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The Mediumship of Eusapia Palladino

Eusapia Palladino (1854-1918) was a medium whose name continues to be associated with both spectacular mediumship and fraud; the impact made by her activity is clearly demonstrated by the continuing debate. Some might consider the occurrence of fraudulent mediumship automatically excludes her from any attention, but as will be shown, her mediumship was of a type that actually demands serious consideration.

After being orphaned in Bari, and having received virtually no education, Eusapia moved as a young girl to Naples, and worked in a household where séances were held. It was during one when she was present that her mediumistic abilities became evident, and in time, attracted attention. Her demonstrations received favourable reports that resulted in her being investigated by Prof. Lombroso, an enthusiastic skeptic. On witnessing the phenomena produced by her in Naples, he was sufficiently impressed to arrange a series of séances that took place in Milan. In these, a number of academics were also present; to their amazement, there was levitation in the full light, and partial-materializations. As was recorded: 'It is impossible to count the number of times that that hand appeared and was touched by one of us; suffice it to say that doubt was no longer possible; it was, indeed, a living human hand which we saw and touched, while at the same time the bust and arms of the medium remained visible and her hands were held by those on either side of her'.(1) The effect of Eusapia's mediumship on Lombroso was significant; he felt it necessary to write, and admit: 'I am filled with confusion and regret that I combated with so much persistence the possibility of the facts called Spiritualistic'.(2) He continued to investigate mediumship and eventually accepted the concept of survival and that communication was possible: he published his findings in, *After Death - What?*

In view of the success, more researchers examined Eusapia's mediumship, e.g. Dr Ochorowicz's at Warsaw during 1893-94, and

Prof. Richet at his island home in 1894. In the case of the tests by Ochorowicz, he and others present, were convinced of the genuineness of the phenomena. Nonetheless, some remained unconvinced, as Eusapia was undoubtedly, as Beloff says, 'a slippery customer'.(3) Inglis's view is no less uncomplimentary: 'that given a chance to try to cheat, by distracting their [the investigators'] attention and freeing a hand or foot, Eusapia would take it'.(4) The problem that arose in the investigation of Eusapia's mediumship was the occurrence of phenomena that were not genuine, and the occasions when these could not have been produced through such means. Sadly, the instances when Eusapia resorted to trickery made the matter of her marvelous mediumship extremely problematic and a source of continuing controversy. Additionally, many researchers found her behaviour somewhat uncomfortable, i.e. she 'was liable on awakening from her trances to throw herself into the arms of the nearest male sitter with unmistakable intent'.(5)

In the case of the tests at the home of Richet, these were important in view of the hypothesis that Eusapia had accomplices to assist her; in this location, the island of Isle Roubaud, the only other residence was a lighthouse, and the possibility could not arise. A number of other experienced researchers attended, e.g. Myers and Lodge of the SPR, and Ochorowicz. A record was made of the séances that were held with some light present; in one, there was levitation of the table (that had been specially made, and weighed forty-four pounds), psychic winds, loud noises and water being levitated and taken to Eusapia. Richet and Myers were both grasped by unseen hands. While there were reservations about the conditions, 'no fraud was actually discovered'.(6)

After this, the Sidgwicks of the SPR became involved; they represented the more sceptical element of the SPR, and certainly so in the case of physical phenomena. They attended séances at another of Richet's homes, near Toulon, as did Ochorowicz and von Schrenck-Notzing. Although the phenomena were less than had been witnessed earlier, some did occur, e.g. the movement of heavy objects. Despite the sceptical Sidgwicks being satisfied with what they had seen, Hodgson of the SPR was not content and it was arranged that Eusapia come to England. She did this in the summer of 1895 and stayed at Cambridge. The séances were attended by a number of members of the SPR, and it appears that being unable to produce the phenomena as before, Eusapia attempted to deceive those present. Naturally, the Sidgwicks were distressed and measures were taken to withdraw anything resembling recognition of Eusapia's mediumship. Beloff refers to Dingwall's opinion concerning the atmosphere prevailing at Cambridge, i.e. the wide gulf between Eusapia, the peasant from

Naples, and the academics who were there to investigate her abilities, and how the situation was anything but congenial.(7)

An important point emerges here: Gratton-Guinness comments on how the SPR 'has had a tendency to reject all evidence from a psychic if some of it turned out to be fraudulent, thus ignoring the argument that since repeatability is so hard to achieve in the subject, there is no reason to assume that fraud is always repeated'.(8) In fact, matters at Cambridge were not quite as simple as have been maintained. While there were certainly occasions of fraud by Eusapia, there were also the instances when the explanation of fraud for the phenomena is hardly tenable. As Gauld comments: 'Not all the phenomena which occurred could be explained on any such simple hypothesis. There were, for instance, the curious protuberances from Eusapia's body which some sitters occasionally observed'. Moreover, in view of the behaviour of the SPR's Hodgson in which he deliberately 'made his own control as lax as possible', it was hardly surprising that there 'were however not a few people, especially among the continental investigators, who felt that all the trickery had not been on Eusapia's side'.(9)

Despite what had happened in Cambridge, Eusapia traveled to Paris in 1898 and was monitored during a number of séances by Richet again, and other researchers. Richet was satisfied with what he saw and contacted Myers and suggested that he sit with Eusapia again. On doing so, he was persuaded and openly declared that Eusapia had produced genuine phenomena.

Séances were then conducted in Italy during 1901-1902 and 1906-07, where despite the precautions taken, phenomena occurred, including materializations. One of those attending was Prof. Morselli who made a detailed record of the events; these were published in his book that was reviewed by the SPR that referred to the view that 'the great majority of the phenomena that occur...are genuine manifestations'. Although these were less than in earlier years, the séances included 'touches, grasps, movement of objects, appearances of hands...and occasionally lights', together with partial materializations that were some distance away from Eusapia. The review includes Mrs. Sidgwick's cautious stance throughout, although she agreed there were events that could not be accounted for by Eusapia simply freeing her limbs, e.g. materializations, table levitation and the movement of objects in a lighted environment; she also related how other academics had accepted the genuineness of Eusapia's mediumship. She concluded her review by saying that Eusapia had been studied by investigators in 1908 who were 'all experts in the tricks of physical

mediums', and they had 'come substantially to the same conclusion as Professor Morselli'.(10)

Before the 1908 experiments, there were further investigations, including those held at Turin and Naples during 1907-1908, details of which were supplied by Carrington.(11) These included a further examination by Lombroso with members of the medical profession, and the results were impressive.

Following this, the 1908 series of tests to which Mrs. Sidgwick referred, were conducted between 21 November and 19 December, in the Hotel Victoria, Naples. The investigators were according to Beloff, 'all experienced, not to say jaded'; in these séances, strict precautions were applied and a careful account was made of the events: 'the Feilding Report'. Beloff adds the note that this report has been 'one of the mainstays of the case for the paranormal and a stumbling-block for sceptics'.(12) The three investigators represented a considerable amount of experience: Carrington, an amateur conjurer, who had worked for the American SPR, and carried out an extensive study of fraudulent mediumship; Baggally, also an amateur conjurer who had a keen interest in physical phenomena, and who, before meeting Eusapia, had a very sceptical view of physical mediumship; and Feilding, who was familiar with physical phenomena. The details of the conditions imposed during the séances indicate the methodical arrangements made: electric lights were installed and the curtain and table were carefully examined, with various objects brought in, e.g. tambourines, a trumpet and bell. A person to take shorthand notes concerning events during the séances was also employed.

At the beginning of the séance, one of the researchers sat on either side of Eusapia, holding or being held by her hand, his foot on or under her foot, and his leg pressed against hers: Eusapia sat outside the cabinet, usually about a foot away, rather than inside it. When phenomena occurred, the researchers would report exactly what the contact with the medium was. During the séances, Eusapia would either be fully conscious, in a semi-trance, or a deep trance when her control, John King, was apparent. In the case of John King, as so often happens, a number of researchers viewed him as little more than a secondary personality, i.e. part of Eusapia's own mind. Nonetheless, Eusapia's account hardly coincides with this. She explained how an English woman in Naples, during her own Spiritualist activity, was advised by a communicator calling himself John King, about a medium in Naples, supplying details of where she lived. The woman then visited the address and found Eusapia there. When Eusapia next held a séance, the person who communicated was John King, who from that day remained her control. It is worth noting that as 'John King'

controlled a number of different mediums, it is possible those 'prominent Spiritualists [who] came to feel that "John King" was a pseudonym for a group of Controls', were correct.(13)

In the 1908 tests, certain actions by Eusapia that allowed her to deceive were noted and the investigators believed that she would produce phenomena by such means if provided with the opportunity; however, it was agreed that such behaviour could not account for what was witnessed during the séances. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that it was observed, 'we did not find the reduction of light, and the consequent increased facility for fraud had any effect'. It was also stated that the amount of control exerted by the researchers over Eusapia's freedom of movement did not unfavourably influence the phenomena.(14)

In the record of the eleven séances, it is apparent that the phenomena improved; in the first, there was only object movement and noises, but by the fifth, there was complete and partial but lengthy levitations together with partial materializations. During the third, it appeared that Eusapia had substituted her hands; however, it was not viewed as an intention to deceive, apart from the fact that in previous séances, accompanied by phenomena, there was sufficient light to prevent this happening. Shortly afterwards, Eusapia, being aware of the dissatisfaction caused, asked for her hands to be tied, and this was done; nonetheless, different phenomena continued in the séance.

The record made of the fifth séance related the incidents that occurred:- After it began, the phenomena began almost immediately; firstly, the repeated movement of the table, and raps; then, the appearance of a hand and a face; this was followed by further table movement, the materialization of a hand, and a cold psychic breeze. Throughout the séance, those present meticulously reported what they were witnessing and their control of Eusapia at the same time. At the end of the séance, Eusapia volunteered to be searched. This was also carried out after the sixth séance when Eusapia agreed to be closely searched and the sitters reported, 'nothing was concealed about her person or her clothes'. This séance was no less eventful and Baggally made the interesting note that just before any phenomena occurred, Eusapia would advise them of what was to happen; this of course is the absolute opposite of a conjurer who needs to distract the audience's attention away from what is to occur and avoid giving any warning beforehand.

Of this particular séance, Carrington reported that it 'has left on my mind an indelible impression of the reality of at least some of the phenomena occurring in the presence of Eusapia'. With regard to the

production of the phenomena, he stated that, 'It is almost impossible to conceive the elaborate apparatus that would be necessary to produce all the effects observed by us'. The researchers noted that in the case of touches in the séances: 'Although the light might be sufficient to see the medium's head and hands clearly, and we might be looking in the direction from which the touch came, whatever it was that produced the touches remained unseen. In the case of faces seen: 'On the occasions when they appeared, they emerged from the side of the curtain, came right across the table... bowed two or three times with deliberation, and then retired'. Additionally, the séances were accompanied by the appearance of different-coloured lights.(15) Of the hands that materialized during Eusapia's séances, Carrington remarked on how: 'Sometimes they would be large, sometimes small. Sometimes they would be white, sometimes black, and sometimes invisible altogether. Yet they were solid and substantial, and had every appearance of being true physiological structures...I myself have held a hand such as this in my grasp, and had it slowly dissolve as I was holding it'.(16)

In addition to the remarkable physical phenomena produced by Eusapia Palladino, her séances could sometimes be rather eventful, to say the least: one example was one held in 1907 in Turin for a number of academics. In this, Eusapia adopted her usual custom of sitting outside the cabinet. In an earlier séance, Dr Foa, one of those present, had seen the profile of John King and had attempted to seize it. Therefore, the events that occurred in the second séance are hardly surprising; furthermore, the sitters decided to use a photographic plate in the session to test for any radiation, to which the next-world visitors apparently took exception. With Eusapia monitored throughout, numerous instances of phenomena occurred, e.g. complete levitations (in full light), that were followed by Dr Arullani wishing to approach the curtain; at this point, the séance table moved towards him, and pushed him away. He then felt hands forcefully pushing him away (Eusapia's own hands were held by the controllers at this time). On his second attempt, he was struck on the head. A bright light then appeared and it was decided that Dr Foa... use the plate for a test, but a hand materialized that attempted to seize it and then struck him. He made a further attempt, resulting in the hand struggling with him and making the plate fall on to the table. Dr Aggazzotti then sought, somewhat unwisely, to conduct the test and held a plate over Eusapia's head and a further struggle ensued. The table then levitated and passed over one of the sitters' head.

Once again, Dr Arullani went towards the table but it blocked his way and went behind the curtain; Dr Fo... followed it and saw it being wrecked inside whereupon it came out of the cabinet and continued to

be pulled apart in front of all the sitters. Dr Arullani asked if he could shake hands with the materialized hand and on nearing the curtain was hit by hands and the pieces of wood that were left behind from the now-disintegrated table. When Dr Arullani said that Eusapia's power appeared to be limited to only a few inches' distance, Eusapia requested that he place himself on the séance table. On doing so, he was then struck by one of the pieces of wood and the table began to forcefully move, and he fell off. Admittedly, this was hardly a typical Palladino séance but is a demonstration of what she could produce; clearly, no one ever fell asleep during one of Eusapia's séances.

Naturally, Eusapia fulfilled the purpose of mediumship and Spiritualism, i.e. to provide comfort and reassurance through evidence of survival; one such occasion was that recorded by Dr Venzano in *Annals of Psychical Science* (September, 1907). With someone controlling Eusapia on each side, and her being visible, Venzano recorded being aware of someone behind him weeping and kissing him; he saw and felt the face, and raps spelt out the visitor's name; this being a relative who had died earlier, and was known to no one present except himself. The relative, who had been part of a family dispute, requested forgiveness for her part in this, giving relevant and personal information about the matter, this being audible to the other sitters. After Venzano accepted her apologies and began to offer his own, he stated that, 'The form then said to me, "Thank you," embraced me, kissed me, and disappeared.'

In 1909, Eusapia traveled to America and received extensive publicity; she was tested by academics and investigators, and possibly because she felt apprehensive as she had been in Cambridge, she resorted to trickery. When she left in 1910, 'she was thoroughly discredited'.(17) Muensterberg, a Harvard psychologist, who had vociferously denounced any such thing as physical phenomena and was involved in Eusapia's downfall, made a report of his findings. It was Krebs, also a skeptic, who later pointed out that the report was unsatisfactory; and after Eusapia died, a number of those who had been associated with the report admitted they had witnessed phenomena that were inexplicable and genuine, and one admitted that he only agreed with the report begrudgingly. Despite all the problems in America, Carrington supplied details of Eusapia's mediumship there and how, during the different séances, remarkable phenomena were manifested: 'Levitation of the table...raps...the curtains of the cabinet would blow out...the bell would be rung, the tambourine played upon..."touchings" would ensue, and occasionally visible hands and faces would be seen'. Carrington also explained that in the case of when she could not produce any phenomena and resorted to fraud (that he believed was only

'occasional'): 'She felt in duty bound to produce phenomena. Here she felt was a group of sitters who had come to see her: she must not disappoint them; they must see something!'. He considered that by the time of her American visit, her powers had declined and she was not able to produce the phenomena of earlier years.(18) In dealing with the occasions of Eusapia's trickery, he believed that it was a simple matter of the sitters showing their displeasure and on her realizing this, 'she will settle down, pass into trance, and genuine phenomena will be obtained'.(19) When Eusapia was accused of cheating, she did not deny it. Nicol mentions how, 'On one occasion she cried out in her Neapolitan dialect, "Hold me tight or I'll cheat"'.(20) In such instances, it appeared that she was aware that something was about to happen to her that would make this possible or likely. However this strange behaviour is interpreted, it is hardly the behaviour of someone whose sole intent is deceiving those nearby.

It was the sitting by Howard Thurston, a renowned professional magician, which demonstrated an excellent example of Eusapia's behaviour and supports Carrington's view mentioned above. Carrington took Thurston to Eusapia for a séance and as soon as it began, the two men observed Eusapia had lifted the table with her toe. Carrington shook his head and said, 'Not good, Eusapia'. Then: 'She thereupon smiled also, settled down in her chair, went into a light trance, and soon produced a series of perfectly magnificent genuine levitations, which so convinced Thurston that he came out in the papers the next day with a thousand-dollar challenge to any magician who could produce table levitations under the same conditions. The challenge was never accepted'. The reality was: 'The mischievous, impish self of the medium trying to "pull something", just for fun, and when she saw that she could not get away with it with impunity, she then produced the genuine article.(21) Nonetheless, by this time, Eusapia's powers were clearly on the wane. The decline in her powers is illustrated by the fact that when Baggally, who witnessed her mediumship in 1908 and with the others, accepted this as genuine, saw her again in 1910, he found no sign of genuine phenomena; he recorded the 'spurious nature' of what happened and how Eusapia pleaded ill-health to explain the lack of phenomena, but dryly concluded, 'She nevertheless accepted her full fee'.(22)

An example of the continuing controversy regarding Eusapia is Wiseman's 'A Reconsideration' of the Feilding Report in 1992, in which he discusses the possibility of Eusapia having an accomplice during the séances that were held in the hotel, by which the phenomena could have been fraudulently produced, mentioning a trap door, a hidden access into the loft, and false door panels.(23) This was answered by Barrington and Fontana; appropriately, Barrington entitled her

response as 'Palladino and the Invisible Man Who Never Was'; Fontana rightly notes that Wiseman's case is essentially based on 'the ambiguities and omissions in the Report', and in view of what is suggested, we have to consider that all three investigators 'left their critical faculties (indeed their brains) behind them in Britain when they set off for the hotel in Naples'.(24) In fact, Wiseman actually agrees that the investigators were highly experienced, and refers to Carrington's 'extensive investigations', how Feilding had been referred to as 'one of the most astute critics', and Gauld's note that the sceptical Baggally 'had sat with every notable physical medium since Home and had found them all wanting'. But challenges such as this often arise, resulting in lengthy, speculative, and invariably unproductive discussions. Sceptics will scour through reports of many decades ago for anything that appears to be an omission of detail, sometimes very minor, and from this, construct an imaginative, if not an entertaining, theory. In sum, producing an argument from silence. For example, Wiseman says that it is 'interesting' that Baggally, whose room was next to the séance room, only mentions that he locked his door, but not that he bolted it...

Many readers may, justifiably, have serious difficulty in deciding whether Wiseman is even being serious here. Nonetheless, he is clearly surpassed by Kurtz; one suggestion to explain away the events during the 1908 Naples sittings is by proposing that Carrington might have been in league with Eusapia. Better still, the researchers were taken in by Eusapia who was, after all, 'a woman, voluptuous and erotic to boot'.(25) In respect of researchers opting for the explanation that fraud 'could' take place in certain episodes, Gratton- Guinness makes the salient observation that, 'if all scientific work were treated this way, then science would disintegrate rather quickly into a collection of scientists rejecting all evidence except their own'.(26) The reality is that a unique set of rules and conditions are applied to psychical research, which are not found elsewhere, and the obvious reason is that the subject represents the ultimate challenge to most spheres of thinking. As Beloff so rightly remarks of attributing fraud to all that Eusapia produced: 'Trickery is, of course, another of those convenient open- ended and slippery concepts that...can be invoked to explain anything whatsoever'.(27)

It is of course those who met and sat with Eusapia whose opinions carry the most weight: Carrington cites the comment of Paola Carrara, the daughter of Prof. Lombroso, that Eusapia, 'has been carried on the wing of universal renown and yet she has never cast off the swaddling clothes of illiteracy...She knows nothing of all the rivers of ink which have been spent upon her'. She continued by adding that Eusapia's

face was marked by suffering, caused through the effort that was required to produce physical phenomena. Possibly relevant to her willingness to 'help things along' on occasions, Carrington remarked that after a successful séance, Eusapia became unwell, 'shrunk together, weak, nauseated...her face deeply lined and sallow'.(28) One only has to read a history of Eusapia's mediumship, and the lengthy list of academics who monitored her in so many séances (only some of these being detailed here), to realize the full extent of what she did, in a comparatively short period of time.

In 1918, Eusapia Palladino, the rotund, almost illiterate and coarse peasant from Naples, who delighted, confounded and disappointed so many investigators, died. She was surely the medium who was more investigated than any others during this period, and whose feats will surely continue to provoke controversy and heated debate. But the last word on the matter may be stated by Feilding, a skeptic until his encounter with Eusapia: after commenting on having to abandon his initial scepticism, he declared: 'I have seen hands and heads come forth, that from behind the curtain of an empty cabinet. I have been seized by living fingers...I have seen this extraordinary woman sitting visible outside the curtain, held hand and foot by my colleagues, immobile.'(29)

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