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Heading by
Vincent Napoli

Dearest

BY H. BEAM PIPER

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Colonel Ashley Hampton chewed his cigar and forced himself to relax, his glance slowly traversing the room, lingering on the mosaic of book-spines in the tall cases, the sunlight splashed on the faded pastel colors of the carpet, the soft-tinted autumn landscape outside the French windows, the trophies of Indian and Filipino and German weapons on the walls. He could easily feign relaxation here in the library of "Greyrock," as long as he looked only at these familiar inanimate things and avoided the five people gathered in the room with him, for all of them were enemies.

There was his nephew, Stephen Hampton, greying at the temples but youthfully dressed in sports-clothes, leaning with obvious if slightly premature proprietorship against the fireplace, a whiskey-and-soda in his hand. There was Myra, Stephen's smart, sophisticated-looking blonde wife, reclining in a chair beside the desk. For these two, he felt an implacable hatred. The others were no less enemies, perhaps more dangerous enemies, but they were only the tools of Stephen and Myra. For instance, T. Barnwell Powell, prim and self-satisfied, sitting on the edge of his chair and clutching the briefcase on his lap as though it were a restless pet which might attempt to escape. He was an honest man, as lawyers went; painfully ethical. No doubt he had convinced himself that his clients were acting from the noblest and most disinterested motives. And Doctor Alexis Vehrner, with his Vandyke beard and his Viennese accent as phony as a Soviet-controlled election, who had preempted the chair at Colonel Hampton's desk. That rankled the old soldier, but Doctor Vehrner would want to assume the position which would give him appearance of commanding the situation, and he probably felt that Colonel Hampton was no longer the master of "Greyrock." The fifth, a Neanderthal type in a white jacket, was Doctor Vehrner's attendant and bodyguard; he could be ignored, like an enlisted man unthinkingly obeying the orders of a superior.

"But you are not cooperating, Colonel Hampton," the psychiatrist complained. "How can I help you if you do not cooperate?"

Colonel Hampton took the cigar from his mouth. His white mustache, tinged a faint yellow by habitual smoking, twitched angrily.

"Oh; you call it helping me, do you?" he asked acidly.

"But why else am I here?" the doctor parried.

"You're here because my loving nephew and his charming wife can't wait to see me buried in the family cemetery; they want to bury me alive in that private Bedlam of yours," Colonel Hampton replied.

"See!" Myra Hampton turned to the psychiatrist. "We are *persecuting* him! We are all *envious* of him! We are *plotting against* him!"

"Of course; this sullen and suspicious silence is a common paranoid symptom; one often finds such symptoms in cases of senile dementia," Doctor Vehrner agreed.

Colonel Hampton snorted contemptuously. Senile dementia! Well, he must have been senile and demented, to bring this pair of snakes into his home, because he felt an obligation to his dead brother's memory. And he'd willed "Greyrock," and his money, and everything, to Stephen. Only Myra couldn't wait till he died; she'd Lady-Macbethed her husband into this insanity accusation.

"... however, I must fully satisfy myself, before I can sign the commitment," the psychiatrist was saying. "After all, the patient is a man of advanced age. Seventy-eight, to be exact."

Seventy-eight; almost eighty. Colonel Hampton could hardly realize that he had been around so long. He had been a little boy, playing soldiers. He had been a young man, breaking the family tradition of Harvard and wangling an appointment to West Point. He had been a new second lieutenant at a little post in Wyoming, in the last dying flicker of the Indian Wars. He had been a first lieutenant, trying to make soldiers of militiamen and hoping for orders to Cuba before the Spaniards gave up. He had been the hard-bitten captain of a hard-bitten company, fighting Moros in the jungles of Mindanao. Then, through the early years of the Twentieth Century, after his father's death, he had been that *rara avis* in the American service, a really wealthy professional officer. He had played polo, and served a turn as military attache at the Paris embassy. He had commanded a regiment in France in 1918, and in the post-war years, had rounded out his service in command of a regiment of Negro cavalry, before retiring to "Greyrock." Too old for active service, or even a desk at the Pentagon, he had drilled a Home Guard company of 4-Fs and boys

and paunchy middle-agers through the Second World War. Then he had been an old man, sitting alone in the sunlight ... until a wonderful thing had happened.

"Get him to tell you about this invisible playmate of his," Stephen suggested. "If that won't satisfy you, I don't know what will."

It had begun a year ago last June. He had been sitting on a bench on the east lawn, watching a kitten playing with a crumpled bit of paper on the walk, circling warily around it as though it were some living prey, stalking cautiously, pouncing and striking the paper ball with a paw and then pursuing it madly. The kitten, whose name was Smokeball, was a friend of his; soon she would tire of her game and jump up beside him to be petted.

Then suddenly, he seemed to hear a girl's voice beside him:

"Oh, what a darling little cat! What's its name?"

"Smokeball," he said, without thinking. "She's about the color of a shrapnel-burst..." Then he stopped short, looking about. There was nobody in sight, and he realized that the voice had been inside his head rather than in his ear.

"What the devil?" he asked himself. "Am I going nuts?"

There was a happy little laugh inside of him, like bubbles rising in a glass of champagne.

"Oh, no; I'm really here," the voice, inaudible but mentally present, assured him. "You can't see me, or touch me, or even really hear me, but I'm not something you just imagined. I'm just as real as ... as Smokeball, there. Only I'm a different kind of reality. Watch."

The voice stopped, and something that had seemed to be close to him left him. Immediately, the kitten stopped playing with the crumpled paper and cocked her head to one side, staring fixedly as at something above her. He'd seen cats do that before—stare wide-eyed and entranced, as though at something wonderful which was hidden from human eyes. Then, still looking up and to the side, Smokeball trotted over and jumped onto his lap, but even as he stroked her, she was looking at an invisible something beside him. At the same time, he had a warm and pleasant feeling, as of a happy and affectionate presence near him.

"No," he said, slowly and judiciously. "That's not just my imagination. But who—or what—are you?"

"I'm.... Oh, I don't know how to think it so that you'll understand." The voice inside his head seemed baffled, like a physicist trying to explain atomic energy to a Hottentot. "I'm not material. If you can imagine a mind that doesn't need a brain to think with.... Oh, I can't explain it now! But when I'm talking to you, like this, I'm really thinking inside your brain, along with your own mind, and you hear the words without there being any sound. And you just don't know any words that would express it."

He had never thought much, one way or another, about spiritualism. There had been old people, when he had been a boy, who had told stories of ghosts and apparitions, with the firmest conviction that they were true. And there had been an Irishman, in his old company in the Philippines, who swore that the ghost of a dead comrade walked post with him when he was on guard.

"Are you a spirit?" he asked. "I mean, somebody who once lived in a body, like me?"

"N-no." The voice inside him seemed doubtful. "That is, I don't think so. I know about spirits; they're all around, everywhere. But I don't think I'm one. At least, I've always been like I am now, as long as I can remember. Most spirits don't seem to sense me. I can't reach most living people, either; their minds are closed to me, or they have such disgusting minds I can't bear to touch them. Children are open to me, but when they tell their parents about me, they are laughed at, or punished for lying, and then they close up against me. You're the first grown-up person I've been able to reach for a long time."

"Probably getting into my second childhood," Colonel Hampton grunted.

"Oh, but you mustn't be ashamed of that!" the invisible entity told him. "That's the beginning of real wisdom—becoming childlike again. One of your religious teachers said something like that, long ago, and a long time before that, there was a Chinaman whom people called Venerable Child, because his wisdom had turned back again to a child's simplicity."

"That was Lao Tze," Colonel Hampton said, a little surprised. "Don't tell me you've been around that long."

"Oh, but I have! Longer than that; oh, for very long." And yet the voice he seemed to be hearing was the voice of a young girl. "You don't mind my coming to talk to you?" it continued. "I get so lonely, so dreadfully lonely, you see."

"Urmh! So do I," Colonel Hampton admitted. "I'm probably going bats, but what the hell? It's a nice way to go bats, I'll say that.... Stick around; whoever you are, and let's get acquainted. I sort of like you."

A feeling of warmth suffused him, as though he had been hugged by someone young and happy and loving.

"Oh, I'm glad. I like you, too; you're nice!"

"Yes, of course." Doctor Vehrner nodded sagely. "That is a schizoid tendency; the flight from reality into a dream-world peopled by creatures of the imagination. You understand, there is usually a mixture of psychotic conditions, in cases like this. We will say that this case begins with simple senile dementia—physical brain degeneration, a result of advanced age. Then the paranoid symptoms appear; he imagines himself surrounded by envious enemies, who are conspiring against him. The patient then withdraws into himself, and in his self-imposed isolation, he conjures up imaginary companionship. I have no doubt...."

In the beginning, he had suspected that this unseen visitor was no more than a figment of his own lonely imagination, but as the days passed, this suspicion vanished. Whatever this entity might be, an entity it was, entirely distinct from his own conscious or subconscious mind.

At first she—he had early come to think of the being as feminine—had seemed timid, fearful lest her intrusions into his mind prove a nuisance. It took some time for him to assure her that she was always welcome. With time, too, his impression of her grew stronger and more concrete. He found that he was able to visualize her, as he might visualize something remembered, or conceived of in imagination—a lovely young girl, slender and clothed in something loose and filmy, with flowers in her honey-colored hair, and clear blue eyes, a pert, cheerful face, a wide, smiling mouth and an impudently up-tilted nose. He realized that this image was merely a sort of allegorical representation, his own private object-abstraction from a reality which his senses could never picture as it existed.

It was about this time that he had begun to call her Dearest. She had given him no name, and seemed quite satisfied with that one.

"I've been thinking," she said, "I ought to have a name for you, too. Do you mind if I call you Popsy?"

"Huh?" He had been really startled at that. If he needed any further proof of Dearest's independent existence, that was it. Never, in the uttermost depths of his subconscious, would he have been likely to label himself Popsy. "Know what they used to call me in the Army?" he asked. "Slaughterhouse Hampton. They claimed I needed a truckload of sawdust to follow me around and cover up the blood." He chuckled. "Nobody but you would think of calling me Popsy."

There was a price, he found, that he must pay for Dearest's companionship—the price of eternal vigilance. He found that he was acquiring the habit of opening doors and then needlessly standing aside to allow her to precede him. And, although she insisted that he need not speak aloud to her, that she could understand any thought which he directed to her, he could not help actually pronouncing the words, if only in a faint whisper. He was glad that he had learned, before the end of his plebe year at West Point, to speak without moving his lips.

Besides himself and the kitten, Smokeball, there was one other at "Greyrock" who was aware, if only faintly, of Dearest's presence. That was old Sergeant Williamson, the Colonel's Negro servant, a retired first sergeant from the regiment he had last commanded. With increasing frequency, he would notice the old Negro pause in his work, as though trying to identify something too subtle for his senses, and then shake his head in bewilderment.

One afternoon in early October—just about a year ago—he had been reclining in a chair on the west veranda, smoking a cigar and trying to re-create, for his companion, a mental picture of an Indian camp as he had seen it in Wyoming in the middle '90's, when Sergeant Williamson came out from the house, carrying a pair of the Colonel's field-boots and a polishing-kit. Unaware of the Colonel's presence, he set down his burden, squatted on the floor and began polishing the boots, humming softly to himself. Then he must have caught a whiff of the Colonel's cigar. Raising his head, he saw the Colonel, and made as though to pick up the boots and polishing equipment.

"Oh, that's all right, Sergeant," the Colonel told him. "Carry on with what you're doing. There's room enough for both of us here."

"Yessuh; thank yo', suh." The old ex-sergeant resumed his soft humming, keeping time with the brush in his hand.

"You know, Popsy, I think he knows I'm here," Dearest said. "Nothing definite, of course; he just feels there's something here that he can't see."

"I wonder. I've noticed something like that. Funny, he doesn't seem to mind, either. Colored people are usually scary about ghosts and spirits and the like.... I'm going to ask him." He raised his voice. "Sergeant, do you seem to notice anything peculiar around here, lately?"

The repetitious little two-tone melody broke off short. The soldier-servant lifted his face and looked into the Colonel's. His brow wrinkled, as though he were trying to express a thought for which he had no words.

"Yo' notice dat, too, suh?" he asked. "Why, yessuh, Cunnel; Ah don' know 'zackly how t' say hit, but dey is som'n, at dat. Hit seems like ... like a kinda ... a kinda *blessedness*." He chuckled. "Dat's hit, Cunnel; dey's a blessedness. Wondeh iffen Ah's gittin' r'ligion, now?"

"Well, all this is very interesting, I'm sure, Doctor," T. Barnwell Powell was saying, polishing his glasses on a piece of tissue and keeping one elbow on his briefcase at the same time. "But really, it's not getting us anywhere, so to say. You know, we must have that commitment signed by you. Now, is it or is it not your opinion that this man is of unsound mind?"

"Now, have patience, Mr. Powell," the psychiatrist soothed him. "You must admit that as long as this gentleman refuses to talk, I cannot be said to have interviewed him."

"What if he won't talk?" Stephen Hampton burst out. "We've told you about his behavior; how he sits for hours mumbling to this imaginary person he thinks is with him, and how he always steps aside when he opens a door, to let somebody who isn't there go through ahead of him, and how.... Oh, hell, what's the use? If he were in his right mind, he'd speak up and try to prove it, wouldn't he? What do you say, Myra?"

Myra was silent, and Colonel Hampton found himself watching her with interest. Her mouth had twisted into a wry grimace, and she was clutching the arms of her chair until her knuckles whitened. She seemed to be in some intense pain. Colonel Hampton hoped she were; preferably with something slightly fatal.

Sergeant Williamson's suspicion that he might be getting religion became a reality, for a time, that winter, after The Miracle.

It had been a blustery day in mid-January, with a high wind driving swirls of snow across the fields, and Colonel Hampton, fretting indoors for several days, decided to go out and fill his lungs with fresh air. Bundled warmly, swinging his blackthorn cane, he had set out, accompanied by Dearest, to tramp cross-country to the village, three miles from "Greyrock." They had enjoyed the walk through the white wind-swept desolation, the old man and his invisible companion, until the accident had happened.

A sheet of glassy ice had lain treacherously hidden under a skiff of snow; when he stepped upon it, his feet shot from under him, the stick flew from his hand, and he went down. When he tried to rise, he found that he could not. Dearest had been almost frantic.

"Oh, Popsy, you must get up!" she cried. "You'll freeze if you don't. Come on, Popsy; try again!"

He tried, in vain. His old body would not obey his will.

"It's no use, Dearest; I can't. Maybe it's just as well," he said. "Freezing's an easy death, and you say people live on as spirits, after they die. Maybe we can always be together, now."

"I don't know. I don't want you to die yet, Popsy. I never was able to get through to a spirit, and I'm afraid.... Wait! Can you crawl a little? Enough to get over under those young pines?"

"I think so." His left leg was numb, and he believed that it was broken. "I can try."

He managed to roll onto his back, with his head toward the clump of pine seedlings. Using both hands and his right heel, he was able to propel himself slowly through the snow until he was out of the worst of the wind.

"That's good; now try to cover yourself," Dearest advised. "Put your hands in your coat pockets. And wait here; I'll try to get help."

Then she left him. For what seemed a long time, he lay motionless in the scant protection of the young pines, suffering miserably. He began to grow drowsy. As soon as he realized what was happening, he was frightened, and the fright pulled him awake again. Soon he felt himself drowsing again. By shifting his position, he caused a jab of pain from his broken leg, which brought him back to wakefulness. Then the deadly drowsiness returned.

This time, he was wakened by a sharp voice, mingled with a throbbing sound that seemed part of a dream of the cannonading in the Argonne.

"Dah! Look-a dah!" It was, he realized, Sergeant Williamson's voice. "Gittin' soft in de haid, is Ah, yo' ol' wuthless no-'count?"

He turned his face, to see the battered jeep from "Greyrock," driven by Arthur, the stableman and gardener, with Sergeant Williamson beside him. The older Negro jumped to the ground and ran toward him. At the same time, he felt Dearest with him again.

"We made it, Popsy! We made it!" she was exulting. "I was afraid I'd never make him understand,

but I did. And you should have seen him bully that other man into driving the jeep. Are you all right, Popsy?"

"Is yo' all right, Cunnel?" Sergeant Williamson was asking.

"My leg's broken, I think, but outside of that I'm all right," he answered both of them. "How did you happen to find me, Sergeant?"

The old Negro soldier rolled his eyes upward. "Cunnel, hit war a mi'acle of de blessed Lawd!" he replied, solemnly. "An angel of de Lawd done appeahed unto me." He shook his head slowly. "Ah's a sinful man, Cunnel; Ah couldn't see de angel face to face, but de glory of de angel was befoh me, an' guided me."

They used his cane and a broken-off bough to splint the leg; they wrapped him in a horse-blanket and hauled him back to "Greyrock" and put him to bed, with Dearest clinging solicitously to him. The fractured leg knit slowly, though the physician was amazed at the speed with which, considering his age, he made recovery, and with his unfailing cheerfulness. He did not know, of course, that he was being assisted by an invisible nurse. For all that, however, the leaves on the oaks around "Greyrock" were green again before Colonel Hampton could leave his bed and hobble about the house on a cane.

Arthur, the young Negro who had driven the jeep, had become one of the most solid pillars of the little A.M.E. church beyond the village, as a result. Sergeant Williamson had also become an attendant at church for a while, and then stopped. Without being able to define, or spell, or even pronounce the term, Sergeant Williamson was a strict pragmatist. Most Africans are, even five generations removed from the slave-ship that brought their forefathers from the Dark Continent. And Sergeant Williamson could not find the blessedness at the church. Instead, it seemed to center about the room where his employer and former regiment commander lay. That, to his mind, was quite reasonable. If an Angel of the Lord was going to tarry upon earth, the celestial being would naturally prefer the society of a retired U.S.A. colonel to that of a passel of triflin', no-counts at an ol' clapboard church house. Be that as it may, he could always find the blessedness in Colonel Hampton's room, and sometimes, when the Colonel would be asleep, the blessedness would follow him out and linger with him for a while.

Colonel Hampton wondered, anxiously, where Dearest was, now. He had not felt her presence since his nephew had brought his lawyer and the psychiatrist into the house. He wondered if she had voluntarily separated herself from him for fear he might give her some sign of recognition that these harpies would fasten upon as an evidence of unsound mind. He could not believe that she had deserted him entirely, now when he needed her most....

"Well, what can I do?" Doctor Vehrner was complaining. "You bring me here to interview him, and he just sits there and does nothing.... Will you consent to my giving him an injection of sodium pentathol?"

"Well, I don't know, now," T. Barnwell Powell objected. "I've heard of that drug—one of the so-called 'truth-serum' drugs. I doubt if testimony taken under its influence would be admissible in a court...."

"This is not a court, Mr. Powell," the doctor explained patiently. "And I am not taking testimony; I am making a diagnosis. Pentathol is a recognized diagnostic agent."

"Go ahead," Stephen Hampton said. "Anything to get this over with.... You agree, Myra?"

Myra said nothing. She simply sat, with staring eyes, and clutched the arms of her chair as though to keep from slipping into some dreadful abyss. Once a low moan escaped from her lips.

"My wife is naturally overwrought by this painful business," Stephen said. "I trust that you gentlemen will excuse her.... Hadn't you better go and lie down somewhere, Myra?"

She shook her head violently, moaning again. Both the doctor and the attorney were looking at her curiously.

"Well, I object to being drugged," Colonel Hampton said, rising. "And what's more, I won't submit to it."

"Albert!" Doctor Vehrner said sharply, nodding toward the Colonel. The pithecanthropoid attendant in the white jacket hastened forward, pinned his arms behind him and dragged him down into the chair. For an instant, the old man tried to resist, then, realizing the futility and undignity of struggling, subsided. The psychiatrist had taken a leather case from his pocket and was selecting a hypodermic needle.

Then Myra Hampton leaped to her feet, her face working hideously.

"No! Stop! Stop!" she cried.

Everybody looked at her in surprise, Colonel Hampton no less than the others. Stephen Hampton called out her name sharply.

"No! You shan't do this to me! You shan't! You're torturing me! you are all devils!" she screamed.

"Devils! *Devils!*"

"Myra!" her husband barked, stepping forward.

With a twist, she eluded him, dashing around the desk and pulling open a drawer.

For an instant, she fumbled inside it, and when she brought her hand up, she had Colonel Hampton's .45 automatic in it. She drew back the slide and released it, loading the chamber.

Doctor Vehrner, the hypodermic in his hand, turned. Stephen Hampton sprang at her, dropping his drink. And Albert, the prognathous attendant, released Colonel Hampton and leaped at the woman with the pistol, with the unthinking promptness of a dog whose master is in danger.

Stephen Hampton was the closest to her; she shot him first, point-blank in the chest. The heavy bullet knocked him backward against a small table; he and it fell over together. While he was falling, the woman turned, dipped the muzzle of her pistol slightly and fired again; Doctor Vehrner's leg gave way under him and he went down, the hypodermic flying from his hand and landing at Colonel Hampton's feet. At the same time, the attendant, Albert, was almost upon her. Quickly, she reversed the heavy Colt, pressed the muzzle against her heart, and fired a third shot.

T. Barnwell Powell had let the briefcase slip to the floor; he was staring, slack-jawed, at the tableau of violence which had been enacted before him. The attendant, having reached Myra, was looking down at her stupidly. Then he stooped, and straightened.

"She's dead!" he said, unbelievably.

Colonel Hampton rose, putting his heel on the hypodermic and crushing it.

"Of course she's dead!" he barked. "You have any first-aid training? Then look after these other people. Doctor Vehrner first; the other man's unconscious; he'll wait."

"No; look after the other man first," Doctor Vehrner said.

Albert gaped back and forth between them.

"Goddammit, you heard me!" Colonel Hampton roared. It was Slaughterhouse Hampton, whose service-ribbons started with the Indian campaigns, speaking; an officer who never for an instant imagined that his orders would not be obeyed. "Get a tourniquet on that man's leg, you!" He moderated his voice and manner about half a degree and spoke to Vehrner. "You are not the doctor, you're the patient, now. You'll do as you're told. Don't you know that a man shot in the leg with a .45 can bleed to death without half trying?"

"Yo'-all do like de Cunnel says, 'r foh Gawd, yo'-all gwine wish yo' had," Sergeant Williamson said, entering the room. "Git a move on."

He stood just inside the doorway, holding a silver-banded malacca walking-stick that he had taken from the hall-stand. He was grasping it in his left hand, below the band, with the crook out, holding it at his side as though it were a sword in a scabbard, which was exactly what that walking-stick was. Albert looked at him, and then back at Colonel Hampton. Then, whipping off his necktie, he went down on his knees beside Doctor Vehrner, skillfully applying the improvised tourniquet, twisting it tight with an eighteen-inch ruler the Colonel took from the desk and handed to him.

"Go get the first-aid kit, Sergeant," the Colonel said. "And hurry. Mr. Stephen's been shot, too."

"Yessuh!" Sergeant Williamson executed an automatic salute and about-face and raced from the room. The Colonel picked up the telephone on the desk.

The County Hospital was three miles from "Greyrock"; the State Police substation a good five. He dialed the State Police number first.

"Sergeant Mallard? Colonel Hampton, at 'Greyrock.' We've had a little trouble here. My nephew's wife just went *juramentado* with one of my pistols, shot and wounded her husband and another man, and then shot and killed herself.... Yes, indeed it is, Sergeant. I wish you'd send somebody over here, as soon as possible, to take charge.... Oh, you will? That's good.... No, it's all over, and nobody to arrest; just the formalities.... Well, thank you, Sergeant."

The old Negro cavalryman re-entered the room, without the sword-cane and carrying a heavy leather box on a strap over his shoulder. He set this on the floor and opened it, then knelt beside Stephen Hampton. The Colonel was calling the hospital.

"... gunshot wounds," he was saying. "One man in the chest and the other in the leg, both with a .45 pistol. And you'd better send a doctor who's qualified to write a death certificate; there was a woman killed, too.... Yes, certainly; the State Police have been notified."

"Dis ain' so bad, Cunnel," Sergeant Williamson raised his head to say. "Ah's seen men shot wuss'n dis dat was ma'ked 'Duty' inside a month, suh."

Colonel Hampton nodded. "Well, get him fixed up as best you can, till the ambulance gets here. And there's whiskey and glasses on that table, over there. Better give Doctor Vehrner a drink." He looked at T. Barnwell Powell, still frozen to his chair, aghast at the carnage around him. "And give Mr. Powell a drink, too. He needs one."

He did, indeed. Colonel Hampton could have used a drink, too; the library looked like beef-day at an Indian agency. But he was still Slaughterhouse Hampton, and consequently could not afford to exhibit queasiness.

It was then, for the first time since the business had started that he felt the presence of Dearest.

"Oh, Popsy, are you all right?" the voice inside his head was asking. "It's all over, now; you won't have anything to worry about, any more. But, oh, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it!"

"My God, Dearest!" He almost spoke aloud. "Did you make her do that?"

"Popsy!" The voice in his mind was grief-stricken. "You.... You're afraid of me! Never be afraid of Dearest, Popsy! And don't hate me for this. It was the only thing I could do. If he'd given you that injection, he could have made you tell him all about us, and then he'd have been sure you were crazy, and they'd have taken you away. And they treat people dreadfully at that place of his. You'd have been driven really crazy before long, and then your mind would have been closed to me, so that I wouldn't have been able to get through to you, any more. What I did was the only thing I could do."

"I don't hate you, Dearest," he replied, mentally. "And I don't blame you. It was a little disconcerting, though, to discover the extent of your capabilities.... How did you manage it?"

"You remember how I made the Sergeant see an angel, the time you were down in the snow?" Colonel Hampton nodded. "Well, I made her see ... things that weren't angels," Dearest continued. "After I'd driven her almost to distraction, I was able to get into her mind and take control of her." Colonel Hampton felt a shudder inside of him. "That was horrible; that woman had a mind like a sewer; I still feel dirty from it! But I made her get the pistol—I knew where you kept it—and I knew how to use it, even if she didn't. Remember when we were shooting muskrats, that time, along the river?"

"Uhuh. I wondered how she knew enough to unlock the action and load the chamber." He turned and faced the others.

Doctor Vehrner was sitting on the floor, with his back to the chair Colonel Hampton had occupied, his injured leg stretched out in front of him. Albert was hovering over him with mother-hen solicitude. T. Barnwell Powell was finishing his whiskey and recovering a fraction of his normal poise.

"Well, I suppose you gentlemen see, now, who was really crazy around here?" Colonel Hampton addressed them bitingly. "That woman has been dangerously close to the borderline of sanity for as long as she's been here. I think my precious nephew trumped up this ridiculous insanity complaint against me as much to discredit any testimony I might ever give about his wife's mental condition as because he wanted to get control of my estate. I also suppose that the tension she was under here, this afternoon, was too much for her, and the scheme boomeranged on its originators. Curious case of poetic justice, but I'm sorry you had to be included in it, Doctor."

"Attaboy, Popsy!" Dearest enthused. "Now you have them on the run; don't give them a chance to re-form. You know what Patton always said—Grab 'em by the nose and kick 'em in the pants."

Colonel Hampton re-lighted his cigar. "Patton only said 'pants' when he was talking for publication," he told her, *sotto voce*. Then he noticed the unsigned commitment paper lying on the desk. He picked it up, crumpled it, and threw it into the fire.

"I don't think you'll be needing that," he said. "You know, this isn't the first time my loving nephew has expressed doubts as to my sanity." He sat down in the chair at the desk, motioning to his servant to bring him a drink. "And see to the other gentlemen's glasses, Sergeant," he directed. "Back in 1929, Stephen thought I was crazy as a bedbug to sell all my securities and take a paper loss, around the first of September. After October 24th, I bought them back at about twenty per cent of what I'd sold them for, after he'd lost his shirt." That, he knew, would have an effect on T. Barnwell Powell. "And in December, 1944, I was just plain nuts, selling all my munition shares and investing in a company that manufactured baby-food. Stephen thought that Rundstedt's Ardennes counter-offensive would put off the end of the war for another year and a half!"

"Baby-food, eh?" Doctor Vehrner chuckled.

Colonel Hampton sipped his whiskey slowly, then puffed on his cigar. "No, this pair were competent liars," he replied. "A good workmanlike liar never makes up a story out of the whole cloth; he always takes a fabric of truth and embroiders it to suit the situation." He smiled grimly; that was an accurate description of his own tactical procedure at the moment. "I hadn't intended this to come out, Doctor, but it happens that I am a convinced believer in spiritualism. I suppose you'll think that's a delusional belief, too?"

"Well..." Doctor Vehrner pursed his lips. "I reject the idea of survival after death, myself, but I think that people who believe in such a theory are merely misevaluating evidence. It is definitely not, in itself, a symptom of a psychotic condition."

"Thank you, Doctor." The Colonel gestured with his cigar. "Now, I'll admit their statements about my appearing to be in conversation with some invisible or imaginary being. That's all quite true.

I'm convinced that I'm in direct-voice communication with the spirit of a young girl who was killed by Indians in this section about a hundred and seventy-five years ago. At first, she communicated by automatic writing; later we established direct-voice communication. Well, naturally, a man in my position would dislike the label of spirit-medium; there are too many invidious associations connected with the term. But there it is. I trust both of you gentlemen will remember the ethics of your respective professions and keep this confidential."

"Oh, brother!" Dearest was fairly hugging him with delight. "When bigger and better lies are told, we tell them, don't we, Popsy?"

"Yes, and try and prove otherwise," Colonel Hampton replied, around his cigar. Then he blew a jet of smoke and spoke to the men in front of him.

"I intend paying for my nephew's hospitalization, and for his wife's funeral," he said. "And then, I'm going to pack up all his personal belongings, and all of hers; when he's discharged from the hospital, I'll ship them wherever he wants them. But he won't be allowed to come back here. After this business, I'm through with him."

T. Barnwell Powell nodded primly. "I don't blame you, in the least, Colonel," he said. "I think you have been abominably treated, and your attitude is most generous." He was about to say something else, when the doorbell tinkled and Sergeant Williamson went out into the hall. "Oh, dear; I suppose that's the police, now," the lawyer said. He grimaced like a small boy in a dentist's chair.

Colonel Hampton felt Dearest leave him for a moment. Then she was back.

"The ambulance." Then he caught a sparkle of mischief in her mood. "Let's have some fun, Popsy! The doctor is a young man, with brown hair and a mustache, horn-rimmed glasses, a blue tie and a tan-leather bag. One of the ambulance men has red hair, and the other has a mercurochrome-stain on his left sleeve. Tell them your spirit-guide told you."

The old soldier's tobacco-yellowed mustache twitched with amusement.

"No, gentlemen, it is the ambulance," he corrected. "My spirit-control says...." He relayed Dearest's descriptions to them.

T. Barnwell Powell blinked. A speculative look came into the psychiatrist's eyes; he was probably wishing the commitment paper hadn't been destroyed.

Then the doctor came bustling in, brown-mustached, blue-tied, spectacled, carrying a tan bag, and behind him followed the two ambulance men, one with a thatch of flaming red hair and the other with a stain of mercurochrome on his jacket-sleeve.

For an instant, the lawyer and the psychiatrist gaped at them. Then T. Barnwell Powell put one hand to his mouth and made a small gibbering sound, and Doctor Vehrner gave a faint squawk, and then both men grabbed, simultaneously, for the whiskey bottle.

The laughter of Dearest tinkled inaudibly through the rumbling mirth of Colonel Hampton.

THE END.

TYPOGRAPHICAL ERRORS CORRECTED

In the text: "... a man in my position would dislike the label of spirit-medium;" the word "meduim" was corrected to "medium."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DEAREST ***

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