

SEANCE

Blake Milton Seance



Hill House Books

First published by
Hill House Books
London, United Kingdom
2025

Copyright © Blake Milton, 2024

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Typeset in ITC New Baskerville and Mutable
by Hill House Books

ISBN: 9789083523125
ISBN DIGITAL: 9789083523132

www.blakemilton.co.uk

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual living persons, is purely coincidental.

For Eveline

*Round her she made an atmosphere of life,
The very air seemed lighter from her eyes,
They were so soft and beautiful, and rife
With all we can imagine from the skies;
Her overpowering presence made you feel
It would not be idolatry to kneel.*

— Sir William Crookes
after *Don Juan* by Lord Byron

*Scientists are trained to believe what they see in the lab.
Magicians claiming psychic powers, however, are trained to
deceive others by fooling their visual senses. As a result,
scientists have been poor observers of psychic phenomena.*

— Michio Kaku
from *Physics of the Impossible*

Part I



An Evening in Hackney

Prologue

Life is a journey that begins with an empty suitcase. The weight we carry with us as the years pass is that of unresolved guilt.

It was April 4 of the year 1919, and in London, people eagerly awaited spring. The afternoon had not yet ended, but outside night had already fallen over the city. Raindrops hurled themselves like needles of ice against the grey buildings, and no one within the city walls believed the sun would ever return.

The townhouse, built in the classical style of the seventeenth century, was located in the heart of the City, on a square that hid behind the printing presses of Fleet Street. The facade was of deep brown brick and each floor had four windows framed in white. At the centre of the front wall was a robust, black door guarded by a snarling lion's head, which held an iron ring between its teeth.

When 17 Gough Square was first occupied some two hundred years ago, the mansion since housed scholars and their families, starting with Dr Samuel Johnson. During that early evening in 1919, another notable thinker lived in the house, though it must be said that his life was almost at an end.

If one had peeked through the second window from the left on the third floor, one would have first noticed the back of a woman sitting in a chair. Her face was not visible from the window, but from her shaking shoulders, one could deduce that she was crying. The cause of her sorrow lay in a four-poster bed: an old man

BLAKE MILTON

with a long, grey, thinning beard and white hair that could be compared to the dusty remnants of an abandoned cobweb. His skin was stretched like parchment over his skeletal frame. He breathed slowly and deeply through wheezing lungs, and his eyes were closed.

The only sounds in the bedroom were the soft crying of the woman, his rasping breath and the ticking of a porcelain pendulum clock.

Make no mistake, the man knew he did not have long to live, but unlike his wife and children, he had accepted his fate. His life had lasted for eighty years, which was quite an achievement. Naturally, he would have liked a few more years — his mind was far from inactive, and there were still a lot of ideas he deemed worth exploring — but, during the previous winter, cancer had invaded his body and now the disease was consuming the last bits of what once had been a healthy body.

He was weary. It was better this way.

However, that late afternoon, he did not think about death. Neither did he think about his wife, although he was fully aware of her presence, just as he knew that his grown-up children were waiting outside on the landing for news of his passing. He did not think about his fruitful and respected career as a physicist and chemist. He did not think about the many accolades he had received for his work, the day the late Queen Victoria had tapped a sword on his shoulders, or the time he was appointed chairman of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge. No, the last minutes of his life were dedicated to the only woman he had ever genuinely loved. The man could smell the scent of flowers in her long, blonde hair, perceived the firm softness of her bosom against his cheek and was convinced that the child had just pressed her lips to his other cheek. He chose to spend his last moments on earth with memories of her: his great love, who had given him everything he could wish for but had taken it away just as quickly. Yes, his life had been beautiful during the brief period he had known her, and no, that great love did not bear the same name as the old lady who was praying at the side of his bed for his swift departure and safe arrival. As he lay there dreaming, nestled in her loving embrace, he

SEANCE

was oblivious to the fact that his approaching death would become a veritable battle of hell.

* * *

It began when the iron ring in the mouth of the fearsome lion was struck twice against the front door.

‘My dear husband,’ sobbed the old lady as she laid her veined hand on his pale fingers. ‘The minister is here.’

His wife’s voice pulled him from the imagined embrace of his beloved, and he opened his eyes with significant effort. He heard someone ascending the stairs and his children standing up to show their respect to the clergyman.

And then Evil came.

The temperature in the bedroom suddenly dropped, though his wife seemed not to notice, and the man began to shiver as if he were standing naked in the garden during a winter morning. His last attempts to gasp for air were visible in the shape of dense clouds, which his wife did not seem to notice either, as she had turned away from the bed and was shuffling towards the door.

The scientist peered through the window, where a large black bird sheltered from the dreary weather on the windowsill. The animal was unaware of the events unfolding on the other side of the glass, as if the window formed a barrier between two worlds that had nothing in common: a world where life mercilessly continued versus a world where life was mercilessly taken away.

On the windowsill stood a vase of Delft blue containing three daffodils. The bedridden man was unsure what he saw as the yellow petals turned into lifeless pastels, after which the stems bent and finally crumbled into dry twigs. The remnants of the daffodils turned into fine dust.

Fearful and powerless, the dying man witnessed the unlikely scene that was solely intended for him. As a man of positivism, he tried to rationally analyse the phenomenon, although he had witnessed the unnatural more than once in his long life. He gave up his attempt when the swirling dust started to form a black mist that

BLAKE MILTON

multiplied rapidly and menacingly descended along the wall, over the skirting board and onto the floor.

He tried to warn his wife of the approaching danger, but his voice failed. The woman ignored him and opened the door to let the clergyman in.

The children, thought the physicist. Close the door and protect the children. Do not let them be infected by this Evil.

He knew all too well what the black substance was that crept like a veil of low-hanging fog over the floor and curled upward along the bedpost to the foot of the bed.

Somewhere, far away and yet close by, the dying man heard voices: a bestial scoffing mixed with cries of fear and torturous pain.

Listen, he tried to say. He's coming. He's coming for me. Help me, please. Don't let that beast take me. But his words never left his ravaged throat.

He pulled his legs up but could not prevent the black mist from reaching his feet, crawling higher and higher.

His wife shook hands with the minister, who gently squeezed her shoulder; a gesture of comfort and sympathy.

'I'm afraid there isn't much time left,' she whispered so her husband would not hear her, as if he did not realise the simple truth.

The dying man, however, was barely aware of the presence of his wife and the clergyman. His lower body was already covered by the black mist that felt colder than the weather outside. The voices — the sardonic laughter and the panicked wailing — grew louder. He wished he could throw himself out of the bed, but the disease had weakened him so much that any attempt to free himself was doomed to fail. He could not move and had to watch helplessly as the hellish substance claimed his lower abdomen and then his torso.

The old lady led the minister to the four-poster, calmed now that her husband could soon be judged with a clear conscience at the gates of the Lord.

How innocent. How unaware. She had known nothing of the secret that would soon be buried with him.

SEANCE

She screamed when she saw him lying there: his thin legs pulled up — chalk-white calves under a nightgown of off-white — his hollowed face like a marble statue contorted in a grimace of horror. With trembling knees, she sought support on the shoulder of the clergyman, who in turn made the sign of the cross with his right hand, for he too — experienced in witnessing the many faces of death — had never seen anything like it.

‘Father,’ cried the lady. ‘What’s wrong with my husband?’

The minister remained silent and could only watch as the sick man experienced his last moments in terror: alone.

The black cloud reached his chin. Petrified, he lay still, desperately gasping for air. The mist penetrated his oral cavity and nostrils. His breath halted while flakes of ice clung to the inside of his lungs. Just before Evil covered his eyes, he cast one last glance at his unknowing wife, who had stood by his side unconditionally, although he had never deserved such goodness. She had buried her face in the shoulder of the minister, no longer able to watch her husband’s suffering. The clergyman, on the other hand, observed the dying man with a look of fear, disgust, and fascination as if he were witnessing a manifestation of the devil.

Some time ago, the scientist had already resigned himself to the inevitable. Still, that afternoon, as the dense black slid over his eyes and infected his brilliant mind by entering his ears, he had to admit that he had imagined his death differently.

As darkness engulfed him, he began to scream, and this time, his voice was audible to his wife and the cleric. His cries joined the demonic laughter and the painful wailing of the others. Evil had wholly consumed him. And when his heart pumped his sick blood through his body for the last time, Evil showed its face. And the face was an abomination.

* * *

BLAKE MILTON

Francis Whitman was the name of the renowned scientist who was born on January 12, 1839, and eighty years later, on the afternoon of April 4, 1919, passed away from us in a most gruesome manner.

I was Francis Whitman.

And this is my story.

Chapter 1

I could begin like Dante and write that I found myself in a dark wood midway through my life's journey, having strayed from the path. Like the great Florentine, I stood at the gates of hell, ready to descend into its deepest depths. In 1873, I was thirty-four. The pinnacle of my career as a physicist and chemist, I thought, was already behind me when, twelve years earlier, as a very young researcher at the Royal College of Science, I had to analyse a batch of sulphuric acid contaminated with an unknown and impure substance. I subjected the acid to a flame test, which produced a green flame of a brightness I had never witnessed in similar experiments. I analysed the green light with a spectrophotometer and thus discovered the element thallium: a lead-like metal and a deadly poison that would soon be used to combat the vermin of London — a war that is impossible to win, if you ask me — and was occasionally employed to eliminate people since the poison is barely traceable in the blood of the deceased. Had I known then that I would immortalise my name in the scientific anthologies for the things I discovered in later life, I would have felt considerably less miserable during the autumn of 1873 — after a further study of thallium that had lasted almost ten years and yielded little of note. Yes, I was disconsolate, aimless, and haunted by the demon known as Melancholy.

On closer examination, I had no reason to lament my existence. After all, I had achieved that which was considered the greatest

BLAKE MILTON

triumph in Queen Victoria's England: I had climbed a fair distance up the social ladder. My father was a wealthy tailor, and a wise man who realised early on that little Francis preferred to work with his brain rather than his hands. However, when I was old enough, my father laid all his money on the table and concluded that he could not afford to pay for a university degree. Moreover, he had no connections in the academic world. So, instead, he sent me to the Royal College of Chemistry, an act for which I am still grateful, not only because he worked himself to the bone to afford my studies, but primarily because he was more aware of his son's talents than I was at the time, for the studies in physics and, mainly, in chemistry opened up a world to me that has continued to fascinate me beyond death. I studied diligently under the watchful eye of Professor A.W. von Hofmann and, after completing my education, was able to work as a meteorologist at the Radcliffe Observatory in Oxford. You might think, wherever you are, that conducting meteorological research in such an exemplary building must have been an honour; but what did that have to do with chemistry? Well, I am not sure myself, but the work was far from unpleasant and much more interesting to me than, for example, my father's world of fashion, which I was doomed to be a part of had he chosen to invest his money elsewhere. The salary I received in Oxford also enabled me to marry Ellen Emsley; a beautiful young lady with whom I was initially blissfully happy. However, over time, we became complete strangers to each other. But more on that later.

During my short career as a meteorologist, I maintained contact with my mentor and other enlightened minds I had met during my studies. I kept myself informed of the marvellous novelties discovered almost daily and decided, even before I married Mrs Whitman, to accept an appointment offered by the Royal College of Science. I resigned from Oxford and moved to London, where my wife and I settled in a rented house a stone's throw from St. Paul's. I could not imagine a better place than number 17 Gough Square, so I bought the property several decades later to spend the rest of my days there. On the ground floor, I had a library next to the drawing room, with a modest laboratory beside it where I could

SEANCE

work peacefully. It often happened that the guests my wife received became ill from the fumes I produced during my ever-diligent research: fumes that wafted through the lab and library into the drawing room, after which I was ordered to apologise extensively unless I myself had become a victim of my experiments, which happened on occasion. Fearing for their lives, most guests limited their visit to Gough Square to the socially acceptable minimum. As a reclusive person, this suited me well, but my wife thought differently.

The new chapter I began in London initially consisted of repeating experiments previously conducted by others, where I occasionally formulated a valuable addition that I published with the approval of Professor von Hofmann in one of the many scientific periodicals. My journey to the top as a leading chemist accelerated when, as I mentioned earlier, the Royal College of Science sent me a contaminated package of sulphuric acid, from which I managed to filter thallium. The chemical world celebrated my discovery and a few years later I saw it appear as element 81 on the ingenious periodic table that Mendeleev unleashed on the world in 1869. Others quickly focused on the practical application of the component, while I primarily concentrated on determining the atomic weight of the poison, which is 204.3833, should you be interested.

I was twenty-two when I made that discovery and was carried on the shoulders of the British physicist society. My agenda, maintained by my fiercely proud wife, was bursting with invitations to give lectures, or to attend soirees of influential individuals from London's social circles. For several years, I enjoyed a kind of popularity similar to the fame Charles Dickens enjoyed as the hero of the general public. The Royal Society offered me a membership card, which I gladly accepted, as such membership meant I was an authority in my field.

But, as you can guess, there came an end to this period of success and personal recognition, while I was foolish enough to think my career and reputation were established for the rest of my days. Eventually, the postman no longer brought the invitations that, although they pleased my ego, I mostly left unanswered. No one wanted to listen to my lectures anymore, and other geniuses had

BLAKE MILTON

already emerged with more spectacular findings than my toxic metal. In other words, I had become old news, and in my youthful naivety I had not anticipated this turn of events. Of course, I was not entirely forgotten. On the contrary, but that was the impression I had at the time.

While Mrs Whitman was still basking in her role as the wife of the poison doctor, my ambitions packed their bags and seemingly left for good. Blinded by vanity, I wandered through the quiet rooms of Gough Square. I believed that time had stopped, or — even worse — that time mercilessly moved on without me.

I was on the verge of being swallowed by the proverbial abyss. I let the world pass me by and allowed gloom to replace my former optimism. The only joy I had left was the relationship with my children. With them, I could frolic and joke for hours without thinking of the great emptiness, until the governess forced the rascals from my arms and I was left alone with my cursed thoughts. Moreover, unemployment made me anxious, leading me to suffer from neurotic episodes, which I stubbornly kept secret from the outside world and especially from Mrs Whitman. Panic attacks back then were primarily the curse of middle-class women — who felt useless and superfluous because their staff took care of the household and because holding a position was taboo for ladies from those circles — which certainly did not improve my self-esteem. Thus, not only did my vanity disappear — which was a good thing — but also my self-confidence was replaced by an insecurity that seemed to come from nowhere.

My first attack announced itself completely unexpected after I had spent several hours with the children in the courtyard of our house. When it was time for their lessons, I retreated to the library, after which I suddenly started to suffocate and thought I was about to lose consciousness. The air I breathed contained too little oxygen, my left hand started to tingle, my heart pounded in my chest and I became dizzy. The panic was overwhelming. I crawled into one of the room's corners against the bookcases, like a frightened mouse trying to flee from a predator, but that changed nothing about the situation. Sweat poured over my face and with great

SEANCE

difficulty I staggered through the drawing room to the hall and then onto Gough Square, where the dirty London air did not precisely improve my condition.

Nevertheless, the anxiety eventually subsided. I could breathe as I should and my heart returned to its acceptable and regular rhythm. The nervous attack left me exhausted, causing me to drag myself to the bedroom with the last bit of energy I had, where I locked myself in until the following day.

This was merely the beginning of a series of neurotic incidents, often triggered by the fact that I was constantly afraid. From then on, panic dominated my entire existence, from morning to often late at night. My brains were filled entirely with thoughts of anxiety while being devoid of reason. I avoided my children and my wife — who, obviously, realised something was wrong but did not understand the cause, as did I — dared not to go outside and even stayed away from the Royal Society meetings.

In the autumn of 1873, the once-celebrated scientist Francis Whitman had become a recluse, a prisoner in his own library, with books he deemed unworthy of attention because his ability to concentrate had been reduced to nothing. The only thing I could bring myself to do was read the magazines our household was subscribed to. The London Illustrated News was one of my favourites because the articles were short and merely supported the large images. I usually left scientific periodicals untouched, except when I was in a better mood. Still, even then, I did little more than skim the articles, except for reading a summary of a topic close to my heart. Only one magazine consistently captured my undivided attention after I finished The London Illustrated News: The Spiritualist.

I feel compelled to elaborate further on this magazine because it plays a significant part in what will follow. It may sound strange to your ears, but I, Francis Whitman, was a deeply religious man — and I can assure you from the other side that I did well to believe. A scientist who believes in a Creator, His Son and the Holy Spirit sounds like a contradiction, although that does not need to be true. Darwin indeed shook up the world in 1859 with his *On the Origin of Species*, from which one had to conclude that nature,

BLAKE MILTON

animals and humans were not creations of the Almighty but the result of a prolonged evolutionary process. Darwin could be called the last heretic in the history of science, but fortunately, his group of supporters — scientists who could no longer reconcile the existence of God with their professional findings and who found an explanation for their doubts in the theory of evolution — was almost as large as that of his devout opponents. However, between these polarising groups were a few individuals who had read *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* differently. They noticed that Darwin nowhere wrote that God did not exist, or that his theory explicitly resulted in the rejection of the Creator. While debates and seminars were held by clerics and scientists armed with crucifixes and enlightenment ideas, respectively, a minority recognised the theory of natural selection precisely as proof of God's existence. My name could be added to that select group of thinkers. I have always believed that the wonderfully complex structure of the elements and the laws of physics are signs of God's existence. I admit that Genesis, the creation of life on Earth in six days, is highly unlikely, mainly because we thought at the time that the planet was fifteen million years old — a gross underestimation, as it turned out. However, rejecting Genesis, in my opinion, does not undermine that the process enabling life on Earth is so fantastically complicated and, at the same time, so wonderfully harmonious and perfect that it would be particularly presumptuous to deny that a higher power is involved.

The battle between enlightened minds and clerics was far from new, but with Darwin's publication, both fronts bombarded each other with arguments that were no longer based on pure faith or a blind ideal. The matter also penetrated the drawing rooms of the uneducated classes — albeit in a highly simplified, black-and-white and unmotivated way — and here and there, the unconditional faith in Christian dogmas began to falter. Many people were no longer satisfied with what the Church of England had claimed for centuries. And some of them were convinced it was time to transpose the positivist rage that prevailed in the academic world to everyday faith. In other words, people wanted proof of

SEANCE

God's existence. Where they came from is still a mystery to me, but suddenly, individuals appeared in the big cities claiming to have contact with deceased souls from the afterlife. For a small contribution, they invited people to join their spiritualist Circle, where they called upon the deceased, communicated with them and even confirmed their presence by, for example, letting the spirit stroke a guest's hair with an invisible hand. In no time, London and other cities were entranced by mediums and spiritualism, as the movement was called, and the fact that no one questioned why these mediums were primarily women and girls from the working and lower middle classes testifies to the blind, unbiased faith in that new science — Oh, the irony!

At one point, there was even talk of a veritable plague of mediums who, lacking a conscience, tried to make as much money as possible from the gullible guests. In response, several amateur societies emerged that did not dismiss the summoning of spirits as mere trickery but tried to explain this trend of empirical religion through the publication of magazines. The societies provided a forum where experiences could be shared and they also published articles emphasising genuine mediums and unmasking fraudulent ones.

The *Spiritualist* was undoubtedly the periodical that enjoyed the most esteem. Although I had never attended a seance at this narrative's beginning, I was subscribed to the magazine for several months. Like many others, this craze awakened an unexpected curiosity in me. As a member of a new generation of scientists who found it difficult to reconcile their profession with their faith, spiritualism played with our rational inability to accept the summoning of the deceased and with our silent hope that its claims contained some truth.

It was unimaginable that I would soon emerge as the first doctor that got himself involved with spiritualism through empirical research — that is, by collecting physical evidence — but that is precisely what happened when, in the late afternoon of December 1, 1873, someone knocked on the door of number 17 Gough Square.

Social media and online reviews have never been so important. If you feel the urge to write a review on Goodreads, Amazon or other retailer websites, please do. We at Hill House Books and the author would be very grateful for spreading the word.

**Get in touch and keep up to date with Blake Milton.
Please visit:**

**The official website
blakemilton.co.uk**

**Facebook
facebook.com/blake.milton.author**

**TikTok
tiktok.com/@blake.milton.author**

**Instagram
instagram.com/blakemiltonauthor**

**Goodreads
goodreads.com/blakemilton**