

The Silver Teapot

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All was ready for the gathering that evening and Leticia Binghamson was nervously ready also. She lived alone in the big Victorian house on Harper's Hill along with Ellie her domestic helper. That is, she was alone since her husband, Atticus died five years previously. Her son, Atticus, Jr. was now president of the foundry down on the flats near the river. She still derived income from the business as, the honorary Chairman of the board, but of course, knowing nothing of the metal working trade or business matters, her son was in complete charge of operations. He had been urging her to sell the house and move into more practical quarters. Upkeep was expensive but the old place did offer status in the community. She would have liked to have some advice from her husband on the matter. She had relied on him for everything and now he was on "the other side" and as yet she had failed to reach him.

To communicate with her beloved Atticus was the main purpose of her "gatherings" as she liked to call them. Most of her guests were usually members of the Spiritualist church at which she was chairperson of the Ladies Aid Society. But others were friends or friends of friends. The medium for tonight's séance, Madam Grosvenor, had been a visiting guest speaker at services three weeks ago and had graciously agreed to conduct this gathering in spite of the fiasco of the previous week.

Her checking and rechecking of preparations was interrupted by the sound of the door knocker. She hesitated a moment, wondering who would be the first to arrive, then went to admit whoever it would be. It was not one of her good friends but Arnold Copehouse. She was surprised that he, of all people, would be an early arrival. It was his father, Colonel Claude Copehouse who had caused the ruckus at last week's assembly. The Colonel had been invited, and he came, supposedly, to contact his late wife but immediately upon his arrival began to voice his doubts about the entire concept of Spiritualism. His constant berating of his son as a know-nothing failure in life was also an annoyance and an embracement to everyone. He continued to voice his doubts and disbelief as the evening progressed until Madam Grosvenor proclaimed she could not conduct the séance under those conditions and abruptly left, ending the evening in failure and for Leticia, (never call her Lettie) gross embarrassment.

The following day, after Leticia regained her composure, she called on Madam Grosvenor who, after much urging, agreed to try again on the condition that the Colonel would not be in attendance. However, Leticia was surprised to be contacted by Arnold Copehouse who begged to be included and promised to be on his best behavior. this in spite of the fact that his reaction to his father had seemed to be one of quiet

amusement at the previous gathering. He insisted that he earnestly wished to contact his deceased mother. And so, there he was and was soon conducted into the spacious parlor where Ellie dutifully offered wine or port as well as dainty cookies prepared for the occasion.

The second to arrive were Mr. and Mrs. George Thayerton. Their daughter had died in childbirth and they were desperately eager to contact her. They had asked their son-in-law to join them but he had rejected the idea as absurd. They hoped that contact with his wife would turn him from that German girl he was seeing. They were terrified that he would marry this daughter of immigrants and their grandchildren would be brought up on sauerkraut in the Lutheran Church. The couple was not from Leticia's church or even from her social group, far from it. They arrived in their Sunday best attire, the same as last week, which, in Leticia's estimation, was not near good enough. But, in their sincerity of purpose, there seemed no doubt, and so in all charity they were welcomed.

Jennie Royce and Belle Fenton were the next to arrive. Jennie was a fellow church member and a teacher. Jennie was interested in contacting her parents but, as she would say, not fanatical about it. It would be nice to know they were at peace and thriving "on the other side". She believed that to be the case anyway. Belle was a librarian and Jennie's friend. And that was the only reason she was there. Belle was slight in stature, attractive but a bit timid, quietly observing everybody and everything. Leticia did not quite know what to make of her but, she was a friend of Jennie's so that would have to do.

As the guests arrived, or I should say, those after Arnold Copehouse, they asked of the gloves that the first arrival was wearing to which he explained that there were a myriad of infections in the community and that he was trying to avoid contact with them, comparing himself with John Philip Susa and apologizing for causing any concern.

Much to the relief of all, Madam Grosvenor finally arrived. She was almost a half hour late but entered as if she was right on time. No one dared to question her tardiness and she offered no explanation. She also seemed to not notice the gloved hands of our Mr. Copehouse. She declined the offered refreshments and after brief reintroductions suggested that the evening should begin, which of course, it already had.

While Ellie remained downstairs to tidy up, Leticia dutifully and without further delay, led her guests to the upstairs room that had been prepared for the event. In past times it had been a sitting room where tea had been served and one could read or have quiet family conversations. There was a side board on one side of the room and on it was a beautifully crafted silver tea pot bearing the mark of Paul Revere. It was of course quite valuable and was the Binghamson family treasure. Opposite the sideboard was a bay window now open to admit what little breeze may come in on this

sultry summer evening. In front of the window and leaving a space just sufficient for a person to stand between it and the window were heavy dark green drapes. They had been installed for the purpose of creating a completely dark room when closed, to accommodate just such a gathering. Other than that, the walls were covered in a dark patterned wallpaper, probably elegant in its early days and now quite dull. Centered in the room was a round table about which were seven chairs. When all were in the room, the only door was locked, as was the custom for these events.

Wishing to have the view of the window, Belle sat with her back to the tea pot. Jennie was at her right and, with a friendly smile, Arnold seated himself at her left. The Thayerton's were next in order and Madam Grosvenor was seated at Jennie's right. Leticia was the last to be seated but before she did, she closed the drapes securely eliminating Belle's view of the window and then switched off the room lights. It was only then that she made her way in the pitch dark to her chair.

Madam Grosvenor instructed all to either join hands or place them on the table with one on top or under their neighbor's hand. In any case one hand must be in contact with the table and all hands must be in contact with another's to form an unbroken ring. In reaching to her left in the darkness, Belle found Arnold's hand already palm down on the table and she gingerly placed her hand upon it, grateful for not needing to be in more familiar contact with him. Belle also found Jennie's hand to her right which she comfortably and securely clasped. There was a general shuffling as everyone assumed positions as comfortable as possible in the darkness. Madam Grosvenor asked for perfect quiet.

After a short time she began a subdued chant, almost a hum, fluctuating in pitch and intensity ... and then quiet! Did the table move? Yes ... there was slight movement. She said, almost un-perceptibly, "A spirit is here ... an unknown spirit ... a seeking spirit." More chanting and humming ... "Who do you seek?" Belle wondered how Arnold could keep his hand so still. Then there was more movement of the table. You could hear others breathing and almost feel the anticipation. Then Belle thought she felt something brush her shoulder. Why her? She didn't expect to be contacted by any spirit. But maybe it was her imagination. What was that? A voice from beyond? Or, ... a squeaking floor? Another time of silence followed.

Was there a brief light shimmering in the room for a moment? ... And then again? The chanting stopped as if Madam Grosvenor herself was startled by the ghostly illumination. A moment of silence ... more chanting ... then a bump ... or a thud. A voice uttered a surprised Oh!, softly, almost breathlessly. More silence ... followed by another movement of the table. The hand that Belle had under hers moved just minutely. Now she heard Arnold's breathing. Then all was quiet. Someone coughed. Someone sighed.

Madam Grosvenor, seemingly even more disturbed than the rest, suddenly said, "The contact is broken, the spirit is gone, can we have the lights." It was not a question but a command. Everyone released their grip or removed their hand from their neighbor's either relaxing or rubbing their own hands to restore circulation. Leticia found the light switch and the room was illuminated. Everyone looked a bit bewildered and somewhat disappointed. It had been so close ... hadn't it?

As Madam Grosvenor stood up, suddenly Leticia screeched, "My tea pot! ... Where is my tea pot?" It was gone! Indeed it was gone! Everyone looked and there was no place to hide it. Who has it? What was done with it? Had it been removed by the visiting spirit? Madam Grosvenor gave a quick "No!" to that suggestion. "Spirits have no need of tea pots or any other material thing". Everyone agreed but then Who? Accusations ensued.

The Thayerton's must have taken it. Selling it would certainly have made their life better than it now is, the poor wretches. Mrs. Thayerton burst into tears and Mr. protested their innocence.

Arnold suggested Madam Grosvenor as the culprit since she was obviously a charlatan and a thief. She in turn attacked Arnold as an unbeliever and one who would do anything to discredit her.

But then, it was suggested that Leticia Binghamson herself may have taken and hidden it to keep it from the rest of the family or intended to sell it to maintain her house and lifestyle which she of course vehemently denied.

What of Jennie, a poor teacher, underpaid and without a husband and what about Belle of whom no one knew anything. Arnold again chimed in this time in defense of everyone in the room, stating that it could not have been any of them since they were in constant contact with their neighbors on both sides through their hands. It must have been the servant girl Ellie who entered the room in the dark and absconded with the silver pot. "Why", he proclaimed, "she has probably already hidden it someplace intending to sell it at some later time."

Leticia interjected that the door was locked and the only key was still in her pocket. No one entered the room nor could anyone have left it!

It was then that Belle, timidly spoke up. "Mr. Arnold, I am afraid that it is you who is our thief. You wish us to believe that we were all providing an alibi for each other through our hand contact. You, as did all, saw the teapot last week as well as observing the layout of the room and the procedures which would ensue during the séance . I am the only person who is new to the room."

Many of the others gasped and one said, “But how? And where is the teapot?” Belle continued, still addressing the surprised Arnold Copehouse. “You came prepared, wearing gloves, an obvious oddity to all who saw you a week ago without their benefit. As soon as the room was dark, gloves stuffed with something to resemble hands were placed on the table allowing you to get up from your place. The table leg was most likely jostled in doing so. Unknowing it at the time I felt you pass behind me when you picked up the teapot. As you made your way around the room to the window the floor creaked. I recognized the sound when Madam Grosvenor just got up and stepped behind her chair. You parted the drapes as quickly as possible to get behind them and drop the teapot to the ground below. Some of us saw the brief moonlight as you did that and again when you came back through the drapes. Then you continued around the edge of the room but struck the toe of your shoe on the door post.” Mrs. Thayerton interjected, “Yes, right behind me ... and then I felt something touch my shoulder.” “Yes” replied Belle, “that’s when you let out a gasp of surprise”. Turning again to Arnold she continued, “You again jostled the table when you found your seat and I felt the slight movement when you grasped the wrist of your false hand.” He was white, drained of blood and stammered, “All conjecture ... All ...” Belle continued. “Will you show us the false hands hidden on your person or shall we ask Mr. Thayerton to search for them.

At that, Arnold looked as to flee but the door was still locked. He relented and produced the cleverly constructed gloved hands from beneath his dress jacket. Later, the Silver teapot was found in a blue cloth bag with a drawstring lying in a bush under the bay window.

Apologies ensued all around with all begging forgiveness for the offences and accusations inflicted earlier. This soon turned to praise for the acute thinking of Belle Fenton. Even Madam Grosvenor commended her and further agreed to return for another try at a proper séance when “disturbing factors” were not present.

Arnold was turned over to the authorities and after much discussion, instead of being prosecuted for attempted theft, was remanded to the supervision of the Colonel, a fate worse than any prison term.