

Chapter 2: **Competing with the Cheshire Cat Story of Madame Elizabeth d'Esperance**

- Nandor Fodor -

THE CHESHIRE Cat kept on appearing and vanishing so suddenly that it made Alice quite giddy. Then "it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail and ending with the grin, which remained after the rest of it had gone".

To tell the story of a woman who all but rivalled that achievement and to speak of people who believe in it, is to invite the answer of the Cat:

"We're all mad here. I am mad. You are mad."

You will most probably call this a mad story.

Would it help to say that it was vouched for by fifteen eminent witnesses, among them professors at Swedish Universities, that their testimony was collected by Alexander Aksakof, Imperial Councillor to the Czar of Russia, and that it was published, as a contribution to science, under the title *A Case of Partial Dematerialization*, in 1898?

It happened in Helsingfors on December 11th, 1895, during a séance given by one Madame d'Esperance.

The sitters actually saw the medium's body, *from the waist downwards*, disappear. Her skirt lay flat on the chair, and her trunk appeared to be suspended in the air above the seat.

This astonishing state of affairs continued for about fifteen minutes.

The light was sufficient to see by, and Madame d'Esperance was quite conscious throughout the proceedings.

She permitted five persons to verify the phenomenon by passing their hands below all that was left of her.

How did Madame d'Esperance feel about it

Here are her own words, quoted from *Shadowland*, her autobiography:



A seven feet high Golden Lily which Yolande mysteriously produced from the air at a séance with Madame d'Esperance, who stands beside it.

"I relaxed my muscles and let my hand fall upon my lap, and then I found that, instead of resting against my knees, they rested against the chair in which I was sitting.

"This discovery disturbed me greatly, and I wondered if I were dreaming.

"I patted my skirt carefully, all over, trying to locate my limbs and the lower part of my body, but found that although the upper part of it - arms, shoulders, chest, etc. - was in its natural state, all the lower part had entirely disappeared.

"I put my hand where my knees should have been, but nothing whatever was there but my dress and skirt.

"Nevertheless, I felt just as usual - better than usual, in fact; so that if my attention had not been attracted by accident I should probably have known nothing of the occurrence.

"Leaning forward to see if my feet were in their proper place, I almost lost my balance. This frightened me very much, and I felt that it was absolutely necessary to assure myself whether I was dreaming or the victim of hallucination.

"To this end, I reached over and took Professor Seiling's hand, asking him to tell me if I was really seated in the chair.

"I waited his answer in a perfect agony of suspense. I felt his hand just as if it touched my knees, but he said, 'There is nothing there, nothing but your skirt.'

"This gave me a still greater fright. I pressed my free hand against my breast and felt my heart beating wildly."

The phenomenon; the miracle, if you like: or perhaps you would say the trick - lasted for fifteen minutes.

Then her skirts filled out and her lower limbs appeared in full view of the sitters.

Madame d'Esperance endured deep distress during that experience. She was ill for three months afterwards.

Who was she, this woman of mystery?

D'Esperance is French for Hope. She was Elizabeth Hope; by marriage Mrs. Reed, of Newcastle-on-Tyne.

She died fifteen years ago after living most of her life abroad.

She won an honoured place both in the annals of psychical research and in the esteem and friendship of many great scientists of her age.

She was "queer" from childhood. Saw "shadow people" where there was but a blank space. Later, in the dark, she could see a luminous cloud assuming human shapes. She took a pencil and sketched a form which nobody else had seen. There came a strange discovery.

The sketches were recognised as portraits of the dead.

A period of great excitement followed. Madame d'Esperance studied for a few months to improve her natural sketching talent. But as she progressed her power to see waned. Every attempt was followed by a violent headache.

T. P. Barkas, an alderman of Newcastle, initiated a scientific investigation of her strange powers. As a lecturer on popular science he became deeply interested in this girl of limited education who, through automatic writing, set out to prove that all his science was wrong.

A definite personality appeared to be behind these scripts. It claimed to be one Humnur Stafford, a long-dead philosopher.

For one who was long dead he was very up to date. Very minutely he described an instrument which, according to Alderman Barkas, later proved to be the telephone, and also another by which messages would be forwarded to a great distance in the original handwriting.

The remarkable re-education of Alderman Barkas paled into insignificance by subsequent happenings.

Sitting in a dark cabinet, Madame d'Esperance became conscious of a curious disturbance. The air seemed to be agitated as though a bird were fluttering about, and she felt as if fine threads were being drawn out of the pores of her skin.

The sitters in front of the cabinet grew excited. High above the curtain they saw a face with merry, laughing eyes, but - *without a body*.

Materialization. That mystery of mysteries... The apparent birth and flowering into full growth of human shapes from that peculiar bodily substance called ectoplasm. A biological miracle, which is now being forced on the attention of science.

Witness Professor Charles Richet, the world famous physiologist of the Sorbonne, by no means a spiritualist, writing in his *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*:

"I shall not waste time in stating the absurdities, almost the impossibilities from the psycho-physiological point of view of this phenomenon. A living being, or living matter, formed under

our eyes, which has its proper warmth, apparently a circulation of blood, and a physiological respiration, which has also a kind of psychic personality, having a will distinct from the will of the medium, in a word, a new human being. This is surely the climax of marvels. Nevertheless, it is a fact."

In the early years of Madame d'Esperance's amazing life few people dared to testify to such enormity.

It was so easy to picture a masquerading medium or an accomplice. So many took the bull by the horns. There was a rush, a scream, and a struggling spirit was found, not infrequently, to be the medium.

If that had been all, the problem of materialization would have been laid long ago.

But there is more in it than meets the eye.

Grim experiences have taught a terrible lesson that the phantoms are the flesh and blood of the medium even though distinct.

This is what happened, in Madame d'Esperance's own words, when Yolande, a young Arab phantom companion, was suddenly seized:

"All I knew was a horrible, excruciating sensation of being doubled up and squeezed together, as I can imagine a hollow gutta-percha doll would feel, if it had sensation, when violently embraced by its baby owner.

"A sense of terror and agonizing pain came over me, as though I were losing hold of life and were falling into some fearful abyss, yet knowing nothing, hearing nothing, except the echo of a scream I heard as at a distance.

"I felt I was sinking down, I knew not where.

"I tried to save myself, to grasp at something, but missed it; then came a blank from which I awakened with a shuddering horror - and sense of being bruised to death."

Was, then, Yolande found to be the medium?

Yes, she was.

Moreover, she was seized because she showed, at first, a bewildering resemblance to the medium.

Was, then, Madame d'Esperance a fraud?

The Spiritualist contention was, and with good reason, that the materialized

phantom is part and parcel of the medium.

The Spiritualists also said, with less reason, that the grabbing acts as a paralysing shock; that it prevents the quick-disintegration of the phantom and its return, in the of ectoplasm, into the body of the medium; that, instead, the medium is violently precipitated into the phantom form.

A dangerous belief, with almost no justification. For it offers a safe conduct for rogues.

There is another defense which is far better transfiguration. That is the claim that *when "power" is slight the medium's face is being "built over" by the same ectoplasm that would, if ample, serve for a full form.*

Lovers of mystery should frown at both explanations. They spoil the glamour of the story.

For Madame d'Esperance vowed never to sit within the cabinet again, but to *exhibit herself and the phantoms at the same time.*

She kept faith. "Ghosts" trooped in and out. They worried sceptical scientists to death.

Madame d'Esperance grew old. But Yolande remained young and beautiful. Three times was she grabbed, and three times was the medium brought to the verge of death.

The last was the most harrowing ordeal. In Helsingfors in 1893 a sitter lost his reason. He assaulted the phantom girl. There were frightful consequences. The medium's hair turned white. For two years she was confined to bed.

In her biography Madame d'Esperance left us a stirring description of her psycho-physiological identity with her "ghosts". It reads:

"Now comes another figure, shorter, slenderer and with outstretched arms.

"Somebody rises up at the far end of the circle and comes forward. And the two are clasped in each other's arms. Then inarticulate cries of 'Anna, oh, Anna, my child, my loved one!'

"Then somebody else gets up and puts her arms round the figure. Then sobs, cries and blessings get mixed up.

"I feel my body swayed to and fro, and all gets dark before my eyes.

"I feel somebody's arms around me, although I sit on my chair alone.

"I feel somebody's heart beating against my breast. I feel that something is happening.

"No one is near me, except the two children.

"No one is taking any notice of me. All eyes and thoughts seem concentrated on the white slender figure standing there with the arms of the two black-robed women around it.

"It must be my own heart I feel beating so distinctly. Yet those arms around me? Surely, never did I feel a touch so plainly.

"I begin to wonder which is I? Am I the white figure or am I the one in the chair?

"Are they my hands around the old lady's neck or are these mine that are lying underneath of me, or underneath the figure if it be not I on the chair?

"Certainly, they are my lips that are being kissed. It is my face that is wet with the tears which these good women are shedding so plentifully.

"Yet, how can it be? It is a horrible feeling, thus losing hold of one's identity. I long to put one of these hands that are lying so helplessly and touch someone just to know if I am myself or only a dream if Anna be I and I am lost as it were in her identity?"

Thriller writers, have you ever conceived of a greater mystery?