

## Chapter 11: The Ghost Story which Started Spiritualism Story of the Fox Sisters

- Nandor Fodor -

THIS THING Spiritualism which has been arraigned as striking at the very foundation of science and religion, how did it begin? Or did it have a beginning at all? Down the ages, amongst savages and civilized folk alike, psychic phenomena have always been in evidence. As a movement it certainly had a definite beginning. The age of animal magnetism prepared the soil, forerunners tempered the inclement mental atmosphere of the budding scientific age, and in 1848 in the little hamlet of Hydesville, New York, some phenomena (by no means unique in human history) kindled a fire from which the flame of a new reformation sprang and spread all over the world.

It was a ghost story which started all that follows: As ghost stories go it was nothing to cause the flesh to creep and the hair to stand on end, but it was rather unsettling, for the ghost in the case contrived to convey an intelligent message.

The house concerned in the story had an uncanny reputation. A former tenant left it rather hastily, but the family of John D. Fox experienced no serious discomfort until March, 1848. Then the trouble began. Raps, knocks and noises of shifting furniture at dead of night were heard. They grew in intensity, and on March 31st they kept the whole family awake. The head of the house got up and tried the sashes to see if they were loose. As he shook them raps seemed to reply. Little Kate, seven years old, noticed this, and snapped her fingers. Someone snapped back. Here was a game to delight the heart of a child. Kate clapped, there was an answering clap. Ten-years-old Margaret joined in the fun. She counted: one, two, three, striking her palms. Claps came in answer, until she grew afraid.

The parents had already concluded that the house must be haunted by some unhappy and restless spirit. They followed the lead of the children. They tested the knowledge and intelligence of the mysterious rapper. He rapped out the ages of all the Fox children, including one who had died. Rapping twice as the letters of the alphabet were called, he told a gruesome story. He was a pedlar, Charles B. Rosma by name. He was given hospitality in the house for the night. He had five hundred dollars on him. At midnight his host crept in and cut his throat with a butcher's knife. He dragged the body downstairs and buried it ten feet below in the cellar.

The accused was never brought to justice. He produced a certificate of good character from the town where he lived. There was no objective evidence against him. The testimony of the ghost could not be taken into court, the more so as the digging in the cellar produced no corpse. Only some hair and bones were found which a medical man pronounced to be human. But the skeleton was found fifty-six years later. A rough wall built a yard from the true wall of the cellar crumbled. The owner, on excavating, unearthed an almost entire human skeleton with a pedlar's tin box near the bones.

If this was the pedlar, whose were the bones in the cellar? Pedlars cannot afford two sets of bones. All spooks should know strange bones from their own. It certainly looked as if the ghost protested against the diggers' verdict, for the phenomena grew in violence. The sound of a death struggle, the gurgling of a throat, and the heavy dragging of a body across the room were heard night after night. The Foxes could not stand it; they left. The ghost stayed and entertained hundreds of curious people who flocked to the house of mystery.

Kate was sent to Auburn to her brother's house, and Margaret to her sister Leah, in Rochester. Raps broke out in both places. As it was thought that the ghost was left behind in Hydesville, it occurred to no one to ask questions for some time. When, at length, questions were put, a message was spelt out:

"Dear friends, you must proclaim this truth to the world. This is the dawning of a new era; you must not try to conceal it any longer. When you do your duty God will protect you and good spirits will watch over you."

With this message was Spiritualism born.

For the Fox sisters it meant a life of turmoil and vicissitudes. They became the centre of a storm which never abated in violence. They were tested, exposed and acknowledged time and again. The testers were as ignorant as the tested. Of the physiology of mediumship, of the dangers of its abuses, nothing was yet known. On one hand the Fox sisters were charged with imposture because there was a synchronous pulsation in their body when raps were heard; on the other hand they tried to exploit, in a hostile atmosphere, a gift which they did not understand. They were drained of nervous energy; they had little comprehension of the religious aspect of spiritualistic phenomena. They deteriorated and succumbed to drinking.

Margaret Fox had the good fortune to be wooed and wedded by Dr. Elisha Kane, the famous Arctic explorer. His love-letters were published after his death in 1857. In one of them he accuses her of "living in deceit and hypocrisy".

Leah Fox married a wealthy insurance man, named Underhill. Kate Fox came to England and became the wife of H. D. Jencken, a barrister-at-law. In 1888 the three sisters quarrelled disastrously. Kate, after the death of her husband, did not lead a very exemplary life. Leah attempted to deprive her of the custody of her two children. Margaret allied herself with Kate and swore vengeance to ruin her sister. This she did by sending a letter to the *New York Herald* denouncing Spiritualism and promising a complete exposure of the frauds which had been practised.

To keep her promise she gave a public lecture in the New York Academy of Music. There she confessed to being a fraud. She produced raps on the stage and explained that she could produce them at will. To make matters worse, Kate Fox joined her sister in New York and endorsed her revelations.

The consensus of opinion was that Spiritualism would never recover from this blow. But public opinion was again wrong. Apparently the pecuniary expectations of Margaret were not realized, or the revenge proved less sweet than she had anticipated. A year later she completely retracted her confession and explained that she was suffering from great financial difficulties and was under the effect of an excitement which almost upset her mental equilibrium. Of her moral stability there is no doubt. "For five dollars she would have denied her mother and would have sworn to anything" - wrote Dr. Isaac Funk, the well-known American publisher. And the irony of her confession was revealed before the Medico-Legal Society of New York in 1905 by Mrs. Mellen, a woman doctor who attended Margaret Kate Fox during her last days. She lived in a squalid room. She was unable to move hand or foot. There was not a closet in the place, nor any other hiding-place. Yet in answer to questions which Margaret Fox put to her spirit guides, knocks resounded on the walls, on the ceiling and on the floor.

But what is the importance of raps as a phenomenon? According to Professor Charles Richet, the world-famous physiologist of the Sorbonne:

"The reality of these raps is of primary importance and this phenomenon carries the implication of the whole of metapsychics. If it is established that mechanical vibrations can be produced in matter, at a distance, and without contact, and that these vibrations are intelligent, we have the truly far-reaching fact that there are in the universe human or non-human intelligences that can act directly on matter."

Have, then, the raps of the Fox sisters been definitely established?

Sir William Crookes had an opportunity for a full investigation with Katie Fox. He writes:

"It seems only necessary for her to place her hand on any substance for raps loud enough to be heard several rooms off. In this manner I have heard them in a living tree, on a sheet of glass, on a stretched iron wire, on a stretched membrane, a tambourine, on the roof of a cab and on the floor of a theatre. Moreover, actual contact is not always necessary. I have had these sounds proceeding from the floor, walls, etc., when the medium's hands and feet were held, when she was standing on a chair, when she was suspended from the ceiling, when she was enclosed in a wire cage and when she had fallen fainting on a sofa. I have heard them on a glass harmonium, I have felt them on my shoulder and under my own hand. I have heard them on a sheet of paper held between the fingers by a piece of thread passed through one corner."

The sounds were "delicate ticks, as with the point of a pin; a cascade of sharp sounds as from an induction coil in full work; detonations in the air; sharp, metallic taps; a cracking like that heard when a frictional machine is at work; sounds like scratching; the twittering as of a bird."

To Robert Dale Owen, son of Robert Owen, the great social reformer, we owe the description of a luminous instrument that produced the raps. He observed in a séance with Mrs. Underhill, on February 22nd, 1860:

"While I was looking intently at such a light, about as large as a small fist, it rose and fell, as a hammer would with which one was striking against the floor. At each stroke a loud rap was heard in connection. It was exactly as if an invisible hand held an illuminated hammer and pounded with it."

Such psychic lights may represent an initial stage of materialization. A record of four hundred sittings with Katie Fox in which human forms different from the medium were gradually built up was left by Charles F. Livermore, a rich banker of New York. The principal ghostly visitant was Estelle, the deceased wife of Charles Livermore. While Katie Fox was held by the hand, the phantom wrote out messages with a perfect reproduction of the characters she used on earth.

Under date of February 22nd, 1862, we find a unique description of the materialization of flowers. It reads:

"Appearance of flowers. Cloudy. Atmosphere damp. Conditions unfavourable. At the expiration of half an hour a bright light rose to the surface of the table, of the usual cylindrical form, covered with gossamer. Held directly over this was a sprig of roses about six inches in length, containing two half-blown white roses, and a bud with leaves. The flowers, leaves and stem, were perfect. They were placed at my nose and smelled as though freshly gathered; but the perfume in this instance was weak and delicate. We took them in our fingers and I carefully examined the stem and flowers. The request was made as before to be very careful. I noticed an adhesive, viscous feeling, which was explained as being the result of a damp, impure atmosphere. These flowers were held near and over the light, which seemed to feed and give them substance in the same manner as the hand. By raps we were told to 'notice and see them dissolve'. The sprig was placed over the light, the flowers dropped, and in less than one minute melted as though made of wax, their substance seeming to spread as they disappeared. By raps, 'see them come again'. A faint light immediately shot across the cylinder, grew into a stem; and in about the same time required for its dissolution, the stem and the roses had grown into created perfection. This was several times repeated, and was truly wonderful."

These are but a few samples of voluminous testimonies to the remarkable occurrences in the presence of the three Fox sisters. It would be too childish to suggest that two children, aged seven and ten respectively at the time of the Hydesville disturbances, organized a fraud which could flourish for eighty-five years.