

Chapter 22: Being the Instruments of "Spirit Magic" Story of the Davenport Brothers

- Nandor Fodor -

THE MAIN difference between the performance of a magician and a medium is that the magician is always master of ceremonies, whereas the medium has to submit to the conditions imposed upon him. Magicians never attempt stage demonstrations under the control to which the medium is subjected. Without preparation, equipment and assistance they are helpless. Travesties of mediumistic performances they have given often enough in the past, but many masters of *leger-de-main* have also acknowledged the inexplicability of mediumistic phenomena.

If, then, mediums can beat the magicians at their own game, as the sceptic would put it, why don't they choose fame and fortune on the stage as magicians instead of abuse and vilification which they get as mediums?

Never in the eighty-four years' history of modern Spiritualism has a medium changed colours and set himself up as a magician. Only a few gave seances from the stage. Either the nature of their power could not stand a large and promiscuous audience, or they learnt from the bitter lesson of the American Davenport Brothers. At Hull, Huddersfield and Leeds, in 1864, they barely escaped lynching because they refused to declare themselves magicians. Those who too lightly dismiss their mystery as one of *leger-de-main* never face the psychological issue which their pathetic cry presents:

"Were we mere jugglers we should meet with no violence, or we should find protection. Could we declare that these things done in our presence were deception of the senses, we should, no doubt, reap a plentiful harvest of money and applause. As tricks they would transcend, according to the testimony of experienced observers, any ever exhibited in Occident or Orient. The wonders of the cabinet, or still more, of the dark séance, surpass all pretensions of conjurers. We should safely defy the world to equal them, and be honoured for our dexterity. But we are not jugglers, and truthfully declare that we are not, and we are mobbed from town to town, our property destroyed and our lives imperilled."

For the campaign of hatred and persecution which was started against them there is no apology.

"We never in public affirmed our belief in Spiritualism" - Ira Davenport is quoted in a letter by Harry Houdini. "That we regarded as no business of the public, nor did we offer our entertainment as the result of sleight-of-hand or, on the other hand, as Spiritualism. We let our friends and foes settle that as best they could between themselves but, unfortunately, we were often the victims of their disagreement."

Truly, this is a remarkable set of circumstances. Extraordinary things must have been witnessed in their demonstrations if, without an open claim on their part, people saw no escape from ascribing them to supernatural forces.

What were these demonstrations?

Dion Boucicault, the famous actor in whose house the Davenport Brothers gave their first séance in London, on October 11th, 1864, sent a detailed report to the *Daily News*. Lord Bury, Sir Charles Nicholson, Sir John Gardiner, Sir C. Lennox Wyke, Robert Bell, Robert Chambers, Capt. E. A. Inglefield, Rev. E. H. Newenham, Rev. W. Ellis, and fourteen others

were present. The séance was held in a large drawing-room from which all surplus furniture had been previously removed. Six guitars and two tambourines were bought from a neighbouring music shop and were placed, with some bells and trumpets, on the floor of an improvised cabinet. The Davenport Brothers and Mr. W. H. Fay, a third medium of their party, were searched. Then the two brothers entered the cabinet. With hands behind their back they were bound firmly to their seat by a nautical gentleman who was "profound" in the matter of knots. The knots on their ligatures were sealed with wax. The doors were then closed upon them, sufficient light being kept in the outside room to see what happened.

Instantly a Babel of sound, a crazy play on all the instruments at once issued from the cabinet. The following incident seemed to be particularly worthy of note:

"While Lord Bury was stooping inside the cabinet, the door being open, the two operators seen to be seated and bound, a detached hand was clearly observed to descend upon him, and he started back, remarking that he had been struck. Again, in the full light of the gas chandelier, and during an interval in the séance, the doors of the cabinet being open, and while the ligatures of the brothers were being examined, a very white thin female hand and wrist quivered for several seconds in the air above. This appearance drew a general exclamation from all the party. Sir Charles Wyke now entered the cabinet and sat between the two young men, his hands being right and left on each, and secured to them. The doors were then closed and the Babel of sounds recommenced. Several hands appeared at the orifice, amongst them the hand of a child. After a time, Sir Charles returned amongst us and stated that while he held the two brothers, several hands touched his face and pulled his hair; the instruments at his feet crept up, played round his body, and over his head, one of them lodging eventually on his shoulders. During the foregoing incidents, the hands which appeared were touched and grasped by Capt. Inglefield, and he stated that to the touch they were apparently human hands, though they passed away from his grasp."

In the second part of the séance the Davenport Brothers, as was their general habit, quitted the cabinet and sat amongst the guests in the dark. By invisible hands in two minutes and a half they were tied hand and foot. While this was being done a pandemonium of music raged. A shooting light was seen. Several sitters were simultaneously touched or struck by hands. All this while they were firmly holding hands. No one could move without the two adjacent neighbours being aware of it. Under the legs of the mediums a sheet of paper was placed on which an outline of their shoes was drawn. They were asked to count constantly. Their voices could be located all the time.

"Mr. Fay then asked that his coat should be removed. We heard a violent twitch and here occurred a most remarkable fact. A light was struck before the coat had quite left Mr. Fay's person, and it was seen quitting him, and plucked off him upwards. It flew up to the chandelier, where it hung for a moment and then fell to the ground. Mr. Fay was seen meanwhile bound hand and foot as before. One of our party now divested himself of his coat, and it was placed on the table. The light was extinguished and this coat was rushed on to Mr. Fay with equal rapidity."

Boucicault's account must be assumed accurate, for the reports of the correspondents of *The Times*, *Standard* and *Telegraph* agreed with these statements.

What was the meaning of all this? Boucicault was not a spiritualist. He protested that such puerile phenomena, however mysterious, should be considered spiritual. Whereupon Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten, one of Spiritualism's historians, remarks(1):

(1) "Nineteenth Century Miracles", London, 1884, p. 156.

"Had we an opportunity of questioning Mr. Boucicault concerning his opinion

as to what becomes of the great mass of mankind that sit nightly to watch his dramas, perhaps we might be in a position to show that the taste of the majority inclines to puerility only, and that anything that was not puerile would not represent the vanished millions that have passed through the gates of death to the life beyond, where it is exceedingly doubtful if puerile spirits become wise in the twinkling of an eye, or low men or women suddenly become exalted angels. Meantime, the question is not one of quality, but kind. Were the manifestations recorded above made by the Davenports, if not, by whom and what?"

No one has ever succeeded in proving that the manifestations were made by the Davenports. Naturally they were so accused because apparently there was no other solution. But the magicians who tried to emulate them produced an infantile and almost grotesque parody of the Davenport phenomena. Spiritualists alone claimed to understand all the pranks by which occasionally people were frightened. Here is an account of what happened at the Imperial Court at St. Cloud, in the presence of Emperor and Empress Louis Napoleon:

"The Marquis La Grange, having entered the cabinet with the Davenports, he extended his arms, and was fast bound to the brothers in the usual way. The instant the doors were closed the noise and confusion which was heard within the cabinet surprised the Imperial party extremely; when the doors were thrown open and the Marquis was seen with his cravat removed, a bell stuck in his waistcoat, the violin and guitar fantastically arranged about his person, and the tambourine upon his head, the Emperor threw himself back in his chair and laughed heartily at the grotesque appearance of the helpless and somewhat frightened Marquis, who, on his part, seriously and emphatically assured the company that the brothers had not moved a muscle."

In the early demonstrations of the Davenport Brothers in America, pistols were fired in the dark seance against a minute mark which was always hit with marvellous precision. In a billiard-room in Milwaukee, in total darkness, the balls were heard to roll and click against each other, the cues moved, and the game appeared to be regularly played, marked and counted.

In an attempt to solve these problems it is not sufficient to postulate the exteriorization of an unknown biological force which Dr. Loomis, Professor of Chemistry and Toxicology in the Georgetown Medical College, America, submitted. The intelligence, or intelligences, which ruled the force, appeared to see in the dark. The operation could hardly be ascribed to the immobilized brothers as it often transcended the known laws of physics. Here is how Mr. Robert Cooper, who spent several months in the study of the Davenport phenomena in England, described in his book(1), the flying coat phenomenon:

(1) "Spiritual Experiences, including Seven Months with the Brothers Davenport" London, 1867.

"The coat of Mr. Fay has, scores of times, been taken from his back in my presence, and Mr. Fay at the time might be sitting like a statue with his hands securely tied behind him and the knots sealed. I have seen coats of various descriptions, from a large overcoat to a light paletot, put on in the place of his own in a moment of time, his hands remaining securely tied and the seal unbroken. I have known the coat that has been placed on Mr. Fay so small that it could only with difficulty be got off him. I have known a coat that was first placed on Mr. Fay transferred in a moment on Ira Davenport, whose hands, like Mr. Fay's, were tied behind him, and the most curious part of the proceedings was that it was put on inside out. I have also known the waistcoat of Ira Davenport taken from under his coat, all buttoned up, with his watch and guard just as he wore it."

It sounds too amusing to be scientific, but the demonstration is by no means unique in spiritualistic history. To mention only one instance, the great Lombroso recorded it with Eusapia Paladino. An overcoat was placed on a chair beyond the reach of the medium, whose hands and feet had been continuously controlled. Several objects from an inside pocket of the overcoat had been brought out and laid on a phosphorescent cardboard on the table. All at once the medium began to complain of something about her neck and binding her tight. On light being produced it was found that she had the overcoat on, her arms being slipped into it, one in each sleeve.

The intellectual side of all these buffooneries displayed conscious direction, intelligent planning by definite personalities. John King, alias Sir Henry Morgan, the buccaneer, was the chief of the invisible operations. He made his debut in 1850, in the home of father Davenport, a police official of Buffalo. Ira Davenport had been impelled to fire a pistol in the dark. At the instant of firing the pistol was taken from his hand and a human figure was seen holding it and smiling at the company. It was John King, a singularly gifted spirit. He managed a simultaneous levitation of Ira and William, the two brothers, and their sister Elizabeth. The Rev. J. B. Ferguson, the noted American preacher, who risked his ecclesiastical reputation on the Davenport Brothers in accompanying them and vouching for them before the British public, writes(1) on this point:

(1) T. L. Nichols, M.D.: "Supramundane Facts in the Life of Rev. Jesse Babcock Ferguson, A.M., LL.D.", London, 1865, p. 108.

"From as good testimony as I have of any fact that I can accept without personal knowledge, I believe that these young men have been raised into the air to the ceilings of rooms, and have been transported a distance of miles by the same force and intelligence, or intelligent force, that has for eleven years worked in their presence so many marvels."

John King stayed with the Davenport Brothers as an invisible manager throughout their career, and in difficult situations often gave sound advice in the "direct" voice. This was no illusion. Says Rev. Ferguson:

"I have, in their presence, had articulate and audible conversation with a voice which was not theirs, nor that of any living person. With this I have conversed as a man talks with his friend, while the power or being from which the voice proceeded made its presence and reality known to me by other physical manifestations. In railway carriages, when in company with the Brothers Davenport and Mr. Fay, in passing through dark tunnels, I have been manipulated all over my body by hands seemingly human, sometimes unexpectedly at others at my request, when no one present could have touched me without my knowledge."

Besides Robert Cooper's testimony we have the record of James J. Mapes, Professor of Agricultural Chemistry of New York. He conversed with John King for half an hour. His hand was seized in a powerful grasp. When it was taken again the invisible hand increased in size and was covered with hair.

Hamilton, the successor of Robert Houdin, declared in a letter to the *Gazette des Etrangers* (September 27th, 1865), that the phenomena surpassed his expectations, and that they were inexplicable to him. Another famous magician, Prof. Jacobs, stated in a letter to the editor of *Licht, Mehr Licht* (April 20th, 1881), that the phenomena "were absolutely true and belong to the spiritual order of things in every respect".

As mediums, the Davenport Brothers were unique in several respects. In the Winter Palace in Russia, they held a seance before a thousand people in the presence of the Czar. Indeed, as many as two thousand were known to participate in England. They never asked for music. The phenomena were instantaneous. It is almost impossible to imagine that in a career of almost thirty years (William Davenport died in Sydney in 1877), their secret, if they had one, would not have been discovered. Houdini tried his best. In a letter to Conan Doyle(1), he

writes:

"I was an intimate friend of Ira Erastus Davenport. I can make positive assertion that the Davenport Brothers were never exposed... I know more about the Davenport Brothers than anyone living."

(1) A. Conan Doyle: "The Edge of the Unknown", London, 1930.

It is a great pity that he did not make public all he knew.