

Apparitions and the Case for Survival

- D. Scott Rogo -

SINCE THE first psychical investigators conducted a fair amount of field research, it wasn't odd that their first evidence for survival emerged from the day-to-day experiences of the British public. The SPR founders were interested in collecting and studying cases of spontaneous ('real life') psychic experiences, and by 1886 they were amassing a great number of cases of telepathy, apparitional experiences, and other psychic anecdotes. What so impressed these great thinkers was the number of crisis apparition reports included in their data. These were cases in which an apparition was seen at the same time that the person who projected it actually died. Thirty-two such cases were included in their collection, and the SPR leaders felt that an in-depth investigation of these reports might help resolve the survival issue[2]. The following report is typical of these early cases. The report was dated 20 May 1884:

[2] Gurney, Edmund, Myers, F. W. H. and Podmore, Frank, *Phantasms of the Living*. London: Trubner; 1886.

I sat one evening reading, when on looking up from my book, I distinctly saw a school-friend of mine, to whom I was very much attached, standing near the door I was about to exclaim at the strangeness of her visit when, to my horror, there were no signs of anyone in the room but my mother. I related what I had seen to her, knowing she could not have seen, as she was sitting with her back towards the door, nor did she hear anything unusual, and was greatly amused at my scare, suggesting I had read too much or been dreaming.

A day or so after this strange event, I had news to say my friend was no more. The strange part was that I did not even know she was ill, much less in danger so could not have felt anxious at the time on her account, but may have been thinking of her; that I cannot testify. Her illness was short, and death very unexpected. Her mother told me she spoke of me not long before she died ... She died the same evening and about the same time that I saw her vision, which was the end of October, 1874.

It soon fell to Edmund Gurney to investigate these cases personally. He painstakingly sought to determine whether the witness was prone to hallucinations, or whether she might be mistaken about the day on which she had her experience. His fieldwork findings were consistent with the witness's testimony.

Most of these early crisis apparition cases were less than dramatic. This peculiar banality impressed the SPR researchers, since it was out of keeping with the intense drama that typified fictional ghost stories. In fact, one early reviewer of the SPR's work suggested that these stories tended to put one to sleep rather than banishing it! For example, the following case was reported by a puzzled teacher:

About fourteen years ago, about 3 o'clock one summer's afternoon, I was passing in front of Trinity Church, Upper King Street, Leicester, when I saw on the opposite side of the street a very old playmate, whom, having left the town to learn some business, I had for some time lost sight of. I thought it odd he took no notice of me; and while following him with my eyes, deliberating whether I should accost him or not, I coned after him by name, and was somewhat surprised at not being able to follow him any further or to say into which house he had gone, for I felt persuaded he had gone into one. The next week I was informed of his somewhat sudden death at Burton-on-Trent, at about the time I felt certain he was passing in front of me. What struck me most at the time was that he should take no notice of me, and that he should go along so noiselessly and should disappear so suddenly, but that it was E.P I had seen I never for one moment doubted. I have always looked upon this as a hallucination, but why it should have occurred at that particular time, and to me, I could never make out.

Follow-up interviews substantiated that the witness had never experienced a previous hallucination. The SPR also learned that the witness first told the story to his mother before hearing of the death. The witness's mother unfortunately died before the SPR conducted its inquiry, so this important testimony was lost to them. Nonetheless, the SPR researchers were able to unearth several cases where such testimony

was still available to them. In some cases the apparition was even seen by more than just one person, as in the following example:

Some years since, when living at Woolstone Lodge, Woolstone, Berks, of which parish and church, etc., etc., my husband was clerk in Holy Orders, I left the fireside family party one evening after tea, to see if our German *bonne* could manage a little wild Cornish girl to prepare her school-room for the morning. As I reached the top of the stairs a lady passed me who had some time left us. She was in black silk with a muslin 'cloud' over her head and shoulders, but her silk rustled. I could just have a glance only of her face. She glided fast and noiselessly (but for the silk) past me, and was lost down two steps at the end of a long passage that led only into my private boudoir, and had no other exit. I had barely exclaimed 'Oh, Caroline,' when I felt she was something unnatural, and rushed down to the drawing-room again, and sinking on my knees by my husbands side, fainted, and it was with difficulty I was restored to myself again. The next morning, I saw they rather joked me at first; but it afterwards came out that the little nursery girl, while cleaning her grate, had been so frightened by the same appearance, 'a lady sitting near her in black, with white all over her head and shoulders, and her hands crossed on her bosom,' that *nothing* would induce her to go into the room again; and they had been afraid to tell me over night of this confirmation of the appearance, thinking it would shake my nerves still more than it had done.

As chance would have it, many of our neighbours called on us the next morning - Mr Tufnell, of Uffington, near Faringdon, Archdeacon Berens, Mr Atkins, and others. All seemed most interested, and Mr Tufnell would not be content without noting down particulars in his own pocket-book, and making me promise to write for inquiries that very night, for my cousin, Mrs Henry Gibbs. She had been staying with us some time previously for a few days, and I had a letter half written to her in the paper case.

I wrote immediately to my uncle (the Rev. C. Crawley, of Hartpury near Gloucester) and aunt, and recounted all that had happened. By return of post, 'Caroline is very ill at Belmont' (their family place then), 'and not expected to live; and die she did on the *very day* or evening she paid me that visit. The shock had been over-much for a not very strong person, and I was one of the very few members of the Drawley or Gibbs family who could not follow the funeral.



Luckily, one of the independent witnesses was still alive and was able to confirm the entire series of events for the SPR.

Edmund Gurney of the Society for Psychical Research played a leading role in gathering evidence for apparitions. (Mary Evans Picture Library)

The fact that apparitional appearances seemed to be genuine paranormal phenomena intrigued the SPR founders no end. Did these appearances, they wondered, constitute evidence that man possesses a soul released from the body at death? This seemed a tenable position to take at first; but when they started examining their data in more depth, they gradually became less sure.

A prolonged debate about the nature of apparitions came to the forefront of psychical research when [Edmund Gurney](#), [F. W. H. Myers](#) and their colleague [Frank Podmore](#) joined forces to write their two-volume study, *Phantasms of the Living*. This publication was the first major undertaking of the SPR and it was clear that these brilliant researchers could not agree about the nature of phantasms ... much less whether they represented the release of the soul from the body.

Edmund Gurney wrote the bulk of *Phantasms*. Since he was fascinated by the subject of telepathy, he couldn't shake the idea that apparitions actually resulted from a form of thought-transference. He pointed out that apparitions seem little different in essence from the visual images some people 'see' during the reception of a telepathic message. This led him to suggest that apparitions are merely a more perfectly exteriorized form of mental image. This was a radical stand to take, but Gurney supported his view on empirical as well as theoretical grounds. He pointed out that apparitions do not appear to be objective, space-occupying entities. His data indicated that they never leave anything behind, they appear and then vanish without a trace, can walk through walls, and usually appear dressed in ordinary clothing. These seem to be tell-tale marks of immateriality. Sometimes, Gurney went on to show, apparitions appear dressed in ways the witnesses might expect to see them. This would indicate that the figures were partially constructed from the witnesses' own minds.

This was not the last word on the subject of apparitions by any means, since F. W. H. Myers was fast to counter his colleague. He objected that the existence of collectively seen apparitions demonstrated their partial objective reality. His theory was that an apparition results when some aspect of the dying persons organism projects over space and exteriorizes at the distant location. What manifests might therefore not be purely physical in the objective sense, but would represent a partial psychic invasion of its place of manifestation.

Edmund Gurney couldn't go along with Myers' complicated rehabilitation of the idea that apparitions are objective phenomena. So he countered by suggesting that collectively seen apparitions occur through a form of telepathic infection between (or among) the witnesses.

While these debates bandied back and forth, other SPR researchers organized an attempt to replicate the *Phantasms* study. This was undertaken in 1889 by surveying the British public about their psychic experiences, and the results were published in 1894 as the 'Census of Hallucinations'. Reports of crisis apparitions were once again conspicuous by their presence. The evidence for some of these cases was even better than for those appearing in *Phantasms*.

Despite the discovery of so many new cases, it seemed that the debate over the nature of apparitional appearances was heading towards a stalemate. This state of affairs led some of the SPR researchers to study post-mortem apparitions; i.e. those phantoms seen long after the agents' deaths. Through these studies the SPR uncovered cases where the apparitions appeared and even conveyed correct information to the witnesses. In other cases it seemed that the phantoms were interested in fulfilling some goal or intention that had consumed them in life. A few cases of conventional haunted houses also came to the SPR's attention as well. These cases turned out to be much rarer than crisis apparitions, and some of SPR leaders were rather dubious about their value. F. W. H. Myers studied them the most intensely and soon concluded that they represented '... manifestation of persistent personal energy; but he was sharply criticized by Frank Podmore. Podmore, who eventually became the SPR's resident sceptic, pointed out that most post-mortem apparitions rarely displayed any true sense of personality. He preferred to believe that these accounts were either bogus, or that the apparitions were created by the witnesses' own minds, although perhaps in response to the reception of psychic information.[3]