

## Chapter 15: The Medium of Kings and Kings of Mediums Story of D. D. Home

- Nandor Fodor -

THE LATE W. T. Stead was the first journalist to whom the Czar of All the Russians (Nicholas II) granted a newspaper interview. According to his own story, after a half an hour's conversation, the publicist forgot himself and rose saying: "I must not detain your Majesty any longer."

Around the seventies a less nonchalant but similarly unprecedented attitude was shown towards Alexander II of Russia by another Englishman, D. D. Home, the famous medium. He himself writes of it in *Incidents in My Life* with an engaging naivety:

"On reaching St. Petersburg, I was honoured by a kind invitation to be received by the Emperor, which I was obliged to decline, not being *in power* at the time, and His Majesty having most graciously sent to me to say that under any circumstances he would be pleased to see me, I excused myself on the plea of having so much to attend to, previous to my marriage."

D. D. Home was such an extraordinary man that the Czar forgave him the rebuff. Indeed, if we can believe a letter of Prince Emil Sayn Wittgenstein, his Imperial Majesty's late aide-de-camp, to Mrs. Hardinge Britten in 1876, the Emperor and most of his household were completely converted to Spiritualism.

"Since Mr. D. D. Home's first visit in - I think - 1861," he wrote, "His Majesty has never doubted the truth of spirit communion, and the rich presents and special favour he has bestowed on Mr. Home is proof positive of the royal acceptance of his mediumship."

In France rumours were also rife that Louis Napoleon, as a result of D. D. Home's visits to the Tuilleries, became a believer in Spiritualism. The Duke de Morny told the Emperor that he felt in duty bound to contradict the rumour. To which the Emperor replied:

"Quite right, but you may add when you speak on the subject again that there is a difference between believing a thing and having proof of it, and that I am certain of what I have seen."



The first flashlight photograph of

What the Emperor saw was probably the most amazing experience of his life. When he received Home for the first time his and the Empress's unspoken thoughts were replied to, and the Empress was touched by a materialized hand in which, from a defect in one of the fingers, she recognized that of her late father. In the second séance the room was shaken, heavy tables were lifted and glued down to the floor by an alteration of their weight. At the third séance a phantom hand appeared above the table, lifted a pencil and wrote the single word "Napoleon" in the autograph of Napoleon I.

human levitation: Amadee Zuccarni in the air.

There were other crowned heads who treated D. D. Home with favour: the King of Bavaria, the German Emperor, the Queen of Holland, and the King of Naples. Were they, with hundreds of other famous people, suddenly attacked by a form of insanity which caused them to believe in things incredible, or did they witness genuine phenomena?

That a roomful of intelligent people who are quite sane in other respects should concur, to the minutest particulars, in the details of the occurrences of which they were supposed to be the witnesses, seemed to Sir William Crookes more incredible than the facts which they attested. From personal observation he wrote that the phantom hand "is not always a mere form, but sometimes appears perfectly life-like and graceful, the fingers move, the flesh apparently as human as that of any in the room. At the wrist, or arm, it becomes hazy and fades off into a luminous cloud." To the touch the hand sometimes appears icy cold and dead, at other times warm and life-like. He has seen a luminous cloud hover over a heliotrope, break a sprig off and carry it to a lady, he has seen a finger and thumb pick the petals from a flower in Home's button-hole and lay them in front of several persons sitting near him.

"Moreover, on one occasion," writes Crookes, "I have retained one of these hands in my own, firmly resolved not to let it escape. There was no struggle or effort to get loose, but it gradually seemed to resolve itself into vapour and faded in that manner from my grasp."

He also saw complete but transparent ghostly forms.

"In the dusk of the evening, during a séance with Mr. Home at my house, the curtains of a window about eight feet from Mr. Home were seen to move. A dark, shadowy, semi-transparent form, like that of a man, was seen by all present standing near the window, waving the curtain with his hand. As we looked, the form faded away and the curtains ceased to move."

Once the semi-transparent ghost, holding an accordion in his hand and playing continuously, came up to Mrs. Crookes.

"As the figure approached," she writes, "I felt an intense cold, and as it was giving me the accordion I could not help screaming. The figure seemed to sink into the floor, leaving only the head and the shoulders visible, still playing the accordion, which was then about a foot off the floor."

After manifestations of so astounding a character it seems almost a paltry thing to speak of a heavy dining-table which Crookes saw rise between a few inches and one and a half feet off the floor under special circumstances which rendered trickery impossible; or, again, to listen to Lord Lindsay's following testimony:

"I had one hand on his chair and the other on the piano, and while he played both his chair and the piano rose about three inches and then settled down again."

A man who could not be kept down on earth! Crookes knew of at least a hundred instances of his rising from the ground. He believed the story of his floating out of the third story window of Lord Adare's house in Victoria Street in the presence of three witnesses(1) because he

himself had to acknowledge:

"On several occasions Home and the chair on which he was sitting at the table rose off the ground. This was generally done very deliberately, and Home sometimes tucked up his feet on the seat of the chair and held up his hands in full view of all of us. On such an occasion I have got down and seen and felt that all four legs were off the ground at the same time, Home's feet being on the chair. Less frequently the levitating power was extended to those sitting next to him. Once my wife was thus raised off the ground in her chair."

(1) See Chapter 1.

There is almost no end to the miracles which D. D. Home produced for Crookes. Under the strictest test conditions he saw:

"a solid luminous body, the size and nearly the shape of a turkey's egg float noiselessly about the room, at one time higher than anyone present could reach on tiptoe, and then gently descend to the floor. It was visible for more than ten minutes, and before it faded away it struck the table three times with a sound like that of a hard solid body. During this time the medium was lying back, apparently insensible, in an easy chair. I have seen luminous points of light darting about and settling on the heads of different persons. I have had questions answered by the flashing of a bright light a desired number of times in front of my face. I have had an alphabetic communication given me by luminous flashes occurring before me in the air, whilst my hand was moving about amongst them."

Lord Adare, the father of the present Lord Dunraven, had seen the extended hand of Home become quite luminous. On another occasion his clothes commenced to shine. Once the top of his head glowed with light as if a halo surrounded it. On Home's request he asked the starlike lights in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Ghost if that was the work of God. "I repeated the words very earnestly," he says, "the light shone out, making three little flashes, each one about a foot higher above the floor than the preceding."

Crookes constructed a wire cage which he connected into an electric circuit and placed under the table so that it just fitted. An accordion which Home placed in the cage played by its own accord floating in the air. Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace, the great naturalist, writes of the same experience in *My Life*:

"I was invited to go under the table while an accordion was playing, held in Home's hand, holding the instrument which moved up and down and played a tune without any visible cause. He then said: 'Now I will take away my hand,' which he did; but the instrument went on playing, and I saw a detached hand holding it while Home's two hands were seen above the table by all present."

The accordion not only played, but it played exquisite music. According to Robert Bell's anonymous article, "Stranger than Fiction", in the *Cornhill Magazine*, August, 1860:

"The air was wild and full of strange transitions, with a wail of the most pathetic sweetness running through it. The execution was no less remarkable for its delicacy than its Powers. When the notes swelled in some of the bold passages, the sound rolled through the room with an astounding reverberation; then gently subsiding, sank into a strain of divine tenderness." The experience was the same when Bell held the accordion in his own hand, with full light upon it; during the loud and vehement passages it became so difficult to hold, in consequence of the extraordinary power with which it was played from below, that he was obliged to grasp the top with both hands."

On Easter evening, 1866, in S. C. Hall's, the well known art critic's home, to quote from a well-attested experience from Home's biography:

"First we had simple, sweet, soft music for some minutes; then it became intensely sad; then the tramp, tramp as of a body of men marching mingled with the music, and I exclaimed 'The March to Calvary'. Then three times the tap-tapping sound of a hammer on a nail (like two metals meeting). A crash, and a burst of wailing which seemed to fill the room, followed; then there came a burst of glorious triumphal music, more grand than any of us had ever listened to, and we exclaimed, 'The Resurrection'. It thrilled all our hearts."

If for miracles all that is not sufficient we may add that at the very least 50 people had seen D. D. Home grow in stature to a maximum of eleven inches. Lord Lindsay observed "the top of the hipbone and the short ribs separate". Home looked as if he had been pulled up by the neck. He also grew in breadth, he could elongate his arms and legs, and also shorten them, it seems, so that the limbs "felt shrunk and withered".

Physiologists will, of course, say that the thing is a total impossibility. But it is no less impossible for a human being to handle live coal with impunity or bury his face in a blazing coal fire. Yet Home did it. Writes Lord Adare in *Experiences in Spiritualism with D. D. Home*:

"Having apparently spoken to some spirit, he went back to the fire, and with his hand stirred the embers into a flame; then kneeling down he placed his face among the burning coals moving it about as though bathing it in water. Then, getting up, he held his finger for some time in the flame of the candle."

Crookes and Sir William Huggins, the astronomer, former president of the Royal Society, had seen Home improvising a furnace in his hand by covering a piece of red hot coal, of the size of an orange, with his left hand, and blowing on it until it was nearly white-hot, and "then drew my attention," continues Crookes, "to the lambent flame which was flickering over the coal and licking round his fingers; he fell on his knees, looked up in a reverent manner, held up the coal in front, and said: 'Is not God good? Are not his laws wonderful?'"

People who had faith could take the coal from Home without injury. Mrs. S. C. Hall saw a burning coal placed on the head of her husband. Home drew up his white hair over the coal into a sort of pyramid, the coal still showing red beneath the hair.

No man was more sought after by the great ones of the day than D. D. Home. Dumas, *pere*, considered him a friend. He was his marriage witness in St. Petersburg, the Czar's Chamberlain being another. When Emperor Alexander II "forgot" to ask him on inviting Home, he consoled himself with the grandiose remark: "There are many crowned heads in Europe, but there is only one Alexander Dumas."

Thackeray considered Home a genuine mystery; Lord Bulwer-Lytton looked up to him; Robert Chambers, the author and publisher, Dr. John Ashburner, one of the Royal physicians, Dr. John Elliotson, F.R.S., some time president of The Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society (the model of Dr. Goodenough in Thackeray's "Pendennis"), Alfred Russel Wallace, Prof. Augustus de Morgan, the famous mathematician, came over to Spiritualism. Faraday refused investigation because Home was disinclined to acknowledge in advance "that the phenomena, however produced, were ridiculous and contemptible". Tyndall and Carpenter would not condescend. Huxley, the great, was "not interested". With two great men of the day Home came into open conflict and emerged with honours. Sir David Brewster declared, after a sitting in the company of Lord Brougham, that "this upsets the philosophy of 50 years". It also upset his judgment, for when the statement was published in the Press he made an indignant denial and set down all the phenomena to imposture. In the heated newspaper controversy which followed he was definitely worsted, and in 1869, in *The Home Life of Sir David Brewster*, his own daughter proved him to be in the wrong by printing the original note on his experience from his private diary.

Robert Browning wrote a prose poem, *Sludge the Medium*. It was generally thought to refer to Home, and did great harm to his reputation. Browning's own experiences gave no justification for it. It was "a blot on the Browning 'scutcheon" - as Mrs. Sarah Whitman, the American poetess, remarked. It might be true, as G. K. Chesterton says in his Browning biography, that the poet "did not dislike spiritualism but spiritualists". His wife was one of them. That was mainly why the subject of Spiritualism was tabooed in the Browning home.

Home was no professional medium. He was never exposed, never even specifically accused. For his sittings he accepted no payment. He lived precariously on the hospitality of his friends. Once he became an international figure, and the subject of a debate in the House of Commons. He made frequent visits to Italy. Rumour arose among the peasants that he was a necromancer who administered the Sacrament of the Church to toads in order to raise the dead by spells and incantations. An attempt was made on his life, and he was officially warned of his sinister reputation. Nine years later he was expelled from Rome. As he claimed the protection of the English Consul his expulsion was discussed in the House of Commons, but no representation was resolved upon.

A few years later in England he was the central figure of a scandalous law-suit. A certain Mrs. Lyon, a wealthy widow, took a fancy to Home, and proposed to adopt him if he added his name to his own. Home assented. Mrs. Lyon transferred £60,000 to his account, and drew up a will in his favour. Later she repented her action and sued for the recovery of the money on the basis that she was influenced by spirit communications from her dead husband. Home, on the point of leaving for Germany, was arrested. He was liberated the following day on depositing in the Court of Chancery the deeds relating to the £60,000. Before the Court the onus of proof was put on the defendant. Though Mrs. Lyon's statements were found "so perversely untrue that they have embarrassed the court to a great degree", judgment was entered against Home.

Ugly rumours were circulated in the Press. One of them being that Mrs. Lyon had a false left hand and Home made her believe that he could create life in the artificial limb. It had no more basis than the fantastic explanations of his phenomena. In Russia they said that he had a great number of cats to sleep with and drew from their body electricity. In Paris they whispered that he carried about a trained monkey in his pocket to twitch dresses and shake hands during the séance. But the most ingenious explanation came from an old woman in America, who said:

"Lor, sirs, it's easy enough, he only rubs himself all over with a gold pencil first."