

Chapter 14: **She Convinced Sir Oliver Lodge of Survival** **Story of Mrs. Eleonore E. Piper**

- Nandor Fodor -

HUMAN NATURE is such that it recoils from facing momentous issues. From the close of the last century onward a number of famous scientists announced to the world that after a personal investigation, extending over a great number of years, they found human survival an established fact of science. The world apparently is not ready to believe that religion need no more be a matter of hope and faith, but that it is a matter of knowledge. It prefers to think that even the most famous scientist may, in some respects, go off his head. And if the famous scientist suffered personal bereavement they deduce from this fact a "proof" that his emotional nature overrode his reason. Protests against this attitude availed nothing. In vain did Sir Oliver Lodge write in his famous book Raymond:

"My conclusion has been gradually forming itself for years... But this event has strengthened and liberated my testimony."

He testified to a stupendous reality. It was a way of escape for his opponents to believe that grief over the loss of his son might have affected his critical faculty. The fact that his views of demonstrated survival were announced as early as 1909 was conveniently forgotten. The name of the remarkable woman who brought him this conviction, to whom science owes an undischarged debt of gratitude, is not even known to the world.

Some day a monument will be erected to Mrs. Leonore E. Piper. She is still with us. A woman of sterling character and courage, on whom Prof. William James, the greatest modern philosopher, was willing to stake his reputation "for wisdom or folly to stand or fall"; who converted Dr. Richard Hodgson, the greatest fraud-hunter in the history of psychical research ("a veritable Saul persecuting the Christians", as he was described) to a belief in human survival; who convinced Prof. J. H. Hyslop of Columbia University that "there is a future life and persistence of personal identity", a declaration which cost him his professional chair; who reduced psychologists to a state of bewilderment all over the world and who, for a period of over forty years, endured every kind of scrutiny, I might say vivisection, which scientific ingenuity could devise to disprove the reality of an invisible world.

It spells little to say that she was a trance medium. To the average man that only means a person of doubtful respectability who spends the greater part of her life talking gibberish in a state of sleep. But to psychical research it means that she becomes a human automaton, an organism which her ego ceases to inhabit, and which is temporarily possessed of beings that call themselves spirits of the dead.

What could be more provoking to physiology than the actual description of this preposterous process. It was thus summarized to Dr. Hodgson:

"We all have bodies composed of luminiferous ether enclosed in our flesh and blood bodies. The relation of Mrs. Piper's ethereal body to the ethereal world in which communicators claim to dwell is such that a special store of energy is accumulated in connection with her organism, and this appears to them as "light". Mrs. Piper's ethereal body is removed by them and her ordinary body appears as a shell filled with this "light"... If the communicator gets into contact with the light and thinks his thoughts, they tend to be reproduced by movements in Mrs. Piper's organism... When Mrs. Piper is in ill health the light is feebler and the communications tend to be less coherent. It also gets used up during a sitting and when it gets dim there is a tendency to incoherence even in otherwise clear communicators. In all cases, coming into contact with this light tends to produce bewilderment, and if the contact is continued too long, or the light becomes very dim, the consciousness of

the communicator tends to lapse completely."

It appears that the proceedings are in expert hands. The so-called "controls" succeed, in spite of inconceivable difficulties, in efficiently handling an alien organism for earthly manifestations. This is how "Pelham", one of Mrs. Piper's other-world supervisors, explained the position:

"In order to reveal themselves to you the spirits put themselves in an environment that discommodates them a good deal. They are like persons who have received a blow on the head and are in a state of semi-delirium. They must be calmed, encouraged, assured that their idea will immediately be of great importance... In order to speak with you it is necessary for me to re-enter the body and there dream. Hence you must pardon my errors and the lacunae in my speech and memory."

The marvel of Mrs. Piper's case was that her body responded to the invaders exceedingly well. She could obtain three simultaneous communications: writing with both hands and speaking at the same time. The dramatic activity of the hand was a remarkable phenomenon. It was full of intelligence and could be described as acting more as a person than a hand. Dr. Hodgson reported that at a sitting where a lady was engaged in a profoundly personal conversation with the control concerning her relations "the hand was seized very quietly and, as it were, surreptitiously, and wrote a very personal communication to myself purporting to come from a deceased friend of mine and having no relation whatsoever to the sitter; precisely as if a caller should enter a room where two strangers to him were conversing, but a friend of his is also present, and whisper a special message into the ear of the friend without disturbing the conversation."

The first point on which the average inquirer wishes to be satisfied is the integrity of the medium. As to this, we have the testimony of Mrs. Piper's discoverer, Prof. William James. For the first eighteen months he kept her under personal supervision. He hypnotized her and found the condition of her trance and hypnotic sleep radically different. He found no signs of thought transference either in the hypnotic condition or immediately after it. Would he have declared in his report to the Society for Psychical Research without taking the utmost pains:

"And I repeat again what I said before, that, taking everything that I know of Mrs. Piper into account, the result is to make me feel as absolutely certain as I am of any personal fact in the world that she knows things in her trances which she cannot possibly have heard in her waking state, and that the definite philosophy of her trances is yet to be found".

It was as the result of Prof. James's representation to the Society for Psychical Research in London that Dr. Richard Hodgson was sent over to America and initiated there the most famous period of mediumistic investigation. He started by engaging detectives to watch Mrs. Piper and see if she made any attempt to obtain information normally. On days of sittings he forbade her to read the morning papers. He introduced all sitters under the pseudonym "Smith". He improvised sittings for the benefit of chance callers of whose very existence Mrs. Piper could not have been aware. For fifteen years he was ready to pounce upon the least suspicious circumstance. And in later years he ruefully declared more than once that his *amour propre* had never quite recovered from the shock it received when he found himself forced to accept unreservedly the genuineness of the Piper phenomena. For in his second report to the S.P.R. in 1897, he stated:

"At the present time I cannot profess to have any doubt that the chief communicators to whom I have referred in the foregoing pages are veritably the personages that they claim to be, that they have survived the change we call death, and that they have directly communicated with us whom we call living, through Mrs. Piper's entranced organism."

The terror of fraudulent mediums, the hardest sceptic that ever entered the arena of psychical

research, the man who exposed Mme. Blavatsky in India became a spiritualist. His outlook upon life underwent a complete change. He refused remunerative offers from universities and colleges and lived happily on an inadequate salary in one room in Boston for the rest of his life. He was in touch with a reality of which he did not dream, the fullness of which only the personalities of Mrs. Piper's last controls could adequately unfold.

"Phinuit", her first control, a soi-disant French doctor of Metz, was a dubious personality. Prof. N. S. Shaler, in a letter to William James, calls him a "preposterous scoundrel". He had an exclusive reign until the advent of "Pelham". He was George Pellew, a lawyer and writer, a friend of Dr. Hodgson. He died accidentally in 1892 and came back through Mrs. Piper to keep his promise. He talked with 130 persons, of which thirty had previously known him. He addressed each of them in the tone and manner which he used in his lifetime. In 1897 a great change had taken place. The Imperator group arrived on the scene. They suppressed Phinuit and relegated Pelham to the role of a minor communicator. They professed to be the same august personalities whose chosen vessel Stainton Moses was: Malachias, the prophet and his faithful band. The tone of communication assumed a dignity and loftiness of expression and a quasi-religious character which it had heretofore entirely lacked. The group exercised a tremendous spiritual influence over the life of all those who came in contact with its members. Many sitters prayed to Imperator for comfort and guidance as one would pray to a favourite saint. Even Dr. Hodgson, a man of a keen sense of humour, always buoyant and cheerful, would become grave when the name of Imperator was mentioned. In the closing years of his life, alone in his room, he received direct communications from these august beings. They were of a convincing nature and of a revelatory character. He never allowed anyone to enter his room for fear of disturbing its "magnetic" influence, and none but his most intimate friends knew why Dr. Hodgson lived like a saint.

In 1889 Mrs. Piper paid her first visit to England. She was isolated more completely from the world than if she had been taken to a fever hospital. Sir Oliver Lodge had her down to his house in Liverpool. His wife engaged an entirely new staff of servants. All her correspondence passed through the hands of her host, and she could not even go on a shopping expedition alone. Yet this extraordinary woman revealed the most extraordinary familiarity with the lives of all the strange people who were brought to her. Her control, the "rascally" Phinuit, showed an extraordinary familiarity with the boyhood days of two of Lodge's uncles. Lodge thereupon sent a professional inquiry agent to Barking where they lived to see how much he could find out on the scene. The agent wrote:

"Mrs. Piper has certainly beat me. My inquiries in modern Barking yield less information than she gave. Yet the most skilful agent could have done no more than secure the assistance of the local record keepers and the oldest inhabitants living."

Lodge's first report, issued in 1890, was cautiously restricted to the conclusion:

1. That Mrs. Piper's attitude is not one of deception.
2. No conceivable deception on the part of Mrs. Piper can explain the facts.

But 19 years later in his *Survival of Man* he admitted:

"The old series of sittings with Mrs. Piper convinced me of survival for reasons which I should find it hard to formulate in any strict fashion, but that was their distinct effect. They also made me suspect - or more than suspect - that surviving intelligences were in some cases consciously communicating - yes, in some few cases consciously; though more usually the messages came, in all probability, from an unconscious stratum, being received by the medium in an inspirational manner analogous to psychometry.

"The hypothesis of surviving intelligence and personality - not only surviving but anxious and able with difficulty to communicate - is the simplest and most

straightforward, and the only one that fits all the facts."

Few people will remember the famous Faunus message of Mrs. Piper which warned Sir Oliver of his impending bereavement during the war. On August 8th, 1915, in the form of a message from the spirits of F. W. H. Myers and Dr. Hodgson, it came abruptly as follows:

"Now, Lodge, while we are not here as of old, i.e., not quite, we are here enough to give and take messages. Myers says you take the part of the poet, and he will act as Faunus. Faunus. Myers. Protect: he will U.D. (understand). What have you to say, Lodge? Good work, ask Verrall, she will also U.D. Arthur says so."

The message reached Sir Oliver Lodge from America early in September, 1915. On September 17th the War Office notified him that his son Raymond was killed in action on September 14th. But before the blow fell Sir Oliver inquired from Mrs. Verrall, lecturer in classics at Newnham College: "Does the poet and Faunus mean anything to you? Did one protect the other?" She replied at once that "the reference is to Horace's account of his narrow escape from death, from a falling tree, which he ascribes to the intervention of Faunus".

According to Rev. M. A. Bayfield:

"Faunus lightened the blow; he does not say 'turned it aside'. As bearing on your terrible loss, the meaning seems to be that the blow would fall, but would not crush; it would be lightened by the assurance, conveyed afresh to you by a special message from the still living Myers that your boy still lives."

F. W. H. Myers was a well-known classical scholar. The message was of the type which he would have planned so as to prepare Lodge and be beyond the reach of the medium's mind.

Mrs. Piper's life is too full of amazing happenings and incidents of scientific importance to be adequately dealt with in a single chapter. Never before has a medium made out so strong and unanswerable a case for the reality of an unseen world; and never since has the world of science been able to explain away that mountain of strictly scientific evidence which her life-work represents.