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[/tvbwebmaster@btinternet.com](mailto:tvbwebmaster@btinternet.com)



Miss Florence Cook (1856 – 1904)

Materialisation Medium

There is not much information available about Florence Cook before 1871 when she reached the age of 15 years. Although she had been aware of spirit throughout her life, this was put down to her having a '*vivid imagination.*' At 15 she was invited to a friend's for a tea party, one of these friends suggested a table turning experiment, to which she promptly refused to participate. However, on a second suggestion of the proposal being made, and with the consent of her mother, Florence agreed to participate in the experiment. At this first sitting extraordinary things started to happen and the table became unmanageable and Florence was levitated.

It became apparent to Florence's mother that, what she had been telling her during her childhood must have been right and that the spirits were trying to make use of her skills.

As a result Mrs. Cook and Florence began to sit at home by themselves, during one of these sessions Florence's hand began to write. The message that came through was in mirror writing and told her that she should seek out a certain bookseller and inquire about the 'Dalston Society' and that a meeting would take place within a few days and there she would be able to make the acquaintance of

the editor of '*The Spiritualist*'. For some time after this meeting she gave séances to the 'Dalston Society'. During this time she was able to sit with other physical mediums; Frank Herne and Charles Williams, sitting with Herne in her father's house.

She soon gave up the Dalston sittings because the manifestation became too strong and embarrassing for a public assembly, she was often carried over the heads of sitters where invisible hands stripped her of her clothing, and then replaced them again. Mrs. Cook decided that she was only to sit at home with herself. It was during these sittings at home that she often became entranced. It was during these trance states that 'Katie King' made herself known. She was the daughter of John King, alias 'Captain Henry Owen Morgan' the Welsh buccaneer and pirate. During these sittings Katie promised to remain with her for three years and that during this time she promised to reveal many strange things. The promise was generously kept.

Still at only fifteen, she lost her job as a teacher due to the poltergeist type activity that occurred whenever she was present at the school. As a consequence she was able to devote her time fully to her development as a physical medium.

The Hackney Circle was formed and consisted of Florence's parents, her two sisters, who were also mediums, and Mary, the maid. The circle soon became famous and Mr. Charles Blackburn a wealthy citizen of Manchester, guaranteed Florence an annual retaining fee, to enable her to be free to give her service when required.

Florence encouraged a lively and happy atmosphere at her séances, believing that this assisted the phenomena to occur. This was probably promoted by Katie King as she was already known for her fun loving attitude. She was the first British medium who exhibited full materialisations in good light. The first attempt was made by Katie King in April 1872. A Face that resembled a death mask appeared between the curtains of the cabinet. It is curious to note from a letter from Miss Cook, to Mr. Harrison that previously in the afternoon, Katie, told us "that we must give her a bottle of phosphorescent oil because she could not get the phosphorus that was necessary from my body because my mediumship was not sufficiently developed." The bottle of oil was employed in the place of psychic light and lit up Katie's face. At this stage of development the medium was still conscious. Later she passed into trance.

As time went on and Florence got more practice, Katie King was able to show herself much more clearly. Her face was felt and found to be hollow at the back, but it later filled out. The drapery became less abundant and a year later Katie walked out of the cabinet. Shortly afterwards she stood and posed for the first ordeal of flashlight photography. This created another problem as her resemblance to the medium did not go unnoticed. She could not help it. To

prove that she was distinct from Florence, Katie changed the colour of her face from white to chocolate and then jet black. As further proof, Florence was tied by the sitters or sometimes by the spirits in the cabinet. Moreover, Katie King was different in stature, manner and personality.

It was reserved for Sir William Crook's to furnish the proof of Katie's separate existence. The report of his long series of experiments with Miss Cook, which were conducted in his laboratory and the Cook home, was published in 1874 and came under a storm of ridicule, sarcasm and protest. Prior to his report he felt prompted to come before the public in defense of Miss Cook in a curious incident.

On December 9th 1873, The Earl and Countess of Caithness and Count de Medina Pomar were the guests of Mr. Cook; Mr. Volckman, one of the other guests present became suspicious of Katie King, rushed forward, seized her hand, then her waist. A struggle ensued in which two of the medium's friends went to Katie's help who, in the testimony of Mr. Henry Dumphy, a barrister – appeared to loose her feet and legs and made a movement similar to that of a seal in water. According to his version Katie glided out of Mr. Volckman's grip, leaving no trace of corporal existence or surroundings in the shape of clothing. According to Volckman, she was forcibly freed. The incontestable fact, however, was that five minutes later when the excitement subsided and the cabinet was opened. Miss Cook was found in black dress and boots with the tape tightly round her waist as it was at the beginning of the séance, the know sealed with the signet ring of the Earl of Caithness and untampered with as at first. She was subsequently searched but no trace of white drapery was discovered.

As a result of this ordeal the medium became ill and Sir William Crook's came forward, in three letters in the Spiritualist Press, with his experience with Florence Cook. In his first letter he said that when 'Katie' was standing before him in the room in the house of

Mr. Luxmoore, he had distinctly heard from behind the curtain of the cabinet, the sobbing and moaning of Miss Cook from the pangs of trance. The second and third letters contained accounts of séances held in Crook's own house, and at Hackney.

Describing how Katie took his arm when walking:

“The temptation to repeat a recent celebrated experiment became almost Irresistible. Feeling, however, if I had not a spirit I had all events a close to me, I asked her permission to clasp her in my arms so as to be able to verify the interesting observations which a bold experimentalist had recently somewhat verbosely recorded. Permission was graciously given and I accordingly did well any gentleman would under the circumstances. Mr. Volckman will be pleased to know that I can corroborate his statement that the 'ghost' (not struggling however) was as material as Miss Cook herself.

On March 12th 1874, Katie came to the opening of the curtain and summoned him to the assistance of the medium. Katie was in white. Crook's immediately went into the cabinet and found Miss Cook, clad in her ordinary black velvet dress, lying across the sofa. Katie vanished.

During a séance on March 29th, evidence of the simultaneous appearance of both Katie and Florence were obtained. Katie allowed Crook's into the cabinet again and from the shorthand notes taken at the time, Crook's quotes his experience.

"I went cautiously into the cabinet, it being dark, and felt around for Miss Cook. I found her crouching on the floor. Kneeling down, I let air into the phosphorus lamp, and by its light I saw the young lady dressed in black velvet as she had been in the early part of the evening, and to all appearances perfectly senseless; she did not move when I took her hand and held the light quite close to her face, but continued quietly breathing. Raising the lamp I looked around and saw Katie standing close behind Miss Cook. She was robed in flowing white drapery as we had seen her previously during the séance. Holding one of Miss Cook's hands in mine, and still kneeling, I passed the lamp up and down so as to illuminate Katie's whole figure, and satisfy myself thoroughly that I was really looking at the veritable Katie, whom I had clasped in my arms a few minutes before and not at the phantasm of a disorientated brain. She did not speak but moved her head in recognition. Three separate times did I carefully examine Miss Cook, crouching before me to be sure that the hand I held was that of a living woman, and three separate times did I turn the lamp to Katie and examine her with steadfast scrutiny until I had no doubt whatever of her objective reality."

He also noticed that a blister that showed on Miss Cook's neck, was not visible on Katie's neck, and that Katie's ears were not pierced for ear rings were Miss Cook's were.

On March 1874, one of the many precautionary measures taken by Crook's to prevent fraud was the electrical test devised by Cromwell Varley, of the Royal Society. The medium was placed in an electric circuit connected with a resistance coil and a galvanometer. The movements of the galvanometer were shown in the outer room to the sitters on a large graduated scale. Had the medium removed the wires, the galvanometer would have shown violent fluctuations. Nothing suspicious occurred, yet Katie appeared, waved her arms

about, shook hands with her friends and wrote in their presence. When the séance was over, the wires were found attached to Florence exactly as they were attached at the start.

As an additional test, Crook's, asked Katie to plunge her hands into a chemical solution. No deflection of the galvanometer was noticed. This would have been infallibly the case if Katie had had the wires on her because the solution would have modified the current.

On May 21st, 1874, Crooks witnessed the farewell meeting between Miss Cook and Katie behind the curtain. Katie woke Miss Cook from her trance. The farewell was very moving. They were talking affectionately and Miss Cook shed many tears. She never saw Katie again. All sitters were given a wonderful gift from Katie when she left a single flower.

After Crook's became involved in Florence's mediumship 1872, he wrote in the *Spiritualist* (April 1874) of a recent séance, and related how, 'Katie never appeared to greater perfection, and for nearly two hours she walked about the room, conversing familiarly with those present'. Unfortunately, Katie's forwardness and Crooke's fondness of her that has soured his involvement ever since: Crooke's response to Katie caused offence amongst some spiritualist observers who were apparently unimpressed by Crooks' standard of morality and scientific impartiality. There were accusations about Crooke's allowing fraud to be committed by Florence due to the relationship with her.

About Crooke's involvement with Florence's mediumship and the accusations made against him, which could be viewed as an invalidation of some of Florence's mediumship. Firstly, Crooks brought on his own back, much of the criticism directed at him; for example, he was inconsistent with his attitude and impartiality about Florence. He then made an unwise comment, quoting from '*Don Juan*' to describe Katie's beauty. In 1874, he wrote that he had been unable to obtain proof that the dead were able to communicate, and believed that spirit communications might originate from non-human agencies rather than from the dead.

Fortunately, despite all else, the mediumship of Florence Cook stood firm the test of time and was not dependant on the testimony of Crook's.

After Katie left another influence took her place who called herself 'Marie'. Marie danced and sang in a professional style but on 9th January 1880, Marie was grabbed by Sir George Sitwell. She did not dissolve like Katie did. It was in fact the Medium, Florence, wearing only her corsets and flannel petticoat. The divested pieces of garment were brought out of the cabinet by another sitter. This time the medium did not fall ill. In spite of the ordeal, Florence fulfilled another séance the next morning, but according to Florence Marryat, following this exposure she declined to sit unless someone remained in the cabinet with

her. The choice fell onto the authoress. She was tied too her with a stout rope and remained attached to her in this way for the whole of evening. Marie appeared, sang and danced just the same as the day before when she was seized. Owing to the many trials that she had to undergo, the medium who since 1874, was known by her married name of Mrs. Elgie Corner, for some time gave up public mediumship. In 1899, on the invitation of the Sphinx Society she sat, under test conditions, in Berlin. Marie materialized and produced astounding phenomena. The question as to whether she was occasionally a fraud is a very delicate one. The Sitwell exposure was the only condemnatory evidence ever found or, to our knowledge produced.

An example of the many testimonies given concerning Florence Cook's mediumship is that of Aksakoff, a Russian aristocrat; he reported how, when attending a séance, the medium was bound with twined tape and sealed knots, and her hands were brought behind her back and these were also bound. Then, a lengthy piece of tape was fixed to her that was brought outside from where she was sitting; this would indicate any movement by her. After a short period, and light from the lamp being present, they saw a human figure standing upright...it was completely clad in white...that was Katie...all the time the sitting lasted Katie chatted away with the sitters. Katie asked if there were any questions and Aksakoff asked to see Florence; Katie invited him to where Florence sat and on not being able to see her adequately was told by Katie to use the lamp. He did so and there was Florence, in a deep trance...sitting on a chair, with both her hands bound fast behind her back.

Such occasions were important as the common challenge was that Katie King and Florence Cook was in fact the same person, as they were very similar in appearance. Apart from Crook's seeing both women at the same time during a séance on March 29th, 1874, Katie was taller than Florence, her ears were not pierced as were Florence's, her face was larger, her hair was a different colour, together with other physical difference, Florence always wore black velvet during her séances, but Katie was always clad in white apparel. Furthermore, at one séance, Florence was suffering from a blister on her neck, but when Katie materialized, no blister was present on her. There was also an occasion were dye was placed on Florence's hands but none was found on Katie. This list goes on and on, without mention of the numbers of photographs that were taken. Crook's himself took forty four.

I think that we can safely say that Florence Cook was no fraud, magician or clever trickster. As indicated by DD Home. She was a genuine medium who, for what ever reason was caught, just once, performing a fraudulent act. Why? Only she could answer that. But it is not impossible that she was unaware of her performance whilst in a trance state. There have been many mediums who have been accused of fraud in the past, some were fraudulent, and some were genuinely unaware of what they were doing or were controlled by an unexplainable and irresistible desire to do it.

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