

Biography of Eusapia Paladino (1854 - 1918)

While history books and Internet sites have not been particularly kind to Eusapia Paladino (January 21, 1854 to May 16, 1918), an illiterate Italian medium, anyone taking the time to study and discern the research records will recognize that she was a genuine medium, producing mostly physical phenomena, including levitations, ectoplasmic hands and arms, occasionally a full form materialization, mysterious lights, the playing of musical instruments by invisible hands, and apports, as well as communicating raps and voices.

She was studied by more than two dozen scientific men and scholars. Most of the researchers referred to her by her first name, while her last name is sometimes spelled "Palladino."

There are three explanations advanced for her tainted reputation. 1) She could not always produce on demand and therefore, in order to satisfy the observers, the unsophisticated Neapolitan woman attempted to make things happen, i.e., "conscious fraud." This usually involved only minor phenomena; 2) While in the trance state, she was controlled by spirits who moved her limbs to effect phenomena, and thus it appeared that she was cheating; This is often referred to as "unconscious fraud." 3) Many phenomena were beyond scientific observation and testing and therefore those researchers who had concluded beforehand that she was a charlatan found it convenient to simply write her off as a complete fraud.

"Even if there were no other medium than Eusapia in the world, her manifestations would suffice to establish scientifically the reality of telekinesis and ectoplasmic forms," wrote Dr. Charles Richet, the French physician, professor,

and researcher, who won the 1913 Nobel Prize in medicine.¹

Richet, who had more than 200 sittings with Paladino, described her as a very simple-minded woman, yet intelligent. At the beginning of the experimentations with her, she could speak only the Neapolitan dialect and a little Italian. However, she learned to understand French and speak it a little during his experiments with her.



Richet reported that ectoplasmic arms and hands emerged from the body of Paladino and did what they wished, independent of Paladino's will, as she had vacated the body. "It is also quite easy to understand that when exhausted by a long and fruitless séance, and surrounded by a number of sitters eager to see something, a medium whose consciousness is still partly in abeyance may give the push that he hopes will start the phenomena," Richet explained. "There is a quasi-identity between the medium and the ecto-

plasm, so that when an attempt is made to seize the latter, a limb of the medium may be grasped; though I make a definite and formal protest against this frequent defense of doubtful phenomena by spiritualists. More frequently, the ectoplasm is independent of the medium, indeed perhaps it is always so; though I do not mean to imply that the severance or capture of the ectoplasm can be effected without danger to the medium. The case of Mme. D'Espérance is on record to show that a medium may incur a long illness by reason of such an attempt."²

At his private retreat on Ribaud Island in the Mediterranean, Richet, along with Sir Oliver Lodge, Frederic Myers, and Dr. J. Ochorowicz – three objective observers whose competence and honesty cannot be called into question – conducted experiments with Paladino during 1894. "I held one of Eusapia's hands firmly in each of mine," Richet recalled one experiment. "I then felt a third hand touch my shoulder, my head, and my face. This was not in darkness; there was a lighted candle in the room. All kinds of absurd hypotheses must here be eliminated: first that I was hallucinated – that is, disposed of by the fact that the slap on the shoulder given by 'John King' (Paladino's spirit control or guide) was heard by all present; then that Myers, Lodge, or Ochorowicz should have perpetrated this bad joke; then that I had let go of one of Eusapia's hands, which could not be, for my friends could all see her hands held far apart, one in each of mine. Further, the same phenomenon of the materialization of a hand while Eusapia's hands were held separate by one person has been observed by Oliver Lodge, by Myers, and by Ochorowicz."³

Clearly, any claim that Paladino was assisted by a confederate was out of the question on this isolated island, and the researchers made sure that she brought nothing in to the room and had no opportunity to "prepare" the room in advance of the sitting.

Lodge wrote that Paladino resented the charges of fraud and that he was willing to give her the benefit or the doubt, so far as morals of deception were concerned, referring to her as a kindly soul with many of the instincts of a peasant. He recalled that on more than one occasion, she took a boat to a mainland village and came back without her coat. When asked what happened to it, she explained that she gave it to a beggar who needed it more than she did.

"She wanted us to understand that it was not conscious deception, but that her control took whatever means available, and if he found an easy way of doing things, thus would it be done," Lodge explained, further mentioning that Myers felt that further study of her was pointless as nothing could be established scientifically.⁴

Lodge reported on a test involving a spring dynamometer, which, when squeezed, measured hand grip strength. It was Richet's idea that all the energy used at a sitting had to come from the medium or some of the sitters. Thus, he recorded the grip strength of Paladino and each sitter before and after the two-hour sitting. In the before reading, Lodge scored the highest, followed by Richet, Myers, and Ochorowicz, with Paladino's being much weaker than the four men. But after the sitting, Paladino was giving a feeble clutch when she suddenly shouted, "Oh, John, you're hurting!" and the men observed the needle go far beyond what any of them could exert. "She wrung her fingers afterwards, and said John (King) had put his great hand around hers, and squeezed the machine up to an abnormal figure," Lodge explained, noting that "John King" occasionally showed his hand, "a big, five-fingered, ill-formed thing it looked in the dusk."⁵

Dr. Cesare Lombroso, a world-renowned Italian neuropathologist known for his studies in criminal behavior, began studying Paladino in 1891. Until then Lombroso had been a hard-core materialist and had scoffed at reports of psychic

phenomena. Upon witnessing the phenomena of Paladino, his attitude began to change.

Lombroso observed a number of table levitations. "As usual, [Eusapia] is seated at one of the short sides (end) of the table – the position least favourable for mechanical levitation," he recorded. "After a few minutes, the table makes a lateral movement, rises now to the right and now to the left, and finally is lifted wholly off its four feet into the air, horizontally, as if afloat in a liquid, and ordinarily to a height of from 10 to 20 centimetres, (sometimes, exceptionally, as high as 60 or 70), then falls back on all four feet at once. Sometimes it stays in the air for several seconds, and even makes fluctuating movements there, during which the position of the feet under it can be thoroughly inspected."⁶

He further noted that during the demonstration Paladino's face would be convulsed, her hands contracted, and she would groan and seem to be suffering. "She first becomes pale, turning her eyes upward and her sight inward and nodding her head to the right and left," he explained how she went into trance. "Then she passes into a state of ecstasy, exhibiting many of the gestures that are frequent in hysterical fits, such as yawning, spasmodic laughter, frequent chewing, together with clairvoyance and a word often extremely select and even scientific, and not seldom in a foreign tongue with very rapid ideation, so that she comprehends the thought of those present even when they do not express it aloud or utter it in a mysterious manner."⁷

Some of the séances were given during daylight conditions, as was the case in when Lombroso first witnessed her in 1891, but the best phenomena were produced under dark conditions with a red lantern permitting the sitters to observe.

On two occasions in 1892, Lombroso observed Paladino being levitated above the table. "The medium, who was seated near one end of the table, was lifted up in her chair bodily, amid

groans and lamentations on her part, and placed (still seated) on the table, then returned to the same position as before."⁸

In one of those levitations, Lombroso was holding one of her hands, as Professor Richet held the other. While in trance, Paladino complained of hands grasping her under the arms. Then, her voice changed, and said, "Now I lift my medium up on the table." Lombroso and Richet continued to hold her hands as Paladino and the chair rose to the top of the table without hitting anything. "After some talk in the trance state the medium announced her descent, and (M. Finzi having been substituted for me) was deposited on the floor with the same security and precision, while MM. Richet and Finzi followed the movements of her hands and body without at all assisting them...Moreover, during the descent both gentlemen repeatedly felt a hand touch them on the head."⁹

By 1903, Lombroso had observed Paladino many more times, but at a sitting with her in Genoa in 1903, he experienced something new. Before Paladino entered the trance state, Lombroso asked her for some special manifestation that day. Paladino consented. "...after half an hour of the séance had passed, I was seized with a very lively desire to see her promise kept," Lombroso wrote. "The table at once assented to my thought by means of its usual sign-movements up and down; and soon after (we were then in the semi-obscurity of a red light) I saw detach itself from the curtain a rather short figure like that of my mother, veiled, and which made the complete circuit of the table until it came to me, and whispered to me words heard by many, but not by me, who am somewhat hard of hearing. I was almost beside myself with emotion and begged her to repeat her words. She did so, saying, 'Cesar, fio mio!' (I admit at once that this was not her habitual expression, which was, when she met me, 'mio fio!'; but the mistake in expression made by the apparitions of the deceased are well known,

and how they borrow from the language of the psychic and of the experimenters), and removing the veil from her face for a moment, she gave me a kiss.”¹⁰

Lombroso wrote that his mother reappeared at least 20 times in subsequent sittings, although less distinct than on that first occasion. On one of the subsequent appearances, she uttered, “My son, my treasure,” as she first kissed Lombroso’s head and then his lips. Lombroso described her lips and tongue as feeling dry and ligneous.¹¹

“Her deepest grief is when she is accused of trickery during the séances – accused unjustly, too, sometimes, it must be confessed,” Lombroso wrote of Paladino, “because we are now sure that phantasmal limbs are superimposed (or added to) her own and act as their substitutes, while all the time they were believed to be her own limbs detected in the act of cozening for their owner’s behoof.”¹²

For some 20 years, Paladino submitted to testing by numerous European and American researchers. Some of them, not understanding the unconscious fraud element, wrote her off as a complete charlatan after one or two sittings. Those like Richet, Lodge, and Lombroso were able to see beyond the alleged cheating and recognize her as a genuine medium. Unfortunately, the judgment of the “know-nothings” has been given equal or more weight in the long run than that of the distinguished scientists who understood the phenomena.



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¹ Richet, Charles, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*, W. Collins Sons & Co., 1923, p. 34.

² _____, p. 458.

³ _____, p. 465.

⁴ Lodge, Oliver, *Past Years*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932, p. 296.

⁵ _____, p. 298.

⁶ Lombroso, Cesare, *After Death – What?*, Small, Maynard & Co., 1909, p. 44.

⁷ _____, pp. 113-114.

⁸ _____, pp. 49-50.

⁹ _____, p. 50.

¹⁰ _____, p. 68.

¹¹ _____, p. 69.

¹² _____, p. 102.