

When Scorn Turned To Awe

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“It was fortunate that our expressions could not be seen, for my nose was tilted in scorn and my lip curled in unrestrained contempt.”

So wrote Irish playwright and author H. Dennis Bradley on the occasion of his first séance, which took place in 1923 at the Arlena Towers country home of Joseph De Wyckoff, a retired lawyer, in Ramsey, New Jersey, not far from New York City. Bradley, who lived in London and was on his first trip to the United States, was a guest at the De Wyckoff home when De Wyckoff asked him if he would like to experience a séance. Although extremely skeptical, Bradley thought it might provide some amusement and agreed to it.

Medium George Valiantine was then invited to spend the weekend with them at the De Wyckoff home. Also present for that first séance on June 16, 1923 was De Wyckoff's 20-year-old nephew, Joseph Dasher. The four men sat in a circle about five feet from each other, two aluminum trumpets in the center of the room to amplify the voices of the spirits. “The lights were turned off, when the whole affair struck me as being rather idiotic,” Bradley told the story in a 1924 book, *Toward the Stars*. “I wondered at intelligent people submitting to such infantile forms of amusement. I wondered how a shrewd mind like that of my host could be induced to waste his time on such silly exploits.”

It was explained to Bradley that they had to sing some hymns in order to achieve a certain passivity and harmony. Bradley's expression of “unrestrained contempt” came on after about 20 minutes into the singing, as nothing was happening. Bradley saw it as an “exceptionally dull show.”

But, without warning, things started to happen. A soft and gentle woman's voice was heard. “I was called by my name, and the voice, which sounded about three feet away on my right, was full of emotion,” Bradley explained. His first name, Herbert, was repeated twice, and then his deceased sister, Annie, identified herself.

“Then we talked, not in whispers, but in clear, audible tones, and the notes of our voices were pitched as if we might have been speaking on earth,” Bradley continued the story. “And that which we said to each other were things of wondrous joy.”

The cynical skeptic was suddenly a believer in spirit communication. He was certain that the information coming from his sister could not have been known by anyone else in the room. “Any suggestion of ventriloquism is ridiculous,” he added. “No man living could imitate the clear and gentle voice which spoke, and, beyond this, no man living could talk in Annie's characteristic way, with her individual enunciation, her own choice of words, and her knowledge of the many things which she and I alone could have known.”

They talked for 15 minutes. “She told me that for several years she had been trying to get into communication with me, that she was always with me, and that she watched over me and accompanied me on my journeys. She knew of the books that I had written and other things that I have done since she died.”

On the following night, they again sat for a séance. De Wyckoff's cook and butler were invited to join with the four men. After a Dr. Barnett spoke to the group in a loud Scottish accent,

Bradley's sister again spoke. "Her tones were clear and bell-like, her notes were sympathetic and understanding, and were radiant," Bradley recorded. "How can I describe the indescribable?"

Again, Bradley pointed out that his sister mentioned things that nobody else knew about or could have known about. After his sister left, the trumpet floated in front of De Wyckoff's cook. "Anita! Anita!" the "voice" said. "Si! Si!" Anita Ripoll excitedly responded. "It is Jose! Jose!" the "voice" said. It was the cook's deceased husband. They carried on a conversation in Spanish which Bradley could not understand.

Bradley called it the "most staggering event of my life," causing him to change his whole philosophy of life. "Doubt took flight when faced by an unchallengeable fact and the mind understood in a flash that what had hitherto appeared to be impossible was possible."

Shortly after returning to London, Bradley received a shocking cable from De Wyckoff advising him that Valiantine had been discovered "in undeniable instance of conscious fraud." Thinking back to that weekend, Bradley could conceive of no possible way that a charlatan could duplicate the phenomena he had experienced – his sister's voice, the personal knowledge, the intimate dialogue he had with his sister. Still, he was bewildered.

On November 27, 1923, Bradley and his wife visited the renowned English medium Gladys Osborne Leonard. The appointment had been made by a friend and their identities not given. After Leonard went into a trance, Feda, her spirit control, announced that Bradley's sister and W.A. were present. (The full name of "W.A." was given but his family objected to his name being used in the book.)

As W.A. was doing most of the communicating, Bradley requested that he ask his sister if she had been present at De Wyckoff's several months earlier. W.A. said that she had and that he (W.A.) also had been there, although he could

not muster enough power to speak. Annie then spoke and further confirmed some of the things they had talked about at De Wyckoff's home. Bradley mentioned the fraud charges made by De Wyckoff. W.A. then explained that a medium may sometimes be impelled or impressed by his unconscious knowledge of what the spirit communicators want to do or want to say and thus carry it into action, i.e., his unconscious actions are then interpreted by the sitters as a conscious attempt to deceive them.

At the Leonard sitting, Annie and W.A. spoke of a number of things which Bradley was certain Leonard could not have known about, including family members, mutual acquaintances, and various activities of Bradley. Thus, Bradley accepted the explanation of Valiantine's alleged deception at a later sitting with De Wyckoff.

"Beyond the momentous Arlena Towers sitting, the sequence of evidence which followed was so extraordinary that it must rank as one of the greatest evidential sésances ever held," Bradley wrote of his sitting with Mrs. Leonard. "If questions were asked, the understanding was immediate and they were clearly answered without pause, and on several occasions names and comments on subjects were spontaneously introduced....It was as if both were determined to give me all the particulars of evidential value that they could muster."

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