

CONFESSIONS OF A GHOST-HUNTER

I have finally uncovered the identity of the ghost writer who collaborated with Jasper Maskelyne.

In our correspondence ten years ago, Alistair Maskelyne was adamant that a ghost writer had produced both *Magic–Top Secret* and the earlier *White Magic*.

I had no reason to doubt Alistair, but historians of magic understandably would require additional evidence.

In October 2004 I contacted Random House who now own Stanley Paul. I spoke to their archive librarian, Jean Rose. She helpfully located the original contract for *Magic–Top Secret* signed by Jasper Maskelyne on June 23rd, 1947.

The surviving contract did not refer to a second writer.

I pressed her on this point.

She said that from Stanley Paul's perspective Jasper Maskelyne was the sole person contracted to write the book.

However, she added that the contract also made reference to Jasper's literary agent, Rupert Crew.

Jean Rose kindly informed me that the Rupert Crew agency was still in existence and gave me their number.

I then spoke to Doreen Montgomery, director of the Crew agency.

I introduced myself by saying: *"I've done a great deal of research on the wartime career of Jasper Maskelyne. I've corresponded in detail with his son, Alistair. But his son claims that Magic–Top Secret was ghost-written..."*

"It was."

Her response was instant. There was no hesitation or doubt.

I then asked her how she knew this. I explained that I had checked at Stanley Paul. Their records indicated that Jasper was the sole signatory.

And Doreen made the following points:

The agreement with a ghost writer is done through the agent, not the publisher. The celebrity signs with the publisher, but they make separate arrangements with their collaborator and these terms are sorted out with their agent. Such an arrangement would not show up in the publisher's contract.

Furthermore, she was able to provide a name—Frank S. Stuart.

She said he had ghosted several books for their Agency.

She also thought that he was responsible for *White Magic*, published before the war.

She insisted that Frank was a reputable worker. He would have to meet and interview the client. He would not be allowed to write material without their approval.

(In the same telephone conversation, Doreen told me that she was the literary agent behind the recent controversial *Jack the Ripper Diaries*. *"I don't understand what the fuss was. They looked genuine to me."*)

I then spoke to Jean Rose at Random House again. She agreed that if Jasper worked with a ghost writer brought in by the Rupert Crew literary agency, then the second name would not appear on the Stanley Paul contract.

As long as Jasper fulfilled his contract and delivered the manuscript, no hard questions were asked about authorship.

Who then was Frank S. Stuart?

Doreen would not respond to my follow-up e-mail.

I decided to press on with my own research. I needed to scrutinise Stuart's out-of-print writings.

FAIRY STORIES

In November 2004, I visited the new British Library, which is not far from The Magic Circle in London.

The solution to the Jasper Maskelyne mystery was at hand.

I quickly discovered that Frank Stanley Stuart had specialized in manufacturing tantalising tales for the gullible public.

His lack of commitment to the truth is evident in two earlier works of non-fiction:

Vagabond, Reminiscences of a Tramp (1937) documents the far-fetched adventures of a mysterious vagrant, an educated gentleman of the road with connections to high society.

Memoirs of a Royal Detective (1935) is an autobiography of Detective-Inspector Herbert Fitch. In a promotional foreword, Baroness Orczy (creator of the Scarlet Pimpernel) asks: “*Is truth stranger than fiction?*”

The Baroness inadvertently blows the gaffe on the false Inspector when she says: “*Inspector Fitch is a character that any fiction writer would have been proud to conceive.*”

Fitch conveniently died before finishing his dubious masterpiece. Stuart writes: “*When Mr. Fitch had almost completed this book, he was found dead in his study chair. Sheets of the story still littered his desk. So that his tale of these unique experiences should not be wasted, I was asked to conclude the task.*”

Leaving aside these ludicrous pseudo-biographies, I was anxious to examine *Nothing Up My Sleeve*, supposedly the life story of Douglas Beaufort, Society Magician, written with the assistance of Frank S. Stuart and published by Stanley Paul in 1938.

This forgotten book conveys important independent evidence.

Firstly, its very existence shows that Frank S. Stuart collaborated with a magician from Maskelyne’s era.

Secondly, its distinctive style and subject matter strongly support the theory that its author also wrote the Maskelyne books.

For example, the teaser design of the contents pages of *Nothing Up My Sleeve* is similar to the sensational style of language used in the contents of *White Magic* and *Magic-Top Secret*. Below are classic examples culled from the chapter headings:

NOTHING UP MY SLEEVE

“I challenge the Chilean Army”

“Threatened with death by a near-royal madman”

“Asked to heal sick Moors—An Eastern Royal Command performance—Four Queens receive a whipping—Diddling the Devil-doctors—Ventriloquism in Fez ... I receive a right Royal gift”

“Kidnapped by a Sheikh—Making magic for my life—Murder in the audience”

“I am offered a partnership by J.N. Maskelyne ... Devant becomes a partner instead of myself—an uncanny adventure at Lord Wolseley’s—I nearly lose my life”

“Attacked by the detectives of a Grand Duke”

And so the melodramatic make-believe continues:

“The Shah of Persia is angry because I have no naughty pictures”

“I travel with Crippen”

“I am prevented from travelling on the Titanic”

“I am suspected as a spy—Magic saves my life from a madman”

“I kissed a murderess.”

MAGIC-TOP SECRET

“I kidnap the C-in-C—Nothing Up Our Sleeve—Poisoned—Firing Squad—The Devil

Calls"

"Setting Hun-traps in Arabia—A special mission to Damascus—I tell a Holy Imam how to perform his own magic—A lance through the stomach—Desert rider"

"Balbo bombs us with dummy bombs—Douglas Fairbanks Jr. comes to study war-magic—And captures a U-boat (Note: Fairbanks does not mention this amazing feat in his own memoirs.)"

"Lost among the sandhills—No food or water—Four days in hell"

"My hunt for 5,000-year-old temple magic in Egypt—Magic curses from the royal tombs—My hunt for ancient books of sacred magic"

"The beauty who accepted ugliness to save her lover—And he was repelled by the ugliness"

"I sleep with Phoebe—She is abducted—And saved from a Fate Worse Than Death"

In the final chapter of *Nothing Up My Sleeve*, Beaufort/Stuart shamelessly declares:

"Looking back over nearly sixty years of conjuring, it seems to me ... that I have left out more adventures than I have included!"

There was the occasion when a European Prince sought my aid when an escapade with a grisette ceased to be a joke to him and became a terror. There was a time when a young English Duke asked me to investigate the secret of a grisly family legend, told to each heir when he became twenty-one. It was a peculiarly horrible story, and my magic proved puny beside a more sinister magic we could not understand.

Once I saw what seemed to be a werewolf. Once a highly educated, titled girl offered me priceless family heirlooms for a love potion, and would not believe me when I said I could not invent one. Once I saw something of a poisoning case in very high life, and saw how skilfully it was hushed up.

Many of these stories I have purposely avoided in this book. I have tried to stick almost entirely to tales in which I could quote names, dates, and places as verification.

One need not be a magician to make up fairy-stories, but I have given, as far as possible, accounts of things I have actually witnessed."

The author boldly claims that everything he writes about is true and verifiable. Such assertions are worthless.

The very last sentences of *Nothing Up My Sleeve* and *White Magic* sound suspiciously similar:

"I shall perform the greatest disappearing trick of my career. And then—as now—my audience will rub their eyes and stare at one another and say—"Upon my soul! The fellow's vanished!" (p.284) White Magic

"After which, there is nothing left for me to do but to make a gesture of farewell to the first of my audiences that I have not been able to see, mutter 'Abracadabra!'—and vanish!" (p.284) Nothing Up My Sleeve

The unusual double exclamation structure in both accounts is worth noting. An exclamatory "vanish!" also appears in the final paragraph of *Magic—Top Secret*.

DEFTLY DIDDLE THE DERVISH DEVIL DOCTORS

"Mr. Beaufort,—we want you to go out and see the Sultan of Mowocco, and show him some twicks that his Court Mawabouts can't equal? There you have it. Diddle the Devil-doctors, so to speak."

The contents of Chapter 11 and 12 of *Nothing Up My Sleeve* are most revealing and have direct parallels with material that was later recycled for *Magic—Top Secret*.

Beaufort's perilous mission to Morocco is a precursor to Maskelyne's dramatic mission to Damascus.

Beaufort's duel with the Marabouts is suspiciously similar to Maskelyne's duel with the Imam.

The archetypal ingredients of this ridiculous fable are probably drawn from the unreliable adventures of Robert-Houdin who was sent on a mission by the French Government to Algeria in the 1850s.

Take your hero magician (Houdin, Beaufort or Maskelyne), dispatch him to a foreign country on a dangerous mission, make him confront enemy magicians (for sinister effect call them Marabouts or Dervishes), and, after mishaps and near disaster, let your brave magician triumph, his brilliant conjuring skills outwitting the devilish tricks of Muslim fanatics who impede foreign policy objectives of your beloved homeland.

The fraudulent rabble-rousers are outwitted. And British diplomacy triumphs.

Beaufort's mission is *"to destroy once and for all the growing influence of the Court marabouts."*

The Sultan's magical advisors were a dangerous and cruel faction: *"rivals were usually boiled in oil, or tied between two camels who were then incited with spears to run rapidly in opposite directions."*

However, their most despicable trait was to favour the French over the British: *"It was my task then to terrify the Sultan with the idea that England could produce such magic as would shrivel him and his dervishes together if he did not favour England's wishes concerning the destiny of his country."*

In a fanciful confrontation, the Sultan demands that Beaufort produce snakes from his mouth.

Beaufort is caught off-guard. *"It is a common dervish trick, but not having any snakes I naturally could not do it."* (This response sounds more like an insane comic monologue by the late Peter Cook.)

Beaufort instead resorts to banal British music hall trickery:

"Tell His Majesty, I said swiftly to the interpreter, 'that Englishmen think snakes unclean, as you do pigs. I cannot touch them without losing caste. But I will do something yet more wonderful. I will bring a great number of eggs from your mouth.'"

Beaufort astonishingly produces dozens of eggs from the interpreter's mouth.

He then pulls out lengths of coloured ribbon from the Sultan's ceremonial dagger.

The climax is a ventriloquist act. Beaufort's two little dolls miraculously converse with each other.

His Majesty is impressed.

Instead of suffering a horrific death, Beaufort is rewarded with the Sultan's silver dagger, a beautiful stallion, and five hundred silver dollars.

Generous recompense for an impromptu close-up act.

"The Sultan's attitude towards Britain became very friendly ... my mission was satisfactorily performed; and the lisping Mandarins in Whitehall could count on one more successful move in their unending game ..."

The story is not finished yet!

Returning on horseback, Beaufort is kidnapped by his enemies and dragged before a sheikh.

Again, he has to demonstrate his wondrous magical powers, or else meet a nasty end.

He starts off with coin tricks and then cigarette manipulations, but fails to impress his audience.

His last resort is ventriloquism. He points at one of the enemy magicians, mimics his voice (in perfect Arabic) and makes him utter the blasphemous words *"The Sultan is Satan!"*

The mob turns on the court magician.

"This was high treason, and the Sultan's reputation was such that it was well known that he would stamp the town flat and massacre every living thing in it if this story came to his ears. Most of all, he would see to it that the two Court magicians already disgraced, ... died very slowly and in unprintable ways."

“The one I had not picked on cut the Gordian knot very simply by sliding his knife up to the handle into the ribs of his shouting companion.”

A dramatic ending. Beaufort turns the tables on those dirty dervishes.

What a load of unprintable camel dung!

NAILING THE GHOST

I defy anyone to read these puerile extracts without concluding that Frank S. Stuart made it up.

And that is why I am even more convinced that Maskelyne’s ‘memoirs’ are hopelessly compromised.

The giveaway clue, overlooked by the experts, is hidden in plain sight on the very first page of *Magic–Top Secret*:

“... Mr. Douglas Beaufort, was sent by our Foreign Office to Morocco to perform some alarming illusions at a time when the Sultan’s friendship seemed essential to avert a war, and the desired result was attained”

Frank Stuart is craftily and impudently publicising his earlier book.

What a circular trail of audacious self-endorsement!

Not surprisingly, *Nothing Up My Sleeve* has the following complimentary line: Jasper Maskelyne is described as *“far and away the cleverest magician on our modern stage.”*

A few chapters later is a flattering reference to the great Detective-Inspector Fitch.

Stuart deceptively cross-pollinated his books with these favourable asides.

The time has come to rip into these ripping yarns and properly evaluate, even emasculate, the Maskelyne myth.