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### The Mediumship of Mme. d'Esperance

The mediumship of Elizabeth Hope (1855-1919), who worked under the pseudonym of Mme. d'Esperance, is not only an example of the quality evidence available through physical mediumship, but also, the problems that occurred in respect of female mediums in Victorian England. Spending her early childhood in London, she claimed to see 'shadow people' that no one else could see, and consequently, she was viewed as mentally ill. Her problems were made worse by having an absent father and a mother who scolded her for the stories that she told about those whom she saw. After consulting a physician and being told of similar people who had been imprisoned in asylums, Elizabeth related how: 'I shivered with fear, and prayed almost frantically that I might be kept from going mad'.<sup>(1)</sup>

Her encounter with the 'shadow people' continued, only bringing about more doubt about her sanity and the increasing possibility of being taken to 'the mad house'. By the age of fourteen, she had suffered a complete nervous breakdown. After a period of having little encounter with the 'shadow people', this was interrupted when she was at school; one morning she awoke to find that an essay to be submitted, had been produced in her own handwriting during the night while she had been asleep. Due to its excellence, she was interrogated at school regarding its source, and after further questioning by the rector, it was accepted as being her work, despite it apparently originating through another source. She married when aged nineteen, and resided in Newcastle, and the 'shadow people' then reasserted themselves in her life. It was about this

time that Elizabeth heard of Spiritualism from a friend, although she was initially unable to accept the phenomena claimed for it.

Despite her apprehension, she joined a circle in the early 1870s, and attempted table-tipping and, 'there seemed to be a tremendous vibrating movement in the wood of the table-top...which gradually spread itself to all parts of it'. When the others removed their hold of the table, 'still it moved'. Elizabeth then experimented with this activity and discovered that a basic communication could take place with the unseen table-mover. Following this, she was able to also demonstrate an ability in clairvoyance. Having had her interest motivated, she began to read about the subject that she found 'all very bewildering'.<sup>(2)</sup>

At this point, she believed it appropriate to mention the 'shadow people' to her friends; receiving understanding and co-operation; she began to feel less anxious. The next stage in Elizabeth's development was the attempt at obtaining automatic writing; this again was successful and she recalled that: 'These unseen correspondents of ours soon became familiar to us'. One was a Walter Tracy, an American who had been at Yale, involved in the American Civil War, and drowned when aged only twenty-two. Elizabeth noted how he: 'very soon made himself a favourite with our circle; he seemed to bring with him a veritable atmosphere of fun, good humour and liveliness'. It is interesting to note how years later, Elizabeth met a man who had been at Yale, and the details that he gave about life in Walter's time, e.g. places, customs, etc, 'were identical with Walter's'.<sup>(3)</sup> Walter was joined by Humnur Stafford, a philosopher, and Ninia, a young girl, as Elizabeth's controls.

Further progress was made when Elizabeth was able to draw refined pictures of communicators in the darkness; one of which was completed in about thirty seconds. When others heard of her ability, she found herself besieged by requests to witness her mediumship. In time, she travelled to other countries, e.g. France, Norway, Belgium, Sweden and Germany, due to the demand for her mediumship. Continuing the attempt to develop, on first trying to produce materializations, she said that she sensed how, 'the air around me seemed agitated as though a bird was fluttering about'. Nonetheless, she felt a hand upon her that she recorded as having 'the effect of soothing my fear and excitement'.<sup>(4)</sup> The first materialized form was partial and both Elizabeth and the sitters, saw a man's face smiling at them in the light of the gas lamp; Elizabeth suddenly realized that it was Walter. After this experience, more people were selected to join the circle and witness the events that took place; in the day, they were conducted with some light allowed through the upper window, and in the evening, there was light from gas jets. These seances, with guests, were successful, and Elizabeth recorded how the cost of the séance room, etc, was met

through a fund contributed to by the members, with any surplus being given to the poor and sick, about whom she felt very distressed.

There was clear progress in the production of materializations; Walter, a frequent visitor, 'seemed to make himself rapidly familiar with all the company'. At the conclusion of this particular series of séances, one next-visitor who began to make an appearance was Yolande, a young Arab girl, and Elizabeth pointed out that she, 'soon became, as it were, the leading feature of our séances'. Elizabeth also related how on one occasion, Yolande 'gradually dissolved into mist under the scrutiny of twenty pairs of eyes, [her] shawl was left lying on the floor...the shawl would itself gradually vanish in the same manner as its wearer'. During these occasions, Elizabeth did not fall into the usual trance-state and also became aware of the link between herself and the materialized person, and stated: 'There seemed to exist a strange link between us...I seemed to lose, not my individuality, but my strength and power of exertion, and though I did not then know it, a great portion of my material substance'.<sup>(5)</sup>

Elizabeth's mediumship also fulfilled the purpose of Spiritualism, i.e. to reunite the bereaved with those who had died, and demonstrate their continuing existence. She recorded how on one occasion, a young sailor materialized and 'I heard cries and exclamations of joy'. The boy had walked towards one of the sitters and 'flung his arms around her'. The sitter told the circle: 'It is my son...my only child, whom I never thought to meet again. He is not altered...He is just my boy'. Another instance cited was when a Mrs. Bitcliffe came to one of Elizabeth's séances, shortly after her husband had died; the séance was almost at an end when her husband materialized. A statement was drawn up by one of the sitters, and signed by others present, saying 'Not only did I recognise him, but his wife, my wife, and another lady present, all knew him immediately he appeared'. Additionally, there were two more sitters who acknowledged him. At a later séance, Mrs. Bitcliffe brought her two young daughters, and their father materialized for them. The girls embraced him and asked questions, e.g. from where had he obtained his 'white clothes'? Elizabeth also narrated how a woman materialized only days after her funeral and 'was instantly recognised by several' who had known her.<sup>(6)</sup> Requests to attend her séances continued to be made by various persons. One was William Oxley, and in the séance that he attended on 4 August 1880, a magnificent plant of nearly two feet in height was brought to him; it was later found to be an *Ixora Crocata*, native to India. The production of magnificent flowers into the séance room was a common occurrence. The greatest accomplishment in this respect was on 28 June 1890, when Yolande apported a seven-foot high Golden Lily. She explained that she had only borrowed it, and it had to be returned; not having the power to dematerialize the plant, it was kept in the property in the meantime, but 'then vanished in an instant, filling the room with an overpowering perfume'.<sup>(7)</sup>

During the tests conducted by Oxley, he decided to place plaster casts on the wrists and legs of the materialized figure of Yolande: this would demonstrate that Yolande was indeed a genuine materialization as she would have to dematerialize to exit from the casts. This was, as Inglis noted, 'a test which "Yolande" passed'.<sup>(8)</sup> Oxley wrote a number of books concerning materializations and these included his observations regarding those produced by Elizabeth. One of the more curious features of Elizabeth's mediumship were the occurrences when she was found to be missing at the time of a materialization: the immediate response was naturally that the medium was a fraud, but the situation appeared to have been far more complex than this. This was demonstrated when, during one séance, Yolande was seized by a sitter who asserted the figure was the medium herself. But matters were not quite as simple as that, i.e., Yolande's clothing could not be found; moreover, as Inglis remarked, 'nobody who knew her could conceive of her being involve in a deliberate fraud'.<sup>(9)</sup>

In fact, others had remarked on how a medium would vanish from sight during materializations: for example, in *Light* (1882, p.197), Stainton Moses detailed how, in one séance, materialized forms joined the circle and were recognized by the sitters, being followed by the male form of the one of the medium's controls, and yet the medium could not be seen. Curnow refers to similar occasions, e.g. when Colonel Olcott secured Mrs. Compton, the medium, to prevent movement; when materialized forms appeared, Olcott found no trace of the medium. The situation became even more bewildering when he weighed a materialized girl and on request, she even made herself considerably lighter. Following this, Mrs. Compton was weighed and found to be nearly twice the weight of the materialized being.<sup>(10)</sup> The question of the relationship between the medium and those who materialize is obviously an important one that remains unexplored, and it is regrettable that despite so much 'investigation' of physical mediums for so many years, so much remains unexplained. Despite the problem that arose from the occasions when she was no longer visible during materializations, Elizabeth was able to demonstrate her separateness from the next-world visitors; in 1893, Nepenthes, a Egyptian, materialized and joined the circle, and both she and the medium were seen at the same time. Another feature noticed was that of partial-dematerialization by Elizabeth. One researcher, Aksakov, believed there was a distinct link of association between the appearance of the materialization and the medium. He investigated the matter, the results of which were detailed in his *A Case of Partial Dematerialization*; subsequently, he 'had an experience which strongly suggested that, in some cases at least, the body of the medium is entirely absorbed for the production of apparitions outside the cabinet'.<sup>(11)</sup> Elizabeth's psychic abilities were not limited to mediumship; she described an occasion when she became separated from her physical body, and of this state, i.e., the same that communicators enjoy, said: 'How wonderfully light and strong I felt! For the first time I knew what it means to live...'.<sup>(12)</sup>

Elizabeth was acutely aware of the duality of her role as a medium and the unresolved conflict brought her to despair at certain times; eventually, she developed ideas not in mainstream Spiritualist thinking at the time. Her book *Shadow Land* reveals her melancholic nature, and the distress with which she so often found herself confronted. In addition to her own problems, she also highlighted the outrages to which young female mediums in Victorian England were subjected, invariably by middle-aged, middle-class male academics, saying: 'My blood boils within me when I hear of sensitive mediums...being subjected to the indignities and insults of these "investigators"'.<sup>(13)</sup> Owen notes how Elizabeth 'spoke, too, of spy holes and surprise strippings; in addition to the usual ropes, bolts, and screws, as "the investigator of this class" sought to catch out the unsuspecting medium'.<sup>(14)</sup> Boddington commented on how Elizabeth, 'placed herself without fee or reward at the disposal of scientific investigators'; furthermore, how unacceptable behaviour by sitters 'resulted in a broken blood vessel and an illness of a month's duration. At other times, prostration and nervous weakness followed'.<sup>(15)</sup> Fodor also refers to the occasion when after an incident involving a sitter, Elizabeth fell into ill health for two years and her hair turned grey.<sup>(16)</sup> Although Elizabeth had worked with some light present, she decided not to sit in a cabinet so that she could see, as well as hear, what occurred during the séance; she described this as being 'rather uphill work', but was successful. She narrated one incident that she witnessed when a young boy was reunited with his parents, brother and sister. Going to his mother, the materialized child 'stroked her face with his tiny hands and drew himself back to...beside his brother and sister'.<sup>(17)</sup> Elizabeth continued to demonstrate her mediumship, going as far as allowing the materializations to be photographed in March 1890, the report and photographs being included in *Mediums and Daybreak* (March 28 and April 18, 1890). Further progress was made when it was discovered that in photographic practice sessions, faces were seen behind Elizabeth, just as the photograph was to be taken, and these duly appeared on the plates when developed. A number are included in *Shadow Land*; after this book, Elizabeth wrote *Northern Lights*. Unfortunately, at the outbreak of war in 1914, she was in Germany and was no longer able to travel; moreover, her notes and records for further writings were confiscated and not returned.

The life of Mme. d'Esperance is an adequate example of some of the problems faced by gifted mediums, particularly female mediums, in Victorian Britain. It was through their trials and tribulations that modern Spiritualism came into being; the price that they paid was considerable, and surely one that twentieth century Spiritualism should never forget.

## References

- (1) E. d'Esperance, *Shadow Land (or: Light from the Other Side)* (London: Redway, 1897), p.31.
- (2) d'Esperance, *Ibid.*, pp.88,89,127.
- (3) d'Esperance, *Ibid.*, pp.133,134.
- (4) d'Esperance, *Ibid.*, pp.226,227.
- (5) d'Esperance, *Ibid.*, pp.245,248,253,271.
- (6) d'Esperance, *Ibid.*, pp.275,276,278,280,282.
- (7) N. Fodor, *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* (London: Arthurs Press, 1933), p.84.
- (8) B. Inglis, *Natural and Supernatural* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p.385.
- (9) Inglis, *Ibid.*, pp.385-386.
- (10) W. L. Curnow, *The Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism* (Manchester: Two Worlds Publishing, 1925), p.102.
- (11) Fodor, *Op. Cit.*, p.85.
- (12) Cit., S. Muldoon and H. Carrington, *The Phenomena of Astral Projection* (London: Rider and Co, 1951), p.81 (This relates the full account).
- (13) d'Esperance, *Op. Cit.*, pp.403-404.
- (14) A. Owen, *The Darkened Room* (London: Virago, 1989), p.231.
- (15) H. Boddington, *The University of Spiritualism* (London: Spiritualist Press, 1947), p.443.
- (16) Fodor, *Op. Cit.*, p.85.
- (17) d'Esperance, *Op. Cit.*, p.343.

**NB. This article appeared in the October 1997 NAS Newsletter.**