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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Somnambulist and the Psychic Thief**

Written by Lisa Tuttle

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## CHAPTER ONE

### On a Train Going South

I admit I did not plan my escape very well, but the fact is that I had not planned it at all.

It was the end of June, 1893, and I had been in Scotland for barely two weeks, a guest in a grand – if somewhat ominous, chilly and under-populated – country house, where I had intended to remain for at least another month along with my friend Miss Gabrielle Fox. Or, rather, my erstwhile friend. The thought of Gabrielle, who must have discovered my defection by now, made my stomach plunge. I felt sick with nerves and unhappiness as I sat, shut in alone in my sleeping compartment while the night express rocked and swayed and rattled through the border country. I could ill afford the extra five shillings for a private compartment, but I had paid because that is what a lady must do. Even though I did not expect to be able to sleep, I lacked the energy to remain as alert and vigilant as one must be in a third-class carriage against importunate strangers.

Gabrielle Fox, known to readers who follow the reports

published by the Society for Psychical Research as Miss X, had been my closest companion for nearly four years. Although she had originally been my employer, by the time economic difficulties forced an end to that arrangement, a sympathetic understanding had developed, and our relationship became a partnership in which we shared work and its rewards equally. When she was hired by the SPR to conduct investigations into various types of supernatural phenomena, or to test the claims made by mediums and spiritualists of all kinds, I went as her assistant, and wrote up our findings for publication.

Then Miss Fox was put in charge of an official SPR investigation into a haunted house in Perthshire. Instead of being part of a larger team, she had absolute authority to decide how to conduct the affair, when or if to bring in experts – and of what sort – and told expense was no obstacle. The house was turned over to us as the owner had gone abroad, leaving only a small staff to manage the upkeep at our direction, and a coach and horses, also at our disposal.

Throughout the first week, although we were both aware of certain *atmospheres* – a cold spot in the hall, a room in which neither of us could bear to stay for more than a few minutes – and heard noises to which we could assign no source, there was nothing so definite as an apparition, nothing that might not be explained away as the product of imagination.

For the second week, Gabrielle had invited others, including a well-respected psychic medium, to join us, and planned a séance.

I never doubted her honesty; I had not the slightest reason

to suspect she was planning any trickery. So I cannot explain why, on the morning of the day that our guests were to arrive, I felt driven to enter the drawing room, go to the heavy round table made of dark wood that we intended to use for our séance, crouch down on the carpet, look up at the underside of the table and run my fingertips across it.

Thus I discovered the thin wires with the hooked ends – so useful for making objects appear to move through the air – tucked away out of sight, attached to the wood with bits of wax, as well as other hidden things: long strips of the finest, lightest gauze, a piece of charcoal, a stick of chalk, a small rubber ball, a baby's rattle.

These were not random objects, such as might have been secreted there by a visiting child. I knew their meaning and their purpose, for had I not seen these things and others like them used by the pretenders we had revealed to be fake mediums?

*We.*

From the moment of this discovery, I understood that I could no longer use the word 'we' with reference to Miss Fox, for no one else could have hidden such things in this place. Whether she had done so in collusion with the medium who would be arriving later that day, or with the intention of using them herself to create illusions of a ghostly haunting, I did not stay to learn.

While Gabrielle still slept in her room – she was for preference ever late in rising – I hurried up to mine and swiftly packed my bag. I knew that the carriage was to be sent to the station to

meet the 11:15 train, and if I was quick enough, I could catch a lift.

I was, and I did, and from the local station I took the next train bound for Edinburgh, and from there boarded the night express to London.

Shut in for the long hours of the night on a train speeding south, I had plenty of time to reflect and regret my impulsive actions, to reconsider and know I had done the right thing, and to make resolutions for the future. There was nothing else I could do.

Eventually, I fell into a restless sleep until the knocking of the porter woke me, as he announced: 'Next stop, King's Cross Station.'

I was back in London, which I still thought of as home, although I had nowhere to go. My sister was, at present, out of the country, and I knew that the furnished rooms I had shared with Miss Fox, in a street near the British Museum, were now let to someone else. There were a few old friends who might have taken me in, but I did not wish to impose – certainly not by turning up on their doorstep unannounced. Most of the people that I knew in this city I knew in connection with Miss Fox, and naturally I did not wish to approach *them*.

After paying the train fare I had little more than twelve shillings left in my purse. I had no bank account, no property and nothing of any value that I might easily pawn or sell. My most urgent need was for gainful employment. Until I knew what my income would be, there was no point seeking lodgings.

I set off from King's Cross Station for the ladies' employment bureau in Oxford Street. It was a fine, dry, warm morning, so I went on foot rather than spend any more of my limited funds on cab or omnibus fares.

The bag that had been light enough when I took it down from the train grew heavier with every step, until I was obliged to stop and set it down for a few moments. As I caught my breath and rubbed my aching arm just outside a newsagent's shop in Gower Street, I casually read the notices on display in the window. Amidst the descriptions of lost pets and offers of rooms to let, one gave me pause:

Consulting Detective Requires Assistant  
Must be literate, brave, congenial, with a good memory  
& willing to work all hours.  
Apply in person to:  
Mr J. Jespersen, 203A Gower St

*Why not?* I thought. I had always enjoyed solving mysteries, and had nothing to apologise for where brains, observation and memory were concerned. The advertisement said nothing about the use of weapons or physical strength. After all, he was not looking for a bodyguard, but an assistant.

I looked from the number on the card to the two doors immediately right of the window where it was displayed. One door, marked 203, led into the shop. The other, painted glistening black, bore a brass plate inscribed *Jespersen*.

My knock was answered by a lady in early middle age, too genteel in dress and appearance to be mistaken for a servant.

‘Mrs Jesperson?’

‘Yes?’

I told her I had come in response to the advertisement, gesturing towards the shop window as I spoke, and she let me in. There was a lingering smell of fried bacon and toasted bread that reminded me I’d had nothing to eat since the previous day.

‘Jasper,’ said she, opening another door and beckoning me on. ‘A lady has come to apply already, a Miss . . .?’

‘I am Miss Lane,’ I said, and walked into a room where I immediately felt at home.

The general atmosphere of a pleasantly crowded, comfortable, cheerful place, rich with the familiar scents of old books, paper and ink and tobacco, toast and tea, is just what I like, in a home or an office, and this room appeared to be office and living room in one. The floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, crammed with volumes and adorned with small trinkets, oddities, photographs and postcards, gave it the look of a slightly eccentric scholar’s study, as did the very large cluttered desk, piled high with papers and journals, but there were also armchairs near the fireplace and a table bearing the remains of breakfast for two. This quick impression was all I had time to absorb before Mr Jasper Jesperson, springing up from his seat at the table, commanded all my attention.

He was excessively tall and very young in appearance – the smooth, pale, lightly freckled face beneath a crown of tumbled,

red-gold curls was that of an angelic child. But his blue eyes were sharp and penetrating, and when he spoke his voice was deep and well-modulated.

‘How do you do, Miss Lane? You fancy yourself a detective, do you?’

‘I do not say so. But you advertised for an assistant, someone literate, brave, with a good memory and willing to work all hours. I am all those things, and I hope you will find me congenial.’

His eyes met mine and something sparked between us. It was not that romantic passion that poets and sentimental novelists consider the only connection worth writing about between a man and a woman. But there was curiosity in that look, on both sides, and a tentative recognition – or at least the hope – that here there might be a congeniality of mind and spirit.

Mr Jespersen nodded his head and rubbed his hands together. ‘You have worked before, of course, in some capacity requiring sharp perceptions, careful observation and a bold spirit, yet now you are suddenly cut adrift, in need of employment—’

‘Jasper, please,’ Mrs Jespersen interrupted. ‘Show the lady some common courtesy!’ Laying one hand gently on my arm, she invited me to sit down and offered me a cup of tea.

‘That would be lovely, thank you.’

She lifted the fine white china teapot, assessing the weight of the contents with a practiced turn of her wrist. ‘I will fetch more. Would you like a plate of bread and butter, or anything else to eat?’

A lady always refuses food when she hasn't been invited to a meal – but I was too hungry for good manners. 'Bread and butter would be most welcome, thank you.'

'I'd like more as well, please, Mother – and don't forget the jam.'

She raised her eyes heavenward and sighed as she went away. Her son did not notice, his attention focused upon me. 'You have been in the Highlands, in the country house of a wealthy family. You expected to stay there for the whole of the summer, all your needs taken care of, until something unpleasant happened, or – no, you made a shocking discovery, as a result of which you terminated your visit and left at once. You travelled down by the night express train, but once arrived you were at a loss as to where to go in this big city, for you have no family here, and insufficient funds for what might be an extended stay in a good hotel. Thinking of the good and inexpensive lodgings for women students at University College London where, I venture to guess, you may have been a student yourself—'

I interrupted him. 'Now you have gone too far.'

'Self-educated? I do beg your pardon. I, too, am happily un moulded by any conventional school or university. But I remain fixed in my belief that you were in search of lodgings when you turned onto Gower Street.'

'I was *not*,' I said firmly. 'My first priority was to find employment, and to that end I was headed to Oxford Street, where there is a well-known ladies' employment bureau.'

He stared at me, crestfallen. 'Was I wrong about everything else?'

‘Well, no,’ I admitted. ‘But anyone with eyes might guess I’d come from a well-to-do country house in Scotland considering the time of day, my state of dress and that there are no foreign stickers decorating my portmanteau.’

‘And the abrupt departure? I was right about the shocking discovery, was I not?’ He had recovered some of his confidence.

But I remained resolutely unimpressed by his deductions, as I explained: ‘I was on foot, alone, there not having been time to send a letter to inform my friends of my impending arrival, and I have no family here at present. I think almost anyone might have made the same assumption.’ I sighed. ‘Though I do not deny that a discovery did shock me – I found I had been wrong to ascribe honesty and strict professionalism to someone I counted as a friend. Perhaps I should not have run away, but stayed to confront her with the evidence . . . but there is no need for me to go into the details now.’

‘Of course not,’ he said warmly. And then: ‘It’s yours. Do not worry about references – you are your own best reference. The job is yours, if you want it.’

Although pleased, I could not help feeling he was being a bit rash in offering to hire someone he had known for barely five minutes as his assistant. Or was it my own lack of caution that I queried? I was in desperate need of security, but it was surely foolish to expect it to be supplied by a man I had just met, simply because I felt comfortable in his room?

‘I should like to know a little more about this job, first,’ I said cautiously. ‘What would my duties be?’

‘Duties is the wrong word. Your role, if you like, would be that of an assistant-detective, helping me to gather clues, deduce motives and solve crimes by doing whatever that might require. You’ve read the Sherlock Holmes stories?’

‘Of course. I should point out that, unlike Dr Watson, I’d be no good in a fight. I have a few basic nursing skills, but—’

‘Don’t worry. My mother’s the nurse. I’m a crack shot and have mastered certain skills practised in the Orient, which give me an advantage in unarmed combat. I cannot promise to keep you out of danger entirely, but if that does not frighten you . . .?’ He took the answer from my face and broke into a broad smile. ‘We’re agreed?’

How I longed to return that smile and take the hand he offered to shake upon it. But without a home and only twelve shillings to my name, I must have more. ‘This is awkward,’ I said. ‘But again unlike Dr Watson, I have no medical practice to provide me with an income . . .’

‘Oh, money!’ he exclaimed, with that careless intonation possible only for people who have never worried about the lack of it. ‘Of course, you should receive a percentage – depending upon the extent of your contribution, it might be twenty or even fifty per cent of whatever the client pays. And if you wished to write up the more interesting cases and sell them to the magazines, you’d keep whatever you made from that.’

Mrs Jespersion came back into the room with a laden tea tray as her son was speaking.

‘I cannot pay you a salary,’ he went on. ‘The best I can offer is an equal share in whatever comes our way.’

My heart was sinking fast. ‘I wish I could afford to agree,’ I said sadly. ‘But my financial circumstances are too precarious – I cannot even afford a week’s rent on a furnished room in Bloomsbury; not if I wish to eat, too.’

‘But you can stay here!’ exclaimed Mrs Jespersion. She looked up from pouring the tea to frown at her son. ‘Didn’t you explain?’

He took a teacup from his mother and handed it to me. ‘I thought you might have deduced as much from the wording of my advertisement,’ he said to me calmly. ‘The part about working all hours – my assistant must be close by, ready for any eventuality. It’s no good if I must write you a letter every time I want your help, or send someone to fetch you.’

‘There’s a room upstairs, furnished and waiting for an occupant,’ said Mrs Jespersion, handing me a plate of white bread, thinly sliced and thickly buttered, and then a little glass bowl heaped full of raspberry jam. ‘And I provide three meals a day.’ My worries vanquished, I gave Mr Jespersion my hand and thus began a new chapter of my life.