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Opening Extract from...

The Statue of Three Lies

Written by David Cargill

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Chapter 1

DEATH BY MISADVENTURE

Wistful but frowning, Giles Dawson drew reflectively on his second cigar of the day, savoured the flavour, and blew smoke at the lilac-tinted pages in his hand. He stabbed the air with the glowing Havana as if trying to disperse the haze. The riddle in the letter perplexed him. The copperplate writing evoked echoes of happy days – worlds away from the shabby gentility here and now in the Club; of a childhood among friends, endless tales of mystery and magic and the voice of a young girl calling from his adolescence of almost twenty-five years ago. His furrowed brow deepened in academic concentration.

As a member of The Magic Circle he found the clues intriguing, as fragrant as the writing paper, as insubstantial as the wisps of smoke dissipating into his prematurely greying temples. The letter was almost intimate – but cryptic.

Maskelyne Hall

24 October 1966

*Dear Giles, or should I call you Professor? A voice from the past!
What is the room you leave without entering? What is the room you
enter without leaving? Remember? Remember me? Laura. Jack
Ramsden's little girl – though not so little now.
Remember those ancient riddles we loved to solve?
As we get older, we begin to realise that the biggest riddle of all is
Life. Or is it Death?
But enough of the preliminaries. Now, I need your help.*

The Statue of Three Lies

Remember Daddy – and how he died? Of course you do – though I'm sure you do not know the entire truth. But then neither do we. That's why I need your help.

And remember the story you told me – about Chung Ling Soo, the Magician? How you said his accidental death could have been suicide by proxy – or worse. It has played on my mind for years. People can be so vile to each other. Daddy's death wasn't suicide. It was no accident either. More and more I'm forced to believe that his death was meant to happen. And now the past is closing in on us, and we have to deal with it.

Please come back to Maskelyne Hall! Mother will be seventy on Hallowe'en.

After fourteen years as a widow she doesn't want a party but the rest of us want to celebrate this occasion. And to do that we need to come to terms with...the past.

You must come – as guest of honour and old friend of the family.

You must come. Please! You have to. I desperately need your help. Help me prove that Daddy's 'fatal accident', unlike Chung Ling Soo's, was – Murder! Don't let me down. Call me! The number hasn't changed...help me! For God's sake...

Laura.

The figure in the chair opposite had watched in silence for several minutes as his perturbed friend and associate since RAF days chewed on his cigar and stared unblinkingly at the words in front of him. Freddie Oldsworth was well aware that any interruption in similar circumstances was likely to be unproductive but caution was sacrificed as the brooding and darkening features opposite became more pronounced. He stirred from his sleeping sphinx position.

'What's puzzling you?'

Freddie Oldsworth asked the question, ordered coffee and brandy, then settled back in the leather armchair, in the knowledge that it could well be long enough before he received a reply.

'Puzzling me?' Professor Dawson sounded vaguely distant and the normally enthusiastic glint in his blue eyes was missing. He stabbed the air with his cigar.

'How I wish it could be that easy! What do you make of that?' he said, cryptically, as he passed the letter across.

Freddie Oldsworth brushed a hand through his mop of light brown hair, took the letter and fumbled for his spectacles, became aware of the slightly perfumed notepaper and started to read the mysterious contents.

‘Laura?’ Freddie had an impish look on his face as he tilted his head slightly and posed the question.

Giles frowned, stared across at a Munnings’ print of Racehorses on the wall behind Freddie and, in a strangely disembowelled voice, said ‘Oh, Laura? Sorry...I was thinking about Lind...So sorry! Laura! Of course...Laura Ramsden!’

‘You cunning old fox! You’ll go, of course?’ Freddie warmed in anticipation.

‘Would you?’ The Professor took another puff of the cigar, looked Freddie straight in the eye and said, ‘Well! Would you? Hmm ...yes, I suppose you would!’

‘Of course I would...Pretty girl...Well, is she or isn’t she?’

The Professor nodded. ‘I suppose so!’ he said. ‘At least she was the last time I saw her.’

‘Well there you are then. You’ve solved most puzzles, conundrums, riddles and illusions in your time! Why not try your hand at *murder*?’

Freddie sat back, clasped both hands behind his neck and continued his questioning.

‘Maskelyne Hall! Very, very interesting! Now that’s *magic*! Surely that needs an explanation, if I’m not mistaken!’

‘Okay, Torquemada, why the Grand Inquisition? Will it be the thumbscrews next?’

‘Just curious, that’s all. Anyone worth his salt and steeped in the history of magic would be more than curious at the naming of a house after one of the all-time greats!’

‘Well Freddie, just remember what curiosity did! One murder, if it was murder, will be more than enough of a problem without trying to solve the death of the cat as well!’

The Prof knocked the ash from his cigar, lifted the glass of brandy that was pushed towards him, savoured the aroma before emptying the glass with one satisfying gulp and said, ‘Now...let me see! I have no intention of keeping you in suspense but it all seems so long ago.’

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At this point his voice had quietened almost to a whisper; the eyes had glazed over – nostalgia beckoned.

‘During the war years I grew up with the Ramsden family in Scotland. Jack Ramsden was almost a second father to me, hence the “old friend of the family” reference in the letter. His tales of Houdini’s exploits, without doubt, led to my fascination with stage magic.’ The Prof was again using his cigar - now unlit - to pointed effect.

‘We were all kids at a time of upheaval. Jack was a cabinetmaker using all of his ingenuity in the production of props for stage illusionists. He’d also started performing, with a young female assistant, at a time when Magic and Illusion, as a form of entertainment, was taking off again after a spell in the doldrums. We all grew up, as kids do, went our separate ways and kept in touch at rather infrequent intervals. Jack’s sudden death, in 1952, happened in the library of his home as he was setting things up as part of the preparations for his wife’s Birthday celebrations. That was on the 31st October; the exact day that Houdini died twenty-six years earlier in 1926.’

The recollection of that coincidence had a strange effect on Giles. His eyes seemed to stare into the past as if searching for the ghostly figures of a bygone age.

‘I never got to know the full details, I was on a lecture-tour of Australia at the time, but it seems that Jack was alone, in what was effectively, a sealed room, when the trick went wrong. He was shot - just as Chung Ling Soo was in 1918 - the difference this time... there was nobody else in the room to fire the gun! Jack died that same night and the subsequent inquest brought in a verdict of...death by misadventure. Suicide had been considered but discounted. Isabella, Jack’s wife, was devastated. Her three sons and one daughter tried hard to pick up the pieces. Now, fourteen years later, a doubt is being thrown on the verdict. But murder? Unless...’

The Prof picked up the letter, got up and turned to go.

‘Leaving so soon, Giles?’

Giles stopped, absentmindedly stubbed his unlit cigar in the ashtray and said, ‘No, I won’t be long! I should be back in a wee while. I’m just going to use the phone.’ He cleared his throat, with that slightly nervous cough of his and said, ‘I’ll just let Miss Ramsden know of my intended travel arrangements!’

The bright demeanour, non-existent for most of the evening, had returned. ‘Oh, Freddie, conjure up another couple of Cognacs! There’s a good fellow! You and I have some serious thinking to do!’ Then, with a voice charged with quiet menace, he said, ‘I’ve a strange feeling that, before long, I may be face to face with the devil!’

Friday, 28th October 1966 – the ‘morning after the night before!’

The London-to-Glasgow express pulled out of Euston Station on time. Only moments before, Professor Giles Dawson had been unceremoniously bundled out of the famous FX4 black cab, officially known as the ‘London’, after a hair-raising journey from his South-Kensington flat. The affable cabbie, who had skilfully negotiated the ‘London Lemmings’, pouring out of every Tube Station and across busy streets on their way to work, had been a magician “par excellence” who deserved the generous tip, freely given.

With a cheery, “It’s your turn now, guv! So get yer skates on”, ringing in his ears, The Prof only had time to purchase a couple of newspapers before clawing himself and his luggage onto an already-moving train.

He sat down to get his second wind and reflect on the events of the previous evening. Gazing out of the compartment window he realised, for the first time that morning, how dull London was looking, as autumn gave way to winter: the thought of a few days in the Scottish countryside lifted spirits and rejuvenated a body that was suddenly in danger of disintegration, after the chariot race from taxi to train with the luggage trolley.

‘Luggage!’ he called out, turning a few heads in his direction. ‘Just talking to myself!’ he sheepishly offered as heads returned to morning papers.

The realisation that his two bags, looking like part of an obstacle course, still lay where he had dropped them after clambering aboard had the effect of making The Prof stack them neatly in the proper rack.

‘Phew!’ he continued, aloud, ‘That should do the trick!’

Loosening his tie The Prof caught sight of the newspaper headlines: all week the terrible disaster at Aberfan had shocked a Nation into communal grief and the previous evening, when Freddie and The Prof had the disaster on their minds; it was Freddie who’d introduced the subject of Premonition. It was always Freddie who

introduced subjects like Premonition, Telepathy and Precognition. The Prof recognized his friend as a Wizard in the field of Extrasensory Perception and always marvelled at his insight and depth of research.

During last night's conversation, Freddie had predicted that a serious article would be published, in little more than a year, recording the many premonitions about the Aberfan Disaster. His strange tale, of a nine-year-old Welsh girl who, on the 20th October, told her mother she'd had a dream that, when she had gone to school it was not there—something black had come down all over it, was one such premonition. That little girl had died in the disaster. Solid and dependable; Freddie was always providing food for thought.

He lived near Evesham in the Cotswolds with his wife Penny and their two young girls. He'd given up a promising career, as a Teacher of Mathematics, and decided to use his considerable knowledge, allied with his study of a unique system of Racehorse Ratings, in order to "beat the bookies" at The Sport of Kings. In view of the fact they were living in the Sixties The Prof was of the strong opinion that Freddie was less than accurate and should've been talking of The Sport of Queens.

"So what!" was Freddie's usual comment?

He was not so much a gambler as a "seeker of value". Two quotes of his: "If you wanna make money in a casino; own one!" and "It's not gambling that's stupid; it's losing!" always brought a wry smile to The Prof's normally worried face.

Freddie liked to be "ahead of the field" and was a guy who could be readily consulted when facing a crisis that required some logical thought.

From his window seat The Prof watched the dull uniformity of semi-detached London speed by and, eventually, give way to the dream of post-war suburbia. Thoughts turned again to the events of the previous evening after he'd returned from making the phone call.

'Here – get a little of this down you and tell me all about it.' Freddie had said, moving a brandy within easy reach of The Professor whilst cradling the other glass. He looked uneasy as he scanned his friend's furrowed features.

'You look as if you've just seen a ghost!'

'Come to think of it, maybe I have! Laura was relieved to hear from me; she was so afraid I might be too busy to come.'

‘You’re definitely going then?’ Freddie’s steel-grey eyes winked wickedly.

‘Yes, in the morning! Cheers, Freddie,’ The Prof took a sip of brandy. ‘She sounded...well... so mature and...!’

‘Did she say anything that might explain the letter? I mean - good heavens! It’s what, fourteen years since her father died – surely, after that time something serious must’ve happened to start the doubts?’

‘I asked her about that and...!’

‘And?’

‘She said her father didn’t commit suicide! If he had wanted to do that *“he would’ve made a bloody good job of it!”* Her exact words! Something about him being a Yorkshire man. She hinted that, although she couldn’t be more specific on the phone, she could now swear, “There was someone else in the room when the shot was fired!” That’s not all, Freddie; she sent a shiver down my spine when she suggested...that something else might have been there! Something that wasn’t human! Something...*Invisible!* And hell-bent on...*murder!* The problem was...how to prove it!’

The two friends exchanged glances before the silence was broken.

‘She sounds a very determined young woman who either knows a lot more than she’s saying or she’s a bit over the top, clutching at straws and, dare I say it, perhaps looking for a man in her life?’ The Prof had looked uncomfortable, as Freddie had added ‘Now, are you up for that, my lad? You know...this could be a *racing certainty*, Son!’

The Prof had known Freddie long enough to know there was no such thing as a racing certainty; he also knew that Freddie, forever tongue-in-cheek, had a sincere wish for his ultimate success in the romantic stakes ever since...!

At this point his gaze had returned to the Munnings’ print on the lounge wall and the distant memory of a tragic figure, in racing silks, lying on damp grass after a crashing fall in The Ladies’ Open at a Warwickshire Point-to-Point! It all seemed - so long ago...!

When he and Freddie had, eventually, arrived back at the spacious flat in South Kensington for a nightcap and a final chinwag The Prof had thanked his lucky stars for a friend he could trust implicitly and for their weekly get-together.

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Commuting daily from his Cotswold home to the major race meetings around the country Freddie still looked forward to his visit to London each week to meet The Prof for a tête-à-tête that often led to investment opportunity, exchange of ideas on a wide range of topics and the odd difference of opinion.

But that was yesterday and the small hours of today – Friday, 28th October 1966.

Professor Giles Dawson was now travelling back to Scotland to wrestle with, what would be, one of the most complex puzzles he had ever faced? Little did he know that Freddie's statement of last night: "You look as if you've just seen a ghost!" might turn out to be closer to the truth than had been intended?

The Prof, his eyelids beginning to close, had no great desire to fight against the soporific effect of neither the rhythmic noise of the train's wheels nor the added fatigue of a night on the town with Freddie.

He left his fellow travellers to their crosswords and paperback novels and drifted off into oblivion.

Bliss was the next stop.

'...To waken the dead!' The Prof surfaced from his deep slumber as a result of those outspoken thoughts of a benign, elderly clergyman who'd been struggling with The Times' crossword until shaken into action.

'Good heavens above!' The clergyman adjusted the spectacles, askew on his florid face; his words almost drowned out by the disembodied voice of a would-be town crier.

'Crewe! Crewe junction! Crewe!'

The voice informed all within a radius of several miles.

'Bless my soul! Will you listen to that? Loud enough – to waken the dead!' The sermon continued from 'florid face'. Doors banged, whistles shrilled and last minute goodbyes were proffered, to the ritual of a flag-waving guard. Seconds later the London-to-Glasgow express juddered a couple of times then gathered speed on the next stage of the journey north.

During the hour or so that followed, as the train stopped at, or sped through, stations between Crewe and Carlisle and across the border into Scotland, The Prof allowed his thoughts to wander into the

past and to gaze into the crystal ball of the future. Reminiscences included meeting Freddie at an RAF Station near Liverpool and going together to watch The Grand National at Aintree, in 1947, when 100/1 outsider Caughoo appeared out of the dense fog, to win the race, with the favourite, Prince Regent, in fourth place.

It was, however, the outcome of this next venture into the fog and mist surrounding the death of Illusionist, Jack Ramsden, which was uppermost in his mind.

The verdict “Death by Misadventure” was somehow a phrase he’d never have associated with the master of Maskelyne Hall - but why had it taken so long for Laura to come to the same conclusion? Why was she calling for his help? He was no detective: all his experience of what seemed to be another “locked-room” mystery had been gleaned from reading classic detective fiction. Come to think of it, that might not be detrimental. The historical know-how of hocus-pocus and the jiggery-pokery of Magic might prove to be the essential ingredients required to solve what really happened in this baffling mystery. The commonsense of Freddie might also be invaluable as partner and ally.

As the express slowed, approaching the station at Lockerbie, the sleepy town in Dumfries-shire, Scotland, The Prof removed his bags from the rack, put on his warm Crombie overcoat and prepared to cross swords with his unknown archenemy. *A murderer who, seemingly, could vanish into thin air!*

Chapter 2

THE GENIE OF THE LAMP

The Prof stepped down on to an almost deserted platform – almost, but not quite. About twenty yards away, with her back towards him, a young woman stood and scanned the train. She was dressed in black; pencil slim skirt, jacket, stockings and high-heeled shoes that accentuated legs of eye-catching shape.

He could not help but admire what he saw; she had a figure an archbishop would kick a hole in a stained glass window to look at! She turned to face him with the easy deportment of a professional dancer or of someone well used to theatrical appearances.

He barely had time to feast his eyes on the pristine whiteness of her blouse and her gorgeously symmetrical face framed with auburn hair in which titian highlights danced disturbingly before he capitulated to her magnetic chemistry.

The Prof stared at her as she smiled back at him. Then he turned away as he felt the red flush invade his cheeks. He was looking for someone much older ...and *male*! Surely old George would be there to meet him. George...lodge keeper, groom, gardener and handyman extraordinaire, had always been “old” George since those heady wartime days when Giles and the others were young and carefree. George, despite his prematurely white hair, was in his forties’s then and would now be a spry sixty something. Yes – he’d be there all right – Laura had said so on the phone. “George will pick you up with the station wagon,” she’d said. Her exact words! Now where the hell was he?

He was startled out of his reverie by the sound of high heels.

‘Giles? Can that really be you?’

He turned and looked into the most attractive face he'd gazed at in years. Her hazel eyes twinkled mischievously as she repeated 'Giles? Of course it's you! I'd have known that blush anywhere and you were staring at me. Didn't you recognise me? Little me?'

'I...well...!'

He dropped both bags and fought hard for his composure.

'Your voice hasn't changed much, Laura. But you were only twelve when I last saw you, and you weren't packaged in quite the same way then as you so obviously...! What did you say? I was staring at you! Yes, I was, wasn't I?'

'Yes, my dear Giles! But please don't let that cramp your style. I'm going to enjoy having the attention of a man for a few days. I seem to scare most of them off!'

'I doubt that!'

'Grab your luggage; compliments can wait! Let me drive you home to meet the others. You look exhausted after your journey!'

Laura kissed Giles on the cheek, turned on her heels and led the way out to the car.

Then, and only then, as he picked up his bags, did he become aware that he was standing in an empty station.

The ghost train had somehow, silently and unnoticed left for Glasgow.

The Prof almost ran the short distance out of the station.

The autumn light was already beginning to fade although it was only mid afternoon; the station wagon was nowhere to be seen. In its place was a Jaguar XK150 sports car in bright yellow with red upholstery. The delicious Laura, clad in black, matching the Jaguar's hood, stood at the open boot.

'Pop your luggage in here Giles, and I'll show you how this little number performs! And do me a favour...' Laura giggled infectiously. 'When you've picked up your jaw, before it trips you, there's something you should know! You have a red mark on your cheek and it's fairly obvious you didn't cut it shaving! So let me remove the evidence before you have some explaining to do.'

Giles gazed into the little compact she held in front of his nose.

‘How did that get there?’ he said as Laura, with the deft movement of a manicured thumb made the mark, shaped like a woman’s lips, disappear.

‘Strange,’ he muttered and put a hand to his cheek. ‘Ready when you are, Miss Ramsden!’

Once they were both comfortably settled into the sports car Laura manipulated the Jaguar into exhilarating life and, with a minimum of slick movement, started Giles on a tour of childhood memories.

The car made a sharp left turn at the newsagent where Giles, as a boy, had prepared his paper-round - the town hall, on the right, venue of The Hunt Ball – the library where, during the war, he’d poured over The Illustrated London News and the cinema where he’d spent many times watching the projectionist check, and repair, reels of film with an eager anticipation for small fragments of celluloid.

Up over the railway bridge and climbing above the sleepy town, Laura was soon heading right on the B7068.

‘You’ve been very quiet! What do you think of it, Mister Professor, Sir?’

‘I’m still trying to get my breath back, and I’m sure I left my stomach behind when we crossed the bridge!’

‘Tut, tut! What do you think of the car, Giles? Do you like it?’

‘It beats anything I’ve experienced. Good job the hood isn’t down though as we’d have difficulty holding a conversation over the rush of air.’

‘We must try that sometime. I mean drive with the hood down ; we won’t need to talk.’

Giles felt the power as the car gathered speed. He glanced at the speedometer then at his companion; she was in total control and enjoying her moment of exhibitionism. Talking was the last thing on The Prof’s mind during the next minute or two.

‘What are you thinking now, Giles?’

‘I’m thinking!’ He swallowed hard. ‘I’m thinking...this was the stretch of road where I had problems with hill starts, when I was learning to drive, many moons ago!’

Laura eased her foot off the accelerator.

‘But the speed, my dear professor! Did you enjoy that?’

‘Let me just say this, young woman. I well remember, as a boy, camping with the Scouts, near the river; a lot of us went down *with the*

trots after eating tinned rhubarb and, a few moments ago, when you had the foot down, I realised you don't need tinned rhubarb to get the same symptoms.'

She burst into another fit of the giggles as she slowed and turned off to the left, careful to avoid the sheer drop on the right plunging down to some menacing trees.

'We're nearly home!' Laura looked across at Giles and smiled.

Another left turn through an entrance flanked by stone pillars. The iron gates that had hung from the pillars had been removed to help the war effort and never replaced.

They drove slowly past the lodge – home to George and Doreen Gardner. Smoke was spiralling from a chimney but there was no sign of anyone. The Prof imagined "old" George Gardner, Gee-Gee as he was sometimes known, would be somewhere in the grounds clearing leaves or some such task and his wife, Doreen, housekeeper and cook at the big house, would probably be up there preparing afternoon tea. Giles couldn't wait to see buxom Doreen again and sample some of her goodies.

Round the next bend Laura stopped the car. That was where he had his first sight of Maskelyne Hall in over twenty years.

'A sight for sore eyes! That's twice in the last half hour!' he said, turning to Laura.

He looked at the house again. 'It looks smaller than it did; but then everything looked big when we were kids!'

'It's great to have you back, Giles! You don't know how much I need you! I can't understand why we've waited so long!'

Her voice was softer than before.

'Can I ask you something, Laura?' He took her hand and squeezed hard.

'You know you can!'

'I didn't mention it when I phoned you...when was it...last night? God knows, it seems ages ago!'

'Start asking then, my dear Professor.'

'What was the real purpose of the riddle in your letter to me?'

'I had a pretty good idea that, if you were too busy to answer my other distress calls, the riddle might just be the catalyst that would bring you here. You solved the riddle I assume?'

‘If you mean The Womb and The Tomb, the answer would be...yes! But there’s more to it than that. Am I right?’

‘You know you are! And that’s why you’re here! We can talk about that later!’

She put the car into gear and drove towards the house. When they stopped on the gravel outside the main entrance Giles leaned across and whispered in her ear.

‘Do you really think you asked the right person to come and help you?’

‘No, I don’t just think I asked the right person...I know I did! Now, let me look at you! Yes, you’ll do! You’re quite presentable! Let’s go and meet the others!’

The smell of freshly-made scones that pervaded the nostrils as Giles followed Laura into the house made him mindful he’d hardly eaten anything since leaving his South Kensington flat, in a rush, that morning.

Laura took his coat, hung it on the hallstand and, opening the door on the right, said ‘Pop in here for a moment, Giles. Make yourself at home and I’ll check if Mother is having her afternoon nap! Better still, why don’t you visit the kitchen and give cook a surprise! Mrs. Gardner will be delighted to see you again. I’ll be with you shortly.’

Laura turned and headed for the lounge on her left. As she crossed the hall, she called back ‘If you play your cards right cook might offer you something to whet your appetite and, I promise you, it won’t be tinned rhubarb!’

She went into the lounge and closed the door silently behind her.

The Prof walked down the corridor towards the rear of the house passing the library on the way. He put his head round the open doorway of the kitchen.

‘Cooee! Anyone at home?’

Mrs. Gardner put a hand up to her ample bosom and turned with a startled expression on her face.

‘Bless my soul!’ she said. ‘You gave me such a fright! Hallowe’en isn’t until Monday! Can I help you, young man?’

‘I’m just a poor beggar man who is down on his luck!’ Giles mimicked with a mock quaver in his voice. ‘Do you think I could

sample one of your goodies! I haven't eaten one of those for twenty years!'

By this time Giles was on his knees and Mrs. Gardner, with arms akimbo and her whole body shaking with laughter, entered into the spirit of the charade.

'Good heavens! Arise Sir Giles - some beggar man, indeed - a professor of something or other I understand and, a starving professor at that, if I'm not mistaken!' She helped him to his feet. 'Come now, give me a great big hug and you can have one of my buttered scones and some home-made jam.'

'I'll go along with that!' The Prof put his arms around the cuddly cook.

'And so you should!' Laura appeared at the kitchen door. 'Mother's having forty winks at the moment. Grab yourself a quick nibble then I'll take you up to your room.'

He crammed one of cook's warm delights into his eager mouth and followed Laura out of the kitchen.

'Afternoon tea will be ready in half-an-hour!'

Cook's parting words made him smile; it was just like it used to be in the good old days.

Giles collected his bags from Laura's car and found her waiting at the top of the stairs, when he came back in.

'Up here Giles.'

He took the stairs two-at-a-time but Laura was already outside his bedroom, on the right, and had his door open when he caught up with her.

'You'll find everything you need in here. There's a bathrobe in the wardrobe, and plenty of hot water, if you want a bath to freshen up. The bathroom, if you remember, is just along to your right. See you downstairs in half-an-hour.'

The Prof unpacked, undressed, donned the blue bathrobe and padded along, in his bare feet, for the bath that was so inviting.

He started to run the bath and had a good look round the bathroom that was totally unfamiliar to him. It had obviously undergone alterations since he had last used the place.

The bath was luxurious. Longer and wider than before, and somehow appeared to be more sunken than he remembered. A style he had always thought was for him. There was a shower unit in one

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corner and a large bathroom cabinet had been fixed to the outside wall. The cabinet seemed to contain everything you could want as far as toilet luxury was concerned.

All The Prof wanted, at this moment, was a good soak to ease the tiredness, and that's exactly what he got.

A good soak. A few minutes of tranquility, and time to reflect.

Murder seemed so far away. But that's why he was here!

The Prof knocked on the lounge door and entered. He was dressed in black polo neck and charcoal slacks.

Laura rose and said, 'Come in Giles. You remember Mother?'

'Hello, Mrs. Ramsden. Please don't get up! You know...you haven't changed. It's wonderful to be back!'

'And the boys, of course?'

'Ah, yes – Victor and Conrad – now which is which?'

'Hardly boys, Mother!' Victor held out his hand. 'Victor, at your service.'

'Victor thinks he's a man of the world; now he's single again.'

Conrad clasped Giles round the shoulders. 'Allow me to introduce my wife. Mabel, meet Giles, or should I say, Professor Dawson?'

Giles gave Conrad's wife a peck on the cheek. 'My pleasure!' he said.

'Which reminds me,' Victor sneered. 'Congrats Professor...but Professor of what? I'm sure we'd all like to hear how that came about.'

'You'd be bored to tears, I wager!' Giles studied the smirk on Victor's face.

'Blow your trumpet for a change, Giles.' Laura said. 'Even Victor might be impressed.'

'Well I did warn you! So don't blame me!' The Prof took a deep breath.... 'After wangling my demob I went to Oxford and read History. My first love was stage magic; your father had a lot to do with that, and I'd done a bit of entertaining in the services. By then I was a member of The Magic Circle and, at varsity, I delved into the History of the Great Illusionists. Everything seemed to work in parallel. I finished up with my PhD, and was offered the chair. Then, in 1952, I went on a lecture tour of Australia. That made my mind up. I returned home and decided to continue lecturing. The rest is history.' Victor started a slow handclap.

Giles looked him straight in the eyes. 'I have one regret. I was unable to attend your father's funeral. I'm so sorry!' He turned his gaze to Mrs. Ramsden. 'The only consolation I have...! It was your husband that started me on an adventure of mystery. I'll be forever grateful for that!'

'So father was good for something...or someone!' Victor's words were chilling.

'It was Albert Einstein who said, "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious." I do hope you have the good fortune to enjoy it some day!'

'Well said, Giles!' Laura's face was slightly flushed as she added. 'Now I almost forgot the youngest in the family – Edgar. He and his wife Sally are due to arrive on Saturday or Sunday. That's all the introductions over; you've now met everyone at Maskelyne Hall, except "old" George!'

'Laura, please don't be disrespectful.' Mrs Ramsden chided her daughter.

'We've always called him that, Mummy. He really doesn't mind.'

'Will you pour the tea, Laura? Scone, Giles? They're home made!'

Laura, giggling again, looked at Giles and winked.

The door opened and Mrs. Gardner, the cook, came into the lounge.

'Will you be wanting more tea?'

'Another pot wouldn't go wrong, Doreen.'

'I'll have it here in a jiffy.'

Mrs. Gardner left in a swirl of skirts and apron.

Laura got up, closed the curtains and switched on a lamp.

'It's getting quite dark! We'll really be heading for winter when the clocks go back after tomorrow night!'

The lamp Laura had switched on had not only added brightness to the firelight of the burning logs in the grate but had grabbed the attention of The Prof. It was a heavy solid object of beautifully turned wood; rare, with fine graining and of a rich and distinctive colour. The stunning artistry of such a wonderful household object had an immediate impact on Giles.

'Now that's what I call a lamp!'

The Statue of Three Lies

‘There’s a story attached to that lamp that you might like to hear,’ Laura said. ‘It has a secret genie and you don’t need to rub it! Want to hear about it?’

‘Try me!’ Giles quipped. ‘I love secrets!’

‘Not that again!’ Victor chipped in. ‘You know it’s only coincidence!’

‘Well I’ve never heard the secret. You never told me, Conrad.’ Mabel said. ‘I’d love to hear the story?’

‘It’s over to you, Conrad!’ Laura made a show business gesture with her arms.

‘Are you all sitting comfy? Then I’ll begin,’ Conrad said.

‘Let me see...it was early November 1951. I’d been to the Ideal Homes Exhibition in Glasgow. The lamp you see there was on show and I bought it for Mum and Dad’s wedding anniversary. There was something about the lamp. The quality of the turned wood or the grain or the colour; something that I couldn’t resist.

‘Anyway, on the Saturday after I brought it home, we were in this room listening to the radio. The BBC was broadcasting the Manchester November Handicap and father was quite keen to hear the race; Raymond Glendenning was doing the commentary and was talking about the runners down at the start. Father was studying them in the paper and Mother was enthusing about the lamp. “*Good Taste*,” she said at the same time as the commentator said the same two words; it was the name of one of the runners in the race. We all looked at each other in a kind of eerie silence and Mother repeated the words “*Good Taste*,” at the exact same moment as Glendenning spoke the horse’s name once again.

“That’s going to win!” she said. “I know it is!” Father checked the paper and pooh-poohed the whole idea. He said, “No chance! It isn’t even in the betting; 33/1 others. Hasn’t a bloody hope!” And that’s what we all thought!’

‘The race was run in a thick fog. The commentator made the best of a difficult job calling the leading contenders without ever mentioning Good Taste at any time. That is until the last few yards...when the horse appeared out of the mist to win at 28/1. Good Taste was ridden by leading Northern jockey Billy Nevett and trained in Yorkshire. The result was an incredible one to all of us listening. Probably the most dramatic finish to the race ever! Mother was white

to the gills, and the rest of us could only stare at her; we couldn't believe it!

'Pure coincidence! I've said it before and I'll say it again!' Victor was adamant. 'Either that... or Mother is a witch!'

'Careful, son!' Giles cautioned. 'Don't be too ready to jump to conclusions!'

'I can't listen to any more of this nonsense! I'm going for a walk!' Victor rose and, on the way out, said 'See you at dinner, Giles! Welcome back, by the way!'

'What about a foursome at Bridge you two?' Conrad said, checking his wallet. 'Mabel and I will give you and Giles a run for your money, Laura. That's if you have no objection, mother?'

'Off you go, you lot, but a witches' warning! Giles might be even better at card manipulation than he used to be! So beware! Anyway, let me have a word with him first! And alone, if you please. I'll let him out of my clutches in a few minutes.'

When the others had gone Mrs. Isabella Ramsden folded her hands in her lap and said 'Come and sit closer to me, Giles.'

Giles drew one of the chairs in front of the fire and sat down opposite the matriarch of Maskelyne Hall.

'I know you wish to hear all about that fateful night in 1952 when dear Jack...' She was beginning to stumble over her words. 'I was the first to be at his side after he was shot! I want you to know everything that happened; but not yet!'

Giles nodded, took both her hands in his and waited for her to continue.

'Have you looked into the library yet?'

'No!'

'When you have the time perhaps you'll understand things a little better and maybe understand what Jack was attempting before things went wrong that night.'

'I'd like to think so!'

'Firstly, there is something I want you to do.'

'Anything you say.'

'I want you to open my husband's private safe. Everything is as it was on that terrible night. Nothing has been disturbed! What you find may help to explain events leading to his death; but first you must discover a way to open the safe!'

The Statue of Three Lies

‘More hocus-pocus, Mrs. Ramsden? I’m beginning to understand why you sent for me!’

‘I didn’t send for you, Laura did!’ Mrs. Ramsden’s abrupt outburst surprised The Prof. ‘That’s beside the point! You’re here now and I’m coming to the conclusion that Laura made the right decision in getting me to go along with it.’

‘I’ll do my best! Now what do I have to do to open the safe?’

‘Solve a riddle. I believe you’re good at that!’

‘I have my moments!’ Giles said, releasing her hands from his grasp.

‘Jack always said, if others were on the same wavelength, they would be able to solve his riddles; a sort of mental telepathy.’

Isabella Ramsden, her coiffured white hair helping to soften her features lit, on one side by the fire and on the other by the magic lamp, picked up her handbag from the floor, reached in, produced two sheets of paper and handed them over.

‘One sheet explains the mechanism of the safe and the combination lock; the other is the riddle, which must be solved in order to discover the combination that will open the safe. Once the safe is open you will have the contents that may help you solve a more complex puzzle.’

‘Always assuming that nothing has been disturbed, Mrs. Ramsden!’

The old lady smiled. ‘Take your time. And remember, Giles, if you should get into any difficulty the Genie of the Lamp is here to help you.’

Giles was about to get up when Mrs. Ramsden caught him by the arm.

‘Please read them before you go so that I may have your first impressions.’

Giles looked at the first sheet.

Notes about Safe built into fireplace of Library at Maskelyne Hall – August 1952

The Combination Safe Lock consists of four wheels, or tumblers. With 100 numbers on the dial there are 100 positions for each wheel and a

single knob can set all the wheels. Once the combination is known (in this case six digits) there are one million possible combinations.

The knob is turned anticlockwise until the first number of two digits comes opposite the arrow for the fourth time.

The knob is then turned clockwise until the second number of two digits is opposite the arrow for the third time.

Finally the knob is turned counter clockwise to bring the third number of two digits in line with the arrow for the second time. All three slots are then in one line and the handle can be turned to withdraw the bolts.

Being built into the solid fireplace gives additional protection to the entire structure, as the walls floor and ceiling of the safe do not have to be as strong as the door.

On the second sheet was the riddle.

Beginning or End of Vice?
With a Wee or With a Wubbleyou?
To Unlock, Try Beginning at the End
When This Won't Trouble You!

Giles smiled and was about to speak to Mrs. Ramsden when he noticed her eyes were already closed. He tiptoed quietly out of the room.

Chapter 3

THE MAN WHO COULD WALK THROUGH WALLS

The Prof paused at the door to the library thankful he now had something to take his mind off his dismal performance at the card table. After leaving Isabella Ramsden, asleep by the lounge fire, his brain had been occupied with the imminent opening of the safe and examination of the contents! Winning a rubber at Bridge had been far from his thoughts! It wasn't so much losing to Conrad and Mabel that rankled. It was letting Laura down that hurt the most. Now, at last, he had something to get his teeth into.

The library door opened silently on well-oiled hinges and he stepped into what had been one of his favourite haunts, when he had been privileged to visit the room. He switched on the light and closed the door.

The bookcases, which almost filled the entire wall to his left, were as he remembered them. They contained a treasure trove of biographies, mostly of the great conjurers and magicians, definitive works on the history of magic and priceless volumes on early entertainment in music halls, theatres and circuses around the world, which had been a great passion of the late Jack Ramsden.

The room was floored in solid oak, on the centre of which was a long mahogany table, with an upright chair at each end. Two leather armchairs, one on each side of the large Adam-style fireplace, situated in the middle of the wall opposite the door, served as invitations to potential readers to enjoy a stay in the company of rare books. A standard lamp was conveniently placed beside each armchair and a large, ornate, Japanese screen obscured the fireplace, which contained

the safe. To the right of the door were a cocktail cabinet and a writing desk.

The wall opposite the bookcases, had double small-paned sash windows, which overlooked the gardens, set into the left half, nearest to the fireplace, with a long heavy curtain on either side that did not quite reach the floor. The other half of this wall, which backed on to the room next door, was blank except for a large framed poster of Chung Ling Soo, billed as the *Celestial Chinese Conjurer*, who tragically died after performing *The Great Gun Trick* at the Wood Green Empire in North London on 23 March 1918.

Four small-paned sash windows, each fitted with long heavy curtains, were built into the fireplace wall, two on each side of the old fire, and between the two windows to the left facing the door as you entered hung an oil painting.

The painting was a portrait of a female dancer in a Spanish costume of scarlet and vermillion against a sandy background. The pose was theatrically professional and strikingly provocative. In her left hand the dancer carried a fan and, in her right hand, she held *a long thin-bladed stiletto dagger!* It was her face though that really caught his attention. Even though the black hair puzzled him there was no disguising those hazel eyes. The portrait was that of....

‘Well, I’m damned! It’s you, Laura!’ His words sounded like a stage whisper in the silence of the room.

‘You’re talking to yourself, Giles!’ Laura’s mildly scolding tone made him jump like a naughty schoolboy found raiding the sweet jar.

‘I didn’t hear you come in,’ he said as he turned to find her standing behind him.

‘Of course you didn’t! You were much too absorbed with the painting! And you were wrong! It isn’t me!’

‘But I would’ve sworn!’ Giles’ brow creased into a frown as he studied the portrait again.

‘Daddy had it commissioned just before he married his young bride. The artist partly worked from a poster of Isabella when she’d been a dancer in Vaudeville in the early 1920’s and he was designing and making theatrical sets. Daddy presented it to her as a wedding gift.

‘Uncanny, wouldn’t you say? You could pass as twins!’

‘Well, we’re not! Not even modern medical science has been able to produce twins born so long apart!’

‘Hang on a minute, Laura! I don’t remember seeing the portrait when I was here during the war!’

‘Nor did any of us. Daddy had it stored away in a safe place. Anyway, I’m sorry if I upset you. I only came in to see if you’d cracked the safe. I see you haven’t!’

‘Not yet...’ said The Prof, moving the Japanese screen out of the way and getting down on his knees to examine the fireplace and safe: ‘...but I’m sure I can solve the riddle and the rest should be easy.’

‘I’ll leave you to get on with it then! See you at dinner!’

He rose and turned to speak only to find the library empty and the door closed. Laura had vanished – as if she’d never been there. The question was...had she really been in the room, or had it all been a figment of his imagination? If she had been there, had she glided silently across the floor and exited via the well-oiled door, in the time it takes to wave a magic wand, or had she, like The Man Who Could Walk Through Walls, done just that and *walked through walls*? He really must get a grip, he thought, and returned to his knees.

Come to think of it, the man who walked through walls brought him back to the job in hand; the opening of the safe. He was pretty sure that the conundrum, which would provide the combination to the safe, referred to the person credited with the ability to walk through walls, Harry Houdini, the Master Escapologist. Firstly, he had to give the safe a thorough going over.

What used to be a large opening in the fireplace was now entirely filled by the solid steel safe. An expert had obviously built the safe into the fireplace; it appeared to be secured by bolts and the top and sides were flush with the top and sides of the opening, which were also made of steel. To remove the safe would’ve required demolishing the entire granite fireplace. The combination to the locking system was the only means of entry.

The Prof, remembering the conundrum, took no time at all to apply his reasoning to the tumblers, but to no avail. The door to the safe wouldn’t budge. It was locked tight! Something was wrong! Was he losing his touch?

As he sat back on his heels, a slight noise to his right made him look towards the windows. It was now very dark outside but he thought he could see something looking in at him. It was a face...and

only a face! A face without a body and surrounded by darkness! And it was smiling!

He got up, went over to the windows and looked out. It was difficult to see anything outside but the entire area appeared empty of anyone or anything! Whatever he'd seen, or thought he'd seen, was gone.

Giles closed the curtains and returned to the fireplace. The puzzled frown was back as he thought over his previous actions including the logic behind the interpretation of the conundrum and the solving of the riddle. All the imponderables required consideration. Where had he gone wrong?

He moved across to the door, opened it and was about to switch off the light when he turned to take a last look at the portrait of Isabella. Was it a trick of the light, his imagination, or were his nerves beginning to get the better of him? The painting seemed different! What was it? Did the fan flutter? Was the dagger hand much more threatening? No, it was the face! The face was *smiling*! Had it been smiling when he first looked at it? He wasn't sure! He couldn't remember! One thing he could remember though...the smile was the one he'd seen at the window!!

Something was now rattling the combination tumblers in his brain. The frown was disappearing from his tortured forehead.

He closed the library door, nodded at the dancer with the dagger and the blood-red dress and muttered, 'Let's try again, shall we!' Then, as he knelt down in front of the safe, he could imagine Laura saying, "Giles, you're talking to yourself again."

The Prof, rubbing the tips of his fingers against the material of his black polo neck, as he'd seen the safe crackers do in the old movies, was convinced that The Man Who Could Walk Through Walls, Harry Houdini, was about to open the safe, almost forty years after his death.

The first part of the riddle, referring to *Vice? With a Wee or Wubbleyou* surely meant WEISS. Ehrich Weiss, pronounced vice, was the name that Harry Houdini, the son of a Hungarian rabbi, was given when he was born in 1874. The reference to *beginning at the end* in the riddle must surely refer to the date of Houdini's death. The Prof had used the date 31/10/26 as the three sets of numbers to be introduced to the wheels of the combination locking system. He'd

done that, but they hadn't worked the magic! *Why?* Of course - the smile at the window! Someone had been trying to tell him something. He had it the wrong way round and *that someone* had been watching to see when the penny would drop. It was dropping now.

Ehrich Weiss, Hungarian born, had gone to America and changed his name to Harry Houdini - and he became an American citizen! He was an American. An American who died on Hallowe'en in 1926 and, in America, the date of his death would be 10/31/26 and not 31/10/26. The Prof had failed to think the problem through and the smile had triggered the action and reaction necessary for the solving of the puzzle.

His euphoria was complete when the numbers were fed into the wheels and he was able to turn the handle and open the safe.

Dinner, on his first evening back at Maskelyne Hall after an absence of many years, was a convivial affair for Giles. He was in the company of friends; for the time being!

Friends? I suppose so; he thought looking round the table at his companions. Companions who'd welcomed him with open arms and made him feel as if he'd never been away. Nevertheless, if the reason for his visit was as had been suggested by mother and daughter, one of those friends could be - a murderer. It would be his task to discover which one. Which one was playing a part? Perhaps more than one! There was always that possibility!

The Prof allowed his eyes to wander round the animated group at the dinner table. Mrs. Isabella Ramsden, the matriarch of Maskelyne Hall...demure and benign...who wouldn't hurt a fly! Why did the words, from Act 3 Scene 8 of William Congreve's play *The Mourning Bride* leap into his head? *Heaven has no rage, like love to hatred turned, Nor Hell a fury, like a woman scorned.*

Demure and benign! Was she? She sat and listened to an agitated conversation between her two sons, Victor and Conrad.

Victor, aged thirty nine, born same year as Giles, tall, dark hair, dark complexion and brown eyes, he'd always had a chip on his shoulder, even in boyhood, belligerent, uneasy ...but capable of murder? Hardly!

Conrad, slightly shorter than his brother and two years younger at thirty seven, dark brown bushy hair, brown eyes, intelligent, sporting

but competitive. The killer type? Very doubtful! Neither seemed likely! But then, neither did Crippen, Ruxton or Haigh.

Mabel, Conrad's wife, fair-hair, blue eyes, pale skin with rosy cheeks, fun loving, supportive and poetic, was giggling as she and Laura enjoyed something amusing. Laura, early thirties, attractive and lively, a mysterious enigmatic adventuress, would try most things. But murder? Unthinkable! He had almost dismissed Mabel as a possible suspect and he wondered why?

'You were miles away, Giles!' Laura's voice brought him out of his coma.

'Penny for them!' said a smiling Mabel.

'Not much profit in that, I'm afraid.' The Prof advised. 'I'm so sorry, I was dreaming.'

'Oh, how ...er...interesting!' Mabel's eyes were on Laura as she spoke.

'Victor was trying to get through to you.' Laura informed him gently. 'I think he wanted to ask you a question.'

'I do apologise,' said The Prof, looking across towards Victor. 'I'll do my best to give you an answer. Fire away!' He regretted the use of those last two words as he watched the elder son's eyes giving him a chilly stare under raised brows.

'Conrad and I were having an argument about that story he told this afternoon. You know! The one about the November Handicap and the lamp, and all that! I just cannot go along with the idea that some people can predict the future and I said so! Pure coincidence. Nothing more! Anyway that's what I think. I was trying to ask what you really believe...about prediction or premonition. You know, that sort of thing. You seemed to be in some kind of hypnotic trance!'

'No disrespect intended.' The Prof's tone was subdued. 'Anyway, whether I believe in Prediction or Premonition isn't relevant, I'll leave that to you. Let me just say you're quite correct Victor, about coincidence, I mean.'

'I'm not sure I get your drift.'

'Firstly, we have to decide what are meant by coincidences and whether they have a hidden meaning for us, and what unknown force, if any, they represent.'

Warming to his subject, he continued: 'I have a very close friend...Freddie, Freddie Oldsworth, who lives near Evesham with his

wife and two little girls! Anyway, Freddie has been studying this subject for some time now. We're both members of The Society of Psychological Research and The Ghost Club, as well as The Magic Circle. A mathematician by profession, Freddie devotes his expertise these days to the world of horse racing and the science of probability.'

'Daddy would've been more than a little interested in someone like that. Next time you come back to see us bring him with you. He'd be very welcome,' said Laura.

'That's very generous of you. Now where was I? Oh, yes ...coincidences! Freddie and I have tended to accept the wisdom of the Philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. He defined Coincidence as the simultaneous occurrence of casually unconnected events.'

'Oh, come on Giles, cut the gobbledegook!' The heckler was Mabel.

'No, no! Please continue,' Isabella Ramsden said, showing interest for the first time. 'I'd like to hear more!'

'Thank you, ma'am! I bow to your superior judgement!' Giles acknowledged with a smile and was about to resume when Laura intervened.

'What say we pour The Prof another glass of wine, Conrad. to help lubricate the throat.' she said with a wink.

'And when you're on your feet, I think we could all do with a refill.' Victor said, looking round for approval.

As glasses were being replenished Mabel banged on the table and, in as deep a voice as she could muster, announced 'Pray silence for his professorship!'

Giles cleared his throat amidst a spontaneous burst of mock clapping. 'Now where was I?' he said. 'Ah, yes... coincidences!' 'Philosopher Arthur What's-his-name,' (a whoop of delight from Mabel stopped him in full flow). 'He, er, divided coincidences into two categories; trivial and significant. The trivial kind has to do with spinning of coins, runs of numbers as in a Casino and, of course, hands of cards!' (More whoops of delight from Mabel along with husband Conrad, the winners at Bridge). The Prof gave the two revellers a stony stare before continuing his lecture.

'Researchers are more concerned with significant coincidences. Those that shuffle together people, events, time and space...your incredible story of the race and the lamp comes into this category.'

'Spoo-oo-ky!'

All eyes turned to look at the source of this comment ...Mabel.

'There are recognisable types of coincidences such as literary ones and warning ones but even you, Victor, must surely agree that the mathematical odds against the commentator, in the November Handicap, and your mother uttering the words "Good Taste" at exactly the same time, miles apart and without being in communication would have to be astronomical! And for that coincidence to be repeated shortly afterwards and then for the horse in question to go on and win the race in dramatic circumstances takes the incident into the realm of something far beyond comprehension. Whatever it is, it has to be something much more than mere coincidence, and certainly bears investigation! Wouldn't you agree?'

'O.K., I take your point,' said Victor 'but it was still coincidence!' With his arrogance more diffused than earlier Victor added: 'I do admit that the way you state the mathematical implications puts a different light on things.'

'Am I right, Giles? Did you say there were literary coincidences and warning coincidences?' It was Laura who spoke.

'ESP!' boomed out from the lips of Isabella and produced a shocked silence from everyone until this was broken by an intermittent gurgle from Conrad that eventually materialized into laughter. 'Ha, ha, ha, he, he, of course, Mother, ESB...I thought you were asleep. ESB, a classic example of what The Prof was talking about! Won the Grand National in '56, I think, when *Devon Loch* collapsed and did the splits, just yards from the winning post when he looked home and dry, as they say. There hasn't been a satisfactory explanation for that either. You really *are* a clever old girl?'

'No!' Isabella explained, slowly and deliberately, 'I said ESP! Not that other horse!'

'Extrasensory Perception!' said The Prof. 'The faculty of receiving and transmitting information through means other than the known senses: Clairvoyance and Clairaudience are the ESP of objects or events, Precognition is the ESP of the future and Telepathy is the ESP of one mind in direct contact with another. Freddie would have a field day if he were here. Experiences such as just knowing something was going to happen before it does or being alerted to danger or disaster are forms of Extrasensory Perception.'

‘Very much like someone humming a tune then hearing the same tune when they switch on the radio!’ Laura said. ‘Or thinking about someone then bumping into them round the next corner!’

‘That’s just coincidence!’ insisted Victor.

‘Yes, but it doesn’t happen to everyone!’ Isabella said as she rose from the table. ‘Please excuse me; I’m going to bed. I’ll see you all in the morning! I’ve enjoyed the chat!’

A chorus of “good night” and “sleep well” accompanied her departure.

‘Why don’t we all head for the lounge,’ Laura said when her mother had closed the door, ‘Mabel can help me rustle up some coffee and the lads can get the liqueurs and glasses ready. We might be in the mood for a ghost story as the midnight hour approaches!’

‘Sp-oo-oo-ooky!’

Mabel’s words produced giggles of laughter as the two young women went off to the kitchen.

Victor stoked the lounge fire; Giles arranged sofa and chairs into a cosy semi-circle and Conrad prepared a coffee table with assorted glasses and liqueurs.

The girls arrived with tray complete with pot of coffee, sugar and cream and coffee-cups.

‘Cook left everything ready!’ said Laura. ‘Another example of coincidence, I suppose!’

‘Sp-oo-oo-ooky!’ Mabel was beginning to enjoy herself.

‘Before I get The Prof to elaborate on what he was telling us would you all agree that we should keep the lights off and sit by the glow of the fire? The atmosphere might be more conducive to the subject of mystery and imagination. A bit of the Edgar Allan Poe’s!’

Victor’s words were met with nods of approval and everyone settled down as if preparing for a séance!

‘The coincidences you talk about! I accept that, in some cases, they can’t be explained but the majority of them are pretty ordinary. I’d be less sceptical if you could provide evidence of situations involving major happenings! You know; world events!’

‘Wasn’t there something strange connected with the D-day landings towards the end of the war?’ Conrad asked. ‘I seem to recall reading something about it. Not sure where though! Didn’t you

mention something in the dining room about literary and warning coincidences? Could the D-day thing be one of those? I wish I could remember! Now what was it?’

‘You’re absolutely right!’ said The Prof. ‘Literary coincidence, the researchers call it; the D-day affair is one of the classic examples!’

‘Go on then, Giles; don’t keep it to yourself! Laura said, pouring the coffee. ‘Black or white, Giles?’

‘What?’ The Prof looked puzzled.

‘*The coffee*, Giles! Black or white?’

‘Oh, black please!’ He lapsed into silence.

‘This is like trying to get blood out of a stone!’ Mabel said in comic irritation.

‘I think you’ve just lost him, Mabel!’ Conrad said to his wife. ‘I do believe you were going to tell us something mysterious about D-day; weren’t you, Giles?’

‘Was I? Yes I was, wasn’t I?’

‘Literary coincidence, I think you said it was!’ prompted Victor as he poured a drink.

‘Quite right!’ The Prof gathered his thoughts. ‘Just before the Allied Invasion of Europe, in 1944, the campaign to try and end the Second World War was Top Secret and referred to only by code words. The entire operation was known as OVERLORD, the Naval Spearhead disguised as NEPTUNE, the two French beaches, where the landings were to be made, were coded UTAH and OMAHA and the artificial harbours, to be used by the troops at the beachhead, were known as MULBERRY. Incredibly, in the thirty-three days before D-day, which was June 6, each of those secret coded words appeared in the answer to a clue in the *London Daily Telegraph* crossword!’

‘Another unlikely mathematical and difficult-to-explain coincidence,’ said Conrad, ‘unless...’

‘Unless what?’ Victor probed his younger brother.

‘Spies! You know! Secret agents using the Newspapers, to convey information to the enemy, instead of wireless!’

‘A possibility, certainly! Ingenious, if true! However, the fact that the enemy was taken by surprise seems to rule out such a theory. Never mind; definitely an explanation well worth consideration! Well done, Conrad!’ said The Prof. ‘But that’s not all,’ Giles continued, ‘The Key

word OVERLORD appeared only four days before the landing! Now that's a classic example of a literary coincidence!

'You mentioned another kind, Giles. What was that?' Victor asked.

'Yes, as well as the literary coincidence, there is the warning coincidence. History seems to offer many examples. One of the strangest, and this is a combination of the literary and the warning kind, was when a United States' writer, Morgan Robertson, published a novel, back in 1898, about a giant ocean liner called *THE TITAN*, which sank one freezing April night, in the Atlantic, after hitting an iceberg, on her maiden voyage!'

'Don't tell me!' said Laura, 'Let me guess! The prediction came true when the *TITANIC* sank on a freezing April night in 1912 after hitting an iceberg...on her maiden voyage!'

'Spot on! But not the whole story! It is believed that a copy of the novel was in the library of the Titanic on that fateful night. Also the two liners, the one in the story and the one in real life, were around the same tonnage, the disasters occurred in the same stretch of ocean, both were regarded as unsinkable and neither carried enough lifeboats! Fact and fiction...inextricably linked!'

The noise of the fire was the only thing to be heard in the room.

'S-s-spooky!'

It required no guesswork, by the others, to know where that remark came from.

'There is a footnote to my little tale,' Giles was now speaking in a voice reminiscent of The Man in Black, from the BBC radio series, *Appointment With Fear*, broadcast during the War Years. 'A further coincidence happened twenty three years later, in 1935, when the *TITANIAN*, note the similarity of name, that was carrying coal from the Tyne to Canada, was sailing in those same Atlantic waters. A member of the crew began to feel a terrible foreboding and, by the time the Titanian reached the spot where the other ships went down, the feeling was overpowering. He wondered if he should try and stop the ship simply because of a premonition? One thing made his mind up for him. A further coincidence; if you like. 'As he yelled "*Danger Ahead!*" at the top of his voice he was only just in time to alert the helmsman on the bridge and avoid the enormous iceberg in the path of the ship.'

'What was that other, er...coincidence?' Mabel could hardly get the words out.

‘The crewman, who screamed the warning, *was born on the night of the Titanic disaster!*’

The crash, following those final words, came from the coffee cup dropping from Mabel’s trembling fingers on to the hard surface of the fireplace. It had an electrifying effect!

‘I’m so sorry; it just slipped out of my hand!’

Conrad put an arm round his wife’s shoulders. ‘My God, Mabel, you’re as cold as ice! Can I get you anything? What about a brandy?’

‘No, I’ll be all right. I’ll be going to bed shortly! I was a bit carried away by The Prof’s story and my imagination! Well it reminded me of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow! I was thinking of *Haunted Houses!*’ Mabel, her composure returned, started to recite.

*‘All houses wherein men have lived and died
Are haunted houses. Through the open doors
The harmless phantoms on their errands glide,
With feet that make no sound upon the floors.’*

As Mabel began to shiver Conrad, with his arm still around her shoulders, escorted his wife from the room.

‘I won’t be long,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll just put her to bed!’

The door closed behind them.

‘I think I’ll get the head down as well...’ said The Prof ‘...it’s been a long day!’

‘Take my advice and have a long lie,’ Victor suggested. ‘The baby of the family won’t arrive until late tomorrow afternoon!’

‘You mean...today,’ Laura corrected her brother. ‘It’s already after the witching hour! Goodnight, Giles! See you in the morning.’

Giles, stifling a yawn, slipped out of the lounge and headed upstairs.

As he drifted towards sleep, at the end of that, first, long and exhausting, day at Maskelyne Hall, Giles thought of Jack Ramsden and his strange death. What had really happened in the library on that fateful Hallowe’en? Was this one of those Haunted Houses? He thought of Laura; thought of their meeting in the library; that library again and how she had, secretly, and silently left the room, like one of Longfellow’s harmless phantoms that *made no sound upon the floor*. Was she a...?

He turned over and, purring gently, was soon fast asleep.