

## Biography of Isaac Funk (1839-1912)

Most remembered today as the co-founder of Funk & Wagnalls Company, publishers of *The Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, Isaac Kaufmann Funk began his professional career as a Lutheran minister and later in life took an interest in psychical research. He authored two books dealing with psychical phenomena, *The Widow's Mite and Other Psychic Phenomena* (1904) and *The Psychic Riddle* (1907).

Born in Clifton, Ohio, Funk graduated from Wittenberg Theological Seminary in 1860 and was ordained as a Lutheran minister, serving churches in Ohio, Indiana, and New York, his last at Saint Matthews English Lutheran Church in Brooklyn.

"I confess that some of these experiences are so startling that if they had not come within my own vision and hearing, being myself fully acquainted with the details of the test conditions imposed, I should be strongly attempted to doubt them," Funk wrote in his 1904 book, only a chapter of which is devoted to "The Widow's Mite" story.<sup>1</sup>

That story involves an ancient Roman coin known as the "Widow's Mite," which, in 1894, Funk borrowed from Professor Charles E. West, the principal of a lady's school in Brooklyn Heights, New York to illustrate it in *The Standard Dictionary*. Henry Ward Beecher, a mutual friend, had told Funk about the coin and introduced him to West some years earlier.

As Funk was to later recall, he gave the coin to his brother, Benjamin, the company's business manager, and asked him to return it to Professor West after the photographic plate was made. Benjamin then gave the coin, along with another coin, both in a sealed envelope to H. L. Raymond, head cashier of the company. Raymond placed the envelope in the drawer of a large combination safe,

where it would remain forgotten for some nine years.

It was in February of 1903 that Funk, a member of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), was told about an apparently gifted medium in Brooklyn. She, her son, her brother, and a few close friends were holding a kind of "prayer meeting" or "family reunion" every Wednesday night. Funk arranged to sit with the group. As the medium was strictly an amateur and wanted no publicity, Funk did not give her name in the book. He described her, however, as a 68-year-old widow "of little school education, refined in manners." She had three spirit controls – a deceased son named Amos, a daughter of her brother named Mamie, who died at age 7, and George Carroll, the deceased friend of a member of the circle.



As a guest of the private circle, Funk did not feel he could impose test conditions upon the medium. "It was all 'upon honor,'" he wrote. "After considerable investigation, however, and fuller acquaintance with the family, I am morally certain that this confidence in the integrity of the medium and family at the time of this mite incident was not misplaced."<sup>2</sup>

The medium was of the trance, direct-voice type, i.e., the voices did not come from her vocal cords but from somewhere near her through a floating trumpet. "The voices are of a great variety," Funk observed. "I counted in a single evening as many as twenty – some apparently the voices of children, and others of middle-aged persons and old men and women; a few of these are the voices of Indians, and one of a jolly, typical, Virginian Negro. Each voice maintains its individuality during the evening and from one evening to another."<sup>3</sup> Most of the communications came from deceased members of the family, especially from the brother's deceased wife and the daughter, Mamie.

On Funk's third visit to the medium, George Carroll spoke up in "his usual strong masculine voice" and said: "Has any one here got anything that belonged to Mr. Beecher?" There was no reply, but Funk, having known Beecher, who had died several years earlier, asked for clarification. George Carroll bellowed: "...I am told by John Rakestraw, that Mr. Beecher, who is not present, is concerned about an ancient coin, the 'Widow's Mite.' This coin is out of its place and should be returned. It has long been away, and Mr. Beecher wishes it returned, and he looks to *you*, doctor, to return it."<sup>4</sup>

Funk recalled borrowing the coin, but told George that it had been promptly returned. "This one has *not* been returned," George replied. Funk pressed for more information. "I don't know where it is," George replied. "I am simply impressed that it is in a large iron safe in a drawer under a lot of papers and has been lost sight of for years, and that you can find it, and Mr. Beecher wishes you to find it."<sup>5</sup>

At his office the next day, Funk questioned his brother about the coin. Benjamin said that he was sure he had returned it to the owner. Funk then questioned, Raymond, the head cashier, who also said it had been returned to the owner. Funk then directed Raymond to go to both of the company's iron safes and search for it. About 20 minutes later,

Raymond returned with an envelope holding two widow's mites – one very dark and one light. He explained that it was found in a little drawer in the safe under a lot of papers.

Upon examining the two coins, Funk concluded that the lighter one was the genuine widow's mite. It was the one displayed in the dictionary. On the following Wednesday, Funk attended the Brooklyn circle. Toward the end of the session, George Carroll began talking and Funk informed him that he had found the widow's mite, in fact, had found two of them. He asked George if he knew which was the genuine coin. "The black one," George replied without hesitation. Funk checked with the Philadelphia mint and found that George was right and he was wrong. In fact, they had used the wrong coin in the dictionary illustration. The light one was simply a replica.

As a test of George or the medium, Funk then asked George if he knew from whom he had borrowed the coin. George responded that it was Mr. Beecher's friend, but he could not give a name. George reported, however, that he was being shown a picture of a college, which he identified as a lady's college in Brooklyn Heights. Funk also asked George to whom the coin should be returned. George replied that Mr. Beecher did not give a name.

At a circle with another medium the following week, Funk heard from Beecher through the medium's spirit control. "I was told by the control that Mr. Beecher said that he was not concerned about the return of the coin," Funk continued. "What he was concerned about was to give me a test that would prove the certainty of communication between the two worlds, and since that has been accomplished in my finding the coin, he cared nothing further about it."<sup>6</sup>

As West had died, the coin was returned to his son. Funk ruled out fraud, coincidence, and telepathy and concluded that spirit communication was the most likely explanation.

"This case, certainly, represents one that has very possible claims to supernatural knowledge, to

the say the least of it," Dr. James H. Hyslop, the Columbia University professor of logic and ethics turned psychological researcher, wrote when he read Funk's full report of the case. "I see no way to impeach it positively. I could imagine a theory to explain it without supposing the supernormal, but I would have no possible evidence in favor of what I can imagine."<sup>7</sup> In fact, Hyslop, an ASPR associate, had accompanied Funk to one sitting with the Brooklyn medium and agreed with him that she was genuine.

Funk died on April 4, 1912. On October 2 of the same year, he began communicating with Hyslop through the mediumship of "Mrs. Chenoweth" (a pseudonym for a medium later identified as Minnie Meserve Soule). Funk provided Hyslop with much evidential information relative to his identity and informed him that communication was not as easy as he had expected when alive. "Thought produces images and unless the thought is concentrated on some particular thing, the image quickly melts into other images, a kaleidoscope movement," Funk communicated through Mrs. Chenoweth's hand while she was in trance.<sup>8</sup>

Funk communicated several more times over the next few months, but did not communicate again until nearly four years later, on June 14, 1916, at which time he referred to the time Hyslop had accompanied him to a sitting with the Brooklyn medium. This was especially evidential to Hyslop as he was certain that Mrs. Chenoweth knew nothing of the visit.

On June 27, Henry Ward Beecher communicated and also referred to the "money" message. But neither Beecher nor Funk could get the words "widow's mite" through the medium's mind or hand. The words came out either "money" and "bronze medal." Then, on February 14, 1917, Funk's mother communicated and said: "I know that the idea of medals and medallions and all articles which suggest such form is a left over impression of his most striking evidence, and he is the receiver of so many suggestions of that nature

from the living and dead, because of his known interest in the ancient coin, and it always comes with force as he attempts to write."<sup>9</sup>

In his June 28, 1916 communication, Funk said, referring to the coin, that "the British Museum held nothing better."<sup>10</sup>

Funk attended some 40 circles with the Brooklyn medium through whom the messages about the widow's mite came. In addition to the evidential messages, he also heard a number of lectures by apparently advanced spirits and put questions to them. He said there was sufficient light in the room to detect fraud and was convinced that there was none. The spirit voices were strong and masculine, nothing like the weak, feminine voice of the medium. Moreover, the responses to the questions he put to the communicating spirits was well beyond the intellect of the medium and her family.

At one sitting, Funk asked why the spirits could not provide more enlightenment, to which the communicating spirit responded:

"You ask why we do not tell you more. We tell you all that you can receive. Why does not the receiver get messages for which it is not attuned? Waves may be passing in all directions and weighted with most important information, but the receiver, not attuned to them, responds not at all. Do not imagine that we have no communications with your world except through mediums and their circles. Every brain that has uplift and is friendly to progress is an open door for us – an open door up to its capacity to receive. A man may not know from whence come his thoughts, but they come from the spirit world, back of his consciousness, and these thoughts we receive from sources still higher. You think that you originate, but you do not. If the doors of the early world were open wider and men were more in harmony with us, so that they could more constantly commune with us, progress would be far more continuous and greatly accelerated."<sup>11</sup>

Funk asked for clarification, asking if geni-uses in the material world are but echoes of the spirit world. The reply came:

“For us to impart to your world a complicated and deep thought, we must do it through a brain that can master such a thought. A human brain must be fitted for a thought, or the thought remains unnoticed, and on one human brain is far ahead of its age. As I have already said, the spirit world has an abundance to tell. What is needed is for your world to get itself ready to receive. Remember, as in your wireless telegraphy, the receiver must be adjusted to the transmitter. There must be harmony.”<sup>12</sup>

Funk asked if the communicating spirit had ever seen the person we call God, and the answer was that he had never seen God and had never met anyone on that side who had seen God. “Is there no God?” Funk reacted. “No God after the kind in your mind,” was the reply. The spirit then asked what Funk meant by a “person.” Funk explained that he meant a conscious individuality, a unity, and continuity of mind, heart, and memory, and again asked if there were such a “person.” The reply came:

“There is infinite truth; we also are learners. What is truth? We speak of it as a principle. But back beyond our words and beyond all we know is the infinite center of things. Truth is life, truth is God. So with all elements that we call principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Funk, Isaac, *The Widow's Mite and Other Psychic Phenomena*, Funk & Wagnalls Co., New York & London, 1904, preface iv

<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 158

<sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 158\_

<sup>4</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 159

<sup>5</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 160

<sup>6</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 163

<sup>7</sup> Hyslop, James H., *Contact with the Other World*, The Century Co., New York, 1919, p. 296

We feel this infinite essence of things that is omniscient and omnipotent and perfect love. This infinite potency, call it what you will, draws us upward as the sea is drawn by the moon or as gravity pulls toward the center.”<sup>13</sup>

When Funk asked if the communicating spirit had ever seen Jesus, he was told that a spirit sees a spirit on its own plane and on the plane below it, but he was not advanced enough to see Jesus. “Spirit recognition is by an inner response in a like nature,” the communicating spirit went on. “This is what Jesus meant when He said, ‘My sheep shall know my voice.’ This is true at every stage of spirit intercourse.”<sup>14</sup> He added that trying to explain his world to Funk would be like trying to explain the beauties of a Rembrandt picture to an ox. “The ox is drawn more to a handful of grass than to all of the paintings in an art gallery.”<sup>15</sup>

Funk asked why the communicating spirit would not give his name. “My name signifies nothing;” came the answer. “be not curious about trifles. What I say is the only thing that is important. Good-night.”<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>8</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 285

<sup>9</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 307

<sup>10</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 297

<sup>11</sup> Funk, p. 201

<sup>12</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 202

<sup>13</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 202

<sup>14</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 203

<sup>15</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 207

<sup>16</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, p. 203