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THE HISTORY OF SPIRITUALISM VOLUME II

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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I. The Career Of Eusapia Palladino

THE mediumship of Eusapia Palladino marks an important stage in the history of psychical research, because she was the first medium for physical phenomena to be examined by a large number of eminent men of science. The chief manifestations that occurred with her were the movement of objects without contact, the levitation of a table and other objects, the levitation of the medium, the appearance of materialized hands and faces, lights, and the playing of musical instruments without human contact. All these phenomena took place, as we have seen, at a much earlier date with the medium D.D. Home, but when Sir William Crookes invited his scientific brethren to come and examine them they declined. Now for the first time these strange facts were the subject of prolonged investigation by men of European reputation. Needless to say, these experimenters were at first sceptical in the highest degree, and so-called "tests" (those often silly precautions which may defeat the very object aimed at) were the order of the day. No medium in the whole world has been more rigidly tested than this one, and since she was able to convince the vast majority of her sitters, it is clear that her mediumship was of no ordinary type. It is little use pointing out that no psychic researcher should be admitted to the séance room without at least some elementary knowledge of the complexities of mediumship and the right conditions for its unfoldment, or without, for instance, an understanding of the basic truth that it is not the medium alone, but the sitters equally, who are factors in the success of the experiment. Not one scientific man in a thousand recognizes this, and the fact that Eusapia triumphed in spite of such a tremendous handicap is an eloquent tribute to her powers.

The mediumistic career of this humble, illiterate Neapolitan woman, of surpassing interest as well as of extreme importance in its results, supplies yet another instance of the lowly being used as the instrument to shatter the sophistries of the learned. Eusapia was born on January 21, 1854, and died in 1918. Her mediumship began to manifest itself when she was about fourteen years of age.

Her mother died at her birth, and her father when she was twelve years old. At the house of friends with whom she went to stay she was persuaded to sit at a table with others. At the end of ten minutes the table was levitated, the chairs began to dance, the curtains in the room to swell, and glasses and bottles to move about. Each sitter was tested in turn to discover who was responsible for the movements, and in the end it was decided that Eusapia was the medium. She took no interest in the proceedings, and only consented to have further sittings to please her hosts and prevent herself from being sent to a convent. It was not until her twenty-second or twenty-third year that her Spiritualistic education began, and then, according to M. Flammarion, it was directed by an ardent Spiritualist, Signor Damiani.

In connexion with this period Eusapia relates a singular incident. At Naples an English lady who had become the wife of Signor Damiani was told at a table séance by a spirit, giving the name of John King, to seek out a woman named Eusapia, the street and the number of the house being specified. He said she was a powerful medium through whom he intended to manifest. Madame Damiani went to the address indicated and found Eusapia Palladino, of whom she had not previously heard. The two women held a séance and John King controlled the medium, whose guide or control he continued ever after to be.

Her first introduction to the European scientific world came through Professor Chiaia, of Naples, who in 1888 published in a journal issued in Rome a letter to Professor Lombroso, detailing his experiences and inviting this celebrated alienist to investigate the medium for

himself. It was not until 1891 that Lombroso accepted this invitation, and in February of that year he had two sittings with Eusapia in Naples. He was converted, and wrote: "I am filled with confusion and regret that I combated with so much persistence the possibility of the facts called Spiritualistic." His conversion led many important scientific men in Europe to investigate, and from now onward Madame Palladino was kept busy for many years with test sittings.

Lombroso's Naples sittings in 1891 were followed by the Milan Commission in 1892, which included Professor Schiaparelli, Director of the Observatory of Milan; Professor Gerosa, Chair of Physics; Ermacora, Doctor of Natural Philosophy; M. Aksakof, Councillor of State to the Emperor of Russia; Charles du Prel, Doctor of Philosophy in Munich; and Professor Charles Richet, of the University of Paris. Seventeen sittings were held. Then came investigations in Naples in 1893; in Rome, 1893-4; in Warsaw, and France, in 1894 – the latter under the direction of Professor Richet, Sir Oliver Lodge, Mr. F.W.H. Myers, and Dr. Ochorowicz; in 1895 at Naples; and in the same year in England, at Cambridge, in the house of Mr. F.W.H. Myers, in the presence of Professor and Mrs. Sidgwick, Sir Oliver Lodge and Dr. Richard Hodgson. They were continued in 1895 in France at the house of Colonel de Rochas; in 1896 at Tremezzo, at Auteuil, and at Choisy Yvrac; in 1897 at Naples, Rome, Paris, Montfort, and Bordeaux; in Paris in November, 1898, in the presence of a scientific committee composed of MM. Flammarion, Charles Richet, A. de Rochas, Victorien Sardou, Jules Claretie, Adolphe Bisson, G. Delanne, G. de Fontenay, and others; also in 1901 at the Minerva Club in Geneva, in the presence of Professors Porro, Morselli, Bozzano, Venzano, Lombroso, Vassallo, and others. There were many other experimental sittings with scientific men, both in Europe and in America.

Professor Chiaia, in his letter to Professor Lombroso already referred to, gave this picturesque description of the phenomena occurring with Eusapia. He invited him to observe a special case which he considers worthy of the serious attention of the mind of a Lombroso, and continues:

The case I allude to is that of an invalid woman who belongs to the humblest class of society. She is nearly thirty years old and very ignorant; her look is neither fascinating nor endowed with the power which modern criminologists call irresistible; but when she wishes, be it by day or by night, she can divert a curious group for an hour or so with the most surprising phenomena. Either bound to a seat or firmly held by the hands of the curious, she attracts to her the articles of furniture which surround her, lifts them up, holds them suspended in the air like Mahomet's coffin, and makes them come down again with undulatory movements, as if they were obeying her will. She increases their weight or lessens it according to her pleasure. She raps or taps upon the walls, the ceiling, the floor, with fine rhythm and cadence. In response to the requests of the spectators, something like flashes of electricity shoot forth from her body, and envelop her or enwrap the spectators of these marvellous scenes. She draws upon cards that you hold out, everything that you want—figures, signatures, numbers, sentences—by just stretching out her hand toward the indicated place.

If you place in the corner of the room a vessel containing a layer of soft clay, you find after some moments the imprint in it of a small or a large hand, the image of a face (front view or profile) from which a plaster cast can be taken. In this way portraits of a face taken at different angles have been preserved, and those who desire so to do can thus make serious and important studies.

This woman rises in the air, no matter what bands tie her down. She seems to be upon the empty air, as on a couch, contrary to all the laws of gravity; she plays on musical instruments—organs, bells, tambourines – as if they had been touched by her hands or moved