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The Queen of Whale Cay

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THE HAUNTING
OF ALMA
FIELDING

A True Ghost Story

Kate Summerscale

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Alma Fielding

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PROLOGUE

In January 2017 I visited the Society for Psychical Research archive in Cambridge to look up some references to the ghost hunter Nandor Fodor, a Hungarian emigré who had been a pioneer of supernatural study in London between the wars. I wanted to know more about Fodor's investigation of a housewife called Alma Fielding, a poltergeist case from which he deduced, to the horror of his colleagues, that repressed traumatic experiences could generate terrifying physical events.

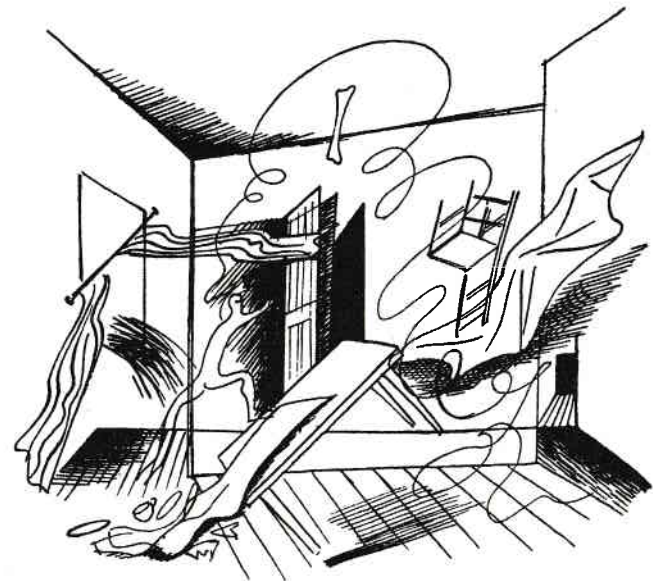
I had seen several references to Fodor in the catalogue to the SPR archive, but I didn't expect to find anything directly relevant in its files: he had investigated Alma for a rival organisation, the International Institute for Psychical Research, whose papers were said to have been destroyed by German bombs. But when the documents were delivered to the university library's manuscripts room, I discovered that they were Fodor's original International Institute papers. The SPR must have acquired the smaller organisation's archive when it was disbanded in the 1940s. To my delight, one of the files turned out to be Fodor's dossier on Alma, mistakenly catalogued as a holding on 'Mr' Fielding.

Part One

THE GHOST HUNTER

'Nowadays, we find that nearly everything
comes from within – from our
subconscious self'

Agatha Christie, 'The Red Signal' (1933)





Nandor Fodor

ONE

The crack in the teacup

At his office in South Kensington on Monday 21 February 1938, Nandor Fodor opened a letter from an East End clergyman of his acquaintance. The Reverend Francis Nicolle wanted to alert him to a poltergeist attack in the suburb of Thornton Heath, just south of London, which had been the subject of a report in that weekend's *Sunday Pictorial*.

'I wonder whether you have seen it?' wrote Nicolle. 'Unfortunately the actual address is not given.' The minister thought that the haunting sounded even more remarkable than a similar case in east London that he had helped Fodor to investigate that month.

Fodor, a Jewish-Hungarian journalist, had for four years been chief ghost hunter at the International Institute for Psychical Research. He loved his job, which required him to investigate and verify weird events, but the spiritualist press had recently turned against him. The bestselling weekly *Psychic News* accused him of being cynical about the supernatural and unkind to mediums, charges that were so damaging to his reputation as a psychical researcher – and his future in England – that in January he had sued for