

Chapter 17: From Medium to Genius Story of Jesse Francis Grierson Shepard

- Nandor Fodor -

IN MY *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* I define inspiration as "a psychic state in which one becomes susceptible to creative spiritual influence or, to a varying degree, lends oneself as an instrument for through-flowing ideas".

We draw on inspiration or inspiration draws on us. We create consciously as men of letters, science and art, or become instruments. In other words, mediums.

But the line of distinction is not clear. Genius or medium, there are cases in which the choice is compelling.

Francis Grierson, the famous American writer of Scottish and Irish parents, offers a test. Known as Jesse Shepard, the musical medium for almost forty years, in the latter part of his life he chose to be a genius. He trimmed Jesse Francis Grierson Shepard to his two middle names and lived down one of the strangest careers of the last century as a master of literary art.

There is only one reason why the revelation should shock the world of literature. Grierson's genius as revealed in his *Modern Mysticism*, *The Celtic Temperament* and *The Humour of the Underman* was a small quantity beside his musical gifts.

Had he been able to claim them as products of his own consciousness he might have gone down in history as the greatest musician the world ever had.

An intimate knowledge of his history mollifies the boldness of this statement. Who would not be the greatest musician of the world if alternately inspired by Mozart, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Sontag, Persiani, Malibran, Lablache, Liszt, Berlioz and Chopin? And who could claim such an inspiration without a delivery more brilliant than any which connoisseurs had ever heard?

The first question is pure Spiritualism, the second is a question of facts. However absurd in many of its points the following quotation may appear, I ask the patience of the reader for Prince Adam Wisniewski's account in the Italian *Vessillo Spiritista* of a musical séance on September 3rd, 1894:

"After having secured the most complete obscurity," the Prince writes, "we placed ourselves in a circle around the medium, seated before the piano. Hardly were the first chords struck when we saw lights appearing in every corner of the room. The great pianists and composers of all epochs arrived, some to perform, others to hear the music. The first piece played through Shepard was a Fantasia of Thalberg's on the air from Semiramide. This is unpublished, as is all the music which is played by the spirits through Shepard. The second was a rhapsody for four hands, played by Liszt and Thalberg with astounding fire, a sonority truly grand, and a masterly interpretation. Notwithstanding this extraordinary complex technique, the harmony was admirable, such as no one present had ever known paralleled even by Liszt himself, whom I personally knew and in whom passion and delicacy were united. In the circle were musicians who, like myself, had heard the greatest pianists in Europe; but we can say that we never heard such truly supernatural execution.

"A globe of light which appeared on the hand of Mme. D. announced the arrival of Chopin. He always manifests his presence in this fashion. He

executed a fantasia which recalled the duct Adalgisa and Norma, with mysterious arpeggios of crystalline and expressive tones which distinguish Chopin. On this occasion his spirit vouchsafed most exquisite melodies with a pianissimo of diminishing tones and notes full of despair - a prayer to God for Poland. After him came Georges Sand. As I expressed my pleasure to find this genial soul in our midst, she gave three powerful raps on my knee. Mme. D. having said that she was jealous of this friendly sign, Georges Sand granted her the same favour. Then Mozart came and played with the agility and lightness of a sylph, with a variety of touch and a melodious style which were the invariable marks of his genius. But the most marvellous incident of the evening was the presentation of the spirit of Berlioz by his two chaperons, Liszt and Thalberg. That was the first time that Berlioz had played through Shepard. He began by saying that the piano was tuned too low for his music (Shepard is also clairvoyant and clairaudient) and he tuned it a tone higher himself. For ten minutes we heard the spirits working with the piano, which was closed. At the first sound we observed that the instrument was about two notes higher. Then Berlioz played sweet, ideal music. It seemed as if we heard the little bells of a country church; as if we saw and heard a marriage procession descending the mountain side, and entering the edifice; then a music which imitated to perfection the sound of the organ and continued piano, pianissimo, and morendo, as if indicating that the marriage was celebrated, and the procession returning to the mountains. This piece finished, Berlioz, with the aid of several other spirits, restored the instrument to its first tuning and began playing on its ordinary tone while the lid was still shut. Several spirits came afterwards, speaking each his own language. Now Shepard is English, and, in addition to French, knows no other tongue. Once in trance, however, he speaks - or rather the spirits speak through him - in every living language. Thus Goethe has recited passages in German; a spirit calling itself Isaiah has spoken in Hebrew; Mahomet in Arabic. Spirits have come and translated these speeches, and promised to help us in our psycho-researches, and indicate to us the persons with whom we shall put ourselves in communication. After this séance Mr. Shepard was much exhausted, and had to retire to rest."

The Prince must have been a gibbering idiot, will the reader conclude? Even spiritualists will be left breathless by this account. They now dislike the return of the great ones and accord them a cool reception. Allowing for the exuberance of enthusiasm, the account still leaves a problem. It cannot be dismissed by calling Prince Adam, Wisniewski mad. He is not in bad company. In fact, in the best of the last century.

Jesse Shepard was the darling of kings. He performed at the Imperial Palace of Gatchina for the Czar of Russia and before a reunion of three royal houses at Cumberland Palace in Gmunden, Austria. His hostess was the Duchess of Cumberland, sister of the Empress of Russia, of the Princess of Wales and of the Queen of Greece. An account of what happened at the reunion is given by Mr. Lauritz Waldemar Tonner, of The Hague, in *Light*, March 17th, 1894. It says:

"I had also the good fortune to be present at Mr. Shepard's reception at the Cumberland Palace; I shall not soon forget the impression made on the royal assemblage by his music. The music room was brilliantly lighted by lamps and candles; H.R.H. the Duchess of Cumberland asked me if Mr. Shepard would not prefer less light; indeed, the Duchess seemed to realize, as if by intuition, that so much light would not add to the beauty of the music. Accordingly, some of the lamps were extinguished and the concert was given with only the candles burning. I feel certain that darkness would not have been objected to on this memorable occasion as Mr. Shepard has never been heard by a more cultured and intelligent audience. The Queen of Hanover, who was sitting beside H.R.H. the Reigning Duke of Saxe-Altenburg, rose from her seat during the singing and exclaimed: 'I have never heard anything like it!' And the Queen of Denmark, who sat immediately

behind Shepard, complimenting him at the dose, said that the piano playing had the effect of four hands instead of two."

The mystery deepens. But we need better testimonies.

Mr. Henry Kiddle, superintendent of the schools of New York, had Shepard in his own house for twelve months. On one occasion he heard him playing, under the control of "Mozart", a magnificent impromptu symphony and delivering at the same time, under the influence of "Aristotle", a learned philosophical dissertation. Further, he heard him in trance speak French, German, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Chaldaic and Arabic.

Shall we place Mr. Kiddle on the list of suspects? We do not know much of his credentials except that he was forced to resign because of his openly stated spiritualistic convictions. So let us leave him for the testimony of the editor of the *Dagblad*, the leading orthodox and aristocratic newspaper of the day in The Hague. He wrote on March 14th, 1894:

"All of a sudden in a moment of ecstasy, the bass voice turned into a soprano - not one of the falsettos one sometimes hears in theatres, but full, large, and of extraordinary volume, from the lowest to the highest register. It was as if the room had suddenly been filled from all sides with splendid and ringing tones, melting together in a mighty harmony. It surpassed the piano music in power, although the tone of the piano became more and more fortissimo, and seemed like waves of tone swelling up from the instrument. It was as if one heard the word 'Excelsior!' Although we do not believe in the supernatural, the soul was taken hold of and carried to higher spheres. The inspiration which is awakened through Mr. Shepard's power is already quite wonderful enough. Why try to find an explanation in the supernatural?"

The editor was apparently deeply impressed by a man who professed to be utterly ignorant of music, who is claimed to have played the piano through shut keyboards, who rendered duets in bass and soprano, and who was not giving his demonstrations to make a living. For by this time Jesse Shepard had established himself in literature by two volumes than which Maeterlinck knew nothing more admirable and profound. He was a well-paid contributor to French newspapers and magazines. He only sat for his friends and in the strictest confidence. From Spiritualism he was gradually drifting away. Finally he severed the last tie by sacrificing his name. From then on nothing more was heard of his musical gifts. But his past lived in spiritualistic memory and in psychic periodicals. This is how he was advertised in the *Medium*, London, in 1870:

JESSE B. H. SHEPARD

THE CELEBRATED AMERICAN MEDIUM

(late from Paris)

Gives Sittings, Clairvoyant, Prophetic, Writing, Impression, Psychometric

Also gives diagnosis of disease, and discovers mediumistic faculties.

Charges are made according to the amount of time and labour undertaken.

N.B. - The music manifestations are not given at the same sitting.

His two initials are wrong. But there is no doubt about his identity. He not only advertised but, in the issue of May 6th, 1870, under the title, "How I became a Musical Medium", he tells his story himself. He was not taught music in the usual way. His psychic faculties first manifested in 1867 in the form of clairvoyant seeing, hearing and the power of healing. Later he developed "raps" and the gift of psychometry: sensing the story of an object or of the people connected with it by simply holding it. The turning-point of his career came in January, 1868.

"While I was in the theatre," he writes, "the spirit of Rachel came to me and asked if I would like to be developed in singing. She advised me to go next day and have the quality of my voice examined by a competent professor. I did so; called on a celebrated musician and told him my business. He was astonished at the power of my voice and facility of execution, facts of which I was ignorant myself, and of which I was no judge. The professor gave it as

his opinion that the voice would not last long; it was too wonderful to be permanent. However, I was only two weeks in being developed, but when the important result had been accomplished, I was too sceptical to believe that I really can sing, and was in great doubt as to the propriety of making the attempt in public, all of which I expressed to the music professor, asking his opinion on the matter. He replied that he would be very proud to have me sing in Ave Maria in St. Xavier's Church, where he was organist. This is one of the most fashionable churches in the city, and the choir is composed of superior singers, On taking my place in the service, I was influence to sing the pieces allotted to me to the astonishment of all who heard me."

There is little of the supernatural in this account, and no mention is made of piano playing. But 1870 was the beginning of Shepard's career. He lived, at the time, the life of a professional medium. After his star had risen, he did his best to forget this.

As a mystic he was not the twice born, but the twice dead. He died for the first time in 1907 as Jesse Shepard, the musical medium, the second time in 1927 as Francis Grierson, the writer. The writer killed the medium, and the medium killed the writer.

In Los Angeles, at the age of seventy-eight, playing as of old at the piano, with the last dying strains his soul sores after his immortal inspirers.