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A Chat With the Readers

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ITSELF

By SEABURY QUINN

Author of "Servants of Satan," "The Phantom Farmhouse," etc.

"NO," Dr. Applegate said reflectively, "I'm not at all sure we can refer everything to science for an explanation, at least, not to science as we know it."

Renouard, the demonstrator of anatomy, gave his diminutive beard a quick, nervous tug and smiled like an amiable Mephistopheles. "Ah, yes," he mocked, "'In earth and sky and sea, strange things there be,' eh? Can you give us any sign, doctor?"

Applegate drew thoughtfully at his cigar. "I wouldn't be too anxious for a sign, if I were you, Renouard," he warned. "Patrick O'Loughlin wanted a sign, and got one.

"It was last spring that O'Loughlin came down with a touch of influenza. Nothing serious; just a case for careful diet and bed-rest treatment; but the family wanted a nurse, so I got them Miss Sandler. Wonderful girl, Sarah Sandler. None better. If she were on night duty and the devil himself came into the sick room, she'd tell him to make as little noise as possible when he put his pitchfork behind the door, and step softly, lest he wake her patient.

"I dropped in to see O'Loughlin toward the end of the week and found him lying on his back, trying to stare a spot of sunlight off the ceiling.

"'How are you, Pat?' I asked when he took no more notice of me than if I'd not come in. 'Let's see the chart. Ah, fine; you'll be up and attending to business by this time next week.'

"'No, I won't, doctor,' he answered in a hollow voice. 'I'll never get out of this bed till Mike Costello comes to dress me for my funeral.'

"'Rats!' I answered. 'You're healthy as a herd of elephants, O'Loughlin. A little touch of flu won't have any more effect on you than a drink of liquor. Why, your chart shows a steady decline in temperature. You're as good as recovered this minute, man.'

"'No, doctor,' he replied with the stubbornness only an Irishman can show. 'I'm a doomed man; I've had the sign.'

"'Sign?' I repeated testily. 'What d'ye mean?'

"'The comb sign, sir,' he replied. 'Mary Ann had it before she went, and go she did, spite of all you could do to keep her.'

"'Your daughter had an aggravated case of interstitial nephritis,—it's particularly deadly in the young,' I told him. 'We caught the disease too late, and no power on earth could have saved her. You're a husky man, sound as a trivet, except for a touch of flu—'

"'She had the sign, and she went, doctor,' he interrupted doggedly, 'and I've had it, and I'll go, too. It's no use your trying to save me; I'm going.'

"'What do you mean?' I asked, seating myself on the bedside. When a patient gets in such a frame of mind the doctor has to think fast, if he doesn't want to lose another case.

"It came to us three months before Mary Ann died," he answered. "There was a crowd of young people at the house, and 'long toward midnight someone suggested they try some table-tipping. I didn't want to interfere with their fun; but I didn't like it. Table-tipping and such like things aren't good for the soul, sir, as any man from the old country can tell you.

"Well, sir, they all sat down to the little table in the hall, and put their hands on it, little fingers touching, so as to make a complete circle, and one of the young men called out, "Are there any spirits here tonight? If there are, let them answer our questions. One rap on the table means a, two, b, and so on through the alphabet. Now, then, are there any spirits here tonight?"

"Dr. Applegate, you can believe it or not; but that table—a brand-new piece of furniture it was—began to quiver like a mettlesome horse when something startles him, and all 'round its edge there started a series of rappings as though someone was marching about it beating a tattoo with a pair of drumsticks.

"Then I lost my temper, for I don't hold with that sort o' thing, and I said, "Whoever's knocking on that table, quit it. I won't have it in my house."

"The young folks jumped up from their chairs, doctor, but the drumming kept up, and Mary Ann suddenly cried out, "Why, father, they're calling for you! Hear the rappings? 'Patrick O'Loughlin; Patrick O'Loughlin,' is what they're spelling."

"And so they were. "Who calls?" I wanted to know, and the rappings stopped like a drum corps' music when the drum major brings down his baton.

"Who calls?" I asked again, and the thing spelled out the answer: "Itself."

"You're not Irish, doctor, and you most likely don't know what that word meant to an Irishman. Over in the old country we have fairy folk and such like, and those we call the little good people, though the holy saints know they're not good at all. But we call 'em good lest they hear our real opinion of 'em and steal away our children or burn our homes over our heads. But bad and troublesome as the little good people are, they're holy angels compared to some o' the things that hover 'round in the air. And these terrible things, the very sight or sound of which means death, we don't name at all, though we know their names well enough. We refer to 'em by the use of a pronoun, and the worst of 'em all we call simply "themselves."

"And what does Itself want with Patrick O'Loughlin?" I asked, though my breath was coming so fast in my throat it near choked the speech from my lips.

"And it answered me and said, "Patrick O'Loughlin, you have called to me and here I am. Never, while there's a man or woman of your blood in this new land will I desert you. You shall know when Death and I are near by the movements of the comb."

"I could have laughed in the man's face. Who but an Irishman could have dreamed such a fantastic story? Table-tipping, a message from an old-world fairy, delivered by rappings on a piece of Grand Rapids furniture!

"You're crazy, Pat," I told him.

"Am I, indeed, doctor?" he answered seriously. "Then listen to this: Never a word more could we get from the table after that one message had been delivered, and what the night-thing meant by "the movements of the comb" was more than any of us could imagine.

"But you recall well enough when Mary Ann was taken sick. You remember how she seemed so much bet-

ter just the day before she died? Well, sir, the very night the poor lamb went away I went a-tiptoe into her room to kiss her good-night, and she was lying in bed, staring at me with her big blue eyes like a little child lost in the woods. "Did you put my comb on the bed, daddy?" she asked as I came into the room.

" "Comb, child? What comb?" I asked, curious to know what she meant.

" "My big comb, there," she says, and points to the foot of the bed where, lying on the folded comfort, was the big Spanish tortoise-shell comb her Uncle Timothy, who was a sea captain in the Lamport and Holt service, had brought her from Barcelona for a gift on her fifteenth birthday. She always kept the trinket in a blue velvet case on her dressing table, and most of the time the case was locked, for you never can tell when a servant will pick up a piece of bric-a-brac like that and make off with it.

" "It was in the case this morning, I'm sure," she told me, "for Miss Jarvis, the nurse, was admiring it then; but just now I chanced to look at the foot of the bed, and there it was, shining in the electric light more beautifully than I'd ever seen it glisten before."

" "It must have got put there by mistake, child," I told her as I picked the thing up and restored it to its case; but there was a feeling of dread running through me as I spoke, for I recalled the message I'd had.

" "That very morning the angel came for her, doctor. You yourself remember how we called you from your bed past midnight, and how her little white soul had gone to heaven before you could get here?"

" "Yes; I remember, Pat," I answered soothingly, "but what has all this to do with your getting well?"

" "Just this, doctor," he replied earnestly. "Mary Ann's room has been left untouched, save for the

necessary cleaning, since the day we took her from it, and the comb has always lain in its velvet case on her dressing table, exactly as I put it the night she died. Last night, sir, as I was lying here, trying to sleep, and not able to for the way my thoughts kept turning on Mary Ann, I felt a soft thump on the foot of my bed, as though a cat had leaped up there. Dr. Applegate, sir, it was my daughter's comb lying there, though the Holy Mother herself only knows how it came down a flight of stairs and through two closed doors to get there.

" "I've had the sign, doctor. You mean well, and your medicine's as good as any; but there's nothing you can do. 'Tis a priest I need to doctor my sinful soul, not a medical man to patch my body up, sir."

" "H'm, where is this comb?" I asked.

" "Upstairs, in Mary Ann's room," he answered.

" "Well, then, Patrick," I told him, "here's where we play a Yankee trick on this old-country goblin of yours. I'm going to take that comb home with me, and lock it in my office safe, and if "Itself" comes snooping around my place I'll give him a dose of medicine that'll send him back to Ireland by the non-stop route."

"He grinned wanly at my suggestion as he answered, "All right, doctor, do as you please, but it's no use. I've had the sign and nothing earthly can help me now."

"HALF an hour later I left the blue velvet case containing the carved tortoise-shell comb under my arm. I locked the thing securely in my wall safe, attended to my office calls, ate dinner and went to the club for a rubber of bridge.

"It must have been just past midnight when I got back to the house, for the policeman on our beat was putting in his call at the patrol box

across the street as I unlocked my front door.

"The shrilling of my telephone bell greeted me as I stepped from the vestibule. 'Hello?' I called.

"'This is Miss Sandler, Dr. Applegate,' a voice came over the wire. 'Mr. O'Loughlin has died. Shall I—'

"'I'll be right over,' I said.

"'HE DIED while I was out of the room, doctor,' the nurse told me. 'I made sure Mr. O'Loughlin was sleeping easily before I slipped downstairs at midnight to pour myself a cup of coffee—I was gone less than five minutes by my wrist watch. When I came back he seemed still sleeping, but a second look told me he'd never wake again in this world.'

"'She busied herself with the bottles on the bedside table a minute, then looked up at me, almost diffidently. 'Did Mr. O'Loughlin say anything to you about a comb this afternoon?'

"'Yes, he said something about a sign, and as it was preying on his mind, I took the thing home with me.'

"'You *did*?' she replied incredulously.

"'Yes; why?'

"'Why—why,' she seemed at a loss for words—'you're sure you took that comb home with you, doctor?'

"'Of course I'm sure,' I answered.

"'Well, sir, when I came back from drinking my coffee—just after I noticed Mr. O'Loughlin had gone—I happened to look down on the foot of the bed, and—and I saw this there.' She lifted a cushion from the couch and produced the exact duplicate of the comb I'd taken from O'Loughlin's house that afternoon.

"'I've been nursing for nearly ten years, doctor,' she went on,—'two years in the army during the war—and I didn't think anything could unstring my nerves; but—well, Mr. O'Loughlin told me about this comb tonight, and I thought it was funny—

then. Now I don't know what to think. It gives me the creeps.'

"'You're not the only one who has the creeps,' I told her as I took the comb. 'Call Costello's undertaking establishment and tell them I'll have the death certificate ready when they get here.'

"'WHEN we'd completed the clerical details I drove Miss Sandler to her apartment, then hustled back to my office. 'Now we'll see what's what,' I promised myself as I took from my pocket the comb the nurse had found on O'Loughlin's death bed and began to turn the knob of my safe.

"'My fingers seemed all thumbs and my hand shook in spite of myself. I laid the comb on the corner of my desk, grasped the safe knob in both hands, and spun the combination.

"'There was the blue velvet case, exactly as I had placed it in the safe ten hours earlier. I fairly snatched it open in my eagerness. In its setting of white satin, the tortoise-shell comb lay glistening in the light.

"'That settles that,' I murmured: 'now for the other one.' I turned to the desk, then blinked in stupefaction. The comb I'd laid there two minutes before was gone.

"'High and low, over every inch of my office, I searched for that bit of feminine frippery like the woman in the parable hunting her lost piece of silver. Daylight was coming through the office windows before I gave up.

"'Explain it any way you will, or don't explain it at all. I can swear I locked up one physical, tangible comb in my safe that afternoon; Miss Sandler found exactly the same comb on the bed beside O'Loughlin's body, and I will take oath that I carried that very comb home with me. But from the moment I turned my back on it to open my safe, I never saw that second comb again.'