

## Chapter 20: He Convinced Gladstone of the Supernormal Story of William Eglinton

- Nandor Fodor -

FEW PEOPLE know that W. E. Gladstone took an active interest in psychical research. That he considered it "the most important work which is being done in the world - by far the most important". That as Prime Minister he had a sitting with William Eglinton, the story of which went around the world, and, incidentally, inconvenienced him somewhat. For he was deluged with letters from pious people who were horrified at seeing him engaged in "sorcery", and from others who were anxious to save him from becoming the victim of imposture or delusion.

The sitting took place on October 29th, 1884, in London, at the residence of a lady of distinction in Grosvenor Square. The story was first divulged in an interview which Eglinton gave to *Light* and which the daily Press speedily reprinted.

According to this, in the general conversation which preceded the sitting, Gladstone declared that:

"he was already convinced that there were subtle forces with which our puny mind could not deal and which he could not comprehend; he held the attitude, therefore, not of a scoffer, but of a student who had no reason to doubt the genuineness of my pretensions. His experiences in thought reading were sufficient to show that there were forces in nature which were not generally recognized."

There were four sitters and the medium. They took their places round an oval table of the usual description. One of them provided two common slates. Eglinton brought his own locked double slate.

"We began by asking Mr. Gladstone to write a question upon one of the school slates. He did so, and the slate was held by me beneath the table with the question upon the under side so that I could not see it, the other side being pressed closely against the under side of the table. Presently the writing began."

"Did Mr. Gladstone hear the writing?" - the interviewer asked.

"He did - and his face was a study. His intense look of amazement would have been amusing to those who have had experience of such phenomena, and was intensified when the slate was brought up and the few words which had been written were declared by him to be a pertinent reply to his question. The reply was, 'In the year 1857,' and on the slate being turned over, it was found that his question had been, 'Which year do you remember to have been more dry than the present one?' After that, Mr. Gladstone took the locked slate into a corner of the room, and on the inside of it wrote a question, which of course none of us saw. Then, locking the slate, and retaining the key, the slate was handed to one of the ladies and myself, and we both held it in the sight of all. While in this position, the writing was heard going on upon the closed surfaces, and upon the slate being opened, it was found that the question asked was, 'Is the Pope ill or well?' which has been answered in red pencil by the words, 'He is ill in mind, not in body.'"

The questions were purposely trivial. Gladstone, at the first stage, wanted to test whether it

was possible to obtain writing at all.

"Of the subsequent experiments," continues Eglinton, "I can only say that they were perfectly successful; that some of the communications were written upon Mrs. O's own slates when held under the table; that several messages were given, not only between these two slates, but also within the locked slate, in view of all present; and that some of the questions were put in Spanish, French and Greek, and satisfactorily answered in the same languages."

Eglinton knew a little French, but no Spanish or Greek. He was quite emphatic:

"The written questions were in every case unknown to me; and pertinent answers, as I have told you, were written between slates fully exposed to view upon, or held over the table of a brilliantly lighted drawing-room, the writing being distinctly heard while in the actual process. Mr. Gladstone had the fullest opportunity of observation, and I have no doubt whatever that his keen, penetrating eyes, as he carefully watched all that was passing, assured him that everything was genuine. As one indication I may mention the evident interest he took in the messages themselves, which he could scarcely have done if he had any suspicion whatever of the bona fides of the experiments. From first to last he made a careful record of all the questions and all the replies."

Of course, this is Eglinton's own version. Yet it must have been a true account, for Gladstone never repudiated it. There was one *communiqué* from Downing Street in answer to a direct inquiry of the *Daily News*, signed by Horace Seymour. It only contained:

"Sir, I am directed by Mr. Gladstone to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of yesterday, and to say that while he cannot undertake to enter into details, he has expressed no conclusion upon the subject to which you refer."

Any further doubt as to the deep impression produced on Gladstone's mind by this séance is dispelled by the fact that some time after he joined the Society for Psychical Research, which had already enlisted many great scientists and statesmen of the day.

The phenomenon itself, which Gladstone witnessed, was one of the minor manifestations of William Eglinton's amazing mediumship. One which is now antiquated. Mediums came to realize that conjurers could duplicate such performances, so they abandoned this particular phase. But in Eglinton's days passions ran yet high, especially after the Society for Psychical Research had found an expert conjurer, Mr. S. J. Davey, who masqueraded as a medium. He produced messages on screwed, sealed and locked double slates of his sitters in various languages, in colours, in answer to mental requests; he made a tumbler walk across the table in strong gaslight, floated musical boxes and produced materialized figures. His feats were so marvellous that when he exposed himself, spiritualists accused him of being a renegade medium. The accusation could have been easily answered had Davey revealed the trick of all his performances. But that he refused to do. So as great a man as Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace wrote in 1891:

"Unless all can be so explained, many of us will be confirmed in our belief that Mr. Davey was really a medium as well as a conjurer; that in imputing all his performances to trick he was deceiving the society and the public."

Before all, Eglinton was a materialization medium, and a very remarkable one. He never gave a séance in his own rooms and complied with all conditions of control, his sleeves being mostly sewn to his knees or behind his back to his coat. A typical example of what occurred is the following description from Eglinton's biography(1):

(1) "Twixt Two Worlds: A Narrative of the Life and Work of William Eglinton", by John S. Farmer, London, 1886.

"All this time his breathing became increasingly laboured and deep. Then, standing in full view, by a quick movement of his fingers, he gently drew forth, apparently from under his morning coat, a dingy white looking substance. He drew it from him at right angles and allowed it to fall down at his left side. As it reached the ground it increased in volume and covered his left leg from the knee downwards. The mass of white material on the ground increased in bulk and commenced to pulsate, move up and down and sway from side to side. Its height increased and shortly afterwards it quickly grew into a form of full stature, completely enveloped in the white material. The upper part of this the medium then drew back and displayed the bearded face of a full-length materialized spirit, considerably taller than himself. All this time a link of white material was maintained between it and the medium, but this was now severed or became invisible and the spirit walked round the circle and shook hands with the various sitters. The enveloping white material was now seen to be a flowing robe, fastened round the waist with a girdle. After a few minutes the medium, still in trance, drew forth more of the white material and stretched it out to the spirit which eagerly grasped it. Finally the medium became weak, staggered, and was supported by the nearest sitter (Dawson Rogers, editor of *Light*), whereupon the spirit approached and dragged him into the cabinet."

This marvellous description is in some agreement with modern observations on "ectoplasmic" flow. On the other hand, Eglinton's open air materializations have no parallel in spiritualistic history. This is a summary of Dr. Nichols' experiences in Malvern:

"Mr. Eglinton lay on a garden bench in plain sight. We saw the bodies of four visitors form themselves from a cloud of white vapour and then walk about, robed all in purest white, upon the lawn where no deception was possible. One of them walked quite around us, as we sat in our chairs on the grass, talking as familiarly as any friend ... took my hat from my head, put it on his own, and walked off with it where the medium was lying; then he came and put it on my head again; then walked across the lawn and up a gravel walk to the foot of the balcony and talked with Mrs. Nichols. After a brief conversation he returned to the medium and gradually faded from sight."

The spiritualistic Press of the day was full of such marvels. Mr. W. H. Harrison, the editor of *The Spiritualist* and a Fleet Street writer on science, reported the transportation of Eglinton through the ceiling of a locked room into the room above on March 16th, 1878, at Mrs. Macdougall Gregory's house at 21 Green Street, Grosvenor Square, London. He was one of seven sitters.

"The séance was held in the drawing-room on the first floor high above the street. The shutters of all the windows of the room were closed and barred; they could not have been opened without admitting light from the street. The door was locked on the inside and the key left in the lock. The table around which all the sitters sat was about two yards from the lock and considered in the most favourable position for enabling all the sitters to gaze into the passage if the door had been opened either to a large or small extent... Mr. George Sutherland, one of the sitters, was raised, chair and all, and placed on the centre of the table, where he was seen when a light was struck. Another sitter and his chair were raised about two feet. Mr. W. H. Harrison half seriously asked if the spirits could take Mr. Colman through the ceiling by way of giving a variety of manifestation; Mrs. Fletcher and Mr. Colman then called out simultaneously that Mr. Eglinton had broken the circle and left them. Mrs. Gregory told them to join hands. About the same moment, a chair, probably Mr. Eglinton's, was heard to fall lightly on its feet, apparently some yards from the circle; and a violent bump, caused by the falling of a

heavy body on the floor of the room above, caused everybody to think that Mr. Eglinton was carried through the ceiling. So a light was struck.

"From the time the remark was made about Mr. Colman to the time the light was struck, was about a minute. From the time Mr. Eglinton disjoined hands to the time the fall in the room above was heard, was probably less than ten seconds; some of the sitters, a few minutes after the event occurred, estimated it at five seconds.

"When the light was struck, Mr. Eglinton was not in the room. Mr. George Sutherland unlocked the door by turning the key which was in the lock, and it was then noticed that the passage outside was fairly illuminated by reflected light from the gas in the hall below. Mrs. Gregory and several sitters proceeded upstairs, and found Mr. Eglinton lying in a deep trance on the floor with his arms extended. This was about two minutes after he disjoined hands in the room below. In two or three minutes he revived and complained of the back of his head being hurt, as if by a blow; beyond this there was nothing the matter with him and he was as well as before in a few minutes."

Were all these people dithering imbeciles or did Eglinton actually go through the ceiling?

In 3,500 sittings, dozens of which were given in Continental and Scandinavian universities, only three times was definite proof of fraud claimed against Eglinton. Archdeacon Colley cut a piece of the robe and beard of a materialized figure and found them fitting the muslin and beard which he discovered in the medium's portmanteau. In Munich his face and hands were found covered with lamp-black with which, secretly, the musical instruments had been daubed. The most disastrous one followed a visit to India.

He gave séances at the residence of the Maharajah Sir Jotendro Johun Tagore; he converted Lord William Beresford to Spiritualism and he levitated Harry Kellar, the famous conjurer who, being in Calcutta, issued a public challenge. Eglinton accepted it. At the séance, while Kellar was firmly holding his left hand, the medium rose in the air and pulled Kellar after him so that "his own body appeared for the time being to have been rendered non-susceptible to gravity". Kellar acknowledged his defeat. "I went as a sceptic," he stated, "but I must own that I came away utterly unable to explain, by any natural means, the phenomena that I witnessed."

Such glory, apparently, did not satisfy Eglinton. He joined Mme. Blavatsky in engineering a theosophic miracle and compromised himself hopelessly. He was at first openly sceptical as to the existence of the Mahatmas. But before he left, his spirit controls declared their conversion and said that "they had been appointed to work in concert with the Brothers thenceforward". Collusion might have been a better word than concert. On board of the *S.S. Vega*, bound homeward, Eglinton claimed to have seen the apparition of Mahatma Koot Hoomi. He wrote out his experience in a letter which was miraculously transported to Bombay and dropped from the ceiling when Mme. Blavatsky had company. The letter was addressed to Mrs. Gordon, in Calcutta. In blue ink, over Eglinton's writing, there was a message from Koot Hoomi. Mine. Blavatsky added a postscript, whereupon the mysterious postman snatched the letter forthwith and dropped it from the ceiling in Mrs. Gordon's home in Calcutta.

It was a most effective miracle. But there was a hitch. A theosophist, named Mr. J. E. O'Connor, happened to be on board ship and unexpectedly asked Eglinton to enclose, as an additional test, a letter from him to Mme. Blavatsky. Eglinton could not refuse. But as he could not notify Mme. Blavatsky, O'Connor's letter did not arrive. And when Mahatma Koot Hoomi's writing was found to be, by experts, done in Mme. Blavatsky's hand, Eglinton denied that he ever met her and professed to be bewildered by his experience.

The last reports on Eglinton in the psychic Press concerned his visit in 1887 to Russia and his reception by Alexander III. He married on his return and, having become independent, retired from mediumship and spiritualism. He broke with his friends, but was not forgotten by them. They re-discovered him on the pinnacle of his new life. I was shown the *Who is Who* of

1929, and I studied certain strange agreements of particulars. It may come as a shock to many in Fleet Street to discover that, according to all these indications, William Eglinton, one-time editor and chief proprietor of the *British Export Gazette*, of the *British South African Export Gazette*, of *The New Age* and of the *Tatler*, was none other than William Eglinton, the famous medium.