

THE SERPENT UNDER IT

A Play

By

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(Frank Frederick Cook)

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Dramatis Personae

(Note : This play is designed so that many parts may be doubled, trebled or even quadrupled. Several characters appear only in one scene and the actor playing the role may therefore easily duplicate. In some cases - as with the nurses - doubling is essential.)

Helen Duncan	<i>(Hellish Nell, a medium)</i>
Henry Duncan	<i>(her husband)</i>
Gena	<i>(their daughter, also a psychic)</i>
Cressida Halliday	<i>(A client)</i>
Marcus Halliday	<i>(Husband to Cressida)</i>
Harry Price	<i>(An investigator of psychic phenomena)</i>
Ethel Beenham	<i>(His secretary)</i>
Daphne Widmacott	<i>(His mistress)</i>
Chief Constable West	<i>(Chief of Portsmouth Police)</i>
Stanley Worth	<i>(A key witness)</i>
Charles Loseby	<i>(Counsel for the Defence)</i>

John Maude, Q.C.	<i>(Counsel for the Prosecution)</i>
Grimwood-Mears	<i>(A Hampshire Judge)</i>
Esson Maule	<i>(An associate of Harry Price)</i>
President of the L.S.U.	
Secretary of the L.S.U.	
1st Committee Member	
2nd Committee Member	
3rd Committee Member	
4th Committee Member	
Mrs. Worth	<i>(Stanley's mother)</i>
Anthea Bryce	<i>(Daphne's friend)</i>
Phyllis Wrayburn	<i>(another)</i>
Avis Childs	<i>(another)</i>
Mary Mc.Ginlay	<i>(Nell's maid)</i>
Mrs. Duncan Senior	<i>(Nell's mother-in-law)</i>
Isabella MacFarlane	<i>(Nell's Mother)</i>
Eithne	<i>(Daphne's maid)</i>
Jean Duncan	<i>(Friend to Nell)</i>
Megan	<i>(Maid to the Hallidays)</i>
Skelton	<i>(Their Nanny)</i>

Harriet	<i>(Friend to Isabella)</i>
Chief Hospital Administrator	<i>(Of the Dundee Infirmary)</i>
Sister Slater	<i>(Ditto)</i>
Nurse Wilde	<i>(Ditto)</i>
Constance Price	<i>(Wife to Harry)</i>
General Fraser	<i>(of the War Office)</i>
Sir Edward Tindal Atkinson	<i>(D.P.P.)</i>
Maud	<i>(an artist; his sister)</i>
Sir Desmond Wooler	<i>(of the War Policy Committee)</i>
Lord Ansell Wilcox	<i>(of the War Policy Committee)</i>
D.S. Ford	<i>(of the Portsmouth police)</i>
Air Raid Warden	<i>(Formerly an estate steward)</i>
Cecil Williamson	<i>(Working for MI6)</i>
Mrs. Homer	<i>(A spiritualist entrepreneur)</i>
Mr. Homer	<i>(her partner)</i>
Frances Brown	<i>(Nell's travelling companion)</i>
Alfred, Lord Tennyson	<i>(The Spiritualist Poet)</i>
Emily Brontë	<i>(Poet, novelist and mystic)</i>
Agnes Sampson	<i>(A practising witch)</i>

3 Nurses.

Optional Soldiers.

And in the Prologue :

Three Witches played by members of the Cast.

* * * * *

Note :

Facts about the real-life characters may be gleaned from the Appendix notes and from web-sites and books on the case. In some cases physical appearance is important. Miss Maule, for instance, was a feminist-lesbian who wore “male” trousers and blazers and a tie, and had her hair cut in a (relatively) short back and sides. I say this not to caricature her but to give some idea of how truth to reality should, where possible, be respected.

Time :

Variously between 1906 and 1956.

Place :

Variously in Perthshire, London and Portsmouth. Also in the indeterminate Beyond.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play is based on the true story of Helen Duncan, the spiritualist medium imprisoned towards the end of the Second World War under the 1734 Witchcraft Act. It is a story of Government hypocrisy, personal tragedy and war-time dilemmas and it had and retains a mystery at its heart.

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A C T O N E

SCENE ONE

A dark stage. Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches.

First Witch

When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch

When the hurly-burly's done,
When the D-Day's lost and won.

Third Witch

That will be ere set of sun.

First Witch

Where the place?

Second Witch

Upon the heath.

Third Witch

There to plait her prison-wreath.

First Witch

I come, Sir Winston!

Second Witch

Wooler calls.

Third Witch

Anon.

All :

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

(They remove masks to reveal themselves as three members of the 1940's male establishment – probably Wilcox, Wooler and the Director of Public Prosecutions, all of whom we will meet in Part Two. Brief black out. Then, as their piece fades, Nell discovered alone in semi-darkness, but with a small red light burning, in her cell in Holloway prison. She is a large woman, well over twenty stone, sitting - squatting almost – on a stool. She has a cigarette in her hand, which she puffs occasionally. She speaks with quite a strong Scottish accent and may use more Scottish contractions and idioms than I include in the actual text.)

Nell : It's grim here, isn't it? Cell after cell all the same. Mesh-covered walkways where I am not allowed to walk. Bibles used as paper for the lav. I had hopes before. I was really hopeful. But now after the Appeal failed ... I mean, why should it fail? D-Day has happened. It's over and done with. And yet still they need to get at me : I was a fraud. I couldn't have raised spirits because spirits don't exist. Tell that to Emily Brontë. Tell that to Lord Tennyson. There he is, over in the corner. He's lounging now – sprawling on a sofa, smoking his everlasting pipe.

It's odd, you'll think, me knowing about Lord Tennyson. Ignorant hag like me. But, you see, he was a believer so he did crop up sometimes. Likewise Emily. Likewise Agnes Sampson. Later on you'll meet Agnes – in fact, you may be able to see her already – but she was never a medium. More a genuine witch. (*Addressing the as yet invisible Agnes*) That's right. Weren't you, Nessie? She's nodding at that. Nodding and grumbling. Mind, she did have second sight. How else could she have told the King exactly what he said to his bride on their wedding night?

You see that? (*Pointing at a figure who is either unseen by us or represented only by a flickering light*) That's Henry. He's my husband and I met him in a very strange way. Later you'll find out how I met him but I won't say now. And neither will I tell about Harry Price. Only to make clear he's a monster. A monster. Are you not, Harry, you bugger? And there's Miss Maule and there's Ethel. Ethel's his secretary. Jumped-up little bitch. Oh my, she nearly bumped into Emily Brontë. Didn't see her, of course. Not got the sense of it. That's what it is to be spiritually blind.

I wouldn't mind this place so much if it wasn't for the bombing. All them doodlebugs. *(Suddenly almost gleeful)* One of them landed on the Royal Courts of Justice. It did, right enough. So when we had the last day of my appeal it was in a kind of shelter. An air-raid shelter – plain wooden tables, worm-eaten benches. Spectators, though. And then it was all over and I was told to keep smiling and go back to my cell. I just groaned. How could I else? I knew they were determined to keep me – that I'd be stuck here till the end of the war.

What's that you say? If we don't start soon, it'll *be* the end of the war. Well, I dare say that's true. No point telling my tale if I'm not going to get on with it. But I need my supports. I need my allies. Only not Albert. Not yet. Albert is all very well but to bring my chief spirit-guide here - here to this filth and him with his posh voice and manicured fingers They say, don't they, that the spirit world is very close. That it runs parallel. And if we can only tap into it – if we can tap into *that* and from there into a wider pool of psychic power..... only we mustn't be pulled back ... not suddenly pulled back. *(Stubbing out cigarette)* So then, Emily : are you ready?

Emily (as a voice) : Ready, Nell.

Nell : Agnes?

Agnes (as a voice) : Ready, Nell.

Nell : Tennyson? Come on, Tennyson

Tennyson (in a sepulchral rather sad voice) : Far other worlds in which I must believe.

Nell : And I of course since way back long ago. *(Fade)*

SCENE TWO

*(Scene changes to Cherry Cottage, the home of the MacFarlane family. Mrs. Duncan – henceforth to be known as Mother – discovered with Harriet, a neighbour. The characters should speak with a Scots lilt and may use dialect forms such as **wasna** for **wasn't** in place of the standard English variants used for clarity in the following script.)*

Mother : And it was good, was it?

Harriet : Very good.

Mother : What did he say?

Harriet : Oh well, you ken.

Mother : I don't ken. I ken a lot of things, Harriet. I ken that my man is no hand with the bairns, that it's no joy being wed to a slater, and that it wrenches your heart when the children count the peas in their broth, but I do *not* ken what was said by the visiting gentleman at the Literary Society.

Harriet : Dr. Mc.Diarmid – that was his name. An authority on Gaelic culture. Folklore – witches - everything really.

Mother : What sort of everything?

Harriet : Guess.

Mother : I'll not guess. Do you think I have second sight?

Harriet : Ask Nellie.

Mother (rather intrigued now) : My Nell thinks I have second sight?

Harriet : It's because of the petticoat. You know she goes swimming in the pool. And you don't like it but you always seem to know. Well, Nell thinks it's your second sight. But it's no' that, is it? It's the way she does up her buttons. Because by rights they should fasten down the back but

she can only do them up the front. And so you can tell. That *is* how you know, isn't it?

Mother : I'm no' saying it isna. She's a strange child, Harriet.

Harriet : Oh well, possibly. A bit of a tomboy. She climbed the minister's trees yesterday – climbed up, stripped off the apples. And then she roasted a rabbit.

Mother : Oh not again.

Harriet : She and her brother. They were playing Highland Hunters. And there were these rabbits munching on the cabbage stalks. And so up they creep and catch one and then they roasted it.

Mother : She'll be roasted herself one day. Hellish Nell, the Callander witch.

Harriet : I heard about Johnny.

Mother : Oh *that*. Aye.

Harriet : While you were baking.

Mother : Baking, making pasties. And in she comes, Harriet – in she comes, all innocent, and suddenly asks, "Who is Johnny?" So I say, "What?" or "Why?" or something. And she says, "Oh, because he's here and he's saying he's no' dead. I'm to ask you to tell his mother he's not dead and is happy."

Harriet : So what did *you* say?

Mother : What do you think I said? I told her not to utter things like that. That Johnny had been killed before she was born and, if she went round saying such things, people would call her a witch and put her in prison.

Harriet : Not very likely.

Mother : Not really but I had to scare her. And then later she came back to it – said she always told the truth and didn't know why I was angry, and couldn't I see? Because Johnny *was* there – he was right before her in his soldier's uniform. And then she said she heard a voice. A voice

talking – saying to her, “Yes, you did see him. And one day they will believe”. Which I don’t for a moment think really happened – she was just showing off - but still

Harriet : I know. It unsettles you. Still, good in a way. Because if ever you thwart them

Mother : Thwart who?

Harriet : The spirits. If ever you doubt the spirits or vex the fairies - if you annoy them, say, or recognise them, when you shouldn’t - they will punish you. Blind you probably. Ask Mr. Cumming – he’s our President, and he admitted it (*Breaking off as Nell enters*) Oh hullo, Nell.

Nell (rather drearily as if depressed) : Hullo.

Harriet : I’ve been telling your mother about the Literary Meeting. And about your schoolteacher Mr. Cumming –

Nell : I don’t want to talk about my schoolteacher.

Mother: Why not? Have you been naughty?

Nell : No I haven’t. Just because he thinks I cheated

Mother : Cheated? Not again.

Nell : I don’t cheat and I never tell lies. But that won’t help. He’s going to come to father. All that fuss. I mean, it was only ink.

Mother : Ink?

Harriet : Tell us, Nellie.

Nell : The others liked it. Oh yes, they liked it well enough. Normally they don’t care for me. They think I’m different. Just because I fight with them and yell sometimes, and they tell on me and suck up to the teachers. But this time How they laughed!

Mother : What happened, Nellie?

Nell : It was a test.

Harriet : What was a test?

Nell (quite earnestly) : You see, that's not how I learn. I'm not clever. I know that. But sometimes things just come to me – they get in my head – I don't know how – God, is it? – and then I just lift my head and sing out an answer. And then I get whacked. Like when that Inspector came and they made me take down my drawers to be searched by another girl. Because they thought I had hidden a book. And then today –

Mother : Go on.

Nell (suddenly diverting; more dreamily) : - when I was thinkin' about bridges – about bridges linking things up – different houses, different towns, us and the fairies –

Mother : Please, Nellie.

Nell (getting back to the point) : It was history. Battles. Dates of some battles. And I didn't know but I clasped my slate close to my chest and prayed to God to help me and ... well, the names came on my slate.

Mother : What?

Nell : They just came. And he said I had cheated. That I couldn't possibly know So I grabbed up my inkwell and threw the ink at him. How we all laughed. Well, *we* did, only *he* didn't. He picked up a cane and I I ran away. I came home. Only before that – I think I said something about 1066. Or it might have been Bannockburn. So perhaps he will die in a battle. Or – no – he'll die during a lesson. A lesson about a battle.

Tiger Cumming in a rage
Like a monkey in a cage
When the ink goes down his back
He'll be like a Jumping Jack.

It's a poem. Johnny sent it.

Harriet : Johnny again. And bridges! ... As if she knew.

Nell : Knew what? Can I have some cake?

Harriet (to Mother) : It was at the lecture. A story we heard. There are these clergymen travelling to attend a very sick man. And on a bridge they meet a piper who strangely knows where they're going.

Nell : Ah, like me. I know where people are going.

Harriet : I'll write it out for you. But I'm afraid it's not very cheerful. It ends with fire. He disappears in flashes of fire – hell-fire, fairy-fire

Nell : Fire. I shall see fire.

Mother : No you won't, Nellie.

Nell (defiantly) : I will so. I shall see fire and prison and bridges and
Albert.

Mother: Albert? Who on earth is Albert?

Nell : If Cumming comes, you will stick up for me? Can I have this?
(Indicating a lump of dough) That ink did stain him so! *(Laughs and raises her pinafore to her face. Fade. Brief music.)*

SCENE THREE

(Scene changes to an office in the Dundee Royal Infirmary. Sister Slater – behind a desk - discovered with Nurse Wilde who is in front of it.)

Sister : And she said it was possession, did she?

Nurse (pursing her lips) : Demonic possession.

Sister : You didn't mishear?

Nurse (self-righteously) : I did not mishear. She's always sayin' such things.

Sister : About possession.

Nurse : Well, not just that. Spirits and things. I tell her she should stop her nonsense and get on with her work.

Sister : Yes, well, so she should.

Nurse : And count herself lucky. Lucky she's not in the bleach fields or the jam factories. Lucky, for that matter, she's not in munitions.

Sister : She did *try* to get into munitions.

Nurse : Turned down, I suppose.

Sister : The tubercular lung.

Nurse : So-called tubercular.

Sister : And she does weigh over fifteen stone. But these messages. Have you ever thought, Nurse, that it is possible – that messages coming through space, like they do with the wireless?

Nurse : That's different.

Sister : How is it different?

Nurse : Because we know what sends them. I don't but scientists do. Whereas if it's all fake – if there are no messages, and she just makes them up or is deluded

Sister : Yes, but we know so little. I mean messages do come through and already people are able to intercept them –

Nurse : Yes, well if they threaten us. We have to block out what is a threat to us. And if the enemy are threatening our freedoms, if they are trying to stop us from communicating, or prevent us from criticising their horrible systems We've come a long way from Helen Macfarlane.

Sister : Yes, well, I'm going to see her. You can send her in..... I suppose, Nurse, you haven't considered that she may be right – that she may really have something special to communicate.

Nurse : Ridiculous. Blasphemous.

Sister : You think so?

Nurse : I do think so. In my view, people are far too prone to encourage ridiculous ideas. We are born to suffer, Sister. *She* is born to suffer – and if she would only realise it – learn that life is a prison, and that wise folks accept the fact, do their duty and just put up with it

Sister : Send her in, will you?

Nurse : Yes, Sister. (*She goes*)

Sister : Born to suffer? I wonder. Perhaps if we open the cage a little

(*Nell enters, now in her late teens.*) *Nurse MacFarlane*.

Nell : Sister.

Sister : Take a seat please.

Nell (doing so a little defensively) : You wanted to see me.

Sister : I did, yes. Tell me, Helen, how long have you been here now?

Nell : Six months.

Sister : Six, yes. I have your file somewhere.

Nell : In the blue drawer.

Sister : You know that?

Nell : I sensed it.

Sister (withdrawing it) : Yes, here we are. Helen MacFarlane. Auxiliary nurse. Born in Callander. Came to Dundee. Took refuge in a women's hostel.

Nell : Yes.

Sister : You don't mind my saying that? That phrase : Took refuge?

Nell : It's true enough.

Sister : And you are a truthful person.

Nell : Och aye. As for instance –

Sister : Go on.

Nell : Well, I was thinkin' o' when I was young. When I went to church, and won *Oliver Twist* for regular attendance. It's a book.

Sister : I know it's a book.

Nell : I returned it.

Sister : You did what?

Nell : It's about thieves. I thought it might teach me how to steal.

Sister : I see. On the other hand, the pleasures of the imagination –

Nell : I don't have an imagination.

Sister : And yet you see spirits?

Nell : Sometimes I do. (*She shuts up abruptly.*)

Sister : So then you came to a women's hostel. There was a reason, I assume. A reason why you left your home – why you were expelled from it –

Nell : Not expelled. I wasna expelled. But yes, there was a reason.

Sister : Which was?

Nell : You know what it was.

Sister : Pregnancy. You have a little daughter.

Nell : I do have a daughter. Isabella. Named for my mother. Which if I had really been expelled If she had really chucked me out

Sister : And is that why you were turned down? Why the munitions factory

Nell (thinking of the pregnancy) : Three months. I was only three months. And strong. I could have coped. When I came first, I worked in the mills. I met Jean there. Jean's my friend. Just a little scrap of a thing. Only then when the war came and she got into munitions whereas I me

Sister : You were turned down. You ended up in the sanatorium. Which perhaps as a blessing

Nell : You mean because of the yellow. Because the girls come out looking like canaries

Sister : I mean, Helen, a restoration to health, a living baby, perhaps inspiring you to take care of others –

Nell : I do want to take care of others. In my own way I do.

Sister : At the same time, I have to point out I have to insist

Nell (as if she intuits what is in the Sister's mind) : I know. That Psychiatry. Terrible. There's a woman there thinks she's a cat. And another eats sanitary towels. She eats them when – when -

Sister : - when she menstruates –

Nell : menstruates, yes – and that's not to mention the ones who keep having fits. Epileptic they call them. But they can't help it. It's the demons – when the demons are in them –

Sister : Yes, that is what I wished to talk to you about. We really can't have you going about proclaiming demonic possession –

Nell : But it *is* demonic possession –

Sister : No it isn't.

Nell : Yes, it is. There are spirits everywhere. I ken you may not believe it, but if you'll only open your eyes Because they're everywhere. When I'm in bed – when I'm at church - when I go skating -

Sister : Skating?

Nell : You think I'm too big? People think because you are big and clumsy you can't have feelings or ideas or a sense But I *do* have a sense. Jean knows. Jean believes in it.

Sister : Jean being your friend?

Nell : We go skating together. I tell her my dreams. I keep having these dreams. I am visiting Flanders. Wandering among the trenches. And there before my eyes is my soul-mate. A young private – tall, thin, sad-looking. Jean says I need to come back to earth. She believes but she says I need to get an anchor. Which I have in a way.

Sister : By working for us.

Nell : By the writing. Jean has this brother, you see, and, seeing as he's in the war and even though I've never met him What I said, ma'am, about being truthful. I *am* truthful. The only time I ever wasn't was when I said I was waitressing'. And I really do see spirits. Only people don't believe me. They think I tell lies. Do you think I tell lies?

Sister : I think you believe what you say you believe. And after all why not? Emily Brontë

Nell : What?

Sister : It just flashed through my mind. How Emily Brontë, who was undoubtedly a genius – how she too believed in spirits. There's a book she wrote – *Wuthering Heights*.

Nell : *Wuthering Heights*. With a girl in it called Isabella.

Sister : You've read it?

Nell : No, no, only I do sense There's this food. Isabella brings fairy food – she tips it in somebody's lap. Changelings, you see. The heroine is a changeling. A changeling prisoner, hair combed, wheeled to the fire, feet washed like Jesus, cakes poured in her lap

Sister : This is extraordinary. You *have* read it, haven't you?

Nell : No, no, I haven't read it. I just sense I just know (*Breaking off as Nurse Wilde returns*) Oh.

Sister : Oh.

Nurse : Excuse me. Patient in Psychiatry. Screaming. Won't have her feet washed. And she's rousing up others, so if we could have some extra muscle

Sister : You'd better go.

Nell : I'd better go.

Sister : And Helen This gift of yours – don't make too much of it. And let us not hear any more about demonic possession. Epilepsy, Helen, is a medical condition.

Nell (tonelessly as if half in a trance) : It's a medical condition. (*Goes out with Nurse Wilde*)

Sister : A cry for help – or is she genuine? A fraudulence? How can I know or say? (*Stands pondering. Fade.*)

SCENE FOUR

(Scene changes to the home of Jean Duncan's parents. Jean discovered with her mother who is ironing. A table is part-set for high tea. We are in a kind of kitchen or scullery, so there are facilities for washing at a sink and making tea, though the set need not be at all elaborate. Mrs. Duncan Senior is finishing some ironing, using an old-fashioned flat iron, of course. Jean is a tiny girl – less than seven stone.)

Mrs. Duncan Senior : So who is she then, this Helen?

Jean : Nell. I call her Nell.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : Do you indeed? And where does this Nell come from?

Jean : From Callander.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : Oh from Callander.

Jean : You don't have to make it sound like a foreign country.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : And she left this Callander because?

Jean : Well, she needed work. We all need to find work. But she goes home sometimes. She goes at weekends. Which is hard because of the fares.... She goes without food sometimes to pay for the fares

Mrs. Duncan Senior : And that's why she's coming to us is it : to get a square meal?

Jean : I told you. I'm her friend. And she wants to meet Henry.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : Oh so that's her little game. Feet under the table. Listen, Jean. Our Henry is very sensitive. And now with the war Not that it wasn't bad enough before.

Jean : The dreams you mean.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : The gas dream. Does your friend know about that? How he dreamt over and over again about a menacing man. And the smell of the gas. And the ghost of a woman. A woman who had gassed herself. And the husband turning out to be real -

Jean : No. She doesn't know that. Let alone that he hanged himself. She's been ill.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : So let's get this straight. There's this friend of yours – Helen – and you've known her for months but never mentioned her - and she writes to Henry but she's never met him and she worked with you once in the jute mills. And then after all *that* she wheedles her way into a nursing job from where somehow she manages to travel home every weekend ... and then, to crown it all, to put the tin lid on it, she produces a baby –

Jean : Oh.

Mrs. Duncan Senior (with dark triumph) : Oh.

Jean : You've been checking.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : You can be sure indeed I've been checking.

Jean : It wasn't like you think.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : What was it then? Immaculate conception?

Jean (not knowing the term) : I don't know what -

Mrs. Duncan Senior : It means there was no man. Which there obviously *was*. How you can bring a woman like that into our home after all we've been through – all Henry's been through ...

Jean : Henry wants it. He desires to meet her. He says –

Mrs. Duncan Senior : Well?

Jean : He says it's fate.

Mrs. Duncan Senior : Oh, fate?

Jean : Fate piping his future. Nell told me a tale about a piper.

Mrs. Duncan Senior (censorious in tone) : Did she?

Jean : On a bridge. There's this piper on a bridge and he begs the priests to ask the very sick man about himself – about where he, the piper, will go on the Day of Judgement. And they say "Heaven." But only if he can find enough blood in his body to write his name. But he can't – not a drop. And so when, after all this, not a drop flows, the priests ask the piper who he is. And he says he is a fairy. He is a lost soul who has been wandering the earth since the start of time. And he's never hurt anyone. But now, seeing that Heaven is not to be his home that he is an outcast and unwanted *(She shudders and breaks off)*

Mrs. Duncan Senior : Listen, Jean.. I'm your mother and I love you and I love Henry but all this is nonsense. I was a herring-gutter. I raised five children in a two-up tenement. And no help from my man. So don't tell me about fate. Don't tell me about pipers. Not unless they turn up in a pinny.

Henry (entering) : Ah, there you are!

Jean (pleased) : Henry.Mother's been scolding me. She doesn't think I should have invited

Mrs. Duncan Senior : No you shouldn't. Clean collar, I see.

Henry (sensing her mood) : It's the anniversary. This is the day when Willy

Jean (mortified for having forgotten) : Oh of course.

(Mrs. Duncan Senior tries to divert her own grief by indicating the need to cut up the meat-loaf)

Henry : It upsets you, I know. It's bound to. But if you're ever to come to terms ever to get over it

Mrs. Duncan Senior (cutting the meat-loaf vigorously) : I have got over it.

Henry : Then why do you cry o' nights?

Mrs. Duncan Senior : Being alive is enough to make anybody weep.

*Henry : You cry because you haven't come to terms ... you haven't got over it. But I tell you, Mother, there's a spirit world all around us. There is, honestly. Well, remember my dream – horrible, but a proof. And so it was with Willy. You remember, Jean. The police saying he had been abducted by gypsies. And we knowing he hadn't. *(To his mother)* And then you consulted the medium.*

Mrs. Duncan Senior : I didna.

Jean : You did, ma. Don't say you didn't.

Henry : And the medium saw water.

Jean : Water and ships.

Henry : And correctly predicted that news would come in exactly three weeks.

Jean : And then right on time –

Henry : Right on time, a ship in for repairs -

Jean : It revealed a drowned boy between the hull and the quay. And that boy was Willy.

Mrs. Duncan Senior her voice breaking) : It was Willy.

Jean : I do remember. I'd forgotten but I do remember. I'm sorry I asked her today, Ma. But it's not the end. It's not, is it, Henry? Even at our lowest – even when everything is dark

Henry : There's a saying, isn't there : 'If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride'. Well, I rode, Mother. Even lying helpless in the mud I rode. And you know why? Because of the girl. The girl I saw. That round smiling face, the dark hair, the deep-brown eyes, reassuring me And she's coming closer. I can feel her coming closer. (*There is, after this, a tap on the window*)

Jean (looking through the window) : That'll be Nell. (*Going to let the visitor in*)

Mrs. Duncan Senior : Oh Henry, if I could only believe.

Henry : You do, you do. You're just afraid of it.

Jean (entering with Nell) : Come along, Nell. Come into the parlour. This is my mother and this -

Nell (who holds a bunch of cheap - possibly wild - flowers) : This is Henry.

Henry : The smiling girl and now the self-same voice.

Nell : I've brought you some flowers. (*Handing them to Mrs. Duncan*) I feel I've come home now. (*Fade*)

SCENE FIVE

(Scene Hospital Scene changes to the Office of the Hospital Administrator. He is interviewing Sister

Administrator : Come in, Sister.

Sister : Mr. Mortimer.

Administrator : I am sorry to take you from your no doubt very onerous duties but I felt I must speak to you. It's about Helen Macfarlane.

Sister : Yes.

Administrator : Helen Duncan, as she is now.

Sister : You disapprove?

Administrator : I'm not sure we can keep her. There have been complaints.

Sister : There are always complaints.

Administrator : These are serious. I am not saying of course that they are necessarily justified. I mean think of motor cars.

Sister : Motor cars?

Administrator : I can conceive, Sister, of a time when motor cars will be driven by electricity. I can conceive of a time when the electronic transmission of instructions will be commonplace. But what then? What then? What if the systems be infiltrated?

Sister : Infiltrated?

Administrator : It is possible, is it not? Wide-scale interference with authorised systems – deliberate distortion. Or what about politically? If the airwaves are taken over by an enemy force and they transmit deliberate misleading information – dangerous information – information that is bad for morale –

Sister : And you think Nurse Duncan is such a phenomenon – that she is an unreliable transmitter?

Administrator : I think it is possible. She claims psychic gifts. Well, perhaps she has them. But that does mean it is good for us to hear what her messengers convey. And what if she lacks them? What if she does not have those gifts at all? What if it is all make-believe or pretence or – and this is a third proposition – does have the gifts but misreads the messages –

Sister : Faulty transmission.

Administrator : Faulty transmission. But that is not really the point. Personally I don't care which of the three is applicable. I don't care if none of them are. The point is that Mrs. Duncan is already dealing with

seriously disturbed patients and when she tells them what she is telling them –

Sister : That being?

Administrator (reading from a paper) : “She told me she knew her husband even before she met him. She says it was in a dream. She was in France in a dream and there was this young man – a soldier. And he looked so ill. So pale. And then one night it was different. He wasn’t in the trenches. He was in hospital. But he still looked so ill”

Sister : And he wrote to her of this, did he?

Administrator : I beg your pardon.

Sister : I was just thinking. She wrote to the brother of a friend of hers and if he wrote back if he told her all this

Administrator : Ah the Nurse Wilde syndrome. Nurse Wilde tells me the dreams were hallucinations brought about by T.B. She also says it was because the papers were printing the names of the dead

Sister : I did not know you had spoken

Administrator : She is one of the complainants.

Sister : Ah, I see. She was telling on me.

Administrator : It is not just Nurse Wilde. A complaint here – taken by a priest from a Mrs. Fox. Who is already under extreme mental stress. Nurse Duncan told Mrs. Fox she knew in advance the answers in a history test. And something about a piper who vanished in flames of fire. She also mentioned the story of her husband, claiming that he confirmed everything – that one day after endless fighting, aching all over, all his joints swollen, he fell into a coma, and the last thing he remembered was a sensation of lightness – lightness and gentleness - of being lifted by unseen hands. And then, when he eventually came to –

Sister : He was lying in hospital -

Administrator : Yes.

Sister : A field hospital.

Administrator : Yes.

Sister : Next to a man with no legs. She told me that. She said that her husband never wrote that. Only that he'd had rheumatic fever.

Administrator : And yet she knew.

Sister : Yes.

Administrator : Knew about the man with no legs knew he had had visions -

Sister : She said she too had visions. A young soldier, ailing but safe. A young thin man.

Administrator : Her husband.

Sister : As it turned out. The face was vague but even so -

Administrator : And he heard a voice. Her voice saying, "You'll be all right".

Sister : She told Mrs. Fox, that?

Administrator : That was to another patient.

Voice (off) : That was to another patient.

Administrator : Pardon me?

Sister : I did not speak.

Administrator : The point is, what are we going to do about it? About this communication through space? Heaven knows, I have heard some odd things. I have heard of twins, oceans apart, sharing an astonishing range of identical behaviour. Calling their dogs by the same names. Marrying men of the same name and same birth date. I have heard of twins sensing illness in siblings they did not know they had – even dying at an identical moment – but if we allow Mrs. Duncan to keep indoctrinating sick people with such challenging ideas – (*A paper drops to the floor*) Oh what's that?

Sister : It seems to be another complaint.

(He goes to pick it up and in so doing knocks over a vase of flowers.)

Administrator (as the vase falls) : Oh!

Voice Off : Oh!

Sister : Here, let me help. (Getting down on her knees to do so) How odd.

Administrator : What?

Sister (having picked up the paper) : This. A complaint. A complaint from a Mrs. Painter. In it she says that Nurse Duncan had just been talking of her spirits and she knocked over some flowers and there was a great puddle and she said, “Oh just look at that puddle! They will get me for that puddle”.

Administrator : Get her for a puddle?

Sister : The puddle under her legs.

Administrator : If this goes on, there’ll be a prison cell. Best sign her off – get her to leave, Joan, eh? (Sister starts mopping up the puddle. Fade)

SCENE SIX

(Scene changes to a prosperous and rather elegant drawing-room – details can be suggested rather than actually staged. Present are Daphne Widmacott, Anthea Bryce, Cressida Halliday, Avis Childs, Phyllis Wrayburn, and Mrs. Ada Worth. The first four are all charming and elegant women still in their twenties, though Cressida looks troubled and is clearly the most sensitive. Miss Wrayburn is rather more starchy, though also young. Mrs. Worth is older but still under forty. A maid, Eithne, is serving tea.)

*Daphne : Well, of course, I’m not saying I’m a believer. Not really a believer. But I’m not *not*, if you know what I mean. And then, besides, she did tell the most amazing stories.*

Anthea : What sort of stories?

Daphne : Oh well, you know.

Anthea : Hardly. I'm not psychic.

Daphne : No, but you *are* interested.

Anthea : I came to see *you*, Daphne. And of course to meet your friends, Miss Wrayburn, Mrs. Worth, Miss Childs, Mrs. Halliday.

Cressida (murmuring) : Cressida, please.

Daphne : Such an odd woman. Fat. Huge. Enormous. But her stories. There was one about the Spiritualist Church.

Anthea (half-mockingly) : Oh, the spiritualist church.

Daphne : Quite interesting, actually. (*Mainly to the others*) What it was, she went to this church – first visit – never done it before - and the odd thing was it was the *medium* who was in trouble. And she sensed it. She sensed it and became ever so agitated. So agitated did she become that her husband – he's called Henry – he had to take her hand to comfort her. And then, when he did, she gripped so tight – so strongly – that he had to stop himself from calling out.

Anthea (half-satirically) : Heavens! (*As Mrs. Worth nods vehemently*) And you remember this?

Mrs. Worth : Oh I do, yes. It was most compelling.

Phyllis : So what happened then? I mean, after all this hand-gripping.

Daphne : Well, he asked what was wrong. Naturally. And she – Mrs. Duncan – she said, “Can't you see? Oh, God help him!” And all the way home that's how it went – she wringing her hands and saying the same thing - “Oh God!”, you know, and the bit about helping - and the point is he really *was* in trouble but nobody knew it. Not even his wife. Who thought it all quite mad. Which I suppose it *was* because afterwards Mrs. Duncan said she'd seen the medium being followed round by a monkey.

Anthea : A monkey? She saw the medium being followed by a monkey?

Daphne : Little furry thing – just like your husband.

Phyllis : How you can believe ...

Daphne : I told you, I don't. But I don't *not*. More cake?

Anthea : And after all this monkey-business?

Daphne : Oh well, that came later. But about eleven months afterwards the wife turned up frantically at Mrs. Duncan's door and said her husband had been put in an asylum. Because he kept saying she was trying to kill him. But she too had seen the monkey. And I forgot to say it was holding a noose. When Mrs. Duncan saw it, it was holding a noose I mean it's not as if she hasn't been *investigated*.

Phyllis : Oh investigated, was she?

Daphne : By the London Spiritualist Alliance. (*Phyllis snorts*)

Avis : Now, now, dear. Open mind.

Phyllis : Only if you want your brains to fall out. (*Turning to Cressida*)

Mrs. Worth : You're very quiet. What do *you* make of all this, Mrs. Halliday?

Cressida : I?

Anthea : Yes, you. You're interested, aren't you?

Cressida : Oh yes I'm interested.

Anthea : Well, then.

Cressida : I'm interested but it's difficult.

Avis : Why is it difficult?

Cressida : Because on one level it sounds so absurd. They say that when Mrs. Duncan is tied up, ectoplasm streams from her mouth - she floats in the air – she makes the sign of the Cross. And yet and yet well, she does *care*, doesn't she?

Phyllis : Care?

Cressida : Like with the poor disturbed medium. She visited him several times, you know. And on one occasion she placed her hands on his head and prayed – she prayed fervently - and suffered – oh, such a headache. Transference, they call it. Her husband was so alarmed that he straightaway opened the Bible and read a passage at random. *Corinthians*, actually. And what with that and the room going cold and Mrs. Duncan bleeding from the nose -

Phyllis : Pressure. Nasal cavity pressure.

Cressida : Yes, but it wasn't the end.

Avis : Wasn't it?

Cressida : You don't want to hear.

Avis : No. I do, I do.

Cressida : Well, he was just reading the 23rd Psalm – just hoping this might help somehow - when suddenly – suddenly there was a loud bang and then absolute silence. Total absolute silence. They found out later that the medium had died. He had died at exactly the same time as the end of the nose-bleed. Which itself stopped with the bang. Which as an example of something uncanny

Phyllis : It's ridiculous. Totally ridiculous. I'm afraid the susceptibility of some people

Mrs. Worth : Mrs. Halliday is bound to be susceptible. Considering what she's been through

(Breaking off, slightly embarrassed)

Cressida : Toby. His name was Toby.

Daphne : Mrs. Halliday lost her son, Phyllis.

Phyllis (rather chastened) : Oh. Oh dear.

Mrs. Worth: So if she can take comfort - derive strength from this spiritualist circle

Cressida : No. No, I don't, I don't.

Daphne : Nonsense, Cressida. You just said you did.

Cressida : I only came once. Just to the talk.

Daphne : Came to the talk – met my friend the psychic investigator. (*To the others*) Remind me to tell you about my psychic investigator. (*To Cressida again*) Besides, you said yourself Toby was a very imaginative little infant.

Cressida : Both my boys were very imaginative.

Anthea: Oh - not like your husband.

Cressida : Toby wasn't psychic. At least I don't think so. But he did love stories. Elfame. Fairyland. And wildlife. He loved wildlife. We took him to a park once and there were peacocks and he thought they were so beautiful, only wasn't it a pity they couldn't sing? So he was going to teach them. Only then, when he got the fever

Phyllis : I shouldn't dwell on it.

Cressida : I *like* to dwell on it. It's all I have. I'm sorry. I know I speak too much of him.

Phyllis (murmuring automatically) : No, no.

Mrs. Worth : Not at all.

Cressida : The thing is, everyone says, "Move on" but what have I got to move on *to*? Amos, I suppose. He's my other one. And it's true if I keep obsessing about Toby and forget to pay attention to *him*.... I do *love* him, of course. Love him deeply. But he's all right – I know he's all right - so I don't have to worry. Whereas with Toby

Anthea : Yes, I do see that. Is there any more tea?

Cressida : What do *you* think, Mrs. Worth?

Mrs. Worth : Me?

Cressida : You have a son. Do you think if you lost?

Daphne : Stanley –

Cressida : Stanley, you would be able to move on? It's an unfair question.

Mrs. Worth : Yes, it is rather.

Phyllis : - which is why I really don't think it helps to make a meal of it. It's all very well for you, Daphne, to go on about these talks and meetings and whatever it is, but that's different. It's a game. You don't take it seriously. Whereas for people like Mrs. Halliday (*Eithne draws in her breath sharply*) Yes?

Eithne : Nothing, madam.

Phyllis : No, you were going to say something.

Eithne : It's not my place.

Daphne : No, go on, Eithne.

Eithne : Well, it's just that I really do think you should take care, because ... well, sometimes these spirits

Anthea (half-satirically) : Angry, are they?

Eithne : So Mrs. Duncan says.

Daphne (surprised and rather delighted) : Eithne, you mean you've also been ...?

Eithne : Only the once. She was talking about how she got into it. About the electricity. When it failed, madam. Apparently the electricity in their flat failed and the Duncans were using candles and Mrs. Duncan snuffed one out, and lo and behold, the vapour started forming into letters.

Phyllis : How ridiculous.

Anthea : How thrilling.

Eithne (mainly to Phyllis who is the one needing most convincing) : And it spelt out a name, madam. The name Williams. And then a voice spoke and said he *was* Williams. Dr. Williams in the world of the spirit. After

which he materialised something. A tie pin. Rather bent, as if trodden on. And it turned out to have come from the pin-box of a friend of theirs. And then, after the disturbance –

Phyllis: A disturbance?

Eithne : I'd better not say.

Anthea : Oh come *on*, Eithne.

Eithne : A malevolent spirit. It spat a lot and overturned her sewing-machine. Which is why, after *that*, they made a trumpet and a red light and started every session with a hymn (*Turning to Daphne*) But what I *wanted* to say was you must be careful, madam. Because some of these frauds, these charlatan mediums

Phyllis : Exactly, Eithne. You are quite right to warn us.

Avis : A wise word to the credulous

Phyllis : Prison, that's the answer. Weed out the false ones and put them in Holloway. Talking of which, isn't your friend – your pal Mr. Price

Daphne (who is the person addressed) : What?

Phyllis : I thought I heard *he* was going to conduct some tests – some sort of an investigation

Mrs. Worth (wandering into her own line of thought) : My son says that in Holloway they use bacon grease to rub into their calluses. And they make rouge from the covers of exercise books.

Cressida : There's so much fraud but yet there's so much truth. Oh Toby! If you'd stayed, and hadn't gone! (*Fade*)

SCENE SIX

(Scene changes to the home of Maud Tindal Atkinson. There is a small dinner party going on, with Maud's brother Sir Edward present and also Lord Ansell Wilcox)

Atkinson : And what do we call this, Maud?

Maud : This, my dear Edward, we call raspberry charlotte. You'll love it - won't he, Ansell?

Wilcox : My dear Maud, your excellent fare –

Maud : Not mine. The cook. She spirits them up. An ally of Hitler.

Atkinson : What?

Maud : By which I mean a socialist. Socialist, cook, interested in spiritualism.

Wilcox : That too?

Maud : Oh yes. *(To her brother)* And if you'll kindly stop looking at the paper

Atkinson : I was searching for an article

Maud (confiscating it) : The reason being that Hitler too is interested. Apparently these new Nazis are obsessed with astrology, and mesmerism, and everything. Which considering her hero believes his fate is determined by divine providence

Wilcox : God help Providence.

Maud : That's rather the idea. Although whether he believes in God

Atkinson : He doesn't. He believes in patriotism, in manliness, in all those other things which attempt to turn man's animal fighting instincts into something more glorious. He also believes in electricity. He definitely believes in electricity.

Wilcox : My dear Edward, we all believe in electricity.

Atkinson : Earth electricity?

Maud : What?

Atkinson : It's a theory of his. I don't understand it. But I suppose electricity *is* a force, isn't it?

Maud : Enid says one day we shall have electric windows. But cook doesn't. She says it's a fantasy. She also discounts the idea of people intercepting our currents – picking up messages and so on when they zing through the wires.

Atkinson : And the reason for your mentioning this?

Maud : Nothing, nothing.

Atkinson : There must be.

Maud : There isn't. Only I was reading about a Mrs. Duncan. One of her predictions. There's this Mrs. Duncan and she had a vision of a man who was appointed to high office and turned away from it. And well, I thought that might be *you*, Edward.

Atkinson : Me?

Maud : When you were called to the Home Office – when you were summoned and told you were to be made Director of Public Prosecutions. (*To Wilcox*) He refused to believe it – walked out – had to be brought back in again

Atkinson : Because I knew none of the staff – I knew none of the staff – I was not a criminal lawyer

But as for any relevance to visions and messages –

Maud : Receiving them, transforming them.

Atkinson : What are you talking about?

Maud : Ansell understands. Don't you, Ansell? Because if, for instance, we could really intercept messages and change them, and then let them go on again so as to mislead our enemies

Atkinson : We haven't *got* any enemies.

Maud : Anyway, that's not the point. I just thought that supposing you could tap into her mind hear *her* predictions before she uttered them – knew what was coming I'm not being entirely serious.

Atkinson : I should hope not.

Maud : Not a hundred per cent. About ninety eight.

Atkinson : Which is far too much. It is ridiculous to confuse occult mumbo jumbo with the scientific transmission of aerial waves. And another thing : I don't like you talking about Hitler.

Maud : Don't you?

Atkinson : No. I know you probably think he is just some lunatic and there is no doubt he is an ego-maniac, but the truth is, he is gaining ground. There are those who say that the Nazi Party grew out of occult cults. That it is a reaction against materialism and technology. That he is a sort of Messiah. There are even some who say that some German occultist imparts secret techniques to him – techniques of mind control, of mental domination. And when you add that he has appropriated Christian symbolism

Wilcox : Has he?

Atkinson : Spears of Destiny – the Holy Grail – the swastika -

Maud : Not actually Christian.

Atkinson : Hindu, then. A sun symbol. Only backwards.

Maud : And Mrs. Duncan?

Atkinson : Oh she's a fraud. I've never heard of her but she must be. Some old witch who keen only for money and publicity and egged on by her money-grubbing relations

Maud : You're very quiet, Ansell.

Wilcox : I was thinking about another Mrs Duncan.

Maud : Another one?

Wilcox : Gelie she was called. Gelie Duncan of the North Berwick Witches. They had to catch this toad, hang it by its feet, collect the venom and smear it on something the king had worn. I wonder whether Mrs. Duncan ever does that. Or at any rate hides uses her garments as a hiding-place. Because, after all, when you have a large public to please when the people are there, and some horrible speaking tube appears, and the dead are expected to speak out into it What are you doing, Edward?

Atkinson : Reading.

Maud : Not again.

Atkinson : Rather a coincidence actually. Anniversaries.

Maud : Ansell is telling us about Gelie Duncan and you are sitting there reading anniversaries?

Atkinson : Yes, but it's today, you see. June 28th. (*Reading*) "On this day in 1590 there was arraigned the so-called North Berwick Witch, Gelie Duncan. Who, undergoing numerous tortures, named others, notably Agnes Sampson, a respectable midwife and healer, herself fastened to the wall, kept without sleep, thrown about with ropes, and finally confessing to fifty-three indictments, before being strangled and burnt"

Maud : Well, there you are. I hope, Edward, you're not planning to torture *our* Mrs. Duncan. Or use some ghastly legal trick against *her*. Because I think she's very good – and Cook says

Atkinson : Eat up your charlotte – make the most of that. Still, rather odd. A quirk too far, let's say. (*They eat decorously. Fade*)

SCENE SIX

(Enter Agnes Sampson, perhaps before the main curtain or perhaps on the main stage from the curtained-off recess. She is dressed in late 16th

century costume with some of the appurtenances of a traditional witch. She speaks in a rather refined Edinburgh accent.)

Agnes Sampson : Silly people, aren't they? Hardly worth a comment. And even if they *were*, it's not me you want. It's Gelie. Gelie Duncan. Still I was with her – I, Agnes Sampson. Conjuring the devil, or so they said. That was at the command of the Earl of Bothwell. Who desired us to kill the king, but then, managing to escape and flee to Italy

Where we met was in a church. But there was no restriction about it. Not like *your* Mrs. Duncan. Tying her up, putting sealing wax on the knots, sticking her in a sack. They did all that. Everything they could to restrict any movement. But that didn't stop her. Her spirit guide still came out - still wandered around, chatting away in his impeccable King's English. There he is now - chatting, waving his soft white hands.

Not everyone believed it of course. Some said it was Henry. That he was out to make money. Which maybe he was. What I *do* know is that fiddling about with trumpets is not the real way. Using red lights and cabinets is not the real way. And nor really is communing. Real witches don't bother with communing. They prefer killing. Real witches aren't interested in rediscovering the dead.

Another thing I've noticed is that she doesn't use animals. Oh they *appear*, yes, but never with any malevolence. Well, that's not *our* way. Not if you believe the records : bats, snakes, toads. Well, take the matter of the King's marriage. By this time we'd given up on the smearing because we couldn't get the right garment. And so what we did – or what they *say* we did - we took a cat, christened it backwards, bound it to a

dead man and threw the whole lot into the water. Splash! Right into the water. The aim being to raise a storm and sink the King's ship. Which failed, though a storm did blow up. I don't think Helen Duncan would have drowned a cat. She was coarse, yes, but she wasn't cruel. But she did like money. As of course did Harry Price – Harry Price, her Nemesis. And he was a terrible publicity-seeker so just because he denounced her, you needn't think you need concur with it.

After we were dead, the King published a book. *Daemonologie*. In which he brought a scholarly approach to his genuine belief in us. And then it was *Macbeth*. Where we were terribly downgraded. Sisters of Fate, aye, but not like in the woodcuts. Not dressed as great ladies. Let alone in front of a tree. Because we were evil, you see. We were bare heath and barrenness. I don't think Nellie was barrenness. I think she was a victim. Victim of what? Well, first of Harry Price. And here he comes – I'll off and take my tea. (*Picks out a frog – not a real one of course - from her pocket and swallows it. Flies off or simply fades.*)

SCENE SEVEN

(Scene changes to the study of Harry Price. Price discovered with his wife Constance. They seem more edgy than at ease with each other.)

Constance Price : So you are determined to publish, are you?

Harry Price : Yes, dear, I certainly am.

Constance Price : Because you know what people are saying? They are saying that your experiments are barbaric. That your laboratory is more like an operating theatre. An operating theatre crossed with a torture chamber.

Harry Price : Very colourful. And what about *you*? *You* don't say that, of course.

Constance Price : No, of course not.

Harry Price : Then what are you complaining about?

Constance Price : I ... Well, this business with Mrs. Duncan.

Harry Price : Ah yes.

Constance Price : You pay good money to test her, yes. I have no quarrel with that. But the poking about, the indignities.

Harry Price : Mrs. Duncan is well remunerated for her séances. Her husband is well remunerated for her séances.

Constance : She doesn't like you. You terrify her.

Harry Price : Judging by her own well-attested aggressiveness ...

Constance Price : That's different. That's self-defence.

Harry Price : Oh, so when she swears and spits at me -

Constance Price (half-conceding but simultaneously countering it) : She doesn't spit much. I would spit if, every session, I were searched – sewn into a strait-jacket – prodded by anonymous doctors. And then, when Mrs. Goldney trod on that ectoplasm –

Harry Price : That apparent ectoplasm –

Constance Price : - and had to be yanked free. Have you any notion of the trauma?

Harry Price : No. Have you?

Constance Price : I know she was screaming. I know there was blood on her face – I know she says you will be the death of her, and that she swallowed half a bottle of chlorinated lime and had to have her stomach pumped.

Harry Price : That was histrionics. It was a histrionic performance. Pure Houdini.

Constance Price : You're just jealous.

Harry Price : Jealous? Not at all.

Constance Price : Yes, you are. Always have been. The mere thought of anyone stealing your limelight

Harry Price : That is absurd.

Constance Price (hurt and angry) : Oh I'm absurd now. Well, perhaps I am. Profit and publicity : that's all you care about, Harry. But when it comes to acknowledging who pays for it who puts up with your bluster and your women friends and who ultimately *pays* for it *(She almost breaks down, then gets a grip on herself and goes)*

(Ethel, his secretary, emerges from behind a screen)

Ethel : Is she gone?

Harry Price : Gone in a puff of ectoplasm.

Ethel : I've got the book. *(Showing an appointments book)*

Harry Price : Ah yes, thanks. *(Scanning it briefly)* Wilson, yes. Stella, yes. And after that nothing till a quarter to twelve? Good. I don't want any skimping. I, Ethel, have a reputation to maintain – and now with Mrs. Duncan

Ethel : Oh yes. Make or break, there.

Harry Price : I sometimes wonder, Ethel, if it would have been better if I had never met Mrs. Duncan. Which, if I hadn't been walking upstairs – going up to my laboratory and she behind. -

Ethel : And what a big behind.

Harry Price : Anyway, I know her game. Like Houdini. Except that he admitted his deceptions.

Ethel : And even then people believed.

Harry Price : Believed, augmented. Remember that woman I told you about? The one who recognised a finger? The truth is I'm tired, Ethel. Tired of being shown off like a debutant and paraded about in these High Society Séances. And now just because I happen to say as much - just because of *that*, what happens? Conan Doyle is outraged. The Spiritualist Alliance is outraged. Mrs. Duncan is outraged. Which, considering I have by this time publicised her, made her name, used her in some sittings –

Esson Maule (*entering, dressed in mannish clothes, shaking an umbrella*) : Made her name, did you?

Harry Price : Miss Maule. Come in, come in.

Esson Maule : I'm in already. Dreadful journey.

Harry Price : You would like tea?

Esson Maule : Whisky would be more appropriate.

Harry Price : Miss Maule has come all the way from Edinburgh, Ethel.

Esson Maule : Yes I have. And considering the favour I am doing you –

Harry Price : It is *I* doing the favours.

Esson Maule : That's as may be. You are, I find, already discussing our subject.

Ethel : Mr. Price was telling me about his first meeting with Mrs. Duncan.

Esson Maule : Oh yes, I heard about that. You going up to your laboratory and she walking behind.

Harry Price : Yes.

Esson Maule : And you inviting her to some experimental sittings.

Harry Price : I don't know why I bothered. I was on the point of moving out. And considering her obvious fraudulence

Esson Maule : Yes, so they say. Tell me, have you heard about the teeth?

Ethel : Teeth?

Esson Maule : Yes.

Esson Maule : A séance in Scotland. Apparently she invited an old man to compare his materialised mother's gums with her own fair teeth. Trouble is, she was wearing dentures.

Harry Price : And you still have some faith in her?

Esson Maule : I think she's interesting. Perhaps if we sit down.

Ethel : Oh yes. I'll take your coat.

Esson Maule : The thing is, Mr. Price, it's very easy to mock – we all like to belittle. But how can we know? Mrs. Duncan says you terrify her. That even before you met she had a premonition you would do her harm. But is it true or is it an after-the-event myth? Perhaps it's even a publicity stunt. And then when we get to the ectoplasm -

Harry Price : Ah yes, the ectoplasm ... all that swallowing and regurgitating.

Esson Maule : What do you think it is?

Harry Price : Cheese-cloth. Nothing but cheese-cloth.

Ethel : Cheese-cloth mixed with the white of an egg, a length of cotton, and a little bit of lavatory paper.

Esson Maule : The proof being

Harry Price : The proof being her reluctance to have it analysed. There is also the fact that, when I did finally persuade her to swallow a tablet of methylene blue, nothing appeared. (*He means no ectoplasm*)

Esson Maule : No. I heard about that.

Harry Price : And?

Esson Maule : Well, it's not that I doubt you. But there's rather more to it. May I smoke?

Harry Price : Do, please. Ethel – (*He indicates that she should bring over an ashtray*)

Esson Maule (*lighting up, using a cigarette holder, as this is done*) : I know what they say, of course. That her whole history's a sham. That even the premonitions about her husband can be explained. That she was ill and he was on morphine. But what about the food? Everyone says Mrs. Duncan has a hearty appetite. It's nothing for her to swallow a plate of ham and eggs minutes before performing. Which if she is going to regurgitate

Ethel : Perhaps she has a second stomach.

Esson Maule : Setting aside these rather wild speculations –

Ethel : They're not *that* wild.

Esson Maule : Setting aside all that, it seems to me that we are merely skating round the issue. Which is whether she is or is not actually fraudulent. So tell me, Mr. Price, what do you think? I mean *really*. You've seen her. You've examined her. Four sittings, wasn't it? During which time, I understand she refused to allow photographs, reacted violently at all attempts at an X-ray, ran from the laboratory, made a scene in the street –

Harry Price : Yes, she did all that.

Ethel : - clobbered her husband.

Esson Maule : She hit her own husband?

Ethel : When he tried to remonstrate. Though considering his own character

Harry Price : A chancer. An absolute chancer. It's the meal-ticket he cares most about ... If only we'd found that cheesecloth if only we had, Ethel

Esson Maule : Perhaps she passed it to *him*.

Harry Price (sighs) : Perhaps.

Esson Maule : But you're not sure.

Harry Price : I know this, if I'm to make my name – really to make it ... enter into what we now call the big timewe need more than hysteria. We need more even than the stereograms of her so-called materialised phenomena. I don't suppose ... we couldn't tamper perhaps - we couldn't plant

Esson Maule : Plant? Really, Mr. Price, if you think I have travelled all this way to deal in illegalities -

Ethel : Of course not. Have some more whisky.

Esson Maule : Listen, Mr. Price. What you have suggested is wrong. It is quite wrong. I will have no truck with it. On the other hand well, there is the maid.

Harry Price : The maid?

Ethel : Is that what you've come to talk about?

Esson Maule : Mr. and Mrs. Duncan employ a maid. A rather slatternly but not altogether negligible creature, who, being embittered by her treatment and low wages and various other real or imagined grievances ... well, let us say I believe she might interest you, and if she can help - be a bridge, shall we say, to further investigations

Harry Price : Bring her. Let's see her.

Esson Maule : And you'll take her seriously?

*Harry Price : There's a story, isn't there? A piper on a bridge. Trying to wring out blood, only he can't. And that is how *I* feel. I try so hard to wring out my scientific evidence. I produce pamphlets. I produce articles. I produce reports. And even now I am not credited. I *must* be credited. Because if I'm not*

Esson Maule (who also knows this story) : Oh, if you're not, you will depart in flames – Hell-flames – the flames of fairy magic

Harry Price (vehemently) : I must have proof she isn't what she seems.

Esson Maule (dryly) : Blood from a stone. Well, try it anyway. (She smokes thoughtfully. Fade)

SCENE SEVEN

(Scene changes to the home of Cressida and her husband, Marcus. Comfortable but rather desolate in atmosphere. Cressida discovered with her husband.)

Marcus : So you're determined to go, are you?

Cressida : Yes, Marcus, I am determined.

Marcus : You know I disapprove.

Cressida : I could hardly fail to.

Marcus : I have a responsible position, Cressida. I am secretary to the Chairman of the County Court. And if I should get this new post with Sir Edward – with Sir Edward Grimwood-Mears -

Cressida : Old Grumpy.

Marcus : Don't you dare call him that. If ever a man was distinguished – You do know he was Secretary of the Dardanelles Commission? –

Cressida : Was he now?

Marcus : Secretary there, attaché to America, Chief Justice to the High Court in Allahabad, Knight of the Indian Empire

Cressida : Yes, it all sounds most illustrious. But that's the point. I cannot think the illustrious Sir Edward would be remotely interested in the doings of your humble little wife who happens to have a fancy to attend a spiritualist meeting

Marcus : It isn't a fancy.

Cressida : Oh. So you know what I'm thinking? You are a sort of a medium.

Marcus : Of course I am not a medium. I repudiate such rubbish. And really when I hear the idiotic things these so-called spirits bring back to us – their infantile communications, their conjuring tricks, their appalling taste in music.

Cressida : Albert likes "South of the Border".

Marcus : You see. Not even Gilbert and Sullivan.

Cressida : Marcus, I do appreciate your position. I do honestly. But my friends – well, they're acquaintances really – they do say Mrs. Duncan is quite wonderful and if I can in any way reach through ... a word - even a breath –

Marcus : How many times have I told you : Toby cannot breathe – he is dead.

Cressida : I know he is dead.

Marcus : You seem to think I myself haven't felt – haven't longed. But the more we are tempted, the more we must resist. I don't know, Cressida. I thought when you finally arose from your sick-bed we might at last be making some headway –

Cressida : I did not finally arise –

Marcus : Yes, you did. With a great display of incipient martyrdom. The novelists say, don't they, that for a woman to take to her bed is a sign of defeat. But it isn't. It's a form of defiance – of empowerment.

Cressida : Of retreat. It was a retreat. A retreat from reality. An unbearable reality.

Marcus : This reality is unbearable. I am married to a lunatic. I have heard of mediums whose low tricks so enrapture the sitters that they actually come to believe their own fraud. And *you* believe in them. You actually credit it. And that's not to mention the peculiar character of this particular medium.

Cressida : Mrs. Duncan.

Marcus: Her. A woman who blasphemes, who spits, who is aggressive I suppose you will say that that's her spirit speaking. To which I respond that, if she really had any decency, she would try harder to control it. Or else not practise at all. You think I am ridiculous.

Cressida : No. No I don't say that.

Marcus : It's because I'm upset. And when I'm upset I simplify. But it *is* dangerous, Cressida. Ask anyone. Go to the Egyptian Hall. Go there where twice a day a couple of illusionists challenge any medium to perform a feat they cannot immediately reproduce. Or all right, *don't* do that. Stick to your guns. But so what? Perhaps it's all trauma. Perhaps by hypnotising herself, she releases a hidden psyche. She materialises a child, doesn't she?

Cressida : She has materialised children, yes.

Marcus : Peggy. Who of all the obnoxious knowing little squirts (*Cressida sighs, pained*) - Well, anyway, she produces her. And what does this little child say : "I don't know where my mummy is." "I want my mummy". Well, wasn't Mrs. Duncan abandoned by her own mother? Wasn't she thrown out, in pregnancy? And doesn't that betray a darker, deeper, sadder stimulus ?

Cressida : I don't know. I'm surprised you are even aware

Marcus : Yes, well, I made some enquiries.

Cressida : And think you've fathomed it?

Marcus : I think I have.

Cressida : The point being

Marcus : Two things. I have decided it is two things. One is her own suppressed need. And the other is ambition. It is the desire to inspire awe, fear or gratitude, all of which can be very addictive. Tell me, Cressida, what you have seen of her : it was not exactly decorous, was it?

Cressida : Decorous?

Marcus : She swears sometimes. Swears, screams, gets hysterical.

Cressida : Yes, but if she is in a trance Oh I see. You mean all this profanity and blasphemy and exhibitionism is a defiance – it's a form of rebellion –

Marcus : Exactly. I've seen it before. Poor people from a poor narrow background, resenting it, wanting to break out

Cressida : And that's it, is it? Nellie is solved. Not a vessel – not a medium at all – but a woman in whom the thirst for adulation combined with the release of a reservoir of underwater resentments

Marcus : Have you a better explanation?

Cressida : No.

Marcus : No?

Cressida : Who knows? Perhaps poverty does make you extreme. Perhaps you do veer into mental instability, religious fanaticism or you do if you are not simply ground down into an ant-like existence or the burrowing despair of a mole. But it is more than that. The cuts and sores and burns that have been found on Mrs. Duncan ... She suffers, Marcus. She is an instrument, and the tunes that are played on her ...

Marcus (disdainfully) : Stigmata, I suppose. Signs from the spirits.

Cressida : Can you imagine what it's like when the spirits do *not* come? And that's not counting the other things. The gatecrashers, the sceptics. They mock, Marcus – they pervert the atmosphere. Endless challenging, endless deriding, endless sneering Is it any wonder some mediums resort to trickery? That they seek a safeguard, a second string?

Marcus : And that's all right too, is it? It is all right to cut faces from magazines and present them as spirit children. It's all right to play with rubber gloves – to make shapes – to devise

Cressida : You distort everything. I don't know where you get it from.

Marcus : From this. (*Taking out a pamphlet*). From the *Anti-Spiritualists Bible*. One moment. (*He rings a bell*)

Cressida : What now? Oh what now, for God's sake, Marcus?

(*As if in readiness for this, Megan Wrayburn the maid enters promptly*)

Marcus : Wrayburn. Thank you for your promptitude. You have the book there?

Megan : I do, sir.

Cressida : That's *my* book.

Marcus : Exactly.

Cressida : You have been searching my wardrobe?

Megan : I'm so sorry, mistress.

Marcus : This book was discovered wrapped in tissue paper in your shoe drawer. In it there is a fulsome account of practising mediums. And *this* book – this other one - (*indicating the pamphlet*) is mine. A rather better book, consisting of a range of real-life exposés. As for instance : “There was this star. I was looking in a drawer one day and I came across this star. And I recognised it as just like one worn by a little spirit girl when

she came back to see her mother.” Or again, “She wears black stockings because they are invisible. And then, when she is shoeless, she seems to be floating.” Or again, “It’s quite easy to raise your height. A bogus ghost can gain as much as eighteen inches. They do it by draping an arm extended vertically. They extend it like this - ” (*He copies a gesture, presumably illustrated in a diagram*)

Cressida : Stop it! Stop it!

Marcus (surprised at the strength of her reaction) : Cressida, for heavens’ sake.

Cressida : You believe anyone except me. Any voice, any sneer. Look at you, Marcus. Look at you standing there, mocking, deriding. You seem to believe that my illness has allowed me to withdraw from all sense of responsibility. That it has let me deliberately play mad. Well, I admit that Spiritualism does allow a kind of release. We can express our need, we can be freely emotional. But think of what I was suffering. Think of that, and ask yourself was I in a state to put on *any* act that wasn’t genuine? When Toby died, I thought the sun would never shine. Living had no purpose. Death would have been kind. And don’t tell me he was so thin and wasted that his death was a relief. It wasn’t to *me*. Because I could only think of him as he was *before* – his true essence – his beautiful, beloved reality – healthy and strong and good and kind and so therefore this terrible pain – this ache of hollowness

Marcus (emotional himself now) : I know, I know. I felt it too. Toby playing with his trains, Toby reading his stories. Elfame stories. Mop the Fiddler. You remember Mop the fiddler, standing on a bridge, playing the fiddle so that all the women were enchanted At first it wasn’t too bad. He had been ill and in pain, and considering the pitiful state he’d been reduced to But of course what now comes thronging back is the

image of how he was in his prime : before he degenerated, before he ceased to be the one we loved - to be recognisable as that person –

Cressida : The person who loved us and loved nature –

Marcus : Yes –

Cressida : And talked to the peacocks –

Marcus (as a growing rapprochement develops) : He did, didn't he? And so -

Cressida : And so even now I look for a sign. Not to punish you, Marcus. Not to deny you. A sign that he is somehow with us – that we haven't been forgotten – that he loves us still as we love him. Oh Marcus if you could only join me in this If you could only suspend your disbelief

Marcus : I can't, I can't. I am the heavy-handed husband and I can't. It would be as likely for *me* to materialise as for Toby

Cressida : Cruelty! Cruelty!

Marcus : Cruel to be kind. To make you realise (*Breaks off as the nanny enters*) Yes?

Skelton The Nanny (entering) : It's Master Amos, sir. I thought I should say. There's a rash. And if it happens to be measles

Cressida : Measles? Oh no. Megan, run - fetch Mrs. Duncan

Marcus : Mrs. Duncan? I absolutely forbid Skelton, take Mrs. Halliday upstairs. Give her a sedative. And then when our guests arrive

Cressida (who had forgotten this) : Guests? Oh God. Not Sir Edward. You can't possibly mean Sir Edward.

Skelton : I'll telephone for the doctor, ma'am.

Cressida (to Marcus with sudden new insight) : You're frightened. He's frightened Skelton, and so the need to bully me

Marcus (giving each word equal emphasis) : A sedative. At all events stay calm. For Toby's sake. *(Correcting himself hastily)* For Amos. *(To Skelton)* Go now, eh? *(Skelton puts an arm round Cressida to hurry her out. Megan follows after. Marcus sinks exhausted. Quick fade)*

SCENE EIGHT

(Scene changes to the study of Harry Price. Ethel and Miss Maule discovered.)

Esson Maule : He's not here then?

Ethel : He slipped out for a moment. Tobacco. Usually he sends me. Which is rather demeaning, though compared to other things he's asked me do –

Esson Maule : As, for example, producing ectoplasm -

Ethel : That was a hoax.

Esson Maule : Well, of course, I know it was a hoax. May I hang up
(Holding up her coat)

Ethel (taking it) : Oh yes, sorry.

Esson Maule (handing over a second one) : And this is Mary's. I'm sorry she's so long in the lavatory. But when you are afflicted by nerves

Ethel : Wait till she meets Mr. Price. Bowled over, probably. Like Daphne. Who is actually nothing like Mary, but as a dalliance – a bit on the side who can also help him in his exposés Odd, isn't it? His father was a grocer. He was a street-corner grocer who at the age of forty two impregnated a fourteen-year-old girl. And yet here we have Mr.

Price, the gentleman-scientist, pretending to come from London when he is actually totally provincial

Mary (entering, rather shyly) : Excuse me.

Ethel : Oh hullo. Mary, isn't it?

Mary : Mary Mc.Ginlay.

Ethel : Feeling better?

Mary : A bit, thanks. It's just – London's so big -

Esson Maule : Perhaps some tea ...

Ethel : Oh yes, we can do tea. (*As she sorts this out at the side*) What I said : you mustn't quote me.

Esson Maule : No.

Ethel : And especially about the ectoplasm. I shouldn't say this but the ectoplasm thing was a bit of an own goal. (*Talking over her shoulder*) I was photographed, Mary. With ectoplasm. Which was really six foot three inches of Woolworth's cheesecloth. Only then, when the Duncans hit back when they said the photos were a farce - that the ones Mr. Price claimed to be of Nellie were of *me*. Here you are.

Mary (taking the tea) : Thank you. Is that what I'm here about then?

Esson Maule : Not exactly.

Mary : I don't know why I'm here actually.

Esson Maule : Yes, you do, Mary.

Mary : I'm just the maid.

Esson Maule : A much put-upon maid. A maid with no room - working all hours. And now the lady trying to get rid of you.

Ethel (half a question) : The lady, yes – that would be Mrs. Duncan, would it?

Mary : Aye.

Ethel : The same Mrs. Duncan who at a recent séance materialised a singing grandmother. And another seeking praise for her ectoplasmic dress.

Mary (dully) : I wouldn't know.

Ethel : She also produced her favourite little child figure – a lively little thing who bounced a ball, sang “Baa baa Black Sheep”, and pranced about like a dancing dishrag, while expressing a strong distaste for lemonade –

Mary : Oh.

Ethel : - because of the gas. She hates gas. (*Harry Price enters*) Oh! Mr. Price!

Harry Price (entering, not best pleased) : Yes. So you're here then.

Esson Maule : Yes, Mr. Price. This is Mary.

Harry Price : Good morning, Mary.

Mary (almost curtseying) : Good morning.

Harry Price : I am Mr. Harry Price. I am a rather celebrated psychic investigator.

Mary : Oh.

Harry Price : Is that all you can say? I hope we shall be able to make you more forthcoming presently.

Esson Maule : She's just shy, that's all.

Harry Price : By the by, Ethel, I forgot to tell you, if Mrs. Widmacott should ring up – Mrs. Daphne Widmacott –

Ethel (rather sourly) : I know what to say.

Harry Price (reinforcing the message) : Not till tonight. No possibility of a meeting before tonight. Now then, Mary, let's get on. Let's get to know you. You are not, I take it, an educated girl.

Mary : I can read.

Harry Price : I should hope you could, considering the excellent nature of the Scottish elementary educational system. But you are not versed in algebra, in calculus, in science –

Mary : What?

Harry Price : Or in folklore? I mean you haven't been primed.

Mary : I want to go home.

Harry Price : For instance, Joanna Southcott. Let us take Joanna Southcott. She being something of an obsession of mine and her box

Mary : Her what?

Esson Maule (as Mary looks blank) : She was a mystic, Mary. A mystic and a prophet. When she died she left a box and Mr. Price having examined it

Mary : Oh.

Harry Price : I found nothing. Nothing worth the name. Never mind that it was said to contain holy mysteries. Never mind that it belonged to a woman who at the age of sixty four blithely announced that she was pregnant with an eternal saviour.

Mary : Why are you telling me all this?

Ethel (sotto voce) : Why indeed?

Harry Price : Because I want to see how suggestible you are. Whether you can tell the difference between falsity and truth. In Joanna Southcott's time, Mary, reapers at the end of harvest would chant incantations round someone they called the "priest". Sufferers from the fits took the church keys in order to get in at midnight and crawl three times under the communion table. Those with dental pain sought relief by biting a tooth from a skull in the churchyard. But, you see, Mary, what people believe and what is *true* are two different things. There is no correlation. And that is what I want you to remember when you give your testimony.

Mary : Testimony?

Harry Price : To me. Not in the courts.

Mary : All right then.

Harry Price (beginning on the real business of the meeting) : You work for Mrs. Duncan.

Mary : Yes.

Harry Price : But you don't enjoy it.

Mary : Nobody would.

Harry Price : Coarse, isn't she? Terribly coarse. And I believe recently you voiced your objections – that you actually spoke to somebody in the street.

Esson Maule (to whom this is news) : In the street?

Mary : I did speak to somebody. A man.

Harry Price : I thought as much. In fact, I sent him.

Mary : You sent a man all the way to Edinburgh?

Harry Price : There are telephones, Mary. A quick word. A call to a local journalist.

Esson Maule : I knew none of this.

Ethel : No, well, if you knew his methods

Esson Maule : So what did this journalist ask you, Mary?

Mary : He gave us ten pound.

Ethel : Ten pounds? That must be as much as you earn in a month.

Mary : More, miss.

Harry Price : So then, he gave you ten pounds but, since presumably this was not an act of philanthropy – it means charity – since it was not an act of charity, he required something in return.

Mary : Information.

Harry Price : Go on.

Mary (more voluble at last) : I told him they had masks. And a dummy.

And Bella agreed. Bella is her daughter.

Harry Price : Your employers' daughter?

Mary : The one who lost an eye.

Harry Price : So then, Mary. You met a man – a very nice man – and he gives you ten pounds just for talking about some silly old masks and a dummy.

Mary : More or less.

Harry Price : The more being?

Mary : He mentioned you. That you might like to hear more stories. And then when Mr. Duncan dismissed me – that was because Bella told him – she told him and he said I was a Judas, only a Judas with a price-rise – well then, I thought I *would* speak to you. And Miss Maule encouraged me.

Harry Price : She encouraged you, even though she did not know about the ten pounds.

Mary : And why not? Why shouldna she encourage me? I'd met her – we'd spoken –

Harry Price (to Mary) : And so she befriended you. She was sympathetic.

Mary : Very.

Harry Price : You were ill through overwork.

Mary (almost repeating what he wants to hear as a prompted witness) : I was ill through overwork. Not to mention being given notice. They'd gone and given me notice. So yes, I told her. I said I knew things and she said why not write to you – or she would – she'd do it - and then as soon as you sent me that cheque to buy clothes and a railway ticket -

Harry Price : Yes, I *did* do that.

Ethel (to Mary) : Made you feel quite important.

Mary (sinking back, rather forlornly) : I'm not important.

Harry Price : Tell us exactly why you think Mrs. Duncan is fraudulent.

Mary : She just is.

Harry Price : Yes?

Ethel : How exactly?

Mary : Well, the things. The things, for instance. Rubber gloves, dolls, a lighting-up star. And then there's the vomiting. (*Warming to her story slightly, seeing Ethel's interest*) Mrs. Duncan used to get me to wash out a length of this muslin. It had a rotten smell. Like pee. And sometimes it would be stained a bit as if it had been washed before.

Harry Price : You are saying that this muslin was the stuff Mrs. Duncan swallowed – she used it as ectoplasm.

Mary : I suppose.

Harry Price : Continue.

Mary : Will I get paid for this?

Esson Maule : Just tell him, Mary.

Mary : Well, other times she would give it to me just as she had used it. And then it would be all stained and slimy. There were rips too. Rips in it. Like the ones in your photographs.

Esson Maule (to Harry Price) : I showed them. I thought she should see.

Mary : And then there was the eggs. I was made to separate whites and eggs. She said it was treatment – you put it on an abscess, but if you believe *that* But that what struck me most was the eating - how before every séance she had a snack – couple of biscuits – cup of tea – and then she took a bath and disappeared.

Ethel : Disappeared? How do you mean : disappeared?

Mary : Into the potting shed. She went into that shed for at least five minutes, and I think that was when she swallowed the material.

Harry Price : Good. Good. Excellent, but not evidence.

Mary : She was always going into the potting shed. And once – when they came back from London – this was after they'd tried to say she was a fraud - they had a terrible row.

Harry Price : A row, eh?

Mary : Her and Mr. Duncan. With him saying the game was up. He couldn't go on. And he give me the very cloth she'd passed to him. When she was trying to get rid of it. Only then he went back and said how could they ever be parted? And after that they went to bed and he never said no more about it.

Harry Price : : I see. I see. Well, thank you, Mary.

Esson Maule (to Harry Price) : So what do you think?

Harry Price : You first.

Esson Maule (to Mary) : You are prepared to swear to all this? To go, before the members of the National Laboratory of Psychical Research and recount all you have told to us –

Mary : Will I get money?

Harry Price : You will get money. On the other hand

Esson Maule : I agree. It's strongly circumstantial but as for actual proof ... We shall have to do more – learn more ... go a bit further. Tell me, Mary, your replacement in the Duncan household : what's *she* like?

Mary : Sarah? She's horrible.

Esson Maule : And she knows nothing of *me*?

Mary (eyeing Miss Maule somewhat disapprovingly) : I shouldn't think so.

Esson Maule : Good. Good. I was thinking of a séance – of holding a séance – of inviting Mrs. Duncan ...

Harry Price : Planting things.

Esson Maule : Not planting things. Not planting, but watching waiting - catching her out at an inadvertent moment –

Ethel : Caught in the act. (*Telephone rings, off*) Oh, signal from heaven. (*She goes*)

Harry Price : I still think that if we just planted things

Esson Maule : It is neither necessary nor commendable. It would be fraud. Whereas if we are to uphold the standards in which I believe

Harry Price : Spiritualist standards.

Esson Maule : Christian standards. I am a Church-going Christian as well as a Spiritualist.

Harry Price : More fool you. (*As Ethel returns*) Ah, Ethel. We were talking about the church. About that great Christian edifice, famous for taking in the halt, the deaf, the blind (*Eyeing Esson significantly on the last word*)

Esson Maule : Really, Mr. Price, if you're going to mock at me

Harry Price : My dear Miss Maule, I would never mock at you. You go ahead. Organise a séance. Advertise for sitters. But there's no doubt that the more inadequate we are – the more inadequate, deprived, disabled
..... Tell me, Mary, do you think the afflicted truly have a spiritual apprehension or are they merely seeking a refuge?

Mary : When will I get my money?

Ethel (to Harry Price) : Don't you want to hear your message?

Harry Price (not answering, pursuing his thought): A sanctum where for once they're not made mock! That's church to them. Another bridge too far. (*Fade*)

SCENE NINE

(Scene changes to the home of Mrs. Worth. Stanley, her adolescent but precocious son, discovered eating rather ravenously at the tea-table with her.)

Stanley : So you've been again, have you?

Mrs. Worth : Once. I went once.

Stanley : Once is enough. It's enough to hook you. What happened this time?

Mrs. Worth : Nothing. It was very disappointing. Mrs. Duncan was disappointed.

Stanley : She would be. No results, no customers.

Mrs. Worth : You're very hard, Stanley.

Stanley : Not hard, Mother. Flippant. When venturing into the unknown one should always pass through the slipper-bath of irony. Hey, that's rather good.

Mrs. Worth : You can try it on your lady friends. You do now *have* a lady friend.

Stanley : Yes, I have a lady friend. Kay she's called. Or, as I term her, Potassium. And why not? It's allowed. I'm sixteen.

Mrs. Worth : Mrs. Duncan is a skilled and much prized medium. And the troubles she's had. Did you know, Stanley, that when Mr. Harry Price poached her – well, used her for tests – a friend of his - a Mrs. Goldney – who fancies herself as a midwife - she conducted a physical examination which would have made your hair curl.

Stanley : Interesting.

Mrs. Worth : Degrading. Worse than with witches. What did they think she was hiding? An infant? A sanitary towel?

Stanley : She got paid presumably.

Mrs. Worth : Oh she got paid. Mr. Price paid her husband a hundred pounds. It's a retainer. They get this retainer and then there is ten pounds for each weekly séance and the promise of another hundred at the end.

Stanley : You seem very well informed.

Mrs. Worth : Daphne told me.

Stanley : Oh Daphne. Mr. Price's fancy-piece.

Mrs. Worth : Stanley! Really! I don't think this Kay is having a very good effect on you. I don't honestly. In fact, the sooner you're in the navy and settled into a proper professional career

Stanley : Listen, Mother. I do understand what attracts you. I *can* appreciate. And in fact Kay can too. She's even trying to get *me* to go But all this jiggery-pokery. You do know about the flashlight photos : plastic dolls, cloth, cut-out heads. There's a maid too. I don't know the details but apparently she got involved once and her Scottish grandfather came through with an Irish accent.

Mrs. Worth : Your point being –

Stanley : My point being that the grandma was Irish and the granddad Scottish but poor old Nellie muddled them up.

Mrs. Worth : I don't believe it. The malice of some people! (*As there is a ring at the doorbell*) Oh who's that now?

Stanley (glancing to window) : Lady. Young lady. Cloche hat.

Mrs. Worth : Oh that'll be Miss Childs. (*Goes to answer the door*)

Stanley : Plain face but good figure. Nice legs. Oh yes, her legs are very tasty. (*He takes up some more food*)

Mrs. Worth (returning with Miss Childs) : Stanley, this is Miss Childs.

Avis : How do you do. I do apologise. I'm returning the book.

Mrs. Worth (rather embarrassed) : Oh yes.

Avis : About the spiritualist.

Mrs. Worth : Yes, thank you.

Avis : Interesting, wasn't it?

Mrs. Worth : Stanley doesn't believe

Stanley : I didn't say that.

Mrs. Worth (to Stanley) : You were sceptical.

Avis : Oh yes, well, so was I. I mean you have to be. It's like Phyllis says, the burden of proof But then on the other hand when you think about the stitching

Stanley : Stitching?

Avis : They stitch her in a special suit. A special suit with coloured thread in a secret kind of code. So how anyone thinks she could move ...

Stanley : And you know this how?

Avis : Gena told me.

Stanley : Gena?

Avis : One of her daughters. Who is psychic and so if anyone should know (*Indicating Stanley*) He's laughing at me.

Stanley : No, no, I'm not.

Mrs. Worth : Stop laughing, Stanley.

Avis : No, no, it's all right. I've heard the stories. Cheap silly props. Babies turning out to be dollies. But that doesn't discount the other things. (*Deciding to try him*) There was an illness. Gena was ill with an oedema and she went into hospital. And caught measles. And, would you believe, Mrs. Duncan demanded to see the doctor and if she hadn't herself diagnosed pneumonia and demanded her daughter be removed immediately from a draughty doorway If she hadn't psychically sensed the real trouble (*Breaking off*) What's that?

Stanley : Newspaper. (*Picks it up and reads it rather ostentatiously and a little rudely*) Which, if you'll allow me, while Mother makes some more tea

Mrs. Worth (to Avis) : Oh yes. You'll stay for a cup. (*Going over to sort out the tea*) The trouble with you, Stanley, is you are too cynical. (*To Avis*) And he doesn't take account of the evidence. (*To Stanley*) When Mrs. Duncan is in a séance there are rules. Strict ones. No lights, no smoking, no striking watches, no touching of the manifestations.

Avis : And of course everything done by the book. There's this book. All sitters to sign the book - ladies to the left, gentlemen to the right.... Everything confidential, everything done by the book (*Exasperated now as Stanley is idly*) May I ask, Mr. Worth, what you are reading?

Stanley : Nothing.

Mrs. Worth : Yes, you are, Stanley.

Stanley : No, I'm not, Mother.

Mrs. Worth : I'm afraid, Miss Childs, when he gets distracted

Stanley : Something caught my eye. About mediumship. About the abuses. And among the material – guess what? - a report - a report of a court case. Mrs. Helen Duncan : fined the sum of ten pounds in the Edinburgh Sheriff's Court.

Avis : Oh.

Stanley : Oh. Quotation of her parting shot – “May God forgi' ye!” –

Avis : Really?

Mrs. Worth : That's enough, Stanley.

Avis : No, no, it's interesting. (*Stanley passes her the paper*) Oh my goodness.

Mrs. Worth : What?

Avis : Well, it says here that the maid gave evidence. That she asked if there was any money in it and went on to report that the Duncan children were often to be seen cutting faces – that they would often cut faces from celebrity periodicals.

Mrs. Worth : I don't believe it.

Stanley (taking the paper back and speaking with a sarcastic edge) : No. Of course. It's a put-up job. Everybody against her.

Mrs. Worth : Give me that paper.

Stanley : No I shall keep it.

Mrs. Worth : No you won't.

Stanley : Yes, I will. I want to show Kay. In fact, if she's so keen on all this malarkey, perhaps I *will* go.

Avis : Go where? To a séance?

Stanley : Why not?

Mrs. Worth : You can be very cruel, Stanley. The sooner you are off my hands and out in the navy

Stanley (kissing her on the head, not without affection) : Oh mother dear, I doubt that changes much. A séance, girls. That ought to point the way.

SCENE TEN

(Scene changes to the rather impressively panelled interior of the headquarters of the London Spiritualist Alliance. (The set can, however, dispense with such details). The President discovered, together with a small board or committee of society members, the 3rd a woman. Also present, lounging rather, is Harry Price, who has Ethel with him for the taking of notes.)

President : And we're quite prepared for this, are we?

Secretary : Fully prepared. Both parties agreeing.

President : Only it must never be known. May I impress upon you, ladies and gentlemen, that this must never become a matter of public gossip.

What with the adverse publicity and Mrs. Duncan already having received a conviction

Ist Committee Member : Fine : ten pounds. Payable within a month.

Secretary : So, then, how are we going to play it? Have them in together?

President : Have them in together on the strict understanding that they answer separately and speak only when addressed. You agree to that, Mr. Price?

Harry Price : Oh I agree to anything.

President : I doubt that. However, bearing in mind that you are only here in a non-speaking capacity

Secretary (going to door to usher in those to be interviewed) : Miss Maule, Mrs. Duncan *(They come in)* Oh, and there's a young lady.

Nell (rather belligerently) : I've brought my daughter.

Ist Committee Member : You've done what?

Nell : I want witnesses.

President : Well, really, Mrs. Duncan, I do not believe we gave any sanction for

However, if she agrees not to speak

Gena : I won't speak.

2nd Committee Member (rather sourly) : And given that we also have Mr. Price and his secretary

President : Very well then. Sit over there.

Nell : Sit where he says, Gena. It's a disgrace. Ten pounds or prison. May the good God forgive her. *(Indicating Miss Maule)*

3rd Committee Member (a woman) : I hope God will forgive all of us.

Nell : Not her he won't. *(She sits heavily)*

President : Mrs. Duncan, we are here as a representative body. We represent the wider spiritualist circle and are gathered to conduct our own independent enquiry into the recent events of the séance at the home of Miss Maule. You know, I think, most of those assembled.

Nell (indicating Harry Price) : I know him. I don't know her. (Indicating Ethel)

Ethel : I'm the one in the photographs – the one with fake ectoplasm.

Nell : More fool you.

Ethel (to President) : You needn't worry. I won't interrupt.

President : So then, Miss Maule, if we might begin with you – proceed with your account.

Gena : A false account. (As the board members frown etc.) All right. I'm not speaking either.

President (encouraging Miss Maule to proceed) : On January 4th of this year you, Miss Maule, held a séance.

Esson Maule : I did.

President : A spiritualist meeting. At your home at 24, Stafford Street. The medium at this sitting being Mrs. Helen Duncan.

Esson Maule : She was.

1st Committee Member : Whom you have of course met before.

Esson Maule : I have.

President : Go on please.

*Esson Maule : Well, I do know her of course. I had seen her previously many times – notably at a séance at the Edinburgh Psychic College on Heriot Row. On that occasion I obtained some photographs – spirit photographs taken by a Dundee press photographer, a Mr. W. M. Scott. I have them here. Perhaps you would like to look. I would draw your attention to one in particular. That is the one depicting the medium at home, allegedly entranced. You will see at her side a mannequin – a mannequin fashioned from a *papier mâché* coat-hanger and a bit of old muslin. The point being that it purported to be a materialised spirit.*

*President : I see. Yes, it *does* look a bit like a coat-hanger.*

Esson Maule : What looks like a coat-hanger *is* a coat-hanger. What looks like a fake is a fake.

3rd Committee Member : And yet you invited her.

Esson Maule : I had reasons.

Nell : Bloody ridiculous reasons.

Esson Maule : Well, if you must know, I was suspicious. As early as March last year I had made bookings. I had seen Mrs. Duncan at work several times and I have to say I was not satisfied. And then when Mr. Price interviewed her maid and found spectacular evidence of fraud –

President : Fraud?

Esson Maule : Sharp practice – well, I decided to set a trap.

1st Committee Member : Which was?

Esson Maule : Aren't you going to record this?

Secretary : The production later of a comprehensive statement

Esson Maule (impatiently continuing) : I had decided, as I say, to set a trap. And so on the 5th of January – 5th or 4th – it may have been the 4th – I can check my diary – on one such date, I conducted a sitting. Mrs. Duncan came over from Glasgow. She had been performing in the Holland Street Spiritualist Church. On that occasion she filled the room with a scent of roses. She also materialised a gentleman's wife who kindly returned a red blossom he had placed in her coffin.

3rd Committee Member : Very pretty.

Esson Maule : Very fraudulent. However, as I was not there

1st Committee Member : Quite.

Esson Maule : Anyway, she did the séance and then she left. She departed taking with her the gift of some scones and fresh jam. They were packed in her séance case. That is correct, is it not?

Nell : I decline to answer.

Esson Maule : Well, she did anyway. I should add that her hostess, a Mrs. Drysdale, had allegedly warned her. She had informed her that Albert had warned her to be careful.

Gena : He had, yes.

1st Committee Member : Albert being her spirit guide.

Esson Maule : One of them.

2nd Committee Member : But she didn't heed it.

Esson Maule : It was while she was in deep trance.

President : Go on.

Esson Maule : Well – and I know this is not evidence – according to Mrs. Duncan, she made light of his words. She packed her scones – home-made actually – pulled on her leather coat, and rushed to catch the train back to Edinburgh. She then hailed a taxi. She hailed a taxi and hastened to my address. Once there, she was met by my secretary Miss Hilda Snowden.

President : Miss Snowden.

Esson Maule : Yes. Who led her up the stairs and into the den. It's what I call the morning room. She was taken to the den – greeted the sitters – rather coarsely, I thought – and was guided to a desk where she lit a cigarette and was handed four pounds in a sheaf of ten shilling notes. She then stubbed out her smoke and was led upstairs to the top of the house – led, in fact, into the actual séance room.

President : Which was empty -

Esson Maule : No. It wasn't empty. I think I should stress that it wasn't empty. There were several people. Some, in fact, in response to an advertisement I had put in earlier

1st Committee Member . You mean you advertise? You had touted for custom?

Esson Maule : I wouldn't call it touting.

2nd Committee Member : But you did publicly recruit

Esson Maule : Not normally. On this occasion. I wanted a representative sample – people unknown to Mrs. Duncan – who could observe witness

1st Committee Member : Anyway, these sitters were already present ...

Esson Maule : In a semi-circle. Sitting in an arc facing a cabinet. It was a chintz cabinet. Flowered curtains. It extended across one corner.

Nell : Part of the trap.

Esson Maule : It was not part of the trap. It was just a normal séance arrangement.

President : And the lighting?

Esson Maule : Ah, I'm glad you asked that.

Ethel (*under her breath, mockingly, imitating, in a la-di-dah voice*) : - glad you asked that.

Esson Maule : There was light, of course, but it was dim. To be precise, a forty-watt bulb. A red electric bulb covered with a Turkey-cotton bag. There was also a single candle burning on the mantelpiece but that was of small account. As to temperature, well, the room was cold but not supernaturally. It was owing to the mundane fact of the electric fire having just fused. Now then – What's that?

(A sort of low growl has emanated from Helen Duncan)

President : What?

Esson Maule : That noise.

President (*reprovingly*) : Mrs. Duncan.

Esson Maule : Now then, I don't want you to think I in any way rigged the proceedings. I didn't. I am far too disciplined. (*Helen growls again*) What matters is what followed ...

3rd Committee Member : Well, what *did* follow?

Esson Maule : Nothing at first. She was still wheezing from climbing the stairs. However, eventually there was a change. She began breathing steadily. Steadily and heavily. She gave little groans. (*Helen is now doing exactly that but only Gena and possibly Harry Price seem much concerned by it.*) Which, given that by this time the sitters were singing

1st Committee Member : Singing? Singing what?

2nd Committee Member : *Onward Christian Soldiers?*

Harry Price : *Yes, we have no bananas?*

President : Really, gentlemen, if you are going to take that tone

Esson Maule : The sitting was to raise the vibrations.

4th Committee Member : And you all sang.

Esson Maule : Yes.

Secretary : So then there you all were singing and then -

Esson Maule : Then a long whitish thing appeared and introduced itself as Albert. "I am Albert." However, when I asked for a better look – when I begged it would approach nearer my nostrils - it immediately vanished. As did another one. A rather large one which accosted Miss Snowden and which she immediately recognised as Mrs. Duncan.

Gena : Untrue.

Secretary : Be quiet.

Esson Maule : She recognised it as Mrs. Duncan with a length of cloth about her head. Anyway, that went too, though not before Miss Snowden had patted it, discerning that it had a particularly well developed pair of female breasts. Meanwhile, while all this was going on, I was reaching into the cabinet

2nd Committee Member (seriously now, seeking clarification) : The medium's cabinet.

Esson Maule : Yes.

2nd Committee Member : Where Mrs. Duncan was supposed to be.

Esson Maule : Yes. Now then (*Helen burps and belches again*) Not again.

Nell (as if having briefly come to) : Excuse me. (*She lapses again*)

Esson Maule : She was supposed to be sitting in the cabinet but in fact when I reached in – when I felt the interior -

1st Committee Member : - nothing.

Esson Maule : Nothing.

President : And then?

Esson Maule : Oh then a whole range of spirits dropped by. They dropped by, said hullo, waved, bobbed - the remarkable thing being that they all smelt of tobacco.

1st Committee Member : What?

2nd Committee Member : What?

President : You are really suggesting that these spirits were *not* spirits – that they were all variations on Mrs. Duncan?

Esson Maule : Yes I am. And I am prepared to justify it. The more so as having done the same thing myself

Secretary (as a clarification) : Smoked?

3rd Committee Member : Puffed tobacco?

Esson Maule : Posed for photographs. One showing my face peeping through an armholeone depicting me with a handkerchief across my nose. (*Demonstrating*) I had a handkerchief here and an under-vest over my head

2nd Committee Member : And you can produce these photographs?

Esson Maule : Certainly

1st Committee Member : Leaving aside all this flummery ...

President : Yes, really, Miss Maule, if we are going to get on ...

Nell (in a very deep voice) : Get on.

Esson Maule : I am merely pointing out how easy it is to fake things. And then when Albert returned – when in a continuation of this floor-show, he flew back and presumed to assert that he couldn't bear my singing

1st Committee Member (semi-satirically) : He said that?

Esson Maule : After that he handed over. He gave way to the star turn. Peggy. An annoying little child. She popped up behind a vase on the sideboard and then clambered down to dance. That is her stock-in-trade. She sings, dances, regales people with *The Bluebells of Scotland*. On this occasion, I wished her a happy new year and then, bored with her inane chatter, accosted her directly. And why not? Everyone could see who the little scamp was. It was Mrs. Duncan on her knees manipulating something white and speaking childishly. And so then I grabbed at her. (*Helen groans*)

Gena : No, no, mother.

Esson Maule : I grabbed and found out – which was no surprise – that the so-called Gorbals lassie was actually nothing more than a puppet. It was a doll made from some sort of soft elastic material. My fingers tore through her. (*Helen groans*) They ripped her apart. (*Helen groans more loudly*) We had a kind of tug-of-war. (*She groans again*) And then, at a pre-arranged signal, one of the sitters – a Miss or Mrs. MacKay – she snapped on a powerful hand-lamp to reveal –

1st Committee Member : To reveal what? (*Helen groans*)

Esson Maule : To reveal Mrs. Duncan sitting in the cabinet, desperately trying to bundle the lifeless Peggy under her clothes. That is what she was doing, everyone. Bundling her away. (*Helen groans violently*) She was hiding her. (*Helen groans even more violently*) She was cheating us. (*Helen falls sideways and groans*) And then I spoke.

Nell (as if in a trance) : I spoke.

Esson Maule : “Mrs. Duncan,” I said, “you are a fraud – you are taking money for false materialisations.”

President : And the medium?

Esson Maule : I shall never forget. She began to scream - to curse. In one of her pamphlets she denounces wrath. She says it’s the way to lose an argument. But the wrath and terror she displayed at that point (*Helen groans again*) Eventually she subsided. She was momentarily silenced, though only because the sitters were heckling to look at Peggy. And then the pandemonium which followed

Nell (beating her fists loudly on the table) : Followed, followed.

Esson Maule : She cursed, she screamed. She yelled back that she “wouldna show men her knickers” and, when I insisted – when I said she must instantly strip – she raised a wooden chair and swung it at me. She actually swung a chair. And all the while bawling – shouting out, “I’ll brain you! I’ll brain you, you bloody bugger!”

Gena (rising) : Stop it! Stop it!

Esson Maule : I won’t stop it. You expect me to be quiet when I was assaulted, I was attacked?

Secretary : She hit you?

Esson Maule : No, she missed. But only because a gentleman intervened. She hit him all right. Hit him - flung a shoe

Nell : Fling – fling – fling a shoe. Toby’s dead and so are you.

Secretary : Restrain her please, somebody.

4th Committee Member : But she did agree to get undressed eventually.

Esson Maule : Oh well, eventually. But if I hadn’t ducked if I hadn’t ducked when she went to strike at me (*Helen laughs coarsely, then subsides somewhat*)

President : Let us take stock here. You are saying that Mrs. Duncan was out of control, that she was shrieking, swearing, that there was violent mayhem – but she did agree to be searched. She did do that, didn’t she? (*Esson nods somewhat reluctantly*) And so what happened? She was taken outside, was she?

Esson Maule : Yes.

President : The door open?

Esson Maule : Yes it was ajar.

2nd Committee Member : Spectators peeping?

Esson Maule : Well, I suppose.

3rd Committee Member : Which as an annoyance enough to rouse anybody

Esson Maule (getting annoyed but restraining herself) : Miss Mackay held her spotlight and Mrs. Duncan crouched down. She crouched low and pulled up her petticoat. Dress and petticoat over her head in a single sweep. But – *but*, Mr. President - she failed to make Peggy travel with them. Peggy got stuck. Meaning that, when she finally *did* fly free, a white stockinette vest landed just short of the other things. (*To the President and Secretary*) A white stockinette vest, gentlemen. Torn in the struggle. (*To all*) At which I said, “Here. This *is* Peggy”. And she –

4th Committee Member : Yes?

Esson Maule : She said, (*imitating Nell's accent*) "I'll no' say it's no."

Nell (*alert now and looking up, but also rather ashamed and accusatory*)

: She made me take off my knickers. (*Nell resumes comparative normality, sitting on her seat again. The effect is of calm after a storm*)

President (*after a slight pause*) : Ladies and gentlemen – gentlemen and ladies - if I could just have your attention. The truth, is I am at rather a loss. The stories we have heard – the exhibition we have witnessed but perhaps if we could just review the evidence

2nd Committee Member : Why? We know the evidence. Science, not séance.

Gena : And is that all? Is it all, gentlemen? We all know how crowds can be misled – how they can sink to the level of the lowest common denominator. But if Mother will speak now

Secretary : If you have anything to say, Mrs. Duncan - anything in the least germane to the present enquiry ...

Nell : What's 'germane' when it's at home?

Gena (*handing over a document to the President*) : If you'd just look at that

2nd Committee Member : What? What's happening?

(President scans the document. The others wait expectantly)

Ethel (*to Harry Price*) : Are you going to allow this? (*Harry Price shrugs*)

President : It's a summary. A summary of the run-up to the séance. And given what it says (*He hands it to the Secretary*)

Secretary (reading aloud) : “My mother had got in the habit of responding to requests by post. People were always asking. And one day a letter came from a Miss Souls.”

Gena : It did. It did come from Miss Souls. It was enquiring if my mother could give a sitting for a friend in need of comfort. And, if so, would she come to 22, Stafford Street?

3rd Committee Member : 22.

Gena : Yes, that’s important.

2nd Committee : And why is that?

Gena : It is important because my mother knew it to be the address of the Psychic Research Centre.

Ethel : Though as this girl promised not even to speak to us....

President : Go on, Miss Duncan.

Gena : My mother was asked to give comfort. So she had no hesitation. She always gives comfort where needed. And so she told my father to give Miss Souls a date. My father was my mother’s booking secretary.

Esson Maule (with some contempt) : Bookings secretary.

Secretary : Miss Maule, please!

Gena : Unfortunately the day he gave was one on which my mother had already accepted a meeting. A private one, as it says there. And so being private it had not got into the books. And so, when they realised – when they found out - my father suggested writing to cancel but my mother being so conscientious ...”

Ethel : So greedy, so money-grubbing

Gena (intervening) : She said she’d do both. That’s what I want you to know. So she had *two* bookings. One with Mrs. Drysdale in Glasgow and the second in Edinburgh. The first sitting was wonderful. She materialised a horse.

Harry Price : Oh really!

Gena : There was a horse, roses, and then Albert gave the warning. I say in the letter about the warning -

Secretary : You do, yes. (*Quoting from the letter*) “Albert gave Mrs. Drysdale a warning”. (*He hands the letter back to the President*)

Gena : That’s right. He gave her a warning. Only because time was short, Mother misinterpreted. She thought he was just telling her not to rush. Not to hurry. In case of an accident.

Ethel (sarcastically) : Oh dear!

Gena : And *that* was why she decided not to change out of her séance clothes. She had her ordinary clothes in a travel bag but she decided not to change. Because of the time.

3rd Committee Member : And so then, a departure for Edinburgh -

Gena (nodding) : Yes. But not to where she thought. Not 22. Because, when she got there, she was escorted next door. No explanation. Just taken. And who by? (*Turning to indicate Miss Maule*) By that woman’s secretary. A secretary who had formerly passed herself off as Miss Souls. (*Repeating the name*) Souls. Of all the blasphemous choices

4th Committee Member : And Peggy?

Gena : What?

4th Committee Member : You make a lot of this Miss Souls person but as for the so-called Peggy

President (indicating the paper) : There is no mention here of anyone called Peggy.

1st Committee Member : Then how can we possibly? Listen, Miss Duncan, you are obvious keen to protect your mother and your devotion is very commendable. But setting aside the possibility of this Miss Souls being involved in a trick – of her being actually Miss Maule’s secretary

and not really existing in her own right at all - how do you explain the whole Peggy manifestation?

Gena : It was the clothes, wasn't it?

2nd Committee Member : Clothes? What do you mean "Clothes"?

Gena : When my mother arrived, she was let in and then left. She was left to hang her coat on a peg, which she did, putting her travel bag on the floor. And then she was shown into the séance room. Only the tear in the vest was already there. It was nothing to do with a struggle. Ask our housekeeper. Ask Sarah. She has sworn that she herself tore the vest while ironing. She also swears that Miss Souls and Miss Snowden are one and the same. And she should know. She *must* know because when Miss Souls came to confirm the booking

4th Committee Member : She was there?

Gena : She let her in.

President : Well, Miss Maule?

Esson Maule : Well what? It was a legitimately conducted experiment an investigation. Which, if you ask Mr. Price

1st Committee Member : Mr. Price? Was *he* involved?

Esson Maule : I repeat, it was an investigation.

1st Committee Member (forcefully now) : Yes, but was he involved?

Gena : I will tell you who was involved. The spirits were involved. Albert was involved. You deny that, of course, because her face doesn't fit. But in the spirit world there *is* no fitting. There are no classes, no social distinctions. And even on earth the most humble, the most unlikely

Harry Price : Oh come now.

Gena : Yes, come now. But look first at the trial. Does it not matter to you that at the trial my mother was supported? Doctor after doctor saying that my mother had taken part in a series of tests? That she had been stripped naked in their presence? And yet she *still* produced materialisations. And as for regurgitation My mother had eaten scones. She had eaten ham and eggs. So how she could possibly regurgitate?

President : And Peggy?

Gena : What?

President : You have explained about Miss Souls. You have mentioned the change of venue. But that is *not* the question. The question is whether the vest was actually Peggy. Whether your mother left her chair and then, taking off the vest, removing it from her person, waving it about ...

Nell : I was tied in the chair. I was always tied.

Secretary (to Esson Maule) : Was she tied?

Nell : When I do séances, I am always tied. They put me in a sack and rope me in. So how I could move myself

3rd Committee Member (her mind swayed back from scepticism a bit) : Was she so held, Miss Maule?

Esson Maule (rather sullenly) I don't remember.

2nd Committee Member : Do you remember what she was wearing?

Esson Maule : No.

President : You don't remember that either? Because I have here very muddled testimony. (*Referring to notes*) One witness says she was wearing a brown frock. Whereas the daughter –

Ethel : - who wasn't there –

President : - who admittedly wasn't there – *she* says that she was still in séance clothes over her own underclothes – though why Mrs. Duncan should have been wearing a stockinette vest under a black séance suit

Esson Maule : Exactly. Why *should* she? The vest was Peggy. The woman is a hooligan. She drew blood from the man who defended me. And then when I insisted on taking charge of the vest – when I did *that* and she threw the vest and attacked me with a chair ...

3rd Committee : Oh dear.

Esson Maule : Blood everywhere. What with that her and running out and calling for the Police

1st Committee Member : What? Go back. Did you say she called for the police?

Esson Maule : She did, yes. Only she changed her mind. And since none of the rest of us desired to press charges

4th Committee Member : You didn't want to press charges?

Esson Maule : No.

4th Committee Member : And yet you *did*. You *did* press charges. Not at the time – but later. ...

2nd Committee Member : Later –

Gena : After she'd consulted with that devil (*Indicating Harry Price*)

President : Mrs. Duncan, we know what followed. Despite having allowed the matter to lapse – despite having not desired to press charges - still, some eleven days later, Miss Maule and five other sitters *did* press charges. They pressed them before a magistrate's court where you were solemnly accused of having pretended to materialise the spirits of certain deceased persons. What I want to know – what the Committee wants to

know - is, was it a deception? (*Helen is silent*) Come, come, Mrs. Duncan, we know that sometimes the pressure to perform – even among the most genuine of the gifted ... and if a trap is sensed – if the atmosphere is hostile –

Harry Price : And a vest already stuck up the jumper ...

Nell : I am innocent. It wasn't proven.

Esson Maule : It was! It was!

Nell : Liar!

Esson Maule : Devil!

Nell : But I tell you what, there will come a time. Not now but later. I shall do such things – I shall *see* such things

2nd Committee Member : What things?

Nell : I shall be able to see what you are denied to see ... what the government will not *let* us see. There will be a war and I will see ...

Gena : That's enough, Mother.

Ethel : More than enough.

Nell (in a strange voice, not her own, as if from outside her) : Your ship will come home.

Disembodied Voice (loudly and echoing – it could be Emily Brontë's) : Your ship will come home.

Nell : The *Barham* is coming. (*These words echo*)

Disembodied Voice : The *Barham* is coming.

Harry Price (as the echoing resonates; going up to her, manhandling her physically) : What is this? Are you a fraud? Are you a lunatic?

Nell : Out of my way! And you! (*Attacks Esson Maule*)

President : Mrs. Duncan! For God's sake, Mrs. Duncan (*Nell punches him, then straightens up. Esson is now on the floor.*)

Nell (with some dignity and in a voice not entirely her own) : The waters surge. It is my ship of fate. A boat ... that's all Await what I shall see.

(Drums and echoing voices, possibly suggesting the cackle of the three witches. Quick black out.)

End of Act One

* * * * *

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

Initially a bare stage with a single figure writing at a desk. This is Cecil Williamson. Eventually he blots what he has been writing, puts down his pen with careful precision, rises, and starts to address the audience.

Cecil Williamson :

Quiet here, is it not? Peaceful. No sign of a war. No sign for that matter that the spirits of the dead are all around. Though they are of course. At least *I* think so and I dare say some of you do too.

I don't know whether I should reveal my name. I don't generally but, on the other hand, given the intimacy of the setting and my sense that you are yourselves collaborators - (*holding out a hand to shake*) : Cecil Williamson, occult expert, currently in the employ of Colonel Maltby. That's Colonel Maltby of M16. My role being to establish a Witchcraft Research Centre, drawing up a list of high-ranking German officers with a taste for, and interest in, the occult.

Not, I should add, that the Colonel believes in it. Lot of tomfoolery, *he* calls it. But that is not the point. Others do, and their belief might be useful. So in he comes, one Monday morning, rather red, distinctly hot

under the collar, and commands me to make up my list. Write them all down. Label them. And that, shall we say, was enough to allow me my head. (*Moves a little before resuming*)

Spiritualism, then. And the first thing to say, gentlemen, is that it is not peripheral. The War Office, for instance, employs an astrologer. Nice man – lives in Grosvenor House, from where he is deputed to cast Hitler's horoscope. Which, as a means to predicting his moves (*Breaking off letting the thought dangle*) And then there's the psychic unit. We have this psychic unit within M15. The claim being that it aids our agents in travelling. Travelling astrally. Behind enemy lines. A feat not unknown to Henry Duncan who once travelled to Arbroath and back to see his sister – he was lying in bed but he visited his sister. A distance of some sixty seven miles.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Cyber travel : isn't that a bit extreme? Well, perhaps it is but I certainly wouldn't shut it off completely. I personally know a Miss Geraldine Cummins who performs psychic work entirely for our patriotic benefit. Nowadays of course we are all classified but it wasn't so at first. Early on, I served in the Royal Signals. I also broadcast propaganda and relayed degenerate jazz to the crews of enemy U-boats. But my real mission was in the shadow-lands. Things like monitoring the work of Nazi astrologers. Things like *Operation Mistletoe*. What? You don't know *Operation Mistletoe*? It was a Druidic ritual – a rite in which a Mr. Crowley, at the behest of M15, burned a dummy in Nazi uniform. Crazy? Not at all. He was surrounded the whole time by white-robed soldiers decorated with branches of the plant.

Which brings me to the present. Where the main thing to note is that we're not done yet. Sir Hugh Dowdling – former Air Chief Marshal – remember him? Supporter of the Cross of Light Campaign. Part of the Magical Battle of Britain. The point being that it does suggest a climate. A climate of positivism – of invoking the spirit world against the forces of darkness. The truth is, spirit forces must be prized. Besides which, even if *you* disdain them, what about our enemies?

Enemies, yes. And that's where I think I ought to stop. Only what final advice may I proffer you? What word of wisdom, as I offer you a last cigar, and then disappear back into the ether? As I understand it, your present predicament relates to one particular medium. To Mrs. Duncan who, so you fear, has tapped into classified information. So here is my answer. First you must silence her. You must find some way to keep her out of action. But you must do it legally. Never forget that British Spiritualism is alive and well. That its freedoms are our freedoms. Go, gentlemen : use law against her acts – claim fraudulence - but keep on tapping, eh?

SCENE TWO

(He vanishes. Scene changes to a well-upholstered room – possibly a private room in an exclusive Gentlemen's Club. Sir Edward Tindal Atkinson discovered, ushering in John Maude, Sir Desmond Wooler, Lord Ansell Wilcox, Chief Constable Arthur West, and General Sir Jeremy Fraser.)

Atkinson : Take a seat, gentlemen. Help yourselves to drinks.

Wooler : Rum do, this, Edward.

Atkinson : Yes, it is a rum do but, I think, a significant one. I have no need to tell you that this meeting is absolutely hush-hush.

Fraser : Oh absolutely.

Atkinson : Nothing outside these four walls.

Fraser : Not a dicky-bird.

Wilcox : And an agenda? Do we have an agenda?

Atkinson : Not a written one, no. This case, gentlemen, must be entirely and distinctly sub fusc. Properly considered, this meeting is not even happening. We are not here.

Wooler : Oh, sort of wafting spirits, are we?

Atkinson : We are not wafting spirits.

Wooler : Extending ourselves from our physical bodies by our ectoplasm.

Maude : You speak more relevantly than you are aware.

Fraser (shrewdly) : Mrs. Duncan.

Maude (confirming it) : Mrs. Duncan.

Atkinson : What my friend and colleague means is that we are here in the interests of national security. An interest which directly involves formulating our response to a so-called medium. And let us be clear about this. I admit that I too once tended towards flippancy. I did, Ansell, didn't I? But we are entering a different world. These days we can imagine the interception of codes, we can admit tampering, sabotage – we can imagine the enemy discovering our transmitted intentions, jamming them, altering them, threatening reprisals

Fraser : Which given that it has nothing to do with the occult

Atkinson : Doesn't it? See this? (*Holding up a spiritualist talisman*) I got it from Rudolf Hess. That is the Hess who was a member of the Thule Society, who personally ordered the mapping of the Fatherland's ley lines and who came recently to Scotland on the back of a dream experienced by one of his friends. Now then. I am aware that his Scottish flight was

abortive. And that, after it, Hitler arrested necromancers by the bucket-load. But what you may not know is that Hess only took off after direct consultation with Nazi astrologers. *They* sanctioned it. And what with *that*, and Heinrich Himmler superintending an Occult Bureau, and Hitler himself believing in coloured auras and dowsing with a pendulum over maps -

Wilcox : And Mrs. Duncan? You're not saying, Edward, that *she* is in league with the Nazis?

Atkinson : I am saying that she somehow seems party to classified information. In a moment, I shall back this up. I shall be reading from the report of a Mr. Williamson. And before I do, I would remind you yet again that we are not dealing here with simple tomfoolery. It is not vaudeville. Nor is it merely a matter of credulous fools who can be gulled into believing anything. Such people are of no account. What they *believe*, however.... What they have been encouraged to think and disseminate about national defence, about British security

Wooler : Well, go on then. Give us the meat of it.

Wilcox : He means the background.

Fraser : *Operation Bodyguard*.

Wooler : Oh so *that's* it, is it?

Atkinson : It is partly it.

Wooler : Police and everything.

Atkinson : Police, yes. Though perhaps a more respectful tone. Chief Constable West being, after all, one of our most valued commissioners.

West : Don't mention it.

Wooler : I didn't notice him.

Atkinson : I think, gentlemen, it will generally be agreed that the main aim of military intelligence is obfuscation : it is to convince Herr Hitler that, while the Russians attack from the East, the combined British and American forces intend assaults on three separate Western European fronts.

Fraser : Yes. That's the story.

Atkinson : All of these fronts to be actually bogus.

Fraser : Yes.

Atkinson : Bogus Front One : from the South. Bogus Front Two : from the north. Bogus Front Three :

Fraser : That's from the West. In late summer, an assault on Calais. A mighty attack launched across the Channel. Troops to be General Patton's troops currently stationed in the Thames estuary.

Wilcox : Yes.

Atkinson : Yes. But none of it is true. None of it is real. The point being that, as long as Hitler buys into this falsehood – as long as we can continue to dupe him – Nazi troops will remain dispersed. They will be waiting in the wrong places at the wrong times. On the other hand –

Maude : On the other hand, if the Führer suspects otherwise - if he gets to know our *real* plans - he will move all his forces to northern France. He will have a rock-solid armory. In which case the senseless bloodbath that would ensue on the Normandy beaches

Fraser : Senseless and costly.

Atkinson : Quite.

Wooler : Which is why, I suppose ...

Atkinson : It is why, Desmond, we must do everything in our power to prevent it. No one must know that the real Allied plan is quite different. That it involves one massive invasion launched from in and around Portsmouth. Every citizen – every person in the country - must be deceived : people deceived, leaks orchestrated, everything managed to confirm the illusion.

Fraser : As, for instance?

Wilcox : As, for instance?

West : It's a matter of timing. And of all playing the same melody. *(Seeking to take up the narrative)* May I, sir?

Atkinson (glad to hand over) : Please.

West : Imagine, gentlemen – imagine just for once - that you are not habitués of the corridors of power. That you do not inhabit Whitehall and Parliament and the leather upholstery of London clubs but that you walk the streets as ordinary citizens. Say further that you are residents of Portsmouth. Well, then supposing you *are*. Supposing you are Portsmouth inhabitants and are asked, “Why are so many battleships anchored in the harbour?”. Well, then your answer must be that they are getting ready for a big push in the Mediterranean. Or supposing you are a Scotsman. You are a Scotsman and you meet another Scotsman who wonders what is going on with the building of forces around Edinburgh. Well now, your approved song here is Norway. It is preparation for an attack on Norway. Or let us imagine you are a Londoner and are questioned by another Londoner, “Why do you think General Patton’s troops are training at that huge secret base on the Thames?”. Yet again the idea is the same : it is simply the best place from which to cross the Channel for a major assault on Calais. And that is what you must believe. You must actually believe it. No variations. No descants. No counter-melodies -

Wooler : I see. Very droll. Drink, perhaps? (*Wooler waves towards the bottle expecting West to fetch it*)

Wilcox (*partly to prevent West's having to even think of acting on this*) :
If I may intervene here

Atkinson : Of course, Ansell.

Wilcox : Well, let me make clear I am not trying to rock the boat. I can quite see the need for all the security. But what I *fail* to see is why Mrs. Duncan Mrs. Duncan who has already been discredited

Wooler : Lunatic. Making rabbits appear out of non-existent hats.

Atkinson (*ignoring this, answering Wilcox*) : The reason is simple. There is, Ansell, a fear in certain quarters – naval quarters especially – that she may be a danger to this enterprise – that she has a way of knowing things.

Fraser : Knowing things? What things?

Wooler : I told you, how to materialize rabbits.

Maude : Rabbits are not at issue. Come, come, Sir Desmond, considering what you know of me

Wooler (*surprised*) : What?

Maude : I joined M15 in 1939. My title officially was that of a temporary Civil Servant. But that was a cover. Under that title I received my Intelligence Corps commission - I investigated spies – I was given full charge of a section dealing with leakages. Leakages, Sir Desmond. Among which were leaks about troop movements, leaks about ship movements, leaks about sinkings –

Wilcox : Sinkings? –

Maude : I shall come back to that. Suffice it to say that this is not some game. In my time I have had recourse to information from the Magic Circle. I have consulted members of the Society of Psychic Research. But

though you may see witches and warlocks flying through my testimony - though, for all I know, you may refer me back to the levitating doughnuts produced by Madame Mina Crandon and now regarded as a huge hoax got up for the purposes of discrediting psychical phenomena - this is *not* the real picture. Or at any rate not the bas-belief. The bas-relief is danger. It is the risk of national defeat. At which point I should like to draw attention to the *Barham*.

Atkinson (giving permission) : Please.

Wooler : I need a drink.

Maude (pulling down a chart showing the sea-lanes of Europe from Iceland to the Mediterranean, and pointing with a lecturer's wand) : On November 25th 1941 *H.M.S Barham* – veteran battleship of the Great War - was cruising with *H.M.S. Queen Elizabeth* and *H.M.S Valiant* in the eastern Mediterranean. Well, that seemed all right. She was screened by destroyers. But at 4.26 p.m. a barely concealed German submarine, U 331 – commanded by a certain Kapitänleutnant von Tiesenhausen - passed through the screen and fired four torpedoes. And she was sunk. Sunk, gentlemen. Three thuds, a massive explosion and there she was – gone, with a loss of eight hundred and sixty eight lives. And the point is, Mrs. Duncan seems to have known.

Fraser : Known?

Maude : Despite a news-blackout, despite our dispatching of the deceased men's Christmas cards, despite the Admiralty sending their relatives forged holiday greetings ... she seems to have known. Explaining why, at one of her séances, up comes a ghostly crew-member, greets his widow, seems only too glad to tell the company all about it – everybody – including possible German spies

Wilcox : I don't believe it.

Wooler : Neither do I. How do we know all this?

Atkinson : We know because a woman who was present rang the Admiralty. She rang, asking for confirmation, and was immediately visited by two naval officers – M15 obviously - demanding to know her sources. Well, that's one case. But there is another also. Tell them about the *Hood*.

Maude : The *Hood*, yes. For which we have to resort to Mrs. Duncan's control. In Spring, 1941, Mrs. Duncan's spirit-control reported the loss of a great British battleship. He said it was on May 24th. On May 24th the *Hood* was split in two by the *Bismarck*. It was split here. Off Iceland.

Wilcox : And your informant this time?

Atkinson : Ah, we were lucky there. Our informant, Ansell, was one of ours. Brigadier Roy Firebrace. Who is a spiritualist and was at the sitting and, being also head of Scottish Military Intelligence -

Wilcox (guessing accurately) : - he rang the Admiralty.

Maude : - who said they knew nothing. They denied it altogether.

Wooler : Well, then ...

Maude : That is not the end.

Wooler (half-mockingly, playing the part of a reprimanded schoolboy) :
Oh it's not the end.

Maude : - because later - later that same night – the Admiralty rang back. It rang back informing him that a flagship battle-cruiser had indeed been sunk. It had erupted like a seagoing volcano. Killing one thousand four hundred and fifteen of its crew. But that, given that the whole incident was under wraps – given that there were only three survivors

Wilcox (gravely) : I see.

