


# The Problem Of The Panelled Room: Solved

**In an exclusive interview with *Witness*, Andrew Paris explains what happened in the panelled room on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June? KAREN YU reports**



**E**ven when Andrew Paris is unconscious it's hard to accuse him of being boring. Indeed, despite spending much of June unresponsive in a hospital bed, the renowned sceptic and presenter has seen his fame reach new heights in recent weeks. Sales of his books and VHSs have soared. A new series of his long-running television show, *The Judgement of Paris*, has already been commissioned. "It seems the less I do the more popular I am," chuckles the 51-year-old. "I'll try not to read into that too much."

For those of you who've spent the past month hiding in caves or visiting relatives in Norfolk, a quick recap. Paris is in possession of an old and supposedly haunted tribal mask, known theatrically as the Hungry Corpse. In order to dispel rumours that the mask contained an evil spirit – and to prove that no harm could come from it – on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June Paris volunteered to spend the night in the now-infamous panelled room in which the Hungry Corpse resides. The experiment went very badly wrong, for less than an hour after he locked himself up in the study he was found half-conscious on the floor, lying in a pool of his own blood. He had been shot through the stomach. So far, so weird. But things took a turn for the truly bizarre. When police tested Andrew's cardigan for gun residue they reached a baffling conclusion: the gun had been fired from a distance of at least four feet. Andrew Par-

is, alone in a locked room, could not have shot himself.

Were these events not so widely known a visitor to his Oxfordshire home of White Gate might struggle to guess that its owner has only just escaped a brush with death. Paris greets me at the door, apologises for the mess once again and insists on making me a mug of wincingly strong tea. Had I not met him before the shooting I probably wouldn't have even noticed the slight limp to his gait or the occasional wince of pain across his otherwise sanguine face.

"Doctors told me I ought to rest up for a week or so," he mentions as he reaches for the teapot, battling away my offers of help. "I told them I've been doing precisely that for almost three weeks now. At my age body maintenance definitely falls under the use-it-or-lose-it school of thought. Besides," he adds, rummaging for biscuits, "I've been in worse scrapes than this before." I remind him that he very nearly died on the way to hospital. "You think that's the first time I've nearly died?" he replies. "I had a much more dicey time of it out on the Congo a few years back. The crew and I were looking for the mokele-mbembe – a sort of four-legged dinosaur that's rumoured to plod through the jungles of Central Africa – when I managed to get a nasty gash on my calf which quickly turned septic. We were hours away from lopping the whole leg off with a parang when we happened to

stumble across a makeshift hospital a few miles north of Mbandaka. Hobnob?"

Tea made, we amble out onto the sun-soaked patio. Before us stretches White Gate's garden, which is easily big enough and overgrown enough to hide a dinosaur all of its own. "It's bullshit, by the way," remarks Paris without warning. "The mokele-mbembe. As soon as we showed some of the tribes in the area a picture of a rhino they said that was the dinosaur we were looking for. It was all a simple case of mistranslation."

We're enjoying another beautiful summer's day. Sitting in the bright, breezy sunshine I look back at the chaos and confusion of the past few weeks – when much of the nation, myself included, was gripped by a sleuthing frenzy – as if it were a distant dream. Rivers of ink were spilled discussing and debating the mystery at White Gate. Hundreds of explanations were offered as to how someone could perform the sinister miracle of walking through a locked door and shooting someone. There were even fears that Paris' phantasmal assailant would use his or her unearthly powers to embark on a violent crime spree.

Since returning home Paris has filled his time reading through the volumes of material written about his mysterious occurrence. "A lot of it was bunkum, of course," he comments dryly, motioning to a stack of newspapers and magazines on the patio table. I can't help noticing a few copies of *Witness* poking out the pile. "All those people invoking curses and hexes, insisting that the mask had claimed another victim." Paris watches a wispy cloud glide overhead. "But once you wipe away the nonsense there were actually some sensible suggestions here and there. It reminds me of the old fable of the blind men trying to describe an elephant: one person can feel the trunk, another the tusks, another the legs or what have you. Taken together, various people had identified the entire explanation as to what happened in that room. They just needed—" he meshes his hands together "—some synthesis."

I nod along politely through the preamble, resisting the urge to demand the explanation from him right this second. If he hadn't recently been released from intensive care I might have started shaking him for it. Paris glances across the table at me, and not for the first time I get the uncanny feeling those icy blue eyes can read my thoughts. "I suppose you want to know what really happened?" he asks.

With another wince Paris hoists himself upright in his garden chair. "I'm afraid anti-climax doesn't quite do it justice," he sighs. "Prepare to be disappointed."

He places his mug on the table and looks squarely at me. "No one shot me in the panelled room. Or, should

I say: no one *else* shot me in the panelled room. I shot myself. By accident. The whole thing was a simple, clumsy accident." His sardonic grin reignites at the sight of my confusion.

"Here's what happened. When I locked myself in the panelled room I was struck with the realisation that I had given myself nothing to do for the next six, seven hours. The one thing I hadn't counted on was how boring this experiment of mine was going to be. I could have left the room, of course, but that would have violated the parameters of the experiment, and I wasn't prepared to do that. So I had a look around. It had been a while since I was last in the room and I was curious to see what it contained that I might have forgotten about. Turned out there was nothing too exciting – copies of John's old books, a few maps, but mostly old geographical tracts and travelogues. It was when I was rooting through John's desk that I found his Colt Python. Trust John to use such an oversized gun. Out of idle curiosity – it was this or re-read Humboldt's account of his travels through the Amazon – I picked it up. I had no idea it was still loaded, you see." Paris pauses for a moment.

"Well, you can guess the rest. The gun went off – that was the first shot you and Dr Woolham heard that night. The safety catch wasn't even on. The bullet lodged in my stomach, as you and the rest of the world know. I dropped the gun, and as it hit the floor it went off again – the bloody thing was a death trap – sending a second bullet into the skirting board by the fireplace. That was the second shot you heard. I think one of your readers suggested that," he adds, nodding to the pile of papers on the table.

Surely it can't be that simple, I ask. What about the residue? Paris smiles to himself. "Ah yes, the infamous gunshot residue. A bit of a red herring, I'm afraid. You see, the police only ever tested my cardigan for powder. Had they tested my hands or shirt I'm sure they would have found them caked in the stuff." So how does he explain lack of residue on the cardigan? "Well, I wasn't wearing it when the gun went off, of course. I'd lit a fire in that room, remember, and after half an hour or so it was getting quite warm in there. So I took it off. But then I shot myself—" he talks as if it were as common a mishap as stubbing a toe "—and one of the curious things about getting shot is how cold you suddenly feel. As ridiculous as it sounds, my last act before collapsing onto the floor was to put my cardigan back on." He drains his tea. "Why I didn't try to unlock the door or call for help I'll never know."

He did warn me it would be an anti-climax, I console myself. Even so, I can't help but feel royally underwhelmed by the explanation. "You seem disappointed in me," laughs Paris, demonstrating his

clairvoyance once more. "What did you expect, an ingenious solution involving levers and counter-weights? An evil mastermind capable of vanishing at will?" Either of those would have been preferable, I confess. "The problem with the panelled room, as you called it," grimaces Paris as he shifts his weight, "is that everyone *wanted* there to be a problem. Few people stopped to think if there could be a more mundane explanation for what happened — one that didn't need elaborate set-ups or sinister motives."

Speaking of sinister, what of the Hungry Corpse, the unsettling mask that sparked this entire mysterious misadventure? "What can I say?" shrugs Paris. "It's just a wooden mask. If it really is evil then why hasn't it been able to kill me in the twenty-something years we've shared a roof? Of course, I'm sure many of my detractors will ascribe my ham-fistedness with the Colt to the malevolent influence of the mask," he continues, "but then again I could have walked out of that room unscathed and some people would have still insisted on believing in the dark powers of the Hungry Corpse." Fulfilling a promise he made on the evening of his accident, Paris is donating the mask to the University of Stratford, where it will fall under the care of Dr Charlie Woolham, the anthropologist who was here the night Paris was shot. "White Gate is long overdue a spring clean," admits Paris, looking over his shoulder at the turreted curiosity piled behind us. "It's

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about time some of the stuff in here was curated rather than just collected."

As for the other people caught up in this mystery, all seem happy to put the events behind them and move on with their lives. Andrew's niece Lisa and her husband Jared returned to their California home just over a week ago, where they are collaborating on a book about their shared interest in the New Age (much to

Uncle Andrew's irritation). Brian Docherty, the former police detective and long-time friend of Paris, gratefully returned to his retirement at the first opportunity. "He's spending most of his time back at the allotment," notes Paris. "Very predictable things, vegetables. I think that's what he likes about them." Paris pushes himself to his feet as I prepare to leave. "Although he swings by every day to make sure I haven't accidentally shot myself again," he grins.

And what about Andrew Paris himself? Now that he's debunked his own locked-room mystery, what's next for the famous sceptic? "More of the same, I imagine," he replies,

looking out over his jungle of a garden. With his sleeves rolled up and hands on his hips he certainly doesn't look like a man about to take things slow. "What the past few weeks have taught me is that people are all too willing to reach for ridiculous explanations for everyday events. Clearly I have a lot of work still to do." ■



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