



A. J. ALAN has, with the coming of a broad-casting age, reintroduced the art of telling tales instead of writing them. His stories are taken down in shorthand as he stands at the microphone. "The Diver," taken from his volume of short stories, "Good Evening Everyone!" is a good example of the new technique developed out of the contact between the story-teller and his invisible audience.

THE DIVER

FOR some reason or other the B.B.C. are always asking me to tell a ghost story—at least, they don't ask me, they tell me I've got to. I say, "What kind of a ghost story?" and they say, "Any kind you like, so long as it's a personal experience and perfectly true."

Just like that; and it's cramped my style a bit. Not that my personal experiences aren't true. Please don't think that. But it's simply this: that when it comes to supernatural matters my luck hasn't been very good. It isn't that I don't believe in such things on principle, but I do like to be present when the manifestations actually occur, instead of just taking other people's word for them; and, somehow or other, as I've said before, my luck has not been very good.

Lots of people have tried to convert me. There was one young woman in particular. She took a lot of trouble about it—quite a lot. She used to dra—take me to all sorts of parties where they had séances—you know the kind: table-turning, planchette, and so on—but it wasn't any good. Nothing ever happened when I was there. Nothing spiritual, that is. People always said:

"Ah, my boy, you ought to have been here last night. The table fairly got up and hit us in the face."

Possibly very wonderful—but, after all, the ground will do that if you let it.

Well, as I say, they took me to several of these parties, and we used to sit for hours round tables, in a dim light, holding hands. That was rather fun sometimes—it depended on who one sat next to—but apart from that, the nights they took me no manifestations ever occurred. Planchette wouldn't spell a word, and the table might have been screwed to the

floor. To begin with they used to put it down to chance, or the conditions not being favourable. But after a time they began to put it down to me—and I thought: "Something will have to be done about it." It's never amusing to be looked upon as a sort of Jonah.

So I invented a patent table-tapper. It was made on the same principle as lazy tongs. You held it between your knees, and when you squeezed it a little mallet shot up (it was really a cotton reel stuck on the end of a pencil) and it hit the underneath of the table a proper biff. It was worked entirely with the knees, so that I could still hold the hands of the people on either side of me. And it was a success from the word "Go."

At the very next séance, as soon as the lights were down, I gave just a gentle tap. Our host said:

"Ah, a powerful force is present!" and I gave a louder—ponk! Then he said:

"How do you say 'Yes'?"—and I said:

"Ponk!" Then he said:

"How do you say 'No'?" And I said:

"Ponk, ponk!"

So far so good. Communication established. Then people began asking questions and I spelt out the answers. Awful hard work ponking right through the alphabet, but quite worth it. I'm afraid some of my answers made people sit up a bit. They got quite nervous as to what was coming next. Needless to say, this was some years ago.

Then some one said:

"Who's going to win the Derby?" (I don't know *who* said that) and I laboriously spelt out Signorinetta. This was two days before the race. I don't know *why* I said Signorinetta, because there were several horses with shorter names, but it just came into my head. The annoying thing was that I didn't take my own tip and back it. You may remember it won at 100 to 1 by I don't know how many lengths—five lengths dividing second and third. However, it's no use crying over the stable door after the horse has spilt the milk, and it has nothing whatever to do with the story.

The amusing thing was that when the séance was over various people came round to me and said:

"Now will you believe in spiritualism?" "What more proof do you want?" and so on and so forth. It struck me as rather rich that they should try to convert me with my own false evidence. And I don't mind betting you that if I'd owned

up to the whole thing being a spoof, not a soul would have believed me. That's always the way.

I've told you all this to show that I'm not exactly dippy on the subject of spiritualism—at any rate, not the table-turning variety—very largely because it *is* so easy to fake your results.

But when something *genuinely* uncanny comes along—why, then I'm one of the very first to be duly thrilled and mystified and—what not. It's one of those *genuine* cases I want to tell you about. It happened to me personally. But first of all you must know that there's a swimming-bath at my club. Very good swimming-bath, too. Deep at one end and shallow at the other. There's a sort of hall-place adjoining it, and in this hall there's a sandwich bar—very popular. It's much cheaper than lunching upstairs. Quite a lot of people seem to gravitate down there—especially towards the end of the month. Everything's quite informal. You just go to the counter and snatch what you want and take it to a table and eat it. Then when you've done, you go and tell George what you've had. George runs the show, and he says “one-and-ninpence,” or whatever it is, and that's that.

Personally, I usually go to a table in a little recess close to the edge of the swimming-bath itself. You have to go down a few steps to get to it. But you are rather out of the turmoil and not so likely to get anything spilt over you. It's quite dangerous sometimes, people darting in and out like a lot of sharks—which reminds me: a member once wrote in to the secretary complaining that the place wasn't safe—I shan't say who it was, but you'd know his name if I told you; I managed to get hold of a copy of his letter. This is what he says, speaking of the sandwich bar:

“I once saw an enormous shark, at least five feet ten inches long, go up to the counter and seize a sausage roll—*itself* nearly four inches long—and take it away to devour it. When he had bitten off the end, which he did with a single snap of his powerful jaws, he found that it was empty. The sausage, which ought to have been inside, had completely vanished. It had been stolen by another shark even more voracious and ferocious than himself.

“Never shall I forget the awful spectacle of the baffled and impotent rage of this fearful monster. He went back to the counter, taking the empty sarcophagus with him, and said: ‘George, I have been stung!’”

“ In order to avoid such scenes of unparalleled and revolting cruelty ”—after that he is rather inclined to exaggerate, so I shan't read any more—I usually go late, when the rush is over and it's fairly quiet. People come and practise diving, and sometimes they are worth watching—and sometimes not.

That's the sort of place it is, and if you know of anywhere less likely to be haunted I should like to see it. Very well, then.

One day I was just finishing lunch when there was a splash. I was reading a letter and didn't look up at once, but when I did I was rather surprised to see no ripples on the water, and no one swimming about, so I went on with my letter and didn't think any more about it. That was all that happened that day.

Two or three weeks later, at about the same time, I was again finishing lunch, and there was another splash. This time I looked up almost at once and saw the ripples, and it struck me *then* that it must have been an extraordinarily clean dive, considering that whoever it was must have gone in off the top. One could tell that from where the ripples were—well out in the middle. So I waited for him to come up. But he didn't come up. Then I thought that he must be doing a length under water, and I got up and went to the edge of the bath to watch for him. But still he didn't come up and I got a bit worried. He might have bumped his head on the bottom, or fainted, or anything, and I saw myself having to go in after him with all my clothes on.

I sprinted right round the bath, but there was undoubtedly no one in it. The attendant came out of one of the dressing-rooms and evidently thought I'd gone cracked, so I went to the weighing-machine and weighed myself—eleven stone eight—but I don't think he believed me.

That was the second incident. The third came about a fortnight later. This time I saw the whole thing quite clearly. I was sitting at my usual table and I saw a man climbing up the ladder leading to the top diving-board. When he got up there he came out to the extreme end of the plank and stood for a few seconds rubbing his chest and so on—like people often do.

He was rather tall and muscular—dark, with a small moustache—but what particularly caught my eye was a great big scar he had. It was about nine inches long and it reached down from his left shoulder towards the middle of his chest.

It looked like a bad gash with a bayonet. It must have hurt quite a lot when it was done.

I don't know why I took so much notice of him, but I just did, that's all. And, funnily enough, he seemed to be just as much interested in me as I was in him. He gave me a most meaning look. I didn't know what it meant, but it was undoubtedly a meaning look.

As soon as he saw that he'd got me watching him he dived in, and it was the most gorgeous dive I've ever seen. Hardly any noise or splash—just a gentle sort of plop as though he'd gone into oil rather than water—and the ripples died away almost at once. I thought, if only he'll do that a few more times it'll teach me a lot, and I waited for him to come up—and waited—and waited—but not a sign.

I went to the edge of the bath, and then I walked right round it. But, bar the water, it was perfectly empty. However, to make absolutely certain—I mean that he couldn't have got out without my seeing him—I dug out the attendant and satisfied myself that no towels and—er—costumes had been given out since twelve o'clock—it was then half-past two—and he, the attendant, he'd actually seen the last man leave.

The thing was getting quite serious. My scarred friend couldn't have melted away in the water, nor could he have dived slap through the bottom of the bath—at least, not without leaving some sort of a mark. So it was obvious that either the man had been a ghost, which was absurd—who's ever heard of a ghost in a swimming-bath?—I mean the ideas's too utterly—er—wet for anything—or that there was something wrong with the light lager I was having for lunch.

I went back to my table and found I'd hardly begun it, and in any case let me tell you it was *such* light lager that a gallon of it wouldn't have hurt a child of six—and—I'm *not* a child of six. So I ruled that out, and decided to wait and see if it happened again. It wouldn't have done to say anything about it. One's friends are apt to be a bit flippant when you tell 'em things like that. However, I made a point of sitting at the same table for weeks and weeks afterwards, but old stick-in-the-mud didn't show up again.

A good long time after this—it must have been eighteen months or more—I got an invitation to dine with some people called Pringle. They were old friends of mine, but I hadn't seen them for a long time because they'd mostly lived in Mexico, and one rather loses touch with people at that distance. Any-

way, they were going back there in a few days, and this was a sort of farewell dinner.

They'd given up their flat and were staying at an hotel. They'd got another man dining with them. His name was Melhuish, and he was, with one exception, the most offensive blighter I've ever come across. Do you know those people who open their mouths to contradict what you are going to say before you've even begun to say it? Well, he did that, among other things. It was rather difficult to be entirely civil to him. He was travelling back to Mexico with the Pringles, as he'd got the job of manager to one of their properties. Something to do with oil, but I didn't quite grasp what, my mind was so taken up with trying to remember where on earth I'd seen the man before.

Of course *you* all know. You know he was the man who dived into the swimming-bath. It sticks out about a mile, naturally; but I'd only seen him once before in a bad light, and it took me till half-way through the fish to place him. Then it came back with a rush, and my interest in him became very lively. He was an American, and he'd come over to England two months before, looking for a job—so he said. I asked him why he'd left America, and he didn't hear; but it did seem fairly certain that he'd never been in Europe before. So when we got to dessert I proceeded to drop my brick.

I said: "Do you mind telling me whether you have a scar on your chest like this?" And I described it. The Pringles just stared, but Melhuish looked as if he were going to have a fit. Then he pulled himself together and said: "Have you ever been in America?" And I said: "No, not that I know of." Then he said: "Well, it's a most extraordinary thing, but I *have* a scar on my chest," and he went on to explain how he'd got it.

Funnily enough, he'd gone in for high diving a lot when he was younger, and taken any amount of prizes, and on one occasion he'd found a sharp stake at the bottom of a river. He gave us full particulars. Very messy. But what they all wanted to know was how the—how I knew anything about it. Of course, it was a great temptation to tell 'em, but they'd only have thought I'd gone off my rocker, so I started a hare about perhaps having seen a photograph of his swimming-club in some newspaper or other. They caught on to that idea quite well, so I left them to it.

The whole thing was by way of being rather a problem, and it kept me awake that night. Without being up in such

matters, it did occur to me that it might be a warning of some kind. Is it likely that any one—even a ghost—would take the trouble to come all the way from America simply to show me how well he could dive? Of course not, and I sort of thought that a man who was in the habit of going in off the deep end and *not* coming up again was no fit travelling companion for any friends of mine. I'm not superstitious, goodness knows! Of course, I don't walk under ladders, or light three matches with one cigarette, or any of those things, but that's because they're unlucky—not because I'm superstitious.

Anyhow, in case the Pringles might be, I went round next day and saw them. At least, I saw her—he was out—and told her all about the apparition at the club, and so on. That did it. She fairly went off pop. It was a portent, a direct intervention of Providence; nothing would induce her to travel with Melhuish after what she'd heard—and all the rest of it.

I left her to carry on the good work. I don't know how she managed it, but the fact remains that the Pringles did *not* start for Mexico, as arranged, and Melhuish did.

And now you are expecting me to say that the ship in which he sailed was never heard of again. But that wouldn't be strictly true. He got to the other side all right. But the train in which he was travelling through Mexico had to cross a bridge over a river. A steel bridge, it was. Now some months previously there'd been a slight scrap between two local bands of brigands, in the course of which the bridge had been blown up.

When the quarrel was patched up the bridge was patched up, too, but not with the meticulous care it might have been. The result was that in the daytime, when the sun was hot and the steelwork fully expanded, it was a perfectly good bridge, but at night, when it was cold and the girders had shrunk a bit—well, it didn't always quite meet in the middle.

It so happened that the train in question tried to cross this wretched bridge at the very moment when it was having rather a job to make both ends meet—and it simply couldn't bear it. The middle span carried away and the engine and two carriages crashed through into the river, and fourteen people were killed. It was very sad about thirteen of them, but the fourteenth was Mr. Melhuish.

There must be a moral to this story, if I could only think of it; but I can't, so perhaps some of you can help me by suggesting one. .