rare fruit in its native wilds.’

Maskull looked at Krag carefully, trying to analyse his own feelings towards him. He was distinctly repelled by the man’s personality, yet side by side with this aversion a savage, living energy seemed to spring up in his heart which in some strange fashion was attributable to Krag.

‘Why do you insist on this simile?’ he asked.

‘Because it is apropos. Nightspore’s quite right. That was Crystalman’s face, and we are going to Crystalman’s country.’

‘And where is this mysterious country?’

‘Tormance.’

‘That’s a quaint name. But where is it?’

Krag grinned, showing his yellow teeth, in the light of the street lamp.

‘It is the residential suburb of Arcturus.’

‘What is he talking about, Nightspore? . . . Do you mean the star of that name?’ he went on, to Krag.

‘Which you have in front of you at this very minute,’ said Krag, pointing a thick finger towards the brightest star in the south-eastern sky. ‘There you see Arcturus, and Tormance is its one inhabited planet.’

Maskull looked at the heavy, gleaming star, and again at Krag. Then he pulled out a pipe, and began to fill it.

‘You must have cultivated a new form of humour, Krag.’

‘I am glad if I can amuse you, Maskull, if only for a few days.’

‘I meant to ask you – how do you know my name?’

‘It would be odd if I didn’t, seeing that I only came here on your account. As a matter of fact, Nightspore and I are old friends.’

Maskull paused with his suspended match.

‘You came here on my account?’

‘Surely. On your account and Nightspore’s. We three are to be fellow-travellers.’

Maskull now lit his pipe, and puffed away coolly for a few moments.

‘I’m sorry, Krag, but I must assume you are mad.’

Krag threw his head back, and gave a scraping laugh.

‘Am I mad, Nightspore?’

‘Has Surtur gone to Tormance?’ ejaculated Nightspore in a strangled voice, fixing his eyes on Krag’s face.

‘Yes, and he requires us to follow him at once.’

Maskull’s heart began to beat strangely. It all sounded to him like a dream-conversation.

‘And since how long, Krag, have I been *required* to do things by a total stranger . . . besides, who is this individual?’

‘Krag’s chief,’ said Nightspore, turning his head away.

‘The riddle is too elaborate for me. I give it up.’

‘You are looking for mysteries,’ said Krag, ‘so naturally you are finding them. Try and simplify your ideas, my friend. The affair is plain and serious.’

Maskull stared hard at him, and smoked rapidly.

‘Where have you come from now?’ demanded Nightspore suddenly.

‘From the old Observatory at Starkness . . . Have you heard of the famous Starkness Observatory, Maskull?’

‘No. Where is it?’

‘On the north-east coast of Scotland. Curious discoveries are made there from time to time.’

‘As, for example, how to make voyages to the stars. So this Surtur turns out to be an astronomer. And you too, presumably?’

Krag grinned again. ‘How long will it take you to wind up your affairs? When can you be ready to start?’

‘You are too considerate,’ said Maskull, laughing outright. ‘I was beginning to fear that I should be hauled away at once . . . However, I have neither wife, land, nor profession, so there’s nothing to wait for . . . What is the itinerary?’

‘You are a fortunate man. A bold, daring heart, and no encumbrances.’ Krag’s features became suddenly grave and rigid. ‘Don’t be a fool, and refuse a gift of luck. A gift declined is not offered a second time.’

‘Krag,’ replied Maskull simply, returning his pipe to his pocket, ‘I ask you to put yourself in my place. Even if I were a man sick for adventures, how could I listen seriously to such an insane proposition as this? What do I know about you, or your past record? You may be a practical joker, or you may have come out of a madhouse – I know nothing about it. If you claim to be an exceptional man, and want my co-operation, you must offer me exceptional proofs.’

‘And what proofs would you consider adequate, Maskull?’

As he spoke he gripped Maskull’s arm. A sharp, chilling pain immediately passed through the latter’s body . . . and at the same moment his brain caught fire. A light burst in upon him like the rising of the sun. He asked himself for the first time if this fantastic conversation could by any chance refer to real things.

‘Listen, Krag,’ he said slowly, while peculiar images and conceptions started to travel in rich disorder through his mind. ‘You talk about a certain journey. Well, if that journey were a possible one, and I were given the chance of making it, I would be willing never to come back. For four-and-twenty hours in that Arcturian planet, I would give my life. This is my attitude towards that journey . . . Now prove to me that you’re not talking nonsense. Produce your credentials.’

Krag stared at him all the time he was speaking, his face gradually resuming its jesting expression.

‘Oh, you will get your twenty-four hours, and perhaps longer, but not much longer. You’re an audacious fellow, Maskull, but this trip will prove a little strenuous, even for you . . . And so, like the unbelievers of old, you want a sign from heaven?’

Maskull frowned. ‘But the whole thing is ridiculous. Our brains are over-excited by what took place in *there*. Let us go home, and sleep it off.’

Krag detained him with one hand, while groping in his breast-pocket with the other. He presently fished out what resembled a small folding-lens. The diameter of the glass did not exceed two inches.

‘First take a peep at Arcturus through this, Maskull. It may serve as a provisional sign. It’s the best I can do, unfortunately. I am not a travelling magician . . . Be very careful not to drop it. It’s somewhat heavy.’

Maskull took the lens in his hand, struggled with it for a minute, and then looked at Krag in amazement. The little object weighed at least twenty pounds, though in size not much bigger than a crown piece.

‘What stuff can this be, Krag?’

‘Look through it, my good friend. That’s what I gave it to you for.’

Maskull held it up with difficulty, directed it towards the gleaming Arcturus, and snatched as long and as steady a glance at the star as the muscles of his arm would permit. What he saw was this. The star, which to the naked eye appeared as a single yellow point of light, now became clearly split into two bright but minute suns, the larger of which was still yellow, while its smaller companion was a beautiful blue. But this was not all.

Apparently circulating round the yellow sun was a comparatively small and hardly distinguishable satellite, which seemed to shine, not by its own, but by reflected light . . . Maskull lowered and raised his arm repeatedly. The same spectacle revealed itself again and again, but he was able to see nothing else. Then he passed back the lens to Krag, without a word, and stood chewing his under-lip.

‘You too take a glimpse,’ scraped Krag, proffering the glass to Nightspore.

Nightspore turned his back, and began to pace up and down. Krag laughed sardonically, and returned the lens to his pocket.

‘Well, Maskull, are you satisfied?’

‘Arcturus, then, is a double sun. And is that third point the planet Tormance?’

‘Our future home, Maskull.’

Maskull continued to ponder.

‘You inquire if I am satisfied. I don’t know, Krag. It’s miraculous, and that’s all I can say about it . . . But I’m satisfied of one thing. There must be very wonderful astronomers at Starkness, and if you invite me to your Observatory I will surely come.’

‘I do invite you. It’s from there that we set off.’

‘And you, Nightspore?’ demanded Maskull.

‘The journey has to be made,’ answered his friend in indistinct tones, ‘though I don’t see what will come of it.’

Krag shot a penetrating glance at him.

‘More remarkable adventures than this would need to be arranged before we could excite Nightspore.’

‘Yet he is coming.’

‘But not *con amore*. He is coming merely to bear you company.’

Maskull again sought the heavy, sombre star, gleaming in solitary might, in the south-eastern heavens, and, as he gazed, his heart swelled with grand and painful longings, for which, however, he was unable to account to his own intellect. He felt that his destiny was in some way bound up with this gigantic, far-distant sun. But still he did not dare to admit to himself Krag’s seriousness.

He heard his parting remarks in deep abstraction, and only after the lapse of several minutes, when alone with Nightspore, did he realize that they referred to such mundane matters as travelling-routes and times of trains.

‘Does Krag travel north with us, Nightspore? I didn’t catch.’

‘No. We go on first, and he joins us at Starkness on the evening of the day after tomorrow.’

Maskull remained thoughtful.

‘What am I to think of that man?’

‘For your information,’ replied Nightspore wearily, ‘I have never known him to lie.’

Chapter III

Starkness

A couple of days later, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Maskull and Nightspore arrived at Starkness Observatory, having covered the seven miles from Haillar Station on foot. The road, very wild and lonely, ran for the greater part of the way near the edge of rather lofty cliffs, within sight of the North Sea. The sun shone, but a brisk east wind was blowing and the air was salt and cold. The dark green waves were flecked with white. Throughout the walk, they were accompanied by the plaintive, beautiful crying of the gulls.

The Observatory presented itself to their eyes as a self-contained little community, without neighbours, and perched on the extreme end of the land. There were three buildings: a small, stone-built dwelling-house, a low workshop, and, about two hundred yards further north, a square tower of granite masonry, seventy feet in height. The house and the shop were separated by an open yard, littered with waste. A single stone wall surrounded both, except on the side facing the sea, where the house itself formed a continuation of the cliff. No one appeared. The windows were all closed, and Maskull could have sworn that the whole establishment was shut up and deserted.

He passed through the open gate, followed by Nightspore, and knocked vigorously at the front door. The knocker was thick with dust and had obviously not been used for a long time. He put his ear to the door, but could hear no movements inside the house. He then tried the handle; the door was locked.

They walked round the house, looking for another entrance, but there was but the one door.

‘This isn’t promising,’ growled Maskull. ‘There’s no one here . . . Now you try the shed, while I go over to that tower.’

Nightspore, who had spoken not half a dozen words since leaving the train, complied in silence, and started off across the yard. Maskull passed out of the gate again. When he arrived at the foot of the tower, which stood some way back from the cliff, he found the door heavily padlocked. Gazing up, he saw six windows, one above the other at equal distances, all on the east face – that is, overlooking the sea. Realizing that no satisfaction was to be gained here, he came away again, still more irritated than before. When he rejoined his friend, Nightspore reported that the workshop also was locked.

‘Did we, or did we not, receive an invitation?’ demanded Maskull energetically.

‘The house is empty,’ replied Nightspore, biting his nails. ‘Better break a window.’

‘I certainly don’t mean to camp out till Krag condescends to come.’

He picked up an old iron bolt from the yard and, retreating to a safe distance, hurled it against a sash-window on the ground floor. The lower pane was completely

shattered. Carefully avoiding the broken glass, Maskull thrust his hand through the aperture and pushed back the frame-fastening. A minute later they had climbed through and were standing inside the house.

The room, which was a kitchen, was in an indescribably filthy and neglected condition. The furniture scarcely held together, broken utensils and rubbish lay on the floor instead of on the dustheap, everything was covered with a deep deposit of dust. The atmosphere was so foul that Maskull judged that no fresh air had passed into the apartment for several months. Insects were crawling on the walls.

They went into the other rooms on the lower floor – a scullery, a barely-furnished dining-room, and a store place for lumber. The same dirt, mustiness, and neglect met their eyes. Half a year at least must have elapsed since these rooms were last touched, or even entered.

‘Does your faith in Krag still hold?’ asked Maskull. ‘I confess mine is at vanishing-point. If this affair isn’t one big practical joke, it has every promise of one. Krag never lived here in his life.’

‘Come upstairs first,’ said Nightspore.

The upstairs rooms proved to consist of a library and three bedrooms. All the windows were tightly closed, and the air was insufferable. The beds had been slept in, evidently a long time ago, and had never been made up since. The tumbled, discoloured bed linen actually preserved the impressions of the sleepers. There was no doubt that these impressions were ancient, for all sorts of floating dirt had accumulated on the sheets and coverlets.

‘Who could have slept here, do you think?’ interrogated Maskull. ‘The Observatory staff?’

‘More likely travellers like ourselves. They left suddenly.’

Maskull flung the windows wide open in every room he came to, and held his breath until he had done so. Two of the bedrooms faced the sea; the third, and the library, the upward-sloping moorland. This library was now the only apartment left unvisited, and unless they discovered signs of recent occupation here Maskull made up his mind to regard the whole business as a gigantic hoax.

But the library, like all the other rooms, was foul with stale air and dust-laden. Maskull, having thrown the window up and down, fell heavily into an arm-chair and looked disgustedly at his friend.

‘Now what is your opinion of Krag?’

Nightspore sat on the edge of the table which stood before the window.

‘He may still have left a message for us.’

‘What message? Why? Do you mean in this room? – I see no message.’

Nightspore’s eyes wandered strangely about the room, finally seeming to linger upon a glass-fronted wall-cupboard, which contained a few old bottles on one of the shelves, and nothing else. Maskull glanced at him, and at the cupboard. Then, without a word, he got up to examine the bottles.

There were four altogether, one of which was larger than the rest. The smaller ones were about eight inches long. All were torpedo-shaped, but had flattened bottoms, which enabled them to stand upright. Two of the

smaller ones were empty and unstoppered, the others contained a colourless liquid, and possessed queer-looking, nozzle-like stoppers which were connected by a thin metal rod with a catch half-way down the side of the bottle. They were labelled, but the labels were yellow with age and the writing was nearly undecipherable. Maskull carried the filled bottles with him to the table in front of the window, in order to get better light. Nightspore moved away to make room for him.

He now made out on the larger bottle the words 'Solar Back-Rays'; and on the other one, after some doubt, he thought that he could distinguish something like 'Arc-turian Back-Rays'.

He looked up, to stare curiously at his friend.

'Have you been here before, Nightspore?'

'I guessed Krag would leave a message.'

'Well, I don't know – it may be a message, but it means nothing to us, or at all events to me. What are "back-rays"?''

'Light which goes back to its source,' muttered Nightspore.

'And what kind of light may that be?'

Nightspore seemed unwilling to answer, but finding Maskull's eyes still fixed on him he brought out – 'Unless light pulled, as well as pushed, how would flowers contrive to twist their heads round after the sun?'

'I don't know. But the point is, what are these bottles for?'

While he was still talking, with his hand on the smaller bottle, the other, which was lying on its side, accidentally rolled over in such a manner that the metal