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The Mediumship of Cecil Husk

Cecil Husk (1847-1920) was one of the many mediums who worked in Victorian England, and provided excellent evidence of survival through physical mediumship. Cecil was aware of his mediumistic abilities from his early childhood, experiencing clairvoyance and being accompanied by the unexplained movement of objects. Fortunately, Cecil's father was a Spiritualist, and Cecil therefore did not suffer the fate of other mediumistic children who were victimized by unthinking parents. It was in his teen years that his abilities appeared to develop: he recorded how, at this time, 'On several occasions persons that I did not recognise would open the door, walk into the room where I happened to be sitting, and without a word would just walk out again'.⁽¹⁾ added that although no speech occurred, he gained an impression of what they wished to convey to him.

Cecil sought to develop his mediumship, sitting two or three times a week, and through this, table-turning was achieved. His father, a professional singer, participated in these activities, although his mother was somewhat unenthusiastic. Cecil followed his father into the musical profession, eventually becoming a member of the Carl Rosa Opera Company, and while travelling on tour, gave sittings to those who wanted evidence of survival: he conducted séances on a regular basis from 1870, and from 1875, was able to facilitate materializations. When he experienced diminishing eyesight, he abandoned his career and embarked upon a lifetime of professional mediumship. Cecil had five guides, the primary one being 'John King', who was often involved in the work of other physical mediums in the nineteenth century.

Under the guides' control, Cecil's séances would be accompanied by 'the weird music of fairy bells which used to fly around the room playing tunes...[and] the heavy musical box which used to be wound up and lifted on to the table by unseen hands, and which then played its familiar melodies'. Moreover, the appearance of 'those spirit beings...who were recognised by their friends and relatives'.⁽²⁾ A considerable amount of information concerning Cecil's

mediumship was supplied by Florence Marryat when she detailed what was witnessed during the different séances attended from 1892. She described how, at the beginning of the séance, the sitters would hear Cecil's controls talking among themselves in their endeavour to begin the phenomena. In the case of the apparel used by the materialized forms, she noticed that 'when the full form dematerialises in sight, and goes down through the floor, the drapery invariably is left behind for a few seconds till it follows suit'. On one occasion when she attended a séance, John King explained how the process of materialization was a concerted effort and there was often difficulty in producing an exact replication of the person's physical body; this was, according to the guide, invariably because the spirits 'are in such haste that they render my task very difficult. That is why very often a spirit appears to his friends and they cannot recognise any likenesses. She relates one amusing incident when John Powles, a friend who had died, refused to use white apparel when he materialized. This led to an informative conversation between Marryat and John King: she asked him why white was preferred by most materializations and King replied that it was wholly unrelated to spiritual standing, as was often believed by sitters, but it helped to preserve the borrowed material form for a longer period of time. Marryat also reported how King refused to inform the sitters of who was about to materialize as he believed they should be recognized, and if this did not occur, it simply meant they had failed to attain sufficient strength and should make another attempt on a later occasion.

When Powles materialized, Marryat noted that he was dressed in tweed and 'looked exactly like himself and spoke quite distinctly'. One instance of quality evidence was when a young man materialized and walked up to a friend of Marryat, who was sitting next to her; however, the materialization was not recognized and was therefore asked what his relationship was to the sitter and he replied 'brother'. On then being asked his name, he replied, 'Willy'. After the séance ended, Marryat, who had noticed some physical similarity between the visitor and sitter, asked the sitter whether he knew of any brothers who had died and he replied that he had. He acknowledged that he had almost forgotten that before he was born, his mother had given birth to twins who had died shortly afterwards. One had been named William. Supplying a further example of excellent evidence, Marryat went on to detail the reunion with her own mother who had died on 13 February, 1883. Very shortly before her death, the mother had asked Marryat to sing the hymn 'Rock of Ages', and also made it very clear that she did not want flowers at her funeral, but Marryat decided that she could not comply with the request and placed violets on her body as it lay in its coffin: she told no one of this. Years later, at a séance with Cecil, the room became filled with the scent of violets, so much so that the different sitters began asking which one was wearing violet scent or powder. Not long afterwards, 'Rock of Ages' began to be heard. This was followed by a bunch of violets, still covered in dew, being thrust in Marryat's face and the voice of her mother saying, 'You were very naughty to put flowers on me when I told you not to do so'. Marryat seized the opportunity to ask her mother about her new life to which she replied

that she was happy, but 'added that it is all so very different from what I imagined'.

Marryat also referred to a séance when a young boy, who had died of food poisoning, materialized for his father who was present. She details how she saw the boy and 'heard him speak to his father of his home, mentioning everybody there by name, enumerating the playthings and books he had left behind, and saying to whom he wished them given'. This was one example of the many occasions when parents were reunited with their children through Cecil's mediumship: 'I have seen mothers and fathers at these sittings, with the tears pouring down their cheeks, as they spoke with their children again'.⁽³⁾ One phenomenon that was often produced through Cecil's mediumship, was the passing of matter through matter; one of the more unusual features of this activity was the placing of a ring around his wrist. Dr George Wyld provided an oval ring that was so designed that it was too small to be fitted on the wrist by passing it over the medium's hand. Wyld held Cecil's hand and then found the ring had been placed on Cecil's wrist; he subsequently produced a yet smaller ring of solid iron, and once again, while Cecil's left hand was held, the ring was found to have been placed on his wrist. Cecil was examined by William Crookes, and three others, on 17 April 1885; after careful measurements were taken, it was noted that the internal circumference of the ring was 182.5mm, while the widest part of Cecil's hand, even after 'troughing', was 194mm. However, their conclusion was only that, 'we do not consider these conditions to be those best adapted', and 'we cannot infer that it is impossible that the ring should have come into the position in which we found it by known natural forces'.⁽⁴⁾ In sum, this particular exercise did not produce any definite judgement.

In old age, Cecil recorded how, when the feat was accomplished, he 'felt a shock go through my arm, and immediately felt the coldness of the ring encircling my wrist'. He went on to relate how 'I suppose I must have had my arm tugged and pulled at by hundreds of people...who tried to take the ring off, but there was no way of moving it. I am very much thinner now than I was, but it still cannot be taken off'.⁽⁵⁾ Cecil wore the ring until he died and indeed, according to Boddington, the ring, 'remained to his dying day a puzzle to conjurers and scientists alike'.⁽⁶⁾

When Cecil was interviewed about his mediumship, he revealed how the behaviour of some sitters had caused him ill-health and physical injury, e.g. they had pressed pins into him while in trance and turned on the light during a materialization séance. He had also suffered annoyance by mischievous spirits although his guides protected him from any harm in this respect. As so often happened in the era of Victorian physical mediumship, a cloud was cast over Cecil when, in 1890, some claimed that he had resorted to fraud at a public séance. Again, as so often happened, there were claims and counter-claims,

but the reality of the overall situation is surely demonstrated by the testimonials of those who sat with Cecil.

In the *Annals of Psychic Science* (July 1906), Henry Fotherby described the occasion when the materializations developed from a type of phosphorescent vapour in the air, and they were seen to have flecks of bright light, and made visible by the luminous slates 'which rose by themselves from the table'.⁽⁷⁾ Other witnesses testified to further paranormal activity, e.g. Gambier Bolton who saw, in his own house along with fourteen other investigators, Cecil levitated in his chair. When Admiral Moore attended séances conducted by Cecil in 1904, there was the movement of objects about the séance room, followed by the materialization of some fifteen persons.

Meads described an occasion when the Maharaja of Nepal visited this country in 1908 and had sittings with Cecil and Robert Boursnell, a medium through whom spirit photographs were facilitated. Through the agency of both mediums, those persons who appeared in the spirit photographs could be recognized when they also materialized through Cecil. Meads also attended a sitting with Cecil when materialized persons 'clearly showed their faces, but each gave her or his name'.⁽⁸⁾

Fodor relates an amusing incident when a sitter, during a period when communicators were speaking, asked whether they were using the medium's throat. Suddenly, a bellowing voice boomed close to him: 'Do you think that this is the medium's throat? If so, he must have a long neck'.⁽⁹⁾ It was also noted that communicators spoke in various different languages. Furthermore, the séances were sometimes accompanied by communicators singing in the different tones, and with considerable volume; this occurred even when Cecil was suffering illness. The extent of Cecil's mediumship is demonstrated by the letters written by those who attended his seances: George Davis, writing to *Two Worlds*, described how he had sat with Cecil during the previous four years. He related how in one séance, a woman whose husband had died only recently was greeted firstly by her only son who had also died, and then her husband: 'Both forms were instantly recognized by several in the circle'. He went on to report that, 'Three other forms appeared' accompanied by music being played. During all this time, Cecil sat with the other circle members.⁽¹⁰⁾

One witness to Cecil's mediumship was Sir William Barrett, a prominent figure in the SPR, and a person whose testimony carries significant weight. When he reviewed his years of research, he referred to having had only one experience of witnessing a materialization: this was with Cecil. He recounted how he and others met in a 'almost bare room', that had been lent for the occasion. Cecil's legs were tied to the table and his hands were held by the sitter on either side. He went into trance, whereupon lights appeared and began to dart about the room, accompanied by object movement. A voice was then heard that said he was John King; Barrett recorded: 'suddenly right in front of me appeared a

clothed human figure...The face was undoubtedly a living one, for I saw its eyes open and close and its lips move...[It was] quite unlike that of the medium'. Of this occasion, Barrett said it: 'seemed to be inexplicable by fraud'.⁽¹¹⁾ Sadly, Cecil's final years were spent in considerable discomfort. By 1917, he was bed-ridden, paralysed, and blind: however, he was given support by Spiritualists and well-wishers; through the setting-up of the Husk Fund, it was possible to support him financially and assist in the nursing that he needed. When interviewed in 1917, he remained cheerful and spoke of the continuing contact with John King; he also mentioned that his control had become involved in ministering to the soldiers slaughtered on the bloodied fields of Europe in the Great War and were passing into the next world (N.B. in this war, up to sixty thousand soldiers could die in a single day). Cecil observed that due to this situation, John King 'always seems so full of business, and simply calls as he is passing through'.⁽¹²⁾

References:

- (1) International Psychic Gazette, February 1916, p.141.
- (2) Ibid., p.141.
- (3) F. Marryat, *The Spirit World*, (London: F. V. White and Co., 1894), pp.194, 196,197,204,210,214 - 216,217,218.
- (4) W. Crookes and Others, 'Report On An Alleged Physical Phenomena', PSPR, December 1885, p.463.
- (5) International Psychic Gazette, Ibid., p.141.
- (6) H. Boddington, *The University of Spiritualism* (London: Spiritualist Press, 1947), p.448.
- (7) Cit., N. Fodor, *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* (London: Arthurs Press, 1933), p.178.
- (8) E. C. Meads, *The White Lotus* (London: Unicorn Press), pp.133-134.
- (9) Fodor, Op. Cit., p.178.
- (10) G. Davis, 'Materialisation Séance', *Two Worlds*, May 1889, p.313.
- (11) W. Barrett, *Death-Bed Visions*, rev. (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1986), pp.163,164.
- (12) Ct., International Psychic Gazette, August 1917, p.300.

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