

**Do the Dead Return?
Can We Communicate With Ghosts?
Read**

Doctor DeBruce

By EARL LEASTON BELL

THE old Tentmaker declared that the rose, once blown, forever dies. Then came the Bard of Avon, who described the Afterland as an unknown country from which no traveler ever returns. I used to laugh with Omar and philosophize with Shakespeare, believing both were right.

I laughed with the Persian scoffer—now they laugh AT me when I tell them why I believe both Omar and the author of Hamlet were wrong. I am convinced the rose lives on, even as Elsie, my rose, still exists. The Afterland may forever remain an unknown strand, but I am certain the path to it is not always a one-way road.

Yes, I am convinced, but I do not care to investigate. To probe too deep into such things often means a long journey from which the traveler returns sans sanity. Therefore, I, Arthur Wrens, humble barrister of Boston, will have none of it; haven't I said they already laugh at me?

I LOOKED at my watch. Five minutes till closing time. As I turned the key in my office door I was interrupted by a messenger. The telegram read:

"Arthur Wrens,
Boston, Mass.
"Come at once. Heaven and hell depends."
"ARMON DeBRUCE."

Armon DeBruce! A man who, at the age of 27, had disappeared while resident physician of one of the largest hospitals in Boston, and whose whereabouts he had never revealed, even to his own family.

"Heaven and hell depends!" I perused the telegram several times, wondering the while why DeBruce at last had chosen to reveal his hiding place, and the reason for his urgency of appeal. He it was who had attended Elsie Shakelford, my betrothed, in her fatal illness,

and we had become the closest of friends.

I recalled the little town from which the telegram was sent—a rustic hamlet nestling in the majestic hills of North Georgia. DeBruce and I had at one time spent several days there, camping out on a hunt for small game and quail, with which the woods abounded at the time.

En route to my bachelor quarters, I fell to ruminating on DeBruce's past. He had been most successful in his chosen profession, and could not have asked for a more promising future at the time he so abruptly abandoned his career and disappeared. Though a fellow of marked eccentricities, he had a pronounced penchant for making friends,



and everything in the line of good luck seemed to swerve his way. Fortune had smiled on him, and he had returned the compliment by systematically disposing of much of his income in various charitable ways. A friend of the unfortunate, much of his time was spent at the bedside of the poor.

But reminiscences were crowded out by conjecture over DeBruce's telegram. Undoubtedly he must be ill, or in deep trouble. Anyway, it set me thinking.

I AWOKE early and purchased a few periodicals with which to while away the trip to Georgia.

The journey was without incident save for a strange dream that night which was so vivid that I awoke and slept no more. It seemed I heard a voice, fraught with memories of the past; crying out "Too late, but not too late!" The voice sounded weirdly like DeBruce's.

Next morning I dismissed it as an absurd fancy occasioned by my concern over DeBruce's telegram and the fact that I was not accustomed to making long journeys by rail.

Came the hour when the train was straggling over the Blue Ridge, and the early afternoon found me whirling through the stately hills of North Georgia, where the iridescent hues of autumn blended into the blue background of the pines. At four o'clock I reached my destination, the only passenger to alight.

Going into the little station to inquire the way to DeBruce's dwelling, I found the place deserted save for a little pickaninny who eyed me curiously, particularly after I queried him. After a moment he stammered that Dr. DeBruce's home was located about two miles west of the village, and pointed out the road.

Tossing the boy a coin, I set out to walk the distance.

After making a few inquiries of natives along the way, I soon neared the house. As I approached, I studied its appearance and wondered why DeBruce, who in his youth so loved the magnificent, could be content to dwell in such a place. It was a roomy structure, built on the colonial style, but apparently put together hurriedly and left unpainted. The pathway, palisaded by ancient oaks, was a foot deep in leaves, and the trees themselves gave evidence of not having been trimmed in years. The great oaks stood like giant sentinels guarding the desolation. Nowhere was there sign of life, save for the shrieking of bluejays and the distant hammering of a woodpecker on a moribund pine.

Mounting the steps, which were carpeted with leaves, I saw before me a massive door, ajar, revealing the dark interior of a spacious hall. A moment's hesitation, and I knocked lightly. Nearly five minutes elapsed before I rapped again, this time more forcibly, but the only answer was an echo that reverberated ominously through the hall—a lingering echo that seemed to die reluctantly before the silence of the approaching night.

Before I could rap again I was startled by a deep growl, and, glancing behind, saw a large setter dog, his fangs bared. The animal growled again, and then his mood suddenly changed, the snarl turning into a whine as he looked at me in that piteous manner which only a dumb brute in pain or hunger can register. I spoke kindly to the animal, and he eventually left me, curling himself in a bed of leaves on the far end of the porch.

I rapped on the great door for the third time, louder than ever. Again, only an echo. I repeated the knocking; and then, pushing open the door, I peered into the hall.

Only shadows; but a door to the left was open, revealing a room fairly well lighted by the rays of the descending sun straying through the windows. Thinking that DeBruce might be in a distant part of the house, and assuming that he would not take offense at finding me inside, I decided to enter and await his coming. First glance showed the room to be a library. Books were everywhere, and over the shelves were many pictures, ancient and dusty. I noticed that the largest picture, which occupied a central position between the shelves, was turned with its face to the wall.

I conjectured that the picture must be that of some fair girl whom DeBruce had loved and lost; although, as far as I knew, he had always been a misogynist. But his nature was such that he would have loved with an almost mythical intensity had he ever loved at all. The thought came to me that the original of the portrait might have been the cause of his forsaking his career and living the life of a recluse.

I became deeply reminiscent there in the stillness of the apparently deserted house. If, as had been said, darkness may become so intense that one may feel it, then, by the same token, silence may become so deep that one may hear it. And so it was that I fancied I heard voices of other days, and—above all—the love-song of Elsie.

How long I sat there lost in meditation I cannot recall. Having lost much

sleep on the train, I became drowsy; and, to arouse myself, walked over to a shelf of books. Reseating myself, I tried to read, but the letters blurred. Drowsiness was overcoming me. Twice I thought to leave the house and return to the station, and twice I decided that DeBruce might be out for a late afternoon walk and would return soon. I placed the book on a table in the center of the room and walked to an open window. Outside, all nature was seeking sleep. Even the jays had quit their quarreling.

AS I gazed out upon the blue hills I became aware of a presence in the room, though I had heard no footfall.

"Welcome, Arthur," said a voice I recognized, and I turned to meet my host. Changed almost beyond recognition, it was an aged, palsied man who stood before me. He seemed to be suffering from some devitalizing malady. His sunken eyes held no lustre. His complexion was as yellow as the old lace curtains that shaded the windows. I was indeed startled, but composed myself and met him half-way, extending my hand. But instead of the warm clasp that I expected, DeBruce seemed not to notice my proffered greeting.

"I knew you were coming," he said, and I involuntarily stepped back; for in the articulation his lips moved in a most horribly indescribable manner. His grimaces were terrible to behold, particularly when he attempted to emphasize his words with a smile. I returned a greeting that must have been almost as incoherent as his. He seemed to notice my confusion, and his lips again twitched in an uncanny smile.

"Arthur," he said, "I sent for you because there is something I must tell you before it is too late. A week ago I was stricken with paralysis. See, I cannot close my eyes. It is with the greatest effort that I speak. But first tell me how you have fared since I saw you last. Let's talk of bygone days."

We dwelled in reminiscences for a little while, and DeBruce then turned the conversation by asking me to look over the pictures with which the walls were crowded. They were old, and the faces—those of scientists and medical men—were scarcely discernible, what with their covering of dust and the gathering shadows.

Night was falling fast. I turned to my host, and, seeming to divine my thoughts, he tottered to the table and lighted a large oil lamp which, though it dispelled the gloom fairly well, flickered in a manner grotesquely in keeping with the weirdness of its surroundings.

As I looked at each picture, DeBruce told me what the original had accomplished in science. I noticed that his enunciation was becoming clearer and his lips twitching less. While I was studying the likeness of a French scientist, who according to my host, had been blown to atoms while experimenting with some "rejuvenating" acids of his own concoction, I heard a whine behind me. The dog had forsaken the porch and entered the room. I stroked the animal gently, and he looked at me so piteously, whining the while, that I turned to DeBruce for an explanation. Again he anticipated my words.

"Poor Leo," he said. "He has not eaten in several days."

At his master's words, the dog bristled, then covered to the floor and crept out of the door. My host seemed not to remark the animal's queer conduct and proceeded to discuss the scientist in the picture.

I soon reached the large painting turned to the wall, and started to pass it by. But DeBruce gestured for me to turn it around. It was with difficulty that I succeeded, and then—

"My God!" I cried, stepping back agnost.

It was a likeness—a life-size oil painting—of Elsie Shackleford! And O, the horror of it! But for the eyes—violet eyes that had been with me always—I would not have recognized her; for from her lips—disfigured lips—a crimson stream apparently had been painted and mingled with the red of a rose on her breast. The flower also was disfigured, and its red had trickled down and daubed the whiteness of her raiment.

Speechless, I turned to DeBruce. My face was as bloodless as his, and I was trembling violently. He again motioned for me to be seated, and I complied, shielding my eyes from the gruesome sight on the canvas.

Again my host was speaking. I listened with bowed head.

"You have seen the portrait that has driven me mad," he began. "You see that the life-blood seems to be flowing from her pallid lips and that it stains her breast. Every time I look at the picture her lips seem to say 'Murderer! Murderer!' See, the frightened, piteous stare! Arthur, turn the picture to the wall, so I may tell you the ghastly story!"

THERE in the dancing shadows, as I caught hold of the gilded frame, I again glanced at the pathetic face on the canvas, and it appeared that Elsie's eyes were fixed on DeBruce in a wild and

stony stare; that her wüted lips were trying to find speech.

Her eyes then turned to us, and in their violet depths I beheld a ray of the lovelight that had played there so long ago, and her lips seemed to shape into the ghost of a smile. . . . Maybe it was only a phantasmagoria of lamplight and shadows.

The task completed, I tottered back to the chair and again shielded my face with my hands. DeBruce, still standing behind me, continued his story. Throughout the unbelievable recital I never raised my head, overcome by the horror of what I had seen.

"Arthur," he said, "I killed Elsie in trying to kill you. I loved her desperately, and while she was convalescing in the hospital I tried to win her. Finally, I told her of my love, and learned that it could never be returned. It was the first I knew of your approaching nuptials. She was the only woman I had ever cared for, and I had loved her since childhood. The hope of winning her had spurred me on to success in my profession. When I learned my fate I went insane—a cool, calculating madness. Next day you came to see her, and when you held her in your arms, I decided to kill you.

"Chance favored me, for Elsie soon rang for a glass of water. I filled two glasses, and into one I poured a few drops of a colorless drug I had formulated. The ice in the glasses tinkled merrily as I brought the water into the room, and in my madness I fancied the music that of wedding bells. The poison was for you."

"Again chance favored me. You, too, were thirsty and reached for the glass before I could offer it. You smiled as you drank to Elsie's health. Mine was a devil's smile when in my room a few minutes later I drank of wine to your death.

"Two days later Elsie died. In my fenshish anticipation I had given her the wrong glass. After discovering my mistake I was no longer a madman. Day and night I watched by her bedside and sought to undo my crime. But the drug was too potent. She was unconscious and did not hear my confession and prayers as I knelt by her bed. She died in unspeakable agony, a hemorrhage staining her raiment as you see it in the picture.

"You know the rest, Arthur. Afraid to face the judgment of men, I fled. But no one suspected me, and I would have been safe in Boston. Now, that I soon must face the inevitable judgment, I confess to you.

"God knows I have tried to atone! From a small photograph of Elsie I had an oil painting made, and placed it in my room. Every night, kneeling before the portrait, I prayed her forgiveness. And nightly I noticed a gradual change in the picture. Slowly her features began to alter. Her eyes seemed to alternate between an accusing stare and the dull gaze of death. At first I dismissed it as a defect in the oil. Then, as the metamorphosis became more pronounced, I said it was but the imagining of an avenging conscience, and prayed all the more.

"Almost imperceptibly, the disfiguration continued until I saw Elsie as she appeared in the agonies of death. For years I continued to implore her forgiveness, but the only answer was her piteous, accusing stare which seemed to focus on me whenever I entered the room. Eventually, I turned the portrait to the wall, but I could not thus hide the accusations of my conscience, and I soon became a decrepit old man. But now I believe Elsie has forgiven me, and it is without fear that I prepare to leave the world behind. Farewell, Arthur; I ask you to forget if you cannot forgive."

I RAISED my head and found the room in darkness. I shouted DeBruce's name. No answer. Again I shouted, and after I had struck a match, the feeble flame of which threw phantom shadows on the walls, a terror-stricken echo came back to me through the gloom. Experiencing cold fear for the first time in my life, I rushed frantically out of the room and down the steps. The station was my destination.

I had gone only a short distance when I saw a nebulous glow in the darkness ahead; a vaporous, weirdly luminous substance hovering over the path. I stopped and regarded the phenomenon with awe, for its phosphorescence was beautifully different from any I had ever seen.

The whirling of the substance rapidly gained momentum. It was taking shape!

First the faint outlines of a human form; then the semblance of a beaming face; a metamorphosis from angel to woman—and Elsie stood before me!

There was nothing wraithlike in her appearance as she came forward to meet me, except her raiment, which still was luminous.

I stepped forward to meet her—to clasp her in my arms as of old—but she held up a warning hand.

She smiled. She spoke.

"Arthur," she said, "I have forgiven him; he has atoned. You, too, must for-

give. I am alive, Arthur, even as you are alive, but our spheres are different. I still love you, and some day you will come to me. As a token of this, I will leave with you the engagement ring you gave me in the long ago. I will drop it into your hand, as I must not touch you."

She slipped the ring from her finger and gave it to me.

"Farewell, beloved, I must return to my plane."

She wafted me a kiss—and was gone. For a fleeting moment a faintly luminous spiral marked the place where she had been.

THE station agent was a typical native who seemed both surprised and glad at my appearance. After I had bought my ticket, he ejected an inordinate quid of cut-plug and drawled:

"A fellow never knows how many friends he's got until he's daid. That fu'nal this afternoon was the biggest I've ever seen in these parts."

I nodded and inquired the time the train would arrive. He told me I had but a few minutes to wait.

"Great man, was Dr. DeBruce," remarked the station man as I took a seat in the vacant waiting room. "Everybody for miles 'round was at his fu'nal today. Did I see you thar?"

"What's that!" I ejaculated, the ticket falling from my hand.

"Dr. DeBruce's fu'nal today—thought I mought have seen you thar," the man repeated, evidently not remarking my astonishment.

I understood—that is, if the realization that one has just finished talking with a man just buried can be classified as understanding of any sort.

It wasn't necessary to ask the man for particulars. Upon discovering I was not at the funeral, he was eager to tell the whole story. At least a hundred carriages and automobiles were there, he said, and hundreds of the physician's friends had come afoot, many from adjoining counties. His narrative drifted to the life DeBruce had led since coming to Clofton.

From the Southerner's drawl I was able to gather that DeBruce had devoted most of his time to caring for the sick and needy in the village and in the mountains, and had never accepted a penny

for his services. About two years before his death, however, his health began to decline, and thereafter he was seldom seen to leave his estate. It was rumored he had locked himself up with his books on science and "spiritism," as the native called it. Two days before my arrival at Clofton, a hillsman, calling at his house for medicine, had found him dead in his library. The coroner had pronounced it paralysis.

The fellow was still talking when the locomotive shrieked in the distance. Five minutes later it was speeding me northward.

YES, maybe it was all a dream—a nightmare superinduced by reminiscences there in the gloomy library. Yet I will swear I was awake through it all, and that it was no hallucination, no phantom of imagery, that related the story of a madman's crime—no incubus, that vision of Elsie.

If it was a dream, where did I get this ring?

Perhaps it is a matter for psychologists and other delvers into the Unknown to investigate. As for me, Arthur Wrens, I repeat I will have none of it.

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