

THE RICHARDS CIRCLE

The Richards Circle by Maurice Barbanell

The strength of Spiritualism is and always has been in the home circle, of which there are many thousands in Britain and in several overseas lands. Here a group, composed of relatives or friends, meet once a week, usually at the same time, for a stated period, to develop psychic gifts and participate in spirit communication and communion.

In these circles the hearth becomes the altar. Guides, relatives and friends who have crossed the Great Divide are the regular communicators. They may be described in the words of the well-known Bible text as the angels who have been given charge concerning us.

In most cases these gatherings are private and outsiders are not welcomed. The regularity of sittings and harmonious conditions create a stability of spirit power which ensures the best results. Visitors, however desirable, inevitably upset the delicate balance.

I am going to describe three home circles which I was privileged to attend and where, in each case, the phenomenon of materialisation was a regular occurrence. My first memorable visit was to an old Welsh farmhouse.

There, every Sunday night, 'angels of the Lord appeared unto them'. These were not the winged, conventional figures of religious orthodoxy but the forms of loved ones, friends and guides who were seen and heard during their temporary resurrection.

Though 'dead', they were regarded as part of the household by Mr. and Mrs. P. Richards, their family and the more than a score of regular sitters for whom the Bible came to life every week. The small rectangular room into which thirty of us crowded on the Sunday evening to which I refer was as sacred to them as any church or temple.

Their weekly séance in the simple farm near Wrexham - I deliberately refrain from giving the address - was a service conducted with an evangelical religious fervor that could happen only in Wales. I have always refrained from giving the address because doing so would lead only to requests for admittance which would have to be refused.

As each person entered the séance room, which was their 'holy of holies,' they knelt and silently prayed, with clasped hands and bowed heads, before taking their seats. This complete religious devotion permeated the whole séance.

It was evident in the simple homily and prayers uttered by the circle's leader, who, with his wife, made the 30-mile journey from his Liverpool home every week, thinking nothing of returning in the early hours of the morning. I noted the spontaneous cries of 'Hallelujah' and 'God bless you' with which every 'angel' who materialised and talked was greeted.

In nowhere else but Wales could there have been such a mighty volume of melody when they rendered old hymns. To hear these Welsh people sing 'Cwm Rhondda', their national hymn, with the emphasis on the repeated words 'Bread of heaven', was to understand the power of vibrations released in sound. These, and their simple faith, provided ideal conditions for the coming of the 'angels'.

The séance-service started with absent healing. As each name of the sick person was read aloud the sitters exclaimed, 'God bless him!' or 'God bless her!' not perfunctorily but wholeheartedly. They really meant it.

Then came a Bible reading, a few words of counsel from the circle's leader and the electric light was extinguished. We were advised not to cough unless it was inevitable and then to seek permission because experience had proved its adverse effect on the medium.

For a short while all the sitters clasped the hands of neighbours. We sat in the darkness, relieved only by two star-shaped luminous plaques, coated with phosphorous, on a small table. The only window was shut and boarded. The only door was closed, with a large screen in front of it.

Mrs. Richards, the medium, sat in a corner of the room. She was flanked on each side by her husband and daughter. There was no cabinet as is usual in such séances. She did not even go into trance. Indeed, she conversed with the materialised 'angels'.

Two-and-a-half hours later, when I talked with this almost fragile, slight figure - the opposite in build that one expected a materialisation medium to be - she told me that, apart from a little tiredness, not unnatural after the lack of air and the heat, she felt quite all right. She would be getting up at 7.15 a.m. as usual to help with the farm and to do her housework. I doubt whether she would have got to bed before 2 a.m.

The first indication of physical phenomena was the typical and welcoming cold psychic breezes, later repeated several times. Next came the sprinkling of perfume. Then a small moving light was seen.

This, they told me, was the spirit light of Willie Jackson, a child killed with his parents and brother in a railway accident, who had attached himself to the medium's daughter and her husband. Willie's coming was greeted with cries of ecstasy because he was always the precursor to other 'angels'.

Like all child controls of mediums, Willie knew how to break down the tension which so often spoils séances. He was a skilled manipulator of one of the luminous plaques which, held by him, darted all over the room in lightning sweeps.

He spoke simply and naturally without using the trumpet which was present and which, at other séances, communicators utilised like a megaphone to intensify their voice. Every 'angel' who spoke that night did so independently of the trumpet.

Willie touched my hands, my notebook and pencil with which I was recording the happenings. He put his arms round my face and pecked me on one cheek. Never

once did he fumble or knock off my spectacles.

He sat on the table and sang a verse of 'Gentle Jesus' and another of 'Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam'. Willie told me that he was trying hard to show his garb, the ectoplasmic drapery with which he was robed and also his face. By the light of the plaque I could faintly discern the white ectoplasmic raiment, but I could not clearly see his features as he stood about three feet in front of me.

Willie was proud of his curls, which I felt brush against my hand. They were soft and silky. What he had to say was short and simple. It consisted merely of telling us that if only we all loved one another there would never be wars.

Then came a dramatic moment. Another luminous star was lifted. A materialised figure stood in front of me with the head bent forward. I peered, but I could not see the face. The lips moved. Then slowly, and speaking softly, a woman's voice said, 'I used to write in *Two Worlds*.'

There was a pause and then I heard, 'My name is Emma Hardinge Britten.' This was Spiritualism's great woman pioneer, a wonderful medium, who travelled all over the world spreading psychic knowledge. She founded *Two Worlds* and was its first editor.

Incidentally, I have been editing this periodical for many years. 'It used to be my paper,' she said. 'Oaten is with me.' Ernest Oaten, one of my predecessors in the editorial chair, was an excellent medium who always said that his leading articles came from Mrs. Britten.

Another dramatic episode was the materialisation of a Mrs. Jones, who had passed on eleven months previously, and stood in front of her daughter, Stella. She said her mother was clearly visible to her. It was a touching reunion as Mrs. Jones, speaking with a distinct Welsh accent, addressed her daughter and gave homely advice.

Stella, I noticed, naturally called her 'Mum' in this short conversation which bridged the chasm of death. 'Mum, could you bring me the glass of water?' she asked. At once the materialised Mrs. Jones moved to the oil stove on which the glass of water rested, just behind the medium. She carried it to her daughter, who asked whether she could bring it to me. The materialised form did so, placing the glass without fumbling straight into my hands.

As she bent down, the plaque illuminated her face. I had a clear view of her profile, framed in its white ectoplasmic drapery, its soft texture brushing over my fingers. I noted the nose, cheeks and chin and the life-like flesh hues. Later I studied Stella's face and could see the resemblance to her mother's features.

Mrs. Jones was then asked by her daughter to take the glass of water to her namesake, my friend, Vidie Carleton Jones, seated on my right. She complied and placed it unerringly in this sitter's hands. Later the materialisation removed the glass, without any jarring or fumbling, just as she had done from me, and put the glass on the table.

Then Vidie's husband, whose passing was responsible for her psychic quest, made an attempt to speak, but he could not manage it in these unfamiliar conditions. He did succeed on a later occasion. The only sounds from his lips were sibilant whistles. I judged his materialised figure to be under six feet.

Neither I nor his wife could see his features. He held Vidie's hands, touched mine and placed the plaque on my head.

The circle now eagerly awaited the appearance of Sister Helen, a former nun, who presided over these séances from the Beyond. I noticed that every member referred to her with a love which bordered on adoration. Her exhortations, when she regularly materialised, were, I was told, the dominant feature of these gatherings.

She was regarded as the guardian angel of the Richards household and was as real and alive to them as any person in the flesh. Sister Helen was engaged on a mission of giving healing, at the request of the circle, to a sick boy whose earthly life was in jeopardy. For that reason her stay was brief.

Soon, however, news that the little boy was much better came to us from Zenda, another of the angelic band, who spoke with a pronounced German accent. She took my hand between her two hands. I felt the warm, soft fingers. This was no apparition but an intensely real human being.

The heat on this August night was almost overpowering, even though I sat coatless in an open-neck shirt with sleeves rolled.

Mrs. Richards said she now needed some air, as we all did. One more figure materialised, that of a guide, who spoke briefly. On the opposite side of the room a sitter announced that the materialised form of a little girl had climbed on her knee.

Then the circle leader announced the closing hymn, 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. It says volumes for Welsh singing that the rafters rang with the sound even at this late hour. Above the volume of the singing could be clearly heard a spirit accompaniment in a loud, rich, contralto voice.

We filed into the sitting-room, where the slight figure of the medium, weighing a little over eight stone, showed her vitality, despite the call on her psychic energy, by making tea for all of us. I was intrigued to hear the comments of the circle members that the proceedings had not been up to their usual standard. They blamed the heat.

My abiding impression was the naturalness with which the séances were regarded.

Graham, then thirteen, the Richards' son, had no fear of death when we discussed it. He retained all the charm of youthful freshness. Like a real boy, he proudly showed me how he had trained himself to walk on stilts. When we strolled round the farm, he picked up a stone and tried to dislodge an apple from a tree.

He spoke of 'Sister Helen' and the 'angels' without a trace of embarrassment. To him the Sunday séance was part of the family life. Mrs. Richards and her husband, I found, were both dedicated to her mediumship. To them, when they sang the well-

known hymn, 'There are angels hovering round' ...it had a personal meaning.

My friend, Vidie, paid a return visit to the Welsh farmhouse a year later. This time her husband's materialisation was highly successful. 'He came to me,' she said, 'fondled my hair and kissed my forehead with warm, human lips. He spoke well and clearly and used phrases that were typical of him when on earth. I knew it was he.'

Among the figures to materialise that night was a young girl, Beryl, the daughter of a woman present. 'She came to me and I saw her face so clearly by the light of the plaque,' said Vidie. 'It was not in the least like that of the medium, but rounder and fuller and that of a young girl.'

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