

DENYS PARSONS

TESTIMONY AND TRUTH

‘When the mind is once pleased with certain things, it draws all others to consent, and to go along with them; and though the power and number of instances that make for the contrary are greater, yet it either attends not to them, or despises them, or else removes them by a distinction, with a strong and pernicious prejudice to maintain the authority of the first choice unviolated. And hence in most cases of superstition, as of Astrology, Dreams, Omens, Judgements, etc., those who find pleasure in such kind of vanities *always observe where the event answers, but slight and pass by the instances where it fails, which are the much more numerous.* — FRANCIS BACON: *Novum Organum*. I. xlv.

THE recent trial at the Old Bailey of the materializing medium Helen Duncan, and three others, and their conviction of offences under the Witchcraft Act of 1735, raises again the question of the reliability of human testimony generally, and in particular of the testimony of sitters at a dark-room spiritualist séance. The jury of six men and one woman heard contradictory evidence given sincerely and convincingly by intelligent witnesses on both sides.¹

In the whole history of Spiritualism and Psychical Research there have been few more hotly debated cases than that of the mediumship of Helen Duncan. A great number of people believe implicitly in the genuineness of her phenomena; their belief persisted after her previous conviction at Edinburgh in 1933, and is unlikely to be shaken by the verdict of the jury at the Old Bailey.

Mrs. Duncan is what is known as a ‘materializing’ or ‘physical’ medium because she claims to be able to materialize in the ‘ectoplasm’ produced by her own body, the spirits of departed relatives, friends, and even animals of the sitters. She has been described as a common fraud, and indeed fraud undeniably forms part of her make-up, but *common* fraud she certainly is not, because her amazing phenomena have never been satisfactorily explained.

Harry Price, who has exposed many a fraudulent medium, conducted a series of sittings with Mrs. Duncan in 1931. The

¹ An appeal has been lodged and the case is likely to remain *sub judice* at the time of going to press. Comment on the trial must therefore be restricted.

precautions taken against fraud were elaborate, and included a thorough medical examination of the medium immediately before the sitting, after which she was sewn up in a special one-piece black séance-suit and escorted to her place in the 'cabinet'. In spite of this, ectoplasm and spirit heads duly made their appearance, and Price developed his 'Regurgitation Theory'. He is convinced that all the phenomena can be explained on the assumption that the medium swallows cheese-cloth and other materials before the séance and subsequently regurgitates them in the dark seclusion of the cabinet. He points out that regurgitation has long been known to medical science; the frog-swallowers of country fairs are said to make use of a secondary stomach or œsophageal diverticulum. (H. Price: *Regurgitation and the Duncan Mediumship*.)

When Price had reached this conclusion he offered Mrs. Duncan a large cash sum and his cachet of genuineness if she would give a séance after a stomach examination under anæsthetic. She appeared to agree, but before the séance was due to take place she fled to Scotland. At about the same time the London Spiritualist Alliance, part of whose policy is an acknowledged belief in Survival, issued an unfavourable report on the medium in which they also concluded that regurgitation was the explanation. (*Light*, 17 July 1931 and May 1944.)

Inspection of the photographs¹ taken at Duncan sittings certainly gives one an overwhelming impression that the ectoplasm and spirits are of mundane and not of spiritual origin. What appear to be the warp, weft, and selvedge of butter-muslin can be clearly identified, as can rents and folds in the material, and in other photographs we can pick out unmistakably a rubber glove, a safety-pin, and dolls' heads or masks. On four or five occasions the investigators were allowed to cut off small pieces of 'ectoplasm'. Analysis showed these to be identical with paper or cotton gauze mixed sometimes with albumen or resin.

Nevertheless the regurgitation theory is not entirely satisfactory; if we accept it we must believe that Mrs. Duncan can swallow before the séance six or seven feet of 30-inch width butter-muslin or cheese-cloth, a rubber glove, portraits cut from

¹ The photographs accompanying this article are reproduced by kind permission of Mr. Harry Price. They appear in his book *Leaves from a Psychist's Case-book*.

magazines, pins, etc., regurgitating them during the séance and swallowing them once more without trace. Moreover, Mrs. Duncan has since been X-rayed (though not at the time of a séance) and found to have a completely normal stomach and œsophagus. Witnesses have testified that they have seen her consume large meals before séances. Unfortunately it was not stated that a medical examination was made in these cases; in the absence of a medical examination it is not impossible that 'ectoplasm' had been concealed elsewhere. (According to Price, fraudulent mediums have been known to conceal 'ectoplasm' and small 'apports' in the mouth, nostrils, rectum, vagina, under the arms, in the hair, etc.)

The most interesting aspect of trials under the Witchcraft and Vagrancy Acts is the testimony of witnesses for the defence. After prosecution witnesses have declared that in the dim light only the vague outlines of a white material could be seen, twenty-five or thirty defence witnesses testify that they identified their husbands, wives, or mothers, beyond all possibility of doubt. The points of recognition include mannerisms of speech and movement, foreign dialects, and distinguishing marks such as moles on the face. Now the witnesses on both sides are ordinary intelligent people, many of them holding responsible positions, but both sides cannot be right.

A study of the literature makes one incline to Bacon's view that the 'will to believe' is a powerful factor in our judgements of supernormal events. Thus D. D. Home, a physical medium of repute, in his book *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism*, 1878 (p. 342), quotes part of the confession of an exposed physical medium: 'At the first séance I held after it became known to the Rochester people that I was a medium, a gentleman from Chicago recognized his daughter Lizzie in me after I had covered my small moustache with a piece of flesh-coloured cloth, and reduced the size of my face with a shawl I had hung up in the back of the cabinet. From this sitting my fame commenced to spread.' In *Revelations of a Spirit Medium* (anonymous), a book which has the ring of truth in every line, another American medium tells how he purchased a toy wire-gauze mask which he held out at sittings, in front of a luminous handkerchief: 'That wire mask has been recognized by dozens of persons as fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers and cousins, sweethearts, wives, husbands, and

various other relatives and friends.' Elsewhere in the book he says: 'After all it is not always the excellence of the work so much as the ignorance of the observer that makes many things appear wonderful. . . . The writer was himself under the eye and in the pay of a gentleman investigator for three years, not only not being detected in any tricks but making a firm Spiritualist of him.'

The valuable work of the Society for Psychical Research during the past sixty years includes investigations into the reliability of human testimony. An important investigation was conducted in 1887 by Richard Hodgson in collaboration with S. J. Davey, an amateur conjuror. At the time 'psychography' or psychic slate-writing was much in fashion due to the activities of the well-known—but undoubtedly fraudulent—mediums, Slade and Eglinton. A large number of sittings was held and the investigators collected from many intelligent people, including professional conjurers, testimonials to Davey's 'wonderful supernatural powers'. When Davey subsequently announced that all his effects were produced by trickery, the Spiritualists were, perhaps justifiably, annoyed, but one or two indeed would not accept Davey's explanation, maintaining that at their own sittings with him real psychography *was* manifested; and challenged him in effect to prove that he was *not* a medium!

More recently (1931) the Society for Psychical Research undertook an elaborate experiment designed by Theodore Besterman with the express purpose of examining the sort of evidence obtained at sittings with a physical medium. A dummy séance was held, to resemble as closely as possible a real spiritualist séance. A lady member of the Society took the part of the medium and sat in front of the curtained 'cabinet' with the usual variety of musical instruments—trumpet, xylophone, tambourine, zither, and bell—on a table in front of her. Other members acted as sitters. Besterman made it clear that the séance was not a real one, and asked everybody to pay particular attention. During the séance he dimmed and brightened the lights, started and stopped the gramophone twice, made a flash-light exposure, and so on. On one occasion, at a pre-arranged knock on the door, he left the room and returned immediately, putting a white card in his pocket. At the end of the sitting, which lasted 25 minutes, the sitters adjourned to the next room

to answer a questionnaire. The results were most instructive.

Forty-two sitters took part in the experiment, six identical sittings being held with seven persons present at each. Question 3 was: 'Early in the sitting there was a disturbance. Describe what happened.' Of the 42 sitters, 11 failed to give any account of the knock-on-the-door incident; of the remaining 31 sitters who mentioned the knock, 13 did not report the opening of the door and only four reported the important fact that Besterman put something in his pocket on returning. During the sitting the 'medium' moved a small hand-bell in good light from one end of the table to the other. The question, 'What object did the medium move?' produced correct replies from only 18 of the 42 sitters. Even more striking was the fact that 13 sitters experienced illusions of one kind or another. Thus two sitters reported the bell as a glass of water! Another sitter referred to a candle on the table though there was none there. Others experienced illusions of movement: 'Immediately after the flashlight photograph four objects jerked up and down in a zig-zag pattern'. Three sitters, one of them a psychologist, reported movements of the table which did not in fact take place.

It must be emphasized that these marked defects of observation and memory, and the illusions, took place on occasions when there was no suggestive atmosphere, no emotional stress, and when every sitter was on the *qui vive* in anticipation of the questionnaire. How much reliance, then, are we to place on the statements of emotionally tense persons sitting in dim light, in an atmosphere of religious fervour, and actuated by the powerful desire to get in touch with their departed relatives?

The experiments of Claparède at Geneva University in 1906 are relevant to the Duncan case. Claparède arranged for a masked figure to enter his lecture-room unexpectedly, create a disturbance, and retire after 20 seconds. A week later 23 students were asked to pick out the mask used from ten others of different types. *Only five of the 23 answered correctly*: four others choosing the correct mask jointly with another one, unable to make a final decision. Six of the masks, only one of which was even remotely like the one worn by the figure, were wrongly chosen by one or more students. Indeed, it is unnecessary to have recourse to the supernormal for cases of mistaken identity. Police officers and magistrates are very familiar with them, and

interesting cases appear from time to time in the daily Press.

As an example of the lengths to which any one of us may be led by the will to believe, we have the famous story of the adventure at Versailles. (*An Adventure*, by C. A. E. Moberly and E. F. Jourdain, 1911.) Two distinguished scholars, ladies of more than average intelligence, spent an afternoon together at Versailles wandering round the gardens of the Petit Trianon. They saw nothing strange enough to occasion any surprise or excite comment; in fact they neither discussed nor thought about their visit until *a whole week later*, when Miss Moberly said to Miss Jourdain: 'Do you think that the Petit Trianon is haunted?' She replied: 'Yes, I do,' and the ladies now exchanged their recollections of the visit, as a result of which they became convinced that they had been transported back in time from 1901 and had seen the buildings, gardens and people as they were in 1789. They had met liveried flunkies, seen a curious plough, and had stumbled upon Marie Antoinette herself sketching in the gardens. *Three months later* they first set down on paper their recollections of the 'adventure', and for the next ten years they spent the best part of their spare time examining old documents in the archives of the Palace and in consulting various authorities. They built up a mass of evidence to support their supernatural explanation—it seems never to have occurred to them to try to find a *normal* explanation. Those who have read the book will argue that the predictions made by the authors and verified by subsequent research afford conclusive proof of a psychic event. They should read *The Mystery of Versailles*, by J. R. Sturge-Whiting (1938), who points out a number of discrepancies in the original story and gives a normal explanation of the whole affair. These readers will then have a balanced picture of what happened at Versailles on that afternoon in August 1901.

A balanced picture—yes, that is the best we can hope to achieve, for Sturge-Whiting's book provides no *proof* that the events did not occur exactly as the two ladies relate. Any sceptic who would dismiss *a priori* the possibility of apparitions should first examine the enormous weight of evidence collected and sifted by the S.P.R. from cases of apparitions in normal healthy people. Compared with the Versailles case the evidence for some of these apparitions is of a much higher quality. (See *Apparitions and Haunted Houses*, by Sir Ernest Bennett, M.P., 1939; *Phantasms of the*

Living, by Gurney, Myers and Podmore, 1886; and *Apparitions*, by G. N. M. Tyrrell, 1942.) All these apparitions were subjective hallucinations of no physical substance, and could not be photographed. On several occasions cameras have been exposed with an apparition in full view, but nothing appeared on the plate. It is not very difficult to believe that hallucinations can and do occur at séances to sitters and medium under conditions so favourable for their production, but it is difficult to believe in spirit forms which can affect a photographic plate. (The evidence for spirit photography is voluminous but most unconvincing; the evidence against is formidable.)

The Spiritualists are as eager as the Psychical Researchers to settle once and for all the question of physical mediumship, and fortunately we shall not have to rely much longer on human testimony. After the war the technique of the infra-red cine-camera will become standard in all Psychical Research laboratories, thus doing away with the necessity for the unsatisfactory tactual control of the medium. Alternatively, if the medium complains (as Mrs. Duncan does) that the infra-red burns, she may be controlled indirectly by a network of 'electric eyes' (photo-electric cells) on the burglar-alarm principle. Other instruments will register 'psychic breezes' and changes of temperature if any.

It is time for *genuine* mediums to realize that they need some measure of protection against falling foul of the law, and that such protection is afforded by sittings *under test conditions with an independent scientific body*. Rudi Schneider, one of the best-known physical mediums, was tested by the Society for Psychical Research by Dr. Osty of the Institut Metapsychique in Paris, and by Harry Price of the National Laboratory for Psychical Research. The writer is convinced that charges of false pretences would have failed in face of expert testimony (backed by instrumental records) to his genuineness. Another medium well known forty years ago, Eusapia Palladino, was similarly tested by various authorities and pronounced genuine.

Now the surprise—Palladino was many times caught cheating by the investigators; she would cheat in the most naïve and ridiculous way, and admitted herself that she would 'help out' the phenomena if she could get a hand free. In some of the later Schneider sittings the control was unsatisfactory and the medium may have cheated. Yet these two mediums convinced the

arch-sceptics of many countries that they produced phenomena inexplicable by known laws. This paradox, that a medium caught red-handed in fraud may yet be capable of genuine phenomena, is only one of the difficulties encountered with physical mediums, and it emphasizes the need for the most elaborate control.

The early papers of Sir William Crookes, F.R.S. (then Mr. Crookes), on his investigations of the physical phenomena of D. D. Home are well worth reading. (*Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*, 1874.) Robert Browning ridiculed Home in 'Mr. Sludge, the medium', a poem of great length which begins:

'Now don't, sir! Don't expose me! Just this once!
This was the first and only time, I'll swear—
Look at me—see, I kneel, the only time,
I swear, I ever cheated—yes, by the soul
Of her who hears (your sainted mother, sir!)
All, except this last accident, was truth.'

Curiously enough, D. D. Home was one of the few physical mediums who have never been exposed.

Many Spiritualists complain that Psychical Research Societies will go to any lengths to expose mediums. This is not so; the psychical investigator is only anxious to find out the truth, and he is as pleased as anybody when positive results are obtained. He is nevertheless compelled by his fear of recording *spurious* positive results to adopt a higher standard of criticism, and moreover he is as critical of his own work as of that of others. Some who have sat with Mrs. Duncan say, 'My dear man! When one has seen the phenomena with one's own eyes it is futile to talk of test conditions and stomach examinations.' But having heard what Hodgson and Besterman have to say, can we really trust the evidence of our own eyes on these matters?

The onus is on the Spiritualists¹ to explain why materializations which they believe to be genuine, when photographed, bear every indication of fraudulent origin. Why is the ectoplasm indistinguishable from cheese-cloth? Why does the spirit hand look *exactly* like a rubber glove? Why does the stereoscopic camera show the spirit head to be a two-dimensional cut-out portrait? Why does analysis of the ectoplasm reveal that it

¹ By no means all Spiritualists support Mrs. Duncan, and of course Spiritualism does not stand or fall by physical mediumship.

consists of cotton or paper fibres mixed with albumen? These problems are not peculiar to Mrs. Duncan, but arise in nearly every case in which ectoplasm has been photographed. It is well worth spending half an hour examining the photographs in Baron von Schrenck-Notzing's massive book, *The Phenomena of Materialization*.

Mrs. Duncan offered to let her powers be tested in court, but the offer was declined. Let us hope that she will one day offer herself again for investigation to one of the research institutions; in the meantime her mediumship must be regarded as 'not proven'.

PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

Science and Psychical Phenomena, by G. N. M. Tyrrell (1938: abridgement shortly to appear in Pelican edition). The best book on the subject.

- *Fifty Years of Psychical Research*, by Harry Price (1939).

Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death, by F. W. H. Myers (1903, 1917).

How to go to a Medium, by E. J. Dingwall (1927).

PHYSICAL PHENOMENA AND MATERIALIZATION

Regurgitation and the Duncan Mediumship. Bulletin No. 1 of the National Laboratory for Psychical Research (1931).

Materialisationsphänomene, by A. von Schrenck-Notzing (1923), and English translation (1923).

The Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism, by Hereward Carrington (1920).

Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism, by Wm. Crookes (1874).

Rudi Schneider, by Harry Price (1930).

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

La Critique du Témoignage (1927), by François Gorphe, who gives 600 literature references.

The Principles of Judicial Proof, by John Wigmore (2nd edition, Boston, 1931).

Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, Vol. IV, pp. 45-74, 338-495; Vol. VIII, pp. 253-310; Vol. XL, pp. 365 ff., 'Besterman's Fake Séance'.

DECEPTIVE METHODS

H. Carrington: *op. cit.* H. Price; *Fifty Years* . . .

Revelations of a Spirit Medium (anonymous, 1891: facsimile edition edited by Price and Dingwall, 1922).

Few of the above books are available in public libraries, but they may be obtained from the libraries of the Society for Psychical Research, 31 Tavistock Square, W.C.1, and of the London Spiritualist Alliance, 16 Queensberry Place, S.W.7.

ENID STARKIE

ECCENTRICS
OF EIGHTEEN-THIRTY

II. LES BOUZINGOS

(a) PÉTRUS BOREL

THE literature of the period of unrest during the early years of the reign of Louis Philippe was a literature of extravagance, morbidity and indecency. Novels and stories abound in accounts of rape, incest, orgies and scandals. Typical of this literature is that of the *Bouzingo* movement, also called the *Jeunes France*. Théophile Gautier has related their eccentricities in a book of sketches called *Les Jeunes France*.

The chief *Bouzingos* were Gautier himself, Gerard de Nerval, Pétrus Borel, Philothée O'Neddy and some artists. At the time it was Pétrus Borel who was considered the most important and Gautier only reached fame after the end of the movement, when the star of the other poet had set.

The *Bouzingos* were the chief fighters in the *Bataille d'Hernani*, those who were responsible for the victory and, during the last years of the Restoration, were considered the brightest hopes of literature. The fame of Pétrus Borel in particular was very great, although he had not yet published anything. It used to be said in literary circles that when he began to print his poems, Victor Hugo would need to look to his laurels. In 1829 he was the unchallenged leader of the younger generation of writers and it was to him that Hugo turned—not to Gautier or to Gerard de Nerval—to organize the campaign for the *Bataille d'Hernani*.

Pétrus Borel, says Gautier in his *Histoire du Romantisme*, was the living incarnation of the spirit of poetry and not an ordinary mortal. At this time he looked as if he had stepped down from a picture by Velasquez and it would have been easy to imagine him slinking mysteriously through the streets of Seville in his cloak *couleur de muraille*. He had a haughty, condescending courtesy which made him different from his contemporaries for, although he was a rebel, he was not a rough Bohemian. It