

Chapter 24: Tested by Infra-Red Photography Story of Rudi Schneider

- Nandor Fodor -

WITH CERTAIN peculiar people certain phenomena are claimed to occur in the dark. Asked to test them, we will want to be assured that (1) there is no accomplice in the room, (2) no physical or chemical instruments are introduced, (3) the medium is prevented from normally producing the results.

For a roomful of intelligent people united in distrust of the medium it should be child's play to provide against the first two possibilities. As regards the third, the methods of immobilizing the medium may greatly vary. Roughly speaking, the control might be instrumental or tactual. The first is effective but often too complicated. The second is always open to suspicion. "After three months' practice and meditation one can arrive at the certainty of holding well a human hand," was the sarcastic remark of Professor Charles Richet, the famous physiologist of the Sorbonne to those who criticized his experiments with Eusapia Paladino. As a last resort some people will prefer to believe that control was relaxed than to admit something which defies science.

A way out from the apparent impasse was found by the introduction into the seance-room of infrared ray photography. It marked the beginning of a new epoch in psychical research. The developments which led to it unfold a story of absorbing interest.

It all goes back to Braunau, a little town in Austria where out of the six sons of a linotype compositor, named Schneider, two were discovered to be decidedly queer; not abnormal, but queer. Willi, who was born in 1903, "went off" periodically. He fell into a trance. His personality altered and claimed to be somebody else; a rather unusual somebody, a girl, calling herself Lola Montez, one-time mistress of Ludwig I, the blind king of Bavaria. One night, amidst rather dramatic circumstances, she transferred her attention to Willi's younger brother, who was then 11 years of age. She complained that there was not enough "power" for moving objects and showing strange shapes suggesting human limbs and faces. She wanted Rudi. The parents objected. Rudi was too young and he was asleep. "Olga" did not answer. But a few minutes later the door opened and Rudi, in deep trance, entered and joined the circle.

After this incident he showed a rapid development of the same powers which Willi possessed. Soon he eclipsed his brother. That in itself was no mean achievement, for Willi, whose mediumistic education was taken up by Baron von Schrenck-Notzing, a German doctor of considerable renown, proved to be a remarkable lad. In Munich, between December 3rd, 1921, and July 1st, 1922, under very strict test conditions, a round hundred scientists witnessed an array of phenomena for which there was no normal explanation. The room was searched each time, Willi was examined by specialists, his seance robe was fitted up with luminous straps, he was held hand and foot, and he was cut off by a gauze screen from the objects which he claimed to be able to move. He did move them. They acted as if they came to life. Sometimes a nebulous shape in the form of a hand appeared to handle them. For the first time in the history of mediumistic research a hundred scientists affixed their signature to a statement that they were completely convinced of the reality of "telekinesis" (movement of objects without contact) and of the "ectoplasmic" order of phenomena.

The English world first turned its attention to these results after Mr. Harry Price, then Director of the National Laboratory of Psychical Research, London, and Dr. Eric J. Dingwall, then Research Officer of the Society for Psychical Research attended some sittings in Munich in 1922. Both of them signed a statement that they witnessed genuine phenomena. In consequence, two years later Willi was invited to London to sit at the premises of the Society for Psychical Research. After a desperate attempt to get away from the facts observed, Dr. Dingwall reluctantly admitted that "the only reasonable hypothesis which covers the facts is

that some supernormal agency produced the results".

Soon after, the curtain rung down on Willi Schneider. His powers vanished as incomprehensibly as they came. His mantle fell on Rudi. He was five years Willi's junior. With all the stamina of youth he stood, for a period of nearly ten years, the concentrated attacks of bitterly sceptical scientists and - won. The theories of explanation, the charges of fraud, so many attempts to save science from an admission of bankruptcy, all that is now of merely historical interest. For if by infra-red photography Rudi Schneider could prove in October, 1930, as he did, that the much-disputed phenomena were genuine, obviously he could not have been much wrong in the past.

But even before this crucial period arrived, in 1929 at the National Laboratory of Psychical Research in London, under the most merciless triple control devised up to the date, Rudi Schneider impressed with the reality of supernormal powers such eminent men as Lord Rayleigh, Prof. A. O. Rankine, Dr. F. C. S. Schiller, Dr. William Brown, Prof. Nils von Hofsten, Prof. A. F. C. Pollard, Mr. C. E. M. Joad, Mr. A. Egerton, Prof. A. M. Low, Dr. David Efron, Dr. Eugen Osty, and Dr. Jeans.

"I am convinced that what I saw at the séance was not trickery. No group of my fellow-magicians could have produced these effects under such conditions.," wrote Will Goldston in the *Sunday Graphic*, after a séance. Further, the founder of the Magician's Club writes in his *Secrets of Famous Illusionists*:

"I persuaded him (Rudi Schneider) to let me show him a few sleight-of-hand tricks. He knew nothing of the principle of mis-direction, for he followed my movements with the eyes of a child."

From the phenomena themselves there was no possible escape. Of course they did not and could not prove the reality of "Olga". That remained a mystery.

"After many séances and 'confidential talks' with her," writes Harry Price, "I am completely at a loss to know whether she is really a figment of Rudi's subconscious mind or actually a discarnate entity."

Rudi himself emerged with such success from the ordeals which science imposed upon him that Mr. Harry Price presented him with a certificate and had no hesitation in stating(1):

(1) Harry Price: "Rudi Schneider, a Scientific Examination of his Mediumship", London, 1930.

"If Rudi were to be exposed a hundred times in the future it would not invalidate or effect to the slightest degree our considered judgment that the boy has produced genuine abnormal phenomena while he has been at the National Laboratory of Psychical Research."

In view of later developments special importance is to be attached to this unequivocal statement.

In October and November, 1930, Rudi outdid his London achievements at the Institut Metapsychique International in Paris. For the first time in the history of mediumship infra-red ray photography was employed to detect the presence of the hypothetical invisible force in the dark. According to Dr. Osty's report, in the fourteenth séance, infra-red photography revealed, at a distance from the medium, the existence of an invisible substance, localized in space but rigorously commanded by the psychical organism of the medium. Sound-registering and recording instruments signalled the movements of this invisible substance. No screens and meshes of various materials, nor electrically charged plates, could intercept it. An increase in red light, a change in the conditions of the room or of the position of the medium, however, always sensibly diminished the action of the substance.

Significantly, all these infra-red experiments were successfully duplicated in the spring of 1932, when Rudi sat again at the National Laboratory of Psychical Research. A number of distinguished scientists became convinced of the reality of the phenomena. The uproar which followed it a year later was totally unexpected. Mr. Harry Price suddenly published an automatic photograph taken in the 25th sitting which revealed an arm free behind Rudi when he was supposed to have been controlled by Mr. Price himself. "It will be necessary for previous investigators to revise their findings," Mr. Price concluded(1). As he never revised his own previous findings, the statement was obviously directed against Dr. Osty's conclusions. The result was rather unexpected. The Council of his own Laboratory rose against Mr. Price. Several members resigned in protest, accusing him of incompetence as a controller and unfairness towards his fellow-investigators whom he failed to enlighten of his discovery.

(1) Harry Price: "An Account of Some Further Experiments with Rudi Schneider", 1933.

Rudi Schneider might have seriously suffered in reputation had it not been for a series of successful sittings which, prior to Mr. Price's bombshell, he gave in London to a research group associated with Lord Charles Hope.

"The results obtained go far to support the claims put forward by Dr. Osty in his report," concluded Lord Charles Hope.

Miracule dictu, even Mr. Theodore Besterman, Investigating Officer of the Society for Psychical Research, who was, up to the time, the bitterest opponent of the reality of physical phenomena, rallied to Rudi's defence by saying that "Mr. Price's report appears to me to be in itself quite worthless as an exposure. It can have no effect on Rudi Schneider's standing."(1)

(1) Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, Vol. XLI.

Admittedly, of late years Rudi's phenomena lost in strength. But sufficient has been left to amaze and dumbfound orthodox science. Professor D. S. Fraser-Harris attended 37 of the Lord Charles Hope sittings. In a lecture before the Survival League at Caxton Hall, London, in the autumn Of 1933, he spoke of puzzling luminous phenomena, a selfluminous fog billowing in front of the curtain and on the top of the table, of inexplicable intelligent movement of objects, of strange breezes from nowhere, of Rudi's abnormal rate of breathing, and continued, stating:

"The only phantom I observed and am never likely to forget was a small rod-like shape, on March 29th, 1932. My palm was extended. Out of the darkness there came, or rather began to form, near my palm, an elongated homogeneous structure, not anatomical, looking like a ruler but more like condensed smoke. It slowly approached my thumb. Before reaching it, the palm of my hand became intensely cold as if a lump of ice had been placed there. The cold went through to the back of my hand, then it went up to the elbow and stopped. The rod came and pressed against my thumb for 5 or 6 seconds - long enough for me to say that it was cool, moist and elastic. It was like gutta-percha. The visible length of the rod was about 18 inches."

The professor's conclusion based on his own observation and on the records of the infra-red experiments was that:

"We seem to be on the threshold of the discovery of a force entirely unknown to the physicists of to-day."

Although this statement, than which nothing more startling can be expected from a scientist, received no confirmation from the Society for Psychical Research (where an attempt was made to obtain infra-red cinematographic pictures of the operation of this force which Rudi emits, but which at that period had appeared to lapse), it still seems as if eighty years of spiritualist clamour had not been in vain. Spiritualists were not such deluded fools as they

were suspected to be. Behind mediumship there is something very big. Had science been more tolerant in the last sixty years since Sir William Crookes announced his momentous findings to the world, who knows what revolutionary discoveries might not have been made many, many years ago!