

TALES OF THE MIDNIGHT CLUB

C. E. Van Loan

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The Midnight Club is the house of peace and harmony. It is the place where actors of rival companies meet and pass each other judicious compliments; it is the place where reporters on rival papers bury their hammers and forget to refer with proper pride to their past scoops; it is the neutral ground where all good men are good friends. There is a rule which provides that the man who starts any unpleasantness loses ten numbers and must buy the next two rounds, but this rule has never been enforced, because it has never been broken.

Mr. Blackwood, of the Belasco, dropped in the other night just in time to hear Thomas Oberle close a learned dissertation on mind reading, thought transference and other occult subjects.

"And that's why I know there's no fake about it," said Thomas, absent-mindedly pouring half a bottle of tomato catsup on the white cat's back. The outraged feline immediately leaped into MacVicars' lap and shook himself violently, whereat the Irish giant turned a back flip in a vain endeavor to save his new serge suit. A new suit is no joke with Mr. McVicars, for the tailors measure him twice and charge him accordingly.

After Mr. Oberle had been fined one round of Pilsener for this atrocity and Alphonse had removed a fair half of the sticky mess from MacVicars' waistcoat, the culprit proceeded:

"This mind reader was the talk of Washington—he had 'em all buffaloed! He answered all our sealed questions, called us out by name and things like that, you know. He came from India, but he had an English name—Sir—Sir—"

"Sir Russell Dequi," suggested Mr. Blackwood, quietly.

"Now, how in the deuce did you know that?" sputtered Tommy excitedly. "Did you know him?"

"A little over seven thousand dollars worth," grinned Belasco's manager. "I ought to know him. I put him in the business."

"Mr. Chairman!" bawled Oberle, rising and addressing the still fuming MacVicars. "I move that Mr. Blackwood tell us the true story of the Simla seances!"

The motion was seconded with a rush and carried with a roar, and after Oberle had been fined one more round on general principles and another one for taking unwarranted liberties with the house cat, Mr. Blackwood lighted a nine-inch perfecto and proceeded:

"About five years ago I was in Washington ahead of a show—"

"How much ahead?" innocently asked Mestayer, the child wonder.

For this bit of impertinence Harry was justly fined two oyster stews and a package of cigarettes.

"As I was saying," continued Mr. Blackwood, "I was in Washington ahead of a very bum comedy company. They stranded in Baltimore, and though nominally ahead of them, I found myself behind, if you understand me. I needed the money.

"Now Washington is the greatest place in the world for fakes of every kind—fake palmists, bum mind readers and phony psychists. They're everywhere. As I was walking down the street one day wondering how long I could stall my landlord, I saw a sign which said that the future would be revealed and sealed questions answered for twenty-five cents. Now it struck me that I would be willing to give a quarter to see my finish, and I went in. I wrote my question all right, sealed it, and then the man came back into the room, smote his forehead with the palm of his hand and told me exactly what I had written. I had been looking for some mirror arrangement or other, but there was nothing of that kind in sight, and I was a trifle dazed.

"I had some talk with the man, whose name was Simmons—a long thin, cadaverous chap with a seldom-looking black mustache. I found out afterward that he used to beat his wife, but that's a detail. I said to him. 'You've got a good money-making graft here—why don't you put it on the stage? Why don't you get hundreds instead of quarters?'

"Simmons pulled me into the back room and talked a blue streak. That was the very idea he had been figuring

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on for months, only he didn't know how to go about it. He showed me how the whole business was worked—stuffed bull's head on the wall—bull's eyes were the biggest magnifying glasses you ever saw in your life—made a sheet of paper six feet away look as big as a house. Simmons just ducked into the other room, and while you were writing your question on the one table in the reception room, he was on a step ladder with his head poked through into that bull's head, reading off every letter as it was put down.

"Simmons was crazy to stage that act, and as he was a loose, free talker, I made up my mind to take a chance. Joe Luckett had the Columbia theater on F Street, and I cracked the scheme to him. Joe had been putting on a lot of rummy concerts Sunday nights, and I showed him where we could all make a little money. I booked my mind reader for a week from Sunday and began to get busy. I had to furnish the paper, and I finally found an old darkey with a foot press who was willing to wait a week for the money. He printed me about a million hand bills advertising Sir Russell Dequi, the White Mahatma, the Adept of the Himalayas, the Wonder of the Century.

"Say, we just painted Washington with those bills. I wasn't a newspaper man once for nothing, and of all of the boosting you ever saw, those posters were the limit. Sir Russell Dequi in his great Simla Seances—thanks to Kipling, a lot of people knew where Simla was, and were interested right away—Sir Russell Dequi, a titled English gentleman, famed as the most adept of the age, would repeat his old world triumphs before a cultured Washington audience. He would reveal the past, explain the present and foretell the future. He would answer sealed questions, and that there might be no deception—that last was in big type, no deception—people were urged to write their questions at home and bring them sealed to the theater. He would answer all questions relating to love, matrimony, business, lost treasure, reveal the whereabouts of missing ones, and everything else I could think of at the time.

"That was a great bill, and the language of it would have turned a Pike barker green with envy. Then, just to make the play strong again, I wound up with press notices from London, Paris, Madrid, Vienna, Hong Kong and other towns. I had one from the Calcutta Mail and another from the Simla Advertiser, boosting Sir Russell as the most wonderful adept in the world. I wrote 'em all in a hall bedroom in Washington—that's what metropolitan journalism did for me, gentlemen.

"Well, the first night the theater was jammed to the roof—those handbills did the trick. We had a nice program, lecture by the Professor—we always called Simmons that—then a lot of sleight of hand tricks which he told the people he had learned from the Yogis up at the monasteries in Thibet—! I think he called 'em Yogis, but never mind that, it was a good spiel, anyway—and then the answering of sealed questions. Honest, that man Simmons was a gold mine! He had more useless information in him than forty encyclopedias and the way he shot the bull was a wonder! He sent that crowd home talking in whispers, and every one of them swearing to come back the next Sunday night.

"How did he do it? The easiest thing in the world. He sat on a small elevated platform in the middle of the stage—no draperies, no curtains, no deception anywhere. The chair was a plain wooden one so there could be no deception. We courted investigation on that no deception gag—in fact, we courted it so strong that nobody seemed to want to investigate. That chair was just like all other chairs except that the back of one of the legs was hollowed out and a simple little tin tube ran up into the seat and from there to the top of one of the arms. The rest of that tube went through the stage floor into the basement, and ended in a big phonograph horn suspended over a table.

"Simmons wore the yellow robes of the Indian Fakir and on his head he had a smashing big yellow turban. It hid him completely with the exception of his eyes, nose and mouth, and that was providential because he had a couple of phonograph clips in his ears with a rubber tube running down the back of his neck and from there down his right sleeve to wrist. When he sat down, he just rested one hand naturally on the arm of the chair, poked the rubber tube into the end of the tin one and then he was ready to hear from the other world.

"How did he get the questions? Easy again. When the Professor called for volunteers to collect the sealed envelopes, four of our boosters jumped up in the front of the house and got busy. They came down the aisles toward the back of the house and at the head of each aisle another booster was stationed. These fellows were always in evening dress, with their overcoats over their arms. Inside their hats, they had a hundred envelopes or so, all of them sealed and addressed, but there was nothing in them. The collectors would stop an instant as if to pick up another envelope, the transfer would be made, and then the collectors would carry a lot of dead ones up on the stage and put them in the wicker basket on the table, where they were in plain view of the audience every

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minute of the time. No deception again, you see.

"While the Professor was handing out the Simla talk, Joe Luckett and I were down in the cellar opening those envelopes and planning what talk we would shoot upstairs to his nibs in the chair.

"I'll never forget a question we got that first night. It said, 'Where is the purest water in Washington found?' and it was signed 'Dr. Barton.' I wanted to throw that one out, but Luckett, who had lived in Washington all his life and knew that town like a cat knows a back fence, wouldn't hear of it.

"There's a well up by the Convention Hall where the water is said to be absolutely pure,' said he. 'We'll take a chance.' Then he 'phoned to the professor that the water question was a good one and for him to play it up to beat the band. I sneaked upstairs to watch him. I wish you could have heard Simmons—he was immense.

"I receive the impression,' said he, 'that Dr. Barton is present. Will you please stand up, doctor? Thank you.' The Doctor stood there and looked foolish and wondered what was coming next.

"Unless I am mistaken, Doctor, your question is about water is it not? Ah, I thought so. You wish to know, as near as I can make out, where the purest water in Washington is to be found? Ah, yes, quite so.'

"And then that fakir Simmons tore off a rambling long-winded spiel about different springs, Carlsbad, Saratoga, every spring you've ever heard of, and he knew just about enough to get away with the bluff. But he wound up strong: 'The purest water in Washington, Doctor, is in a well near Convention Hall on K Street!'

"Dr. Barton got red in the face and climbed up on his chair. 'This is marvelous!' he roared, 'Marvelous! The Professor is absolutely right!'

"Now wasn't it lucky that Luckett knew about that spring?

"One woman wanted to know if she was to marry again. Luckett looked at the signature and thought a minute. Then he grabbed the tin horn and began to talk.

"Here's a beaut, Simmons! Mrs. Opdyke wants to know if she will marry again. She had a pretty warm divorce suit about six years ago. Here are the details.' And when the Professor began to receive revelations about that divorce suit, Mrs. Opdyke jumped up and ran screaming from the house. Oh, it made a sensation, I tell you!

"For six Sundays we packed the Columbia every time. Raised the price on them after the second Sunday, but it was 'Standing Room Only' every time. The papers cut in on it and interviewed Sir Russell Dequi until he was black in the face. He talked mind currents and special revelation until the reporters were dizzy and of course that made the game better every time.

"But it couldn't last forever. We got ours at last, and this is how it happened. The sixth performance had all fashionable Washington in the house. Sir Russell Dequi was the reigning fad. The Professor made his usual request that the envelopes be collected, and I was simply paralyzed to see four big Johnnies in evening clothes tumble out of the stage boxes and bump our boosters out of the way. They thought it would be a great joke to collect the cards, and they did it. Our boosters followed them, but they made a clean sweep and didn't leave a thing. I looked over at Luckett and he looked back at me and we both knew that it was all off with the Simla seance. I tried to stop the man who collected in my aisle and tell him that I would put the letters on the stage, but he only grinned and said:

"Oh, I guess not! I'm doing this!'

"Two minutes after I met Luckett under the stage and he was blue around the nose. He worked the wireless and told the professor how things stood, and then I ducked up on the stage to see how Simmons would get out of it. I was afraid he would be mobbed if he lost his nerve.

"Right there was where I underestimated the Professor—he was a peach if there ever was one. He made a great business of rubbing his forehead with his hand, and all the time he was talking he kept nodding his head like a man dead for sleep. All at once, right in the middle of a sentence his voice trailed away to nothing and he did a face fall out of his chair that was a wonder! It was the finest stage fall I ever saw, and it ought to be, for it broke the Professor's nose in two places. But he kept right on rolling until the footlights stopped him. The house was in an uproar and the first thing I knew I was out on the stage with my hand raised.

"The plan came to me like a flash of light. It was a long and desperate chance, but I had to take it.

"Ladies and Gentlemen,' I said, 'I implore you to keep your seats. Sir Russell has only fallen into a trance. As you doubtless know, the Adepts of the Himalayas go into trances and sometimes remain unconscious for many days. Sir Russell has been working very hard of late, and the strain of these performances has been too much for his nerves. Last week he was in a trance for eight hours, and this being the second one within ten days, it is

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impossible to say when he will awake. Your money will be returned at the door.'

"Then I gave the orchestra leader the high sign and he played the loudest march he had in stock. We got away all right, but the Professor's nerve smashed along with his nose. We couldn't get him to try it again in New York, and the last I heard of Simmons he was revealing futures at twenty-five cents a throw, via the bull's head. He was a grand fakir, but he lacked ambition. Let's have another stein all around. Oberle, it's up to you to buy!"