

Biography of Leonora Piper (1859-1950)

Probably the most celebrated and tested American medium ever, Leonora Piper (June 27, 1859 to July 3, 1950) was referred to by Professor William James of Harvard University as his “white crow,” the one who proved that all crows are not black.

Born in Nashua, New Hampshire as Leonora Evelina Simonds, she is said to have had clairvoyant experiences as a young girl but did not really discover her mediumship until 1884 after being persuaded by her husband’s parents to sit with Mr. J. R. Cocke, a blind healing medium, because of a tumor.

Cocke claimed to be controlled by a French physician named “Finny.” During her second sitting with Cocke, Piper lost consciousness and was controlled by the spirit of a young Indian girl who gave the name “Chlorine.” During her first year of mediumship, Piper was also controlled by spirits identifying themselves as “Mrs. Siddons,” “Bach,” “Longfellow,” “Commodore Vanderbilt,” “Loretta Ponchini,” and “Dr. Phinuit.”

Initially, Dr. Phinuit came only to give medical advice. However, he eventually became Piper’s chief control for communication purposes. According to Piper, Phinuit *was* “Finny,” Mr. Cocke’s control. (The French pronunciation of “Phinuit” – fin-WEE – sounds very much the same as “Finny.”) Whether or not he continued to work with Cocke for healing at the same time he was working with Piper for communication is unknown. (The control would take over the body of the medium and relay messages from spirits on the other side of the veil.)

Prominent author and publisher Henry Holt had several sittings with Piper. He related that after being seated a minute or two, her eye-balls rolled upward, her face became slightly con-

vulsed, and then she began talking in a rough voice not her own. He recalled the voice affecting him as if it were coming from a statue, “pouring forth at one moment some brusquerie in the rough deep tones of Phinuit; at the next, in the same voice softened to gentleness, petting a child; then, perhaps, a return to the gruff tones in some biting sarcasm to some interloping control; then perhaps issuing from the same mouth, a child’s voice singing the little boat song – all going on amid the weeping relatives who join in the song.”¹



Piper was “discovered” by Professor James after his mother-in-law informed him of a very evidential reading she had had with Piper. Highly skeptical, James sat with Piper and was stunned. “This lady can at will pass into a trance condition, in which she is ‘controlled’ by a power purporting to be the spirit of a French doctor, who serves as intermediary between the sitter and the deceased friends,” James reported. “... I am persuaded of the medium’s honesty, and of the genuineness of her trance; and ... I now believe

her to be in possession of a power yet unexplained."²

In 1887, James, who had been persuaded by Professor William Barrett of England to form an American branch of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), turned over the study of Piper to Dr. Richard Hodgson, an Australian who had been teaching in England. Hodgson moved to Boston to become executive secretary of the ASPR. He studied her for some 18 years, sitting with her an average of three times a week, until his death in 1905.

While Hodgson and James were certain that something non-fraudulent was taking place with Piper, they leaned toward the theory that Dr. Phinuit was some kind of "secondary personality" buried in her subconscious and that this secondary personality had the ability to read minds. When information came though that was not known to the people sitting with Piper, the theory was expanded to suggest that she had the ability to read the minds of people anywhere in the world or to somehow tap into some cosmic reservoir for whatever information was being offered.

It was not until 1892, following the death of George Pellew, a skeptical member of the SPR, that Hodgson began to accept the spiritistic hypothesis. A month or so after his death, Pellew began communicating and taking over from Phinuit as Piper's control. It was one thing to call Phinuit, whose existence as a human could not be verified, a secondary personality, but quite another to call Pellew, whose existence was clearly known to Hodgson and others, such a secondary personality. Pellew offered much in the way of evidence that it was he – the man known to Hodgson – who was communicating.

As Pellew took over from Phinuit, the communications began coming by means of automatic writing rather than through her voice. Phinuit continued as a secondary control and would sometimes complain that Pellew was too domineering. "I never saw the like of that fellow George," Phinuit grumbled to Hodgson. "There's another here trying to say something but he gave

no chance at all. When he gets hold he keeps hold I tell you Hodgson."³

Beginning in 1895, the quality of the messages began to deteriorate and there were indications that devious earthbound spirits were able to control Piper's organism. Deceased writers Sir Walter Scott and George Eliot supposedly communicated directly through Piper's hand, but the nature of the communication suggested impostors.

Pellew and Phinuit gradually turned over control to "Rector" of the Imperator band of 49, apparently a group of more advanced spirits which had previously been involved with the mediumship of William Stainton Moses. Rector told them that Piper's organism was weakening and needed a rest. While Rector and the band continued to use Piper's organism, it was with more care than Pellew and Phinuit could provide. Rector said they were substituting a "softer melody" for the rough, inharmonious and uncultivated dialect, referring primarily to Phinuit. Rector said that Phinuit was too bound by the attractions of earthly minds. Phinuit made his last appearance on January 26, 1896. It was later reported that he had advanced and gone on to other work.

"I had but one object, to discover fraud and trickery... of unmasking her," Hodgson later wrote. "Today, I am prepared to say that I believe in the possibility of receiving messages from what is called the world of spirits. I entered the house profoundly materialistic, not believing in the continuance of life after death; today I say I believe. The truth has been given to me in such a way as to remove from me the possibility of a doubt."⁴

In a letter to James, Professor Herbert Nichols wrote, "I had a wonderful sitting with Mrs. Piper. As you know, I have been a Laodicean⁵ toward her heretofore. But that she is no fraud, and that she is the greatest marvel I have ever met I am now wholly convinced."⁶

James remained somewhat guarded, however. "One who takes part in a good sitting has usually a far livelier sense, both of the reality and of the importance of the communication, than one

who merely reads the records," he wrote. "I am able, while still holding to all the lower principles of interpretation, to imagine the process as more complex, and to share the feelings with which Hodgson came at last to regard it after his many years of familiarity, the feeling which Professor Hyslop shares, and which most of those who have good sittings are promptly inspired with [i.e., the spirit hypothesis]."⁷

The SPR in London arranged for Piper to travel to England to be studied by researchers, including Frederic W. H. Myers and Professor Oliver Lodge. Both men were very impressed and said that Piper phenomena played a big part in converting them to the spiritistic hypothesis.

After his death in 1905, Hodgson began communicating through Piper, adding to the evidence as Dr. James Hyslop took over the ASPR and reorganized it. Sometime in the Spring of 1909, Stanley Hall, a distinguished psychologist and non-believer, was allowed to conduct a series of tests with Piper. It is recorded that he and his assistant were both very inexperienced relative to psychic phenomena and not very scrupulous. The series was fruitless and a painful experience for Piper. As a result of this experience, she could no longer go into trance. However, she did become a conscious automatic writing medium at that time. The ASPR apparently lost interest in her after she was no longer able to go into trance. Nevertheless, her trance mediumship over some 25 years had converted many researchers to a belief in a spirit world and, concomitantly, to life after death.



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¹ Holt, Henry, *On the Cosmic Relations*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914, p. 381.

² _____, p. 400.

³ _____, p. 589.

⁴ _____, p. 474.

⁵ In the Biblical Book of Revelations, the Christian church at Laodicea is criticized for being lukewarm, and so the pejorative term *Laodicean* implies an undesirable neutrality or indifference. [Ed.]

⁶ Holt, p. 495.

⁷ _____, p. 708.