

Biography of Gladys Osborne Leonard (1882-1968)

In the annals of psychical research, two names stand out above all others – Leonora Piper of the United States and Gladys Osborne Leonard of England. While Piper was referred to by Professor William James as his “white crow” – the one who proved that not all crows are black, Leonard, whose career began near the time that Piper’s was ending, was referred to as “England’s white crow” and the “British Mrs. Piper.” Some of the very best evidence for the survival of consciousness came through her mediumship.

Born at Lytham, on the coast of Lancashire, England, young Gladys Osborne had otherworldly visions as a child; however, they were discouraged by her father and stopped coming. Her mediumship began to unfold in December 1910, after she was married and working as a stage actress. With two friends, Florence and Nellie, Leonard began experimenting with the table-tilting method of spirit communication. After 26 failures, they received messages from several people, including Leonard’s mother. These messages were spelled out by the table tilting so many times for each letter of the alphabet. During this first successful sitting, a long name was spelled out, beginning with “F.” As they could not pronounce it, they asked if they could abbreviate it by drawing several letters from it. The communicating entity consented and the three women selected “F-E-D-A” as the name for the entity.

Feda told them that she was Leonard’s great-great grandmother, a Hindu by birth, and that she was raised by a Scottish family. She married William Hamilton, Leonard’s great-great grandfather, at the age of 13 and died soon thereafter, about 1800, while giving birth to a son. Leonard recalled hearing a story about an Indian ancestress from her mother, but did not remem-

ber any details. Feda told Leonard that she was going to control her as she had work to do through her because of a great happening (apparently World War I) that would soon take place. She also told Leonard that she had been with her as a spirit guide since her birth and that she was fulfilling work required of her to make spiritual progress of her own soul.



“I was not pleased with this, as I wanted to develop normal clairvoyance, but Feda said, ‘No, you must be controlled, because otherwise your own mind would interfere with everything we wish to give through you,’” Leonard wrote. “So I began to think seriously about it, although I did not want to be entranced.”¹

Leonard and her two friends continued sitting at the table night after night, receiving messages from deceased friends and relatives as Feda acted as a kind of spiritual mistress of the ceremonies. “We always sat in a good but slightly subdued light, and on the white walls we often saw the forms of Feda and our other spirit friends silhouetted quite distinctly, like clearly-cut shadows, which showed up perfectly against the light

background,” Leonard recalled. “This was an interesting form of phenomena which I have never witnessed since.”²

Over the next several years, Leonard progressed from table tilting to trance mediumship, as well as automatic writing and occasionally the direct-voice. Early in 1914, Fedra told Leonard that she must become a professional medium and prepare for something big and terrible, apparently World War I. Leonard was reluctant to charge for her services, but when Fedra pointed out that ministers and doctors are paid for their services, Leonard gave in to the suggestion.

At the recommendation of Hewat McKenzie, the founder of the British College of Psychic Science, Sir Oliver Lodge visited Leonard soon after the September 14, 1915 battlefield death of his son, Raymond. His initial message was that Frederic Myers, who had become Sir Oliver’s good friend before his death in 1901, was assisting him (Raymond) in adapting to his new environment.

The first very evidential information was about a group photo taken 21 days before Raymond’s death, which Raymond referenced in sittings with both Leonard and Alfred Vout Peters, a medium visited by Mary Lodge, Sir Oliver’s wife – a photo which had never been sent home or otherwise seen by the Lodge family. Raymond mentioned that the photo showed him sitting while holding a walking stick and that the officer behind him was leaning on him.

About two months later, the mother of one of Raymond’s fellow officers sent such a photo to them. It showed Raymond sitting on the ground with a walking stick over his legs and the officer behind him resting his arm on Raymond’s shoulder. Sir Oliver concluded that this evidence went beyond fraud, coincidence and telepathy and saw it as sort of a cross-correspondence in that messages about the photo came through two different mediums.

Alec Lodge, one of Raymond’s older brothers, sat with Leonard on December 21, 1915. As a test of his own, Alec asked Raymond about

his favorite music. Alec noted that he then heard Fedra questioning Raymond, asking him *sotto voce* (whispering) “An orange lady?” Still confused, Fedra then told Alec that “He says something about an orange lady.” Alec felt that this was very evidential as “My Orange Girl” was the last song Raymond bought when “alive.” Raymond also mentioned “Irish Eyes,” another of his favorites.³

By the time Sir Oliver sat with Leonard on March 3, 1916, he was convinced that she was not a charlatan, but he still felt a need to test her in various ways. Thus, at a sitting with her that day, he asked Raymond if he knew about “Mr. Jackson.” Fedra struggled with understanding Raymond’s response, but she communicated: “Fine bird...put him on a pedestal.” This was especially evidential as Sir Oliver was certain that Leonard did not know that Mr. Jackson was the name of Lady Lodge’s pet peacock, nor that he had died a week earlier and was in the process of being stuffed and mounted on a wooden pedestal.⁴

On May 26, 1916, Lionel Lodge and his sister, Norah, drove from the Lodge home, near Birmingham, to London for a sitting. Knowing that his brother and sister were scheduled to meet with Leonard at noon, Alec Lodge asked two other sisters, Honor and Rosalynde, to sit with him in the drawing room and focus on asking Raymond to get the word “Honolulu” through to Lionel and Norah during the sitting. Lionel and Norah knew nothing of this request.⁵

When Sir Oliver later read Lionel’s notes of the sitting, he saw that Raymond said something about Norah playing music. Norah replied that she could not. Fedra (through Leonard’s voice) then whispered to the invisible Raymond (attention directed away from Lionel and Norah), “She can’t do what?” Upon getting a response from Raymond, Fedra then said, “He wanted to know whether you could play Hulu – Honolulu. Well, can’t you try to? He is rolling with laughter.”⁶

By the end of April 1916, a preponderance of evidence that Raymond had been communi-

cating with them had been accumulated by the Lodge family. "The number of more or less convincing proofs which we have obtained is by this time very great," Sir Oliver wrote, adding that some of them appeal more to one person, some to another; but taking them all together every possible ground of suspicion or doubt seemed to the family to be removed.⁷

Lodge's book, *Raymond or Life and Death*, published in 1916 became a best seller, bringing hope to thousands of people. As a result, Leonard became famous and many people who had lost loved ones in the war sat with her.

During a three month period in 1918, she was exclusively engaged by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), which had 70 of their researchers sit anonymously with her. The overall report was that good evidence of surviving personality had been obtained and that there was no trickery or fraud of any kind involved with Leonard.

One of the SPR researchers, the Rev. Charles Drayton Thomas, a Wesleyan minister, conducted a series of tests with Leonard beginning in 1917. They were referred to as the "book and newspaper tests" and looked upon as among the very best evidence of survival.

The idea behind the book tests was to communicate information gleaned by Drayton Thomas's deceased father from a book in the son's extensive library. For example, in one of the earliest experiments, the father told the son to go to the lowest shelf and take the sixth book from the left. On page 149, three-quarters down, he would find a word conveying the meaning of falling back or stumbling. When the younger Thomas arrived home that evening after his sitting with Leonard, he went to the book and place on the page, where he found the words, "...to whom a crucified Messiah was an insuperable stumbling-block."

"The primary purpose of these efforts was said [by my father] to be a demonstration that spirit people were able to do that for which telepathy from human minds could not account, a

demonstration calculated to clarify the evidence already existing for the authorship of their communication," Thomas wrote in 1922.⁸

Over a period of about two years, the father and son researchers carried out 348 tests. Of those, 242 were deemed good, 46 indefinite, and 60 failures. The discarnate Thomas explained the failures as his inability to get the idea through the mind of the medium or the medium's mind somehow distorting the message.

The father further explained to the son, through Fedra, that he was able to get the "appropriate spirit of the passage" much easier than he could the actual words. However, over a period of 18 months experimentation, he found himself able to pick up more and more words and numbers, gradually shifting from "sensing" to "clairvoyance." It was made abundantly clear by the father that he was experimenting on his side as much as his son was on the material side.

In the newspaper tests, the discarnate Thomas, who had died in 1903, would provide information to be found in newspapers and magazines not yet printed. Thus, he would exercise a sort of precognition and clairvoyance. This would seemingly rule out what was being called Super ESP, the ability of the medium to go beyond reading the mind of the sitter and tap into the mind of anyone having a particular knowledge of a subject.

"These tests have been devised by others in a more advanced sphere than mine, and I have caught their ideas," the discarnate Thomas communicated through Fedra. "This may be done even when we do not realize whence the thought originates, much as when minds on earth receive inspiration. We can visit these higher helpers, and, even when away from them, may be very conscious of their assistance."⁹

In a test on January 16, 1920, the junior Thomas was told to examine the *Daily Telegraph* for the following day and to notice that near the top of the second column of the first page the name of the place he was born. Thomas was born in Victoria Terrace on Victoria Street in Tuanton.

When Thomas checked the paper the following day, he found the word "Victoria" exactly where his father said it would be.

Many other newspaper tests were carried out by Drayton Thomas. In each case, he would immediately write down the information and file it in a sealed envelope with the Society for Psychical Research at a time before the type was set at the newspaper office. Further, Thomas would check papers from at least 10 other days, being sure that the same names did not appear in those editions, thereby ruling out coincidence. Some of the tests were inconclusive and a few were failures, but the positive results far outnumbered the failures.

When Thomas asked his father how he was able to obtain information from newspapers not yet typeset, the father replied that he didn't quite understand it himself. He referred to it as some kind of "etheric foreshadowing." He likened it to seeing the shadow of a man around the corner before actually seeing the man.

Similar tests were conducted with Leonard by Lady Pamela Glenconner, also with excellent results, as set forth in her 1921 book, *The Earthen Vessel*.

In concluding her 1931 autobiography, Leonard wrote that she was often asked what the good of it was. "My answer, my carefully thought out, definite answer, founded on many years of personal experience, is that Spiritualism leads from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light, from the 'sorrow of the night to morning that comes singing o'er the sea.' Is there any other subject under the sun that can do so much for us? Once we realize that there is a Life Beyond where our dear ones wait for us, does it not make all the difference in the world, not only to our happiness, but to the building up of character, making us have thought for others because of our realization of the continuity of life and love."¹⁰

Some people asked her for a straightforward spiritual plan on which they could begin to mould their lives afresh. Leonard replied that the

spirits would always give the same answer: "Turn to the New Testament."

Leonard authored two other books, *The Last Crossing* (Cassell & Co., 1937) and *Brief Darkness* (Cassell & Co., 1942).

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¹ Glenconner, Pamela, *The Earthen Vessel*, John Lane Co, 1921, p. 141.

² Leonard, Gladys Osborne, *My Life in Two Worlds*, Cassell & Co., 1931, p; 31.

³ Lodge, Sir Oliver, *Raymond or Life and Death*, George H. Doran Company, 1916, p. 212.

⁴ _____, p. 257.

⁵ _____, pp. 272-273.

⁶ _____, p. 274.

⁷ _____, p. 279.

⁸ Thomas, Charles Drayton, *Some New Evidence for Human Survival*, Spiritualist Press Ltd., 1922 (Revised 1948), p. 77.

⁹ _____, p. 114.

¹⁰ Leonard, p. 297.