

Anna Eva Fay

The Mentalist Who Baffled Sir William Crookes

Between 1870 and 1874 the eminent scientist William Crookes conducted a series of controversial experiments with some of the most remarkable mediums of the age. One episode shows without a doubt Crookes's failure to detect open trickery. This happened when Crookes met Annie Eva Fay, an interesting personality, now largely forgotten, who deserves to be remembered.

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Between 1870 and 1874 William Crookes—the discoverer of thallium, inventor of the radiometer, developer of the Crookes tube, pioneer investigator of radiation effects, Fellow of the Royal Society, and later knighted—conducted a series of experiments with some of the most remarkable mediums of the age. D. D. Home, possibly the greatest medium of all, was studied by Crookes and declared genuine, as were Florence Cook, a young woman specialized in the materialization of a ghost named “Katie King”; Kate Fox, one of the originators of spiritualism, later self-confessed fraud; Mary Rosina Showers, another young materializing medium; and Annie Eva Fay, a vaudeville entertainer (Brandon 1984; Polidoro 1995).

There are some very strong doubts about the validity of these investigations; for example, it has been claimed that the married Crookes had a love affair with Florence, and that the experiments were just a ruse for their meetings (Hall 1984). Crookes's supposed complicity with the medium, or his inability to conduct reliable, scientific tests in spiritualism, are still debated today. There exists, however, at least one episode that shows without a doubt Crookes's failure to detect open trickery when confronted with it. This happened when Crookes met Annie Eva Fay, an interesting personality, now largely forgotten, who deserves to be remembered.

The "Indescribable Phenomenon"

Annie Eva Heathman was born in Southington, Ohio, in the 1850s (she preferred to keep the exact date to herself). She left home quite young and became interested in theosophy and mysticism. At one time she said that she became Mme. Blavatsky's pupil, living with her and helping her in her work. When she left, along with a handsome shawl presented to her by Mme. Blavatsky, Annie had to earn her own living and decided to go on stage as a mind-reader, a specialty she presented until her last performance in Milwaukee in 1924.

Her first public performance as a psychic entertainer took place in a schoolhouse in New Portage, Ohio. When she married her first husband, Henry Cummings Melville Fay, a self-proclaimed medium, they decided to work on stage as a couple and presented an intriguing performance.

Annie took her place on a stool in an open-front cabinet. A few volunteers, supervised by Melville Fay, would tie her to the stool. One tied her left wrist at the center of a long strip of cloth with many knots, one on top of another; a second volunteer followed suit with her right wrist. She held her hands behind her back as they bound the two strips together and knotted the cloth to a harness ring that was securely embedded in an upright post at the rear of the cabinet. Another piece of tape was tied at the back of the medium's neck, and the ends were fastened to a staple higher on the same post. One end of a long rope was lashed around her ankles; the other was held by a spectator throughout the performance that followed.

After Annie appeared to go into a trance, Melville Fay would place a hoop in her lap and closed the curtain at the front of the cabinet. A second later he threw open the drape: the hoop now encircled Annie's neck. Removing the hoop, he placed a guitar on his wife's lap, closed the curtain and strumming sounds were heard. As soon as he would open the drape, the music stopped and the guitar fell on the floor. The same thing happened with other musical instruments. Other phenomena followed: nails were hammered into a block of wood and paper dolls were snipped from a piece of paper. Finally, a knife was placed in Annie's lap. Though the curtain was closed for only a few seconds, the spirits seemingly had time to sever her bonds. She stood up and came forward to take numerous bows (Christopher 1975).

The Fays billed their demonstration as "The Indescribable Phenomenon," never quite openly claiming spirit intervention. Actually, theirs was a typical magic performance, introduced first by Laura Ellis, following the steps of other similar

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performances, like the Davenports' "Spirit Cabinet" (Polidoro 1998), which combined escapology and spiritualistic themes. A perfect rendition of the "Indescribable Phenomenon" is still performed today by mentalists Glenn Falkenstein and Frances Willard. Annie was bold enough to feature tricks and illusions along her main act: a "Spirit Dancing Handkerchief," a "Rapping Hand," and a "Levitation" were included for years on her program.

At the time few in America considered their performance a real example of spiritualism. Emma Hardinge, a medium and historian of spiritualism, in her book *Modern American Spiritualism* (1870), had stated that Melville Fay's deceptions had been "openly exposed by the Spiritualists themselves"; John W. Truesdell, a skeptic of the time, agreed that Fay was a rascal. It seems clear that Annie's claims adjusted to her audience: When dealing with spiritualists, she claimed mediumistic powers, and when performing on the music-hall stage she let the audience be the judge, an attitude adopted by other mentalists of the time, such as the Piddingtons.

Scientists and Magicians

When the Fays reached London in June 1874, the advertisements for their performances at the Queen's Concert Rooms, Hanover Square, mentioned "entertainments comprising light and dark séances every day," "mysterious manifestations," and "series of bewildering effects"; however, there is no suggestion that they had any relation to spiritualism. This notwithstanding, Annie found herself hailed as a physical medium.

Immediately, she started receiving the attention of various psychical researchers; F. W. H. Myers, for example, later

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to be one of the leading founders of the Society for Psychological Research, had expressed interest in an "extensive investigation of Mrs. Fay's mediumship." William Crookes, however, had stated clearly that he wanted to be first in examining her.

In an interesting comment made in a letter by Myers to his colleague Sidgwick the former says, after mentioning Crookes, that "the lion will not let himself be robbed of his cub—nor the cub of her lion," suggesting that Crookes was trying to make Eva his personal protégée and that Eva was not averse to acting in such a role (Dingwall 1966).

It was about this time that John Nevil Maskelyne and George Alfred Cooke, two well-known British magicians who owned their own theatre at Egyptian Hall and had already exposed the tricks used by the Davenport brothers, added to their show "An Indescribable Séance," with Cooke, tied in the same way as the American, duplicating her feats.

It was possibly to counteract this exposure that Annie Eva Fay, a vaudeville performer who had found herself the center of a body of eminent literary and scientific men, being treated as a "medium" whom it was necessary to "investigate," succumbed to temptation and accepted her new role. If the psychological researchers were determined on her being a medium, then she would agree and cash in on it while she could, thus restoring her reputation and promoting public interest in her performances.

The most important of all the experiments conducted on Annie's "mediumship" were by far Crookes's "electrical tests," held at his own home in February 1875 (Crookes 1875).

For these séances, Cromwell F. Varley, another Fellow of the Royal Society, had provided an electrical control circuit, a slightly modified version of the one used by Crookes with medium Florence Cook. To make sure that the medium, seated in a curtained cabinet, could not slip her bonds, Crookes asked her to clench both handles of a battery, constructed as to interrupt the current if she let go of either handle, and send the meter to 0. Fay managed, somehow, to present her manifestations though the contact remained unbroken.

For a further séance, two of the guests were more skeptical than their host. When they inspected the electrical-control system, before the session began, they discovered that a damp handkerchief stretched between the handles would keep the circuit open. At the suggestion of one of these men, Crookes nailed the handles so far apart that a handkerchief could not span them. Apparently no one considered the pos-

sibility that a longer strip of cloth or some other type of resistor might be used.

Success at these experiments fueled Annie's tour of the English provinces; however, when she opened at Birmingham, in May, she was again described as the "Indescribable Phenomenon" and her show billed as an entertainment (Dingwall 1966). Apparently, at the end of her tour, her manager, dissatisfied with the fact that the scientists' investigations did not produce any money into his pockets, wrote to J. N. Maskelyne suggesting to arrange a public exposure of his ex-client. He offered to reveal

for a substantial sum of money how the Crookes experiments had been faked. Maskelyne declined the offer, so the impresario wrote again presenting him Miss Lottie Fowler, another pretty mystic who could do the Fay tricks and went on tour with the same routine when Annie left England.



Houdini and Anna Eva Fay.

Exposures and Confession

Exposures of Annie's performance appeared occasionally in the press. On April 12, 1876, Washington Irving Bishop, a former member of Fay's American troupe, later to become himself one of the greatest mentalists of all time, revealed to the *New York Daily Graphic* how her tricks were accomplished. Unruffled by the exposure, she continued her work with usual success and reinserted her mind-reading act in her program. Pads were distributed, and members of the audience were invited by her husband to write questions, sign their names, tear off the sheets and hold the pieces of paper folded in their hands. Later, Annie, blindfolded, divined correctly the content of the sheets of paper and answered to the questions written on them. She called this portion of the show "Somnolency," adapted from "Somnomancy," the name Samri S. Baldwin, "The White Mahatma," had given to the act that he had invented.

In 1906 H. A. Parkyn, editor of the magazine *Suggestion*, contributed a long article on the trick methods used by Miss Fay in her billet-reading tests, describing the preparation of the pads and the use of confederates among the audience. This "exposure" was hardly necessary, since it was at this time that she was stating in her program that credulous and foolish persons should not be influenced by her performance since she was "not a spiritualistic medium" and there was nothing "either supernatural or miraculous" about her performance.

In spite of the disavowals of any supernatural power, fur-

ther exposures occurred in February 1907, when Professor W. S. Barnickel described some of her methods and in January 1911, when Albini, the magician, exposed her "Somnolency" act; still, the public filled theatres where she was featured.

Her son, John T. Fay, married Anna Norman, one of the assistants of Eva's show, left home, and set up on his own with his wife, calling themselves "The Fays." When John died in 1908, his widow set up her own show and billed herself as "Mrs. Eva Fay, The High Priestess of Mysticism."

Obviously, Annie resented her using a stage name so similar to her own, but never took legal action to stop her.

In 1912 Annie visited Europe again and when she reached London, where she performed at the Coliseum, the spiritualists were still ready to marvel at her supernatural powers. One of them, J. Hewat McKenzie, claimed he had been able to discover Eva's secret: he said her manifestations were done by a small pair of materialized hands and arms, somewhat like those of a monkey, that protruded from her chest. He knew because he had been able to "smell the odour from the emanation of the psycho-plastic matter" during a performance. This same man would later claim he knew how Houdini performed his escapes: by "dematerializing his body," of course (Doyle 1930).

During her visit, psychic researcher and magician Eric J. Dingwall, who described her as "extremely prepossessing with a perfect complexion and sparkling blue eyes," was successful in getting her proposed and elected as the first Honorary Lady Associate of the Magic Circle (Dingwall 1966).

For another eleven years she continued to attract capacity crowds wherever she performed. Due to an accidental injury, she played her final engagement in Milwaukee in 1924. In July of the same year she received a visit from Harry Houdini.

Houdini considered her "one of the cleverest mediums in history" and noticed her "straw diamond white" hair and penetrating eyes, from which "great big streaks of intelligence would flash in and out." "It is small wonder," he observed, "that with her personality she could have mystified the great mental giants of the ages—not our age, but of the ages" (Silverman 1996).

They talked for hours and she revealed to him all her secrets. "She spoke freely of her methods," Houdini noted. "Never at any time did she pretend to believe in spiritualism." She told him how she had tricked Crookes at the electric test: She had simply gripped one handle of the battery beneath her knee joint, keeping the circuit unbroken but leaving one hand free to do as it wished.

A year later she announced her plan to leave the ten houses on her Melrose Heights property to destitute actors and actresses, but she died on May 20, 1927, before working out the final details of her project.

Annie Eva Fay's revelation to Houdini of the way she had gulled Crookes was confirmed years later when psychical researcher Colin Brookes-Smith found one of the galvanometers used by Crookes at the Science Museum in London. The

machine was repaired and brought to working order.

Brookes-Smith reports that "there was no difficulty at all in sliding one wrist and forearm along over one handle and grasping the other handle, thereby keeping the circuit closed through the forearm, and then releasing the other hand without producing any large movement of the galvanometer spot." In a second test, he "tucked both electrodes successively right down into my socks and let go so that my hands

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were free without producing any large galvanometer spot excursions." In this way, not only did he confirm Eva's revelation but also "Houdini's 1924 footnote explanation (p. 102) that in 1874 Florence (Cook) could have detached one of the electrodes consisting of a gold sovereign and saline soaked blotting-paper pad from one wrist and held it under her knee" (Brookes-Smith 1965).

There is no more doubt, now, that trickery actually took place during Crookes's tests, exactly as described by Annie Eva Fay; what is unclear is whether he was a complete fool (unlikely) or a willing accomplice. In any case, one thing can't be denied: the great William Crookes had a special interest in attractive, young mediums needing a scientific pedigree and was willing to test them all, even if they were outright fakes like Eva Fay, in his own house, right under his wife's nose.

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