

## Chapter 8: **Visions and Predictions of the Poughkeepsie Seer** **Story of Andrew Jackson Davis**

- Nandor Fodor -

HAVE THE denizens of that invisible world of which mediums are the door-keepers ever communicated anything new and helpful to humanity?

As our age is a technical one, "new and helpful" means inventions or discoveries. Why exactly should the spirits of the dead, for such is their own claim, become more mechanical minded in an immaterial world than they were when engrossed in matter, is not quite clear. Nor why such limitations should be placed on helpfulness and novelty in general. But as it is frequently argued that nothing useful to science has yet been revealed in such alleged communications and revelations from the great Beyond, it will not be without interest to point to some curious records in psychic literature.

These records reveal the futility of revelations. They prove that it avails us little to be vouchsafed ideas which are more than one step ahead of our present knowledge and understanding.

A great American seer predicted the motor-car in technical details, and also the typewriter about eighty years ago. The world took no account of it, and failed to realize that a new scientific principle was divulged. It passed it by without comprehension.

This is how the coming of the motor-car was announced in Andrew Jackson Davis' *Penetralia* in 1856:

"Look out about these days for carriages and travelling saloons on country roads - without horses, without steam, without any visible motive power - moving with greater speed and far more safety than at present. Carriages will be moved by a strange and beautiful and simple admixture of aqueous and atmospheric gases-so easily condensed, so simply ignited, and so imparted by a machine somewhat resembling fire engines as to be entirely concealed and manageable between the forward wheels. These vehicles will prevent many embarrassments now experienced by persons living in thinly-populated territories. The first requisite for these land-locomotives will be good roads, upon which, with your engine, without your horses, you may travel with great rapidity. These carriages seem to be of uncomplicated construction."

In the same book the typewriter is outlined as follows:

"I am almost moved to invent an automatic psychographer - that is, an artificial soul-writer. It may be constructed something like a piano, one brace or scale of keys to represent the elementary sounds; another and lower tier to represent a

combination, and still another for a rapid recombination so that a person, instead of playing a piece of music, may touch off a sermon or a poem."

Had such ideas been submitted by a scientist the later inventors might have been accused of plagiarism. But Andrew Jackson Davis, the Pough-keepsie seer, was a shoemaker's apprentice. Up to the age of 16 he received no education. Was he, then, a genius who could make up for educational defects to an astounding degree? This he did, but through no earthly learning.

In 1844 he passed through a strange experience. In a state of semi-trance he wandered away from home and found himself, next morning, forty miles distant in the mountains. Here he met, whether awake or adream, two venerable men whom he later identified as Galen and Swedenborg. The meeting set his soul afire. With an illuminated mind the boy of eighteen returned from the mountains and became the apostle of a new philosophy.

A year later in magnetic trance he commenced to dictate a monumental work: *The Principles of Nature, her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*. For fifteen months Dr. Lyon, his magnetizer, repeated each sentence as he uttered it, and the Rev. Fishbough, the scribe, took them down, restricting himself to grammatical corrections only. Dr. George Bush, Professor of Hebrew at New York University, heard Davis quote correct Hebrew, and he established the seer's good faith by impromptu questions put to him while in the state of trance. His opinion on the book was:

"Taken as a whole the work is a profound and elaborate discussion of the philosophy of the universe, and for grandeur of conception, soundness of principle, clearness of illustration, order of arrangement and encyclopaedic range of subjects, I know no work of any single mind that will bear away from it the palm."

Owing to Prof. Bush's enthusiastic testimony, the book was received with enormous interest, and passed through 34 successive editions. Its originality has never been contested. But some analytical investigations revealed strange coincidences. The *Revelations*, for the most part, expressed Swedenborg's views, the language was, in several cases, "all but absolutely verbal", or identical with that of Swedenborg.

Was this proof of Davis' claim that Swedenborg himself possessed him while he was in trance? If not, by what sort of recondite mental process could an ignorant country boy get hold of the contents of musty old books of the very existence of which he must have been unaware?

Some astronomical statements present a still greater puzzle. Writing in March, 1846, Davis speaks of nine planets. Seven were known at the time. The existence of the eighth was yet hypothetical. It was only discovered in

September, 1846, vindicating completely the calculations of Leverrier. But six months prior to this discovery Davis revealed the planet's density. His statement agreed with later findings. The ninth planet, Pluto, was only put last year on the heavenly map. And it still awaits verification that there is a great central sun in the immensity of space around which our solar system and all the fixed stars revolve.

Other statements might be considered highly questionable or absurd. Like Swedenborg, Davis claimed that the planets, with the exception of the three outer ones, were all inhabited. On Saturn, he put a more advanced humanity than ours. On Venus and Mercury an inferior one. The canals of Mars were yet undiscovered in his age. The planet Mars, in consequence, receives no conspicuous attention.

The book made Davis famous, both as a medium and as a philosopher. His next big work, *The Great Harmonia*, passed through forty editions. There is a wealth of thought in Davis' harmonial philosophy which, strangely enough, has only been harvested in England by W. H. Evans who, too, rose into seership from the shoemaker's bench.

The question to whom should Davis' great literary activity be ascribed, to himself or to agencies out of flesh, is an intriguing problem. For after his first monumental work Davis dispensed with the services of his magnetizer. By a voluntary effort he could throw himself in a "superior condition". He could feel, see and perceive things not open to mortal eyes. Returning to the normal state, he remembered all his inner perceptions and simply wrote them down.

Of "physical phenomena" he knew almost nothing. He was a purely mental medium, a great clairvoyant, a forerunner of Modern Spiritualism. His description of how the soul passes out of the body at death is the first such record, and is still quoted as a classic. It was published in his *Death and the After-Life*, and reads:

"Suppose the person is now dying. It is to be a rapid death. The feet first grow cold. The clairvoyant sees right over the head what may be called a magnetic halo, an ethereal emanation, in appearance golden, and throbbing as though conscious. The body is now cold up to the knees and elbows, and the emanation has ascended higher in the air. The legs are cold to the hips and the arms to the shoulders; and the emanation, though it has not risen higher in the room, is more expanded. The death-coldness steals over the breast and around on either side, and the emanation has attained a higher position near the ceiling. The person has ceased to breathe, the pulse is still, and the emanation is elongated and fashioned in the outline of the human form. Beneath it is connected with the brain. The head of the person is internally throbbing - a slow, deep throb - not painful, like the beat of the sea. Hence, the thinking faculties are rational, while nearly every part of the person is dead. Owing to the brain's

momentum, I have seen a dying person, even at the last feeble pulse-beat, rouse impulsively and rise up in bed to converse with a friend; but the next instant he was gone - his brain being the last to yield up the life principle. The golden emanation, which extends up midway to the ceiling, is connected with the brain by a very fine life-thread. Now the body of the emanation ascends. Then appears something white and shining, like a human head; next, in a very few moments, a faint outline of the face divine; then the fair neck and beautiful shoulders; then, in rapid succession, come all parts of the new body down to the feet - a bright, shining image, a little smaller than its physical body, but a perfect prototype, or reproduction in all, except its disfigurements. The fine life-thread continues attached to the old brain. The next thing is the withdrawal of the electric principle. When this thread "snaps" the spiritual body is free and prepared to accompany its guardians to the Summer Land. Yes, there is a spiritual body; it is sown in dishonour and raised in brightness."

Since then, Davis' description of the emergence of the spiritual body has been borne out by many curious and sensational experiences.

In his late years the Poughkeepsie seer kept a small book-shop in Boston. He sat at the counter and in a little back room prescribed herbal remedies, not as a quack but as a professional doctor. Such wonderful education did he receive at his invisible university that a medical degree was granted to him many years before. Actually, he was a practitioner from the first years of his mediumship. He had X-ray eyes. They saw through the patient's body and located the centres of illness at once.

Did he retain Swedenborg as a guide or inspirer to his dying day? Or did he undergo a radical change of views? The question is suggested by an episode told by Anthony Philpot, an American journalist, in *The Quest for Dean Bridgman Conner*.

Prof. Lutoslawsky, of the University of Krakow, a distinguished Polish psychologist and mystic, was the guest of Prof. William James in America in 1907. He read the books of A. J. Davis and believed him to be dead.

"When I assured him," writes Philpot, "that Dr. Davis was alive at the time, both he and Prof. James were astonished... Then Prof. Lutoslawsky said: 'I must see him. I would rather meet him than any man in America.'

"So I made an appointment with Dr. Davis, and two days later I took Prof. Lutoslawsky to the little office in the rear of the store on Warren Ave., and introduced him to the man he would rather meet 'than any man in America'.

"They looked at each other for a moment as they clasped hands, and then Prof. Lutoslawsky exclaimed: 'Why, you are Swedenborg!'

"Yes, I am,' said Dr. Davis in a most off-hand way as he turned to place a bottle on one of the shelves. Professor Lutoslawsky was speechless for some moments and I stood there looking at them both, to see if they were joking. But no, they were both very serious and silent. Then Professor Lutoslawsky said:

"How long are you going to remain with us?'

"Let me see,' said Dr. Davis as he looked thoughtfully about the little room. 'I have chores enough to do that will take me about three years. About three more years and then I'll be ready to go.' And he went on arranging his bottles again very calmly.

"Chores? Chores?' said Professor Lutoslawsky, with a puzzled look on his face. 'What do you mean by chores?' It was evidently a new word to him.

"Dr. Davis explained that he meant work - work that would take him about three years to finish.

"Oh, now I understand,' said Professor Lutoslawsky. 'Then you are going to leave us in three years?'

"The venerable Dr. Davis - he was then about eighty years of age - nodded his head.

"The whole thing made a rather curious impression on me at the moment, and I wondered if Professor Lutoslawsky really believed that Dr. Davis was a reincarnation of Swedenborg, and whether Dr. Davis believed it himself. But they were both very serious and I said nothing."

Sequel: A. J. Davis died in 1910, three years later, though not exactly to the day.