

## Chapter 19: Witchcraft made Science Story of Eusapia Paladino

- Nandor Fodor -

THERE WAS an Irish Bishop who remarked on *Gulliver's Travels* that it was full of improbabilities, and that he scarcely believed half of it. One wonders whether he paid a compliment to Swift's fantasy or the reverse. And one is tempted to ask what the good old Bishop would have said to a genuine mystery, such as the case of Eusapia Paladino. Improbable as her story is, it cannot be refused belief. Famous scientists have been exercised over it for more than thirty years. They risked their reputation on her remarkable phenomena, which seemed to portend to Schiaparelli, the discoverer of the Canals of Mars "the beginning of a new science pregnant with consequences of the highest importance".

She was an almost illiterate Italian peasant woman, ill-cultured, frequently falling in good sense and even common sense, so impulsive and violent that she would fly at people and beat them if they questioned her reputation as a medium.

Why should the world of science lavish attention on a woman of this type?

She brought witchcraft within the domain of science.

Most appropriately, Cesar Lombroso, the famous Italian criminal anthropologist, was the first to bow his head to this revolution in human thought.

In 1888 he was challenged by Dr. Ercole Chiaia, a noted Italian researcher, to investigate the case of a humble woman. Chiaia said that she could make a table advance by glaring at it; that she could make it back away by warning it off; that by lifting up her hand she could make objects ascend in the air and remain suspended like Mahomet's coffin; that she could herself rise in the air no matter what hands tied her down; that she could play on distant musical instruments; that she could draw on cards whatever people suggest by simply pointing at them; that she could assume strange forms; that no one knew how many legs and arms she had, for while she was being held other limbs came into view without her knowing where they came from.

Lombroso ignored the challenge for over two years. Then, on visiting Naples, he joined Professors Tamburini, Bianchi, Violi and five doctors in a sitting. He saw things which Chiaia claimed but he would not believe. Striking a match, he saw a handbell suspended in the air and ringing without visible contact.

In a statement to the Press he declared:

"I am ashamed and grieved at having opposed with so much tenacity the possibility of the so-called spiritistic facts; I say facts because I am still opposed to the theory. But the facts exist, and I boast of being a slave to facts."

After fifteen years of investigation he ended by accepting the theory as well.

Lombroso's testimony placed Eusapia Paladino in the limelight and initiated an exciting scientific quest. In 1892 there was an investigation at Milan in which Schiaparelli, Prof. Gerosa, Dr. G. B. Ermacora, Alexander Aksakof, Imperial Councillor of Russia, Baron Carl du Prel, author of the *Philosophy of Mysticism*, and Professor Charles Richet of the Sorbonne took part. Eusapia emerged with flying colours. The report, based on 17 sittings, stated:

"It is impossible to count the number of times that a hand appeared and was touched by one of us. Suffice it to say that doubt was no longer possible. It

was indeed a living human hand which we saw and touched, while at the same time the bust and the arms of the medium remained visible and her hands were held by those on either side of her."

Science was aroused. Professors came to Naples from all over Europe. Eusapia was pursued by invitations. She strode from conquest to conquest.

Francesco Porro, Director of the Observatories of Genoa and Turin, concluded:

"The phenomena are real. They cannot be explained either by fraud or hallucination."

That they were not of an illusory character appears from his further testimony:

"Next a formidable blow, like the stroke of the fist of an athlete, is struck in the middle of the table. The blows are now redoubled and are so terrific that it seems as if they would split the table. A single one of these fist blows, planted in the back, would suffice to break the vertebral column."

Who struck the blows? The force was always associated with intelligence. That intelligence claimed to be an entity who is quite famous in the annals of Spiritualism: John King, alias Sir Henry Morgan, the buccaneer. He is the most romantic "spirit control", father of Katie King, the beautiful spirit girl of whom Sir William Crookes took forty-four flashlight photographs in his sittings with Florence Cook. It appears as if Katie King had a sister. Signor Damiani's English wife was told by John King in London that he had a reincarnated daughter in Italy who was a very powerful medium. He gave her name and address. Acting on this information, Signor Damiani discovered Eusapia Paladino.

The old pirate was a genial soul. He did his best to oblige scientists. They could not help accepting him as a personality. Not quite a secondary one. For he showed himself, though mostly in parts.

Describing John King's materialized hand, Prof. Richet says:

"I held it firmly and counted twenty-nine seconds, during all which time I had leisure to observe both of Eusapia's hands on the table, to ask Mme. Curie if she was sure of her control, to call Courtier's attention, and also to feel, press and identify a real hand through the curtain. After twenty-nine seconds I said: 'I want something more, I want *uno anello* (a ring) on this hand.' At once the hand made me feel a ring: I said '*adesso uno bracciletto*' (now a bracelet) and on the wrist I felt the two ends as of a woman's bracelet that doses by a hinge. I then asked that this hand should melt in mine, but the hand disengaged itself by a strong effort and I felt nothing further."

This happened to a professor of physiology who won the Nobel prize for his attainments!

The experience was shared by others. Philippe Bottazzi, professor of physiology at the University of Naples "four times saw an enormous black fist come out from behind the left curtain, which remained motionless and advanced toward the head of Mme. B."

The swarthy, bearded face of John King was a familiar sight to Eusapia's sitters. For a ghost he could perform unusual feats of strength. Here is how, according to Lombroso, he was seen, in a semi-materialized state, levitating Eusapia:

While Eusapia's hands "were being held by MM. Richet and Lombroso, she complained of hands which were grasping her under the arms; then, while in trance, with the changed voice characteristic of this state, she said: 'Now I lift my medium up on the table.' After two or three seconds the chair, with

Eusapia in it, was not violently dashed, but lifted without hitting anything on the top of the table, and M. Richet and I are sure that we did not even assist the levitation by our force. After some talking in the trance state the medium announced her descent and (M. Finzi having been substituted for me), was deposited gently on the floor with the same security and precision, while Mme. Richet and Finzi followed the movements of her hands and body without at all assisting them, and kept asking each other questions about the position of the hands. Moreover, during the descent both gentlemen repeatedly felt a hand touch them on the head."

The suggestion that a group of scientists cannot take effective measures to bar an accomplice or cannot sufficiently immobilize the medium is too childish to consider. Enrico Morselli, Professor of Psychiatry at Genoa University, tied Eusapia Paladino to a camp bed in the way that he would tie a dangerous maniac. Yet in fairly good light six phantoms presented themselves in succession in front of the cabinet, the last one being a woman with a baby in her arms. Each time, after the phantom retired, Morselli rushed into the cabinet and found the medium as he left her. He did not accept the spiritualistic explanation, but as to the genuineness of the phenomenon no doubt was left in his mind. Indeed, according to Richet, "more than thirty very sceptical scientific men were convinced, after long testing, that there proceeded from her body material forms having the appearances of life."

The mystery is a biological one. The depth of it has not yet been sounded.

The coming of the phenomena was precluded by marked sensations for Eusapia. According to Flammarion's description:

"she suddenly experiences an ardent desire to produce the phenomena; then she has a feeling of numbness and the gooseflesh sensation in her fingers; these sensations keep increasing; at the same time she feels in the lower portion of the vertebral column the flowing of a current which rapidly extends into her arms as far as her elbow, where it is gently arrested. It is at this point that the phenomenon takes place."

There was a depression on the medium's forehead due to an accident in childhood. From this depression Lombroso observed a spouting fountain of air. Others called it a breeze. At a good séance, the breeze was very strong, after a poor one it was altogether lacking.

Between the movement of objects and the limbs of Eusapia there was a marked synchronism, on which Sir Oliver Lodge remarks:

"When six or seven feet away, the time interval (between the push and the movement of the object) was something like two seconds. When the accordion is being played, the fingers of the medium are moving in a thoroughly appropriate manner, and the process reminds one of the twitching of a dog's legs when he is supposed to be dreaming that he is chasing a hare. It is as if Eusapia were dreaming that she was fingering the instrument, and dreaming it so vividly that the instrument was actually played. It is as if a dog dreamt of the chase with such energy that a distant hare was really captured and killed, as by a phantom dog; and, fanciful as for the moment it may seem and valueless as I suppose such speculations are, I am, I confess, at present more than half disposed to look in some such direction for a clue to these effects."

Strange to say, this power of "vivid dreaming" could be transferred to the sitter if Eusapia held his hand. Flammarion struck three or four times in the direction of Victorien Sardou while Eusapia was holding his wrist. A second later Sardou felt the blows on his body tallying with the gesture.

Another dramatic display of this invisible contact was witnessed in Prof. Richet's house on the

Isle of Roubaud, in 1894. Eusapia rubbed the end of her fingers with blue chalk, asked Prof. Richet to hold it and, advancing to the table, drew two crosses on the table top in the air. The blue marks disappeared from her finger and the crosses were found on the underside of the table. She also drew scrawls on Prof. Richet's jacket with Myers' fingers. Under the waistcoat on his shirt front a blue mark was discovered. Holding Richet's clean finger as though it were a pencil she drew, in good light, a blue line on a piece of white paper. Another time she took Schiaparelli's finger and wrote her own name with it on the top of a block of writing paper which the astronomer brought along. The writing was found inside the block.

The value of such demonstrations is by no means impaired by Eusapia's well-known propensity towards fraud. If the investigators were not on the look-out she was always ready to play tricks both in the conscious and in the unconscious state. If she was prevented in producing fraudulent results she produced the genuine article. After a genuine seance she was frequently ill the following day, sometimes even on the second day. She preferred deception if she could practise it; it did not exhaust her, and was amusing. As Dr. Carrington remarks, "practically every scientific committee detected her in attempting fraud, but every one of these committees emerged from their investigations quite convinced of the reality of these phenomena, except the Cambridge and American investigation which ended in exposure."

The Cambridge investigation took place in August-September, 1895, at the house of F. W. H. Myers. Sir Oliver Lodge, who attended two sittings, failed to detect any resemblance between the phenomena there produced and those witnessed in the Isle of Roubaud. Continental scientists were more inclined to blame the exposers than the exposed. Eusapia succeeded in rehabilitating herself. There was a seance, held in good light, in Prof. Richet's library in Paris on December 1st, 1898. Astounding phenomena took place. And F. W. H. Myers, who submitted the report on the Cambridge exposure, on the solemn adjuration of Prof. Richet, avowed his renewed belief in the supernatural character of Eusapia's mediumship.

The Society for Psychical Research also reconsidered its attitude. In 1908 they sent a committee of three capable and sceptical investigators to Naples. They were: Mr. W. W. Bagally, a practical conjurer, Dr. Hereward Carrington, an amateur conjurer whose book, *The Physical Phenomena of Mediumship*, is the standard authority on fraudulent performances and the Hon. Everard Feilding, who also brought many a fraudulent medium to grief. The committee brought in a verdict which was a complete acknowledgement of Eusapia's extraordinary powers.

Against the American exposure in 1910, Carrington strongly dissented. He said that Eusapia presented a large number of striking phenomena which have never been explained. Howard Thurston, the famous American magician, supported his view in stating:

"I witnessed in person the table levitations of Mme. Eusapia Paladino ... and am thoroughly convinced that the phenomena I saw were not due to fraud and were not performed by the aid of her feet, knees or hands."

This sketch of Eusapia Paladino's story is necessarily brief. It is to her that the scientific recognition of the physical phenomena of mediumship is due. For she has been accorded that recognition. But as the facts could not be pigeon-holed, orthodoxy conveniently chooses to ignore them. On the day of their readmission a new age of science will be ushered in.