

Friends and Strangers

— Case 48 —

This case consists of extracts from a series of sittings by various people with a medium in which the possibility of explanation via mental-telepathy with the living seems negated due to the communicating spirit not being able to give information that was known to exist in the mind of one or more witnesses.¹

George Pellew was trained as a lawyer and was the author of at least six books, including a well-known biography of John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the United States. Pellew was a member of the Society for Psychical Research but, in common with many SPR members, he did not believe that the human personality survived the demise of its physical body. He and Richard Hodgson, one of the chief researchers for the SPR, were closely acquainted and had enjoyed several lengthy discussions on metaphysical matters. In February, 1892, at the age of 32, Pellew was killed in an accident in New York City.

On March 22, a little over a month after Pellew's death, Hodgson began to arrange sittings for Pellew's friends with the trance-medium Leonora Piper – sittings in which Pellew made himself known. For these, and in all published materials, Pellew was referred to by the pseudonym "George Pelham" or, simply "G.P." Apparently influenced by the Victorian sense of propriety, a great deal of care was taken not to identify people or reveal any personal matters that were discussed. The result was that a great deal – probably the bulk – of evidence developed in the Pellew sessions was never made public. Even so, a significant amount *was* published, as the spirit of George Pellew actively participated in virtually all of Piper's sessions for more than five years. The majority of Pellew's communications were achieved via automatic writing.

Throughout his tenure, over 150 persons participated in sessions with Piper, of whom about 30 were friends or acquaintances of Pellew. Remarkably, he seemed always to recognize with "the appropriate emotional and intellectual relations" those he knew in the past, and to treat as strangers those whom he had never met.

There were actually two exceptions to Pellew's "always" recognizing only those whom he knew. One occurred on January 7, 1897. The sitter, a young woman given the name "Miss Warner," had attended a session the day before and mentioned that she had known Pellew, yet he had not acknowledged her. During this second session, he asked her who she was. Hodgson spoke up and told Pellew that the woman's mother was a friend of his. The conversation proceeded:

G.P. – *I do not think I ever knew you very well.*

Warner – Very little. You used to come and see my mother.

G.P. – *I heard of you, I suppose.*

Warner – I saw you several times. You used to come with Mr. Rogers.

G.P. – *Yes, I remembered about Mr. Rogers when I saw you before.*

Warner – Yes, you spoke of him.

G.P. *Yes, but I cannot seem to place you. I long to place all of my friends, and could do so before I had been gone so long. You see I am farther away. – I do not recall your face. You must have changed.*

At this point Hodgson asked, "Do you remember Mrs. Warner?" Immediately Piper's writing hand showed excitement.

G.P. – *Of course, oh, very well. For pity sake. Are you her little daughter?*

Warner – Yes.

G.P. – *By Jove, how you have grown. I thought so much of your mother, a charming woman.*

Warner – She always enjoyed seeing you, I know.

G.P. – *Our tastes were similar.*

Warner – About writing?

¹ Information and quotations in this case were taken from "A Further Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance," by Richard Hodgson, in the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, vol. 13, 1897-98, pages 295-334.

G.P. *Yes. Do you know Marte at all?*

Warner – I've met him once or twice.

G.P. *Your mother knows. Ask her if she remembers the book I gave her to read.*

Warner – I will.

G.P. – *And ask her if she still remembers me and the long talks we used to have at the home evenings.*

Warner – I know she does.

G.P. – *I wish I could have known you better, it would have been so nice to have recalled the past.*

Warner – I was a little girl.

Hodgson asks his readers to remember that “these sittings were held five years after the death of G. P., and that G. P. had not seen Miss Warner for at least three or four years before his death, that she was only a little girl when he had last seen her, that she had not been, so to say, a special friend of his, and that she had, indeed, changed very much in the intervening eight or nine years. This non-recognition, then, by G. P. is a perfectly natural circumstance.”

The second (apparent) exception to Pellew's perfect memory also adds to the strength of the evidence, but in the opposite way. It occurred when a man known as “Mr. Savage” was a sitter. Hodgson believed that Pellew was meeting Savage for the first time, a belief in which Savage concurred. Nevertheless Pellew seemed familiar with the man. Hodgson asked, “Do you know this gentleman, M. J. Savage?” Pellew replied, “*Yes. I do. How are you, sir? Speak to me. This is too delightful. I am so pleased to see your face again.*” Hodgson persisted, “You remember meeting him in the body?” “*Oh yes, well. I do, well.*”

Hodgson reports that he was “surprised at the amount of feeling indicated both by the words written and the excitement of the hand.” Later, however, Hodgson recalled that George Pellew had, while living, attended one sitting

with Piper and that Savage was an SPR Committee Officer who was present officially at the sitting. At that time, Pellew was not introduced under his real name, and it was noted in the report of the sitting that he was unknown to Savage. Clearly, though, Pellew's spirit recalled with some excitement meeting Savage some six years previously when he was in the position of the sitter, instead of his current position as communicator.

The Pellew sessions thus offer excellent evidence that Piper's success was not due to reading the minds of the living. All the strangers attending a session certainly held their own names clearly in their conscious minds yet, when Pellew was acting as control, he never greeted them by name. Even when the sitter held a memory of meeting Pellew, he could not derive her name because he did not recognize her physically as a past acquaintance. But he did greet all those he knew, even one who had forgotten he knew him. It is this last point — the insistence by the spirit of a truth counter to the thoughts of both the sitter and the witness — upon which is based the uncommonly high rating for the case.

All this indicates a human personality acting precisely as would be expected of one who had survived death. Or, as Hodgson put it, “This recognition of friends appears to me to be of great importance evidentially, not only because it indicates some supernormal knowledge, but because, when all the circumstances are taken into consideration, they seem to point, in G. P.'s case, to an independent intelligence drawing upon its own recollections.”

