

THE SHABTI

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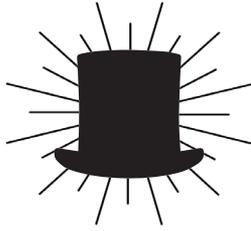
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***TO ROBERT RITNER
AN EXCELLENT AKH
TRUE OF VOICE***







CHAPTER 1



DASHIEL QUICKE SAT AT the center of the stage, head bowed, a shimmering stream of ectoplasm flowing from his open mouth. Overhead, white-hot arc lamps illuminated the ethereal discharge as it cascaded over his lap. Perspiration prickled his scalp and soaked his shirt collar, but he welcomed the punishing heat of the lights. He'd spent enough time working under the cover of darkness. He was a man with precious little left to hide.

His audience's watchful eyes bored into him. The atmosphere was thick with their morbid curiosity. Even at a demonstration like this one, Dashiell didn't shy away from theatrics. If tonight's crowd of gawkers took nothing else from the experience, they would at least leave entertained. His shoulders heaved and he swayed in his seat as the ectoplasm continued to unfurl, pooling on the floor at his feet in a filmy heap. His hands, resting on his knees with the palms facing up, twitched spastically.

Someone in the audience let out a low whistle. Another onlooker, seated closer to the stage, groaned in disgust.

"Holy cats, mister," said a voice from somewhere in the middle seats. "How much of that stuff you got in there?" A handful of the heckler's neighbors broke out in raucous laughter.

Dashiell pulled the tail end of the ectoplasm out of his mouth, then rose to his feet and moved to the edge of the stage. He held

it aloft in front of him, spreading it out wide between his hands. The ends trailed down on either side of him, sweeping up dust and grime from the battered floorboards as he walked.

“I hope you’re all duly impressed by what you’ve seen here tonight, ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “Your average Spiritualist would tell you that it’s impossible to produce ectoplasm under these conditions. It’s sensitive stuff. Disintegrates under full light, you see. The theory has it that light disrupts the ectenic force that the spirits use to manifest it out of the medium’s body.”

He paused, waiting for the crowd to settle. There was a smattering of whispers and laughter from the gaggle of hooligans in the middle seats. In the second row, a young woman snapped her gum with a sharp crack. Her neighbor swatted her arm and giggled.

“What they won’t tell you,” Dashiell went on, “is that it’s made of common cheesecloth. Or muslin, if you’re the type of medium who likes to live large and spring for the good stuff. It doesn’t really matter which one you use, though. Either one looks mighty impressive if you’ve got a dark séance room and a strong will to believe. They’re both just about infinitely compressible—perfect for hiding in tight spaces, away from the prying eyes and hands of doubters and debunkers. And to answer your question, young man,” he added, smiling in the direction of his heckler in the middle seats, “unless the fellow at the general store shorted me, it’s exactly three yards.”

Satisfied that everyone had gotten a good look at the ectoplasm, Dashiell walked back to the center of the stage. Paint splatters, scuffs, and the faded remnants of spike marks from past theatrical productions marred the dark floorboards, which creaked beneath his feet with every step.

Like most campus theaters where he had performed, this one was a humble affair. It held enough seats for about two hundred spectators. Only a battered chalkboard sign outside the front

entrance served to announce his performance that evening. *Tonight Only*, it proclaimed, *Renowned Ex-Spirit Medium Dashiell Quicke Unveils the Dark Secrets of the Psychic Flimflam Racket!*

“My spiritual instrument is speaking to me again,” Dashiell said, nimbly winding up the trailing ribbon of muslin ectoplasm. The length of cloth vanished within seconds into a bundle small enough to fit between his cheek and his gums. “I’m receiving a very strong impression. The spirits have a gift for someone who is here in the theater tonight.”

Someone in the audience snickered. Dashiell blithely ignored them. He tossed the roll of muslin onto the rickety table in the center of the stage, where it joined several other tools of his trade—a dented tin trumpet decorated with bands of phosphorescent paint, a stack of cards inscribed with forged spirit messages, and a fluffy drift of white chiffon veils. He turned his attention to the audience, squinting at them past the glare of the footlights and the bluish cigarette smoke hanging low and heavy in the air beyond the stage.

The spring of 1934 was proving to be a cold and dreary one, and that always meant good business. The house wasn’t packed, but there was a decent crowd. Except for a lone middle-aged gentleman in brown tweeds seated in the front row, the audience was overwhelmingly youthful. Bored college boys and girls filled most of the seats, their dreams of necking with their sweethearts under the mellow April moon dashed by the chilly weather. So far, they had reacted to his routine with rowdy enthusiasm.

To these people, Dashiell was an amusing curiosity, a rainy-day diversion that they’d likely soon forget. He could only hope that he’d serve as an edifying cautionary tale for some of them as well.

A few short years ago, he’d drawn a different sort of crowd indeed. Throngs of affluent true believers once sat through his demonstrations in the chapel at Camp Walburton, eyes shining with devotion, entranced by his every word and gesture. When

he closed his eyes, he could see himself there again, dressed in a pristine white suit and wreathed in the scents of fresh-cut chancel flowers and sandalwood instead of sawdust, cigarettes, and half-dried paint.

No point in dwelling. This was the path he'd chosen for himself.

"Is there," he asked, pressing his fingers to his temples, "a Professor Hermann Goschalk among us?"

It came as no surprise to Dashiell when the man in the tweed suit rose to his feet. He clutched his hat to his chest and cleared his throat, glancing around as if expecting some other fellow to step up and identify himself as the person in question.

"Um, I beg your pardon," he said at last. "That's my name. Do you mean . . . me?"

Dashiell smiled. "Unless there is more than one Hermann Goschalk in the audience, then I think I must. Join me on stage, if you please, sir."

Professor Goschalk made his way to the stage, accompanied by scattered applause, whoops, and whistles. In Dashiell's experience, there were few things that a collegiate audience liked better than the prospect of a faculty member making a spectacle of himself on stage, and this crowd proved to be no exception.

The professor didn't seem to mind. He trotted up the steps and stood smiling shyly at Dashiell like a starstruck kid meeting a *matinée* idol.

"Hello!" he said.

"Good evening, Professor," said Dashiell, with a brief bow. "Please, be seated." The professor nodded, blinking owlishly under the blazing lights, and took a seat in one of the two folding chairs beside the stage's central table.

Hermann Goschalk was a little gray mouse of a man, about fifty years old. Dashiell guessed that his well-worn suit was at least

half as old as its wearer. His rumpled brown hair was generously streaked with silver, and he had large, uncommonly expressive hazel eyes—an excellent asset in a sitter. The more demonstrative the face, the greater the sympathetic response the unwitting skill would arouse in the audience.

“Thank you,” said Dashiell. He sat down in the other chair and fixed the professor with a penetrating gaze. “Before we proceed, I hope you don’t mind if I ask you a few questions, just to get my bearings. I want to be absolutely sure I do have the right Hermann Goschalk, after all.”

“Of course!”

“Wonderful. Now, stop me if I’m mistaken in any detail. You are a member of the faculty here at Dupris University, a professor of Ancient Studies, specializing in the language and civilization of the ancient Egyptians. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s absolutely correct,” said Goschalk, with an enthusiastic nod.

“Very good.” Dashiell inclined his head and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, as if drawing his next morsel of information from some deep, inscrutable well of hidden knowledge. “Is it true that you used to keep a black cat in your younger days, back when you worked as an assistant druggist at that pharmacy in—”

“Milwaukee, yes!” Professor Goschalk’s astonished expression couldn’t have been more perfect if he’d rehearsed it. “Good heavens, you even know about old Tybalt?”

“I do,” said Dashiell, with a solemn nod. “He must have been quite the beloved companion.”

The professor chuckled. “Oh, he was a terrible little yungatsh. He’d lie there in the windowsill soaking up the sun and hissing at anybody who dared to get too close. Did a fine job keeping the store free of mice, though.” He smiled fondly. “Papa always said a pharmacy without a cat was a pharmacy without a soul.”

“Ah yes, that’s right. He was the drugstore cat. Your father owned the pharmacy, and he was hoping you’d carry on the family business. But you longed for greater things. You decided to pursue a degree in Egyptology. Once you completed your studies, you came to work here . . . about fifteen years ago.”

“Gracious, yes! But how on earth did you know all these things?”

“Before a second ago, I knew hardly any of it,” said Dashiel. “All I knew was that you once worked in a pharmacy and had a black cat. Just enough detail to impress you—and get you talking. It wasn’t too hard to put the rest together from there.” He winked and patted the professor on the shoulder. “I daresay you’d be a plum customer in the séance room, Professor Goschalk.”

Goschalk gaped at him. “Well, I’ll be a son of a gun,” he said. Laughter rippled through the audience.

“Thank you, Professor, you’ve been very obliging,” Dashiel went on. “But if you don’t mind me taking just a little more of your time, there’s one more thing I’d like to ask you before I let you go. At this moment, the spirits are telling me that you recently lost something of great sentimental value. Is that true?”

The professor nodded. “As a matter of fact, I have. Gosh, how uncanny! It was a cabinet card of my mother. I’ve kept it on my office desk for years, but I noticed it was gone not two weeks ago. I can’t imagine what could have happened to it.”

“That is too bad. But perhaps we can help you find it again.” Dashiel rose and moved to stand behind Professor Goschalk, resting his hands lightly on the man’s shoulders. He gazed out at the audience and spoke in a booming, authoritative tone. “Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness one of the most powerful forms of mediumistic manifestation. But I must ask for your help in amplifying our connection to the spirit realm. Please, raise your voices in a hymn of praise.”

He nodded to the elderly organ player stationed at stage right. She curtly returned his nod, then began to grind out a shaky but serviceable rendition of “From the Other Shore.” Three or four voices in the audience piped up with gusto, while a handful of others mumbled along uncertainly. It was hardly the sort of performance he would have gotten from his regular Sunday evening congregation back at the camp, but it would have to do. Dashiell let his eyes flutter closed, allowed his head to loll back as if he were falling into a trance.

“Dear ones who have passed beyond the veil,” he intoned above the drone of the organ, “we beseech thee to reunite this gentleman with his lost portrait of his beloved mother. Keep singing, ladies and gentlemen! I am sensing a vibration from the other side. The spirits are with us!” He raised his arms in a dramatic, sweeping gesture, and as he did so, an object tumbled into Professor Goschalk’s lap.

“Oh!” said the professor.

“Oooh!” echoed the audience.

Dashiell lowered his arms, letting his hands come to rest on the back of Goschalk’s chair. He nodded again to the organist, who stopped playing. “Thank you, Mrs. Englebert. Please, Professor Goschalk—tell us what you have just received.”

Goschalk pulled a pair of wire-rimmed glasses from the inner pocket of his jacket and slipped them on. Slowly, he picked up the item in his lap and squinted at it. He turned in his seat and blinked up at Dashiell in amazement. “Why . . . it’s my photograph!”

“The same cabinet card of your mother that used to sit on your desk?”

“The very same, down to the faded spot in the corner. Oh, that is magnificent. Absolutely phenomenal!”

Dashiell bowed and smiled graciously as the audience burst into whistles and hearty applause. “Thank you, Professor. Ladies and

gentlemen, what you have just seen is known in the spook business as an ‘apport.’ Impressive, yes? But of course, like everything else I have demonstrated this evening, a complete hoax. I hope you’ll forgive me, Professor, when I explain that this photograph was stolen from your desk, in broad daylight, by one of my own personal agents—someone who is, what’s more, entirely corporeal and very much alive.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Goschalk, his eyes more saucer-like than ever.

“It was a simple matter for me to obtain a list of the names of people who bought advance tickets for tonight’s demonstration. Having selected your name from the list, I sent my young assistant to gather some basic intelligence. Your students and colleagues were happy to share a few choice tidbits of information with someone who, they assumed, was a prospective pupil in the Ancient Studies program.”

There was some crowing and hooting from the middle-seat gang. “Oooh, Professor,” one of them called out, “he got you good!”

Dashiel raised his voice, speaking over the brief uproar of merriment that followed. “That, Professor Goschalk, is how I learned of your position in the department, your time as an assistant druggist, and yes—even old Tybalt. As for your photograph, all that my accomplice had to do was to pay a brief visit to your office, posing as a student with a rather vexing academic question. When you got up to consult one of your books, he quietly purloined the cabinet card from your desk. Thank you. You may return to your seat.”

Professor Goschalk rose, clutching hat and photograph, and toddled off the stage, still looking delightfully befuddled. Dashiel was conscious of a pang of wistfulness. Had he still been in the business of fleecing the rich and bereaved, this was exactly the sap he would have wanted front and center at every service.



A STINGING WIND had picked up by the time Dashiell finished his act and wandered out of the theater. He turned up his collar and huddled against the wall by the side entrance, debating whether to hail a cab or brave the walk back to the modest room he had rented a few blocks away. Absently, he drew one of the last two cigarettes from the crumpled packet in his coat pocket and placed it between his lips.

“Those things are terrible for you, you know,” said a soft, pleasant voice from the shadows.

Dashiell turned, slowly and deliberately, doing his best not to look alarmed. He’d managed to make himself a number of enemies over the past few years, with one thing or another, and he didn’t relish being crept up on in dark alleys. When he saw that it was the little professor from his demonstration, his shoulders relaxed.

“So my doctor tells me,” he answered with a wry smile. “But you can only ask a man to give up so many vices at once.” He slipped the unlit cigarette back into the package and put it away.

Professor Goschalk chuckled. “I suppose that’s true,” he said, looking like a man who had little experience with vices, much less giving them up. “That was all very impressive, by the way, Mr. Quicke. Very impressive. If you hadn’t explained how it was done, you might have made a believer out of me.”

“Well, if I had, you would’ve been in good company, Professor,” Dashiell assured him. “I’ve hoodwinked everyone from medical doctors to bishops.”

“Please, call me Hermann.” He extended a hand, and Dashiell gave it a firm shake.

“Dashiell. It’s a pleasure.”

Hermann’s fingertips lingered on Dashiell’s for a moment as the handshake ended, and his brow furrowed with sympathy. “Oh,

gosh, your hands are like ice! It is awfully cold, isn't it? Well, this is what passes for spring here in Illinois, I'm afraid. Do you have far to go? I can give you a lift."

"That's very kind of you. I'm just over on 58th and Crestview."

Hermann beamed, and Dashiell realized that he was handsome, in his understated way. He wasn't sure how it had escaped his notice before. "Perfect!" Hermann said. "There's a nice little diner on Crestview. Please, let me treat you to dinner. Unless you have other plans, of course."

"No plans," Dashiell admitted with a hint of wariness. In his experience, this sort of amiable generosity tended to come with strings attached. However, the ex-medium business wasn't a lucrative one, and he was in no position to balk at the offer of a free meal. Besides, it had been a while since he'd dined with anyone socially, and the notion appealed to him. "Dinner sounds swell."



THEY WERE HAILED with a chorus of friendly greetings the moment they stepped into the Nite Owl Diner, one of those sleek little modern establishments that looked like a converted railcar. They sat across from each other in a cozy booth, lit by the yellowish glow of the lightbulb hanging overhead.

With Hermann's hearty encouragement, Dashiell ordered a dinner of roast lamb, buttered corn, and whipped potatoes that seemed extravagant by his recent standard of living. Coils of fragrant, shimmering steam wafted invitingly from the plate. He willed himself to take small bites, resisting the urge to scarf it all down.

"You must be quite the regular here," he said.

Hermann looked a little sheepish. "I suppose I do come here a lot. But their tongue sandwiches are truly the gnat's whiskers, especially after a late evening marking papers."

“This lamb goes down easy, too. Much obliged, by the way.”

“Not at all!”

Dashiel took a sip of coffee before casually continuing. “So, the missus doesn’t mind all those late evenings at the office, eh?” He was still casing the man, like one of his marks. In the old days, he would have gone home and written up a nice little file after a social tête-à-tête like this. Personal information, no matter how trivial, was a medium’s true stock-in-trade, and old habits die hard.

“Oh, there’s no missus,” said Hermann, his cheeks pinkening. “I suppose I’m what you’d call a confirmed bachelor. No, it’s just me and Horatio.”

Dashiel raised his eyebrows questioningly. “Horatio?”

“My cat.”

“Ah.”

“Didn’t the spirits tell you all this?” Hermann asked, blinking innocently. “Oh, don’t mind me, I’m just making fun. What about you? Do you have any family?”

“Just my sister, back in Tampa. But I haven’t heard from her in some time.”

“Ah,” said Hermann. “A Florida man.”

“That I am. Born and raised in Tarpon Springs. My work took me all over, though. Before I left the business, I spent several years at one of the big Spiritualist camps in Indiana. But you heard about that at my demonstration.”

Hermann nodded. He paused, as if weighing his words. Dashiel fancied that the flush in his cheeks grew a little deeper. “You mentioned an accomplice before. The person who purloined my photograph. Do you always work with a partner?”

“Oh, no. That was just a kid I hired for a couple of bucks to do the job for me, before the act. These days, I’m on my own.” He hoped this answer would be enough to satisfy Hermann’s curiosity.

The evening had been pleasant so far, and he had no desire to sour the mood by discussing the details of his former working arrangements. That way led to a morass of painful memories he'd rather not retread.

Lost in thought, Hermann scraped some horseradish sauce over a slice of bread. When he spoke again, Dashiell was relieved that he had moved on to a different subject. "What I can't understand," he said, "is why you decided to give it all up. As good as you are, you must have made a mint!"

"And how," Dashiell agreed, a little wistfully. "But I suppose even the most vestigial conscience starts to get a bit inflamed when you're bilking little old ladies out of their inheritance day in and day out. I just plain got sick of it."

"Hmm. And now you've made it your life's mission to expose all that fraud and humbuggery to the world. It's kind of poetical, don't you think?" Hermann leaned forward, his big hazel eyes shining. "I mean, who better to uncover a hoax than someone who knows exactly how it's done? All those parapsychologists and ghost-hunters and whatnot must have nothing on someone with your experience!"

"Oh, certainly."

"Which reminds me," he went on, a little more hesitantly. "If it's not too much of an imposition, I was wondering if you might help me with something."

Ah, there it is. As always, the ulterior motive.

Dashiell felt a sting of disappointment. He'd found himself enjoying Hermann's company for its own sake. Still, whatever he wanted, maybe it would pay something. "Oh? What did you have in mind?"

"It's—well, I feel a bit silly saying it," said Hermann, looking abashed. "But you see, in addition to being a professor here at Dupris, I'm also the curator of our modest collection of

Egyptian antiquities. Sometimes I keep very late hours in the research archive upstairs from the museum, and lately, I've been noticing some, er, very strange activity in the building at night."

"Strange activity," repeated Dashiell, narrowing his eyes. "As in . . . ?"

Hermann fiddled with his fork. "Oh, you know. Weird noises. Things moving around when they ought not to. And, um, the bleeding walls. That sort of thing."

"The bleeding what?"

"I've tried to ignore it, but it's become more and more bothersome lately. I've had to stop bringing Horatio to work with me because it unsettles him, you see. The students have been asking after him, and I can't very well explain all this to them, can I? I mean, what would I say? And I know this is going to sound a bit peculiar, especially to you. But I just can't shake the feeling that it's, you know." He glanced around before continuing, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "The real McCoy."

Dashiell set down his silverware and sat back, nonplussed. "Hermann, I must confess, I'm surprised. And a little disappointed. I thought you understood that the whole point of my demonstration this evening was to show that all that spirit stuff is bunkum."

"Of course, of course," said Hermann, now blushing a deep red. "But just because most mediumship is bunk doesn't necessarily mean that there's no such thing as spirits, does it? Anyway, whatever I'm experiencing, if it is a hoax—"

"I assure you, it is."

"Yes, well, if it is, why, I bet you'd sniff it out quicker than I could say Jack Robinson. You must know all the tricks."

"I suppose you do have a point there," Dashiell conceded.

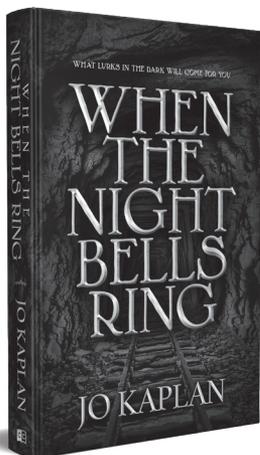
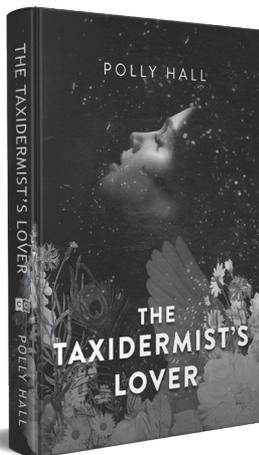
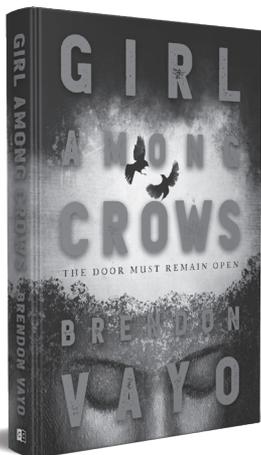
"I'm sure you're right, of course. Only, if you'd just come and take a look, it would surely set my mind at ease. And, naturally, I'd compensate you for your time . . ."

He looked so comically earnest and plaintive that Dashiell had to fight back a chuckle. “All right, all right,” he said, dabbing his mouth with his napkin to hide his amusement. “You’ve piqued my curiosity. I was planning to spend another day or two in town anyway. Shall I drop by tomorrow morning?”

“Oh, you’re a mensch!” said Hermann, beaming with gratitude. “Tomorrow morning would be perfect.”

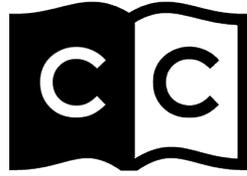


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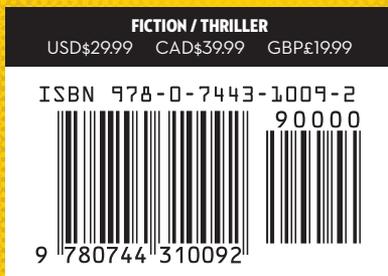
CAN YOU FLIMFLAM A GHOST?

It's 1934. Former medium Dashiell Quicke travels the country debunking spiritualism and false mediums while struggling to stay ahead of his ex-business partner and lover who wants him back at any cost. During a demonstration at a college campus, Dashiell meets Hermann Goschalk, an Egyptologist who's convinced that he has a genuine haunted artifact on his hands. Certain there is a rational explanation for whatever is going on with Hermann's relics, Dashiell would rather skip town, but soon finds himself falling for Hermann. He agrees to take a look after all and learns that something is haunting Hermann's office indeed.

Faced with a real ghost, Dashiell is terrified, but when the haunting takes a dangerous turn, he must use the tools of the shady trade he left behind to communicate with this otherworldly spirit before his past closes in.



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