

Chapter 5: **How Sir William Crookes came to Believe in Spirits** **Story of Florence Cook**

- Nandor Fodor –

THERE ARE certain facts in nature so strange and so far-reaching in their implications that apparently no amount of testimony as to their occurrence is sufficient for those who have not experienced them in person. If good fortune grants certain individuals such experience and they have the courage to announce things that appear grossly incredible to the public, they become targets of the same suspicion and misapprehension as they themselves exhibited before towards others. Apparently no reputation is big enough to establish facts that seem too revolutionary in their nature. Sir William Crookes, the greatest physicist of the last century, affords an example of this.

In the seventies, when Darwin, Huxley, Faraday, Tyndal and Carpenter lifted scientific materialism to its peak, a set of miracle workers made London gasp. Great Spiritualist mediums produced phenomena which could have rightly driven any scientist to despair. They would not be laid. So the clamour arose for a St. George to give them the quietus. The choice of "eminent men exercising great influence on the thought of the country", fell on William Crookes. He did not pretend to understand the subject. He had no views or opinions on it.

"I prefer to enter," he said, "upon the inquiry with no preconceived notions whatever as to what can or cannot be, but with all my senses alert and ready to convey information to the brain; believing, as I do, that we have by no means exhausted all human knowledge or fathomed the depth of all physical forces."

He believed the time was rapidly approaching to "drive the useless residuum of spiritualism hence into the unknown limbo of magic and necromancy".

The entering of Crookes into the arena was received with jubilation in the daily Press. They foresaw a death-blow which would annihilate spiritualism. Expectations were never followed by greater disappointment. After having brought all his scientific acumen to bear on the alleged phenomena, Crookes ended in proclaiming the discovery of a new force and, in subsequent years, of a new world of invisible beings.

The first conclusion was reached in experiments with D. D. Home. In bewilderment, Crookes stated in his report(1):

"Even now, on recalling the details of what I witnessed, there is an antagonism in my mind between reason, which pronounces it to be scientifically impossible, and the consciousness that my senses, both of touch and sight - and these

corroborated, as they were, by the senses of all who were present - are not lying witnesses when they testify against my preconceptions."

(1) "Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism" (reprinted from the "Quarterly Journal of Science"), London, 1874.

Those present were Mr. Williams, his chemical assistant, Mr. Walter Crookes, his brother, Sir William Higgins, the eminent physicist and astronomer, ex-President of the Royal Society, and Serjeant Cox, a prominent lawyer and judge. They testified that they had seen an accordion, placed into an electrically insulated cage, float in the air and being played upon by an invisible hand, and that they had seen the beam of a cleverly contrived balance automatically register a pressure of five thousand grains when it was touched by no mortal hand.

The secretaries of the Royal Society refused Crookes's invitation to witness these amazing things; his report was not printed, even its title was suppressed in the publications of the Royal Society, and Crookes himself was grossly abused. His answer to his detractors was:

"A medium walking into my dining-room cannot, while seated in one part of the room with a number of persons keenly watching him, by trickery make an accordion play in my own hand when I hold it keys downwards, or cause the same accordion to float about the room playing all the time. He cannot introduce machinery which will wave window curtains, or pull up Venetian blinds eight feet off, tie a knot in a handkerchief and place it in a far corner of the room, sound notes on a distant piano, cause a fan to move about and fan the company, or set in motion a pendulum when enclosed in a glass case firmly cemented to the wall."

If Crookes's first report was a shock to science, worse was yet to come. In the presence of a fifteen years-old schoolgirl, he was privileged to witness for three years, under his own conditions and under the strictest scientific control which he could devise, the most amazing manifestations known in human history. No sooner had Florence Cook, the wonder medium, gone into trance in a cabinet, when out walked another being, a beautiful girl, who claimed to be a spirit, the daughter, when in the flesh, of Sir Henry Morgan, the buccaneer. A seeming fairy-tale presented as a solemn truth.

Crookes was a practical man. He had two problems to grapple with. 1) To establish that "Katie King", the wondrous maiden, was not the medium; 2) To assure himself that no human being could find ingress into his laboratory to trick him.

He subjected both the medium and "the spirit" to an exact scrutiny. He measured the difference in their height, noted the absence of a blister on Katie's

neck, the absence of perforation in Katie's ears, the differences in complexion, in bodily proportions, manner and expression. He had himself photographed with Katie King and with Florence Cook in the same position. While his picture completely tallied in the two photographs there was an easily observable discrepancy between the two girls. At a later period Katie allowed him to go into the cabinet.

"I went cautiously into the room," says Crookes, in his shorthand notes, "it being dark, and felt about for Miss Cook. I found her crouching on the floor. Kneeling down, I let air enter the phosphorus lamp, and by its light I saw the young lady dressed in black velvet as she had been in the early part of the evening, and to all appearances perfectly senseless; she did not move when I took her hand and held the light quite close to her face, but continued quietly breathing. Raising the lamp, I looked around and saw Katie standing close behind Miss Cook. She was robed in flowing white drapery as we had seen her previously during the séance. Holding one of Miss Cook's hands in mine, and still kneeling, I passed the lamp up and down so as to illuminate Katie's whole figure, and satisfy myself thoroughly that I was really looking at the veritable Katie whom I had clasped in my arms a few minutes before, and not at the phantasm of a disordered brain. She did not speak but moved her head and smiled in recognition. Three separate times did I carefully examine Miss Cook, crouching before me, to be sure that the hand I held was that of a living woman, and three times did I turn the lamp to Katie and examine her with steadfast scrutiny, until I had no doubt whatever of her objective reality.

"To imagine that an innocent schoolgirl of fifteen should be able to conceive and then to successfully carry out for three years so gigantic an imposture as this, and in that time should submit to any test which might be imposed upon her, should bear the strictest scrutiny, should be willing to be searched at any time, either before or after a séance, and should meet with even better success in my own home than at that of her parents, knowing that she visited me with the express object of submitting to strict scientific tests - to imagine, I say, the Katie King of the last three years to be the result of imposture does more violence to one's reason and commonsense than to believe her what she herself affirms."

What was the purport of these mysteries? How did they originate? The Cook family could not provide much information, except that Mrs. Cook, the mother, persuaded her somewhat reluctant daughter to participate in that amusing game - table-turning. Something totally unexpected and astonishing happened. The table behaved like a thing alive and Miss Cook rose in the air. This miracle was followed by making friends with the spiritualists and joining them in sittings. But the mother soon called a stop to this, for Miss Cook was carried dangerously over the heads of the sitters, and invisible hands stripped her of her clothing. So she only sat at home in the presence of her mother, her sister Florence, who also proved to be a medium, and Marie, the maid. It was in the Cook home at Hackney that the entity calling herself Katie King commenced her strange

ministration which was to last for exactly three years. Her first attempt to materialize was made in April, 1872. A face like a death mask was seen between the curtains of the cabinet. As time went on, the outlines became clearer and more lifelike. At first it was hollow at the back, later it filled out, and a year after her first appearance, clothed in abundant white drapery, Katie walked out of the cabinet. She showed a strange resemblance to the medium which, so she said, she could not help. To prove that she was distinct, she changed the colour of her face to chocolate and jet black.

The coming of Crookes definitely settled her claim to be a separate identity. Cromwell Varley, the eminent electrician of the Atlantic Cable Company, designed for Crookes an electric circuit, connected with a resistance coil and a galvanometer. The movements of the galvanometer were shown in the outer room to the sitters on a large graduated scale. Had the medium removed the wires, the galvanometer would have shown violent fluctuations. Nothing suspicious occurred, yet Katie appeared, waved her arms, shook hands with her friends and wrote in their presence.

As an additional test, Crookes asked Katie to plunge her hand into a chemical solution. No deflection of the galvanometer was noticed. This would have been infallibly the case if Katie had had the wires on her, because the solution would have modified the current.

There were other proofs.

"She called me after her into the back room," writes Florence Marryat(1), "and dropping her white garment, stood perfectly naked before me. 'Now', she said, 'you can see that I am a woman.' Which indeed she was, and a most beautifully made woman, too."

(1) "There Is No Death", London, 1891.

The drapery in which Katie King was clothed was a mystery in itself. She often allowed her sitters to touch it. Sometimes she cut as many as a dozen pieces from the lower part of her skirt, and made presents of them to different observers. She waved her hand over the holes, and lo! they were made good. Crookes examined the skirt inch by inch and found no hole, no marks or seam of any kind.

These pieces of drapery mostly melted into thin air, however carefully they were guarded. Rarely, they were rendered enduring. But in the latter cases, and in instances of careless operation, the medium's dress suffered. Katie explained that nothing material about her could be made to last without taking away some of the medium's vitality and weakening her. When Messrs. Howell and James, London, were asked to match a specimen of the drapery, they were unable to do so. They believed it to be of Chinese manufacture.

To Florence Marryat we owe a dramatic description of Katie's dematerialization in blazing light.

"She (Katie) took up her station against the drawing-room wall, with her arms extended as if she were crucified. Then three gas-burners were turned on to their full extent in a room about sixteen feet square. The effect upon Katie was marvellous. She looked like herself for the space of a second only, then she began gradually to melt away. I can compare the dematerialization of her form to nothing but a wax doll melting before a hot fire. First the features became blurred and indistinct; they seemed to run into each other. The eyes sank in the sockets, the nose disappeared, the frontal bone fell in. Next the limbs appeared to give way under her, and she sank lower and lower on the carpet, like a crumbling edifice. At last there was nothing but her head left above the ground - then a heap of white drapery only, which disappeared with a whisk, as if a hand had pulled it after her - and we were left staring by the light of three gas burners at the spot on which Katie had stood."

The farewell of Katie King on May 21st, 1874, was a scene poignant with drama and emotion. Katie, followed by Crookes, went into the cabinet and woke Miss Cook from her trance-an almost unprecedented act in spiritualistic history. They talked affectionately and Miss Cook shed many tears. She never saw Katie again.

At this point one may ask, was any attempt ever made to forcibly detain Katie King? Yes. On December 9th, 1873, Mr. W. Volckman, a guest of the Cooks, rushed forward, seized her hand, then her waist. A struggle ensued in which two of the medium's friends went to Katie's help. According to their testimony, she appeared to lose her legs and feet, made a movement similar to that of a seal and glided out of Mr. Volckman's grip, leaving no trace of corporeal existence behind. According to Volckman, she was forcibly freed. The incontestable fact, however, was that five minutes later, when the excitement subsided and the cabinet was opened, Miss Cook was found in black dress and boots with the tape tightly round her waist, the knot scaled with the signet of the Earl of Caithness and untampered with. She was subsequently searched, but no trace of white drapery was discovered.

Katie King's place, after her farewell, was taken by another phantom, Marie, who sang and danced. An attempt by Sir George Sitwell on January 9th, 1880, to grab her was a brilliant success. She could not get away. She did not dissolve. She was found to be the medium, wearing only her corsets and flannel petticoat. The divested pieces of garment were brought out of the cabinet by another sitter. This time the medium did not fall ill. She kept another engagement next morning. But, according to Florence Marryat, following this exposure, she declined to sit unless someone remained in the cabinet with her. The choice fell on the authoress. She was tied to her with a stout rope and

remained thus fastened together the whole of the evening. Marie appeared, sang and danced just in the same way as on the day before when she was seized.

In 1874 Miss Cook married Capt. Elgie Corner. To him we owe an amusing anecdote. Katie King was still on the scene when the medium got married; very much so; she walked about the house and went to bed with the medium, and Capt. Corner began to wonder whether he had married one woman or two.

Crookes never found the least sign of deception in Miss Cook. In a letter dated April 24th, 1904, on the death of Mrs. Corner, he expressed his deepest sympathy and declared again that the belief in an after-life owes much of its certainty to her mediumship.

Contrary to all allegations, Crookes never wavered or went back on his discoveries. In 1896 in his presidential address before the British Association at Bristol he declared: "No incident in my scientific career is more widely known than the part I took many years ago in certain psychic researches. Thirty years have passed since I published an account of experiments tending to show that outside our scientific knowledge there exists a Force exercised by intelligence differing from the ordinary intelligence common to mortals. I have nothing to retract. I adhere to my already published statements. Indeed, I might add much thereto."

And shortly before his death in a statement to *Light*, the leading psychic journal, he said:

"I have never had any occasion to change my mind on the subject. I am perfectly satisfied with what I have said in earlier days. It is quite true that a connection has been set up between this world and the next."