

VOICES FROM BEYOND

Robert C. Blackmon

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"THAT card offering you a free reading was sucker bait, Nelda. Just an advertising come-on for the spirit racket."

Mike Varne spoke to the girl beside him in the coupe, but his hard gray eyes watched the wet street pavement glinting under the headlights. There was a gruff gentleness in his voice.

"We won't get anything out of this trip to Madame Nola's seance parlor tonight. Time they see you with Detective Mike Varne they'll pull the old unsympathetic spirits gag and tell you to come back alone. It's all the bunk, girl. They can't talk to the spirit of your uncle, Joe Mannon, God rest his two-fisted soul. Nobody can. Maybe we'd better forget all about this spirit stuff, eh? Maybe I'd better take you back to your apartment."

"No. Please. Mister Mike. Perhaps Madame Nola is different. I've seen her name lots of times in Dade Yates' News column. She must be good to be mentioned there. I . . . I've got to go. That card under my door was a sort of . . . answer. I . . . I do so want to talk to Uncle Joe. I . . . I've got to!"

The girl's hair, curling out from Under her tiny hat, looked black in the semidarkness of the car. but it was really a dark brown, almost the same shade as her eyes. There was a desperate earnestness about the way her slender body leaned forward on the seat, the way her small hands clasped in her lap.

"All I want to do is ask Uncle Joe one question. Just a few words. I . . . I've got to know the answer, Mister Mike! I—"

Her voice broke.

"You and Uncle Joe were such good friends before he . . . left. I didn't want to go alone. I didn't think you minded my asking—"

"I don't mind doing anything at any time for Joe's niece. Don't ever forget that. Call on old Mike every time, any time."

His big, squarish body shifted on the seat. The hard lines pulled tighter about his mouth, giving his ruddy face its usual stoniness.

"It's just that I don't want you mixed up with spirit fakes. Joe wouldn't like it. It's tough, girl, but you've got to accept the fact that Joe is gone . . . dead. Maybe we'll see him and talk to him on the Other Side, after we kick off. Maybe not. I wouldn't know about that. But I do know that, here on earth, no gyp—"

"Please, Mister Mike!"

"O.K."

Mike Varne's wide, gray-clad shoulders lifted resignedly. He scowled at the rain worming down the windshield. His good left hand stayed on the wheel rim. His right lifted to punch the gray snap-brim farther back on stiff, neat-red hair.

That right hand was not complete. The thumb and forefinger were missing. The wound was barely healed. Those fingers were shot away four nights after Joe Mannon was killed. That was six weeks ago.

Mike Varne and Joe Mannon joined the cops together. They took detective ratings together. Six months later, Joe resigned to open a private agency of his own. He wanted Mike to come with him, but Mike stuck with the department. Joe handled jewel-recovery cases, mostly. He was working on the Polkton job when he was killed. The Polkton stuff ran well over a hundred thousand dollars, and it had never been recovered. All leads were lost when Joe Mannon died.

Mike Varne crossed a lighted intersection carefully and scowled at the empty side street.

Joe Mannon was killed by a dope-high gunman named Cassill, but there was someone behind Cassill. A stoolie tipped Varne off to that. Varne nailed Cassill in the back room of a disreputable roadhouse just out of town

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and started to take him in for Joe's murder. Cassill tried to shoot his way clear. His first slug tore off Mike Varne's right thumb and forefinger. He caught the gun in his good left hand and put three slugs in Cassill's chest. There was another man with Cassill, but he dived from a rear window before the shooting. He got away, with Varne getting no more than a blurred glimpse of him. Varne had no idea who he was. Then Cassill, dying with Varne's slugs in his chest, screamed just seven words before he died:

"I was paid to kill Joe by—"

Varne had not been able to complete the sentence since, nor had he spotted the man who dived through the rear window.

"If Madame Nola could only let me talk to Uncle Joe for just a moment, Mister Mike, I'd know just what to do."

Nelda Ellis' voice jerked Varne back to the present, back to the dark street down which the coupe was rolling. The river was somewhere to the right. He could hear the snort of tugs, the whine of ferries and the mournful roar of a steamer.

His jaws hardened. The coupe rolled another block, then he sent it in to the curb before a dark building.

"O. K.," he told the girl, "this is Madame Nola's joint. Just you don't bank too much on talking to Joe, girl. It can't be done. Come on, let's get it over with.

THEY went up a narrow stairway to a small, black-draped reception room. A turbaned Negro held a pad for them to write their names and the names of the "loved ones" to whom they wished to speak. Nelda wrote Joe Mannon's name. Varne, grinning, wrote Cassill's name. The Negro bowed out of the room, left them about five minutes alone, then came back and ushered them into Madame Nola's seance parlor.

Nelda clung to Mike Varne's arm. She was trembling a little. Mike was unimpressed. The spirit stuff was just a racket to him.

The room was black-walled, circular. Soft blue light from hidden fixtures gave it a weird glow. There was a curved black bench before a semicircular table in the center of the room. The black table had ball-like chromium projections at each end. Directly in front of the table was a low, black dais, and upon the dais was a black cylinder about five feet high and three feet thick.

Then Mike Varne saw the short, heavily built Dade Yates seated at the left end of the bench. Yates was supposed to know something about everyone in town, and his column bore out the supposition. Varne read the stuff, but didn't like it.

There was another man seated at the right end of the bench. He was thin, pale and well dressed. Mike didn't know him. The two men got to their feet as Nelda and Varne neared the bench.

"After some column dirt from the spirit world, eh." Mike Varne's face was wooden as he nodded to Dade Yates.

"The madame is good enough to get it. She's good enough to rate mention in my column." Yates' little eyes seemed to sink deeper in his fat pink face. His lips bared broad teeth in a significant smile. "Few people are good enough to rate that."

Mike Varne snorted. He and Nelda slid onto the bench, Yates to his left, Nelda to his right, and the thin stranger beyond the girl. Nelda was breathing rapidly, shallowly. Varne could feel her trembling against him. He muttered under his breath.

Madame Nola was another fake. All mediums were. All they were after was coin, and they weren't too particular how they got it. Pickings must be pretty slim in the spirit racket for Madame Nola to drum up business with cards offering a free reading. With Yates plugging her in the column, she should go after the carriage trade. Monkeying around with a twenty-a-week steno like Nelda Ellis wasn't bright. Nelda couldn't have over five a week to waste on the fake spirits. But a hundred suckers at five per week made a half grand. Nice money for just horsing around with ghost stuff.

Mike Varne scowled.

Nelda had a little money from Joe's insurance. Not much, but plenty to her. It would run around five grand. Her mother died when Nelda was a baby, and Joe, a bachelor, raised her. Mike had helped Joe with the job. Joe would crack down on the spirit gyps for trying to hook Nelda, if he was living. Mike was going to do the same. He'd let Nelda drop a few dollars, to convince her the thing was a fake, then—

He stiffened.

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The lights in the circular room were fading. He felt Yates' right hand on his left, the fingers like warm, fat worms.

"Catch the girl's hand, Varne," Yates whispered almost in his ear. "Tell her to catch Mac's hand."

Varne saw Yates palm the chromium projection in the table. To his right, the man Yates called Mac was doing the same thing. Varne felt Nelda's little fingers touch his wrecked right hand. His lips went straight.

It was the old "unbroken chain" gag. A small electric current came from the chromium projections and traveled through their bodies. The current was too low to feel. A relay somewhere signaled that the chain was complete, and warned the gyps if one of the suckers broke the chain. It was a nice idea to keep the suckers just where the crooks wanted them. The racket was full of bright ideas for—

Mike's gray eyes hardened.

The black cylinder on the dais was opening. It spread wide, forming a curved black screen behind the woman seated in a black chair on the dais. She was Madame Nola, the honey-blond fake who claimed to summon the spirits of the dead and talk with them.

Mike Varne snorted audibly.

Madame Nola was plump. Her eyes were abnormally large. She was dressed in a black strapless gown that brought out the whiteness of her shoulders, arms and face. Her mouth was a rich red blob.

Mike's mouth corners twitched.

It was a swell set-up. Everything was figured to soften dubious suckers. Well, it was wasted on him. He was wise to the spirit racket. Let them shoot the works.

The light of the circular room faded abruptly. At the same moment, a crawling mass of vapor seemed to issue from Madame Nola's mouth. It started as a faint trickle, then formed a thickening cloud that rose and made a nebulous haze above the medium's blond head.

Varne watched it with little interest. Ectoplasm, the gyps claimed it was. It was probably a smart rig making it appear that the stuff was coming from the medium's mouth. Chemical smoke, very likely—maybe muriatic acid and ammonia.

Then he felt the air of the room becoming cold. An air-conditioning plant somewhere in the building made that, of course. It was good showmanship to impress the suckers. But it wouldn't make much impression on Mike Varne.

Then an earthy odor came into the air. He knew it was caused deliberately, by passing the air over wet dirt, but a faint undercurrent of uneasiness seeped into his hard body.

He had smelled just such an odor the day he stood beside Joe Mannon's grave.

His jaws hardened as he remembered that. He could feel sweat on his face. It angered him.

A tiny spot of light appeared in the vapor cloud above Madame Nola's head. The pin-point glow spread. Madame Nola was writhing slowly in her chair, making queer sounds. The light above her head spread and became larger. A face appeared in the haze, blurry at first, then clearing slowly. The whole head appeared. Varne saw big, red cheeks, hard and direct eyes, the grim slash of a mouth, the blue of a uniform.

His throat went dry as the face became clearer. It couldn't be—yet the face in the haze was Joe Mannon's!

NELDA ELLIS screamed beside Varne, and he heard Yates hiss warningly. Nelda's cry dropped to a frightened whimper.

"Hi, Mike!" The throaty growl was Joe Mannon's. "I'm glad you got Cassill. Nelda, you want to ask me something. I can't answer it until we are alone."

The face in the haze faded and was gone.

Mike Varne's jaws hurt. He opened his mouth to brand the whole thing a fake, then remained silent.

Another face was appearing in the cloud of vapor. The face became clearer. A sharp, pallid face. Small eyes. Thin mouth. It was Cassill, the man who had shot Joe Mannon. Cassill's harsh voice came from the haze, and the hair stirred on Mike Varne's head.

"I . . . was paid to kill . . . Joe . . . by—"

Abruptly, Cassill's voice stopped. The billowing haze above Madame Nola's head was swept clean of the man's features.

Varne felt sweat crawling down his stiff cheeks. Dully, he was aware of the fact that Nelda was trying to free her hand of his crushing grip. She was sobbing wildly, calling her uncle's name over and over. To Varne's left,

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Dade Yates was muttering savagely, but Varne couldn't catch words. He eased the pressure of his mutilated right band and Nelda was free.

Madame Nola was jerking in her black chair on the dais. The haze was dissolving above her head.

Mike Varne's mind was all but spinning.

Nelda whimpered in the darkness. Mac, on the other side of her, was silent. Dade Yates, to Varne's left, was still muttering. Varne couldn't see any of them for the darkness. He could see nothing but Madame Nola and the thinning haze above the dais. The light in the haze was growing smaller.

Then cold, hard facts came into Mike Varne's mind.

Joe Mannon had not worn a blue uniform for two years, yet the "spirit" wore blue. Cassill's words—"I was . . . paid to kill Joe Mannon by—" Only Mike Varne and one other man could know those words—the man who dived from the rear window before the shooting started. He could have heard.

Varne tore his hand free of Dade Yates' fat fingers.

"Turn on the lights! Everybody sit still! If anybody makes a break to leave this room, I'll—"

He lunged to his feet, his good left hand reaching for the gun under his right arm. It was the gun with which he had shot Cassill.

"Get those lights on! All of you are under arrest! Get those—"

His voice stopped short as something whipped over his head from behind and jerked tight around his throat.

INSTINCTIVELY, he clawed at the thing with his right hand. His fingers touched the hard circle of cord biting deeply into the flesh of his neck. His breath was cut off, entirely. A thick red mist cloaked his eyes. He tried to swing the gun in his left hand around, but the cord tightened and blackness swirled into his skull. He heard Nelda Ellis' shrill, terrified scream. It seemed to come from an incredible distance. Then he couldn't hear anything. He knew he was falling, caroming off the bench to the floor.

He did not know whether he lost consciousness or not, but he was aware of the rawness of his throat. He opened his eyes, and saw that he was still in the black, circular seance parlor. He could see the round black ceiling. He knew instantly everything that had happened.

Someone, the turbaned Negro, had slipped up behind the curved bench and had thrown the cord over his head. Nelda—

Clamping his teeth together! Varne started up to a sitting position.

"As you were, Varne." The high, nasal voice stopped his movement. He twisted his head about, and saw the man whom Yates called Mac standing behind him. Mac had an automatic in a thin fist. The muzzle of the weapon was trained on Varne's head. "Just lie on the floor, and behave yourself." Mac wagged the gun expressively.

Varne dropped back to the thick black rug. His eyes swiveled.

Nelda was sitting on the curved bench to Mac's left. Madame Nola was standing beside the girl. Dade Yates was to the medium's left. His small eyes were bright in his fat face.

There was another man in the room. He was almost a twin to Mac but his eyes were larger. He was leaning against the bench behind Nelda. Varne recognized him immediately, Harry Bell, a one-time vaudeville performer who used to be a fairly good mimic.

"Harry Bell! the Man with a Thousand Voices." Varne said that flatly. "You were billed like that on the old Pan Circuit. I get the picture now. You're the spirit voices for Madame Nola's racket. The spirits are tinted photographs, thrown on the haze above Madame Nola's head by a picture–projection machine. You didn't have a picture of Joe Mannon except in uniform! so you used that. You had Cassill's picture! too. You'd heard Joe talk, you'd heard Cassill talk. That was easy. But the words you used for Cassill were the words he spoke before he died in the back room of that roadhouse. Nobody but Cassill and I were in that room. And you had to hear the words to speak them, so you were the man who dived from the window. You heard Cassill scream those words before you got away. You were the man with Cassill, Bell."

"So what?" Harry Bell's voice was a perfect imitation of Mike Varne's. A grin was on his thin face. He left the bench and came toward Varne. Gripped in the fingers of his right hand was Varne's service gun. Bell's receding chill was quivering. "Yeah, I was with Cassill. I heard what he yelled. So what? You'll never—"

"Stop that, Harry!" Dade Yates snapped angrily. His fat face had lost much of its pink. "You've done enough damage now. I told you just to show Cassill's face. You knew Varne was with the girl. This thing is wide open now. We can't—"

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"We've got to go through with it, Dade." Madame Nola spoke jerkily. "You, what were you going to ask Joe Mannon?" Her white hand darted out and Varne heard the spat of her fingers on Nelda's face.

HE started up from the floor, but sank back as Mac grunted warningly. His mind was churning.

The whole thing was simple now. Dade Yates and Madame Nola, Harry Bell and Mac worked together. The fake medium dug information from her frightened clients. People under pressure, supposedly talking to lost loved ones, were off guard and would tell things about themselves.

Things they wouldn't think of mentioning under normal conditions. Yates used some of the stuff in his column. The more personal stuff was very probably used for blackmail. Mac and Harry Bell putting the pressure on the unfortunate clients.

But Nelda Ellis didn't fit into that picture. Blackmail couldn't work with her, for she had nothing in her past to use. She didn't have any money except her salary and the insurance Joe—

"Listen, Miss Ellis." It was Dade Yates talking. His voice was thick with anger. We've been gentle so far with you, but we're going to get tough. You've got to tell us what you wanted to ask Joe Mannon. We're going to use unpleasant measures if you don't. Perhaps if we held lighted matches to your feet—"

Nelda screamed.

Mike Varne's teeth clicked together. Some of the ruddiness went out of his face. His fists clenched at his sides. His eyes were flaming.

The picture was clearer now. The advertising card offering a free reading was put under Nelda's door deliberately, to bring her here. His coming, of course, wasn't anticipated. With the girl alone, excited over the possibility of talking to her dead uncle, she—

"Lemme smack her a couple, Dade." Harry Bell's voice matched Yates' exactly. "Turn her over to me for ten minutes and I'll make her talk, with pleasure."

"No! Please! Don't let him—" Nelda's voice was wire-thin with the hysteria of terror.

"Go ahead. Harry." Yates stepped back from the bench, caught Madame Nola's arm and pulled her back. "Go ahead."

Snickering, Harry Bell went around the end of the bench. He shoved Varne's gun into his hip pocket as he neared the girl. Yates and Madame Nola had stepped back almost to the dias.

The semicircular table was swung out from the bench, leaving a wide space before it.

VARNE saw the turbaned Negro who had ushered him and Nelda into the seance parlor. The Negro was standing in the narrow doorway opening into the reception room. His white-balled eyes were wide. A short cord hung from his hands.

Then Harry Bell, grinning, reached for Nelda's arm. His eyes were glittering brightly.

"No!" Nelda whimpered. "I'll tell you—everything. Don't let him—I wanted to ask Uncle Joe what I must do with the storage-check ticket he gave me before he was—killed. I was afraid to ask Mr. Mike. Uncle Joe told me not to mention it to anyone, not even Mister Mike. I didn't know what to do with—"

"Where is that ticket?" Yates' fat hulk waddled the few steps to the bench and he caught the girl's arm, shook her. "Where is it? You've got it with you?"

"No. It's hidden in my trunk at the apartment." Nelda had broken completely. Her hands were over her face and she could hardly talk for sobbing. "The trunk is in my bedroom closet. I—"

"Go after that ticket, Mac!" Yates came around from behind the bench. "I'll handle things here. Get the ticket and hurry back here, fast. And don't try to pull anything. Just remember I can put you away for life, if you manage to skip the chair."

"Put me away," Mac snarled, "and you go too. Cassill and I bumped Mannon under your orders! And don't think I won't—"

"Get that ticket, quick." Some of the bluster was out of Yates' voice. We can't quarrel, Mac. We're all in this together, Harry, you, the madame, Sam—"

"And Sam wants out right now, Mr. Yates." The turbaned Negro came into the seance parlor. "I didn't know cops was mixed up in this. That there Mr. Varne is a detective. He heard what Mr. Mac said about shooting that Mr. Joe. The little lady heard it too. I know what you figuring on doing now. That means this here thing is smelling like electric chair. I don't want nothing to do with nothing that smells like electric chair. I want to get out right now before—"

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"Shut up, Sam!" Dade Yates waved fat arms. "Try to get out, and we'll crucify you! There's over a hundred thousand dollars in this to split, and all of you start yelping. We're all in it and we're all going to stay. We've got to stick together to keep safe. Get going, Mac. Get back to that door, Sam. Harry keep an eye on the girl, but leave her alone. I'll cover Varne, Mac."

Yates took an automatic from the pocket of his dark-blue coat and waddled around to Mac. The fat columnist covered Varne with the weapon, and Mac slid his own gun under his coat. Sam shuffled back into the reception room. The Negro was badly frightened.

"I hope," Mac said sourly as he left the seance parlor, "that you know what you're doing, Yates. I'm getting like Sam."

Then Mac was gone. Varne heard Sam close the outer door behind him.

"So it's curtains for Nelda and me after you find what the check ticket is for, Yates." Varne's hands pressed palm-down on the black rug. "But you can't get away with it. We'll be missed. There'll be an investigation, and—"

"You're wasting time, Varne." Yates wagged the gun in his fat right fist. Broad teeth bared in a grin. "You and the girl will be found a couple of miles from town, on a side road, in your coupe. The coupe will have run off the road and smacked a tree, killing both of you instantly. Maybe the car will burn. That might be a good idea."

His grin broadened.

"We can admit you two were here. We've got plenty of those cards offering a free reading."

MIKE VARNE'S jaws clicked shut. His gray eyes started blazing. Hot rage filled his chest and his muscles flexed to drive him up from the floor. Then reason stopped the movement. Yates would shoot at the first move.

"Joe was working on the Polkton job when Cassill and Mac killed him," Varne said that almost casually, controlling his voice with an effort. "That means you figure the check ticket covers the Polkton stuff. You figure Joe recovered it, checked it, and gave Nelda the ticket to hide until he could make arrangements to return the stuff."

"I know it." Yates still grinned.

"Knowing that, then," Varne said slowly, "you know more. You and Madame Nola fingered the Polkton stuff through this spirit racket. Polkton or his wife came here and mentioned the gems. Mac, Bell or Cassill pulled the job, hid the stuff, then Joe came along and found it. Joe discovered your connection with the whole thing. He was going to crack down, so you sent Mac and Cassill after him."

"You know all the answers, but it won't do much good." Yates was still grinning. "Bell pulled a boner, talking with Cassill's picture, but that won't do you much good. Mac'll be back in a few minutes with the check ticket. If it's for the Polkton stuff, you and the girl start on your—"

Nelda Ellis screamed.

Harry Bell was leaning over her, one bony hand on her shoulder.

Dade Yates turned his head, his eyes swinging toward Bell and the girl.

"Harry, I told you to lay off that—"

He got that much out, then Mike Varne's broad, swinging shoes drove into his fat middle. The detective almost made a complete back somersault as he kicked. Yates loosed a gagging bellow and tottered backward. The gun in his hand blasted once, the bullet going wild. The slug gouged into the wall near the reception-room door, and Varne heard Sam's frightened yelp.

Then Varne was scrambling to his feet, his knotted fists swinging.

YATES fired again, the slug chewing into the black rug almost at Varne's feet. The automatic flew from his fat hand as Varne drove the knuckles of his left fist squarely into the columnist's broad face. Yates squalled in pain and waddled back. Varne pawed the floor for his dropped gun.

Harry Bell whirled away from the bench and jerked the gun from his hip pocket. He blasted two shots at Varne, and the detective felt lead brush his neck. The second slug clipped skin from his right shoulder. Then he had Yates' dropped gun in his hand.

Bell blasted another shot at Varne, and the slug drove through the detective's right forearm. The arm went numb, but Varne was shooting with his good left hand. Clamping his teeth against the pain of the wound, he pumped three carefully placed shots into Harry Bell's chest.

Bell's arms dropped. His legs folded under him, and his falling body all but beat his dropped gun to the floor.

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Yates lurched toward Bell's weapon on the floor. Madame Nola ran after him.

MIKE VARNE'S hard mouth tipped up slightly at the corners and he shot Yates through the right thigh, well up above the knee. The fat columnist roared with pain. The floor shook as he fell.

"Get a doctor!" Yates howled at the top of his voice. "I'm shot!"

Then Varne heard heavy feet pounding in through the reception room. A uniformed cop whom he recognized at first glance ran into the seance parlor. The cop had a gun in his fist. Sam, the turbaned Negro, was running behind him. Sam was yelling:

"I didn't have nothing to do with this, mister! Time they started shooting I run out for you! Mr. Varne'll tell you I don't want nothing to do with nothing that smells like electric chair! I choked Mr. Varne a little bit, but I ain't in this!"

"Sam's all right, Holley," Mike told the cop. "I'll forget the choking, if he'll remember everything that happened up here." Rapidly, he explained the rest. "Bell's dead. A pick-up order will get Mac, if he doesn't come back here. Yates was behind Joe's death and all the rest. That's right, Yates?"

"Yes! Good heavens, man! Yes!" Yates squirmed on the floor, fat hands holding his thigh. There was blood on his fingers. "Get a doctor quick! Call an ambulance! I'm dying!"

"Not yet," Mike Varne told him grimly, "but it won't be long. You'll get the chair, along with Mac. Madame Nola might skip the chair, but if she brings back any more Voices from Beyond during the next ten or fifteen years, they'll have to come back through prison bars!"