

A Challenge to the Sceptic

By: Archie E. Roy.

"Don't confuse me with facts. My mind is made up."
Sam Goldwyn.

Any one of open mind who has made himself or herself thoroughly familiar with the investigations carried out by psychical researchers during the past hundred years and more has to accept that there is a wealth of evidence (of court of law strength) that paranormal phenomena of various kinds have occurred and still occur. They demand study and a satisfactory theory or theories to account for them

The ultra-sceptic, however, usually without more than a tiny fraction, if that, of the impressive research track records of a multitude of capable psychical researchers, arrogantly gives the impression, preferably before the media, that s/he knows what phenomena are possible in nature and what are not and that reports of any ostensible paranormal phenomena seemingly contradictory to established scientific laws must therefore be attributed to fraud, gullibility, wishful thinking and an inability to ascertain the truth even after many years of study by psychical researchers. The further fantasy of some sceptics - one totally against the time-tested scientific method of first ascertaining the facts before attempting to produce a theory to account for them - that uncomfortable facts can be ignored until a theory is found for them, may also be dismissed. To be blindingly obvious, in scientific research, new facts requiring an explanation present themselves before any possible explanation.

But all this is nothing new in psychical research in particular or science in general. The French Academy of Sciences scathingly dismissed the fact that rocks could fall from the skies (meteors) because there was no theory how large rocks could be lifted up into the skies. Early experimental data on radioactivity were likewise scorned. The list is endless.

In the light of evidence for the paranormal collected and studied by psychical researchers over the past century, perhaps we may be forgiven for suggesting that the fundamental sceptic's opinion is long past its sell-by date and is on a par with that of the believer in a Flat Earth or Hollow Earth theory in a world of artificial satellites whizzing round our planet.

But to anyone of open mind, perhaps new to the subject of psychical research and understandably wanting reliable information, there is a formidable and doubtless confusing jungle of books, good, bad and indifferent, devoted to the paranormal, together with countless articles and papers, long, short, non-technical and in a fraction of cases even oblivious to reasoned argument or heavy with jargon and seasoned with definitive statistical pronouncements, that have appeared in a variety of magazines and journals. They have been doing so for well over a century.

Many years ago my colleague Montague Keen and I put together a list of over twenty cases which we used to challenge any fundamentalist sceptic who denied that any cases existed supporting the opinion that paranormal phenomena occurred. Among the list were:

1. The Watseka Wonder, 1887. Stevens, E.W. 1887 *The Watseka Wonder*, Chicago; Religio-philosophical Publishing House, and Hodgson R., *Religio-Philosophical Journal* Dec. 20th, 1890, investigated by Dr. Hodgson.

2. Uttara Huddar and Sharada. Stevenson I. and Pasricha S, 1980. A preliminary report on an unusual case of the reincarnation type with Xenoglossy. *JASPR* 74, 331-348; and Akolkar V.V. Search for Sharada: Report of a case and its investigation. *JASPR* 86,209-247.

3. Sumitra and Shiva Tripathi. Stevenson I. and Pasricha S, and McLean-Rice, N 1989. A Case of the Possession Type in India with evidence of Paranormal Knowledge. *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 3, 81-101.

4. Jasbir Lal Jat. Stevenson, I, 1974. *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation (2nd edition)* Charlottesville: University Press of

Virginia.

5. The Thompson/Gifford case. Hyslop, J.H. 1909. A Case of Veridical Hallucinations, PASPR 3, 1-469.
6. Past-life regression. Tarazi, L. 1990. An Unusual Case of Hypnotic Regression with some Unexplained Contents. JASPR, 84, 309-344.
7. Cross-correspondence communications. Jean (Countess of Balfour) 1958-60 The Palm Sunday Case: New Light On an Old Love Story. PSPR, 52, 79-267.
8. "Bim's" book-test. Lady Glenconner. 1921. *The Earthen Vessel*, London, John Lane.
9. The Harry Stockbridge communicator. Gauld, A. 1966-72. A Series of Drop-in Communicators. PSPR 55, 273-340.
10. The Bobby Newlove case. Thomas, C. D. 1935. A proxy case extending over Eleven Sittings with Mrs. Osborne Leonard. PSPR 43, 439-519.
11. The Runki missing leg case. Haraldsson E. and Stevenson, I, 1975. A Communicator of the Drop-in Type in Iceland: the case of Runolfur Runolfsson. JASPR 69. 33-59.
12. The Beidermann drop-in case. Gauld, A. 1966-72. A Series of Drop-in Communicators. PSPR 55, 273-340.
13. The death of Gudmundur Magnusson. Haraldsson E. and Stevenson, I, 1975. A Communicator of the Drop-in Type in Iceland: the case of Gudni Magnusson, JASPR 69, 245-261.
14. Identification of deceased officer. Lodge, O. 1916. *Raymond, or Life and Death*. London. Methuen & Co. Ltd.
15. Mediumistic evidence of the Vandy death. Gay, K. 1957. The Case of Edgar Vandy, JSPR 39, 1-64; Mackenzie, A. 1971. An Edgar Vandy Proxy Sitting. JSPR 46, 166-173; Keen, M. 2002. The case of Edgar Vandy: Defending the Evidence, JSPR 64.3 247-259; Letters, 2003, JSPR 67.3. 221-224.
16. Mrs Leonora Piper and the George "Pelham" communicator. Hodgson, R. 1897-8. A Further Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance. PSPR, 13, 284-582.
17. Messages from "Mrs. Willett" to her sons. Cummins, G. 1965. *Swan on a Black Sea*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
18. Ghostly aeroplane phenomena. Fuller, J.G. 1981 *The Airmen Who Would Not Die*, Souvenir Press, London.
19. Intelligent responses via two mediums: the Lethe case. Piddington, J.G. 1910. Three incidents from the Sittings. PSPR 24, 86-143; Lodge, O. 1911. Evidence of Classical Scholarship and of Cross-Correspondence in some New Automatic Writing. PSPR 25, 129-142.

All the above cases, except 15, 18 and 19, are given in detail in my book *The Archives of the Mind*. Many are also given in Professor Stephen Braude's book *Immortal Remains*.

For my first challenge to the sceptic, I will choose the Lethe Case (No 19 in the list above) which, apart from its intrinsic support for the reality of paranormal phenomena, is also a first step for the interested reader in coming to some appreciation of why the Cross-Correspondences are taken seriously by so many psychical researchers. The Cross-Correspondences was the name given to the enormous production of automatic scripts written by a group of psychics during the first thirty years of the 20th century and studied by eminent psychical researchers such as Gerald Balfour, Sir Oliver Lodge and J.G.Piddington. Ultimately they came to believe that these scripts were being produced by the surviving personalities of their friends Frederic Myers, Edmund Gurney and Henry Sidgwick in an effort to prove conclusively that they had survived the transition we call death. The study of the scripts is notoriously difficult and anyone interested in them would do well to read the section on them in Alan Gauld's book *Mediumship and Survival*, followed by G.N.M.Tyrrell's account of them in his book *The Personality of Man*. H.F.Saltmarsh's book *Evidence of Personal Survival from Cross-Correspondences* and W.H.Salter's privately printed book *An Introduction to the Study of Scripts*, are also worth seeking out. It is unfortunate that *all* four of them are out of print, any remaining copies of them outside the public libraries probably only to be found in second-hand bookshops buried under mountains of the ghosted (the correct publishing term!) literary works of footballers, supermodels, pop stars and other modern day icons describing their significant, self-sacrificing and seminal contributions to the understanding and improvement of the human situation. Nevertheless they are worth searching for. But let us have a look at the Lethe case found in the Proceedings of the SPR, volumes 24 and 25.

The Lethe Case

Although not strictly part of the Cross-Correspondences, it is worth relating here for several reasons, and not merely because it is one of the classics of psychical research. Not only was it one of the reasons why Mrs Willett was recognised by the investigators as an outstanding medium, but it also exemplified the sort of case that persuaded the generally sceptical investigators to acknowledge the very tenuous basis on which any explanation other than one presuming on the active participation of a discarnate intelligence could be advanced. This particular case centred on the existence of the discarnate Frederic Myers, whose messages were being communicated, so it was claimed, in succession through two mediums thousands of miles apart. The case also represents aspects of Myers' learning and character without plunging the reader into the labyrinthine maze of so many of the cross-correspondence puzzles.

In March, 1908, George Dorr, a Vice-President of the SPR, was conducting a long series of sittings with the American medium, Mrs Piper. At that time, an entity claiming to be Frederic Myers was also communicating. Dorr decided to invite the Myers entity to say through voice or pen what the word 'Lethe' suggested to him. Mrs Piper was ignorant of the classics, but responded by producing in trance a string of references, almost all of them drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. When the results, which greatly impressed Dorr, were brought to the attention of Sir Oliver Lodge in London, he decided to pose the same question to Mrs Willett through whom the same personality claimed to be speaking. Lodge took the precaution of putting the question in a sealed envelope, to be opened only when the medium was satisfied that the question could be put to Myers(w) ['Myers' communicating through Mrs Willett]. The medium received the sealed envelope on September 30, 1909. When it was opened and the question in it put to Myers(w), the response contained another stream of accurate names and places, but this time all drawn from references appearing in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Lodge had not expected the responses to be identical, if only because it was generally accepted that the medium's mind often had a contaminating or distorting effect on the thoughts or words transmitted. He was surprised, however, at the large number of accurate references, nearly all of them drawn from a different classical source, although there was sufficient overlap with the earlier Piper communication to strengthen his belief that the same intelligence must have been responsible.

The Willett script showed clearly that her communicator was well aware of what had been transmitted by 'Myers' via Piper [Myers(p)] in the USA. Not only did he get the bemused Mrs Willett to scribble the name "Dorr" several times, but he inserted a quotation which, he said, was "nothing of the normal intelligence of my machine", i.e. Mrs Willett. The quotation referred to a "door to which I

found no key, and Haggi Babba" [Ali Baba]. To ram home the allusion, there followed a reference to Open Sesame. As for references to Lethe, the name of the river which flows past the fields of Elysium and in which the newly dead, if destined to return to earth, must first wash away their earthly sins and memories by drinking its purifying waters, Myers(w) quoted directly from the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*: "*The will again to live. The will again to live the River of Forgetfulness*". This quotation is also to be found in Myers' own essay on Virgil (*Classical Essays*, p.174), and was incorporated in his poem, *The Passing of Youth*. This could hardly be coincidental, because the first response which Myers(p) had earlier given through Piper to the same question by Dorr was "*Do you refer to one of my poems?*"

To ensure that the earthly investigators could not ascribe this to Mrs Willett's subliminal recollection of a Myers poem she might once have read, the Willett script was scattered with accurate references to the Lethe theme. *In Valle Reducta* (a sheltered vale) is the opening phrase of Virgil's description of the Lethe in the *Aeneid*, and there follow references by Myers(w) to bees and lilies, mainly in the form of Latin quotations. Less direct, but more characteristic of Myers, are his references to the Doves and the Golden Bough amid the Shadows, relating to the branch which Aeneas had to obtain before he could enter the infernal regions in order to arrive at the river Lethe.

Subsequent scripts show the Myers(w) source overflowing with allusions inspired with the Lethe theme. Among these was mention of "Darien, a peak in Darien", a clear reference to Keat's sonnet describing stout Cortez's vision of the Pacific Ocean from a peak in Darien. This phrase had been occasionally employed by the S.P.R. founders to signify cases where dying persons seemed to catch glimpses of another world. In the deluge of information showered on the bewildered Mrs Willett by the author of her automatic scripts, no effort is spared to link the Lethe theme with Myers' own works and beliefs. Thus, whereas the Lethe passage in Virgil may be taken to indicate that souls prepare themselves for re-birth once all earthly memory had been washed away, Myers(w) qualifies the phrase "will again to live" by writing "*Not reincarnation: Once only does the soul descend the way that leads to incarnation*".

Because Mrs Willett's own library contained a popular book on *Stories from Virgil*, although it contained no mention of the Lethe, on February 2nd, 1910, Lodge devised a further test for Mrs Willett's next spell of automatic writing. He wished to be certain that she could not have known or recalled some of these references for herself. There followed literary parallels linking the story of Ulysses (Odysseus) and his visit to the underworld with that of Aeneas. In the course of this the script refers to a line of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* wherein appear the words "Lethe-wards had sunk".

This extended summary, taken from Monty Keen's account of the case, may perhaps explain the vigour with which one distinguished scholar, Professor C. J. Ducasse, in his essay "*What would Constitute Conclusive Evidence of Survival?*" and looking only at the Piper evidence, poses the question:

'Is it the least plausible that Mrs Piper - a woman of limited education - not only herself had or had got by ESP the knowledge of the recondite details of Ovid's writings required for the allusions made by the purported Myers - some of which knowledge Dorr did not himself have; but in addition herself had and exercised the capacity which Myers had (but which even Mrs Verrall who was a lecturer in classics at Newnham College, said she herself did not have) so to combine these allusions as to make them say together tacitly about Lethe something which Myers knew, but which was other than any of the other things which, singly, those allusions referred to; and which it took Piddington [an intelligent and long-term student of the scripts] much study and thought to identify?'

If anyone actually takes the trouble to go to the relevant PSPR volumes and reads therein the developments of the Lethe case, additional important matters are brought to their attention. Firstly it is apparent that Sir Oliver Lodge and Mrs Verrall were continually and honestly striving at every stage to find normal explanations for the scripts and statements produced by Mrs Willett even to the extent of testing quite ridiculous and highly improbable 'normal' scenarios, and not finding any to fit. Secondly it is apparent that the communicator, whoever or whatever he is, is often indulging in a two-way 'dialogue' with Sir Oliver Lodge and displaying the intelligence, the classical knowledge and the characteristic idiosyncracies of the Myers Lodge and Verrall had known when he was alive. And thirdly and sadly, the Lodge and Verrall very long papers on the Lethe Case are good examples of the extremely valuable researches to be found in contemporary publications of the SPR, researches that are now totally unknown to the vast majority of modern psychical researchers and parapsychologists.

My late colleague Montague Keen rightly, I believe, looked upon the Lethe Case as a case of such evidential power of the paranormal in operation, let alone the fact that it makes it necessary to take very seriously indeed the possibility that human personality in some way survives bodily death, that it

posed a severe challenge to the fundamental sceptic who denies that any paranormal phenomenon has ever been proven to occur. Monty used to challenge such sceptics to provide a convincing normal explanation for the case. No one ever took his challenge up. The case has been totally ignored by sceptics in much the same way that the devil is said to avoid holy water. It is for these reasons I have drawn attention to the fact that psychical research, because of the ignorance of most people of the strength of the evidence for the paranormal collected over the past century by psychical researchers, can truly be called the Cinderella science.

In 1917 Mrs Eleanor Sidgwick admitted that the Cross-Correspondences, which were still continuing and would do so for another 13 years, had convinced her that survival of death took place. In her cool, succinct and intelligent way she wrote of the relationship between a pair of automatists.

"We have to seek the designer. It cannot be the supraliminal (i.e. conscious) intelligence of either automatist, since ex hypothesi, neither of them is aware of the design until it is completed. Nor, for a similar reason, can it be attributed to some other living person, since, so far as can be ascertained, no other living person had any knowledge of what was going on. It is extremely difficult to suppose that the design is an elaborate plot of the subliminal (i.e. subconscious) intelligence of either or both automatists acting independently and without any knowledge on the part of the supraliminal consciousness; and the only remaining hypothesis seems to be that the designer is an external influence, not in the body". She concluded: *"I must admit that the general effect of the evidence on my own mind is that there is cooperation with us by friends and former fellow-workers no longer in the body".*

The key word is 'Selection'. Who did the selection of the material given in the communications? Mrs Sidgwick's words are reminiscent of a Myers(w) statement in 1910. On June 5th, Myers(w) emphasises the importance of the evidence for *Selection* in Mrs Willett's script in words almost teasingly addressed to the investigator J. G. Piddington, words that may fitly conclude this account.

'Write the word Selection.

Who selects, my friend Piddington?

I address this question to Piddington.

Who selects?'

So the challenge, dear sceptic, is this. How do you account for this case in any convincing *non-paranormal* way?