

Chapter 12: The Mouthpiece of one of the Three Wise Men Story of David Duguid

- Nandor Fodor -

A HISTORIAN is great if he can make the past live, if he can transport our fantasy back to an age which is no more. To us the past is dead. But once our own survival is established as a fact of science (and for many great minds already it is), it will be established for all those that preceded us in past ages. Could not they come back if they chose to do so, and could not we sit at their feet to re-learn the history of humanity from first-hand testimony?

A staggering possibility this, yet one which in Spiritualism is accepted as an actual occurrence. Not that definite and unquestionable proof could ever be claimed for the return of historic personalities. Proof is always personal. That element the long dead cannot supply. But their history may carry the stamp of truth, or, at least, it may make us wonder and dream. Particularly if it were an ignorant, uneducated man who efficiently trespassed on the preserves of professional dreamers in a setting which was, to say the least of it, highly unusual.

Such is the case of David Duguid, a Glasgow working man through whom it is claimed one of the Three Wise Men came back to tell, in the tones of a living voice, an entrancing story of his pilgrimage to the cradle of the Babe.

It came as a climax of unlooked-for miracles which comprised the whole scale of seance-room manifestations. Duguid was no professional medium. Curiosity led him to participate, in 1866, in table-sitting experiments at the house of H. Nisbet, the Glasgow publisher. During the sitting his hand shook and a cold current ran down his spine. When Nisbet's daughter, who was an automatic writer, placed her right hand on his left, it began to draw rough sketches of vases and flowers and then the section of an archway.

From such beginnings there developed one of the most powerful mediumships of the last century. The phenomena included mysterious raps, stirrings and intelligent action of inanimate objects, voices which from a husky tone became so thunderous that the house shook, the levitation of the medium, appearance of objects from closed rooms, mysterious lights, touches by phantom hands, showers of delicious perfumes and handling live coal with impunity.

All these phenomena were subsidiary to the Great Painting Mystery. In trance, with his eyes shut, Duguid executed sketches of great promise. The influence which claimed to be responsible for it felt hampered by Duguid's absolute lack of artistic education. On his suggestion, the medium took lessons at a Government School of Arts for four months. The knowledge so acquired might have assisted him in the large tableaux which he successively did. But it certainly sheds no light on the major mystery.

In total darkness, on little cards which the sitters brought along and marked, while the medium was held or tightly bound, invisible entities executed small oil paintings, sometimes in as short a time as thirty-five seconds. The noise of the brushes and the crinkling of the paper could be heard from well above the table. When finished, everything dropped, the paper invariably with painted side uppermost, wet and sticky. It showed miniature landscapes, one or more so finely executed that sometimes their merit was enhanced if



LEFT: A direct drawing in the dark in a séance of David Duguid. Note the similarity with the picture on the right.

RIGHT: Moses consecrating Eleazer as Aaron's successor. A picture in Cassell's Family Bible.

viewed under a magnifying glass. Occasionally drawings were produced within a sealed envelope on a folded sheet of paper, on which all those present had placed their fingers. It was in such curious manner that illustrations were provided for the frontispiece of William Oxley's *Angelic Revelations*.

The invisible operators at first refused to disclose their identity. One of them assumed the name of Marcus Baker. He promised copies of his masterpieces which he had painted on earth. For four days, four hours at a time, the medium worked on a large painting. It was initialled J.R. From Cassell's *Art Treasures Exhibition* it was recognized as "The Waterfall" by Jacob Ruisdale. The copy, however, was not exact. Some figures were omitted. The "control", on being questioned, said that those figures were added later by Bergheim. On consulting Ruisdale's biography, this was found to be true.

The second work of the invisible inspirer also claimed a famous name: that of Jan van Steen.

All was well and marvellous in the extreme until after the appearance of Hafed, Prince of Persia. His influence brought about a striking change in the medium. He appeared awe-struck and bent forward with hands clasped in the attitude of the deepest reverence. In forty-six sittings Nisbet, the publisher, took down the amazing story of a warrior prince of 1900 years ago who fought against an invading Arabian army, was later admitted to the order of the Magi, and ultimately rose to the office of the Arch Magus. He described the creeds and social life of ancient Persia, Tyre, Greece, Egypt, Judaea, Babylon, and many other long-perished civilizations, which he studied in his travels. The climax of his story was reached when he revealed that he conducted the expedition of the Three Wise Men to Judaea to the cradle of Jesus. He was summoned by his guardian spirit to go on the journey with two brother Magi and take rich gifts to the Babe. He described the youthful years of Jesus which were not chronicled in the Gospels, his travels with Him in Persia, India, and many other countries and the miracles which the young child performed. After the martyrdom of Jesus he became a Christian himself, met Paul in Athens, preached the gospel in Venice and Alexandria, and finally perished at the age of a hundred years in the arena at Rome.

The story, which proved to be a very good historical romance, was published in 1876 with illustrations of forty-five facsimile drawings and writings done by the spirit artists Ruisdale and Steen.

The spirit artists apparently had no respect for copyright. Arising from this, trouble arose which necessitated the withdrawal of the first edition of this amazing book. Instead of producing masterpieces as of old, Ruisdale and van Steen stooped to "lifting" illustrations from Cassell's *Family Bible*. Three full page and one half-page plates were found to be unquestionably identical, though with some elaboration. For instance, a ruined navel in the *Family Bible* appears in a restored condition in the book. Four more plates gave rise to suspicion and were expunged from the second edition. The suspicion was justified. Mr. E. T. Bennett, who was Assistant Secretary to the Society for Psychical Research, submitted an inscription of an Arabic doorway which came in direct writing, i.e., while the medium was held by the hand, to the expert examination of Mr. Stanley Lane-Pool. He found the text to read: "There is no conqueror but God," the characteristic motto of the Moorish Kings of Granada which occurs on all their coins and all over the Alhambra.

"But the writer of the direct card evidently had not the Alhambra, nor the Syrian Gateway in his mind, but Cassell's *Family Bible*. The engraver of the cut in the Bible, which you sent me," he wrote to Mr. Bennett, "made a muddle of the lower line of inscription under the lintel, not knowing Arabic, and the direct card exactly reproduces the engraver's blunders."

Those who would hastily conclude that Duguid exposed himself to a charge of fraud would show no understanding of the psychological complexities of these phenomena. The mind of Duguid, with his retentive subconscious memory, may have had a lot to do with all these sketches and writings. His hands certainly did not. This was exactly the line of defence taken by the "controls" when reproached and pressed for an explanation. They said that they took what they found in the medium's mind.

Wild and fantastic as the apology appears, it was borne out by other queer happenings. Visitors to David Duguid sometimes recognized in the "direct" paintings produced in their presence scenes which they were acquainted with in America and Australia and which the medium certainly could not have seen. Apparently, therefore, their memory, in some subtle manner, was also tapped.

Another puzzle of a possible similar explanation was furnished by a photographic demonstration. In the presence of sitters, David Duguid often exposed plates trusting to obtain supernormal markings or pictures. On several occasions a beautiful portrait was found on the plate of a Priestess who, according to the impression given to the medium, had been dedicated to the Temple of Venus in Cyprus. The enthusiasm for the charming lady, however, abated somewhat when Mme. Isabel de Steiger, F.T.S., discovered that the photograph was a copy of a German picture "Night", a print of which was in the possession of Mr. J. W. Brodie Innes, an Edinburgh solicitor. It is not at all impossible to conceive that in faking a spirit photograph from a foreign painting, Mr. Duguid should have the misfortune of selecting the very picture of which a print existed in Edinburgh. But a claim has been made for another solution. Experiences with other mediums render it probable that somehow an access can be made to the buried store of memories. By a process totally unknown to us they become occasionally exteriorized on the sensitive plate.

Moreover, as a spirit photographer, David Duguid was duly tested by J. Traill Taylor, the editor of the *British Journal of Photography*. He sat with him in Glasgow and in London, obtained many "extras" under his own condition and stated in his report:

"The psychic figures behaved badly. Some were in focus, others not so; some were lighted from the right, while the sitter was so from the left; some were comely, others not so; some monopolized the major portion of the plate, quite obliterating the material sitters; others were as if an atrociously badly vignettted portrait, or one cut oval out of a photograph by a can-opener, or equally badly clipped out, were held up behind the sitter. But here is the point - not one of these figures which came out so strongly in the negative was visible in any form or shape to me during the time of exposure in the camera, and I vouch in the strongest manner for the fact that no one whatever had an opportunity of tampering with any plate anterior to its being placed in the dark slide or immediately preceding development. Pictorially they were vile, but how came they there?"

Fraud and genuine phenomena march in a queer procession through the lifetime of many a famous medium. Duguid was no exception. In 1905 at the age of seventy-three, after nearly 2,000 seances, he was caught in deliberate fraud in Manchester. He brought the spirit paintings ready-made to the seance-room and attempted to exchange them for the blank cards which the sitters provided. On being forcibly searched, the original cards were discovered in his trousers. His friends were stunned by the exposure. They offered the explanation that Duguid's powers, as is often the case, must have lapsed, and, prompted by vanity, he made a childish attempt to provide the phenomena the sitters desired.

The defence has a claim on our consideration. The psycho-physiological side of these problems is far too complex to pass a precipitate judgment. The qualification for mediumship is not stem morality but some constitutional or mental aptitude which escapes us in ordinary life, as there is no use for it. Rising from a lowly position and held up to admiration, mediums are inclined to lose their balance and do things incompatible with judgment or sanity. By supplanting the genuine with the spurious they may save much bodily discomfort and drain on their vitality. It is the line of least resistance. The majority of their sitters are miracle-mongers. The tendency to satisfy them with the least exertion is difficult to resist. This is now so well known that in the view of Dr. Gustave Geley, a famous French researcher, there is reason for severity in another direction. Bluntly put "When a medium tricks, the experimenter is responsible."

