

## Chapter 7: **His Body was Autographed by Invisible People** **Story of Charles Foster**

- Nandor Fodor –

VISITORS THAT do not leave their names printed on cards but leave them embossed in angry red wheals on the body of their host! Has any novelist ever eclipsed this in fantasy?

For the blase individual who refuses to admit to bewilderment, it should be added that the visitors were invisible; that they committed no outrage, and that the phenomenon, a chief feature of Charles Foster's mediumship, is recognized in psychical research under the term of dermography - writing on the skin.

Charles Foster was an American medium. His chequered career furnishes a strange record owing to his unstable moral character, but its strangeness is nothing in comparison with that of his astounding phenomena.

Skin writing was his speciality. He stripped his arm or bared his chest. Before the sitter's eye the name of a dead friend began to appear in raised wheals on his skin.

The incident which wins for him an undying fame in the heart of all story tellers rests on the direct testimony of George C. Bartlett, his biographer.

As told in *The Salem Seer*, a certain Mr. Adams came to call on Foster. The medium gave him descriptions of his dead relatives and delivered many messages. Mr. Adams apparently trailed clouds of the dead behind him. Foster saw the room filled with them, and the sitter departed greatly impressed.

At two o'clock in the morning Foster woke up Bartlett. He could not sleep. The room was still filled with the Adams family. He complained that they were writing their names over him.

Bartlett, amused and astonished, counted eleven distinct names on Foster's body. One was written across his forehead, others on his arms and several on his back. He was scribbled all over like a writing-pad.

Another entertaining story is of two sceptics who rudely seized Foster's arm. They demanded to see the "trick" while they held his hand. They wanted their names. A minute later they left crestfallen. In large, round characters Foster's arm "spelled" out:

"Two fools!"

But anecdotes cannot be expected to carry conviction. The skin of certain neurotic people is so sensitive that if it is scratched by a blunt instrument or nails, letters may appear on it in a few minutes. Many mediums joined their skin writing demonstrations with pellet reading. They burnt the pellet on which a question or a name was written and rubbed their arm or forehead with the ashes. Such simple artifice could have afforded ample opportunity of covertly tracing an intended message from the dead.

In recent years, however, the phenomenon has been established as genuine beyond a shadow of doubt. At the Institut Metapsychique International of Paris, Mme. Olga Kahl produced on her skin mentally communicated words and images. It is also known from Kraft-Ebbing's records with hysteric patients that writing traced on the anaesthetic right side may appear reversed on the left.

Similar phenomena have been noted in the stigmatic class. To give an illustration Malcolm Bird, then Assistant Editor to the *Scientific American* of New York, wrote of his experience in Berlin:

"Frau Vollhardt suddenly gave a very realistic shriek of pain and held out her hand for all to see. On the back of her hand was a quantity of red marks, some actually bleeding... A handful of forks could not have been held in such a manner as to inflict these wounds. No single instrument that I ever saw would have done the trick, unless it be a nutmeg grater. The holes were small and round, and quite deep; after ten or fifteen minutes they were still plainly to be seen."

Eleonore Zugun, the Rumanian peasant girl, was "bitten by Draku" (the devil) on her face and forehead. Wheals on her right arm were photographed at the National Laboratory for Psychical Research(1).

(1) Proceedings, Vol. 1, 1927-29, of the National Laboratory for Psychical Research.

If such wounds are self-inflicted, an understanding of the mysteries "telekinetic" phenomena will eventually provide the key. For the fact that skin writing can be demonstrated by distant contact with the skin was attested as early as 1869, before the London Dialectical Committee which held an investigation into spiritualism. Manuel Eyre testified to the following experience with Mrs. Seymour at Waukeegan, near Chicago:

"In trance, she would hold out one arm, and with the forefinger of the other hand made a rapid motion as if writing, the movement of the finger being in the air about a foot from the arm; a few minutes after she stripped off her sleeve, and there on her arm, so distinctly written that it could be read across the room, was the peculiar signature of the spirit giving the communication."

The autographs on Foster's skin, or on that of others, did not endure. They usually disappeared in a few minutes. But they were observable sufficiently long to leave no doubt as to their phenomenal nature. In England, Dr. Ashburner, one of the Royal physicians, examined them under a powerful magnifying glass. He noted that they were in relief, and that the colouring matter was under the skin. The colour disappeared after 2 or 3 minutes.

The *elite* of the day took enormous interest in Foster. Lord Lytton invited him to his place at Knebworth. Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, Robert Chambers and William Howitt had frequent sittings with him, not solely to see an autograph book that was alive! Many things, equally mysterious, and even more impressive than this happened in the presence of the strange American. The furniture grew restless if he was in the house. It tossed about at night, or even in daylight in an adjoining room where there was no one present. This is what Dr. Ashburner witnessed(1):

"Mr. Foster, who is possessed of a fine voice, was accompanying himself while he sang. Both feet were on the pedals, when the pianoforte rose into the air and was gracefully swung in the air from side to side for at least five or six minutes. During this time the castors were about at the height of a foot from the carpet."

(1) "Notes and Studies in the Philosophy of Animal Magnetism and Spiritualism", London, 1867.

He also had some marvellous "materialization" experiences with Foster.

"One evening," he writes, "I witnessed the presence of nine hands floating over the dining-table."

Nine hands must belong to at least five people. But what sort of people are they who only make themselves visible up to their wrists? What power is at their command?

Foster was sometimes afraid of them. "In one instance," says Dr. Ashburner, "he grasped my right hand and beseeched me not to quit hold of him; for he said there was no knowing where the spirits might convey him.

"I held his hand, and he was floated in the air towards the ceiling. At one time Mrs. W. C. felt a substance at her head, and putting up her hands, discovered a pair of boots above her head."

The accusations of fraud frequently levelled at Foster's head were based on minor phenomena, mostly on pellet reading, the most dubious and now defunct psychic manifestation.

Foster was a great pellet artist. His usual procedure was to ask the sitters to

write the names of their deceased relatives on slips of paper while he was out of the room, roll them up and put as many blank pellets as they liked together with them in a heap on the table. On his return, raps sounded in the room. They were intelligent, and stopped at certain letters when the alphabet was spelt out, and so gave a name. Foster then picked up the very pellet on which the name was written, opened it, and gave his clairvoyant descriptions of the spirit.

Part of this demonstration could be rendered by any conjurer. Many of them could even emulate Foster's feat. No doubt, he often resorted to conjuring methods. A professional medium's life is not always a pleasant one. He is the prey of forces over which he has no command. Periodically, his strange gift may lapse for no known reason or because of its abuse. It requires moral fortitude to confess to a lapse. Foster had courage, but of the wrong kind.

In January, 1862, on the invitation of Alderman Thomas P. Barkas, he gave four séances in Newcastle-on-Tyne. At each of these ten persons participated. Their names were kept in a private book and withheld from the medium. Yet with these forty strangers the errors in the clairvoyant messages did not exceed three per cent, and these usually happened during some trifling confusion or controversy. But when it came to writing out the names of the departed spirits, the spelling displayed the same errors which were noticeable on the pellets. Such mistakes, of course, the medium could not have recognised. But the dear departed would hardly forget how to write their names. If the performance was genuine, clairvoyance would quite sufficiently explain it without calling in the spirits of the dead.

Foster's stay in England did not end on a pleasant note. In 1863 *The Spiritual Magazine* stated that the editor had received from judge Edmonds of New York such "sickening details of his criminality in another direction that we should no longer soil our pages with his mediumship".

The boycott was not effective enough to reach the ears of Napoleon III. Mediums were well received in his court, and Foster also enjoyed the privilege of being entertained by him.

But he could not be stayed on the downward path.

In New York, in 1872, as we read in Truesdell's *Bottom Facts of Spiritualism*, he was caught in palming the pellets and reading them by continually relighting his cigar, the match being held in the hollow of his hand.

In his later years he became addicted to alcoholism, and in 1888, at the age of fifty, he died in delirium tremens.

His exit was not unique. Some other mediums have shared the same fate. There is some reason to suppose that the production of "physical" phenomena

depletes the organism to such an extent that a craving for stimulants ensues. If the medium's strength of character and will-power is then wanting he may succumb.

For the weak-willed and the immoral there are dangers in mediumship which may easily work havoc with them regardless of the fact that they may periodically produce brilliant supernormal phenomena.