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The Mediumship of Estelle Roberts

The medium Estelle Roberts was born May Estelle Wills, in Kensington, London, on 10 May 1889: Barbanell referred to her as 'one of the world's greatest mediums and the possessor of nearly every psychic faculty'.(1)

She recalled that her childhood was 'ordinary. unremarkable', except for the fact that she heard voices that other family members did not.(2) In time, her experiences became a problem and she was told that such matters were evil and suffered chastisement from her father's leather belt. Nonetheless, the attempted suppression was unsuccessful and she frequently spoke with her brother Lionel in the years following his death. After leaving school, when she was fourteen years old, she took up employment as a nursemaid, caring for the children of a family in Turnham Green.

She then married Hugh Warren Miles who was sympathetic to her psychic experiences; three children, Ivy, Eveline and Iris were born to the couple. In this period, there was considerable hardship as her husband earned only a meager wage; matters were not helped by his charitable nature, e.g. giving his wages away to those in need. Eight years after being married, Hugh became ill and was unable to work, and Estelle therefore had to take up employment as a cleaner to support him and their three children.

After moving to Hastings, Hugh's condition continued to worsen and he died in May 1919. At the moment before his death, Barbanell referred to how Estelle 'saw two spirit forms sharing her vigil. They were her husband's parents';(3) she recorded that she saw his spirit departing and that it 'gradually moulded itself into an exact replica of his earthly body'.(4) There were also physical phenomena elsewhere in the house at this time, surely indicating something of the events to follow in Estelle's life. Following his death, Estelle saw Hugh on a number of occasions and heard him say: 'Here, all live on and cannot die. It is quite wonderful'. Estelle's response to these experiences was: 'You live, and

others live. It is the message I must tell the world'.(5) However, much needed to be done before she would be able to demonstrate this.

Estelle moved to Hampton-on-Thames and shortly afterwards, married again. She was then able to devote more time to her children, but also to communing with her 'spirit people'. Her neighbour, Mrs. Slade, invited her to a Spiritualist church at Hampton Hill, and she was able to discuss her own experiences there with Mrs. Elizabeth Craddock, whom she described as 'a very good medium'. Mrs. Craddock told Estelle that she possessed mediumistic abilities and she therefore attempted table-tipping, but after a complete absence of activity, she gave up in disgust and walked away - only to see the table rising which then hit her on the back.

She attempted a hasty exit whereupon she saw that 'the table pursued me'. Realizing that this is what she was seeking, she stopped and thanked whoever was responsible: a voice was heard, in stilted English, saying that his name was 'Red Cloud', and she then saw the speaker. In view of these events, Estelle decided to conduct a séance with Arthur her husband, and she reported: 'We had not long to wait. Almost at once a brilliant golden light shone'; at this point, Arthur was alarmed to note that he could no longer see Estelle in her chair.(6) This was the beginning of spectacular phenomena that would accompany Estelle for many years afterwards.

Following this, Estelle began to demonstrate her clairvoyance and clairaudience in churches in South London and North Surrey. At this stage important information was being relayed to her: one instance was when Red Cloud advised Estelle that in some cases people were unable to communicate due to the beliefs they endorsed before they died. Another example was Estelle realizing that on death people do not change: 'By passing over they do not suddenly become paragons of all the virtues as some people seem to think...To all intents and purposes [they] are the same people they were on earth'.(7) Estelle's mediumship continued to develop, supplying excellent evidence of survival; she recalled the occasion when a woman attended a sitting and Estelle only received one, rather odd, word over and over again. With considerable reservation, Estelle told the woman what she had heard and the woman responded: 'But that is the very word my husband and I agreed upon as evidence of identification';(8) additionally, she achieved successes in the work of healing in which she was very active.

There can be little doubt that one of the most remarkable features of Estelle's mediumship was the wide range of abilities that she possessed. In addition to those already mentioned, she was also involved in the investigation of haunted properties. In this, her mediumship would often determine the cause of the disturbances and she would be able to advise the person involved concerning matters about which she could not have known by normal means. It is not surprising that Estelle was often requested to become involved in cases where people were frantic with worry, although she attempted to avoid instances

where it would be thought that she was seeking media attention. However, on the occasion when she was asked by Douglas Sladen, a friend, to help in tracing Mona Tinsley, a ten-year old child who had gone missing in Newark in 1937, she agreed to assist: however, she stressed the need to avoid her involvement becoming publicized. Estelle then obtained an item of the girl's clothing from the Chief Constable of the area concerned and she recorded: 'As I took it from its wrapping...I knew at once that Mona was dead. Just then, my old dog, who had been sleeping... suddenly leapt to his feet and began to career madly around the room'.⁽⁹⁾ Estelle then spoke with Mona through Red Cloud's help and the girl described how she had been taken to a small house and strangled, and gave a clear image of the area. The Newark police were contacted and Estelle was told that the description coincided with the area where the girl had disappeared. Estelle travelled to Newark and was collected by the police and they drove until Estelle recognized the house that Mona had described. They entered into it and here, Estelle felt the child's presence and was able to give the police information about certain items in the property, and what had happened, e.g. the place and cause of death.

The police were obviously startled as the girl's body had not even been found. They asked Estelle where the body was and she told them that they should look in the nearby river. The police later charged the owner of the house for abduction, and subsequently, when Mona's body was found in the river, as Estelle had told them, he was duly convicted for murder. Estelle admitted that she did not enjoy dealing with such cases because of the strain effected, although she was nevertheless willing to assist people who had been bereaved through their loved ones being murdered. One such case when she was able to provide excellent evidence was detailed in the *Sunday Pictorial*. An occasion of when Estelle was able to bring comfort to a Mr Proctor, whose wife had committed suicide, was fully reported in *The People*.

In addition to the mediumistic work described above, Estelle demonstrated her clairvoyance at many of the public halls in this country, e.g. the Royal Albert, Victoria, Caxton, etc. In these demonstrations, many people received convincing evidence, and on some occasions, so many attended, that two halls had to be linked together by microphone. Fodor remarked on how her demonstrations at the Albert Hall were before up to six thousand people.⁽¹⁰⁾ In the case of Estelle's work as a physical medium, she recorded the time when Red Cloud made himself visible. The séance began with the trumpet 'becoming most lively', with a conversation taking place between one of the sitters and her father. After a period of silence, one of those present noticed 'a billowing cloud that was becoming slowly more visible as it grew in volume': it was realized that a face was present and this was recognized. It swiftly disappeared upon which the trumpet and two luminous plaques began to move; Red Cloud asked for a torch to be given to him and after a sitter had held this out, 'the next instant it was high over the heads of the circle, flashing on and off as though being tested'. It remained on and moved across to where ectoplasm had formed in the room and a face became visible. Estelle detailed how: 'This

time it was the strong, cleanly-etched features of Red Cloud. The materialisation remained there clearly visible to all'.(11)

It was several years before Estelle's guide was seen again, this time in the presence of twenty people. Maurice Barbanell recorded the sequence of events in *Psychic News*. He explained that Red Cloud had requested in advance that two luminous plaques and a red torch be made available at a forthcoming séance; by this it was known that materializations would be joining the sitters. When the time came for the séance, Barbanell remarked on the humour and absence of any tenseness in those who were there: this was in response to Red Cloud's wishes. Estelle took her place in a hastily-made cabinet, or 'Wendy house' as one of her daughters jokingly referred to it.

After the area was examined, the séance began and within a short time the two plaques rose up and Red Cloud's silhouette could be seen. He called Barbanell forward and asked for his hand and then requested that Barbanell feel his hair; Barbanell noted the hand was masculine and the hair was long, silky and shoulder-length; he was close enough to see Red Cloud's face that included a short beard and that 'it was a handsome face, with eloquent eyes'. Each sitter was then invited to come up and inspect the guide's features.

Following this, 'an extraordinary spectacle' took place. This was when the cabinet curtains were parted and one materialized person held the torch to illuminate another. After this, the trumpets moved and apports were produced through them. Each sitter received one, and most were given a jewel. Barbanell asked Red Cloud where they came from and 'laughingly, he replied, "The Land of Anywhere"'. In fact, while the apports were being dropped out of the trumpet, Red Cloud was laughing and 'treating it all as a huge joke'.(12)

Barbanell wrote that the guide 'always welcomed controversial discussion [and] he never showed the slightest sign of irritation to any who disagreed with his viewpoints. Frequently, his humour was displayed in masterly repartee'.(13) After this séance, further marvels occurred only a short time later when Red Cloud materialized with Archael, another guide, who was present for an hour with some sixty sitters.

As the séances of Estelle Roberts were often accompanied by apports, Estelle wondered whether, by their production, it might be thought this was through somebody else's loss. However, Red Cloud assured her that they were all items previously lost or abandoned, with a number of them being drawn up from the sea. One of the more remarkable incidents of this type was when a sitter asked that a budgerigar from the bottom of the garden be brought to the séance. Estelle recorded that Red Cloud declared that it would be done, and 'as he finished speaking, one of the two luminous plaques on the floor took flight and darted quickly about the room. Then it returned...its glowing phosphorus background showing the clear-cut silhouette of a budgerigar'.(14) Having been assured by Red Cloud that the bird had been entranced and was wholly

unaware of the events taking place, each of the sitters came up to the bird and touched it.

In the case of facilitating direct voice, Estelle stated that while entranced, 'the spirit forms I see clairvoyantly and the spirit voices I hear clairaudiently...are suddenly no more', and likened the state to being in 'a drugged sleep'.(15) It was only after nearly four years of her trance work that a circle was formed to develop her direct voice mediumship. Nearly a year passed without any progress being noticeable. However, after some patient waiting, phenomena did occur: 'Once our ten-month initiation period was over, the voices started to come in, and keep coming in, almost without break'.

One sitter, who saw the moving trumpet when some light had been allowed to enter the room, described it as being 'supported by a pillar of smoke'.(16) In addition to the sitters, a shorthand writer joined the group and was placed outside the circle in an alcove where light was provided to enable her to write. As Estelle pointed out, the direct voice phenomenon was particularly evidential as communicators could be recognized by the phraseology and verbal expression that they used. In some cases, the communicator's native tongue was heard; this occurred in the case of a Dutch communicator who spoke with his brother; the brother confirmed 'that the voice spoke in excellent, idiomatic Dutch without any trace of accent'. Other similar occasions arose when communicators spoke in Finnish, Swedish, and Hindustani.(17)

One palpable instance of evidence through Estelle's direct voice mediumship was when Lady Segrave attended a séance: her husband, Sir Henry Segrave had died as a racing motorist, and coincidentally, had taken up an interest in Spiritualism some time beforehand after attending a séance with the circle of Hannen Swaffer. Shortly after the séance with Estelle began, the trumpet moved towards Lady Segrave and other sitters with short spells of conversation taking place. The trumpet returned to Lady Segrave and her husband called using his pet name for her; but she 'was so overcome at being addressed by the pet name which only her husband used and was unknown to anyone present'.(18) He called the name again, and made further attempts to engage in conversation, but overcome with what was happening she was unable to respond. Eventually, Henry Segrave had no further power and the trumpet dropped to the floor. Despite the disappointment of this occasion, at the next séance, he and his wife did manage to speak with each other. He admitted that he had difficulty on the earlier occasion with manipulating the trumpet and dryly added: 'I knew how to drive a boat or a car, but I'm hanged if I can get the run of this yet'.(19) In the following months he and his wife held long personal conversations between themselves. She later brought friends along to séances who also received excellent evidence. In view of what she had experienced, a year after her first visit, she publicly told of the evidence that she had received. She admitted that she had been forced to do this as: 'I feel it is my duty to help others who have been through the sorrow of bereavement, so that they can become happy again as I am'.(20)

Estelle detailed a further striking piece of evidence connected with this particular sitter. In one séance, a boy spoke to Lady Segrave, giving his name and thanked her for the help that she had given his mother. He supplied further information when requested to do so, giving personal details of names and journeys. When the boy's mother was informed of the communication, she 'confirmed in awe-struck wonder every detail that had been known'.(21)

Another case of remarkable evidence was when Bessy Manning communicated. This has already been detailed in an earlier NAS Newsletter; briefly, the events of this case began when Maurice Barbanell attended a séance with Estelle, and Red Cloud advised him there was a girl who wished to communicate with regard to her mother. The trumpet then moved towards Barbanell and a young girl 'very slowly, but distinctly' said that her name was Bessy Manning, and she had died during the previous Easter from tuberculosis. She then added that Tommy, her brother, was with her; he had been killed in a road accident. Barbanell immediately sent a telegram to a Mrs. Manning at the address informing her of what had taken place. As there was no reply to this, Barbanell therefore dispatched a further one. A few days later, he received two letters from Mrs. Manning; the first expressed her joy on having received the first telegram and in her second letter, she apologized that Barbanell had needed to send another telegram but she explained that she lacked the funds to reply by anything other than letter. She advised him that Bessy had died the previous Easter and her son had been killed nine years earlier.

At this stage, Barbanell viewed Bessy's séance communication: 'as flawless evidence for the after-life. No theories of telepathy or the subconscious mind can explain it away...Mrs. Manning had never met Estelle Roberts, or corresponded with her or any member of her family'. Barbanell arranged for Mrs. Manning to travel to London and attend a séance with Estelle. It was not long before Bessy was speaking with her mother. After Bessy had told her mother that Tommy was with her, Mrs. Manning asked whether she ever returned home. Bessy replied that she did and commented on how she saw her mother pick up her photograph and she would speak to, and kiss it. Barbanell reported that Mrs. Manning later told him this was absolutely correct. Bessy continued by telling her mother that she had seen her talking with her father that same morning and referred to the subject of their conversation; this was followed by yet further evidence, all of which was correct.

Before Mrs. Manning returned to Blackburn, Estelle Roberts gave her another sitting, when, once again, Bessy 'continued to prove her identity with detail after detail, none of which the medium could have known'. A short time later, Mrs. Manning wrote to Barbanell thanking him for his involvement and confirming: 'I heard my own daughter speak in me, in the same old loving way, and with the self- same peculiarities of speech. She spoke of incidents that I know for a positive fact no other person could know'.(22) Estelle's mediumship also brought her into contact with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, one of Spiritualism's most tireless advocates. After he died, he successfully communicated through

Estelle's mediumship. At one séance, one of Doyle's friends was present and decided to gain personal evidence by asking the communicating Doyle a personal question. He decided to ask where they had last met and, 'Instantly the voice replied they had last met by accident in a doorway in Victoria Street'. The sitter recalled that this was so.(23) Estelle admitted that Red Cloud, as a number of prominent guides of other mediums, made a mistake in 1939 when he predicted there would be no war. Estelle explained that wrong predictions were caused through looking at the current circumstances and making a judgment from these, i.e. a 'forecast only on probabilities, on a knowledge of the facts and a careful weighing of them'.(24) In fact, indicating the peril of accepting predictions as unailing, it is worthwhile noting that the forecast of there being no war from various communicators was one of the principal reasons for the decline in Spiritualism after the Second World War: 'The outbreak of war in September hit Spiritualism with devastating force...a section of the movement...had explicitly accepted certain predictions made by the spirits through their mediums about the possibility of war...The movement has never recovered its pre-war position'.(25) In view of the consequences, this aspect in communications is something that should be constantly kept in mind.

Despite the problems faced in these dark years, it was during this time that Estelle fulfilled the important task of bringing comfort and reassurance to those who had been bereaved, and allow those who had been killed to confirm their survival. One example was Mrs. Stevens, whose husband, Flt. Lt. Richard Stevens had been killed in action; when she attended sittings, 'her husband...identified himself by recalling trivial incidents in their domestic lives'; he also spoke about the children and events taking place in their lives at that very time.(26) Numerous cases such as this occurred when the sitters were left in no doubt that their associates, friends and loved ones had not only survived death, but were able to communicate the reality of this fact.

Estelle died in May 1970, and in the years up to this time when she worked as a medium, she surely demonstrated a truly remarkable degree of mediumistic ability. This included many different forms that provided an unmistakable amount of evidence to the many thousands who witnessed her at work. It is no wonder that Barbanell said that, 'though I have read all the worthwhile literature in Spiritualism in the last hundred years, I have not come across any accounts to excel the proofs received in the séance-room of Estelle Roberts', whom he believed to be 'perhaps the most versatile of all mediums'.(27)

References:

- (1) Maurice Barbanell, This is Spiritualism (London: Spiritualist Press, 1959),

p.30.

(2) Estelle Roberts, *Forty Years A Medium* (London: Herbert Jenkin, 1959),

p.15.

(3) Barbanell, *Op. Cit.*, p.112.

(4) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.21.

(5) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.22.

(6) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, pp.25, 26, 27.

(7) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, pp.30, 31.

(8) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.32.

(9) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.71.

(10) N. Fodor, *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* (London: Arthurs Press, 1933), p.331.

(11) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, pp.99-100.

(12) *Cit. Roberts, Op. Cit.*, pp.100-103.

(13) Barbanell, *Op. Cit.*, p.35.

(14) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.107.

(15) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.112.

(16) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, pp.115, 16.

(17) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, pp.126, 127, 131.

(18) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.119.

(19) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, pp.119-120.

(20) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.121.

(21) Roberts, *Op. Cit.* p.123.

(22) Barbanell, *Op. Cit.*, pp.54-61. NB. Maurice Barbanell also gave details of Estelle Roberts's direct voice séances in his book, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1933).

(23) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.144.

(24) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.164.

(25) G. K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1969), pp.162-163.

(26) Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, p.167.

(27) Barbanell, *Op. Cit.*, pp.30, 110.

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