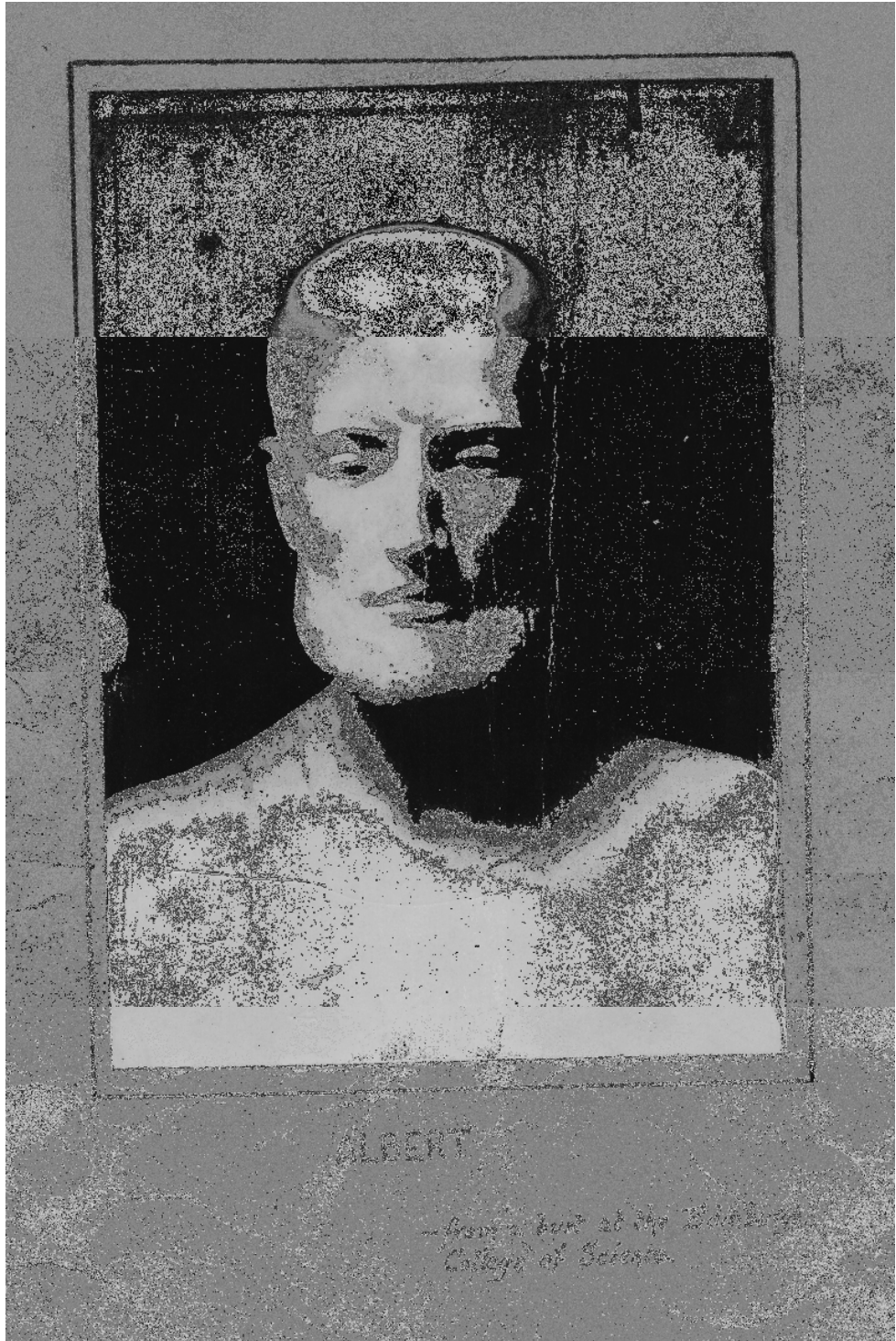


IN AN UPPER ROOM

Cecil Kennett, July 1951



In an upper room.

On the evening of Tuesday July 10th 1951 my wife and I attended a séance at which the medium was Mrs. Helen Duncan. The sitting was held in an upstairs at the house of a friend of ours, Mrs. G. H., in Stoke; the room had been cleared of its usual furniture and now contained only a wardrobe with its face to the wall, chairs for the sitters, and a couple of long, narrow curtains set across one corner and enclosing just enough space to hold a chair. The window was "blacked-out", and there were two electric lights in the room – one white and the other red. There were about 24 sitters present, two or three only of whom were known to me.

Before the sitting commenced the clothes Mrs. Duncan was to wear were passed round for all to see, and two ladies chosen at random (in fact volunteering) from the audience went into the next room and on returning, with Mrs. Duncan, certified that she was wearing only those garments.

Mrs. Duncan, after offering for inspection the chair on which she was to sit (it was an ordinary wooden kitchen chair), sat in the space behind the curtains and almost immediately went into trance. Mrs. G. H., who was sitting on one side of the curtains, let them fall to and then switched off the white light.

The voice of Albert (Mrs. Duncan's guide) spoke from behind the curtains, and it seemed to me that he must be a very tall man, for the voice was apparently almost at ceiling height. He asked the sitters to sing "Smilin' Through" softly, and they began singing "The Rose of Tralee". At the end of the song Albert chuckled, said that was the first time he had known that tune to be "Smilin' Through" and suggested that the sitters should again hum "The Rose of Tralee". We did so.

Albert then asked for the curtains to be drawn aside. "Can you all see Mrs. Duncan?" he asked. We all answered yes; to me as I sat right back in the corner opposite to the cabinet, she appeared as a dark figure surrounded by a soft and opalescent glow that filled the space behind the curtains. "And can you see me too?" asked Albert.

"Yes," the other sitters answered in chorus, but I did not see him – perhaps because my eyes were not yet attuned to the darkness only dimly relieved by the red lamp, perhaps because I was too far away (the room is not more than some twelve feet square, but the diagonal from corner to corner appeared enormous at that moment).

The curtains fell to again, and for the next half-hour or so Albert introduced a succession of "visitors" from the next world. Generally they followed a sort of routine; firstly, Albert gave a very brief description of the visitor – "an old lady who passed to our side with a chest condition", "a little boy – there was no illness here – it was a sudden passing", or "this is a young lady who passed through water – I feel she took her own life" – and then he indicated the position in the room of the sitter for whom the visitor was coming – "sitting between the window and the far wall", "near the fireplace", or "by the door". Sometimes he gave a little more explanation – "there is no relationship here – she is a friend you knew at your place of work", or he was a doctor in a country town". His rule seemed to be to give as little information as necessary, but when identification was delayed he would elaborate to a considerable extent. If two or three sitters responded to his loose description of the place in which the wanted sitter sat, he would suddenly say "That is the voice" when the right one spoke. He end each time by saying in a strong voice, "call her (or him) out!". The sitter then called upon the visitor to appear.

Generally, the sitter rose and advanced to the centre of the room – but not too near the cabinet, for we had been warned that if we touched the visitors it might harm the medium. "is it you, Ted?" the sitter would call – often hesitantly. If it were not Ted there would be no response – or perhaps another exhortation from Albert to "call him out!". "Is it you, George?" the sitter would cry. "Yes," would come an eager husky whisper from the cabinet, and immediately the curtains would part and a figure advance three or four paces into the room. "Hello, George," said the sitter.

"Hello," replies the visitor, and for a few moments a perfectly normal conversation ensues.

"How are you George?"

"Fine, thanks, how are you?"

"Oh not so bad, you know. Are you happy?"

"I certainly am. It's grand over here, grand."

"Good. Remember the old days we had?"

"Sure. The good old days, eh? But I wouldn't come back for anything. I don't mind coming for a minute like this, but I wouldn't stay. Well, I'll have to be going. Cheerio."

"Cheerio, George".

Before going to this séance, I had wondered if the spirit forms would be visible to my eyes. I had read of such séances, and saw no reason to doubt that the writers had seen what they professed to see, but my own experience of mediums and séances (by no means exhaustive) had taught me that though others could describe spirit forms they saw in the room, and though I might myself feel the presence of others than those in the flesh, my eyes were blind to anything supernatural. But at this séance my doubts were dispelled; I saw the spirit forms.

Each of the visitors appeared through the curtains as a form swathed in softly luminous robes. Only the features seemed to be fully formed, and even these, from where I sat, were indefinite, though not so indefinite as those of the sitters, in that dim light. But what was definite every time (strange though it seems) was the attitude and carriage of the visitor.; it was a bent old lady, a loose-limbed young man, a dignified gentleman, or a sprightly girl. How much of this definition was due to sight and how much to sound I could not determine, for although none of the visitors was known to me the various voices they spoke in where exactly what I should expect from the persons they appeared to be, and the sound of their footsteps (although I saw no feet) was equally characteristic and individual.

As each figure stepped from the cabinet into the room there was a sound for which I can find no adequate description. It was a very soft and sibilant sound, something between a tiny tearing and a rapid rustle but not so coarse as either of these; perhaps the nearest equivalent is the sound of cotton wool being parted.

The manner of departure of the visitors was the same in every case. From normal height the figure sank rapidly to the floor, the robes as it were dissolving or flowing down like water and the head sinking on their diminishing crest. The head itself then dissolved likewise and the stream or ribbon or ectoplasm withdrew rapidly under the curtains of the cabinet. From where I sat, each figure

appeared to incline a little to the left as it dissolved, and the stream disappeared under the left hand curtain. I felt that this manner of departure must be slightly disconcerting to the sitters actually talking to the visitors.

I cannot remember the order in which the visitors came, but among them were :-

- a) the young man George already mentioned (although I am not sure if that was the name)
- b) a young lady named Florrie who was very excited at coming back, and didn't know what she was supposed to do. (She appealed alternately to Albert and to the sitter to tell her what to do).
- c) an old gentleman who was greeted by a number of the sitters – "Hello, Mr Robinson!" – and who had passed only a month or so ago. He was the Chairman of a Burslem Spiritualist Church.
- d) a man with a wooden leg ("Old Peg-leg!").
- e) a mischievous young Scottish girl called Peggy, who sang a Scottish song.
- f) a girl who had committed suicide and seemed rather unhappy and certainly bewildered. ("I don't know what made me do it. Oh, I'd never do it again, never.")
- g) a Scottie dog. Albert explained that this dog had come back because his mistress (one of the sitters) had often wondered if dogs had an after life. He was in life a black dog, but he was materialised as a white dog in order to be seen. I did not have a good view of this figure, but saw the tail wagging and the ears pricked.

At the end of the sitting, Albert said he hoped he had added a few more names to his "book of friends". He then almost brusquely directed Mrs. G. H. to "take Mrs. Duncan out of the cabinet please", and the séance was over. Mrs. Duncan was placed on a chair in the room, the white light was switched on, she quickly came round out of her trance, and after having a drink of water she went to her room. The two ladies who had dressed her went with her and on returning certified that she was still wearing the clothes they had put on her.

On the following afternoon (Wednesday July 11th) my wife and her sister attended another sitting, and on this occasion (when, she me, the same "routine" as before was observed) her grandmother appeared and spoke to them both. My wife noted particularly the characteristic high colour in her grandmother's cheeks, and the voice was as she remembered it from 25 years ago. She produced her little purse, and said that she still carried it about with her "over there". Albert reminded my wife that when as a little girl, she visited her grandmother the latter would always take her purse from her pocket and give her "a half-penny, or sometimes a penny". My wife confirmed this.

On Wednesday evening both my wife and I attended a further sitting. On this occasion I sat next to Mrs. G. H. and so was quite close to the cabinet. I was able to confirm my previous impressions as to the build-up of the spirit forms, the fact that when they spoke the voices came from their lips and not from the cabinet and that the features varied in degree of definition. I was also now able to see that the "robes" of each figure trailed back to the cabinet, and however far into the room the figure advanced there was never a complete break with cabinet. I noted too that Albert's voice appeared to come successively from all parts of the cabinet – high, low, to one side and then the other. In some cases, the footsteps of the spirit form could be heard approaching from (it seemed) quite a distance off – eight or ten paces – before he or she emerged from the cabinet.

A friend of ours named Wilfred was sitting by my wife, and an early "visitor" came to him in the form of a young man he had known who was killed in a lorry accident while serving in the army in Egypt. Later in the sitting, the Scotch girl Peggy appeared (unbidden) and said to my wife, indicating Wilfred, "Is he your man?"

My wife answered in the negative, whereupon Peggy said,

"Then I'll sing to him his favourite song."

And she began to sing, "You are my sunshine".

Halfway through she broke off to say to Wilfred, "but those aren't the words you used, are they? No, this is what you sing."

And she started again, singing,

"You are my Woodbine, my Willie ("Wullie") woodbine."

Wilfred confirmed that these were the words he had often sang to this tune.

A visitor came for me too.

"An old lady," Albert said, "who seems to have passed to our side while under a drug."

"Is it my mother?" I asked. There was no response.

"Drugged to ease the pain, perhaps," someone in the circle suggested.

"Is it my mother?" I asked again, and again there was no response. At that moment I could think of no-one else whom it might be, then –

"is it my auntie?" I asked, suddenly remembering that two or three of my aunts had passed over.

"Yes," was the reply. I stood up, wondering which of my aunts it was, and through the curtain came the frail, bent figure of my old Aunt Annie, who passed away two years ago.

"Hallo, Auntie," I said, and quite instinctively I held out my hand.

Remembering the injunction about contact with the spirit forms, I quickly withdrew it again, but my aunt said,

"Yes, of course, shake hands."

She held out her hand and I shook it. The hand was warm and solid, the touch was precisely that of my aunt. She then put her hand to my breast pocket.

"I see you have your comb," she said, taking it out and replacing it, "but where is your white handkerchief?"

"Oh, it's in my other pocket," I said.

"You must wear a white handkerchief in your pocket," my aunt insisted in her gentle, rather tired voice, and turning to Mrs G. H. she said,

"I always made him wear one; will you see that he still does?" Mrs. G. H., who of course never knew my aunt, laughed and said,

"Yes, I will, dear".

"That's right," murmured my aunt, nodding her head benignly.

"Well, goodbye."

"Goodbye," I replied to the diminishing figure, and my aunt was gone.

"She was a lady with no snobbery," said Albert.

"She was courteous and considerate to all, high and low, rich and poor."

"That is true, Albert," I replied, remembering that at her funeral I had said to my cousin,

"I have known your mother for thirty years, and have never heard anyone speak an ill word of her."

I remembered too how, when I was a small boy, stayed with her in 1915 and found her particular about keeping tidy, paying the proper "duty" visits to

relatives, and in short always doing the right thing. It was certainly in character for her to insist upon my wearing a handkerchief in my breast pocket.

Late, Albert announced another visitor.

"A gentleman is coming now," he said, "whose passing was very recent, and sudden. He has something around his neck; I feel he made away with himself, and I think his body has been cremated. He is known to two of you out there."

My friend R.S.J. and I both responded, for we did indeed know someone who had hanged himself a few days before, and whose funeral I had attended the previous day.

"But he wasn't cremated, Albert," said R.S.J.

Albert hesitated.

"Well," he said, "I don't know but I feel it was so. Call him out."

"Come on, Harry," called R.S.J. and I supported him by "Yes, come along".

From the cabinet came a figure, but I failed to recognise it as that of Harry; it was not so tall, nor was the gait his. The features were indistinct, and the head bowed; the figure seemed to be reluctant to appear at all. The voice might have been his, but it was troubled, and as it were on the defensive.

"They didn't like me," he said. "They thought I was funny."

"Nonsense, Harry," I said, but he shook his head.

"Doug was at your funeral yesterday," R.S.J. said,

"Yes, I know," Harry replied. "I was there and I saw him".

We tried to reassure Harry, but he would not stay, and with a muttered

"They thought I was a funny sort of cove" he retired.

"In your world," said Albert, "he was always a bit difficult to get on with."

"Something of a sea-lawyer," I suggested.

"That's it exactly," Albert agreed. "He suffered from a superiority complex – not an inferiority complex but a superiority complex. He is still the same now on our side, but he will learn, he will learn."

A Dr. V. of Audley appeared to one of his old patients, and expressed his surprise and pleasure at seeing how his patient's daughter (who was with her) had grown. The mother of two sitters came and as they rose to greet her one or two of the sitters called softly, "Don't touch her, don't touch her."

This distressed the old lady, for she cried out, "Why shouldn't my girl touch me; why shouldn't my own daughter touch me?" and so crying she went away.

"She is not really unhappy," said Albert's soothing voice. "Do not think she is really sobbing over here. It is just that she is overcome with meeting you again."

At one point Albert said that among the sitters was a gentleman who in his younger days knew a horse that was frequently ill-treated by its owner, and the horse had come through to show him that it was now happy.

A horse's head then appeared through the curtains. It was perfectly formed as to ears, eyes, and nostrils; only the lower jaw seemed to me (and I had a close-up view) to be unreal – not quite formed, although it appeared to be making attempts to mould itself properly.

But the form that was perhaps the most amazing of all came when Albert said, "There are some of you who believe in the 'Little People', and you are right - they do exist. One of them has come to see you now; when he was in your world he lived in Tibet. I am going to ask Mrs. Duncan to put her hand through the curtain, and the little man will stand on it. Put your hand through, Mrs. Duncan." A solid human hand (only dimly seen in the red light) was held out between the curtains, at a height of about four feet from the floor, and out on to it stepped a figure about (I judged) fifteen inches high. The figure was that of an Oriental with a smile on his face; he was dressed – like the rest – in flowing, opalescent robes, and his pose was full of dignity. He bowed gravely to the left, to centre, to right, and then withdrew.

An Arab – a "guide" of one of the sitters – appeared, and beat his chest to shew that he was solid. Another guide was dressed in white but had a coal-black face and hands.

Albert again concluded the evening by hoping that he had made some more friends.

On Thursday afternoon July 12th my wife and her sister attended once more, and on this occasion their mother appeared to them. She patted my wife on the shoulder, telling her to "carry-on".

A Sister of Mercy in full habit appeared, and sang a hymn. An Indian came to R.S.J. attired in the great headdress of white swan's feathers; the name "White Swan" had been "given" to R.S.J. some weeks before and he had dismissed it as nonsense. And at the end of the sitting Albert borrowed a ball of string from one of the sitters and tied up Mrs. Duncan so securely that the string had to be cut to release her afterwards.

What are the conclusions to be drawn from these experiences? I feel that if I had read of them in a book I should have doubted the good faith of the writer; I should have thought his narrative three parts romance to one of truth. But I know that they happened; if my five senses are reliable witnesses and my memory good, the things I have written are things that I saw and heard and felt. And others saw and heard and felt them too.

I am confident that there was no trickery – no wires, no cheesecloth, no rubber gloves. The figures that appeared were built up with ectoplasm; there were no devices of the conjuror, and there was no mass hallucination.

But – how can I determine whether the figures that appeared were indeed what they represented themselves to be, or were they the result of the subconscious of the sitters?

When my Auntie Annie stood before me was it indeed her own conscious identity that inhabited that fleeting frame, or was my own subconscious moulding the ectoplasm to its will? I can say truthfully that I was not consciously influencing the ectoplasm in any way; up to the moment of her appearance I did not know which of my aunts it might be, and none of them was in my conscious mind – it was only after reflection, after the sitting, that I remembered there are only two aunts, to my knowledge who could have appeared. One was my auntie Annie, and the other Auntie Nellie, and of the two the latter would perhaps be the more interested in me, since I lived with her for some years in my late teens. But it was Auntie Annie who came – or was it?

I can think of no way of answering this question; I wish I could.

But what I can say is this. In spite of much of the "sittings" taking on the character of a public entertainment, and in spite of obstinate queries in my mind about dogs and horses and the "little people", in spite of the trivial character of most of the conversation, I am glad to say that Albert has added my name to his "book of friends". I found him a humorous, kindly, lovable, and altogether splendid personality, and I feel the better for having met him. And this being so, I am content to let the rest follow as it will, and when.

Cecil Kennett. July 16th 1951.
