

If the Cap Fits—

By Algernon Blackwood

Field-Martin, the naturalist, sat in his corner arm-chair at the Club and watched them—this group of men that had drifted together round the table just opposite and begun to talk. He did not wish to listen, but was too near to help himself. The newspaper over which he had dozed lay at his feet, and he bent forward to pick it up and make it crackle with a pretence of reading.

“Then what *is* psychometry?” was the question that first caught his attention. It was Slopkins who asked it, the man with the runaway chin and over-weighted, hooked nose, that seemed to bring forward all the top of his face and made him resemble a large codfish for ever in the act of rising to some invisible bait.

“Something to do with soul measuring, I suppose, unless my Greek has gone utterly to pot,” said the jovial man beside him, pouring out his tea from a height, as a waiter pours out flat beer when he wants to force it to froth in the glass.

“Like those Yankee doctors, don’t you remember,” put in someone else, with the irrelevance of casual conversation, “who weighed a human body just before it died and just after, and made an affidavit that the difference in ounces represented the weight of the soul.”

Several laughed. Field-Martin wheeled up his chair with vigorous strokes of his heels and joined the group, accepting the offer of an extra cup out of that soaring teapot. The particular subject under discussion bored him, but he liked to sit and watch men talking, just as he liked to sit and watch birds or animals in the open air, studying their movements, learning their little habits, and the rest. The conversation flowed on in desultory fashion in the way conversations usually do flow on, one or two talkers putting in occasional real thoughts, the majority merely repeating what they have heard others say.

“Yes, but what *is* psychometry really?” repeated the codfish man, after an interval during which the talk had drifted into an American story that grew apparently out of the reference to American doctors. For that particular invisible bait still hovered above the surface of his slow mental stream, and he was making a second shot at it, after the manner of his ilk.

The question was so obviously intended to be answered seriously that this time no one guffawed or exercised his wit. For a moment, indeed, no one answered at all. Then a man at the back of the group, a man with a deep voice and a rather theatrical and enthusiastic manner, spoke.

“Psychometry, I take it,” he said with conviction, “is the quality possessed by everything, even by inanimate objects, of sending out vibrations which—which can put certain sensitive persons *en rapport*, pictorially as it were, with all the events that have ever happened within the ken of such objects—”

“Persons known as psychometrists, I suppose?” from the codfish man, who seemed to like things labelled carefully.

The other nodded. “Psychometrist, I believe,” he continued, “is the name of that very psychical and imaginative type that can ‘sense’ such infinitely delicate vibrations. In reality, I suppose, they are receptive folk who correspond to the sensitive photographic plate that records vibrations of light in a similar way and results in a visible picture.”

A man dropped his teaspoon with a clatter; another splashed noisily in his cup, stirring it a third plunged at the buttered toast of his neighbour; and Field-Martin, the naturalist, gave an impatient kick with his leg against the arm-chair opposite. He loathed this kind of talk. The speaker evidently was one of those who knew by heart the “patter” of psychical research, or what passes for it among credulous and untrained minds—master of that peculiar jargon, quasi-scientific, about vibrations and the rest, that such persons affect. But he was too lazy to interrupt or disagree. Wondering vaguely who the speaker might be, he drank his tea, and listened with laughter and disgust about equally mingled in his mind. Others, besides the codfish, were asking questions. Answers were not behindhand.

“You remember Denton’s experiments—Professor Denton, of Cambridge, Mass.,” the enthusiastic man was saying, “who found that his wife was a psychometrist, and how she had only to hold a thing in her hand, with eyes blindfolded, to get pictures of scenes that had passed before it. A bit of stone he gave her brought vivid and gorgeous pictures of processions and pageants before her inner eye, I remember, and at the end of the experiment her husband told her what the stone was.”

“By Jove! And what was it?” asked codfish.

“A fragment from an old temple at Thebes,” was the reply.

“Telepathy,” suggested someone.

“Quite possible,” was the reply. “But, another time, when he gave her something wrapped up in a bit of paper, taken from a tray covered with objects similarly wrapped up so that he could not know what particular one he held at the moment, she took it for a second, then screamed out that she was rushing, tearing, falling through space, and let it drop with a gasp of breathless excitement—”

“And—?” asked one or two.

“It was a piece of meteorite,” was the answer. “You see, she had psychometrised the sensations of the falling star. I know, for instance, another woman who is so sensitive to the atmospheres of things and people, that she can tell you every blessed thing about a stranger whose just-vacated chair she sits down in. I’ve known her leave a bus, too, when certain people have got in and sat next to her, because—”

Field-Martin paid for his neighbour’s tea by mistake and moved away, hoping his contempt was not too clearly marked for politeness.

“—everything, you see, has an atmosphere charged with its own individual associations. An object can communicate an emotion it has borrowed by contact with someone living—” was a fragment of the last sentence he heard as he left the room and went downstairs, spitting fire internally against the speaker and all his kidney. He seized his hat and hurried away. He walked home to his Chelsea flat, fuming inwardly, wondering vaguely if there was any other club he could join where he could have his tea without being obliged to listen to such stuff. . . . He walked through the Park, meaning to cut through *via* Queensgate, and as he went he followed his usual custom of thinking out details of his work: the next day, for instance, he was to lecture upon “English Birds of Prey,” and in his mind he reviewed carefully the form and substance of what he would say. He skirted the Serpentine, watching the sea-gulls wheeling through the graceful figures of their evening dance against the saffron sky. The exquisite tilt and balance of their bodies fascinated him as usual. He stopped a moment to watch it. To a mind like his it was full of suggestion, and instinctively he began comparing the method of flight with that of the hawks; one or two points occurred to him that he could make good use of in his lecture . . . when he became aware that something drew his attention down from the sky to the water, and that the interest he felt in the birds was being usurped by thoughts of another kind. Without apparent reason, reflections of a very different order passed into the stream of his

consciousness—somewhat urgently. Sea-gulls, hawks, birds of prey, and the rest faded from his mental vision; wings and details of flight departed; his eye, and with it his thought, dropped from the sky to the surface of the water, shimmering there beneath the last tints of the sunset. The emotion of the naturalist,” stirred into activity by the least symbol of his lifelong study—a bird, an animal, an insect—had been curiously replaced; and the transition was abrupt enough to touch him with a sense of surprise—almost, perhaps, of shock.

Now, vigorous imagination, the kind that creates out of next to nothing, was not an ingredient of his logical and “scientific” cast of mind, and Field-Martin, slightly puzzled, was at a loss to explain this irregular behaviour of his usually methodical system. He stepped back farther from the brink where the little waves splashed . . . yet, even as he did so, he realised that the force dictating the impulse was of a protective character, guiding, directing, almost warning. In words, had he been a writer, he might have transposed it thus: “Be careful of that water!” For the truth was it had suddenly made him *shrink*.

He continued his way, puzzled and disturbed. Of the mutinous forces that lie so thinly screened behind life, dropping from time to time their faint, wireless messages upon the soul, Field-Martin hardly discerned the existence. And this passing menace of the water was disquieting—all the more so because his temperament furnished him with no possible instrument of measurement. A sense of deep water, cold, airless, still, invaded his mind; he thought of its suffocating mass lying over mouth and ears he realised something of the struggle for breath, and the frantic efforts to reach the surface and keep afloat that a drowning man—

“But what nonsense is this? Where do these thoughts suddenly come from?” he exclaimed, hurrying along. He had crossed the road now. So as to put a greater distance, and a stretch of wholesome human traffic, between him and that sheet of water lying like painted glass beneath the fading sky. Yet it pulled and drew him back again to the shore, inviting him with a curious, soft insistence that rendered necessary a distinct effort of will to resist it successfully. Birds were utterly forgotten. His very being was steeped in water—to the neck, to the eyes, his lungs filled, his ears charged with the rushing noises of singing and drumming that come to complete the dread bewilderment of the drowning man. Field-Martin shook and trembled as he crossed the bridge by Kensington

Gardens. . . . That impulse to throw himself over the parapet was the most outrageous and unaccountable thing that had ever come upon him . . . and as he hurried down Queensgate he tried to calculate whether there was time for him to see his doctor that very night before dinner, or whether he must postpone it to the first thing in the morning. For, assuredly, this passing disorder of his brain must have immediate attention; such results of overwork could not be seen to quickly enough. If necessary, he would take a holiday at once. . . .

He decided to say nothing to his wife . . . and yet the odd thing was that before dinner was half over the whole mood had vanished so completely, and his normal wholesome balance of mind recovered such perfect control, that he could afford to laugh at the whole thing, and *did* laugh at it—what was more, even made his wife laugh at it too. The fact remained to puzzle and perplex, but the reality of it was gone.

But that night, when he went to the Club, the hall-porter stopped him:

“Beg pardon, sir, but Mr. Finsen thought you might have taken his hat by mistake last night?”

“His hat?” The name “Finsen” was unknown to him.

“He wears a green felt hat like yours, sir, and they were on adjoining pegs.”

Field-Martin took off his head-covering and discovered his mistake. Finsen’s name was inside in small gold letters. He explained matters with the porter, and left the necessary directions for the exchange to be effected. Upstairs he ran into Slopkins.

“That chap Finsen was asking for you,” he remarked; “it seems you exchanged hats last night by mistake, and the porter thought possibly—”

“Who is Finsen?”

“You remember, he was talking so wonderfully last night about psychometry—”

“Oh, is *that* Finsen?”

“Yes,” replied the other. “Interesting man, but a bit queer, you know. Gets melancholia and that sort of thing, I believe. It was only a week or two ago, don’t you remember, that he tried to drown himself?”

“Indeed,” said Field-Martin dryly, and went upstairs to look at the evening papers.

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