

Chapter 13: The Chosen Vessel of Malachias the Prophet Story of the Rev. William Stainton Moses

- Nandor Fodor -

LET US suppose that survival is a fact: that after death, in accordance with the teachings of Spiritualism, we find ourselves in a real world with infinite possibilities of progress: further, that in course of time we shall be filled with commiseration for our brothers groping in darkness on earth. How would we set about teaching them the glorious truth?

First, we would try to impinge on matter direct. In that we might not succeed at all. Then we would try to influence certain people with a peculiar mental and physical equipment, people that could be impressed, that could see and hear, that could liberate certain forces with which we could operate on the plane of matter. But what if they would not believe their own eyes and ears? How would we prove that we were not phantasms of their disordered brain?

A display of greater power and knowledge than mortals possess would provide the only potent argument. Granting that we possessed such power and knowledge, that alone would open their minds to messages from us.

This was precisely the course adopted by a band of invisible communicators clustering from 1872-1881 around William Stainton Moses, M.A., an Anglican clergyman and Master of University College School, London. They asserted that a missionary effort to uplift the human race was being made in the spirit realms, and as he had the rarest mediumistic gifts and personal attainments he was selected as the chosen vessel. The communicators bore assumed names and, at first, refused to reveal their identity. Humanity was then wallowing in the deepest slough of materialism. They chose to prove themselves, simultaneously with the delivery of their high teaching, by a succession of miracles, and reserve the thunderbolt of their identity to a period when the medium might be prepared to face it.

The life of a quiet, unassuming clergyman became more amazing than any fairy tale. Stainton Moses was a man of narrow orthodoxy and dogmatism, a scathing critic of all claims to the supernatural. Circumstances steered him into an investigation of Spiritualism. In five months' time the table turned against him. He received evidence of the continuity of life which he could not put out of court. Moreover, he found himself the subject of visitation by powers that defied all the known laws of physics and chemistry alike.

He became a human dynamo in the hands of an invisible host. He appeared to generate a power which kept the room in constant vibration, which could move objects without contact, and could lift clean off the floor heavy tables that required two strong men to budge them. Like the man who lifted himself by his boot-straps, he rose in the air. In his note-book dated August, 1872, his sensations are described as follows:

"I was carried up. I made a mark on the wall opposite to my chest. I was lowered very gently until I found myself in my chair again. My sensation was that of being lighter than the air; no pressure on any part of the body, no unconsciousness or entrancement. From the position of the mark on the wall it is clear that my head must have been close to the ceiling. The ascent, of which I was perfectly conscious, was very gradual and steady, not unlike that of being in a lift, but without any perceptible sensation of motion other than that of feeling lighter than the atmosphere."

The power acted on matter in a most mysterious manner. According to a note dated August 28th, 1872:

"In the dining-room there was a little bell. We heard it commence to ring, and could trace it by its sound as it approached the door which separated us from

it. What was our astonishment when we found that, in spite of the closed door, the sound drew nearer to us. It was evidently within the room in which we sat, for the bell was carried round the room, ringing loudly the whole time. After completing the circuit of the room, it was brought down, passed under the table, coming up close to my elbow. It was finally placed upon the table."

This was a demonstration that matter can interpenetrate matter. The claim is most often met with in "apports", i.e., the arrival of objects from somewhere outside to a place or room inside which they have no business to be. In Stainton Moses' case they were usually small articles coming through closed doors or walls and thrown upon the table mostly from a direction over the medium's head. But sometimes their origin was unknown.

Such objects included gems, pearls and semiprecious stones. They filled Stainton Moses with uneasiness. He could not disassociate them from the anxiety of their disconsolate owners.

Large globes of light of an unknown nature rose and floated in the air. They had a nucleus, which resembled the outlines of a human hand, and were enveloped in drapery that felt hard to the touch. They grew more vivid if the medium rubbed his hands together or on his coat. They could deliver distinct blows on the table. These luminous globes were succeeded by round discs of light which had a dark side, generally turned towards the medium. The light side gave answers to questions by flashes. On rarer occasions a column of light appeared six to seven feet high and an inch or more wide. It was of bright, golden hue and did not illuminate objects in the neighbourhood. For a minute a cross developed at its top; rays seemed to dart from it.

The strangest feature of these lights was that they could be seen through solid objects. If they appeared under a mahogany table they could be seen from above as well as if the top had been of glass. Sometimes as many as thirty lights were seen flying like comets in the room. They were associated mostly with spirit visitors, some of whom could slip in unbidden. Being touched by the light of an unwelcome visitor the skin of the medium's finger broke open and the joint swelled.

Music was heard when no instrument was present; also in the open air.

"We heard the fairy bells," writes Mrs. Speer, a friend of Stainton Moses, "playing in different parts of the garden, where we were walking; at times they sounded far off, seemingly playing at the top of some high elm trees, music and stars mingling together, then they would approach nearer to us, evidently following us into the séance-room, which opened on to the lawn. After we were seated the music still lingered with us, playing in the corner of the room and over the table round which we were seated. They played scales and chords by request with the greatest rapidity and copied notes sung by Dr. Speer. After Moses was in a trance the music became louder and sounded like brilliant playing on the piano! There was no instrument in the room."

Scents of musk, verbena, new-mown hay and an unfamiliar odour came down in showers during the sittings. Sometimes this occurred also in the open air. Stainton Moses believed that they were employed by his invisible attendants to harmonize conditions. No music was ever asked for by his "controls". A luminous haze appeared around the chair of a new sitter. The perfume issued from this or came sprinkling from the ceiling at the same time. There was a great peculiarity about these scents. They were circumscribed in space, confined to a belt or band beyond which they did not penetrate. It was possible to walk into it and out of it again. Within it the temperature was cool and the scent strong; outside, the temperature was decidedly warmer with no trace of scent. The edges of the belt were quite clearly marked. If conditions were unfavourable the scents were pungent, and most painful if they got into the eye. Unpleasant smells were also in evidence. Now and then the sitters were stunk out of the room by a horrible odour which impregnated everything for twenty four hours. Such smells were always associated with dark spirits.

Only a few select people, friends of Stainton Moses, and occasionally Sir William Crookes, witnessed these phenomena. For as a rule the invisible communicators strongly objected to the introduction of strangers. They had no wish to exhibit their power beyond convincing Moses and his friends of their supernatural claims. But the records are excellent. Dr. and Mrs. Stanhope Speer left numerous accounts and we have the original note-books of Stainton Moses, now preserved at the London Spiritualist Alliance. F. W. H. Myers, the great pioneer of physical research, whose *Human Personality* was the foundation stone of a new cosmic philosophy, subjected them, after the death of Stainton Moses, to a minute analysis. His conclusion as to the phenomena was:

"That they were not produced fraudulently by Dr. Speer or other sitters. I regard as proved both by moral considerations and by the fact that they were constantly reported as occurring when Mr. Moses was alone. That Mr. Moses should have himself fraudulently produced them I regard as both morally and physically incredible. That he should have prepared and produced them in a state of trance I regard both as physically incredible and also as entirely inconsistent with the tenor both of his own reports and those of his friends. I therefore regard the reported phenomena as having actually occurred in a genuinely supernatural manner."

Stainton Moses was no professional medium. His character and integrity were so high that Andrew Lang was forced to warn the advocates of fraud that "the choice is between a moral and physical miracle". Frank Podmore was almost the only critic who preferred to believe in a moral miracle rather than in a physical one. But for the physical miracle there was proof. Against the moral one everything militated.

Moreover, the invisible operators were fully aware that miracles cannot prove human survival. After all, the manifesting intelligence might be other than human, so they brought entities who claimed to have lived recently on earth and came to prove their identity.

The case of the Steam-Roller Suicide has become quite famous in spiritualistic literature. On February 10th, 1874, in a deep trance, the hand of Moses wrote: 'I killed myself to-day.' This was preceded by a very rude drawing, and then "Under steam-roller, Baker Street, medium passed," was written. The medium said "blood" several times and motioned something away. The spirit asked for prayer. On the following day Moses and Dr. Speer walked down Baker Street and asked the policeman on duty if any accident had occurred there. He told them that a man had been killed by the steam-roller at 9 a.m., and that he himself had helped to carry the body to Marylebone Workhouse.

The only flaw in the case was that the *Pall Mall Gazette* published a short account of the suicide the same evening and this may have been subconsciously seen by the medium. But even that flaw was completely eliminated in the Blanche Abercromby case. Her message was so intimate that Stainton Moses pasted down the edges of the corresponding pages in his notebook. They were opened almost twenty years later by F. W. H. Myers. The writing was in the lady's hand who died on that day. Both the lady's son and a handwriting expert established a complete identity.

No one was more suspicious of tricks of his own subconscious mind than Stainton Moses himself. He took extraordinary pains to prevent an admixture of his own thoughts.

"I cultivated the power," he writes, "of occupying my mind with other things during the time that the writing was going on, and was able to read an abstruse book and follow out a line of close reasoning while the message was written with unbroken regularity. Messages so written extended over many pages, and in their course there is no correction, no fault in composition, and often a sustained vigour and beauty of style."

Occasionally, even his hand was dispensed with. Messages were written on sheets of paper

deposited on the floor under the table when no one could have done the writing. Sometimes they grew visibly, even in colours, before the eyes of the medium without the use of pencil or chalk.

The famous *Spirit Teachings* are in the form of dialogue, i.e., in answer to questions which Moses addressed to his invisible interlocutors. Their tone towards him was habitually courteous and respectful. But occasionally it was biting in criticism. This was one of the reasons why Moses was unwilling to allow the inspection of his notebooks during his lifetime. The teachings were couched in tones of a lofty morality and high spiritual purpose. They probed deep into the problems of existence and man's future destiny. They meant not to be a new dispensation but an interpretation and purification of the old one. The beings who signed themselves by such names as Imperator, Preceptor, Prophet, Rector, Vates, Prudens, etc., desired to do for Christianity what Jesus did for Judaism. Imperator, their leader, who always signed with a cross and S.D. (Servus Dei), claimed to be communing, through Preceptor, with Jesus himself. His presence always inspired reverence and awe. On being pressed for his identity on July 6th, 1873, Imperator tore off the veil in such dramatic words:

"Know, then, that I was incarnated upon your earth in those terrible days of desolation which succeeded the return of God's people from the land of Persia under Nehemiah: days when the priests were corrupt and corrupted their people, when the service of God was neglected and profaned; and when the people were fast losing all direct consciousness of the presence of God's Messenger with them. In those days I lived and spake with human utterance the prophetic message, even as now I convey through you a fuller and clearer knowledge of the same God whom I then revealed. When Nehemiah stood forth to guide the people and bring them back to God, I, Malachias, the Angel of Jehovah, the Messenger of God as I was called, stood by his side and prophesied of God's judgment."

The revelation had a crushing effect on Stainton Moses. He was no fool, he had great intellectual attainments, a keen and well-balanced mind. Biblical characters, ancient sages and philosophers (Malachias, Elijah, Daniel, St. John the Baptist, Solon, Plato, Seneca, etc.), communicating through him! Nothing could have sounded more preposterous. He fought against their claim with a stubborn persistence and was again and again reproved for his unbelief. He pointed out the impossibility of proving the identity of ancient spirits. Imperator answered that statements incapable of proof should be accepted as true on the ground that others which could be tested had been verified. The argument was flawless. Moses at last capitulated. In his Introduction to *Spirit Teachings* he wrote:

"Judged as I should wish to be judged myself, they were what they pretended to be."

To the teachings Stainton Moses was, for a long time, bitterly opposed. In the light of his rigid orthodoxy they appeared almost blasphemous. But nothing demonstrates better the influence which they exercised over his age than that almost the whole of these teachings is now embodied in liberalized Christianity. A large proportion of the Anglican Church, modernists and non-conformists, accept them now as beyond dispute.

Imperator and his band accomplished their purpose. It matters not whether the personal agency of Malachias and his helpers is evidentially admissible or not. Moses himself wavered and showed hesitation after the miracles ceased. What alone matters is their value, which proved them worthy of the source from which they claimed to emanate.