

## Chapter 3: **The Voice of Confucius** **Story of George Valiantine**

- Nandor Fodor –

COULD ANY Oriental scholar ever sanely dream of sitting at the feet of Confucius, listening to his words of wisdom, and hearing him chant archaic Chinese - a dead language of which only about twelve sounds are definitely known as pronounced 2,500 years ago, and with which only a handful of scholars in the world have acquaintance at all?

Yet this was precisely the adventure which befell Mr. Neville Whymant, a well-known scholar, in New York in October 1926 A.D.

Mr. Whymant, who is the master of more than languages, was invited by judge and Mrs. William Cannon to meet, on October 15th, 1926, in their apartment "some people interested in discussing psychical research" and kindly to help interpreting Oriental languages.

Not until they arrived did Mr. Whymant and his wife know that they had accepted an invitation to a spiritualist séance.

They had had no similar experience before and were but little impressed with the personality of George Valiantine, the famous direct-voice medium. "His speech," writes Mr Whymant in his *Psychic Adventures in New York* "was far from polished, he seemed to lack imagination ... he made amusing blunders in speech ... he was, in that company, a fish out of water."

The room which they were invited to examine appeared to be fool-proof and fake-proof. There was no appearance or suspicion of trickery.

They sat in the dark, said the Lord's Prayer, played gramophone records, until suddenly voices exploded in the air.

The first one, which proved of scholarly interest, "was roared at full lung force" in pure and clear Italian, and soon dropped into a Sicilian dialect of which Mr. Whymant knew nothing.

After some personal messages to the regular sitters, which made Mr. Whymant feel as an eavesdropper, there came a sound very difficult to describe. It was the sound of an old wheezy flute not too skilfully played.

"Those who have wandered through Chinese streets in the evening will readily recall the sound," he writes.

"In a few seconds it had carried me back to sights and experiences in the old Celestial Kingdom. In that indefinable fashion known only to those who have sat for some hours on end in pitch darkness waiting for something to

happen, I sensed the eager thrill that ran through all the people there gathered as they heard this sound and waited for what was to follow.

"There was a rustling of silks as women straightened themselves in their chairs. There was the sharp intake of breath around the circle, and I noticed at the same moment the heavy, languorous breathing of Valiantine, whose position, directly facing me, I kept in the forefront of my mind.

"The flute-like sound faded, then stopped.

"The next sound seemed to be a hollow repetition of, a Chinese name - K'ung-fu-tzu - the name by which Confucius was canonized.

"I was not quite sure that I had heard aright, but I did recognize the sound for some variety of Chinese speech and so I asked, in Chinese, for another opportunity of hearing what had been said before.

"This time, without any hesitation at all, came the name K'ung-fu-tzu.

"Now, I thought, was my opportunity. Chinese I had long regarded as my own special research area, and he would be a wise man, medium or other, who would attempt to trick me on such soil.

"If this tremulous voice were that of the old ethicist who had personally edited the Chinese Classics, then I had an abundance of questions to ask him."

As the voice went on Mr. Whyment kept calling for repetitions.

"Then it burst upon me," he says, "that I was listening to Chinese of a purity and delicacy not now spoken in any part of China ... The style ... was identical with that of the Chinese Classics, edited by Confucius 2,500 years ago.

"Only among the scholars of archaic Chinese could one now hear that accent and style, and then only when they intoned some passage from the ancient books."

The language being as dead colloquially as Sanskrit or Latin, Whyment determined to test the matter to the full limit.

He asked for details of Confucius' life and "style"; for particulars of his preoccupations on this earth, and set some posers of the type with which all students of Chinese have wrestled in their studies of the Confucian Canon.

"All my questions were answered at once, without any pose or fumbling; in fact, the answers came so swiftly upon the question that all too often I had to ask the voice to repeat its answer, as I had been unable to follow.

"The voice grew stronger with the passing of the moments, so that although

the early part of the conversation was to some extent lost or doubtful, the succeeding phrases were quite clear so far as I was able to understand them."

He thought of a supreme test. Several poems in the *Shih King* - Classic of Poetry - have baffled the commentators ever since Confucius himself edited the work and left it to posterity as a model anthology of early Chinese verse.

Both Western and Chinese classical scholars have long ago given up trying to understand them.

So, using the flowery language of Chinese honorifics, he asked the Master:

"This stupid one would know the correct reading of a verse in the *Shih King*. It has been hidden from understanding for long centuries, and men look upon it with eyes that are blind. The passage begins thus: *Ts'ai ts'ai chuan erh ...*

"I could certainly not have repeated another line of this poem for I did not know any one of the remaining fifteen lines; but there was no need or even opportunity, for the voice took up the poem at once and recited it to the end.

"Read in this way,' the voice had said, 'does not its meaning become plain?'

"Surprised as I was, I did not intend to let matters rest there."

There is a difficult passage in the *Lun Yu*, or Analects of Confucius, which in the standard version of the book makes no sense at all. But Professor H. A. Giles, of Cambridge, gave it balanced sense by suggesting brilliant textual emendations. The voice had talked now for about ten minutes.

"Shall I ask of one passage in the Master's own writing P' queried Mr. Whyment. "In *Lun Yu*, *Hsia Pien*, there is a passage which is wrongly written. Should it not read thus ... ?

"But before I could get even the details of the passage in question," writes Mr. Whyment, "the voice took up my sentence and carried it through to the end ... You were going to ask me about the two characters which end the last two phrases; you are quite right. The copyists were in error. The character which is written *se* should be *i*, and the character which is written *yen* is an error for *fou*.' Again the wind had been taken out of my sails."

Whyment had assisted at about a dozen sittings. He heard altogether fourteen foreign languages spoken. They included Chinese, Hindi, Persian, Basque, Sanskrit, Arabic, Portuguese, Italian, Yiddish, German and modern Greek.

He could not find a satisfactory normal explanation.

"Even if the medium had been a first-class linguist, it was manifestly impossible for him to be speaking in Chinese and American English at one and the same time, and yet all the sitters had heard Valiantine carrying on a conversation with his neighbour while other voices - two and three at one time - were speaking foreign languages fluently ...

"Voices seemed to come from the far corners of the room, out of the very wall against which the back of one's chair was pressed, from the ceiling, and from the floor."

The great Chinese Mystery did not end with Whyment's departure from New York. In 1927 Valiantine was tested, for the third time, in London.

Countess Ahlefeldt-Laurvig brought an ancient Chinese shell to a sitting in the apartment of Lord Charles Hope.

At the top of the shell circular folds ended in a small hollow mouthpiece.

In China such a shell is used as a horn and is blown on occasions as a "call".

The sitters tried it, but could produce no sound whatever. Yet at one period, during the sitting, from high up in the room, the shell horn was blown, and the peculiar notes were rendered in the correct Chinese fashion.

Moreover, on March 2nd, 1927, in Lord Charles Hope's apartment in London, by special arrangement with the Columbia Gramophone Company, the voice of Confucius was recorded. Its curious flute-like tones rose and fell and sometimes broke into a peculiar sing-song tone.

Mr. Whyment, on being invited to hear the record, could only interpret a few sentences because the voice was faint and became blurred in the recording. But he recognized a number of the peculiar intonations. He could gather the meaning of the recorded speech by the tonal values.

The voice was apparently identical with the one he heard in New York.

I do not envy the task of those who would explain this amazing tale by fraud. True, the honesty of the medium is always a central problem.

What, then, was George Valiantine's previous and later career?

He was a small manufacturer in Williamsport, New York, when, at the age of 43, his mediumship was accidentally discovered. In 1923 we find him, under the name of Mr. X, competing for the 2,500 dollars prize of *The Scientific American*, New York, for the production of genuine physical phenomena.

The committee heard voices from high in the air carry on prolonged conversation. But an electric control apparatus, secretly fixed to Valiantine's chair, failed to register his full weight for fourteen or fifteen seconds. So the evidence was ruled out.

In the following year remarkable things happened in England. In sittings with his wife, Mr. Dennis Bradley, the author, developed the direct voice himself. Valiantine came to visit them. During five weeks more than fifty prominent people heard in Bradley's home over a hundred different spirit voices speak a medley of languages - even Cardiganshire Welsh, with Mr. Caradoc Evans, the Welsh novelist, being present.

A year later, again in England, Valiantine sat for the Society for Psychical Research.

The sittings were considered blank.

But in Bradley's house Dr. Woolley, their research officer, heard eleven distinct and individual voices for which he could not account.

And he was also satisfied that the movement of the luminous trumpet in the air was supernatural.

Shortly afterwards, even in daylight, he heard faint voices from inside Valiantine's trumpet. The medium was watched with hawk-like eyes. His lips never moved.

Such phenomena were too incredible to safeguard Valiantine from charges of fraud. Dennis Bradley always took up the cudgels on his behalf and cleared him of several lightly advanced accusations.

It was, therefore, a real sensation when, in 1931, Bradley himself washed his hands of this amazing man and made allegations of fraud.

But significantly, Valiantine was not accused on the count of the voices. Bradley desired to fingerprint the dead. Unknown to Valiantine, the plastic substance introduced into the seance room had been chemically prepared. An expert examination disclosed that the "supernormal" finger-prints obtained were made with Valiantine's toes and elbow and that his limbs were stained with the chemical.

That was bad enough. Worse, however, was that on the fatal night the spirits were also compromised. "Bert Everett," the dead brother-in-law of Valiantine, announced in his usual shrill tones from high in the air that Segrave was present and that an excellent imprint was made.

This part of the mystery was never cleared up. Bradley has no doubt that the voices were independent. Some of them he heard when Valiantine was not present. Was, then, "Bert Everett", the spirit, in league with Valiantine? The conclusion is difficult to escape.

And as it would be sheer lunacy to suppose that in the presence of experts such palpable fraud could be committed without detection, the incident must needs reflect on the combined incarnate and discarnate intelligence of the

Valiantine family.

The exposure affected not the voices in the least. Shortly after, Surgeon-Admiral Nimmo had two sittings in daylight. The voices which he heard came distinctly from the trumpet and gave intelligent and evidential communications from dead people.

In the presence of a second doctor the voices were heard again distinctly and intelligently. The doctors kept Valiantine's face during the phenomena under acute observation. They discovered no movement whatever on it.

Where and how does the voice originate? That the physiology of the medium is implicated is apparent from the fact that the voices are only heard in his presence.

Of the meaning and extent of this implication ectoplasmic studies are furnishing information to psychical research which are little short of revolutionizing physiology and psychology alike.