

The Mediumship of Helen Duncan

Helen Duncan by Maurice Barbanell

I shall always contend that my friend, Helen Duncan, the materialisation medium, was the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice. When, during the war, she was charged at the Old Bailey under the archaic Witchcraft Act of **1735**, some newspapers called it "The trial of the century." Obviously an Act which became law more than a century before Spiritualism began was not intended to apply to modern mediums.

Her conviction, and subsequent imprisonment, led Spiritualists to campaign, successfully, for the repeal of this Act, which, by being resurrected, implied that all séances were illegal, and thus jeopardised our religious freedom. In his war memoirs, Sir Winston Churchill has recorded that he sent a note to the Home Secretary complaining of the fact that in a time of urgency and peril so much time and money should be wasted on a "witchcraft" trial.

Counsel's defence that Mrs Duncan was a genuine medium, and his offer to demonstrate her powers of materialisation within the precincts of the court, were not regarded as legally admissible. The "offence" under the Witchcraft Act was *pretending* that she could conjure up spirits. Whether she was genuine or not was beside the point so far as this Act was concerned. Counsel for the defence was satisfied of her ability to demonstrate her materialisation powers at the trial, for she gave us evidence just before it opened that she was capable of doing so. Despite the strain of her ordeal, she willingly offered us an experimental séance which was remarkable in its results. Yards and yards of ectoplasm streamed from her, and billowed and flowed in swirling masses until even experienced Spiritualists like myself gazed with astonishment at the spectacle.

With Helen Duncan I have been privileged to see the growth of a materialisation inside the cabinet. Outside, I have observed the ectoplasmic forms as they gradually dwindled in size until they resembled small globes of light, and then finally disappeared as if sinking through the floor.

Inside the cabinet, I have watched ectoplasm exude from the medium's nostrils, mouth and ears in waving billows of luminosity that gradually solidified into the six-foot figure of her guide.

Harry Price, a researcher who thrived on publicity, propounded the extraordinary theory that, instead of being a genuine materialisation medium, Helen Duncan swallowed yards of cheesecloth which she later regurgitated. To show how nonsensical this theory was, Mrs Duncan gladly submitted herself to X-ray examination. Price's "explanation" was that she had a secondary stomach, like a cow.

The X-ray examination proved that both her stomach and her oesophagus were normal.

Counsel for the defence at the Old Bailey tried to introduce the X-ray photographs as evidence, but these too were legally inadmissible.

More than once at Helen Duncan's séances, I was invited to handle some of the ectoplasm immediately after it had been produced. It was always bone-dry, and had a curious stiff "feel", proving that it could not have been regurgitated.

I conducted an experiment that was conclusive in its result. At my suggestion, Helen Duncan, and every sitter at one séance, swallowed tablets of methylene blue. These had the effect of dying into a bluish colour the contents of all our stomachs. Yet when the materialisations appeared, they were their usual white colour.

Having given these examples of materialisation, I should like, in contrast, to furnish one that is exactly opposite - dematerialisation.

Helen Duncan had a psychic gift which enabled her to read written questions placed in sealed envelopes, and to supply the answers. I tested this ability many times.

Once I wrote a question concerning a woman with a most unusual hyphenated name, Bayley-Worthington. Naturally, I made sure that the medium did not see what I wrote, but she was able to repeat my question, including this uncommon name, and to give me a reply.

I happened to mention this phenomenon to Estelle Roberts, who, never having seen it demonstrated, expressed the desire to participate in such a séance. I arranged a meeting between the two mediums. I handed Estelle Roberts a sheet of paper on which she wrote a question which nobody else could see. She folded the paper and placed it in an envelope. This was sealed by her and handed to Helen Duncan.

Before attempting to "read" the question, Mrs Duncan followed her usual procedure. Slowly she rubbed the sealed envelope on her temple, and then at the base of her spine. She said it was always necessary to do that before she could repeat the wording on the folded paper. Then slowly she exclaimed: "When—will—I---hear---from—my—..."

Here, a puzzled expression came over Mrs Duncan's face. "It's gone!" she announced.

Estelle Roberts commented: "That is very good.

You have read my question, all except the last two words." Still looking puzzled, Helen Duncan repeated: "It's gone!"

Estelle Roberts assured Mrs Duncan that she was accurate as far as she had gone and, to confirm her statement, opened the envelope with the intention of showing the question she had written. Then we were all surprised, for the paper was gone! The envelope was empty. And the paper has never reappeared.

Estelle Roberts told me that she understood the significance of this strange happening. She had asked a question concerning someone who had passed on, and recalled that Red Cloud had said she should not seek information concerning this individual until a certain time had elapsed, and that had not yet occurred.

Mrs Duncan's power of materialisation had another curious facet, in which a slate pencil would write without any seeming visible means of support. This was a phenomenon she never took seriously, and always had to be cajoled into demonstrating it.

The requirements were two slates, such as school children use, and a pencil. First I washed the slates clean and wrote a question with a pencil, making sure that the medium could not see what I was doing. Then I put the pencil horizontally between the two slates and tied them round with string.

Helen Duncan placed them beneath a table. She held one hand below the slates to keep them wedged and to prevent them falling.

I heard the pencil make its usual scratching sound as an answer to my question was written. When the reply was completed, three distinct taps were heard coming from beneath the table. This was the signal for Mrs Duncan to produce the slates. When I opened them, there was a spirit answer written below my question.

As published by Zerdini on: <http://www.spiritualistchatroom.forumotion.com>