ing, you have wept enough; dry your tears. I adjure to you—do not kill, do not use bad language. I adjure smokers and alcoholics and drug addicts to stop destroying themselves. I am not a mystic. My mission is to make you believe in my power. It is phenomenal, but it exists and it is unique. Children, heed your parents. Do not torment cats and dogs, they also feel pain when hurt.”

The camera showed the audience. Some people were swaying sleepily in their seats; a few men were waving their arms as if doing sedentary exercises. Most people sat with their eyes closed, although he said it did not matter whether they were open or closed. “Don’t worry about your involuntary movements. That is how it should be. It will pass as soon as I stop.” He ended his séance by counting to 33.

His major theses were good. His appeals and messages were human and natural. He struck me as a well intentioned person, a philanthropist keen to use his unusual powers. After the séance I felt sleepy, but I usually do at 11 pm. My wife claimed, however, that her legs and arms felt a little heavier as he talked, and my mother in law aged 85 said the next morning that she had a good night’s sleep, something which had not happened for a long time. In any case, the séance was a welcome relief from the war or revolutionary films that have for years been the usual entertainment on television on a Sunday night.

Meanwhile I am waiting hopefully for the long term effects of Mr Kashpirovsky’s magnetic treatment because I have now been quite bald for 30 years.

What does it all mean? Is it a manifestation of the preoccupation with the mystic, the inexplicable that is

a part of the Russian character (remember Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Rasputin), or a truly psychotherapeutic influence projected by Mr Kashpirovsky?

Following in the steps of Mesmer *et al*

It all seemed vaguely familiar. Somewhere, sometime I had read or heard about such phenomena. And then I remembered: it had all been described and analysed by Professor Sergei Yudin in a chapter in his selected works entitled “Profiles of the Past in the Development of Surgical Anaesthesia.” The manuscript was written during 1946-7, just before his imprisonment and exile to Siberia in 1948, and was not published until 1960.

Professor Yudin (1891-1954), a brilliant surgeon with a worldwide reputation, was a man of many parts. Founder of the Sklifosovsky Institute of Emergency Medicine in Moscow, he was an outstanding figure in Soviet surgery, a pioneer of many gastric and oesophageal operations, and made creative contributions to every subject he was concerned with. In the analysis of the history of anaesthesia he devoted considerable space to the story of Dr Franz Anton Mesmer and animal magnetism. Dr Mesmer, who lived in the late eighteenth century, clearly possessed the same powers as Mr Kashpirovsky and the other practitioners of “alternative medicine” of today. He, too, rapidly won great renown throughout Europe, and the word mesmerism was widely used. I am sure that if television had been invented in his day and he had had as much time on the screen as Mr Kashpirovsky the effect would have been identical.

Beware the Ides of October

R H Ratnasuriya

Six weeks at home in Sri Lanka was just what I needed to recharge my batteries after starting a new job where I was the only consultant. As I had just reached a major watershed in my life my wife and I thought it might be an interesting exercise to visit an astrologer when we were home.

*... the full force of his wrath
had been diluted because I was not
living in my birthplace.*

After about three weeks trouble broke out in various parts of the country and a 24 hour curfew was declared for three days. This provided a respite from all the rushing around meeting friends and relatives. After three days a night curfew was enforced and during one evening’s conversation someone mentioned an astrologer who was supposed to be very good. Apparently government ministers and other high officials visited him.

Curiosity compelled us to visit him and one afternoon we found ourselves being shown into his sitting room. His house was about 200 yards away from a trickle which had once been a mighty river but had been dammed about six km upstream. The sound of clothes being beaten and washed against the rocks was the only noise that joined the occasional chatter of birds in the searing afternoon sun.

The introduction made no mention of profession or

background. We were soon shown into the astrologer’s study, which was a converted garage. On one wall was a magiboard on which there were remnants of someone else’s charts. We were told that we were lucky as he had no one to see that afternoon. As we sat down a well known businessman turned up from Colombo and was told to go away and come back another day. The astrologer’s waiting list was something like two to three weeks. Was it fate that had cleared a slot for us?

The time and date of birth soon provided the essential basic information for the construction of my chart. First names are usually given according to auspicious sound and he asked me to confirm whether my first name started with the sounds that he picked out from his calculations. Volumes of reference books, a pocket calculator, and a slide rule helped him in his calculations. Soon my chart was on the board. After confirming a few minor details he said that he was quite sure that I was a doctor and started addressing me as such. I am quite sure that we had given him no indication that this might have been so. He had been unaware of our plans to visit him and had no fore-warning.

Problems of the heart calculated

With barely a glance at me to confirm whether this was true, he continued with his calculations and his construction of the chart. The time that my father died was calculated with a fair degree of precision. “Surgical treatment at the age of 13”—I broke my femur playing rugby—“problems of the heart”—a broken relation-

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Did the astrologer foresee the great storm from Sri Lanka?

ship at medical college—were calculated to within a few weeks of their actual occurrence. The astrologer concentrated on the board and his calculations and glanced at us only occasionally. It was an uncanny feeling having your past described so accurately.

Then a pause. "You must be living abroad, otherwise you would have died by now. Even so you have been seriously ill." After a quick calculation he mentioned the period in which I had my two myocardial infarcts. He was quite definite in that I was alive only because I was living abroad. Had I been living in Sri Lanka Saturn would have had his way and I would have died. The full force of his wrath had been diluted because I was not living in my birthplace at the time.

So much for the past and on to the future. He worked almost feverishly with his eyebrows knitted, concentrating intensely on his calculations. By now the light had faded and because of a power cut he had lit two lamps. The harsh glare of light from these accentuated the lines on his face, evoking memories of George de La Tour's St Joseph. The sound of the birds outside had been replaced by the chirping of geckoes and cicadas. After describing my past so accurately with little reaction from me for two hours he started talking about the future. Saturn had been trying to wreak havoc in my life and he was quite sure that had I stayed in Sri Lanka I would have died. This bad period was due to end on my 40th birthday (the night of 15 October). I should be careful around this time, though he said that I might also feel the ripples of Saturn's exit towards the end of the next year or so. He advised me to take things easy and not to give fate a helping hand. As a protection against the final attempts of Saturn to harm me before he ceased to have any influence he suggested that I wore a dark yellow sapphire against my skin.

Complementary charts

Soon afterwards he started on my wife's chart and again the rapid calculations and comments continued with little pause for confirmation. Even his ability to comment on events that had occurred in my wife's life was quite uncanny and accurate. He began to spend a bit more time explaining the way in which he calculated things. He said that he had many theorems that he used in his calculations. He also commented that my wife's chart complemented and matched mine. We had not had an arranged marriage but the way that our charts complemented each other is what he would have looked for in such an event. He rarely looked at us, concentrating on his calculations and the board. From my wife's past he started talking about the future and said that around the time of my birthday Saturn might

try to get at me through her. He suggested that she wore a dark blue sapphire and made sure that it was in contact with her skin. He also said that the effects of Saturn's attempts would die down towards the end of the year but suggested that she was careful until after December and that things would improve in the new year.

Back in England the memories of this holiday soon faded. On 15 October we went to bed as usual. I was due to get up early to go to London for a meeting. The weather forecasters' comments about the weather the next day are unlikely to be forgotten in a hurry. Around 1 am I awoke because of the howling of the wind in the trees around our house. Soon there was a crash and this was followed by unidentified flying objects scuttling across our roof. Shortly after that there was another crash as our chimney pot parted company with the roof. The blue cedar tree that stood in front of the garden had suddenly lost about 20 m off its height. Another tree went down followed by more crashes and a thud as what turned out to be another chimney pot fell to the ground. A little later the speed of the wind rose even further and our windows started rattling. It was now about half an hour after I had been born 40 years before. The power failed just after 2 am. The whole family was up by now and rather anxious and scared. I reluctantly agreed to cancel my trip to London the next morning. We finally managed to fall asleep at about 4.30 am.

The damage that the storm had done was frightening and I am sure is vivid in the memories of all those who experienced it.

The turn of the year brought with it storms that caused some anxieties but it passed uneventfully. I hope that Saturn has ceased to have any influence on me now.

Is it true that the absorption spectrum of sapphires corresponds precisely to the wavelengths of light reflected by Saturn? If the wind had been blowing from the south east instead of the south west both the blue cedar and the chimney pot, which was about a metre tall and heavy, would have fallen on to our bed. Was this some attempt of Saturn to get at me? Were we protected by the gems that we had been advised to wear? I am sure that the astrologer had no warning of the storm on the night of the Ides of October or had he?

NAMING NAMES

Blood and spittles

There are names like Barber and the less common Barbour which owe their origin to the days when the barber led the field in simple blood letting, a common medical practice until the last century. To Barber we add Blood, Bleder, Bledleter, Cupper, Cupman, and Ventoser. The last three described those who used the suction cup for blood letting.

Pothecary and Potticary, old surnames from the Norman *apotecaire*, describe a person who sold spices, preserves, and drugs and gave us the later apothecary, forerunner of the modern chemist.

And where would the profession be without the nurse? Fortunately, Nurse, from the Old French, is an occupational name. Norris, although in some cases it derives from "nurse" is also credited with the meaning of "northerner," but Norreys and Norriss are wholly from the Old French *norrice*, or *nourice*, meaning nurse.

The root of the word hospital has given us the surnames Spital, Spittle, Spittel, Spitteler, Spittlehouse, Spittler, and Spittles. The old hospitals were infirmaries attached to the monasteries. Spittles means "of the hospital."—

BERNARD SHOUGH